

# The Printing Press and Abolitionism

Abolitionist newspapers played a vital role in the crusade to end slavery in the United States. The articles carried in these newspapers educated readers about the evils of the institution of slavery and helped to turn public opinion in northern states against it.

Visit the following resources to investigate the question:

How did the printing press impact the abolitionist movement?

## Putting it in Context: Newspapers (1800-1860)

Learn about newspapers published from 1800-1860, including the varieties of content and the publishing process. Compare the newspapers of the past to the newspapers of today.

- **Text:** *American Newspapers, 1800-1860: An Introduction*, created by the History, Philosophy and Newspaper Library at the University of Illinois [library.illinois.edu/hpnl/tutorials/antebellum-newspapers-introduction](http://library.illinois.edu/hpnl/tutorials/antebellum-newspapers-introduction)
- **Video:** Cincinnati Type & Print Museum [freedomcenter.org/learn/cincinnati-type-print-museum](http://freedomcenter.org/learn/cincinnati-type-print-museum)

## The Black Perspective: Frederick Douglass and Black Abolitionists

Learn about prominent Black abolitionists who used the printed word to get their voices heard. Within the abolitionist movement, Black voices were too often overlooked or suppressed. How did these authors challenge society?

- **Text:** *Frederick Douglass Newspapers* from the Library of Congress [loc.gov/collections/frederick-douglass-newspapers/about-this-collection](http://loc.gov/collections/frederick-douglass-newspapers/about-this-collection)
- **Text:** Access a collection of Black Abolitionist Papers from the National Archives [archives.gov/nhprc/projects/catalog/black-abolitionists](http://archives.gov/nhprc/projects/catalog/black-abolitionists)

## The Abolitionist Press: Then and Now

Learn how abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison, promoted their cause and how that legacy lives on. The abolitionist press reveals the value of the written word and the importance of free speech. How does the abolitionist press compare to use of social media to promote modern social change?

- **Text:** Antislavery Connections. *The Abolitionist Press*. Huron University College. [huronresearch.ca/antislavery/contextual-essays/the-abolitionist-press](http://huronresearch.ca/antislavery/contextual-essays/the-abolitionist-press)
- **Text:** National Park Service. (2021, July 13). *William Lloyd Garrison* [nps.gov/people/william-lloyd-garrison.htm](http://nps.gov/people/william-lloyd-garrison.htm)

Learn more about Garrison and *The Liberator* in our 3rd floor exhibit, *From Slavery to Freedom*

- **Article:** Marcelo, P. (2022, Feb. 3). *Abolition newspaper revived for nation grappling with racism*. Associated Press. [apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-education-journalism-boston-bb9dae6b4d9270a26b1470fcd3f674b1](https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-education-journalism-boston-bb9dae6b4d9270a26b1470fcd3f674b1)

Colonial newspapers didn't simply deliver news — they were marketplaces. They connected buyers and sellers of a range of goods and services.

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## How Northern Newspapers Brokered Slavery

**Source:** Merrefield, C. (2020, Aug. 10). How early U.S. newspapers brokered slavery. The Journalist's Resource. [journalistsresource.org/race-and-gender/newspapers-brokered-slavery](https://journalistsresource.org/race-and-gender/newspapers-brokered-slavery)

*Modified from original text*

Newspapers in colonial America (before 1775) often operated with little money and limited staff. A newly formed paper would likely be family run, sometimes with an apprentice. Newspapers were easy to start and quick to fail.

**broker** – arrange or negotiate buying and selling

Institutional slavery supported many aspects of early American industry. Newspapers were no exception. Slave owners paid newspapers to publish advertisements that described the physical traits of slaves who had run away, offering rewards for their return. Those ads “were a lucrative and consistent source of revenue” for newspaper printers, writes Jordan Taylor, visiting assistant history professor at Smith College, in a new paper published in the journal *Early American Studies*.

But colonial newspapers weren't only messengers for slavers. Newspaper publishers also acted as brokers, facilitating the buying and selling of up to 3,400 men, women and children as chattel. For most of that century or so, slave brokerage ads appeared primarily in Northern newspapers, Taylor finds in his paper. “Newspaper editors and printers jumped enthusiastically into brokering the slave trade,” he says.

It's important to note that because the North industrialized well before the South, it had many more newspapers during colonial times.

Most newspapers charged a flat rate for short ads. “For sale,” reads one ad Taylor found from 1792 in the *Independent Gazetteer* out of Philadelphia, “A Young Negro Woman, With three Children. Inquire of the Printer.” An interested buyer would go to the offices of the *Gazetteer* to find out how to reach the seller. Sometimes a printer would provide further details about the sale, such as price terms and attributes of the person or people being sold.

Interestingly, on the same page as that *Gazetteer* ad are poems exalting freedom, offering sympathy to slaves.

A slave-for-sale ad might cost several shillings. These ads were an important revenue stream for newspapers. Benjamin Franklin, one of the nation's founding fathers and a vocal abolitionist in the twilight of his life, printed 277 slave-for-sale ads in his *Pennsylvania Gazette* over the course of 37 years in the mid-1700s.

Prominent and less-prominent printers alike acted as slave-sale brokers for the simple reason that doing so helped maintain their livelihoods.

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Read about advertisements for fugitive slaves:

- **Article:** *An Archive of Fugitive Slave Ads Sheds New Light on Lost Histories* by Smithsonian Magazine [smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/archive-fugitive-slave-ads-could-shed-new-light-lost-histories-180959194](https://smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/archive-fugitive-slave-ads-could-shed-new-light-lost-histories-180959194)

# The Black Press: Too Long Have Others Spoken for Us

Source: *Too Long Have Others Spoken for Us*. PBS.  
[pbs.org/blackpress/educate\\_event/toolong.html](https://pbs.org/blackpress/educate_event/toolong.html)

The year 1827 marked the beginning of an era in which African Americans would use the printed word as a means of political protest, when few other outlets for Black public expression were available.

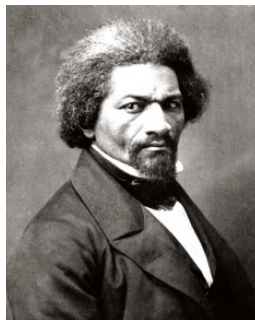
## Before the Civil War

The Black press came to life in 1827, when a group of African American New Yorkers, tired of the negative portrayal of the Black population in the mainstream press, founded Freedom's Journal. John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish, the editors of Freedom's Journal, proclaimed in their first issue that Black Americans would now have a means by which to "plead our own cause"; they would no longer have to depend on white abolitionists to speak for them in the white press.

Between 1827 and 1861 some two dozen Black-owned and -operated newspapers were founded in Northern cities. The North Star, edited by Frederick Douglass, was the most influential. Its readership included not only African Americans but also presidents and members of Congress, who used the paper to keep abreast of the activities of the antislavery movement.

## Reconstruction

After the Civil War ended in 1865, emancipation from slavery sparked a new wave of Black newspapers. Prior to emancipation, the Black press could not publish or circulate its papers in the slave states of the South. Further, under slavery, African Americans had been barred from learning to read. With their newfound access to education, African Americans strove to achieve literacy. They embraced the newspapers as a sign of their freedom, and as a source of information about their people and their communities.



The Black press of the Reconstruction era dedicated itself to building communities of free Black men and women in both the North and South.

## After Reconstruction

When Reconstruction Era protections for newly freed slaves ended, violence against African Americans erupted. The Southern white press failed to condemn racist violence and even encouraged the hatred that fueled the mobs. In response, Black reporters made a public record of crimes against African Americans that went unprosecuted and unreported by the mainstream press. These efforts were not without risk. Ida B. Wells, editor of the Memphis Free Speech, traveled throughout the South to report on lynching. When a mob attacked her paper's office, Wells realized that her life was in danger. Left with little choice but to flee the South, she headed north and continued her career as a writer for the New York Age.



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