

Freedom's Journal First African American-Published Newspaper Had Roots in Lower Manhattan

By Edith Sachs


For several years, New York Law School has been looking forward eagerly to the opening of its new academic building. But looking back at the history of the School's current site and structures can be pretty interesting, too. Evidence suggests that the School's location is linked with an important name in African American history: *Freedom's Journal*, the first newspaper in the United States published by and for African Americans. A number of sources* state that *Freedom's Journal* was launched at 236 Church Street, an address which today is encompassed by the School's building at 57 Worth Street.

In the early 19th century, New York City became a settling place for free Northern blacks. Many were concentrated in the Manhattan neighborhood immediately surrounding the Law School's current location. But they represented a tiny minority in the city at that time, and racism and intolerance made life a daily struggle. Controversy raged over black citizens' rights and status in an overwhelmingly white society. Against this backdrop, *Freedom's Journal* was created. Its founders were Samuel E. Cornish, a Presbyterian minister who had been born free in Delaware, and John Brown Russwurm, a college-educated, Jamaican-born son of a white merchant and a black slave.

Making its debut in 1827, the same year slavery was officially abolished in New York State, *Freedom's Journal* provided a voice and a forum for African Americans. As Cornish and Russwurm declared on the front page of the very first issue, "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly . . ."

With ambitions to reach a national audience, the editors sought to publish a newspaper of record for the black community. Its pages contained current events; editorials; and birth, death, and wedding announcements. It provided regional, national, and international news, and content that served to both entertain and educate. The newspaper broadened readers' knowledge of the world with articles on such countries as Haiti and Sierra Leone. To highlight and encourage black achievement, it featured biographies of renowned black figures such as Paul Cuffee, a Bostonian who owned a trading ship staffed by free black people; Toussaint L'Ouverture, a leader of the Haitian revolution; and poet Phyllis Wheatley.

But the larger purpose of *Freedom's Journal* was to enable African Americans to take an active part in the debates over slavery, abolition, and "colonization," a concept conceived by mostly white pro-emigration activists who advocated the "repatriation" of free black people to Africa. Initially opposed to colonization efforts, *Freedom's Journal* denounced slavery, spoke out against lynchings, and advocated for black people's political rights, including the right to vote. Cornish and Russwurm published articles that shed light on the harsh realities of slavery with the hope that they would undermine pro-slavery arguments. Moreover, readers found articles on how the American legal and political systems helped to perpetuate slavery.

Six months after the newspaper's debut, Cornish resigned under what are generally believed to be amicable circumstances, and Russwurm assumed sole editorship of the paper. During the following year, however, his personal attitudes toward the colonization movement began to shift. In February 1829, he published an editorial declaring the newspaper's support for the movement. The reaction of most of the paper's readership was harsh; and Russwurm, who had already made a decision to emigrate to Liberia, shut *Freedom's Journal* down after publishing its last issue on March 28, 1829. 

* Information Sources:

Bunyan, Paul. *All Around the Town: Amazing Manhattan Facts and Curiosities* (Fordham University Press, 1999).

MAAP—Mapping the African American Past, a Web project of Columbia University's Center for New Media Teaching and Learning, at <http://maap.columbia.edu/image/view/731.html>.

New York Songlines—Virtual Walking Tours of Manhattan's Streets, at www.nysonglines.com/church.htm.

See also:

Bacon, Jacqueline. *Freedom's Journal: The First African American Newspaper* (Lexington Books, 2007).

"Freedom's Journal," at www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/newbios/nwsppt/freedom/freedom.html.

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Vaughn, Stephen L. *Encyclopedia of American Journalism* (Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2008).