

The Historic Black Press--Overview Essay

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1827-1861: Origins of the Black Press

Freedom's Journal, the first black newspaper in the United States, started as a weekly abolitionist journal in 1827. It was the result of a meeting in New York City of black leaders, who realized that such a publication was important to efforts towards uniting free blacks against slavery. Editors Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm advocated education and stressed the importance of civil rights for free blacks. However, Russwurm and Cornish disagreed on editorial policy, and the newspaper, after it changed its name to *The Rights of All*, only lasted until 1829. Other black newspapers, most of them similarly short-lived, appeared in New York City, Albany, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Columbus, Ohio.

For example, Willis Hodges started his own newspaper, the *Ram's Horn*, in New York in 1847 in response to the New York *Sun's* stance against black voting rights--the *Sun's* famous motto "The *Sun* shines for all" did not include black men. The *Ram's Horn* lasted about a year. Enjoying greater longevity, however, was Frederick Douglass's newspaper the *North Star*, which appeared in Rochester the same year as the *Ram's Horn* and lasted, despite financial troubles and a name change, until 1860. Typically, the early black newspapers rarely lasted more than a year or two for several reasons. First, the target audience, the base population of educated free blacks, was seldom large enough to financially support a weekly newspaper. Second, most of these newspapers ignored the many literate but uneducated free blacks that lived in the North. A third reason was that the publishers usually lacked adequate funds to weather the difficult early years.

So, while more than 40 black newspapers were founded before the start of the Civil War, most of them lasted only a year or two, suffering from financial problems and a small readership. Nonetheless, the black press spread westward, as far as Kansas by 1855 with the start of the *Kansas Herald of Freedom* in Lawrence. The earliest black newspaper on the west coast, San Francisco's *Mirror of the Times*, appeared the same year. All of them protested the lack of civil rights for blacks in the North and protested against the inhumanity of southern slavery.

1861-1877: The Civil War and Reconstruction

During the Civil War, the South's first black newspaper appeared in New Orleans. Louis Roudanez, a free black immigrant from the Caribbean, published *L'Union* in French from 1862 to 1864. An English-language section began appearing in *L'Union* soon after the first issue appeared. After the demise of *L'Union*, Roudanez published the bilingual *New Orleans Tribune* until 1870. Both newspapers supported the Republican Party and, after the war, strongly advocated voting rights and supported black candidates for office.

The end of the Civil War brought about a flowering of black newspapers in the South. By the end of 1865, black newspapers had been established in Louisiana, Alabama, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Georgia. Most of the former slave states hosted black newspapers within a few years. Missouri became the last of the former slave states lacking a black paper when St. Louis' *The Negro World* was founded in 1875.

The black press of the Reconstruction period supported the Republican Party almost unanimously, a situation that would change only gradually until the 1920s. The former slaves believed that the party of Abraham Lincoln would create a new world where black economic, social, and political interests would be protected. Later, as many blacks became disillusioned with

the lack of progress in American racial matters, the Republican Party still seemed a better alternative than the Democratic Party that represented the old slave-holding South.

Between 1861 and 1877, an estimated 115 black newspapers appeared across the nation, endorsing political equality and progress for African Americans. Most of them lasted less than two years, but, as a larger number of former slaves learned to read, formed communities, and became active in political activities, more newspapers took advantage of a secure financial base to print successful, long-lived newspapers, especially in the 1880s and 1890s. For example, the *Colored Tribune* of Savannah, Georgia, which started in 1875, survived until 1960. And, a Tennessee newspaper, the *Jackson Index*, lasted from 1870 to 1937.

Some black editors used their newspapers as a forum for a political career before the end of Reconstruction smothered black office-holding. For example, the *South Carolina Leader* of Charleston produced two black U. S. Congressmen, Robert Brown Elliott and Richard Harvey Cain. P.B.S. Pinchback, publisher of New Orleans's *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, enjoyed a long career in Louisiana politics, including a term as Lieutenant Governor and a short term as interim Governor. The two black U.S. Senators from Mississippi, Hiram Revels and Blanch K. Bruce, were both associated with the *Floreyville Star*.

Black newspapers during the Reconstruction era consistently protested the Black Codes--the laws passed by southern states to limit the freedom of the former slaves--and the outbreaks of racial violence, such as the 1866 violence in Memphis and New Orleans. Some newspapers temporarily anticipated a brighter future in black-white relations as Union troops enforced black voting rights and southern politicians courted black support. The *Charleston Advocate*, co-edited by the black B.F. Randolph and white A. Webster, illustrates the optimism of the immediate post-Civil War South. But, the hopes of the newly freed black community withered in the 1870s with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the withdrawal of Federal troops, and the campaign against black rights that the southern states mounted.

The Black Press 1877-1900

The last two decades of the 19th century experienced an explosion in black newspapers across the nation. More than 500 appeared between 1880 and 1890. In 1902 alone, 101 black newspapers started. Further, in the two decades from 1895-1915, over 1,200 black newspapers served African Americans nationwide. They also appeared in states that had never had black newspapers before, from Indiana to Colorado to Wisconsin, and as far west as Montana, Utah and Washington. As before, many black newspapers did not last more than a few years--sometimes, they lasted only a few months--but, growing literacy among the readership, a stronger economic base, more experienced journalists, and more concentrated black populations all helped to support the successful newspapers.

In the face of growing violence against African Americans, the black press tended to adopt a less militant stance after Reconstruction. Activist newspapers, such as the *Chicago Conservator* and the *New York Age*, protested Jim Crow from the relative safety of the northern states. Black southern editors had to tread a fine line to avoid the rage of the white mob at the same time they tried to provide a service to black readers. For instance, black editors avoided criticizing local laws and authorities, reporting on incidents outside the state, or, better yet, outside the South entirely. Those editors who spoke too freely risked losing life and property, and angry white mobs destroyed the offices of several black newspapers--notably, the *Memphis Free Speech* in 1892 and *The Record* in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1899. White mobs, unable to attack the offices of militant northern newspapers with southern circulation, also attacked and killed distributors of the undesired publications.

While many black congregations published their own newspapers mostly to announce services and community news, some of the religious newspapers did not avoid controversy. One example was the militant *Free Speech and Headlight* of Memphis, which started out as a religious newspaper, published by Baptist minister Taylor Nightingale. Further, Rev. R.N. Hall, publisher of Birmingham's *Baptist Leader*, refused to knuckle under to nine Klan members who visited his office in the 1920s and told him to cease a series of articles on the clandestine organization. Hall published a front-page story about the Klan's visit and continued his anti-Klan campaign. In the face of Hall's actions, the Klan did not return. Louis Martinet's New Orleans *Crusader*, to give another example, championed Homer Plessy's challenge of Jim Crow segregated streetcars. And, many black newspapers joined the *Crusader* in attacking the many Supreme Court rulings that practically voided the Civil Rights Acts of the 1860s and 1870s. The *Cleveland Gazette* ran a whole series of articles on the subject.

White violence toward blacks reached epidemic proportions in the last decade of the 19th century and increased in the 20th century. The nation's black press reported the incidents behind the lynching, providing balance to the biased reports that ran in most white newspapers. Many newspapers editorialized on the neglect of the Federal government and the right of black men to defend their lives and property. Black newspapers also covered race riots, poor living conditions and education for blacks, political and economic inequality between the races, and rising street crime.

As the 19th century ended, the black press also reflected the division between African-American leaders over the best way for the African Americans to survive and advance in American society. Booker T. Washington, the most famous black in the world at the turn of the century, advocated a policy of self-improvement for blacks and accommodation with the will of the white man. Washington felt that pushing too hard for equality would jeopardize the progress that blacks had made since emancipation and imperil the African-American future.

On the other side, W.E.B. Du Bois, a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), believed that accommodation had clearly failed. White America would never give equality to the humble and timid black just because African Americans waited patiently until the white man was ready. Washington and the Tuskegee Institute secretly funded a number of black newspapers to promote his philosophy of accommodation. T. Thomas Fortune, often hailed as the finest black journalist of his time, edited the *New York Age*, the most important of the newspapers supporting accommodation.

Most black newspapers tended to be conservative, supporting the ideas of Washington. Yet, the most important dissenting black paper, the *Boston Guardian*, often criticized Washington, charging him with placing his interests in the Tuskegee school before the interests of the black race as a whole. The editor, William Monroe Trotter, wrote savage editorials about Washington and took several members of his staff to a Boston lecture to disrupt a Washington speech. Although most newspapers supported Washington, some black papers, such as William Calvin Chase's *Washington Bee*, maintained independence from both camps.

1900-1963

In 1905, Robert S. Abbott started the *Chicago Defender*, possibly the nation's most important and influential black newspaper of all times. Where black newspapers had previously tended towards a sober tone, Abbott adopted a sensational style of reporting, mimicking the yellow journalism of William Randolph Hearst's newspaper empire. Flamboyant stories about crime and violence, some of them fabricated by Abbott's writers, attracted a large number of regular readers within the black population that had seldom before read newspapers.

By 1920, the *Defender* claimed a circulation of almost 300,000. Yet, its actual number of readers was much higher, because multiple readers looked at every copy of the paper as it was passed from hand to hand. More than two-thirds of the circulation came from outside Chicago, and the *Defender* enjoyed great popularity in the South.

Along with lurid tales of sex and crime to attract readers, the *Defender* also raised awareness with articles on lynching, segregation, and black achievement. Abbott also editorialized on white hypocrisy and offered advice on the advancement of the race. The newspaper's most famous crusade, "the Great Northern Drive," started during World War I (WW I) and urged southern blacks to move north to take advantage of war jobs in the northern cities and escape southern brutality. Thousands of blacks, encouraged by the *Defender* and other newspapers, left the South and went to northern industrial cities; this constituted the largest movement of people in the nation's history.

Abbott's formula partially solved one of the problems that had hindered the success of the black press. Historically, small papers that advocated black activism experienced a drop in advertising. If they moderated the militant tone, reader interest waned and circulation decreased. And, lower circulation discouraged advertisers. Thus, black editors, especially in the South where the threat of indignant white violence always hovered, faced a vicious circle of falling revenue. Abbott's *Defender*, however, appealed to a larger readership base. Because of larger circulation, the newspaper had a lower cover price and relied less on the whims of advertisers, enabling the *Defender* to take on a more militant tone.

The second decade of the 20th century heralded new issues for the black press. The re-birth of the Ku Klux Klan produced a wave of denunciations in black newspapers. Many journals renewed the call for a federal anti-lynching law and decried the lack of progress in race relations. The black press united in protests against "The Birth of a Nation," Hollywood's glorification of the Ku Klux Klan. Many cities banned the film because of the outcry of the black press.

During the First World War, the black press supported the war effort but used the example of black loyalty to criticize America's attitudes on race. Black newspapers emphasized the hypocrisy of a nation, which condoned Jim Crow and deprived an entire group of its citizens of voting rights, fighting a war to "make the world safe for democracy." For instance, editorials in the black newspapers noted the irony in thousands of black soldiers fighting in Europe to protect the interests of a nation that would not use its resources to protect American citizens from lynching in the South.

Unfortunately, the achievements of black soldiers on the battlefields of Europe did not improve white racial attitudes. In the years after the war, black veterans, emboldened by their war service and impatient at the lack of black social and political progress, refused to back down against white intimidation. Black defiance angered racist whites, and the resulting tension exploded in a series of race riots in almost 30 cities from 1919 to 1921, culminating in the Tulsa riot of June 1921. An estimated 300 people died, and Greenwood, the black section of Tulsa, burned to the ground. The black press responded to the race riots by offering a black perspective to balance the biased versions in the mainstream press, which either almost universally blamed African Americans or mitigated the extent of white involvement. Interestingly, while the Depression caused many marginal black newspapers to fail, a surprising number of new newspapers started in the 1930s.

During World War II (WW II), the black press faced a dilemma similar to the one they faced during the Great War. Most black newspapers supported the war effort, encouraging blacks to enlist and writing stories about the African-American accomplishments on both the battlefield and the home front. But, they also criticized discrimination in the armed forces and editorialized on the inefficiency of segregated military forces. For instance, the *Pittsburgh Courier* instituted the "Double V" campaign, calling for victory overseas against Germany and Japan as well victory at

home against Jim Crow. Many newspapers joined the popular campaign and circulation soared, with the *Courier* topping 270,000.

The government responded to criticism in the black press with investigations by the FBI and other agencies into the alleged disloyalty of black editors. Officials visited the largest black newspapers and blamed the "Double V" campaign for low morale in the black population. The Post Office instituted its own investigation and suppressed several small newspapers, but it could not successfully bring sanctions against the much larger *Negro World* of Minneapolis. Other agencies sought to curtail these attempts at suppressing the black press. For instance, Attorney General Francis Biddle, a staunch advocate of press freedom, realized that most of the charges were flimsy and stopped many FBI court actions. Indeed, many government officials felt that black efforts were necessary for the nation ultimately to succeed in the war and denigrated attempts to suppress the black press.

After the war, the black press played its part in the Civil Rights Movement, reporting and providing commentary on the milestones of the period: the desegregation of the armed services, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Freedom Riders, and the March on Washington. The Arkansas State Press played an even more important role in the 1957 desegregation of the Little Rock public school system, because editor Daisy Bates was one of the parties who filed the original lawsuit.

Since the 1960s, the role of the black press has not been as significant, as it achieved many of its goals in the 1960s with the passage of civil rights legislation. Further, the mainstream press has provided greater balanced coverage of black news and activities, though there is still much room for improvement. The base for the many small black newspapers ended long ago, but many large cities still publish black newspapers that provide community and national news, as well a vital forum for editorials on the problems that African Americans still face.

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