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David Ruggles

The hazards of anti-slavery journalism

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Abolitionists organizing the battle against slavery during the 1830s quickly mastered the potentials of the penny press and the post office in their campaign to compel Americans to examine their consciences about the South's "peculiar institution." The movement published millions of broadsides and introduced fiery newspapers advancing the cause. Its emotional exhortations convinced thousands of ordinary Americans to voice their anger at human bondage by sending nearly a million petitions through the mails, beseeching Congress to abolish slavery. Federal legislators had already passed a gag rule prohibiting such discussion. Former President John Quincy Adams, now a congressman, often raised the petitions on the floor, forcing opponents into embarrassing stipulations to table the letters. Undeterred anti-slavery citizens continued the cascade of pleas against any enlargement of the servile system. The movement survived violence, too, when anti-abolitionist rioters burned presses and killed one editor in Illinois in 1837. White editors William Lloyd Garrison and David Lee Child are widely known for their brave commitment to abolitionist publishing. Other than Frederick Douglass, far less is known about the courageous black journalists who strived to extinguish slavery.

David Ruggles, an African-American printer in New York City during the 1830s, was the prototype for black activist journalists of his time. During his 20-year career, Ruggles poured out hundreds of articles, published at least five pamphlets and operated the first African-American press. His magazine, Mirror of Liberty, intermittently issued between 1838 and 1841, is widely recognized as the first periodical published by a black American. Ruggles also displayed unyielding courage against constant violence, which eventually destroyed his health and career. His story reveals the valor required of a black editor struggling against the pitiless hatred of the pro-slavery forces and the yawning indifference of most Americans. Ruggles' valiant work ran the spectrum of the work of journalists. He was an agent, writer, printer, publisher and subject. He was in fact America's first black working journalist. His career epitomized the fusion of professionalism and activism, so characteristic of later black journalists, that would propel him to the center of racial conflict.

Ruggles was born in norwich, Connecticut, in 1810, the eldest of seven children of free black parents. His father, David Sr., was a blacksmith. His mother, Nancy, was a noted caterer and a founding member of the local Methodist church. Ruggles was educated at religious charity schools in Norwich. By the age of 17, he was in New York, first working as a mariner; in 1828 he opened a grocery shop. At first he sold liquor. Observing, as did other black abolitionists, the damage done to the black community by drink, he

converted to the temperance movement. He advocated it in his advertisements in Freedom's Journal, the nation's first black newspaper, which was published by Samuel Eli Cornish, a black Presbyterian minister.

By the early 1830s, Ruggles became involved in the growing anti-slavery movement in New York. White radicals, disenchanted by reform measures, now joined blacks demanding the immediate end of slavery. His grocery shop at 1 Cortlandt Street was the nation's first black bookstore until a mob destroyed it. In 1833, the Emancipator, an abolitionist weekly, appointed him as its agent to canvass for subscribers throughout the Middle Atlantic states. By 1834, Ruggles was also writing regularly. That year, he published his own pamphlet entitled The "Extinguisher" Extinguished: or David M. Reese, M.D. "Used Up..." a satirical screed attacking the leading local proponent of the American Colonization Society. This organization, which roused fiery anger in Ruggles and other blacks, argued that the only solution for America's racial problems was to ship all free blacks to Africa. However implausible this sounds today, the plan was very popular among whites in the antebellum United States. Yet blacks understood, Ruggles thundered, that the plan did not threaten the future of slavery. His self-published booklet was the first imprint by an African American.

Ruggles used his own press the next year in his publication Abrogation of the seventh commandment, by the American Churches, which contended that Northern white women should shun their Southern sisters, whom, he argued, acquiesced in the violation of God's commandments by letting their husbands keep enslaved black women as mistresses. Ruggles beseeched Northern women to consider whether they would "tolerate the adoption of a system which would recognize as their domestic servant the spurious off-spring of their own husbands, brothers, and sons." He lashed out at Southern women as "inexcusably criminal" for disregarding the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women. Ruggles' jeremiad foreshadowed similar developments in the nascent feminist movement and revealed growing personal splits between North and South.

Ruggles believed deeply that newspapers were necessary tools of anyone opposed to the evil of slavery. He enunciated his beliefs in a series of six articles published in the Emancipator early in 1835. Ruggles was worried that a lack of subscriptions from blacks might doom anti-slavery journalism. He urged African Americans to do their duty by supporting the Emancipator and other anti-slavery journals because they were the most effective weapons against servitude. In a nation where few blacks could vote and none could hold office, he remarked, freedom of the press was blacks' most precious liberty. Costing only a few cents a copy, the newspapers were an essential and inexpensive means to combat slavery. For blacks to ignore their "trumpets of freedom" was to display the personal degradation of enslavement. No one in America, he contended with remarkable prescience, could be neutral on the moral issue of slavery. Blacks and sympathetic whites had a moral obligation to support abolitionist newspapers.

Ruggles raised more than his pen in his personal war against the slavocracy. In 1835, he and several other young black activists organized the New York Committee of Vigilance. Manhattan was then swarming with "kidnappers," agents of Southern slave owners whose chattel had fled north to freedom. With the help of New York City magistrates, kidnappers seized blacks off the street, held a quick hearing to "prove" their identity and

kidnappers seized blacks off the street, held a quick hearing to "prove" their identity and within a matter of hours forced their unfortunate victims onto boats headed for Southern ports. Angered by this practice, Ruggles and the rest of the Committee of Vigilance openly confronted slave catchers, demanded that the city government grant jury trials to fugitives and offered legal assistance to them. Backed by the New York Manumission Society, whose members included the lawyer William Jay, son of Chief Justice John Jay, the Committee of Vigilance proved highly effective in protecting the rights of local blacks. On several occasions, Ruggles went to private homes where enslaved blacks were hidden and informed the servants that they were actually free. In case anyone missed these activities, Ruggles often published such adventures in abolitionist newspapers such as the Emancipator and The Liberator.

One of Ruggles' most controversial methods was to demand the arrest of white sea captains he suspected of trading in slaves. Illegal since 1808, slave trading still occurred clandestinely. Ruggles' unmasking of these transactions nearly cost him his freedom.

In December 1836, a Portuguese vessel captained by Juan Evangelista de Souza arrived in New York harbor. Ruggles heard from wharfside sources that the captain held five blacks in slavery and intended to head south to sell them. Under a writ of habeas corpus, Ruggles demanded that the five enslaved blacks be held in a local jail until a hearing could be held on their status. He also sought successfully the arrest of Captain de Souza on charges of slave trading. This was the second time Ruggles had a white man arrested on such charges. His boldness infuriated his opponents. While the case wound through the courts, de Souza, who was free on bail, and a local police officer named Tobias Boudinot and a slave catcher named D.D. Nash decided to take matters into their own hands. Late on the night of December 28, 1836, they arrived at Ruggles' home at 67 Lispenard Street. They knocked loudly and asked to speak to David. When Ruggles told them to come back in the morning, they tried to break down his door. Ruggles escaped and returned later with a watchman. At a hearing at the police station, Ruggles exposed his assailants' plot to grab him and put him on a vessel headed for Savannah, Georgia, where he would be sold into slavery. Frustrated, Nash tried to arrest Ruggles on a specious writ for any black who looked like Jesse or Abraham, generic names for slaves. If it hadn't been for the help of his white allies among local lawyers, Ruggles doubtless would have been shipped off into slavery. Sometime later, Nash proclaimed—during a mobbing of a white abolitionist named John Hopper in Savannah—that he would give "a thousand dollars if he had that nigger named Ruggles in my hands as he is the leader of [the abolitionists]."

Undeterred by these threats, Ruggles continued to publish his articles and pamphlets, writing dozens of pieces for newspapers throughout the Northeast. He was also the most visible conductor on the Underground Railroad. Ruggles claimed to have helped 400 fugitive slaves during the 1830s. One such escaped slave later became one of the most famous Americans of the 19th century. In his classic autobiography, Frederick Douglass recalled his dire straits just after he fled north to freedom in New York City in late September 1838. Though exhilarated by his newfound freedom, Douglass was terrified of slave catchers. The young fugitive was broke, lonely and spent several nights sleeping amidst empty barrels on the wharves. Fortunately, he met a sailor who took him to the print shop of David Ruggles, who sheltered him and welcomed him to freedom with great celebration. A few days later, Frederick was married to Anna Murray, a free black woman, in Ruggles' shop in a ceremony led by James W C. Pennington, a former fugitive turned

in Ruggles' shop in a ceremony led by James W.C. Pennington, a former fugitive turned Presbyterian minister. Immediately after the wedding, Douglass and his new wife traveled to New Bedford, Massachusetts, armed with a letter of recommendation from Ruggles and a $5 bill. In just a few years Douglass became one of America's most famous abolitionist orators. Today, his autobiography is read by tens of thousands of college students and is considered a classic of American literature.

By the time douglass met him, Ruggles had become one of the most notorious black abolitionists in the United States. A look at a remarkable incident, which took place right around the time Douglass arrived in New York City, reveals the energy and courage demanded of Ruggles as he used his pen and life to fight against slavery. The Darg Case, as it was called, caused a furor in New York's newspapers in the autumn of 1838. Its proceeding exposed the extreme dangers for Ruggles and other anti-slavery warriors.

New York City residents in the 1830s were deeply divided over the future of America's peculiar institution. It was naturally abhorred by the city's 16,000 black residents, many of whom had been only recently emancipated by legislative decree ending slavery in New York state in 1827. Much of the city's elite also worked against it, though by different means. Some elite urbanites favored the strategy of the American Colonization Society, with its plan of sending free blacks back to Africa. Others, notably the Jay family, preferred black self-help efforts at home and donated money to the New York Manumission Society and its principal agency, the African Free School. Though the school had declined recently, it was the alma mater of the city's black elite. A more radical wing of the Manumission Society sided with "immediatists"—anti-slavery activists such as William Lloyd Garrison and the Tappan brothers, founders of Dun and Bradstreet—who wanted slavery ended now, not later.

One of the most active Manumission Society members with this view was Barney Corse, who, for more than 10 years, had helped self-emancipated or fugitive slaves come north and helped local blacks protect their freedom against kidnappers. Joining him was the venerable Isaac T. Hopper, a Quaker abolitionist since the 1780s, and Ruggles. This trio had successfully battled city officials and kidnappers on several occasions. At other times, when they lost, Ruggles used his press to blast this unfair system. Some situations were uncomplicated; others, such as the Darg Case, were complex. The facts, as they came out in the subsequent trial, were as follows: On August 25, 1838, John P. Darg, a Virginia slaveholder, arrived in New York City with his slave Thomas Hughes. The issue of Southerners bringing their human chattel to a free state was under intense negotiation between the governors of New York and Virginia, but Darg apparently felt confident about the status of his servant. But a few days later Hughes came to Hopper's house, seeking refuge. The Quaker, however, was initially reluctant and asked Hughes to leave his home. The next day, the New York Sun, the most vitriolic of the penny press, published a notice offering a reward for the return of Hughes and the $7,000 or $8,000 he had taken with him. Hopper, Corse and perhaps Ruggles served as go-betweens for Darg and Hughes. The slave no longer had all the money, having given some of it to others who helped him escape and a portion to some local gamblers.

Corse and Ruggles decided that returning the cash was moral but turning over Hughes was not. They convinced Darg to free Hughes provided that he gave back as much money as he took. When the sum turned out to be far less than Darg demanded, the slave master

he took. When the sum turned out to be far less than Darg demanded, the slave master ordered Corse and Ruggles arrested for grand larceny. Corse quickly found bail, but Ruggles was jailed for two days with common criminals, even though he had not actually been charged with anything. After that incident, a caricature of the three, entitled "The Disappointed Abolitionists," was published, suggesting that they were really interested in the reward and, rather than trying to free slaves, were setting up an extortion ring to prey on unwary masters.

The case remained newsworthy over the next few months. In October, a group of black citizens honored Ruggles by giving him a cane with a golden knob. Sadly, the struggle was taking its toll on the valiant Ruggles. Now only 28 years old, he was nearly blind and was afflicted with severe bowel disorders. All of his money and time went into the movement, so he often was homeless. Worse afflictions were on the way, and they came from a surprising source.

In 1837, samuel eli cornish, aided by Philip A. Bell, resurrected his black newspaper and renamed it the Colored American. Ruggles quickly became a regular contributor. The editors in turn frequently wrote approvingly of his actions. But in early 1839, a terrible dispute arose that ended Ruggles' career in New York City. Hearing rumors that a black hotelier named John Russell was hiding captive blacks before they were transported south, Ruggles, without Cornish's knowledge, inserted an article in the Colored American accusing the innkeeper of helping kidnappers. Russell sued the newspaper, Ruggles and Cornish for libel and won a judgment of $600—which nearly bankrupted the weekly journal. Furious, Cornish attacked Ruggles in print. Although wealthy benefactors soon paid the libel award, Cornish campaigned to have Ruggles driven out of the movement. One method was to demand that Ruggles explain every cash expenditure of the Committee of Vigilance. After a careful accounting, it appeared that the committee's funds were short $400. Broken in health and deeply hurt by Cornish's accusations, Ruggles was forced to resign his post as secretary of the committee. Before doing so, he published his last imprint in New York City, A Plea for a Man and a Brother, in which he tried to refute Cornish's indictments. In truth, the more conservative Cornish and his many allies had tired of Ruggles' radical methods and sought less confrontational means to fight slavery.

Although he still published regularly in white abolitionist journals, Ruggles' plight was desperate. Now blind and seriously ill from several diseases, he left New York for Massachusetts. His father died in 1841. Fearful that Ruggles might soon follow him to the grave, William C. Nell and other Boston blacks honored the ailing man with a dinner and a gift of badly needed funds. They proclaimed him a great soldier in the war against slavery. That winter, noted author Lydia Maria Child and her husband, David Lee Child, editor of the National Anti-Slavery Standard, arranged for Ruggles to join a radical commune in Northampton, Massachusetts. Ruggles, grateful for their help and anxious to find a cure for his many ailments, became first an adherent and later a doctor of hydropathy, a water cure regimen then sweeping the nation. By 1845, Ruggles established the first water cure hospital in the United States. He continued writing a dozen or more articles on abolitionism annually as well as publishing in water-cure journals. Just as his new career soared to new heights, Ruggles tragically succumbed to a severe bowel infection on December 18, 1849. His family came to retrieve his body and buried him in their plot in Norwich. As the anti-slavery movement mourned Ruggles, William Lloyd

their plot in Norwich. As the antislavery movement mourned Ruggles, William Lloyd Garrison summarized his many achievements and plaintively noted "his biography is yet to be written." One hundred fifty years later, that fact is still true, but Ruggles may be remembered for his fusion of committed journalism and fearless activism.

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