

TITLE: A Forgotten Leader Robert S. Abbott and the Chicago Defender from 1910-1920

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Most people make it through life unscathed by public opinion. Robert S. Abbott was not one of those people. From the day he published the first issue of the African-American newspaper, the Chicago Defender, in 1905, to the day he died in 1940, Abbott was subjected to almost constant public scrutiny. Some saw him as a prophet leading southern blacks to the northern "Promised Land." Florette Henri, for example, believed that if "there was finally a black Joshua it was Robert Abbott."(FN1) The famed sociologist, Gunnar Myrdal, wrote that Abbott was "The greatest single power in the Negro race."(FN2) Others, however, were not so generous. Black-nationalist leader Marcus Garvey pronounced Abbott as a "race defamer ... who publishes in his newspaper week after week the grossest scandals against the race," while Julius Rosenwald saw Abbott as, "a monkey with a shotgun."(FN3) Both camps, however, recognized that he had the power to influence millions.

While Abbott's career as a newspaper owner spanned more than thirty-five years, the period between 1910 and 1920 is viewed as the most important and influential epoch of his auspicious career. In this brief span, he not only helped define a new era in black journalism, he also waged a migration campaign that helped entice 250,000 southern blacks to move North in search of a better life.

Unfortunately, when one thinks of great black leaders and their significant accomplishments, Robert S. Abbott, his paper, and his migration campaign are usually forgotten. While other race champions such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and Martin Luther King, Jr., have had a myriad of articles, critiques, and biographies written about them, only one article and one biography examining Abbott's life have been written—and both were published before 1956.(FN4)

Subsequently, since little has been written about the man and his paper, it is the purpose of this work to illuminate Abbott's salient contributions to journalism and to African-American history, specifically during the years from 1910 through 1920. This will be accomplished by 1) briefly describing Abbott's early life, 2) detailing the embryonic period of Abbott's journalistic career, and 3) analyzing the Defender's migration campaign of 1917-1919.

Nothing about Robert Abbott's early childhood suggested that he would become one of the most influential blacks in American history. He was raised on the outskirts of Savannah, Georgia, by his mother, Flora, and his stepfather, John Sengstacke, a German immigrant, educator, and part-time minister.(FN5) By the time Robert turned eight, he was receiving individualized religious and educational training from his stepfather who believed that "intelligence was necessary for Christian salvation."(FN6) Sengstacke, however, taught his stepson more than just how to write and read. He told Robert of his social obligation to his race—"the Sengstacke mission." By the time Robert was fourteen, he became his stepfather's close companion and would often accompany him on missionary errands. During this period, Robert also began preparing for college. He enrolled at Beach Institute in Savannah, a preparatory school.(FN7)

By 1887, at the age of seventeen, Robert was ready to start college. In October of that year, he entered Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina.(FN8) In November 1889, at the age of nineteen, Abbott decided to expand on his education and moved to Virginia to begin printing classes at Hampton Institute. Hampton's goal,

like that of alumnus Booker T. Washington, was to produce black men and women who would be productive in the agricultural and industrial fields. Abbott finished his training as a printer in 1893 and remained to complete his academic work in 1896. Looking back on his days at Hampton, he would say that the time spent there was the most pleasurable of his life.

After graduation, Abbott, now twenty-six, headed for Chicago, a city that he had been exposed to while singing with the Hampton Quartet at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Upon arriving, he sought employment as a printer, but faced racial obstacles that prohibited him from finding steady work.(FN9) Employment difficulties, plus his drive to earn money and status, persuaded him to enroll at Kent College of Law in the fall of 1897. Abbott's dream of the comfortable life as a lawyer, however, quickly faded after graduation. When Abbott interviewed with Edward H. Morris, a fair-skinned black attorney in Chicago, Morris told Abbott that he was "a little too dark to make any impression on the courts of Chicago."(FN10)

After this second encounter with racial discrimination in the work force, Abbott made the watershed decision to start his own paper in Chicago and become self-sufficient. Abbott knew that starting a paper in Chicago would be no easy task, even with the city's well-established black community. Chicago already had three existing black papers: Julius C. Taylor's *Broad Ax*, S. B. Turner's *Illinois Idea*, and Ferdinand L. Barnett's *Conservator*. If this was not enough competition for the young newspaperman, there were also at least two respected, out-of-state black newspapers read in Chicago—the *Indianapolis Freeman*, edited by George L. Know, and Thomas Fortune's *New York Age*.(FN11) Undaunted, Abbott forged ahead.(FN12)

The first issue of the *Defender* appeared on May 5, 1905.(FN13) Three hundred copies were printed at a cost of \$13.75.(FN14) These early issues were handbill size and consisted of only four pages. Abbott was the sole writer, editor, investigative journalist, and newsboy. In fact, his first regular newsstand sales did not begin until 1912.(FN15) But perhaps the most intriguing element of these early issues is not as much the form as the content. For the first five years of the paper's existence, Abbott focused on local gossip and special interest stories. There were virtually no stories pertaining to racial injustice, segregation, or white-on-black crime—topics that eventually distinguished Abbott's journalism.

For the first four years of the *Defender's* publication, it remained a relatively unknown and struggling paper. In 1909, however, things began to change. Abbott tapped into what the masses wanted to read—muckraking crusades. His inaugural exposé dealt with the white-supported red-light district on Chicago's black South Side. Abbott became outraged by the blatant disregard white governmental officials showed for his community. A thousand black readers a week began snatching up copies of the *Defender* to read Abbott's editorials about the sins of sex, drinking, and the white governmental officials who promoted such behavior. While the issue itself is historically insignificant, the ramification of the story for the development of the *Defender* cannot be underestimated: Abbott learned that if he could get his readers involved in a fight, "especially if underscored by a racially high-minded purpose," he would not only uplift his race, but achieve wealth and success as well.(FN16)

Soon after the successful "red light" campaign, the paper's readership began to grow. Abbott quickly realized that if the *Defender* was going to keep pace with the new demand, he would have to search for outside help. To his surprise, he found many willing to devote their time and skills, motivated by nothing more than a sincere desire to help the race. Some of these contributors throughout the early years included assistant editor R. F. Spriggs; cartoonists L.N. Hogatt and A. Rodgers; theatrical reviewers H. H. Byron and Sylvester Russell; proofreader Louis B. Anderson (who

became a city alderman); reporter Henry D. Middleton; sports journalists Julius Nelthrop Avendorph and Fay Young; artists Fon Holly and Langston Mitchell; journalist Lucius Clinton Harper (who became executive editor); and editorial writers Alfred "Alf" Anderson (who became editor during the migration years) and W. Allison Sweeney.(FN17) Many of these individuals remained with the Defender for many years and eventually were put on the payroll and promoted by Abbott.

While these additions to the staff aided the paper's development, Abbott had still not attracted national attention. Then, in 1910, he made perhaps his greatest managerial decision: he hired J. Hockley Smiley as managing editor. The Abbott/Smiley collaboration proved highly productive and creative, introducing significant changes that would stand out as revolutionary in the paper's development. First, they clearly defined the paper's focus. Before 1910, the Defender was like any other small town, gossip-focused periodical. After Smiley's arrival, the paper became a clearly focused organ for racial advancement. Articles and editorials now discussed issues such as lynching, Jim Crow laws, and segregation.(FN18)

The Abbott/Smiley collaboration also refined the paper's format. After analyzing many successful white newspapers, they realized that if the Defender was going to gain national recognition, it would need a face lift.(FN19) Abbott and Smiley began by copying the general layout of Chicago's white daily newspapers; more specifically, Abbott adopted banner headlines, printed highlights in red ink, varied font size, developed political cartoons, incorporated more photography, and created the Defender's slogan, "The World's Greatest Weekly."

Reorganizing and restructuring the paper became their third significant contribution. The newspaper had been loosely arranged and visually confusing. It was common, for example, to see a wedding announcement alongside a sports story or an editorial. Abbott and Smiley tightly organized the paper, creating departments of theater, sports, editorials, and society—a structure until then unknown to the Negro press.

Their final contribution was to treat news sensationally. During Smiley's tenure with Abbott, common headlines read, "100 Negroes Murdered Weekly in United States by White Americans," "Lynching—a National Disgrace," or "White Man Turns Black in St. Louis." While Abbott's competitors frowned at this new departure in Negro journalism, sensational headlines, photographs, cartoons, and editorials produced overnight financial success.(FN20)

Along with the refinement of the paper's form and content, Abbott and Smiley also worked closely on the mass distribution of the paper. Abbott knew that if he was going to create the greatest black newspaper of his day, he had to expand outside the city limits of Chicago to the American South—home to 85 percent of American blacks before 1917.

By 1917, with the help of diligent workers, loyal patrons, politically-active railroad porters who delivered bundles of the Defender to remote sights, and traveling entertainers who handed out copies during performances, the Defender so deeply penetrated the South that blacks were able to pick up a copy in almost any church or barbershop. "In Savannah," for example, "Reverend Daniel Wright regularly sold twenty-five copies to his congregation," while in "New Orleans readers could purchase it on the jitney buses. By 1919, three news dealers in that city were selling one thousand copies weekly."(FN21)

The Defender's southern readers were not just in the major cities, however. In 1919, the Defender's shipping manifest included over 1,542 towns and cities across the region. Towns such as Fry's Mill, Arkansas; Bibsland, Louisiana; Tunica, Mississippi; Yoakum, Texas; and Palataka, Florida, bought more than one-hundred copies of the Defender each week.(FN22) Nationwide, circulation during the migration campaign

(1917-1919) reached more than 230,000 copies a week—far and away the most-read black newspaper in America.(FN23)

While these circulation figures are impressive in their own right, they do not take into account the two modes of informal paper circulation—borrowing and communal reading. Copies of the Defender were often shared among family members, friends, churches, and even other communities who could not afford the luxury of buying their own copies. As one borrower wrote, “Copies were passed around until worn out.”(FN24) The second mode of informal paper distribution was communal reading. Southerners who were illiterate often had one person read the paper aloud at a local church, barbershop, or saloon. This type of public orality is a pragmatic extension of the African-American oral tradition as discussed by such scholars as Thomas Kochman, Walter J. Ong, and Molefi Kete Asante, who have argued that the use of oral interaction in public is deeply rooted in what Asante has called the Afrocentric Idea.(FN25) This communal interaction was so pervasive in 1917 that John Sengstacke, Abbott’s nephew and chief editor of the Defender since 1940, estimated that “For every one Defender purchased, five to seven others either read or heard it aloud.”(FN26) In pragmatic terms, these informal modes of circulation enabled Abbott to reach more than one million black readers a week during his migration campaign.

After Smiley’s unexpected death in 1915, Frank Withers became managing editor. He in turn was followed by Cary B. Lewis, who remained as managing editor during the five-year migration campaign.(FN27) While both men did adequate jobs, Abbott never found another Smiley. As a result, he maintained sole and supreme control over the Defender. His managerial predominance was so absolute that every article, editorial, advertisement, and cartoon created by Abbott’s staff had to have his personal approval before going to press.

Abbott’s contribution to the development, popularity, and distribution of the black press in America was not his only salient accomplishment during this period. Equally noteworthy was his contribution to what historians have labeled the “Great Migration” in which 250,000 African Americans left the South in search of a better life in the North.(FN28) For almost three years, from 1917 through the summer of 1919, Abbott and his paper fervently called for discontented blacks to leave the South and come to the “Land of Hope” in the North.

Commenting on the impact that Abbott’s paper had on this mass expansion in the North, Carl Sandburg wrote that, “The Defender more than any other one agency was the big cause of the northern fever and the big exodus from the South.”(FN29) A Georgia paper called the Defender the “greatest disturbing element that has yet entered Georgia.” The United States Department of Labor said that in some sections of the country the Defender was probably more effective in carrying off labor than all the agents put together: “It sums up the Negro’s troubles and keeps them constantly before him, and it points out in terms he can understand the way to escape.”(FN30)

In his attempt to stimulate the migration, Abbott adopted a basic, two-fold approach to motivate potential migrants. The first strategy focused on the negative aspects of the South; the second focused on the positive aspects of the North. Taken together, the tandem produced one of the richest, most persuasive journalistic campaigns in African-American history.

STRATEGY I: DISCONTENTMENT AND THE NEGATIVE SOUTH

In utilizing the negative aspects of the South to exploit discontentment and motivate the migratory impulse in his readers, Abbott typically encouraged migration after a specific violent act had occurred in the South. On October 7, 1916, for example, Abbott promoted the diaspora after a tumultuous white mob from Abbeville, South Carolina,

lynched race member Anthony Crawford. Abbott reported that “Respectable people are leaving daily. The cry now is—Go North ... Where there is some humanity.”(FN31) Abbott similarly encouraged blacks to migrate after police verbally insulted Miss Alberta White, “one of the best teachers in the state.” As the editor’s bold headline read: “Respectable Members of the Race Leaving South Because of Unjust and Inhuman Treatment.”(FN32)

On May 26, 1917, the editor, while creating momentum through exaggerating migration figures, once again called for the black flight out of the South after white-on-black violence. As the front page headline read: “Millions Prepare to Leave the South Following Brutal Burning of Human.”(FN33) The article continued by detailing the murder of Eli Persons—the proverbial “last straw” in unleashing the race’s desire for freedom. Later Abbott informed his readers that “Thousands Leave Memphis,” to start anew in the North. Similarly, patrons read of the “Two hundred who ... left after the lynching of Walter Best” in Fairfax, South Carolina, and of the “scores” who were reportedly leaving after the Brian Livingston burning in Arkansas.(FN34)

This attempt to create infectious enthusiasm for a mass exodus is perhaps most vividly exemplified, on the front page of his September 2, 1916, issue in which he published a photograph entitled, “The Exodus.” Within the frame, readers saw hundreds of men, women, and children from Savannah awaiting north-bound trains. As the caption read: “The men, tired of being kicked and cursed, are leaving by the thousands as the above picture shows.” For some of the uncommitted, the power of such a photograph or the impact of Abbott’s migration statistics was evidence that this event was truly a “mass exodus” reaching unimagined proportions. Florette Henri asserted that such works “created an atmosphere of religious hysteria.” She added, “The more people who left, inspired by Defender propaganda, the more who wanted to go ... the migration fed on itself until in some places it turned into a wild stampede.”(FN35)

Abbott also masterfully employed what are typically labeled as “non-traditional” forms of journalism. These forms presented, albeit in a different way, the same salient and complex issues discussed in editorials and cover stories. For many, the visual narrative of a cartoon, or the rhythmically structured poem with its built in mnemonic devices of rhythm, verse, and pattern, served as an important augmentation to the written word. These works, like their “traditional” counterparts, fervently encouraged migration as a solution to black oppression. For example, the poem “Bound for the Promised Land,” written by a Mr. Ward and published in October 1916, told readers of the morally impoverished South and suggested the job possibilities that awaited blacks in the North. The first eight lines of this sixteen-stanza work set the tone for the rest of the piece:

From Florida’s stormy banks I go, I’ll bid the South good-bye; No longer shall they treat me so, And knock me in the eye. The Northern States is where I’m Bound, My cross is more than double— If the Executive can be found, I’ll tell him all my trouble.(FN36)

While such poetry was popular, it was Abbott’s bold, uncompromising political cartoons that became the talk in many black communities in the South. In every copy, readers found at least one drawing commenting on the political, social, or economic conditions of black Americans. And more often than not, such conditions either directly or tangentially related to the issue of migration. For example, there was the September 2, 1916, Fon Holly cartoon, “Desertion,” in which readers saw a black man running towards an awaiting automobile labeled “Northern Industries” and away from a white man with a gun and hound dogs labeled “lynchers.” Holly’s written discourse accompanying the cartoon equally expressed the black motivation for migration. He wrote, “They are taking advantage of the opportunities offered in the North by northern

industries, where children can get a fair education and where their wives and daughters are from being ravished.”(FN37)

STRATEGY II: FULFILLMENT AND THE POSITIVE NORTH

Abbott, however, did not focus only on the liabilities of the South. He also utilized the assets of the North to entice potential migrants. “Fearless, sensationalist, and militant,” the paper displayed the “dramatic differences between North and South”—especially the financial and material benefits of the “Land of Hope.”(FN38) Week after week, just as systematically as it detailed the danger of remaining in the South, the Defender informed readers, through its advertising and entertainment sections, of the American Dream awaiting them in Chicago. During the years of the campaign, the Defender published an average of five pages of advertisements and/or announcements per week—touting time-saving devices, leisure activities, and beauty products—with each page containing one to twenty advertisements.

In issue after issue, the Defender informed southern blacks that Chicago could satisfy their drive to “surround themselves in the niceties of luxury.” Each week they were enticed by a wide range of time-saving devices and luxury items that appeared to be common in all Chicago homes. As Franklin Frazier wrote, “The spectacular success of the Defender in the rural South was due to the fact that it provided blacks with mental stimulation of what other Negroes experienced in urban Chicago.”(FN39)

Abbott also sold his city as a place to have fun and relax. As methodically as he castigated the South, Abbott enticed his readers with stories of blacks attending full-length movies, joining social clubs, eating at the nicest restaurants, relaxing at the most comfortable hotels, and loudly cheering for the American Black Giants, black America’s favorite baseball team. Frazier saw Chicago at this time as a place where Negroes could “escape from the social and mental isolation of the rural south.” He argued that by reading northern newspapers such as the Defender, “The Negro’s imagination was awakened by the marvels of the city, which offered various escapes from the pent-up existence which he had known. The Northern city provided mental stimulation not only for the Negro folk, but for the educated Negro as well.”(FN40) One reader from Mississippi expected State Street, the focus of black Chicago’s night life, to be “heaven itself.”(FN41)

One of the Defender’s most popular sections was the Entertainment Section, which told black Southerners of Chicago’s movies, shows, plays, vaudeville acts, and musical groups. James Grossman, in fact, credits Abbott for having the first such section in Negro journalism.(FN42) On any given Saturday during the migration campaign, readers in Alabama, Texas, and Georgia could find page after page of theater advertisements to attract them to the North. For example, on January 27, 1917, the States Theater advertised the showing of 10,000 Leagues Under the Sea.”(FN43) Farther down the street at the newly built Owl Theater, “The South Side’s Finest,” Defender patrons read of the “1200 Roomy Seats—\$10,000 Kimball Pipe Organ—8 Piece Orchestra—and—perfect Ventilation” that awaited them in Chicago.(FN44) The Washington Theater debuted The Trooper of Troop K, “featuring Noble Johnson and an all colored cast.” The ad bragged that this “Sensational 3 part drama” used “350 people, ex-Ninth and Tenth Cavalrymen, Mexicans, Cowboys, and Horses.”(FN45)

The Defender also featured advertisements for restaurants, hotels, and dance halls. Readers in Louisiana and Kentucky were told of “Chicago’s Fashionable Cafe, The Chateau.” Along with the “Finest Fruits, Chops, and Potatoes,” The Chateau offered Chicago’s finest music and “Dance from 8:00 P.M. to 1:00 A.M.”(FN46) If one was not satisfied with the music at The Chateau, Abbott informed readers of other options. “Such dance halls as the Peking and the Palace Garden offered jazz, bright lights,

dancing into the wee hours, and even racially mixed crowds.”(FN47) And after a night of fun and excitement, a new migrant could spend a luxurious night at the Hotel Pullman—“The Finest and Largest Colored Hotel in America”—which promised “first class accommodations for married and single people, everything new and up-to-date.”(FN48)

In selling Chicago and the idea of migration, Abbott also played on the theme of self-sufficiency and financial independence. On August 12, 1916, he wrote an editorial about the new opportunities for blacks in the North. “The Bars Are Being Let Down in the industrial world as never before,” he declared. “We have talked and argued and sat up late at night planning what we would do if we only had an opportunity. Now that it is here, how many are going to grasp it?”(FN49)

On February 10, 1917, Abbott was more specific in detailing the opportunities awaiting race members “who had the courage to act.” In an article entitled “More Business Wanted,” the paper told of the fertile ground for entrepreneurs in Chicago’s business sector. “There is a need,” Abbott wrote, “for six shoe stores, twelve grocery stores, six meat markets, several haberdashers and clothiers.” He continued to inform patrons who flirted with the idea of migration that those “who have experience and capital will find this a splendid field. There is but one fish shop in the city operated by our people and there should be ten.”(FN50)

In a January 6, 1917, editorial entitled “All Wage Seekers,” Abbott expanded his concern past “simple materialism” and stressed that “A HIGHER WAGE is not the only thing that is enticing blacks North ... The promise of a good day’s labor, while a very forceful drawing card, simply served as part of their motivation.” Abbott continued to argue that it was “The great idea of ‘LIBERTY.’ If not liberty in its fullest sense, at least a thousand more than they are accustomed to.”(FN51)

When such appealing sales pitches for the North were read in concert with the myriad of editorial, cover stories, investigative reports, and political cartoons that portrayed the South as a “region of blatant self-righteousness, cruelty and violence,” Defender patrons received a clear message: Migrate and “Happiness will be thine.”(FN52) And by the end of 1919, more than 250,000 blacks, many of whom were inspired by the Defender, did just that.

As one can imagine, the exodus of a quarter of a million blacks out of the South, caused panic that reverberated throughout the white community. This anxiety was especially felt by white Southerners who had grown accustomed to cheap African-American labor. In almost every state in the Deep South, the Defender generated severe white reaction. Whites attacked and killed two Defender distributors in Alabama. Several cities tried to prevent the paper’s distribution. An Arkansas judge issued an injunction restraining circulation of the Defender in Pine Bluff and Jefferson County. The governor of Georgia announced that he would ask the postmaster general to exclude the paper from the mail. And a riot in Longview, Texas, started because a black teacher had covered a lynching for the Defender.(FN53)

It was not just local and state governments that were nervous about the Defender’s role in the migration. The United States Government also grew increasingly interested in Abbott and the paper and established a surveillance operation that included the military, the postal service, and above all, the Justice Department’s Bureau of Investigation. Their mutual goal was to maintain national security during war time. And since it was well publicized that the Chicago Defender was a “revolutionary organ for the black left,” Abbott emerged as a primary target for the operation. Some of the paper’s more noteworthy critics included Senator John Sharp Williams from Mississippi who wrote that the Defender was “a Negro paper with a tissue of lies, all intended to create race disturbance and trouble”; Representative M. D. Upshaw from Georgia who

saw the paper as being “very inflammatory in stirring up race prejudice” and “publishing wild and exaggerated statements about white crimes”; and Senator Edward Gay from Louisiana who saw the articles published by the Defender as “highly inflammatory,” and responsible for the “unrest at present evident among the negroes of the South.”(FN54) Before the governmental task force had time to implement a censorship policy for the Defender, however, Abbott’s campaign came to a halt.

The demise of Abbott’s campaign in 1919 correlated with Chicago’s post-war metamorphosis. This transformation emerged out of a number of related events that had an intensifying effect on one another. The most significant of these was that the war in Europe had ended. As a result, thousands of white soldiers returned home to Chicago only to find the jobs, communities, and lifestyles they left behind appropriated by thousands of African-American migrants. “Whites anxious to reaffirm the old caste lines, acted in ways intended to negate the economic and psychological gains made by blacks during the war, ... but the newly settled black laborers were in no mood to be pushed around.”(FN55) Racial tension began to grow.

This tension ultimately led to the four-day (July 27-30, 1919) Race Riot in Chicago—the event that forever changed the tenor of the Defender. The bold headlines of the August 2 issue summarized the situation: “Riot Sweeps Chicago,” “Ghastly Deeds of Race Rioters Told,” “Gun Battles and Fighting in Streets Keep the City in an Uproar,” and “4,000 Troops in Armory Ready to Patrol City: Scores Are Killed.”(FN56) When the dust settled in Chicago, fifteen white and twenty-three blacks lay dead, with at least 537 others wounded.(FN57) Nationally, this tumultuous period, also known as “[blood] Red Summer,” saw twenty-two race riots ignite, the most violent in Chicago.

The riot became the coup de grace to the migration campaign. Abbott’s campaign, steadily decreasing in intensity since the spring, came to an abrupt stop. It was clear that many of the same problems that existed in the South were also present in the North. Thus, no longer could Abbott honestly paint Chicago as the “Promised Land.” It simply became another place where the black American Dream was deferred.

The Chicago Defender was not the only black newspaper calling for migration during these years. Other papers also wrote disparagingly about the South and/or encouraged migration to the North.(FN58) However, the Defender distinguished itself from its competitors in its radicalism, popularity, and influence.

Specifically, the Defender directed its content and form at the large segments of blacks usually forgotten by other papers—the working class. The black press of the day, whether the Crisis or the Boston Guardian, clearly wrote for DuBois’s “Talented Tenth” percentile of the black community. These papers, perhaps in the search for legitimacy, wrote for the educated, professional, middle-class blacks. Felecia G. Jones argues that the Defender was the first to break from that elitist tradition, appealing instead to the common folk.(FN59) As one Texas sharecropper reading the Defender for the first time in 1917 said, “I never dreamed that there was such a race paper published and I must say that it’s some paper.”(FN60)

The paper also distinguished itself from its competitors through its mass distribution. By the start of WWI the Defender “grew into the largest-selling black newspaper in the United States.”(FN61) During the years 1917-1919, the Defender not only had the largest circulation in the country, but, more important for the migration cause, it also had the greatest Southern readership. Spear wrote that the Defender dominated the southern states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Louisiana.(FN62) Grossman concurs, arguing that the Defender had 230,000 weekly readers, two-thirds of whom were outside the city limits. No other black paper came close to such a national distribution program.(FN63)

Additionally, the Defender published more stories, more often, on the bad South, the good North, and the migration. While other leading black papers included stories and

editorials about migration, no other paper did so as often or as fervently as the Defender. Grossman claims that "Most black newspapers were cautious of racial boundaries and often were dominated by religious and fraternal news and stereotyped by utterly innocuous content.... Many of the more assertive journals were controlled by individuals whose political ambitions demanded moderation."(FN64) As for Abbott, he possessed no political aspirations and displayed no trepidation about waging war against the South or calling for a mass exodus. Abbott's paper became the undisputed champion of the migration cause in both quantity and passion.

Finally, the Defender was also the most ideologically radical of the popular, black papers. Grossman asserts that the paper published material that other black newspapers would not dare, in language that "represented unapologetic black pride, dignity, and assertiveness."(FN65) The paper not only wrote of injustice to blacks in the South, it screamed it out for all to hear. Unflinching, it refused to succumb to calls from both blacks and whites for moderation. In 1944, Gunnar Myrdal credited the paper as being "the founder of the modern Negro press" with its mass appeal and its non-accommodationist message. Concurring, Jones argues that the Defender "is the newspaper that revolutionized black journalism" by "changing from a conciliatory tone of reconstruction to a new militant tone."(FN66)

Therefore, it is the contention of this work that because of Abbott's leadership in the development of the black press, his bold, uncompromising journalistic voice in a time when black subjugation was demanded, and his role in the first, significant black migration in American history, he and the Defender are deserving of inclusion into our historic record and recognition as one of the great leaders of the early twentieth century. For if American history is ever going to be a true narrative of this country, the marginalized voices, the peripheral stories, and the forgotten leaders of the past must be remembered and recorded.

Added material

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FOOTNOTES

1. Florette Henri, *Black Migration: Movement North 1900-1920* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975), 63.

2. Roland E. Wolseley, *The Black Press, U. S. A.* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1971), 35.

3. Alan D. DeSantis, "Under Fire: A Rhetorical Analysis of Marcus Garvey's Apologia," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 17 (1993):19; Henri, *Black Migration*, 63.

4. Metz T. P. Lochard, "Robert S. Abbott—'Race Leader,'" *Phylon* 8 (1947):124-132; and Rio Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior: The Life and Times of Robert S. Abbott* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955). Furthermore, there has only been one published article that focuses on the Defender's role during the migration. See James R. Grossman, "Blowing the Trumpet: The Chicago Defender and Black Migration During World War I," *Illinois Historical Journal* 78 (1985):87-88.

5. Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior*, 1-16: Ottley's work is the only significant record published on Abbott's early life.

6. *Ibid.*, 47.

7. *Ibid.*, 42-60.

8. Lochard, "Robert S. Abbott," 124.

9. *Ibid.*, 124.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Wolseley, *The Black Press*, 36-37.

12. While the above-mentioned papers posed the biggest threat to Abbott, black newspapers were well established throughout the country. By 1910, according to Atlanta University Negro Conference, there were 288 Negro periodicals in the United States. (Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior*, 104.)

13. Both Ottley and Wolseley agree that Abbott had started a daily paper before the *Defender*. There were only an estimated 200 to 300 copies produced, none of which exists today. The paper soon folded because of financial difficulties.

14. Unfortunately, no copies of this first paper have been located, though the *Defender* has been published without missing an issue for more than eighty-five years. The earliest copy on record, housed at the *Defender* Building, is dated Sept. 16, 1905, and only pages one and four are readable.

15. Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, *Anyplace But Here* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), 36-37.

16. Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior*, 95-99.

17. *Ibid.*, 100-120; James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Black Southerners and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 66-98.

18. Frederick G. Detweiler, *The Negro Press in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 65.

19. Abbott and Smiley must have studied other papers a bit too closely. In 1918, the Hearst organization charged Abbott with using the identical masthead found on Hearst's two Chicagopapers, the *Herald Examiner* and the *Evening American*. Before the suit could come to trial, Abbott quickly redesigned a new masthead. The suit was dropped. (Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 84.)

20. Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior*, 105-120.

21. Grossman, "Blowing the Trumpet," 87-88.

22. Grossman, *Land Of Hope*, 79.

23. For a complete list of the *Defender's* shipping list see Theodore Kornweibel, ed., *Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925): The First World War, the Red Scare, and the Garvey Movement*, 25 microfilm reels (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1985).

24. Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 79.

25. For further elaboration of public orality see: Thomas Kochman, *Black and White Styles in Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1986); Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

26. John Sengstacke, telephone interview, 3 March 1992.

27. During the Migration Campaign of 1917-1919, the hierarchy at the paper read as follows: Robert S. Abbott, publisher; Alfred Anderson, editor; Cary B. Lewis, managing editor; and Phil A. Jones, business manager.

28. Before 1910, 90 percent of the nation's black population lived in the southern states. "Estimates of the net migration of blacks out of the South indicated a volume of less than 100,000 in the 1870's and 1880's. This increased to nearly 200,000 in the 1890's and 1900's, 522,000 in the 1910's, and 872,000 in the 1920's." [See Karl E. Taeuber, "Negro Population and Housing," *Race and the Social Sciences*, ed. Irwin Katz and Patricia Gurin (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1969), 174.] Carole Marks argues that "10% of the black population fled the South during this period," with the large majority leaving during the period 1917-1919. Specifically, Chicago's black population grew from 44,103 to 109,458. [Carole Marks, "Black Workers and the Great Migration North," *Phylon* 46, No. 2 (1985): 161.]

29. Henri, *Black Migration*, 63.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Defender*, 7 Oct. 1916, 1.

32. Ibid., 11 March 1916, 1.
33. Ibid., 26 May 1917, 1.
34. Ibid., 9 March 1918, 1, and 31 May 1919, 1.
35. Henri, *Black Migration*, 64.
36. *Defender*, 11 Oct. 1916, 12.
37. Ibid., 2 Sept. 1916, 12.
38. Grossman, "Blowing the Trumpet," 84.
39. Franklin Frazier, *The Black Bourgeoisie* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957), 182.
40. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), 101.
41. Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 86.
42. Ibid.
43. *Defender*, 27 Jan. 1917, 4.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 7 Oct. 1916, 5.
46. Ibid., 6 Nov. 1915, 7.
47. Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 86.
48. *Defender*, 2 Jan. 1915, 8.
49. Ibid., 12 Aug. 1916, 12.
50. Ibid., 10 Feb. 1917, 1.
51. Ibid., 6 Jan. 1917, 12.
52. Ibid., 21 Aug. 1915, 12. From William Crosse's often-cited migration poem, "The Land of Hope," which was periodically published in the editorial page of the *Defender* during the migration campaign.
53. Henry Vance Davis, "The Black Press: From Mission to Commercialism, 1827-1927," (Ph. D. diss., University of Michigan, 1990), 248-49.
54. Kornweibel, reel 19, reel 13, and reel 19.
55. Frazier, *Afro-American History*, 250.
56. *Defender*, 2 Aug. 1919, 1.
57. For more detail, see Charles S. Johnson, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot*, Chicago Commission of Race Relations (New York: Arno Press, 1968; first publ. 1922); and William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1970).
58. The most notable of these papers were the *Washington Bee*, *Indianapolis World*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *New York Age*, *Richmond Planet*, *Atlanta Independent*, *Columbus Messenger*, NAACP's *Crisis*, *New York Globe*, *Boston Guardian*, and *New York's Amsterdam News*.
59. Felecia G. Jones, "The Role of the Black Press During the Great Migration," paper presented to the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Norman, Okla., 3-6 Aug. 1986, 11.
60. Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 80.
61. Ibid., 74.
62. Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 135.
63. Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 74.
64. Ibid., 80.
65. Ibid., 80, 75.

66. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Bros, 1944), cited in Wolseley, *Black Press*, 35; Jones, "The Role of the Black Press," 11.

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