Black Print

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Printing arrived in the Americas in 1539, in Mexico City. A hundred years later, the first press, owned by Elizabeth Glover, was established in Cambridge Massachusetts shortly after the first slaves arrived in August 1619, in the then English colony of Virginia. Over the next 200 years print grew rapidly to cater for a burgeoning and increasingly literate population.

Stereotypes & Steam

'Between 1800 and 1840 literacy in the North rose from 75% to between 91 & 97%'– FEE

The word stereotype originated in letterpress printing at the end of the 18th century. Only later, from the beginning of the 19th century, was it used figuratively, in the sense we are now most familiar with.

For a good summary of 18th- & 19th-century innovations in the printing industry, papermaking, and bookmaking, see *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 3, pp. 40–69

[**1**] *Pamphlets of Protest*, p. 3

The birth of African American printing and publishing coincides with a new momentum, a rising tide of anti-slavery and immediatist abolitionist movements weary of 'indefinite deferral'. Their voices were disseminated and amplified through millions of printed pages of broadsides, pamphlets and books. The spread of their message was further aided by technological innovations of the Industrial Revolution, including the late eighteenth-century 'invention' of stereotype printing; innovations to typecasting in the 1830s

and ’40s, and the steam-powered rotary printing press invented by New Yorker Richard Hoe in 1847. His brilliant idea it was to print from a revolving cylinder rather than a flat bed. It was arguably the most significant innovation to the printing press since Gutenberg. At about the same time too, innovations in paper-making further reduced the cost of printing, so that in the United States, for example, between 1830 and 1850, the cost of print production fell a colossal 600%.[1]

Richard March Hoe’s steam-powered ten-feed rotary printing press (1846-48), the kind that transformed print into mass media

The Black Pamphleteers

Rev. Richard Allen. Picture source: The New York Public Library Digital Collections

Both Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were born into slavery in Delaware. At sixteen, Jones was separated from his family when his mother and siblings were sold, and he was moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Allen was also torn from his family at a young age when his mother and two of his five siblings were sold to another slave owner. Jones and Allen were later members of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, but suffered from discrimination and segregated worship. Things came to a head in 1792 when Black worshipers were forcibly removed for inadvertently sitting in an area reserved for white congregants. Allen and Jones resolved to found their own church. In 1787, they founded the Free African Society (FAS), forerunner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church or AME, established in 1794 – the first Black church in Philadelphia, and one of the very first in the country.

[**2**] On Mathew Carey's role, see Sally Griffith's, 'Total dissolution of the bonds of society', in *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation*; and Philip Gould (2000)

In 1793, while Jones and Allen were raising funds for their new church, Philadelphia was struck by a yellow fever epidemic that killed 5,000, and displaced another 15,000 people, among them George Washington. Many in the Black community heeded calls for help in treating the sick, taking care of their families and even burying the dead. In November of the same year, Mathew Carey,[2] a prominent local publisher and bookseller, who had emigrated to America a decade earlier, wrote and published an account of the epidemic, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever*. Despite praising Allen and Jones, Carey suggested that local African Americans had not only caused the outbreak, but that some had stolen from abandoned homes and otherwise profited from it. Carey's pamphlet was published in three editions in as many weeks.

Title-page and opening pages of the pamphlet published by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in 1794. Printed for the authors by the recently established printer and bookseller William Woodward, who incidentally later printed for Thomas Jefferson. Read the pamphlet online at the US National Library of Medicine

[**3**] *Narrative*, 1794, p. 2

Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, compelled 'to step forward and declare facts as they really are',[3] returned fire in a 28-page refutation. It was also a declaration that mischaracterizations and accusations would no longer be met with silence. The pamphlet was successful in softening Carey's stance, and led him to later join the abolitionist cause.

For the history of the protest pamphlet and black pamphleteering between the American Revolution and the Civil War, see the superb *Pamphlets of Protest*

[**4**] Lapsansky, 1997, p. 61

Just as white supremacists were using print to slander Black communities, spread disinformation and stall the abolitionist movement, it could also be used to publicly and immediately counter it. Before Black newspapers, the protest pamphlet was an essential foil in parrying racist propaganda and stereotypes. Philip Lapsansky goes as far as to describe the Allen and Jones pamphlet as 'the first African American polemic in which black leaders sought to articulate black community anger and directly confront an accuser'.[4]

"Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will." – Frederick Douglass

On July 17, 1794, Samuel Magaw, a white preacher, delivered the inaugural sermon of Allen's newly established Black church. In it he expressed that the congregation should be grateful to white folk for helping them; that although they had been kidnapped from a pagan country, they had had the good

fortune to wind up in a Christian one! What's more, the Black congregation should also be thankful to white Christians for emancipating them from slavery. And to those not yet free, Magaw proposed that they 'should submit in quietness'. On this occasion, print again went to work to set the record straight. Absalom Jones quickly published a response to Magaw's paternalistic – and racist – sermon. These early protest pamphlets were inexpensive to produce, could be quickly printed on demand, and reached large audiences. They are in many respects forerunners of Black newspaper publishing.

The Black Press

[**5**] Source: AAS; and *The Library of Congress Civil War Desk Reference*, p. 89

[**6**] On the Postal Acts of 1792, 1845, & 1879, see the *Encyclopedia of American Journalism*, pp. 399–401

American Independence guaranteed 'freedom of the press' – now written into the Constitution, no less. The early nineteenth century witnessed a newspaper boom. By the 1830s, about 600 newspapers circulated in the United States; by 1850, the number had risen to 2,526, with a combined annual circulation of 500 million copies. By 1860 there were more than 3,700 titles.[5] This newspaper 'big bang' was driven not only by rapid economic growth, urbanization, evolved infrastructure (e.g. steam railroads), and telecommunications (i.e. the telegraph), but by cheaper printing; and crucially, government subsidies in the form of tax breaks on newspapers and advertising. What's more, distribution was made more affordable by government sanctioned subsidies in the form of preferential postage rates for newspapers. For example, the Postal Act of 1792 set a maximum cost for newspaper delivery to anywhere in the country to 1.5 cents, compared to a minimum cost of 6 cents (up to 25 cents) per sheet for a letter. The same law facilitated the free flow of news within the

newspaper industry by allowing newspapers to mail their own papers to one another free of charge.[6]

To plead our own cause

[**7**] *Black Journals of the United States*, pp. 184–85; and *Racism, Sexism, and the Media*, pp. 274–75

After almost three decades of gradual emancipation, abolition loomed for New York State, leading some New York newspapers to intensify their public denigration of African Americans. For example, the racist editor of the *New York Enquirer* attacked abolitionists and Black leaders, arguing that African Americans should be denied citizenship.[7] John B. Russwurm and Samuel Cornish determined to use the same medium, the newspaper, to fight back.

Above: Masthead of *Freedom's Journal*. Image source: AAS

On the history of *Freedom's Journal*, see *Freedom's Journal: The First African-American Newspaper*

The following year, 1828, saw the publication of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the first newspaper published by Native Americans.

'[18th-century newspapers] were printed with the assistance of indentured servants and slaves; they promoted the sale of slaves; and they were funded in part by advertisements for slaves who had run away'. — Jackson, 2010, p. 269; on those ads, see Waldstreicher, 1999; and Johnston, pp. 138–39

The debut issue of *Freedom's Journal*[7] was published March 16, 1827, just two weeks before New York State finally abolished

slavery. It's co-editors, Russwurm and Cornish had founded the first Black newspaper, owned, edited, and published by African Americans. It was distributed throughout eleven states and was even sold in Europe.

Black newspapers could henceforth serve as a bulwark against a still rising tide of racist misrepresentations, racial stereotypes and unabashed white supremacy. In 1827, on the front page of the debut issue of the first Black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, Russwurm and Cornish made plain their motives:

'We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly…'

Unladylike!

[**8**] *The African American Newspaper*, p. 34

Freedom's Journal ceased publication after just two years, but although short-lived it marked the beginning of the Black press and paved the way for newspapers like *The North Star*, published and edited by Frederick Douglass from 1847. It was the first Black newspaper to have a large circulation even among white readers. Despite – or perhaps because of – the quality and success of Douglass's newspaper, opponents set fire to his house and the *New York Herald* suggested, 'the editor should be exiled to Canada and his presses thrown into the lake.'[8]

Above: Masthead of Frederick Douglass’s *The North Star.* Image source: AAS

Mary Ann Shadd (1823–93)

The founding of another Black newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*, in March 1853, is especially notable. It was the first newspaper in North America to be published by an African American woman. Published in Canada by Mary Ann Shadd, born in Delaware in 1823, the masthead motto read, ‘Self-reliance is the True Road to Independence’. Shadd was a remarkable woman, although she was forced to hide or play down her involvement in running the paper. Such brilliant women in positions of power and influence were sadly rare fixtures in mid-nineteenth-century anywhere.

William Wells Brown, the first-published African American novelist (*Clotel*, 1853), wrote of Shadd:

[**9**] William Wells Brown, *The Rising Son*, 1874, pp. 539-40 (the link is to the 1882 reprint)

‘As a speaker, she ranks deservedly high; as a debater, she is … forcible in her illustrations, biting in her sarcasm, and withering in her rebukes’.[9]

Brown goes on to praise her extraordinary talent for recruiting exceptional employees, writing, ‘this proves the truth of the old adage, “it takes a woman to pick out a good man”’. Mary Ann Shadd was routinely accused of being a trouble-maker, of being indecorous and unladylike! Nevertheless, she persisted, and in 1883, aged 60, she did another brilliantly ‘unladylike’ thing, earning her law degree, the second Black woman in the United States to do so.

White Press, White propaganda

[**10**] On Benjamin Wood, see Menahem Blondheim (ed.), *Copperhead Gore*. (Wood’s newspaper has no relation to the current *New York Daily News*, founded in 1919)

But the fight against the inexhaustible torrent of insidious racist stereotypes and white supremacist propaganda disgorged by the white press did not of course end with emancipation and the abolition of slavery. During and after the Civil War, the *New York Daily News*, with a circulation in excess of 100,000, was one of the biggest newspapers in the country. It was fiercely pro-Confederate, pro-slavery, and unabashedly and decidedly racist. Owned by the controversial Kentucky-born, New York-raised congressman Benjamin Wood,[10] his Southern-sympathetic, anti-Union, anti-Lincoln rhetoric was so extreme that in the Fall of 1861, the government forced the paper’s closure for a year. The paper was also instrumental in inciting violence in the week-long New York Draft (race) riots in July of 1863 by stoking fears that Southern emancipation would flood the North with former slaves who would surely

‘take their jobs’. And this was in New York, one of the country’s principal centers of abolitionist activism.

Southern Horrors

Ida B. Wells (1862–1931). Photo: Univ. of Chicago Photographic Archive

[11] From 1864, its successor, the *New Orleans Tribune*, became the first Black daily newspaper.

The first Black newspaper in the South, the thrice-weekly bilingual French & English *L’Union*,[11] was not published until 1862, coincidentally the very year in which the extraordinary

Ida B. Wells was born – into slavery – in Holly Springs in northern Mississippi. After moving a little north to Memphis, she became the co-owner and editor of the *Memphis Free Speech*. Wells was a brilliant investigative journalist, and was the first to expose the true extent, horrors, and real motives behind lynching. Frederick Douglass wrote to Wells in October 1892:

I have spoken, but my word is feeble in comparison. You give us what you know and testify from actual knowledge. You have dealt with the facts with cool, painstaking fidelity…

Brave woman! you have done your people and mine a service which can neither be weighed nor measured. If American conscience were only half alive, if the American church and clergy were only half christianized, if American moral sensibility were not hardened by persistent infliction of outrage and crime against colored people, a scream of horror, shame and indignation would rise to Heaven wherever your pamphlet shall be read.[12]

[**12**] Quoted from Douglass's letter to Wells published in Wells's, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases*

Wells fearlessly called out the white press for their complicity. Lynch mobs had justified the murder of African Americans by accusing their victims of raping white women. Wells revealed that it was nothing more than a cynical and cruel ruse invented to justify their racist summary executions. After an incident in which an angry white mob attacked her newspaper's office, Wells headed north where she continued her anti-lynching, civil rights, and women's rights campaigning. She fought for those rights until the very end. She died in Chicago in 1931. Earlier this year (2020) she was awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize.

[**13**] *Seeking a Voice*, p. 131

Theodore S. Wright (1797–1847), the tireless African American abolitionist and founder of the American Anti-slavery Society, who had declared the US Constitution to be inherently anti-slavery, likened the first Black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, to 'a clap of thunder' awakening the world from slumber. Perhaps at the time, such praise might have appeared hyperbolic, but in hindsight it was rather prescient. By 1890, there were nearly 600 Black newspapers published in the United States.[13]

"All too often, when we see injustices, both great and small, we think, That's terrible, but we do nothing. We say nothing. We let other people fight their own battles. We remain silent because silence is easier. *Qui tacet consentire videtur* is Latin for 'Silence gives consent.' When we say nothing, when we do nothing, we are consenting to these trespasses against us."
— Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist*

Black Books

My brief biographical sketch of Banneker is based largely on Michael J. Bradley's in *The Age of Genius: 1300 to 1800*, (ch. 10), pp. 127–40

Note: Banneker's *Almanac* might not fit all, necessarily arbitrary, bibliographical definitions of 'book', but it deserves to be included here.

[**14**] You can read Banneker's letter and Jefferson's response at LOC

Largely self-taught engineer, surveyor, astronomer, mathematician, and author, Benjamin Banneker (1731–1806) was born and raised at his grandparents' tobacco farm outside Baltimore. Despite living in rural Maryland and only getting the most rudimentary formal education as a child in the winter

months, Banneker was insatiably curious. Aged 22, he took apart a pocket watch, sketched the workings and proceeded to make a working clock – from wood! Aged 58, Banneker borrowed a telescope and textbooks to teach himself more about astronomy. In 1792, he published his first almanac, or astronomical calendar, printed by five printers in three cities. It received critical acclaim from professional astronomers.

Banneker sent a copy[14] to the secretary of state, one Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson later sent a copy of Banneker's *Almanac* to the Royal Academy of Sciences, in Paris.

Woodcut portrait of Banneker from the cover of his 1795 *Almanac.* Image source: Maryland Historical Society

Banneker was one of just a handful of Black authors published in the eighteenth century. Unlike Banneker, who had grown up free and in relative peace in rural Baltimore County, Phillis Wheatley (*c.* 1753–84) was born in Senegal, kidnapped at aged

seven, and shipped off to Massachusetts where she was sold as a slave to a Boston merchant. Wheatley was the first African American poet to be published in print. Her first published poem appeared in the *New York Mercury* newspaper in December 1767. When she had tried to publish her first volume of poetry in Boston, publishers thought they would need to vouchsafe her work as authentic to convince a skeptical public of Wheatley's authorship. Could readers be convinced that a slave had written such poetry? After passing an examination to confirm her authorship, still no one would publish her. However, in 1773 she traveled to England where, in the same year, her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was published in London. Ignatius Sancho (*c.* 1729–80) famously said of Wheatley, who was still a slave when her book was published in London, that she was a 'genius in bondage'.

Frontispiece and title-page to Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral.*
Published in London, 1773. Photo from the British Library
Before Wheatley's poems were published in London as a book, they appeared in more than a dozen editions, in newspapers, broadsides & pamphlets, both in the United States & in England. See *Early African American Print Culture*, p. 25; and *The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, vol. 3, pp. 394–95

Sancho was an especially accomplished letter-writer. A collection of his letters was first published in London posthumously in 1782 as *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*, thus making him the first published Black Briton. By 1805 it had been published in five editions. Briton Hammon's, *Narrative* (1760); Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts*

and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery (1787); and Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* (1789) were among a small number of other Black authors published in the eighteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic. In Hartford, Connecticut, Ann Plato, the first published African American essayist, was perhaps still a teenager when her book was published in 1841. The first novel by an African American published in the United States was Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*, the story of a young girl's life as an indentured slave in antebellum New England. It was published in Boston, Massachusetts in 1859.

Frontispiece and title-page to *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, published posthumously in London, 1782. The frontispiece portrait of Sancho was engraved by the prolific Florentine engraver Francesco Bartolozzi, then living in

London. He is known for popularizing the stipple method of engraving (dots rather than cross-hatching). Photo: British Library

The AME Book Concern

[**15**] For an excellent history of the *Christian Recorder*, read Eric Gardner's *Black Print Unbound*

Founded in Philadelphia in 1817 by the The African Methodist Episcopal Church, the AME Book Concern was the first African American-owned printer-publisher. From 1853, the Book Concern published the *Christian Recorder*,[15] a periodical that served as a springboard for Black writers like the young Philadelphia schoolteacher, Julia C. Collins (*c.* 1842–65), one of the first female African American novelists, whose unfinished novel *The Curse of Caste, or The Slave Bride* was from 1865 serialized in the *Christian Recorder*. The *Christian Recorder* was also there to report on the above-mentioned Draft Riots of 1863.

Above: The weekly *Christian Recorder*, published in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania by the AME Church.

[**16**] I'm reading – & recommend – Graham Russell Gao Hodges's, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City*, 2010

An Unceasing Tide

It's impossible to adequately introduce David Ruggles[16] (1810–49) in just a sentence or two. He was head of the New York Committee of Vigilance, an organization famous for saving the lives of countless fugitive slaves. An almost superhuman character, a full-hearted abolitionist, a writer, journalist,

printer and publisher; and, incidentally, though not unimportantly, in May 1834, he opened the first Black-owned bookstore in the United States. Ruggles believed unequivocally that print, as an irresistible illuminator and educator, could eradicate racism. He likened it to:

[**17**] As cited in Leon Jackson, 2010, p. 265

'… an engine pouring forth an unceasing tide of information, spreading the knowledge of the present and past ages with the speed of electricity throughout the world; before it ignorance retires and slavery will wield up her ghost'.[17]

But there remained, and remain still, those determined to extinguish that light. It goes without saying that slavery was much worse than physical subjugation, for it aimed to limit intellectual freedoms too. Those attempted limits on the mind were even codified in repressive legislation which aggressively excluded African Americans and other people of color from formal and even informal avenues of education. For example, in 1829–30, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Alabama passed antiliteracy laws that outlawed reading to slaves. North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia banned the teaching of reading and writing to all African Americans, slaves and free alike.[18] After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and then the end of the Civil War in 1865, Black printing and publishing flourished as it rose to the challenge of bringing literacy to tens of thousands previously denied it.

[**18**] See *Slavery in the United States: A Social, Political, and Historical Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, pp. 172–73; and *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, pp. 33–39

Press room of the *Richmond Planet* newspaper, Richmond, Virginia, 1899. Photo from Library of Congress

African American print culture was born in turmoil, in a country torn in two, then patched together again after the Civil War. But resentments, discrimination, and white supremacy never ceased rearing its ugly head. The early pioneers of Black printing and publishing daily risked their lives to make their voices heard: through countless pages of poetry, philosophy, science, religious instruction, tales of heroism and horror, international affairs, stories of Black accomplishments, of Black pride and community building. Black print culture, then, is considerably more than the sum of its extant printed artifacts. It is the complex and unfathomably rich interplay of all its parts, and a reflection of a people, determined, proud, and unwavering in their conviction that Black lives matter. ◉

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