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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Delegate Magazine 1981

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Brief History of 146-Year-Old Black Press

By Sherman Briscoe
Executive Director, NNPA

The voice of one of the longest protests in history is the Black Press of America which celebrated its 145th anniversary last March.

But it has been more than an effective voice of protest that has played a major role in every erg of resistance overcome; it has also stimulated attainments in education and self-improvement to help keep black people abreast of opportunities as they have been achieved.

It was in March of 1827 -- more than 200 years after slavery had been established in America -- that John B. Russwurm and the Rev. Samuel E. Cornish launched Freedom's Journal, the first black newspaper in the United States and the first black voice raised in newsprint against bondage.

The Journal not only spoke out against slavery in the South and ill treatment of freed blacks in the North, but it also emphasized education, self-improvement, industry, and thrift on the part of freedmen.

Within a little over a year, Russwurm, an 1826 graduate of Bowdoin college, became discouraged, left the paper and joined the American Colonization Society. He emigrated to Liberia where he served as superintendent of schools and governor of the Maryland colony until his death in 1851.

The Reverend Mr. Cornish, founder of the first black Presbyterian Church in America, continued briefly with the Journal, changing its name to "The Right of All."

Between the death of the Journal and the death of slavery, 23 other black newspapers were to raise their mastheads in protest of that institution, of the denial of full enfranchisement of freed blacks, and of oppression of them. Equally, they promoted the Underground Railroad and other abolitionist efforts, while constantly encouraging self-improvement, self-definition, industry and thrift.

Among the most outstanding of these mostly short-lived papers were: Fred Douglass' North Star, Willis Hodges' Ram's Horn, William Welles Brown's Rising Sun, Phillip Bell and Charles Ray's Colored American, Dr. Martin Delaney's Mystery, and the AME Church's Christian Advocate which is still going after 124 years.

With Slavery dead in 1865, black leaders believed there was no urgency to continue black newspapers. Only about 10 such papers were established between the end of the Civil War and the Hayes-Tilden Deal which led to the withdrawal of troops from the South in 1877 and the rolling back of the clock whose hands were to stand still in racial progress for more than half a century.

Between 1877 and 1900, about 150 black newspapers came into being to protest mob violence, lynchings, the total abrogation of the 14th and 15th amendments and only half observance of the 13th.



[[images - scenes from the meeting]]

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