



## Robert S. Abbott and the Abbott Monument

---



*The obelisk monument near the visitor center of Fort Frederica National Monument honors the family of one of the most outstanding African- American figures of modern history, Robert S. Abbott who was born on St. Simons Island.*

---

Robert Sengstacke Abbott, born nearby to a former slave, became the editor and publisher of *The Chicago Defender*, the most influential and widely read African- American owned newspaper in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

In the 1930s Abbott paid \$1,600 for the impressive white granite monument professing his loving memory to Celia Abbott, Mary Finnick Abbott, and his father Thomas Abbott.

---

On November 28, 1868, Robert Abbot was born near this monument to Flora Butler and Thomas Abbott. Robert's father died four months later of tuberculosis. After his father's death, Flora Abbott returned with her son to her hometown of Savannah, where Robert was reared and educated.

---

Shortly she remarried John H.H. Sengstacke, a German- reared immigrant. Sengstacke had a profound effect on his stepson's basic values and career as a crusading progressive journalist and racial reformer. As a Congregationalist missionary, his involvement with the America Missionary Association vastly influenced Robert's desires to assure equality and equal opportunity for African- Americans.

Educated at the Beach Institute in Savannah, and Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina, Robert later attended the Hampton Institute. At Hampton, he learned the printer's trade and "*prepared for accomplishment*". Later Abbott attended the Kent College of Law in Chicago and received bachelors of law degree, although he never practiced as an attorney, due in part to racial prejudice within the profession.

---

Feeling that a newspaper was the strongest weapon a black man could have in defense of his race, Abbott founded *The Chicago Defender*. The newspaper's slogan was "*American race prejudice must be destroyed,*" and became the means by which Robert S. Abbott acquired great wealth.

Pullman porters assisted the early distribution and growth of *The Defender*, and enabled it to become the most influential and widely read African- American owned newspaper in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Circulation increased from 300 in 1905 to approximately 200,000 by Abbott's death. Its success caused the paper to be outlawed in many Southern communities.

As newspaper editor and publisher, he played a significant role in the *Black Diaspora* or northern migration of African- Americans from the Deep South, to seek equality and a better life. His obituary of February 29, 1940 in the *Chicago Daily News* recognized him as an influential, crusading journalist and racial reformer who vowed "*to wield a powerful influence in the interest of every Black human alive.*" As such Robert S. Abbott ranks with more widely recognized leaders of his period, like W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington.

---