The Black press before the Civil War

Because it was against plantation law in pre-Civil War years to teach African-American slaves to read, almost all of the African-American newspapers of this period were published in the North and directed toward ex-slaves, free African-Americans and abolitionist Whites.

However, the emphasis was clear — all of the early newspapers — with one exception — addressed the issue of slavery and the means by which it should be abolished, or the means by which African-Americans could escape it.

This did not mean that the early publishers were of one mind on how to resolve the issue of slavery. Indeed, they were not.

So in 1829, after the editors of the first African-American newspaper, **Freedom's Journal**, had become divided over the best path for African-Americans to take on the issue, the paper was terminated, after two years of publication.

John Russwurm, who believed in colonization, would emigrate to Liberia where he became editor of the **Liberia Herald**.

And on May 29, 1829, Samuel Cornish, who had left **Freedom's Journal** only six months after its founding, would publish the **Rights of All**, a newspaper that reflected his abolitionist philosophy.

This split between the editors was a harbinger of the debates that would follow in the African-American press.

Many of the pre-Civil War newspapers dealt not only with this basic debate over slavery, but other issues as well.

For example: What strategies would the anti-slavery movement take? Would they be militant or passive?

Would Whites assume leadership roles in this movement? What would become of African-Americans after slavery? Would they integrate totally into White society?

Would they emigrate to Canada? Would they live in segregated societies? Would segregated societies be equal to White societies?

These were the debates that raged among the free African-Americans that were reflected in the dozens of abolitionist newspapers they founded in the United States and Canada before the Civil War.

In many instances, the names they chose for their newspapers reflected the philosophy they espoused.

Frederick Douglass's **North Star**, named after the star followed by escaped slaves, is an example of a name that provides some indication of the philosophy of the editors.

The organizational forum for these debates was the African-American convention movement which began in 1830.

The African-American press published the convention movement's position papers, resolutions, proceedings and general news.

To some extent, this mirrored the way in which the early White-owned abolitionist press operated. It served as the communication vehicle for the national anti-slavery organizations that flourished in the North.

What little knowledge we have of the pre-Civil War African-American newspapers we owe to scholars like Armistead S. Pride, Carter R. Bryan, Warren Brown and Martin E. Dann, and to an 1852 publication of Martin R. Delany.

In most instances, knowledge of early African-American newspapers is not empirical. We assume they existed because they were mentioned in some other historical document.

But they were short-lived and a few copies remain. Thus, we rarely have a definitive idea of what positions their editors took.

Some of the early African-American newspapers are available on microfilm at the Schomburg Collection of the New York City Public Library and the Library of Congress.

Others are kept in libraries, historical collections, and in church and personal archives in the United States and Canada.

John B. Russwurm Samuel Cornish

In a 1969 monograph titled: "Negro Journalism in American Before Emancipation," Carter R. Bryan lists 43 African-American newspapers published before ratification of the 13th Amendment.

Twenty-one of these were founded in New York state, six in Pennsylvania, four in Ohio, four in New Orleans, three in San Francisco, two in Canada and one each in Kansas, Massachusetts and Georgia.

Three — one each from New York, Philadelphia and Augusta — are called The Colored American

Two others— The Colored Man's Journal (New York) and The Colored Citizen (Cincinnati, Ohio) — reflect similar titles.

The Colored Citizen, published from 1862 to 1865 was circulated widely among African-American soldiers who enlisted in the Union Army.

Two newspapers were called **The Elevator** — one from Albany, N.Y. and one from San Francisco. Two others were from Canada.

The first of the Canadian papers, **The Voice of the Fugitives**, was published around 1848 by escaped slave Henry Bibb, largely for readership in the United States.

The second one, the **Provincial Freeman**, was published around 1854 and was the first published by an African-American woman — Delaware-born Mary Ann Shadd. It promoted emigration to Canada.

Another of the papers listed by Bryan, **The Pine and Palm of New York City**, was published for about five months in 1860 and is described as a propaganda organ for the **"Haytian Emigration Movement."**

The most unique and unusual of the group, however, are three of the New Orleans newspapers.

The New Orleans Creole, published from June 1856 to January 1857, was the first African-American newspaper published in the South, the first African-American daily published anywhere, and one of a rare breed in that it was against the abolitionist movement.

L'Union — The Union, published from September 1862 to July 1864, and the **New Orleans Tribune — La Tribune de la Nouvelle-Orleans**, published from July 1864 to February 1869, were the first bi-lingual newspapers published for African-Americans.

The other New Orleans paper, **The Black Republican**, was published from April 15, 1865 to 1868.

Martin R. Delany's **Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States**, lists seven additional newspapers from this period, some of which apparently are precursors of the ones on Bryan's list.

Thus, at least 50 African-American newspapers were published before the Civil War was over and the 13th Amendment was ratified.

A Family Friend Salutes Black History Month

The flame lives on.

Shining through the years, the brilliance of Black excellence lights our way through history.

We pause to salute them. We support the generation taking up the torch, lighting new paths to the mountaintop.

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Good Food and Good Food Ideas

History of the Afro-American Newspaper

By Ida Peters

Twenty-seven years after the Civil War, a former slave set free by the Maryland Emancipation Act of 1863, purchased the name and printing equipment of a one page weekly going out of business. He was John H. Murphy, Sr.

Born 1840

John Henry Murphy was born in Baltimore, Christmas Day, 1840. His father, Benjamin Murphy was a whitewasher. In those days, all back yards had wooden fences and they had to be painted with white creosote paint to keep out rot.

"Uncle Bennie," as he was called was a singer of note. He led the Bethel A.M.E. Church choir for 15 years. His mother, Susan C. Murphy seemed to have impressed him mostly by her patience and insistence on cleanliness about the house.

Served With Grant

When President Abraham Lincoln issued a call for colored troops in the Civil War, John Murphy, then 24, enlisted in Company G of the 30th Regiment Infantry, U.S. Colored Troops, Maryland Volunteers and rose to the rank of first sergeant.

The regiment served 21 months with General Grant in the Wilderness Campaign and the siege of Petersburg, towards joining General Sherman with North Carolina and taking part in final battles which resulted in the capture of General Johnstone.

Photo of John H. Murphy, Sr. (1840-1922) on Dec. 20, 1920 in his study on Druid Hill Avenue in Baltimore. From (L) D. Arnett, Dan, George B., John Jr. and Carl.

The war over, Murphy returned to Baltimore and met and married Martha Howard (1846-1914) of Montgomery County, Maryland. She was a founder of the Colored Young Woman's Christian Association (YWCA) and served as its president for 17 years.

Sunday School Helper

His first venture in the newspaper field was the Sunday School Helper which he set up and printed himself to create interest in Sunday school work. At the time, he was District Sunday School Superintendet of Hagerstown District A.M.E. Church.

He inaugurated the first Sunday School Convention, then called Institutions, which has taken up and adopted as a regular feature of Sunday School work in that denomination.

Auction

When the Northwestern Family Supply Company failed and the Rev. W. Alexander was left with the Afro-American, a one page advertising sheet, on his hands, John Murphy bought the name and printing equipment at auction for $200 down, a sum he borrowed from his wife, in 1892 and maintained it as a continuous weekly publication for 30 years.

Imperial Potentate

Although he was a member of the Elks and a member of Enterprise Lodge of the Prince Hall Masons, he worked hardest for the Shriners of which he became Imperial Potentate.

He was a member of the Board of Managers of Provident Hospital and a former presidentof the Negro Press Association. At the time of the G.A.R. Encampment in Indianapolis, he was one of the two Post Commanders present.

A member and lecturer in the National Business League in the early 1900's, he was also president of the Negro Publishers Association.

Died 1922

He remained publisher of the AFRO for 30 years until his death in 1922. He left to his ten children, what was then the largest Black newspaper plant in the country operated and manned by 138 employees with a circulation of 14,000.

John J. Murphy, Sr. had 10 children, five girls and five boys. All of the children helped at the newspaper, no matter how young, running the hand press, gathering

(Continued on Page E9)

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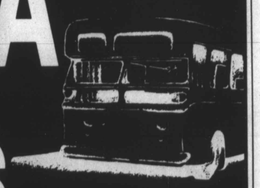
It All Started On A Bus...



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