

THE BLACK PRESS IN NEW YORK



David Ruggles- Photo Courtesy of The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

In 1827, the first newspaper targeted to a black audience was published in New York City. A decade later, in 1838, David Ruggles began publishing *The Mirror of Liberty*, the first periodical in the United States owned and published by a black journalist. These publications would have a far greater impact than their readership

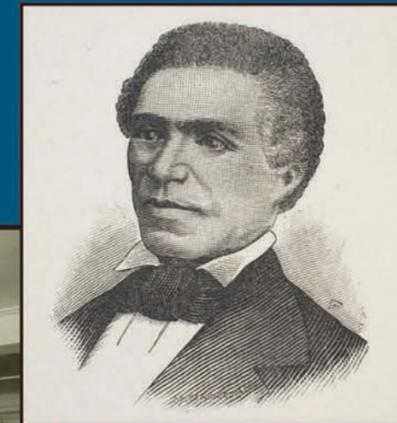
ever indicated because it began New York's tradition as a home to the black press in America. It was not long before other journalists, anxious to expose the destructive and inhumane nature of slavery, began setting up their own press shops in New York City. While abolitionists supported this movement, these pioneers were generally met with resistance from the state, local and national government. Often portrayed as "agitators" or "spreading libelous falsehoods," many of these journalists were harassed, forced out of business or sometimes prosecuted.

A few however were able to stand against this onslaught and used the press to not only publish newspapers and periodicals but full length treatises or autobiographical texts. Frederick Douglass's autobiography was an international best-seller and helped increase the popularity of the abolitionist cause. The

eloquence of black writers also helped reverse some people's misconception of black people as intellectually inferior.

The end of the Civil War did not alter many of the life conditions that many black people still faced throughout the nation. The black press responded by shifting emphasis, with newspapers and periodicals taking a more political, and less moral, tone in their advocacy for people. The opening of black colleges also opened new avenues for black writers and intellectuals.

Women were playing an important role in the black press by the late 19th century. While Sojourner Truth had a newsletter published under



John B. Russwurm, co-editor and founder of the *Freedom's Journal*, an abolitionist newspaper dedicated to opposition of slavery. *Freedom's Journal* was the first newspaper in the United States to be owned, operated, published and edited by African Americans. Photo Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



W.E.B. Du Bois, founder of the Niagara Movement and a leader of the NAACP, at his magazine *The Crisis* headquarters. NYC ca. 1920. Photo Courtesy of The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture



The *Amsterdam News*-Photo Courtesy of Columbia News, the Public Affairs and Records Archives

her name during the 1850s, it was not until 1884 that a black female columnist began appearing on a regular basis in the *New York Freeman*.

In 1909, the *New York Amsterdam News* was founded. It is the nation's oldest weekly periodical geared towards the black community still in publication. By the middle of the 20th century, almost every major urban center in the United States was home to a black newspaper. Through the use of mass media, the civil rights struggle, in all of its facets, was being shared with men and women of every ethnicity across the nation. The stories, both factual and fictional, that were being delivered into the hands of literary consumers have played an important role in the ongoing struggle for equality that black Americans face.