

## Eliza's Hands

Patricia M. Hager

To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships.

— W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903<sup>1</sup>

Eliza Griffin of Malaga Island, Maine, was almost 50 years old when W.E.B. DuBois wrote the words above in 1903. She never read them, but she lived them.

I met Eliza while working on *Re.Past.Malaga*. In addition to writing some of the text for the program, I wrote a short narrative monologue to be delivered by a student who was representing Eliza Griffin at the performative meal. Those words were for a high school student to read during a short part of a much larger event that day. The words for that short presentation didn't fully capture the Eliza Griffin who stepped out of the past to wag her finger at me to tell me to stop dreaming and get to work! That is the Eliza that I hope to put on these pages.

Eliza was born around 1863. She was likely the daughter of Harry Griffin. We know that Harry Griffin lived with his extended family — 12 people under one roof — in the mainland town of Phippsburg, across the New Meadows River from Malaga Island. Twelve people under one roof. We know from census information that the Griffins were a family of cod fishermen.<sup>2</sup>

There is no evidence of settlements on Malaga before the Civil War, but we know at least some of the Griffins had moved to Malaga by the middle of the 1860's. It is possible that Eliza Griffin came to Malaga as an infant while the country was at war with itself. She lived on the island for nearly fifty years. We know for sure that Eliza Griffin appears on the 1870 US Census as a 7-year-old

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<sup>1</sup> DuBois W.E.B (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk* retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>

<sup>2</sup>McMahon, K. (2013). *The Use of Material Culture and Recovering Black Maine. Material Culture Review / Revue de la culture matérielle*, 77. Retrieved from <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MCR/article/view/22085/25645>

living on Malaga Island. Eliza grew up on Malaga; she appears on the census records as a resident of the island in 1880, 1900, and 1910.<sup>3</sup>

The residents of Malaga were black, white, and mixed-race. I do not know for certain of the color of Eliza's skin. Although the census collected information on "color or race," Eliza Griffin's records do not provide decisive information. She is listed as mixed-race on some records, black on some, and the handwriting is illegible on others. So, I do not know the color of most of her skin, but I am sure I know about her hands. They were the hands of a worker. They were the hands of a fisherwoman and lobsterwoman. Rough, from baiting traps and pulling thick wet rope in from the icy ocean waters. Various styles of lobster traps were uncovered from the land surrounding Eliza's house. What did she wear on her hands while she was lobstering? There were none of the insulated vinyl gloves that are available today. Many fishermen at the turn of the century opted to wear nippers—woolen bands stuffed with more wool that were worn around the palm of the hand to leave the fingers free for dexterity (fig. 1). They also left the fingers exposed to get cut while baiting hooks, to freeze in the frigid waters, and get chapped in the northern winds. Eliza's hands were the hardworking hands of a fisherwoman. Eliza's hands were rough and red.



Fig. 1: Woolen Nippers<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Maine State Museum. (2017). Introduction to Malaga Island Fragmented Lives. Retrieved from <https://mainestatemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Lesson-1-Introduction-to-Malaga-Island-Fragmented-Lives-and-Using-Primary-Sources.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> From The Smithsonian National Museum of American History: Fishermen's Woolen Nippers. Retrieved from [https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_859460](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_859460)

It was a hardscrabble life on Malaga. The houses that the settlers built were constructed from the meager supplies that were available on the island. Some were wood frame, some covered with tarpaper, some made of logs. Eliza Griffin had the only home on the island that was once the cabin of a boat (Fig 2). Eliza was a survivor. She used what she had and moved forward. Today we would call her enterprising.



Fig. 2: Eliza Griffin's home (foreground)<sup>5</sup>

Outside Eliza's boat-cabin house, in addition to the collection of old lobster traps and rusted fish hooks that verified her fishing operation, anthropologists have uncovered evidence of a large kitchen garden and some buttons. These artifacts tell us more about what Eliza did with her hands. The same industrious hands that hauled in traps and baited hooks also tilled the rocky earth to grow food to eat and likely share. Farmer's hands with soil stained cuticles. Hands made strong by digging and pulling. Generous hands perhaps sharing a harvest.

Eliza was not only a fisher and a gardener, she was also a laundress. She took in laundry from the mainland. She has been referred to as one of the most industrious residents of Malaga.<sup>6</sup> A 1909 newspaper article reported that Eliza's

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<sup>5</sup> Maine State Museum. (2017). Historic Images of Malaga Island. Retrieved from <https://mainestatemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Historic-Images-of-Malaga-Island.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>McMahon, K. (2013). The Use of Material Culture and Recovering Black Maine. *Material Culture Review / Revue de la culture matérielle*, 77. Retrieved from <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MCR/article/view/22085/25645>

laundry business brought in more money than the fisherman.<sup>7</sup> To take in laundry from the mainland may have involved rowing across New Meadows River to pick it up from hotels where well-off people stayed and from families who could afford to send their laundry out. Rowing there and rowing back. Eliza's arms must have been strong from fishing and rowing. Laundering clothes would have involved transporting many gallons of water to a large pot that was heated (with wood that also needed to be carried) hot enough to dissolve the harsh lye soap used to get the clothes and linens clean; the washing was typically followed by two rinses (more water to carry), then the clothes were put through a mangle (or wringer). After the clothes were dried in the air, they were ironed with a flat iron that was heated on the wood stove. Eliza's strong hands may have been rubbed raw by the coarse fabrics and the caustic soap. Her arms and shoulders must have ached from carrying the water and wood. Laundering also involved mending. When clothes needed repair, the laundress frequently provided basic mending and sewing services. In addition to the fishing artifacts that were found in the yard of Eliza's house on the knoll, there were buttons, possibly left behind from Eliza's sewing supplies. Those hands! After all the rough work during the day, I envision Eliza sitting in her little ship's cabin house in the evening sewing on buttons by the flickering light of an oil lamp.



Fig. 3: A button excavated from a midden on Malaga<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Maine State Museum. (2017). Introduction to Malaga Island Fragmented Lives. Retrieved from <https://mainestatemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Lesson-1-Introduction-to-Malaga-Island-Fragmented-Lives-and-Using-Primary-Sources.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Maine State Museum. (2017). Malaga Island Fragmented Lives: Historic Artifacts of Malaga Island. Retrieved from <https://mainestatemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Lesson-1-Introduction-to-Malaga-Island-Fragmented-Lives-and-Using-Primary-Sources.pdf>

Although Eliza's entrepreneurial pursuits are documented, the specifics of her personal life are more enigmatic. There is no evidence that she married. The 1910 census lists her, then 47-years-old, as single. However, after the Eviction, Eliza moved to Bath on the mainland and lived with Sadie Johnson Colby, Edgar Colby and the couple's two young children. Eliza (then age 61) is listed on the 1920 census as Sadie's mother and a widow, but previous census information from 1870-1910 consistently lists her as single with the surname Griffin. Her surname name on the 1920 census remains Griffin. It is likely that Eliza took over the care of young Sadie while on Malaga and remained with her and her young family after the eviction. Those 60-year-old hands again at work cooking and cleaning and changing diapers for the young Colby family.

I mentioned that Eliza never read Dubois' words. The census information reports she did not read or write. She worked. She fished, and gardened, and laundered, and mended, and cared for her Malaga neighbors and family. She existed. She made it work with what she had. Not only could she not read DuBois' words, she could not read the newspaper articles that called her neighbors and extended family, "a heathen mix of blacks and whites genetically disposed to crime, laziness, poverty, mental deficiency, immorality, and a fear of soap. They belong to 'a degraded class, black and white, all mixed up with the lowest kind of moral ideas,' wrote a reporter for the *Bath Enterprise* in 1902.<sup>9</sup> I like to imagine that, upon hearing that, Eliza would shrug her strong shoulders, issue a little snort, and internally roll her eyes. Then she'd get back to what she was doing.

When the people from "the land of dollars" succeeded in driving everyone off Malaga, Eliza moved on to the little apartment on Washington Street in Bath, Maine to take care of the Colby family while Edgar Colby went to work at Bath Iron Works. I imagine three adults and two toddlers in a tiny apartment felt restrictive and confining to this woman who had lived her life on the water's edge. I imagine there was the social stigma of being a "Maligite" to contend with. I also imagine she responded setting her jaw and putting those hardworking hands back to work.



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<sup>9</sup> Long, Burke O. (2019). The Children of Malaga Island. Retrieved from <https://research.bowdoin.edu/children-of-malaga-island/essay/>

### Postscript

This poem by Lucille Clifton, written in the 1960s, articulates the spirit of Eliza Griffin and so many women. (Listen here<sup>10</sup>)

#### won't you celebrate with me

won't you celebrate with me  
what i have shaped into  
a kind of life? i had no model.  
born in babylon  
both nonwhite and woman  
what did i see to be except myself?  
i made it up  
here on this bridge between  
starshine and clay,  
my one hand holding tight  
my other hand; come celebrate  
with me that everyday  
something has tried to kill me  
and has failed.<sup>11</sup>



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<sup>10</sup> <https://vimeo.com/197834578>

<sup>11</sup> Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me" from *Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton*. Copyright © 1991 by Lucille Clifton.