Andy O'Brien
Rockland
LD 1274

Good morning, my name is Andy O'Brien and I live in Rockland. I work for the Maine AFL-CIO, but my employer has not taken a position on this bill so I am testifying in my personal capacity.

I am here today to testify in support of LD 1274. For the past few years I have been doing a lot of research about the history of African American Mainers for two monthly history columns - one in The Bollard and the other in Amjambo Africa. While students in Maine do learn about the civil rights movement in school, unfortunately they seldom learn about the history of racial injustice in our own backyard.

A lot of people don't realize that slavery existed in Maine for 150 years and was only abolished in 1783 through a Massachusetts Supreme Court decision. Slavery's legacy would last for much longer in the form of racial discrimination and Jim Crow.

The experiences of my ancestors were much different than the ancestors of Black Mainers. When my ancestors came to settle and farm in Maine the 1700s, they initially squatted here and were later able to negotiate favorable terms for the land with the wealthy Boston merchants who held the deeds.

Aside from a few scattered farming settlements, Black Mainers didn't have those same opportunities. They were banned from most trades and professions due to racial discrimination so they most commonly worked as laborers or sailors, which were very low-paying and precarious jobs. When Irish immigrants arrived in the mid-19th century, they elbowed Black stevedores out of work on the Portland waterfront and banned them from joining their union.

In fact, some unions excluded Black workers well into the 1970s and even 1980s, which prevented millions of African Americans from earning good union wages. For several decades after Civil War, local newspapers often inflamed public resentment against Black workers, claiming they were given preference in hiring and were paid more than whites on certain jobs. This certainly wasn't true but drove a narrative that fueled further racial discrimination. Without access to employment, Black families often appeared on town poor rolls, leading to further resentment among their white neighbors, who disparaging referred to Black settlements like Peterborough in Warren as "[N-word]town."

Black students in Portland went to under-resourced segregated schools until the mid 19th century. Efforts to start private integrated colleges were met with stiff resistance. A Black Portlander named William Munroe helped found an integrated college in Canaan, New Hampshire called Noyes Academy. But on August 10, 1835, it was destroyed by a white mob of 500 men. Cannons were fired into the dorms of the Black students, who were lucky to make it out with their lives.

The end of Reconstruction in 1877 to the 1940s, was a very violent and oppressive period as lynchings of African Americans dramatically increased. The kind of racism that fueled this hate was reflected in mainstream public discourse. As the Bangor Daily News wrote in a 1906:

"Today a negro is viewed with suspicion — at times with alarm. New England conservatism finds the negro shifty and unreliable. He is fond of pleasure and prefers idleness and poverty to thrift…Neither the petting of philanthropists nor the efforts of teachers can overcome their inherent laziness and lack of foresight. The end of the Indian is in sight. Indications are that the negro is going in the same direction."

This was obviously racist, ridiculous and offensive. There was a thriving community of hardworking African Americans in Bangor, who had lived there for generations, but this kind of public sentiment was why they were treated like second class citizens in many ways.

Five years after that editorial, a mixed race fishing community on Malaga Island off

Phippsburg, was forcibly evicted by the state and many were put into institutions. To discourage resettlement, Maine authorities even dug up the graves of their family members and reburied them at the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded in Pownal. The Malaga residents were called squatters, but so were my ancestors. Unlike the Black fishermen on Malaga, my ancestors were allowed to stay on the land and leave it to their descendants.

A few years after the Malaga removal, on a cold April morning in 1919, a mob of several white men chased two Black University of Maine students named Roger and Samuel Courtney out of their dorm. After catching them, they stripped the two brothers naked, smeared their naked bodies with hot molasses and feathers and displayed them in front of the mob in the campus Stock Judging Pavilion for a photo op.

As one reporter noted at the time, the "feeling ran so high that it was regarded as fortunate that there were no more serious casualties than bruises and scalp wounds." It was one of the first incidents in what became the violent "Red Summer" of 1919, when white supremacist terrorism and anti-Black riots swept through the United States. There were never many Black students at UMaine, but for decades afterwards, those who did attend lived in private housing off campus.

Many years later, Black Mainer and Professor Hebert Heughan, who attended UMaine in the late 1930s, said that some Black students "found the University hostile and were uncomfortable with the idea of campus living." Heughan was one of several Black UMaine graduates who reported that there was an official policy that barred African Americans from student teaching in Maine. This was an accepted policy at least until the 1960s, which is why Heughan and other Black teachers from Maine ended up moving down South to teach in segregated schools. Nancy Dymond of Bangor, who graduated in 1997, is believed to be the first black Mainer to graduate from UMaine with a bachelor's degree in education and to teach in Maine.

I've interviewed a number of elderly Black Mainers and read several accounts of what it was like trying to find work in the mid 20th century. It was just understood that only the lowest paying occupations were available to them.

Housing discrimination was also rampant during much of the 20th century in Maine. I have a copy of a racial covenant that was put on a home in the same neighborhood near the State House in Augusta where my father grew up. It states "said lot shall never be occupied by a colored person." While these restrictions were deemed unenforceable by the Supreme Court in 1948, my father remembered only one Black family growing up in Augusta in the 1950s. He went to school with one of those students, who was called "Snowball" by all his classmates. I still have the button from Cony High School's annual minstrel show in 1957. It was a very popular event that involved white students putting on Black face to create racist caricatures of African Americans. Minstrel shows were very common in Maine until the 1950s.

At the same time, New Deal-era policies aided the exclusion of African-Americans from white neighborhoods until the practice was outlawed in 1968. Black soldiers stationed in Maine during World War II found it extremely difficult to find white landlords who would rent to them. It actually was legal for landlords to refuse to rent to Black tenants in Maine until the Maine NAACP led efforts to pass the Fair Housing Bill of 1965. African Americans and Jewish Mainers were banned from private clubs until in Maine until the early 1970s.

My father, who served in the military during the 1950s, used the GI Bill to purchase the family farm in Lincolnville in 1970. But the promise of the G.I. Bill was broken for over 1 million Black veterans who courageously served in World War II due to discriminatory state policies.

Today, the family farm in Lincolnville that my parents bought on the GI Bill for $14,000 in 1970 is worth at least a half million dollars. But many of the children and grandchildren Black veterans won't inherit that kind of wealth because their parents and grandparents were denied the benefits they earned during their military service.

The massive peacetime prosperity that built America's so-called middle class was not spread evenly and too many African Americans were left out due to racial discrimination.

For generations, Africans Americans were denied education, good jobs, land, housing and the accumulation of wealth. While some of this information may seem like it happened a long time ago, this legacy is still with us today. For some perspective, my grandfather was ten years old when the residents of Malaga Island were forced out of their homes by the state. The year before I was born, brooks, islands, hills and other geographic landmarks were officially listed on maps with the n-word.

While we can't change the past, we can recognize past wrongs and work to provide opportunities for the descendants of enslaved Mainers that their ancestors were denied. LD 1274 is a modest proposal, but it will move us in the right direction and help build a stronger and more diverse local agricultural economy.