

American Prophecies: African American News in the Antebellum Era

THE COLORED AMERICAN.

SAMUEL E. CORNISH,
Editor.

New-York, Saturday, March 4, 1837.

PHILIP A. BELL,
Proprietor.

VOL. I.

"RIGHTS OF THE NEGRO."

NO. 3.

THE COLORED AMERICAN.

Printed and Published every SATURDAY, by ROBERT SEARS, at his Book and Job Printing Office, No. 2 Frankfort-Street, (3d story,) opposite Tammany Hall, New-York, where Advertisements, Subscriptions, and Communications will be received.

Printing in general, executed with despatch. TERMS OF THE PAPER. ONE DOLLAR AND FIFTY CENTS per annum, always payable IN ADVANCE.

Subscribers out of the City to pay in advance to their respective agents.

Our Agents out of the City are requested to be very particular in giving the names and residences of the Subscribers they may obtain. We wish to have it distinctly understood, no Subscriptions will be received for a less term than One Year.

"All Letters and Communications, intended for the 'COLORED AMERICAN,' must be POST PAID, and legibly directed, as above, unless they contain remittances, or the Names of new subscribers."

Gen. Jackson and the Free People of Color, HIS FIRST PROCLAMATION.

Head Quarters, South Military District, Mobile, Sept. 21, 1814.

TO THE FREE COLORED INHABITANTS OF LOUISIANA.

Through a mistaken policy you have heretofore been deprived of a participation in the glorious struggle for national rights, in which our country is engaged. This no longer shall exist.

As sons of Freedom, you are now called upon to defend our most inestimable blessings. As Americans, your country looks with confidence to her colored children, for a valiant support, as a faithful return for the advantages enjoyed under her mild and equitable government. As fathers, husbands, and brothers, you are summoned to rally round the standard of the Eagle, to defend all that is dear in existence.

Your country, although calling for your exertions, does not wish you to engage in her cause without remunerating you for the services rendered. Your intelligent minds are not to be led away by false representations—your love of honor would cause you to despise the man who should attempt to deceive you. In the sincerity of a soldier, and the language of truth, I address you.

To every noble hearted freeman of color, volunteering to serve, during the present contest with Great Britain, and no longer, there will be paid the same bounty in money and lands, now received by the white soldiers of the United States; viz. one hundred and twenty-four dollars in money, and one hundred and sixty acres of land. The non-commissioned officers and privates will also be entitled to the same monthly pay and daily rations and clothes, furnished to any American soldier.

On enrolling yourselves in companies, the Major General commanding, will select officers for your government, from your white fellow-citizens. Your non-commissioned officers will be appointed from among yourselves.

Due regard will be paid to the feelings of freemen and soldiers. You will not be being associated with white men in the same corps, be exposed to improper comparisons or unjust sarcasm. As a distinct, independent battalion or regiment, pursuing the path of glory, you will, undivided, receive the applause and gratitude of your countrymen.

To assure you of the sincerity of my intentions, and my anxiety to engage your invaluable services to our country, I have communicated my wishes to the Governor of Louisiana, who is fully informed as to the manner of enrolments, and will give you every necessary information on the subject of this address.

ANDREW JACKSON,
Major General Commanding.

General Jackson's
2d PROCLAMATION TO THE FREE PEOPLE OF COLOR.

Soldiers!—When on the banks of the Mobile, I called you to take arms, inviting you to partake the perils and glory of your white fellow-citizens. I expected much from you; for I was not ignorant that you possessed qualities most formidable to an invading enemy. I knew with what fortitude you could endure hunger and thirst, and all the fatigues of a campaign. I knew well how you loved your native country, and that you had, as well as ourselves, to defend what man held most dear—his parents, relatives, wife, children, and property. You were more than I expected. In addition to the previous qualities I before knew you to possess, I found, moreover, among you, a noble enthusiasm which leads to the performance of great things.

Soldiers!—The President of the United States shall hear how praiseworthy was your conduct in the hour of danger, and the representatives of the American people will, I doubt not, give you the praise your exploits entitle you to. Your General anticipates them in applauding your noble ardor.

The enemy approaches, his vessels cover our lakes, our brave citizens are united, and all contention has ceased among them—Their only dispute is, who shall win the prize of valor, or who the most glory, its noblest reward.

By Order,
THOS. BUTLER, Aid de Camp.

ON THE RIGHT OF COLORED PEOPLE TO VOTE.

"For about forty-five years, from 1777, when the old Constitution, (drafted by JOHN JAY,) was formed to the adoption of New, in 1822, the free colored male inhabitants of this State, enjoyed the right of suffrage, subject to no restrictions and limitations only, as attached to the exercise of the same right by white male inhabitants. For the last fifteen years the exercise of this right has been denied to all colored male citizens, except those who own a freehold estate of \$250 in value: a provision by which all but a mere fraction of the 40,000 colored people of this State have been disfranchised. The rights and privileges of other citizens have been enlarged, while our own, and those of our brethren have been abridged. Foreigners and aliens to the government and law—strangers to our institutions are permitted to flock to this land, and in a few years are endowed with all the privileges of citizens; but we, native born Americans, the children of the soil, are most of us shut out."

[The following are extracts from speeches of some of our most distinguished men, in the Convention for amending the Constitution held in 1821, relating the abridgement of the right of colored men to vote as enjoyed under the old Constitution. The extracts are taken from Carter and Sturges Report of the Proceedings of that body, but have been abridged under appropriate heads.]

On the injustice of Disfranchising them.

PETER A. JAY said, when this Convention was first assembled, it was generally understood that the provisions would be made to extend the right of suffrage, and some were apprehensive that it might be extended to a degree which they could not approve. But, Sir, it was not expected that this right was in any instance to be restricted—much less was it anticipated, or desired that a single person should be disfranchised. Why, Sir, are men to be excluded from rights which they possess in common with their countrymen? What crime have they committed? Why are they who were born as free as ourselves, natives of the same country, and deriving from nature and our political institutions, the same rights and privileges which we have, now to be deprived of all their rights, and doomed to remain for ever as aliens among us.

CHANCELLOR KENT supported the motion of Mr. Jay—[viz. to strike out the word white from the limitation.] He was disposed, however, to annex such qualifications as should prevent them from coming in bodies from other States to vote at elections. *He did not come to this Convention* (said Chancellor Kent) *to disfranchise any portion of the community, or take away their rights.*

ROBERT CLARKE, Esq. (from Delaware,) said, I am unwilling to retain the word "white," because its detention is repugnant to all the principles and notions of liberty to which we have heretofore professed to adhere, and to our declaration of independence. We hold these truths to be self-evident—that all men are created equal, &c. The people of color are capable of giving their consent, and ever since the formation of the Government, they have constituted a portion of the people, from which our Legislature have derived their "just powers," and by retaining that word (white) you deprive a large and respectable number of the people of this State of privileges and rights which they have enjoyed in common with us, ever since the existence of the government; and to which they are justly entitled.

By retaining this word we violate the Constitution of the United States. There is a clause upon which it crowns very hard—Free people of color are included in the number which regulates our representation in Congress, and I wish to know how persons can be represented when they are deprived of the privilege of voting for representatives. The Constitution says, "representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the different States, according to the

inhabitants thereof, including all free persons," &c. All colors and complexions are here included. It is not free white persons. No, sir, our venerable fathers entertained too strong a sense of justice to countenance such an odious distinction.

Now, sir, taking this in consideration with the Declaration of Independence, I think you cannot exclude them without being guilty of palpable violation of every principle of justice. We are usurping to ourselves a power which we do not possess, and by so doing, deprive them of an inviolable right—a right which they have enjoyed since the formation of our government—the right of suffrage. And why do we this? Instead of visiting the iniquities of these people upon them and their children, we are visiting their misfortune upon them and their posterity to the latest generation. Because we have done this people injustice by enslaving them, and rendering them degraded and miserable, is it right that we should go on and continue to deprive them of their most valuable rights, and visit upon their children this deprivation. Is this just? Is it honest? Was it expected by our constituents?

ABRAHAM VAN VECHTEN, Esq. of Albany, observed, that the question before the Committee was of importance, and one on which he would be happy to see a unanimous vote. It had been said that the people looked for an extension of the right of suffrage, but he had not heard it suggested that any desired the disfranchisement of any class of electors.

The amendment reported by the select committee contemplated to deprive electors of color of a right which they had enjoyed since the adoption of the Constitution. He asked why this should be done? Those electors are free men, and have been recognized as citizens of the State for nearly half a century and have under the sanction of our constitution and laws duly acquired the legal qualifications as electors. Have they done any thing to forfeit the right of suffrage? This has not been shown.

The absurdity of Prejudice as a ground of exclusion.

ABRAHAM VAN VECHTEN.—Do not prejudicially against the color destroy their rights as citizens! Whence do those prejudices proceed? Are they founded in impartial reason, or in the benevolent principles of our Holy Religion—nay, are they indulged in cases where the services of men of color are desirable—do we not daily see them working side by side with our white citizens on our farms, and our public highways? Is it more derogatory to a white citizen to stand side by side of a citizen of color in the ranks of the militia than in repairing a highway, or in laboring on a farm. Again, are not people of color permitted to participate in our most sacred religious exercises—to set down with us at the same table to commemorate the dying love of the Saviour of sinners. This will not be denied by any one who has been in the habit of attending those exercises and those religious solemnities; and what is the conclusion to which this fact directs us? Is it not that people of color are our fellow candidates for immortality, and that the same path to future happiness is appointed to them and to us—and that in the final judgment the artificial distinctions of color will not be regarded. How then can that distinction justify us in taking from them any of the common rights which every other free citizen enjoys.

Mr. V. concluded by repeating that he had understood, that it was expected by a considerable portion of the people of this State, that the right of suffrage would be extended, but he had not heard that it was expected or desired (except by some of the citizens of N. York) that any of the present electors of this State should be disfranchised. He should, therefore, vote for striking out the word "white," in the amendment before the Committee, in order to preserve inviolate the present constitutional rights of all the electors.

The Exclusion unnecessary.

MR. JAY—This State, Mr. Chairman, has taken high ground against slavery, and all its degrading consequences and accompaniments. Adopt the amendment now proposed, (to insert the word white in the limitation) and you will hear a shout of triumph, and a hiss of scorn from the Southern part of the Union, which I confess, will mortify me. I shall shrink at the sound, because I fear it will be deserved.

But it has been said that this measure is necessary to preserve the purity of your elections. I do not deny that necessity has no law.

But where is the necessity in the present instance? The whole number of colored people in the State, whether free or in bond,

amounts to less than a 40th part of the whole population. When your numbers are to theirs as forty to one, do you still fear them? To assert this, would be to pay them a compliment, which I am sure you do not think they deserve. But then there are a great number, it is said, in the city of New-York. How many? Sir, even in that city the whites are to the blacks as ten to one, and even of the tenth, which is composed of the black population, how few are there that are entitled to vote? It has been said that their numbers are increasing. The very reverse is the fact. During the last ten years, in which the white population has advanced with astonishing rapidity, the colored population of the State has been stationary. Will you, then, without necessity, and merely to gratify an unreasonable prejudice, stain the Constitution you are about to form, with a provision equally odious and unjust, and in direct violation of the principles you profess.

Objections on the ground of the alleged Incapacity and Degradation of colored people considered.

MR. JAY said—But we are told that the people of color are incapable of exercising the right of suffrage. I may have misunderstood that gentleman, but I thought he meant to say, that they labored under a physical disability. It is true, that some philosophers have held that the intellect of a black man is naturally inferior to that of white ones—but this idea has been so completely refuted—and is now so universally exploded, that I did not expect to have heard it in an assembly so enlightened as this, nor do I think it necessary to disprove it. That in general the people of color are inferior to the whites in knowledge and industry, I shall not deny. You made them slaves, and nothing is more true than the ancient saying, "The day you make a man a slave, takes half his worth away." But will you punish the children for your own crimes—for the injuries you have inflicted on the parents. Besides, sir, this state of things is fast passing away—Schools have been opened for them—there has been discovered a thirst for instruction, and a progress in learning, seldom to be seen in other schools of the State.

MR. CLARKE, on this subject, observed—It is said these people are incapable of exercising the right of suffrage judiciously—that they will become the tools and engines of aristocracy.

This might be true to a certain extent; but, sir, they are not the only ones who abuse these privileges; and if this be a sufficient reason for depriving any of your citizens of their just rights, go and exclude also the many thousands of white lawning rascals who look up to their more wealthy and ambitious neighbors for directions at the polls, as they do for bread.

But although most of this unfortunate class may be in this dependent state, both in body and mind; yet we ought to remember, that we are making our Constitution, not for a day or two for a year, but I hope for many generations; and there is a redeeming spirit in liberty, which I have no doubt will, eventually, raise these poor, abused, unfortunate people, from their present state to equal intelligence with their more fortunate and enlightened neighbors. Sir, there is a day fixed by law; when slavery must forever cease in this State. Have gentlemen, seriously reflected upon the consequences which may result from that event; when they are about to deprive them of every inducement to become respectable members of society, turning them out from the protection, and beyond the control of their masters, and in the mean time ordering them to be fugitives, vagabonds and outcasts from society.

Insufficiency of the objection that people of color do not serve in the Militia.

MR. CLARKE in discussing this point said—We have been told that these people are not liable to do military duty, and that as they are not required to contribute to the protection of defence of the State, they are not entitled to an equal participation in the privileges of its citizens. But, Sir, whose fault is this? Have they ever refused to do military duty, when called on? It is laughably asked, who will stand in the ranks shoulder to shoulder with a negro? I answer no one in time of peace—so one when your masters and trainings are looked upon as mere pastimes; no one when your militia will shoulder their muskets and march to their trainings with as much unconcern as they would go to a ball. But, sir, when the hour of danger approaches, your white militia are just as willing that men of color should be set up as a mark to be shot at, as to be set up themselves. In the war of the Revolution these people helped to fight your battles by land and by sea. Some of the



Benjamin Fagan

You suggest in the introduction that the African Americans who started newspapers in the nineteenth century did so because of their sense of “black chosenness.” Can you explain what you mean by that term?

“Black chosenness” is shorthand for the belief that African Americans are God’s chosen people. This belief gained purchase and power among black communities in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and rests in a comparison between African Americans and the biblical Israelites, whom the Bible marks as God’s original chosen nation. The Bible records numerous instances where the Israelites suffer slavery and oppression. We’re perhaps most familiar with the period when the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites, which is recounted in the book of Exodus, but in later periods the Israelites were enslaved by the Assyrians and the Chaldeans, a civilization typically represented through its capital city of Babylon. African American preachers and writers repeatedly pointed out the obvious parallels between the Israelites in slavery and enslaved black people in the United States, and often argued that if black Americans were the modern manifestation of the biblical Israelites, then they too could claim the mantle of God’s chosen nation.

A faith in black chosenness often brought with it a sense of responsibility to act in a certain way (what I call “acting chosen”), though what exactly acting chosen meant in terms of on-the-ground behavior could change depending upon specific circumstances. But most importantly, perhaps, black chosenness contained within it a certainty that black Americans would eventually be free, since God would not allow his chosen people to remain in bondage forever. The when and how of freedom may have been uncertain, but black chosenness guarantees the fact of black liberation.



Front page of *The Colored American*, March 4, 1837 (New York). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

I don't want to suggest, though, that black editors began their newspapers *because* of their faith in black chosenness. In each of my chapters, I try to flesh out in as much detail as possible the specific circumstances that led to the founding of particular newspapers. But black chosenness became a fundamental, if at times subtle, theme of the black newspapers that I take up in my book. Newspapers allowed black editors to apply their faith in black chosenness to specific circumstances, and those circumstances in turn affected the precise contours of black chosenness. For example, in 1848 Frederick Douglass and his staff used the *North Star* to explore the relationship between black chosenness and the anti-monarchical revolutions that rocked Europe during that year. And as it connected black chosenness to an international revolutionary movement, the *North Star* stretched the boundaries of the new chosen nation to include black and white revolutionaries located within and beyond the confines of the United States. As a medium in some ways designed to translate abstract ideas into concrete plans for action, the newspaper was an ideal way for black Americans to put the theory of black chosenness into practice.

How many newspapers were published by African Americans during the antebellum era? How did you decide to focus on the five you selected for the book?

I hesitate to even offer an estimate about the number of black newspapers published in the antebellum era. Frankie Hutton's foundational book *The Early Black Press in America* lists seventeen "extant antebellum black newspapers," but scholars continue to find references to papers that we have not yet recovered. For example, Thomas Hamilton is perhaps best known as the editor of the *Weekly Anglo-African*, a newspaper that I focus on in my book. But according to his contemporaries Hamilton also edited the *People's Press* sometime in the 1840s, and I recently discovered references to a short-lived *Tri-Weekly Anglo-African*, also edited by Hamilton, that ran for a single week in 1865. Now,

Thomas Hamilton was a well-known member of New York City's black elite, and still we're missing entire publications that he produced. So I have to imagine that there are also as-yet-unrecovered black newspapers published in small cities and towns across the northern United States that we don't even know we're supposed to be looking for. And if we decide to consider black newspapers published in Canada and the Caribbean (I think we should), the number grows even larger. All of which is to say, there is still an immense amount of work to be done recovering and analyzing early black newspapers, and I always intended my book to be an entry point into a vast archive, rather than a comprehensive study.

I decided to focus on the five newspapers in my book for practical as well as thematic reasons. I wanted to be able to write about newspapers with runs of at least a year, and as much as possible to be able to read each paper's entire run. So when narrowing down my archive I was immediately confronted by problems of archiving and access. At the time I began my work on this book, only a single issue of newspapers like Martin Delany's *Mystery* was extant, while multiple years of *Frederick Douglass' Paper* were either missing or incredibly difficult to access. On the other hand, nearly full runs of *Freedom's Journal*, *The Colored American*, the *North Star*, the *Provincial Freeman*, and the *Weekly Anglo-African* are all relatively easily accessible, either on microfilm or (for a select few) digitally.

But beyond such practical concerns I chose to write about these five newspapers together because the publications and the people who made them were intimately connected to one another. One reason I decided to focus on newspapers published over a relatively short time period (about forty years) and small geographic area (the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada) is that the women and men who made and sustained these papers knew one another personally. Thomas Hamilton's father, for example, helped found *Freedom's Journal*, a newspaper that profoundly influenced Philip Bell's decision to start *The Colored American* (where the teenage Hamilton worked as a newspaper wrapper). John Dick, who printed and contributed numerous articles to the *North Star*, later emigrated to Canada and helped produce the *Provincial Freeman*, edited by Mary Ann Shadd. And Shadd's good friend and neighbor Martin Delany had his novel *Blake* published in the *Weekly Anglo-African*. In addition, because the editors of the papers I selected engaged in numerous activities besides newspaper editing, they met and interacted with one another in a variety of venues. For example, Samuel Cornish, Philip Bell, Charles Ray, Frederick Douglass, Mary Ann Shadd, and Thomas and Robert Hamilton all attended [Colored Conventions](#). Cornish and Bell served together on education committees in the 1830s, and Douglass and Ray argued over the need for a new black newspaper in the 1840s. And sometimes these cooperations and disagreements spilled over into the pages of their newspapers long after the conventions had closed. So I tried, as much as possible, to put these particular newspapers into conversation with one another precisely because the people reading and writing these papers were actually in conversation with one another. And reading the five newspapers I cover in my book together, I want to suggest, offers us a far richer sense of a community

that existed in person and in print than we would get if we read any one of the papers in isolation. Some of the newspapers that I focus on have been written about by other scholars, in helpful and important ways, but there's much more work to be done teasing out the collective and collaborative nature of the early black press, within and across individual papers. My hope is that my book offers one example of what that kind of work might look like.

Throughout the book, you note that the editors of these newspapers saw their publications as vehicles to regulate or channel the behavior of African Americans. Why did they believe that their newspapers would be a successful avenue to pursue that goal?

It may be impossible to overstate the importance of the newspaper in the nineteenth-century United States. As the era's dominant form of media, I tend to think of the newspaper in the nineteenth century in relation to television in the twentieth or the Internet in the twenty-first. When conducting research for this book, I read through a number of travel accounts from European visitors to the United States, and without fail the authors expressed their astonishment at the sheer number of newspapers in the U.S., and the influence that these papers exerted over the populace. The most famous of these accounts is probably from Alexis de Tocqueville, who devotes [an entire chapter](#) of *Democracy in America* to the place of newspapers in the United States, and sees the newspaper as the key means to not only reach but also to influence a scattered citizenry. Contemporary scholars have debated whether or not the newspaper actually possessed that kind of power, but nineteenth-century advocates and critics of the newspaper alike believed that it did. This respect for the power of the newspaper helps explain why delegates to Colored Conventions spent so much time discussing not only the creation of black newspapers, but the need to support papers of, in the parlance of the day, high moral standing. The minutes of these conventions are dotted with delegates worrying about the influence that a "bad" paper could have on its readers, especially children, and urging families to subscribe to journals that would teach upright behavior.

For the black New Yorkers who founded *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper published in the United States, this faith in the power of the newspaper to shape the perceptions and behavior of its readers was based in personal experience. *Freedom's Journal* was founded for a number of reasons, but one of them was to provide a means to counter the racist representations of African Americans that were rampant in New York's white newspapers. And we see attempts to correct such misrepresentations present in all of the newspapers that I write about in my book, because these lies could have material consequences. Beyond contributing to and justifying the general discrimination that African Americans faced in the North, white editors could and did use the pages of their papers to stir up and organize mobs to attack black gatherings, parades, and businesses. This is not to dismiss or minimize the importance of other institutions like the church, or other forms of print like the pamphlet and book. But when someone in the nineteenth century wanted to get their

message out, if they could, they started a newspaper (or many newspapers). This is true for political parties, organizations committed to causes like temperance or the abolition of slavery, religious denominations from the mainstream to the Millerites, and a wide range of immigrant groups. So the belief by black editors that their newspapers could shape the ideas and actions of their readers reflected the broadly accepted view of the power of the newspaper, which could be wielded for good or ill.

In what ways did these newspapers connect through their mission to other nineteenth-century movements, including abolitionism and evangelical moral reform? What I suggest in my book is that black newspapers applied their theories of black chosenness to a range of issues. For example, *Freedom's Journal* argued that being a member of God's chosen nation brought with it the responsibility to act in a certain way. And for that newspaper, acting chosen meant behaving according to certain class-based norms. The paper railed against working-class black New Yorkers for being too loud, too showy, for lacking decorum and humility. So in this example, *Freedom's Journal* connected black chosenness to its efforts to instill what its editors called "propriety" in its black readers.

And while I decided to focus on the place of black chosenness in black newspapers, this is only one of many stories we could and need to tell about the early black press. The black newspapers that I study were not single-issue publications. Instead, they covered and commented on a range of topics. These papers were certainly abolitionist, printing speeches from well-known black and white abolitionists and consistently agitating for the end of slavery. But they were not simply abolitionist papers. The same can be said for an issue like temperance, which was taken up frequently by black newspapers in the antebellum era.

To what extent did the editors see inclusion among the American nation as a possibility for African Americans?

The black newspapers I study, with the exception of the *Provincial Freeman*, absolutely saw inclusion among an American nation as a possibility for African Americans. But crucially, for these newspapers "American nation" did not necessarily equal the United States of America. Instead, the black newspapers that I study consistently imagined God's chosen people as members of American nations that existed independently of, and at times in opposition to, the United States.

We see this most clearly with *The Colored American*, a newspaper that at times equated the United States to Babylon, a city that, in the Bible, God eradicates because its people hold the Israelites in slavery. With this connection in mind, *The Colored American* speculated that black Americans would only find true freedom after the United States had been destroyed. And out of that destruction, the paper concluded, would come a truly free American nation composed of those that the United States had formerly enslaved and oppressed

(including Native Americans). Indeed, *The Colored American* drew an explicit connection between African Americans and Native American tribes like the Seminoles, while also focusing on the history of Native nations that predated the United States. By reminding their readers, and us, that American nations had existed before the United States and will exist after it, black newspapers like *The Colored American* put some healthy distance between the concepts of nation (or people) and state (or government). There is a long history of U.S. Americans working hard to collapse those two concepts and portray the United States as the natural, inevitable, and only imaginable state of an American nation. But as the contributors to and readers of the black newspapers that I write about in my book recognized, that conflation is designed to eliminate the pursuit of alternative American nation-states free from the oppressive structures and conditions that constitute the United States.

You note, both above and in the book, the difficulty for scholars in gaining access to newspapers because so few of them are digitized. What is the current status of digitization projects for black newspapers specifically, and what work remains to be done?

When I began this project in the early 2000s, I could only access antebellum black newspapers through microfilm and a visit to the American Antiquarian Society, which holds quite a few original issues of the papers I write about in my book. At present, quite a few black newspapers, including but not limited to the five I focus on in my book, have been digitized. These digitization projects have undoubtedly made black newspapers more widely available. The caveat, though, is that the for-profit companies that have digitized and archived these papers charge subscription fees that only the richest universities can afford, and typically do not even offer subscription options for individuals unaffiliated with such institutions. Moreover, the newspaper databases that are freely accessible, such as the Library of Congress's [Chronicling America](#) project, are woefully inadequate in their coverage of black newspapers. So we have a situation where newspapers produced by and for a people who had been bought and sold have been transformed into a commodity accessible only to scholars and students at a select few universities. One of the saddest consequences of this inaccessibility, I think, is the difficulty of bringing black newspapers into the classroom and introducing new generations to the power and beauty of the early black press.

What we need, then, is a freely accessible archive (or archives) of black newspapers (and black print more generally) created and curated by scholars, archivists, and librarians and supported by university libraries. This is a daunting task, especially for folks already overburdened by a range of other professional responsibilities. But projects like the [Colored Conventions Project](#) and the [Digital Colored American Magazine](#) are models for how this sort of work can proceed, and show that it can be accomplished, slowly, as a collective effort.

This article originally appeared in issue 17.4 (Summer, 2017).

Benjamin Fagan is assistant professor of English at Auburn University, where he teaches courses in early African American literature and culture. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *American Literary History*, *African American Review*, *American Periodicals*, *Legacy*, and *Comparative American Studies*. He is the author of *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* (2016) and editor of *African American Literature in Transition, 1830-1850*, a collection of essays under contract with Cambridge University Press. During the 2017-18 academic year, he is a visiting research fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C.