

Black Opinion in Early African American Newspapers in Boston

By Kenneth J. Cooper

Before the Civil War, the development of the black press in Boston was retarded by strong African-American patronage of William Garrison's abolitionist *Liberator*. The city's first black-owned newspaper, *The Anti-Slavery Herald*, launched in 1838 for a brief run.¹ It was followed by *The Impartial Citizen*, an abolitionist weekly that relocated from Syracuse in 1850 and was published from Boston for a little more than a year.² *The Self Elevator* was started in 1853 and closed not long afterwards, after encountering financial problems as its two predecessors had.³

The *Herald*, *Citizen* and *Elevator* were three of just 17 black papers published in the country before the Civil War.⁴ Both the *Herald* and *Elevator* were owned by Benjamin F. Roberts, a prominent black Bostonian better known for his unsuccessful lawsuit challenging school segregation so his daughter Sarah could attend a school closer to the family home at the northern foot of Beacon Hill.⁵

Roberts suggested his goals for the abolitionist *Herald*, at least, included introducing "the arts and sciences" to his black readers and guiding "the free colored people in raising themselves."⁶ The paper apparently had a militant tone that displeased white abolitionists, include Amos Phelps, who abruptly withdrew his endorsement a month after the publication started in April 1838. Roberts complained bitterly in a letter to Phelps of "a combined effort on the part of certain *professed* abolitionists to muzzle, exterminate and put down the efforts of certain colored individuals." In October 1838, Roberts discontinued the *Herald*, six months after its launch.⁷

It is clear exactly how long the *Elevator*, published from Washington Street in downtown Boston, lasted. Subscriptions to the semi-monthly sold for one dollar. Roberts declared it would "agitate the cause of general improvement among the colored people, especially in regard to mechanical employments and scientific pursuits." A specific goal was African American representation in the military.⁸

The Boston Advocate started in 1885, with offices at 47 Hanover Street in the North End. It is apparently the earliest black paper in Boston with surviving copies. *The Guardian*, which William Monroe Trotter founded in 1901, is the second. The *Guardian*'s office was initially at 3 Tremont Row in what later became the Scollay Square downtown. Their editorials and letters from learned correspondents reflect early traces of black strategies for uplift as well as intra-racial debates that endure to this day.⁹

A survey of opinion articles in issues of the *Advocate* from 1885 and *The Guardian* in 1902 finds the papers repeatedly asserted political independence from the major parties to further African American interests. Black history as a source of racial pride and homeownership as a financial boon are advocated. Interracial marriage is debated, and so

too is how black people should identify themselves. Racial identifiers used in the papers include black, colored, Negro (sometimes not capitalized), African and Afro-American.¹⁰

From one perspective, the consistent expression of black strategies found in the Boston papers is reassuring, in that their foundations appear to be deep-rooted. From another, it is disheartening because the problems attaining political power and accumulating wealth, for instance, still have not been solved. The debates about marriage outside the race, and what to call ourselves, have not been stilled either.

Political Independence

The last two decades, African Americans have complained about the Democratic Party taking black voters for granted and argued for more of a presence in the Republican Party to promote electoral competition, aiming to further black interests. President George W. Bush has criticized Democrats for taking the black vote for granted, and the small but growing number of African Americans in his party has used that argument in their recruiting.

Back in 1885, the political situation was reversed, but the same argument was being made in the *Advocate*. Then most black voters were not Democrats but Republicans, the party of Abraham Lincoln, whose Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves. Some black Republicans complained the party took their votes for granted and called for selectively supporting Democrats to hold the Grand Old Party to account.

“Our people have so long held to the idea that Republicanism is the only safeguard of liberty, that the party leaders have put it down as a foregone conclusion that the black man must necessarily vote for the Republican ticket,” the paper said in an editorial published on August 22, 1885. “We do not contend that colored men should leave the Republican Party; or that they should flock to the Democratic party, but that we should be guided by race interest, intelligence, and integrity, let them hail from either side.

“The Republican party has done much to better our condition, which was, and is appreciated by the colored people, but the Republican party of Lincoln, Sumner, and Grant is no longer...if we can accomplish anything for our advancement by being allied with other parties, it is our duty to do so.”

Political independence was a repeated theme in the paper in 1885, a gubernatorial election year in some states. The paper’s perspective amounts to a less pithy version of what has become the motto of the Congressional Black Caucus, “no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, just permanent interests”—itself borrowed from a quotation from British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli.

Another editorial on September 12, 1885 reflects the kind of disgust with cynical racial politics aimed at the black voter then, and some would say, in contemporary campaigns. “One fact is apparent; and that is that just about this time of year, each party will recognize him as a ‘man and a brother,’ for about-- , well, experience has taught us for

about how long... The day has at last come when the colored man, at least in this State, will... think, act, and vote as he believes will be for his best interest, and the best interest of the community where he resides.”

One of the *Advocate's* goals was the appointment of more black officials. “When the vote of the colored people of America becomes more evenly divided between the two great parties, the probability is that under the administration of either, they will have a better representation in the offices at the gift of the governing party than they have today,” the paper editorialized on July 4, 1885.

The proximate cause of the paper's crusade was the nomination of Joseph B. Foraker as the Republican candidate for governor in Ohio. He had run two years earlier and lost, partly because he received limited black support. Critics considered Foraker an opponent of civil rights, citing his involvement as a lawyer who beat back a challenge to school segregation in Springfield, Ohio filed by a black minister. He, like Roberts had in 1849, wanted a daughter to attend the school nearest the family home. Reverend J. W. Gazaway filed his lawsuit under the Civil Rights Act of 1875.¹¹

Richard T. Greener, the first African American to graduate from Harvard with honors, wrote a letter from Washington, D.C. that was published on the front page of the July 4 edition calling for black voters in Ohio to “whip” Foraker in the October election. “The question of our civil rights in this country is one wherein honest men may differ as to the expediency of pushing it, but when once it is up for action, the man who is against it is an enemy to the manhood of the negro race in this, our native land, and we must brand him, no matter what party he hides behind,” Greener wrote.

Just after the turn of the 20th century, the *Guardian* was advancing a similar argument about Republican disregard for black interests and threatening to punish the party in congressional elections. A story atop the front page on Sept. 13, 1902 carried a three-deck headline, which began: “NO REPUBLICAN CONGRESS WITHOUT BLACK VOTE.”

The article was prompted by a North Carolina senator excluding African Americans from a “lily white” Republican nominating convention, not long after President Theodore Roosevelt had toured the state. “It is, therefore, a drawing of the race line and the turning down of Negro Republicans, with the connivance of a Republican president.”

The *Guardian* article was accompanied by a three-column map of the eastern two-thirds of the United States, with 18 states with a significant number of black voters shaded. The paper had done the math.

“It is not generally known that without the Negro vote in the north no such thing as a Republican majority in the lower house of Congress is possible... they can wield a mighty power in behalf of their disenfranchised brother” in the South, the author of the unbylined article observed. “There are some 61 congressmen in the Northern states who owe their election to the colored vote... The congressmen whose fortunes rest more or

less upon the ballot of the colored voter extend all the way from Massachusetts to Colorado.” Four of those districts, the article stated, “come within the limits of greater Boston.”

The opinionated article concluded with a warning and a metaphorical flourish. “In view of these facts, therefore, it is worth while for the National Republican party at Washington to reckon carefully as to its own existence when it proceeds to deal ruthlessly (as of late) with the colored people. A million and a half of colored people throughout the North are looking on with great alarm at the “lily white” conventions and the granddaddy clauses, and are already beginning to ask themselves, have [sic] not the colored race been cast overboard from the Republican ship, as a barrel to amuse the Southern whale, while the imperialistic craft proceeds on her journey?”

The calls for political independence by the *Advocate* and *Guardian* did not yield the election results the papers would have preferred. Foraker was elected governor, defeating a Democratic incumbent, and served a second term before losing and moving to the US Senate. In the House elections of 1902, Democrats picked up 25 seats, but Republicans retained control of the chamber by a slim margin.

History and Homeownership

In 1885, the *Advocate* also took up the issues of black history, homeownership and interracial marriage.

An editorial in the June 20 edition called for the creation of an African Historical Society, 30 years before Carter G. Woodson founded what is now called the Association for Study of Afro-American Life and History. The proposal won eager support from readers whose letters were published. A Mrs. N. F. Mossell from Philadelphia endorsed the idea and envisioned a grand repository akin to that assembled in the next century at the Schomburg Center in New York City. “All books, papers and tracts published by negroes should present a completed file of their works to such a society,” she urged in the July 4 issue.

Mossell picked one nit with the proposal, though. “I would call it the Afro-American Historical Society,” she said, even though her letter also refers to “the African race.” She did not explain her position in a broader, ongoing debate that saw “Afro-American” supplanted by “African American” late in the 20th century.

A week later, a letter was published on the front-page from a correspondent in Attleboro, Mass. who favored a historical society so that “the grandeur of our race in the past, present and future may be preserved,” providing “immeasurable benefit to the rising generations.”

The same July 11 issue carries an editorial headlined, “Owning Our Homes,” whose theme anticipated the wealth-creation initiatives of contemporary times.

“It is a lamentable fact that comparatively few of the colored men of Boston are the owners of the houses in which they live; and as a natural result, after long years of toil, and the expenditure of thousands of dollars for house rent, we are no better off in old age than when we commenced to pay tribute to a hungry horde of property owners,” the *Advocate* observed. The paper called for “our younger men” to seek mortgages from cooperative societies, the forerunners of savings and loans, to buy their own homes.

The editorial’s conclusion quotes someone suggesting that homeownership, compared to politics, is a “more substantial means of race elevation.” That point can be heard being made in modern black debates over whether economic or political power should be a priority.

Interracial Marriage

In the August 1 issue, an editorial responds to a question from a reader, whose note is published, seeking the paper’s opinion about “the marriage of influential men of color, with white women.” The letter-writer, James E. Jackson, phrased the question in the same way some African Americans, particularly women, have put it at least since Supreme Court overturned state bans on interracial marriage in 1967. Jackson suggested his own view, asking rhetorically: “Would it not be better for our race and our standing in society if such men would marry respectable colored women?”

This subject inflames emotions in modern debates, but the paper did not make emotional appeals in its response, which took the side of racial unity *and* individual choice. “For any one on reaching such position to choose as his companion in life, one of the Anglo-Saxon race, whatever may be the circumstances influencing him to do so, it has the appearance that he believed that the immediate association of one of his own race not good enough for him in his elevated position.

“This is the impression it produces on others, whether right or wrong....we give it as our opinion that the welfare of the race can best be promoted by casting in our lot with those of our own race, never mind how high a position we reach.”

But on the other hand, the paper added, “We believe a man or woman of whatever race has a perfect *right* to marry whoever they want to...”¹²

The earliest black newspapers in Boston whose copies survive were advocates of black political and economic power, racial pride and civil rights. Many of their ideas remain alive in African American thought.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Jacobs, Donald M., William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* and Boston's Blacks, 1830-1865. *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (June 1971), pgs. 275-6

² Cooper, Kenneth J., *A History of African American Newspapers in New England*. *New England Ethnic News*, January 2007.
<http://www.gonewz.com/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01articleid=18&cntnt01origid=15&cntnt01returnid=15>.

³ Da Silva, Janine V. and Grover, Kathryn. *Historic Resource Study: Boston African American National Historic Site*. National Park Service, December 31, 2002.
<http://www.nps.gov/boaf/historyculture/upload/HRSfinaldraft.doc> See also Price, George R. and James Brewer Stewart, *The Roberts Case, the Easton Family, and the Dynamics of the Abolitionist Movement in Massachusetts, 1776-1870*. *The Massachusetts Historical Review*. 4.NA (2002): 48 pars.
<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/mhr/4/price.html>.

⁴ Jacobs, pg. 276.

⁵ Kendrick, Stephen and Paul. *Sarah's Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle for Equality Changed America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. pg.104.

⁶ Price and Stewart.

⁷ Kendrick and Kendrick. pgs. 104-106.

⁸ Kendrick and Kendrick, pg. 215.

⁹ Cooper.

¹⁰ Cooper. Microfilm of issues of *The Advocate* at the Boston Public Library begins June 1885. Portions of some articles can not be read because of tears in the newsprint pages that were copied. The library's microfilm of *The Guardian* begins in 1902.

¹¹ Murray, Percy E., Harry C. Smith-Joseph B. *Foraker Alliance: Coalition Politics in Ohio*. *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Spring 1983), pgs. 171-184.

¹² Italics in original.

