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Amanda Hernandez, author
Dr. Michelle Kuhl, History, faculty adviser

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University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Office of Grants and Faculty Development
800 Algoma Blvd.
Oshkosh, WI 54901
(920) 424-3215
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Amanda Hernandez, author
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Amanda Hernandez graduated from UW Oshkosh in May 2009 with a degree in history. Her work on this paper began in the fall of her senior year as a research project for a U.S. slavery senior history seminar. She is a member of the UW Oshkosh chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (international honor society in history). Amanda will attend Concordia University in fall 2009 to receive her post-baccalaureate teacher certification in elementary education.

Dr. Michelle Kuhl received her Ph.D. from Binghamton University in 2004 in U.S. history. She teaches 19th-century U.S. history (specializing in race and gender) at UW Oshkosh and is currently working on a book about the anti-lynching movement.

Abstract

The creation of the black press was spurred by the growing abolitionist sentiment of the antebellum period in America. The growing press developed different methods to reach free blacks and encourage them to join the abolitionist movement. One approach sought to promote the enrichment and advancement of African Americans within white society, while the other focused on attacking slavery and bringing to the surface its evils. By examining archived antebellum black papers and historians' research, this study considers the effectiveness of both methods of the black press to help bring about the abolition of slavery. A critical analysis of these resources indicates that both approaches were indeed crucial in garnering support for the abolitionist movement and successful in getting free blacks to join the movement.

During the mid-19th century, a growing abolitionist movement spread freedom and anti-slavery rhetoric. The antebellum black press was born out of that trend, allowing free blacks to take up the call for mobilization of their abolitionist sentiments and create their own periodicals and newspapers. Through these publications, African Americans penned their opinions and used their own voices to influence the abolitionist movement. Some publications pushed for the advancement and self-betterment of free blacks within society, while others focused on attacking slavery and pointing out the evils and immorality of the institution itself. Both methods provided free blacks with motivation to work for the abolition of slavery.

Historians vary in their analysis of the antebellum black press. Tripp (1992) argued that the publications that covered the advancement of blacks were more influential than the anti-slavery papers. Hutton (1993) argued that the methods of the black press editors are too varying themselves to be completely analyzed and assessed. While it may be difficult to gauge the results the black press achieved in freeing slaves directly, the effect the methods of the press had on free blacks is too often overlooked by historians like Tripp and Hutton. Using research that included the examination of

collections of antebellum black publications, this paper will show the black press was able to instill a sense of social obligation toward anti-slavery within the middle class of free blacks. This was done by advocating social responsibility and pushing for the formation of a respectable free black middle class.

This paper contains analysis of articles from the black press publications found in the University of Wisconsin bound periodical collection and microfilm via interlibrary loan: *The Colored American* (1837), *Douglass's Monthly* (1859), *The North Star* (1848, 1849), *Freedom's Journal* (1827), *The Anglo-African Magazine* (1859), *The Weekly Anglo-African* (1859), *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* (1852), and *The Emancipator* (1835).

The first black press publication was *Freedom's Journal*, which was printed in March 1827 in New York—the same year that slavery was abolished in the state (Daniel, 1982). The weekly four-page paper was founded and edited by the Rev. Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm. Both were highly educated black men and upstanding members of society. Cornish was an ordained Presbyterian minister, and Russwurm was one of the first African Americans to graduate from college (Tripp, 1992).

Cornish and Russwurm published *Freedom's Journal*, intending to be the first voice of blacks in the press and to replace the overwhelmingly white voices that had been allowed to speak for and about blacks in unfair ways. The editors made this clear from the statement of purpose included in the journal's first issue:

> We wish to plead our cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick [*sic*] been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly, though in estimation of some mere trifles; for though there are many in society who exercise towards us benevolent feelings; still (with sorrow we confess it) there are others who make it their business to enlarge upon the least trifle, which tends to the discredit of any person of colour. (Cornish & Russwurm, 1827, p. 1)

Blacks would use the press as a vehicle of their own to spread their abolitionist sentiments and to clear up misconceptions that had, over the years, been made about blacks.

It was not only the opinion of Cornish, Russwurm, and *Freedom's Journal* that blacks, enslaved or free, had not been portrayed accurately in the press. From the publication of *Freedom's Journal* until the Civil War, more than 40 black-owned and edited newspapers and periodicals emerged across the North, most stating the same purpose as *Freedom's Journal* (Tripp, 1992).

In January 1859, the first issue of *The Anglo-African Magazine* was published. Thomas Hamilton called for all blacks to start writing and fighting for their own freedom. He wrote that the purpose of black newspapers was to give blacks their own voice "in order to assert and maintain their rank as men among men, must speak for themselves, no outside tongue however gifted with eloquence, can tell their story" (p. 1). Hamilton, along with other editors, echoed these sentiments throughout the pages of their papers.

Black press editors wanted to reach out specifically to the literate base of free blacks in the North. Editors knew that it would be futile to attempt to put too much

effort in writing for those enslaved and mostly illiterate in the South (Tripp, 1992). For years, slaveholders had prevented blacks from learning to read and write. As a result, enslaved blacks were not connected to the developing black press. Black editors instead addressed the free black population, hoping they might in turn be inspired to help those still enslaved in the South.

Tate (1998) asserted that the Northern free black resistance was the second half of the rebellion against slavery:

> Northern Black political protest and abolition, on the other hand, consisting of political agitation that clarified the parameters and praxis of struggle, vigilantism, slave rescues, and the Underground Railroad, was the counterpart to the slave rebellions and served to mark free Black resistance in the antebellum era. (p. 767)

The "political protest and agitation" that Tate wrote of took place within the pages of the antebellum black press publications. She explained that the individual efforts of Northern free blacks in aiding rescue efforts and involvement in the Underground Railroad were key in the fight against slavery and in freeing enslaved blacks. But it was the involvement of the black press that put all those components together and laid the foundation of the abolitionist movement. The black press instructed free blacks how they could help end slavery.

Free blacks in the North had the ability to make social changes that could help advance blacks within society. In his book *The Early Black Press in America: 1827 to 1860*, Hutton (1993) wrote about the reliance on the free black class and explained that "from the black press we witness that the middle class assumed more and more responsibility for the advancement of the race, both socially and educationally" (p. 2). Like no other time in history, Hutton's words rang true for the free blacks in the North, and African Americans had a real opportunity to mobilize and use their free status to aid their enslaved counterparts.

Not only did free blacks move without the restraint of chains, but they had the ability to organize and to collaborate with the abolitionist movement for freedom for all blacks. Free blacks could fight slavery from outside of the institution, and the black press realized that the free black population could be its greatest ally.

Many black papers pushed free blacks to take their own futures, as well as the future of their race, into their own hands. These papers stressed self-improvement and advancement for free blacks in order to improve on their place within white society. They wanted to erase the illusion of white superiority by proving the worth of blacks in multiple areas. In the July 23, 1859, issue of *The Weekly Anglo-African*, Hamilton spoke of the need for blacks to take control of their status in society. "We shall direct the attention of the masses to industry, to perseverance, to economy, to self-reliance, to the substantial footing in the land of our birth" (p. 1). Hamilton wanted the black press to focus on these elements to build a respectable base of morals and ethics so blacks could argue against white supremacy.

The black papers highlighted the importance of education, black involvement in politics and culture, and the achievements of black artists, actors, and musicians to their base of free black readers. They also advocated personal improvement by encouraging blacks to maintain high moral standards. The editors believed that if they could directly show that blacks were capable of attaining respectable and high positions

in society, they could build a case refuting the white idea of black inferiority as a reason for black enslavement.

J. Holland Townsend (1859) wrote in *The Anglo-African Magazine* about free blacks diligently ascending in society to gain freedom for all:

> The Revolution that we are engaging in is one of greater moment to us than the dominion of the sea; peacefully and quietly we are fighting the battle; we need no weapons but what are of a radically conservative character…they are more potent than the sinewy arm, have wider sway than the conqueror, with such effectual and potent weapons as the printing press, common school and machine shop on our side, there is no word as fail. (p. 327)

According to Townsend, in the fight against slavery there would be no organized military push of the masses against the slaveholders to free the slaves. The fight would be won with the pen of black press editors, in the classroom by free black children seeking education, and by the calloused hands and sweat on the brows of those working diligently in Northern factories. Abolition was a quiet revolution that would take place on the shoulders of free blacks. It was through hard work and advancement that liberty would be won.

Black leaders wanted to establish their own institutions of learning. They believed educated children could become free of any dependence on whites (Pride & Wilson, 1997). In an issue of *The Colored American* (1837), the editors focused on the importance of childhood education:

> Let us do our part, fill up the schools, and affect a punctual attendance, and the trustees will spare no pains nor expenses in furnishing all the means of a useful and finished education….We are not always to be a downtrodden people. Our infant sons, should we give them suitable advantages, will be as eligible to the Presidency of the United States…and it is our wisdom, if possible, to give them as ample qualifications. (Ray, Cornish, & Bell, 1837, p. 1)

It was thought by black editors that whites who already supported abolition would be drawn to help free blacks who were already proving they could help themselves. Editors of publications like *The Colored American* understood that education was the key to winning over doubters. By using the opportunity that came from education, free blacks would be creating a better future not only for themselves, but for future generations.

These periodicals also focused on the creative and artistic achievements of blacks as a way to show other contributions they made to society. *The Anglo-African Magazine* featured a series in each issue that reviewed a picture gallery depicting slave life at several stages. The publication also featured a "selected items" section that highlighted black actors, authors, poets, and musicians who had found success in the North.

Tripp (1992) wrote in *Origins of the Black Press* that black press editors understood that it was essential to focus on cultural and economic advancement in order to create a more unified black population. Free black actors, artists, and musicians were establishing themselves within Northern society, making names for themselves in the creative arts among whites and blacks alike. Their successes in the arts and

entertainment were a testament to the worth and ability of blacks, and the black press publications sought to use those achievements as a sticking point against the argument that they were inferior to whites.

Black papers also called upon free blacks to raise their moral expectations. Tate (1998) wrote that most black abolitionist leaders believed that freedom would be achieved through a "moral revolution" (p. 772). Most editors felt that whites would seize on any shortcomings or vices blacks demonstrated, generalizing and identifying all blacks with any immoral behavior. So it was preached in the early black press writings that blacks must strive to be socially and morally responsible (Hutton, 1993).

In *The North Star*, Frederick Douglass (1848) advised blacks how to act in social interactions with whites:

> Be reserved, but not sour; grave, but not formal; bold, but not rash; humble, but not servile; patient, but not insensible; constant, but not obstinate; cheerful, but not light. Rather be sweet-tempered, rather than familiar; and intimate with very few, and with those few upon good grounds. (p. 3)

By not giving whites an opportunity to criticize their behavior, black editors and writers like Douglass thought they would be making a case against slavery. They wanted to dispel the stereotype that pegged blacks as violent or unintelligent or as tricksters. Editors urged blacks to maintain a clean social image to keep pro-slavery whites from being able to use any missteps against blacks and to motivate non-slaveholding whites to join in the fight against slavery. It was often a sort of mask that these black papers and periodicals urged their readers to put on.

In an 1837 issue of *The Colored American*, Cornish further emphasized the idea that blacks needed to maintain a respectable public image:

> …all eyes are upon us. Many philanthropic minds are waiting the result of the measures of our improvement before they enlist in the holy cause of the slave. And many tyrants are waiting and praying for our deeper degradation as an opiate for their consciences and an extenuation for their guilt. (p. 2)

This approach sought to prove that through hard work anything was possible. If free blacks were willing to take advantage of the opportunities they had as unbonded men and women, then eventually their progress would benefit all blacks. These articles aimed to motivate free blacks to want to improve themselves and in turn raise the hopes of an entire race.

Merely encouraging good social behavior and education for free blacks was not enough action for some black abolitionist publications. The writers of many of these papers claimed it was their purpose to speak out against the evils of slavery and the atrocities that slaveholders had inflicted upon blacks. These publications directly attacked slavery and slaveholders, often acting as a rallying cry to blacks to join in the abolitionist movement (Tripp, 1992).

Douglass (1849) wrote an editorial in *The North Star* that emphasized his views on the actions blacks should take against slavery.

> For two hundred and twenty-eight years has the colored man toiled over the soil of America, under a burning sun and a driver's lash—plowing, planting, reaping, that white men might roll in ease, their

> hands unhardened by labor, and their brows unmoistened by the waters of genial toil; and now that the moral sense of mankind is beginning to revolt at this system of foul treachery and cruel wrong, and is demanding its overthrow. (p. 2)

Douglass (1849) spoke of outright revolt and revolution by the slaves and urged blacks to seek justice against those who enslaved them. He criticized the behaviors and reactions of white slaveholders, accusing them of not only holding them in slavery, but of a plot to rid the country of blacks no matter their status. In another of his publications, *Douglass's Monthly*, Douglass (1859) wrote eloquently and strongly against any movement by whites to undermine black opposition to slavery. He also chastised other abolitionists that had previously suggested that blacks leave the United States and form their own sovereign state.

Douglass (1859) wrote an editorial in his *Monthly* against that very notion of colonization that some groups had previously suggested: "[They] say to us, go to Africa, raise cotton, civilize the natives, become planters, merchants, compete with slave states in which we simply and briefly reply, 'we prefer to remain in America'" (p. 20). As an ex-slave, Douglass was passionate about unearthing the immorality of slavery and the damage done by slaveholders to slaves; avoiding the issue was not the solution.

Other black press publications of the antebellum period were forthright that their papers were staunchly against slavery. They carried names such as *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and *Radical Abolitionist*. These were not publications that focused on pushing free blacks to be upstanding citizens to get an education. Instead, they were fodder to fuel the involvement of free blacks in the fight against slavery.

In *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (1852), an unsigned letter explained ardent abolitionists' opposition to the less brash approach of papers that stressed personal improvement. The first section of the letter read:

> The real objection to the Anti-Slavery movement is, not its aim, but the manner in which it is conducted; and, as the race of fools is never-ending, so incorrigible and thick-headed individuals will be extant till the fact that slavery ever existed on this continent is altogether forgotten. (p. 5)

The letter exemplifies the dissatisfaction that many of the more ardent black press papers felt with the slower, advancement-based tactics of other publications. Publications like *National Anti-Slavery Standard* thought that the advancement-based course was a foolish one that would not result in the end of slavery.

Forgetting about slavery and trying to assimilate or gradually advance the status of blacks within society was not the goal of these papers. Many of the editors and contributors of these papers ardently disagreed with the personal improvement approach. They wanted immediate and widespread action by free blacks and sympathetic whites to free slaves.

Not all papers advocated solely for ardent abolition or personal improvement. Some, like *The Anglo-African Magazine*, were a blend of the two, providing articles that preached the education of blacks and in the same issue featured articles about the deplorable conditions on slave ships and attempts at escape by fugitive slaves. Editors applauded these successful escapes with the hope of motivating blacks to aid these runaways.

The Anglo-African Magazine, along with many other black publications, reported slave insurrections not only to help spread fear that whites might have in the wake of a revolt but to spread the news to the blacks that something was indeed happening in the fight against slavery. One issue featured an obituary that celebrated the life of a black abolitionist by the name of Thomas Jennings, drawing attention to the things he had done in his life to fight slavery (Hamilton, 1859c, p. 126). Along with intellectual essays about black society and culture, the editors also wrote responses and analyses to laws and codes that the government made that the black publications did not support. *The Anglo-African Magazine* (1859a, 1859b) featured a series that criticized the Fugitive Slave Law and outlined what was wrong with the law and needed revision.

Several papers reported on news of blacks outside the country. *The Anglo-African Magazine* (1859d) offered commentary on several revolutions and revolts of slaves in the Caribbean. To the editors, it proved that slaves could rid themselves of their oppressors, survive after the revolution, and create a stable environment. The editors hailed this as testimony and "vindication of the capacity of the negro race for self-government and civilized progress" (Hamilton, 1859d, p. 185). The commentary provided motivation for free blacks to do their part in abolishing slavery and proved that emancipation was not an unreasonable goal.

Although the black press took varying approaches to abolish slavery, the overall effort of the antebellum black press succeeded in getting free blacks socially motivated to join the cause against slavery. Both methods succeeded in getting blacks involved in the emancipation efforts at both a policy and ground level. What the antebellum black press knew and the editors understood was that they themselves could not free the slaves. The press consisted of blacks who could not vote and could not do anything to directly change policy. But they could influence, no matter what tactics they used.

David Ruggles, founder of *The Mirror of Liberty*, acknowledged the shortcomings of the press in the quest for liberty but emphasized the overall power it had to influence free blacks and whites who had more power to change things. In an 1835 issue of *The Emancipator*, Ruggles wrote:

> It may be urged that the press cannot alter the laws of our country which may make us slaves; this I admit. It cannot directly, but it can indirectly, changing the public opinion which creates the laws. What is the public opinion? It is the opinion of the majority of the intelligent people who inhabit our country. (p. 1)

Ruggles himself aided escaped slaves. He took in fugitive slaves and worked to keep free blacks from being kidnapped and re-enslaved (Bullock, 1981).

Reaction and participation of free blacks as a result of the antebellum black press was not limited to individual acts of the writers and editors. In the time between the publication of *Freedom's Journal* in 1827 and the end of slavery, more than 40 black-owned and edited publications were founded across the North and Canada (Tripp, 1992). The increase in the number of publications resulted in increased circulation and more widespread readership of free blacks.

The Anglo-African Magazine often printed statistics in the beginning sections of its issues, documenting the growing number of free blacks in the North. Each year

the number steadily increased—an indicator that the efforts of the antebellum black press were influencing people to help slaves escape and secure their freedom. The black press was affecting the masses.

The antebellum black press drew abolitionists from different areas, as well as newcomers. A number of black-run organizations sprang up because of the black press. More blacks were helping the Underground Railroad that allowed slaves to escape to the North. Groups like the New York Committee of Vigilance were integral in creating a network that would allow more people to gain freedom (Bullock, 1981). Thanks in part to black press outlets advocating elevation of blacks within society, free blacks were in better economic positions to act against slavery (Tripp, 1992). By being better off financially and living respectfully within society, free blacks were more able to help slaves gain freedom. They had the means to supply provisions for and harbor runaway slaves and could dedicate time to abolitionist efforts.

While using different tactics to end slavery, the antebellum black press succeeded in garnering the support of free blacks in the North. As a result of the black press writings, free blacks were motivated to work against slavery. Black papers impressed in free blacks an overwhelming sense of social obligation and a growing sense of a black community so that they would work toward helping their enslaved counterparts. The antebellum black press pushed for free blacks to provide for enslaved blacks with the hope that slavery would be abolished permanently.

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