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The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0wv4n4p6>

Journal

The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced, 2(1)

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Publication Date

2014

DOI

10.5070/H321025694

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Peer reviewed

The Huntsville Gazette: The African American Perspective

By Mike Steele

The Reconstruction era of the United States, after the Civil War, was one of the most tumultuous and uncertain times in American history. This period could best be described as a perpetual roller coaster ride of hope, fear, triumph, failure, optimism and angst. For the first time in their collective history, African Americans would have no master beyond themselves. Adjusting to a life of emancipation however, was by no means a simple task. It can be argued that moving on from a life of servitude and hopelessness to a life of equality and advancement was akin to washing away a mountain, especially given that when the Reconstruction Era ended, any hope of creating a new and better world for the African American in the South was effectively extinguished. However, in the case of *The Huntsville Gazette* of Huntsville, Alabama an African American newspaper that was every bit as informative and engaging as any white newspaper of the day can be observed. This acts as a direct contradiction to the belief that African Americans were racially inferior and unable to advance themselves to the point that they could compete with whites. Still, there are still questions that warrant further investigation such as: what messages or attitudes did the paper try to express, if any? What matters did the paper consider important at the time? In addition, other topics of interest were encountered over the course of my research such as: the lack of condemnation for violence committed against African Americans in the city and how the paper was able to cater to a population that had a staggering illiteracy rate. A combination of the efforts of the stories told in this paper, the efforts of prominent names in the field of race and ethnicity and personal theories will attempt to address each of these issues while at the same time providing a unique window into the past.

The Huntsville Gazette began its publication in 1881 and operated until 1894, covering a wide range of topics from domestic and international affairs to politics and advertisements. The year 1881 was an interesting one for the United States and the beginnings of several important chapters in American history such as the beginning of what would become Prohibition in Kansas, the creation of the Red Cross by Clara Barton, and the forming of the Oriental Telephone Company by Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell. The Reconstruction Era in the post-Civil War South formally ended in 1877, and the white population wasted little time in engineering the near complete disenfranchisement of African Americans. Alabama during this time had experienced social and economic hardships that were similar to several southern states but in time, unfortunately, Alabama would emerge as a shining example of life under the Jim Crow laws, which established the segregation of blacks and whites on the social level. As outlined by Rob Dixon in the *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, “The period is also characterized by civil and social upheaval; farming hardships and exploitative labor practices led to the emergence of labor unions, and Jim Crow laws allowed racism to flourish under the guise of a policy known as ‘separate but equal’.”¹ Over the course of this research eight consecutive issues of the paper were consulted and the results consisted of stories that covered a wide range of topics that reached beyond domestic affairs in the South, such as the story about how “Belgium promises to become the great industrial teacher of Europe. She has fifty nine technical schools, thirty two industrial schools and a higher commercial school, all receiving funds annually from

¹ Rob Dixon, “New South Era” *Encyclopedia of Alabama*. Accessed November 20, 2013. <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-2128>

the State.”² The gazette also provided political commentary on affairs that went beyond the domestic politics of Huntsville, such as the following story: “The New York Legislature after seven weeks of balloting and canvassing succeeded on the forty eighth ballot in electing Hon. Warner Miller for the long term in the United States Senate as a successor to the Hon. Thomas C. Platt, resigned”³. Such a variety of stories indicate the wide array of interests expressed by the audience of the paper. The dominant story that was covered in multiple issues was the monitoring of President James Garfield’s health after an assassination attempt by James Guiteau left the President alive but bedridden. His health however fluctuated constantly making any updates front page news. These are only a few of several similar stories that all together paint a vastly different picture than the one that was shown to the world by the white supremacist element of the South. The powers of the antebellum South had long sought to paint the African American as a racially inferior species incapable of higher forms of learning or equal co-existence with whites. As DeGenova argues, this concept was “Forged through chattel slavery, whereby African Americans were denied any semblance of juridical personhood or collective representation and were generally compelled to exist as the mere property of white men”⁴. Yet in spite of this supposed inferiority the writings of this paper depict a learned, well-informed community that offers a stark contrast to the notion of white superiority. In truth it is something of a miracle that an African American newspaper of any kind existed at all in the social climate that existed in the South during this time.

The slave codes that were in place in the United States prior to the Civil War made any attempt for African Americans to gain an educational foothold a virtually impossible undertaking. For example, section 31 of the 1833 code in Alabama stated that “Any person or persons who attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read, or write, shall, upon conviction thereof by indictment, be fined in a sum not less than two hundred and fifty dollars, nor more than five hundred dollars”⁵. It could be said that such fines and punishments were quite lenient in comparison to the slave codes that were in other southern states which were much less forgiving. For example one of the slave codes in South Carolina dictated that “any slave who evaded capture for 20 days or more was to be publicly whipped for the first offense; branded with the letter R on the right cheek for the second offense; lose one ear if absent for 30 days for the third offense; and castrated for the fourth offense”⁶ To add further fuel to the proverbial fire after the Civil War, the environment became all the more dangerous for southern African Americans because ironically slavery acted as a kind of shield for African Americans since few slave holding whites were willing to injure or kill what they considered valuable property. With the abolition of slavery many whites saw a great threat in the emancipated African American population. In the novel *How Free is Free: The Long Death of Jim Crow* by Leon F. Litwack, the author mentions “That memory of the past, black men learning the uses of political power went far to shape the racial boundaries and ideology of the New South and encouraged the use of terrorist violence to rout any further challenge to white supremacy”⁷. In

² *The Huntsville Gazette*, July 2, 1881.

³ *The Huntsville Gazette*, July 23, 1881.

⁴ Nicholas De Genova, *Racial Transformations: Latinos and Asians Remaking the United States*, (Duke University Press 2006), 2.

⁵ *The Slave Codes. Alabama 1833*. Accessed November 19, 2013. <http://www.archives.alabama.gov/teacher/slavery/lesson1/doc1-9.html>

⁶ *Slave Codes*. Accessed November 20, 2013. <https://www.boundless.com/u-s-history/slavery-and-reform-1820-1840/slavery-in-the-u-s/slave-codes/>

⁷ Leon F. Litwack, *How Free is Free: The Long Death of Jim Crow*, (Harvard University Press 2009), 6.

the end, however, it seems that the utilization of violence by whites on African Americans was not motivated by a desire to uphold a belief system but were motivated by fear that their political and social supremacy was being challenged.

The time was chronicled on several occasions in *The Huntsville Gazette* as seen in the following articles: “Two negroes were recently lynched at Danbury, Stokes County, N.C., their crime being against white women.”⁸ In a similar story, “Houston Turner, colored, was hanged by a mob near Nashville, Tenn., for an assault committed against a young Irish girl”⁹. The *Huntsville Gazette* reported on a similar case that took place in North Carolina “During the eclipse on the night of the 11th about 200 men rode up to the Jail at Greensboro, N.C., and demanded the keys. The Jailer refused to comply with their demands, they broke open the doors and seized John Taylor, a negro confined for an assault upon a white woman, whom they took off a distance of several miles and hanged to a tree”¹⁰. These stories also tie in with a topic of interest concerning those who ran the paper, why were those who were in charge of the paper silent in their condemnation of these acts of violence? The answer to this question may lie in fact in that silence. Being that the political and social climates were dangerous enough to the point that an African American could be put to death for the slightest “offense” the editors and writers knew that any form of condemnation of what the white population was doing would provoke similar acts of violence against either them or the paper. As a result of potential reprisals, all newspapers could do was report the story and keep quiet about anything else. It may also be that the paper was adhering to the beliefs of Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama that consisted of building long term economic and educational foundations without provoking aggression from the white community over the lack of rights in the African American community.

The stories and reactions discussed above lead us to the question of what message or attitude was the paper expressing? The best that can be done is form theories and conjectures about the personal motivations of the editors and writers, but there are a couple of clues that hint at what those motivations might have been. One fact to consider is that every issue of the paper had the phrase “With Charity for All, and Malice towards None” which was a famous quote delivered by President Abraham Lincoln during his second inaugural address. It is well known that during this time Lincoln had immense popularity among African Americans; combined that with radical changes that the Republican Party initiated in the South during Reconstruction, the use of the quote in each issue may be an expression of allegiance to the Republican Party. As most papers of the time had political leanings of some sort, this theory is plausible at the very least. It may have also been a sign to the readers that there was a place where African Americans with allegiance to the Republican Party could congregate away from the whitewash of the white supremacist Democrats who had regained control of the South during the 1880s.

Another aspect of the time period that is of interest was the question of how did this paper market to a demographic that was largely illiterate? According to Kimberly Sambol-Tosco and *The Slave Experience: Education, Arts & Culture*, “Concerned that literate slaves would forge passes or convince other slaves to revolt, Southern slaveholders generally opposed slave literacy”¹¹. As stated earlier the punishment for giving slaves any form of formal education were

⁸ *The Huntsville Gazette*, July 2, 1881.

⁹ *The Huntsville Gazette*, July 23, 1881.

¹⁰ *The Huntsville Gazette*, June 18, 1881.

¹¹ Kimberly Sambol-Tosco, *The Slave Experience: Education, Arts & Culture*. Accessed November 22, 2013. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/history2.html>

severe for all parties involved but there were times when either exceptions were made or the rule was broken. Education was considered a communal affair among slaves with parents, spouses, and other family members sharing their wisdom and experiences amongst themselves. There were other times, when various forms of formal education were unavoidable if a slave was going to be properly equipped to do certain work as stated by *The Slave Experience* “Slaveholders were motivated by Christian convictions to enable Bible-reading among slaves and even established informal plantation schools on occasion in part because of slaveholders' practical need for literate slaves to perform tasks such as record-keeping”¹². In addition, through the efforts of benevolent Northern societies, organizations such as the Freedmen’s Bureau and state governments provided funding for African American schools to be built, thus creating the first formally recognized foundation for African American education.

The unique insights and perspectives provided by *The Huntsville Gazette* should not be underestimated. The paper serves as prime example of what African Americans could achieve standing in stark contrast to everything that white society of the time wanted Americans to believe. The existence of this paper and others like it is one of countless testaments to the endurance and resourcefulness of African Americans and lends serious weight to the words of Michael Omi and Howard Winant in that we can and should see race for what it is “as a mere illusion, which an ideal social order would eliminate”¹³. So let us look to the *Huntsville Gazette* as a confirmation that the concept of race as just that, an illusionary byproduct of a society that wished to preserve its power at the expense of African Americans and failed.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Michael Omi and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960's to 1990's*. (Routledge, New York; 2nd edition March 24, 1994) 18.

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