



**Smithsonian Institution**

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

## **Delegate Magazine 1985**

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## Brief History of 151-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.

### Changes Name

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 the 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.

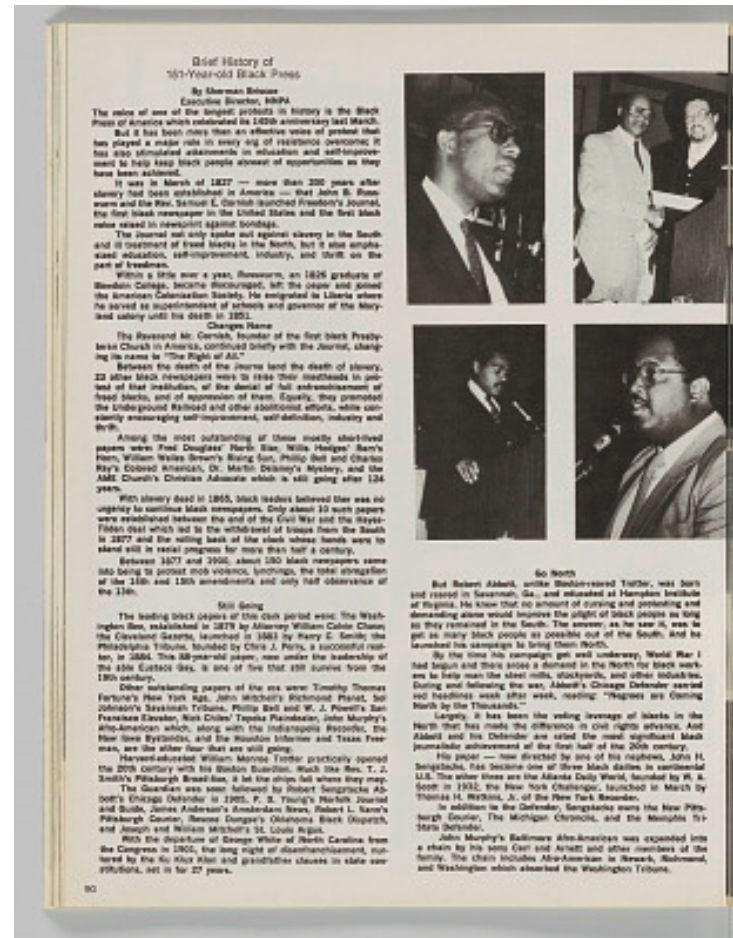
With slavery dead in 1865, black leaders believed there was no urgency to continue black newspapers. Only about 10 such papers were established between the end of the Civil War and the Hayes-Tilden deal which led to the withdrawal of troops from the South in 1877 and the rolling back of the clock whose 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.

### Still Going

The leading black papers of this dark period were: The Washington Bee, established in 1879 by Attorney William Calvin Chase; the Cleveland Gazette, launched in 1883 by Harry C. Smith; the Philadelphia Tribune, founded by Chris J. Perry, a successful realtor, in 1884. This 88-year-old paper, now under the leadership of the able Eustace Gay, is one of five that still survive from the 19th century.

Other outstanding papers of the era were: Timothy Thomas Fortune's New York Age, John Mitchell's Richmond Planet, Sol Johnson's Savannah Tribune, Phillip Bell and W. J. Powell's San Francisco Elevator, Nick Chiles' Topeka Plaindealer, John Murphy's Afro-American which, along with the Indianapolis Recorder, the New Iowa Bystander, and the Houston Informer and Texas Freeman, are the other four that



are still going.

Harvard-educated William Monroe Trotter practically opened the 20th century with his Boston Guardian. Much like Rev. T. J. Smith's Pittsburgh Broad-Axe, it let the chips fall where they may.

The Guardian was soon followed by Robert Sengstacke Abbott's Chicago Defender in 1905, P. B. Young's Norfolk Journal and Guide, James Anderson's Amsterdam News, Robert L. Vann's Pittsburgh Courier, Roscoe Dunjee's Oklahoma Black Dispatch, and Joseph and William Mitchell's St. Louis Argus.

With the departure of George White of North Carolina from the Congress in 1901, the long night of disenfranchisement, nurtured by the Ku Klux Klan and grandfather clauses in state constitutions, set in for 27 years.

[[4 pictures in upper right column]]

Go North

But Robert Abbott, unlike Boston-reared Trotter, was born and reared in Savannah, Ga., and educated at Hampton Institute of Virginia. He knew that no amount of cursing and protesting and demanding alone would improve the plight of black people as long as they remained in the South. The answer, as he saw it, was to get as many black people as possible out of the South. And he launched his campaign to bring them North.

By the time his campaign got well underway, World War I had begun and there arose a demand in the North for black workers to help man the steel mills, stockyards, and other industries. During and following the war, Abbott's Chicago Defender carried red headlines week after week, reading: "Negroes are Coming North by the Thousands."

Largely, it has been the voting leverage of blacks in the North that has made the difference in civil rights advance. And Abbott and his Defender are rated as the most significant black journalistic achievement of the first half of the 20th century.

His paper - now directed by one of his nephews, John H. Sengstacke, has become one of three black dailies in continental U.S. The other three are the Atlanta Daily World, founded by W. A. Scott in 1932, the New York Challenger, launched in March by Thomas H. Watkins, Jr. of the New York Recorder.

In addition to the Defender, Sengstacke owns the New Pittsburgh Courier, The Michigan Chronicle, and the Memphis Tri-State Defender. John Murphy's Baltimore Afro-American was expanded into a chain by his sons Carl and Arnett and other members of the family. The chain includes Afro-American in Newark, Richmond, and Washington which absorbed the Washington Tribune.

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