



Robert S. Abbott – Early 20th Century Civil Rights Activist



On November 28, 1868, Robert Abbott was born on Saint Simons Island to Flora Butler and Thomas Abbott, both former slaves. Robert's father died four months later of tuberculosis. After her husband's death, Flora Abbott returned with her son to her hometown of Savannah, Georgia. When Robert was six, Flora married John Hermann Henry Sengstacke, the German-educated son of an African slave mother and German immigrant father. Mr. Sengstacke was a Congregationalist minister and operated a school for black children. He raised his stepson Robert, and seven other children, to respect hard work, clean living and traditional morality. Robert, at eight years old, had a job as an errand boy. His mother taught her young son the value of wise spending and instilled a strong work ethic. She charged him ten cents a week for room and board.

**Education,
race prejudice
and the
making of a
civil rights
activist**

Attending the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Robert heard and was moved by Frederick Douglass' speech. It would change his life forever and redirect the course of African - American journalism. Mr. Douglass was visibly aged, but after being heckled by a group of rowdy whites, threw down his notes and said, "Men talk of the 'negro problem'. There is no Negro problem. The problem is whether the American people have honesty enough, loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough to live up to their own constitution. We intend that the American people shall learn the great lesson of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God from our presence among them."

Educated as a printer at Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia, Abbott was unable to find work in Chicago. Abbott continued his studies at Kent College of Law and graduated with a law degree in 1898, the only African-American in his class. After trying unsuccessfully to establish a law practice in Illinois, he was told, "You're too dark to make an impact on a white judge." Facing the racial prejudice of the time and unable to make a living in his chosen professions, he turned to journalism. He would spend the rest of his life fighting prejudice and discrimination. *The Defender* would be his voice to reach millions of black Americans.

Started in 1905 Robert Abbott began publishing. For the first five years Abbott was the sole employee: serving as reporter, editor, typesetter, printer and salesman. Borrowing heavily from the journalistic styles of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, Abbott's *Chicago Defender* cultivated the art of irony and became known for its use of piercing language and huge, bold headlines. It was the first black newspaper to have a circulation over 100,000. It contained sections on health, sports, arts, comics, and fashion.

Due to its stance on race issues, many white distributors refused to carry the newspaper. Because groups such as the Ku Klux Klan threatened those who were found in possession of the paper, it had to be smuggled into the South. Abbott used Pullman car porters and black entertainers (two groups that had more freedom of movement in the South) to help distribute the paper as two-thirds of the newspaper's readers were outside of Chicago.

The newspaper was passed from person to person and read aloud in barbershops and churches. It is estimated that for every paper sold, it was read by four to five African- Americans, putting its readership at over 500,000 people each week.

By the mid-1920s, the *Chicago Defender* made Robert Abbott one of the country's first black millionaires.

**"American
race prejudice
must be
destroyed"**

*-Chicago
Defender*

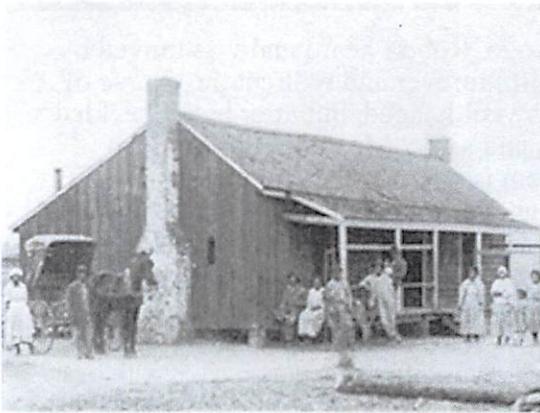


Pullman car Porters



Musicians

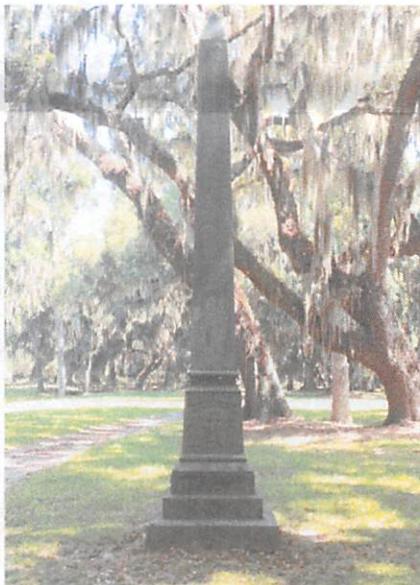
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“The Great Migration”

In the first quarter of the 20th century, the *Chicago Defender* came to the forefront as the strongest proponent of “The Great Migration”. The paper spoke of the hazards of remaining in the South and lauded life in the North. Job listings and train schedules were posted to facilitate the relocation. This movement brought more than 1.5 million rural Southern blacks to Northern industrial cities.

The *Defender* used editorials, cartoons, and articles with blazing headlines to attract attention to the movement. It went as far as to declare May 15, 1917, the date of the "Great Northern Drive." The *Defenders'* advocacy is credited with being the single most compelling factor in over 110,000 blacks coming to Chicago between the years 1915-1917, thereby tripling the city's black population.



The Abbott Monument at Fort Frederica NM

In 1929, Robert Abbott commissioned a Savannah company to make a suitable monument in honor of his late father and aunts. They were former enslaved people on Saint Simons Island. The obelisk was erected near where it was believed there was a slave cemetery. To this day, the whereabouts of Thomas Abbott's final resting place remain unknown.

Abbott worked all his life for equality, economic freedom and the ability to go as far as you can with no bounds or restrictions. These dreams and goals have no color line or time frame.

The *Chicago Defender* newspaper is still in existence today. To “read all about it” go to www.chicagodefender.com.