

Robert S. Abbott and the *Chicago Defender* – Powerhouse of the Black Press

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Overview

In March of 1827 the first Black newspaper in America, *Freedom's Journal*, was published by John Brown Russwurm and Samuel Eli Cornish. In that first issue's front page editorial Russwurm and Cornish clearly stated their motivation behind starting the paper: "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us" (Burroughs 4). The Black press in America was establishing their voice, a voice long ignored by the mainstream white press. From this point on not only would Blacks in America have sources that they could turn to for news and

information concerning their own community, they would also have venues through which to solidify a national identity.

Thirty-five years later in 1862 the Black press in the state of Illinois would welcome its first paper, the *Weekly Gazette*. Soon after, in 1878, Chicago would see the birth of the *Conservator*, the city's first Black newspaper. But the most famous and influential Black newspaper to come out of Chicago, Illinois, the *Chicago Defender*, would not be published until 1905. The *Defender* was published in a time when roughly seven out of ten Blacks in the U.S. were literate (Senna 111), and according to Robert Sengstacke Abbott biographer Roi Ottley, "with the exception of the Bible, no publication was more influential among the Negro masses" (Suggs 11). Through the *Defender*, its founder Robert S. Abbott would not only change the face of the Black press in the United States but also play a crucial role in shaping the nation's Black communities.

An Icon is Born

Robert S. Abbott had a longstanding relationship with the printed word. Growing up he had a part-time job at the print shop of the *Echo* in his hometown of Savannah, Georgia. He also helped out at his own step-father's paper, the *Woodville Times*. He even chose printing as his major course of study in college at the Hampton Institute. After graduation Abbott spent time working at both the *Echo* and the *Times*, but he aspired to make an adequate living wage and found that printing jobs were not able to provide enough. Abbott decided law would be a suitable area of study, so he moved to Chicago and enrolled in the Kent Law School. Upon completing his studies he found he could not be hired as a lawyer because of his race and dark color, and once again Abbott found he would not be able to support himself in his chosen profession. (Senna)

Three Black newspapers, the *Broad-Ax*, the *Illinois Idea*, and the *Conservator*, were already in existence in Chicago when Abbott decided to return to his printing roots and start his own paper (Senna 104). The first issue of the *Defender* was released on May 5, 1905. The paper's staff consisted of only Abbott and the daughter of his landlady, Harriet Plummer Lee. Much credit is due to Lee for providing crucial help at the start of the paper. She provided the facilities for the paper's production as well as supported Abbott through much of that unpredictable early time of the paper. She made him meals, loaned him money, and allowed him the use of her telephone, among other things. Abbott was able to thank Lee properly when years later the paper's considerable profit provided him with enough money to buy Lee and her daughter a new home (Senna 106).

While the *Chicago Tribune* sold itself as the “world’s greatest newspaper”, Abbott sold the *Defender* as the “world’s greatest weekly”. He said he very purposefully chose the title “Defender” to emphasize the role his paper would have as an “advocate of black progress and an adversary of racism” (Senna 108). Abbott’s original motto, “American Race Prejudice Must Be Destroyed”, can still be seen in the masthead of the *Defender* today (Suggs 24).

From its very inception the *Defender* stood out in the crowd of Black newspapers in the U.S. Before the *Defender* the Black press had an almost modest way of reporting news to their community. In the pages of the *Defender* Abbott chose instead to emulate the sensational “yellow journalism” style used by newspaper icons Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Headlines were printed in large and bold red print, and crimes were reported with shocking detail (Simmons 27, 30). Readers were clearly drawn to the style as circulation numbers and readership of the *Defender* boomed (Gosnell). Although one can be critical of this style of journalism and its use of sensationalism and shock to sell papers, Abbott’s use of this style brought “profit and stability” to a Black newspaper at a time when so many other Black newspapers were struggling to stay afloat (Simmons 29).

Abbott employed numerous other techniques that made the *Defender* unique in its approach to relaying news to the Black community. For example, Abbott rarely used the terms “Black” or “Negro” as descriptors of colored people in his paper. Instead he used the term “race people” when referring to those in the Black community (Senna 108). Probably most notable was his decision to add the descriptor “white” after the names of non-Blacks in the paper (Chgo Commission 564). Mainstream papers had developed and maintained the habit of placing the descriptor “Negro” after the names of Blacks printed in their papers. Abbott decided to turn the tables on the mainstream press and use their own device against them. Never once did the descriptor “Negro” come after the printed name of a Black in the *Defender*, yet the descriptor “white” was often found accompanying the names of non-Blacks in the paper, even the names of American presidents (Soldiers without Swords 1998).

Journalism style and resulting financial success due to increased reader volume were not the only things that made the *Defender* stand out amongst its peers. It happens to be the first unionized black paper in the U.S. as well as the first integrated one (Senna 107). And Abbott’s creative means of distributing the paper in the south, by using train waiters and porters as delivery boys along southern train routes, would later become a very popular means of distributing the *Defender* during wartime, when U.S. Postal services would often delay or suspend altogether the distribution of the paper in south (Mullen 44).

Having established itself stylistically as a pioneer of the Black press, the *Defender* became the standout Black newspaper in the U.S. And in inhabiting this prestigious spot it positioned itself to become one of the most influential supporters of a movement that changed the shape of the Black community in the U.S. forever.

The *Defender's* Role in the Great Migration

There were many factors that led up to the Great Migration in the early 1900s. Hostility toward the Black community in the southern U.S. was high, with lynchings and general violence prevalent. Economically speaking times were nearly as hard, as both poor weather and infestation had wiped out crops and put a hold on the opportunities normally extended to the Black southern labor force (Simmons 31).

It was at this crucial time in U.S. history that Abbott used the *Defender's* influence and prestige to encourage the Black southern community to leave the struggles of the South behind for a new and better life in the North. "Most migrants connected freedom with the urban North", and Abbott saw to it that Chicago became the city of focus (Baldwin 14). Chicago was a natural destination in the minds of many migrants because of the Illinois Central Railroad and the direct transportation available via the railroad from the deep south (Suggs 26). Abbott worked to encourage this movement by securing group travel rates on the railroad for migrants traveling in groups of at least ten (Suggs 27), and he was even able to encourage the trains to provide extra cars during times of travel (Simmons 34).

By 1920 the *Defender's* circulation was estimated to be around 283,571 with a full two-thirds of all sales being non-local. The Audit Bureau of Circulations did not monitor circulation numbers for black newspapers, so estimates of the *Defender's* circulation at this time in history could be even higher than imagined (Suggs 25). The *Defender's* non-local sales were so high, particularly in the south, that Abbott's message was therefore able to reach a very large community. In 1916 the *Defender* ran an article that proclaimed:

"Go to it, my Southern Brothers, the North needs you. Better a thousand times, even if it was true, to run chances of being nipped by the fingers of Jack Frost than to shake off this mortal coil at the end of the lynchers' rope, or to the crackling of the lynchers' fire brand" (Serrin 187)

A specific date was even set to encourage mass migration. May 15, 1917 was the date picked for the "Great Northern Drive" (The Negro in Chicago, 1922).

Southern Blacks responded to the *Defender's* message of movement to the North with hope. "It was said that old men who had never known how to read, bought the paper simply because it was regarded as precious" (Chicago Commission 87). There was also an obvious thirst for more

information. Letters from potential migrants who were thinking of making the move up north poured in to the paper, addressed not only to the *Defender* but also to Abbott himself:

“Mr. R. S. Abbott

Sir: I have been reading the *Defender* for one year or more and last February I read about the Great Northern Drive to take place May 15th on Thursday and now I can hear so many people speaking of an excursion to the North on the 15th of May for \$3.00. My husband is in the North already working, and he wants us to come up in May, so I want to know if it is true about the excursion. I am getting ready and oh so many others also, and we want to know if that's true so we can be in the Drive. So please answer at once. We are getting ready” (The Negro in Chicago, 1922, pg 92)

As a result of the *Defender's* widespread encouragement, Chicago's “Black Belt” (the Black Chicago neighborhood that got its name from the railroad tracks that surrounded the area) became home for a large number of southern Black migrants (Senna 108). Between 1910 and 1920 alone Chicago's black population increased by an astounding 148% to 109,458 people total (Suggs 25). And instead of leaving this new migrant community to fend for itself, the *Defender* took it upon itself to publish job opportunities and want-ads from local employers as well as housing and social life information (De Santis 13).

During the Great Migration there were worries and suspicions coming from the non-Black community in the South. The South was losing its main labor force in large numbers, and northern Black newspapers, particularly the *Defender*, were “declared subversive and seditious” (Suggs 26). Panic was also evident in the North. Northern mainstreams newspapers, including Chicago's three dailys the *Tribune*, the *Daily News*, and the *Herald Examiner*, all embellished the number of Black migrants coming from the South and used the migration to blame the Black community for adding “diseases, vices, and low standards of living” to an already overtaxed city (Suggs 27).

While the *Defender* did not create the Great Migration, it did encourage it wholeheartedly. And the far-reaching influence of the paper meant this encouragement became a major factor in changing the face of Black America. The Black community's evolution from “rural southern laborers” to “urban northern industrial workers” can be seen as a direct result of the *Defender's* support of the transition. The *Defender* became not only the symbol of the opportunities and freedom available in the north (Tuttle 91), but it also demonstrated that it had the power and influence to move a community to action, a power that would prove itself worthy of government attention during upcoming times of war.

The Stance of the Black Press During Times of War

World War I provided ample opportunities for news coverage for all newspapers in the U.S., both those in the mainstream as well as the Black press. There was a notable difference, however, in what was being reported by both sets of papers. The Black press paid particular attention to accounts of discrimination and substandard conditions for black soldiers. Accused by the government of being unpatriotic (Suggs 29), the Black press remained determined to alert not only the Black community but the entire country of the poor treatment of Blacks in the military. They were “adamant in denouncing the nation’s hypocrisy as defenders of world peace while at the same time tolerating white violence against blacks in this country” (Suggs 30).

Again fear prompted southern communities to reaction, as it had during the Great Migration. Southern whites informed federal agents that they suspected the *Defender* was being used by Germans to incite black on white violence in the U.S. They admitted to also suspecting German influence to be behind the Great Migration (Kornweibel 38). As a result a halt on U.S. postal distribution of the *Defender* was enacted in many southern areas (Kornweibel). Abbott’s practice of using train waiters and porters as *Defender* distributors was remarkably useful during this time period, as he was able to bypass the U.S. postal service altogether by using this means of distribution.

World War II coverage by the Black press reads similar in tone to World War I coverage. Black soldiers’ contributions to the war efforts were highlighted, and the poor treatment of black soldiers was denounced as racist and hypocritical. Another champion of the Black press, the Pittsburgh *Courier*, initiated the “Double V” campaign during this time period. The two V’s stood for victory, not only abroad but at home in the U.S. as well (Suggs 42). This campaign was successfully supported by other members of the Black press, the *Defender* included.

In 1942 Langston Hughes started writing a regular column for the *Defender*. Hughes said he grew up reading the *Defender* and credited the paper for making him the “race man” he had become as evident in his beliefs and writings (De Santis 14). He later called the paper “the journalistic voice of a largely voiceless people” (De Santis 13). Hughes contributed to the *Defender’s* by submitting not only editorials but also poetry which exposed American hypocrisy:

“Ain’t it funny how some white folks

Have the strangest way

Of acting just like Hitler

In the U.S.A.?”

(Mullen 64)

Clearly with writers like Hughes on staff the *Defender* became even more susceptible to accusations of being sympathetic and supportive of communism (Mullen). During both World War I and World War II the U.S. government monitored the Black press and the red influence (Mullen 54), fearful of the far-reaching power the Black press had on the Black community's actions and the resulting unrest they thought would ensue if the Black press was allowed to promote communism.

Abbott's "Duty" to his Community – the *Defender's* Shortcomings

In respect to the popular debates between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois and their promotion of vocational education and classical education, it is easy to cast Abbott as a proponent of Washington and the vocational argument. As a Hampton Institute graduate and product of the industrial educational model himself, Abbott "embodied the entrepreneurial ethos for black upward mobility set down by Washington" (Mullen 44). He also disagreed with the ideas DuBois proposed concerning the talented tenth. Abbott believed that the "the black masses, not the black classes, were the true leaders" (Senna 107).

Since Abbott "thought of himself as an example of what Negroes could accomplish if they were given a chance" (Drake and Cayton 400), he believed that one of his duties was to "civilize the southern migrant" (Mullen 45). Abbott ran an etiquette section in the *Defender* with the aim to lay out general rules and advice for the new migrants who had arrived in Chicago during the Great Migration. He advised: "Don't use vile language in public places, don't act discourteously to other people in public places, don't allow yourself to be drawn into street brawls, don't use liberty as a license to do as your please" (Mullen 45). In addition to these "suggestions", reports of Abbott speaking disparagingly about his own race are also noted. Abbott biographer Roi Ottley quotes Abbott as saying "When I consider the whole range of social behavior, I am almost tempted to say that we are just a little more than educated apes" (Mullen 45). While clearly working through the *Defender* as an advocate and protector of the Black community, he could also be accused of simultaneously belittling his own race through demeaning suggestions and statements.

At the time of his control of the *Defender* Abbott had also been criticized for making poor choices in news coverage. During the summer of 1919, dubbed the "Red Summer", riots fueled by racial tensions broke out all over the U.S. The Great Migration had aggravated housing and labor tensions already evident in major urban areas throughout the country (Davis 18). Abbott was directly criticized for deciding to run a "box score of the dead and injured" during the

Chicago riot, which was seen as “race encouragement to even the score when one race fell behind in its number of dead” (Simmons 40).

The *Chicago Whip*, a local competitor to Abbott’s *Defender*, launched the “Don’t buy where you can’t work” campaign in 1929, urging the Black community in Chicago to boycott merchants in the city who were discriminatory in their hiring processes. Abbott was criticized yet again, this time for not respecting the campaign by continuing to run advertisements from white merchants who were being targeted in the boycott. Even with the *Defender*’s financial success, it, like most Black newspapers, could not afford to lose advertisers (Suggs 32, Drake and Cayton 412), so Abbott made the decision to not pull any advertisements from the paper. He was accused a being too profit-driven (Davis 20), almost to the point of forsaking the paper’s integrity and responsibility to the Black community. It should be noted that by the 1940s over three-fourths of the *Defender* advertising revenue did in fact come from white advertising sources (Suggs 41). And when the advertisements in the paper were from Black proprietors, they were often purely commercial or even contradictory to the ideology and ideals of the Black press altogether (Davis). For example, Madame C. J. Walker, the leading advertiser in the Black press as a whole and the *Defender* specifically, became rich by developing and promoting her own line of beauty products and cosmetics made by and for the Black community (Davis 21). What kind of statement is being made when the leading Black advertiser in the Black press is promoting skin lighteners and hair straighteners? Instead of promoting self-acceptance and self-respect, these types of commercial ads only sought to promote the idolization of white society.

The *Defender*’s Place in Modern Day America

By the 1930s the *Defender* was losing it’s stronghold as it lost readers to the Pittsburgh’s *Courier* newspaper (Suggs 40). Robert S. Abbott died in 1940, and his nephew John H. Sengstacke, also a Hampton Institute grad, was taking over the paper at a time of diminishing overall numbers in both readership and profit (Mullen 47). The 1950s and 1960s brought plenty of significant moments for coverage in the Black press, and the *Defender* was even able to make the transition to becoming a daily newspaper during this era, but the overall importance and influence of the paper had long ago reached its peak. The country had also recently transitioned to getting news coverage from television instead of by reading newspapers, and as Henry Lewis Suggs acknowledged in his book The Black Press in the Middle West, 1865-1985, “what newspaper circulation could complete with the hundreds of millions of worldwide viewers” tuning in to TV coverage of Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech (Suggs 46)?

Although the *Defender* has lost some of it original star power, its influence is still alive and visible in Chicago today. In 1923 Abbott and the *Defender* introduced the Bud Billiken page, the first newspaper section for children. Abbott then helped organize the Bud Billiken Day

parade and picnic in 1929 to showcase children from the community and specifically honor those who sold the newspaper. The parade, still held in Chicago every second Saturday in August, is the largest parade in the country and more importantly a symbol of the strength of the Black community in the city (budbillikenparade.com/history).

In an article for the *New York Amsterdam News*, writer Todd Burroughs said “the Black press continues because assaults from white American continue” (Burroughs 4). According to Burroughs, while racism persists in the U.S. there will continue to be a need for the Black press. Indeed it is easy to see that certain problems Abbott confronted back at the inception of the *Defender* are still prevalent today. When Abbott decided to use the descriptor “white” in print after the names of non-Blacks in response to the mainstream newspapers’ use of the descriptor “Negro”, he probably hoped this practice would no longer be an issue one hundred years later. Yet a recent article from the *Defender* itself shines a light on the fact that this dual practice is still used today: “The ritual preface of the word ‘Black’ in front of any and every achievement or breakthrough that an African-American makes is insulting, condescending and minimizes their achievement. That’s a burden whites don’t have. They succeed or fail solely as individuals” (Hutchinson 11/12/08).

But perhaps just as important as remaining a firm voice against racism in the U.S., the Black press is still needed to encourage a cohesive community identity. Back in 1922, George W. Gore said “the Negro paper has an unlimited field because of its personal relationship to its readers” (Gore 25). This personal relationship is still evident in modern articles of the *Defender*, as noted recently in an article published the day Barack Obama won the election for president of the U.S.: “A nation that 43 years ago needed a Civil Rights Act to even guarantee Black people the right to vote has now seen that hard-won legislation brings about a nation-changing electoral occurrence: the election of a Black man as president” (Defender Staff Report 11/5/08). This same article ends with the following group statement (the emphasis added is my own): “*He’s done us proud.*” The excitement and pride that is conveyed in this article is almost tangible, and it is excitement and pride that has been most determinedly fought for by members of the Black community in the U.S. What better venue to share this good news than the historic *Defender*?

Activities

I VIDEO

To establish student interest the teacher should start the “Black Press” lesson plan with the film “Soldiers Without Swords”, which outlines the history of the Black press in the U.S. The film can be shown all in one sitting or be divided up into its individual sections for shorter viewings.

II RESEARCH

As a follow up to the film, students will do a short research project (2-3 pages) on one of the historical figures in the Black press. Topics can include but are not limited to John Brown Russwurm and Samuel Eli Cornish, Richard S. Abbott, Claude Barnett, Ida B. Wells, Charlotta Bass, and Marcus Garvey. Papers should include a brief life history as well as a description of how that person contributed to the formation or preservation of the Black press.

III NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT

The Black press was well-known for both revealing problems in and promoting opportunities for the Black community. In this section of the “Black Press” lesson plan, students will be responsible for reporting on an issue unique to their own community, with “community” standing for any group that the student feels special membership to (race or ethnicity, religion, neighborhood or area of the city, etc). Students can opt to either expose a problem confronting their community or highlight a particular strength. If the student decides to report on a problem, they should also attempt to suggest a solution to the problem.

IV NEWSPAPER

The final portion of the “Black Press” lesson will be the assembly of a classroom newspaper. Students in the class will be responsible for development of all sections of the paper – front page

news, arts and entertainment, sports, business, comics, etc. The teacher can chose to highlight the best research papers and reports in a section of the paper itself.