“We form a spoke in the human wheel”: *Freedom’s Journal* and the Public Sphere in Early America

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Introduction

"We wish to plead our own cause. Too long others have spoken for us. Too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly . . ."[1] These are among the opening lines of *Freedom's Journal*, which is the first African American-owned and edited newspaper in the United States. First appearing on March 16, 1827, it aimed to publish its four-page issue every Friday, charging three dollars for a year's subscription and distributed in northern and southern states, even having international agents.[2] The editors, Samuel E. Cornish and John B. Russwurm, were free-born African Americans. Both were men of impressive backgrounds: Cornish was the founder and pastor of the First Colored Presbyterian Church in New York City and Russwurm had attended Bowdoin College, making him the third African American college graduate.[3] The two men enjoyed a brief partnership until Cornish resigned and left Russwurm as the sole editor. The newspaper spanned two years, publishing its final issue on March 28, 1829.[4]

Evidence of African American print culture in the late-eighteenth century is well-documented, though it is a small subset of the period's writings. Authors such as Phyllis Wheatley and Oludiah Equiano navigated their way into the expanding public sphere and subsequently managed to secure their own liberation. Though this body of writing engaged with the broader population in the period following the American Revolution, there were no Black-owned and operated newspapers. In the early nineteenth century, *Freedom's Journal* was

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[1] Samuel E. Cornish and John Brown Russwurm, "To Our Patrons," *Freedom's Journal* (New York, NY: March 16, 1827).
[2] Jacqueline Bacon, "The History of *Freedom's Journal*: A Study in Empowerment and Community," *The Journal of African American History* 88, no. 1 (Winter, 2003), 1.
[3] Jacqueline Bacon, *Freedom's Journal: The First African-American Newspaper*, (Lexington Books: Lanham, MD, 2007), 45 and fn. 24. Bacon provides evidence that Russwurm was the third African American to graduate from college; John L. Rury claims he was the first; John L. Rury, "The New York African Free School, 1827-1836: Conflict over Community Control of Black Education," *Phylon* 44, no. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1983), 188.
[4] Bacon, "A History of *Freedom's Journal*," 1.

followed by other African American newspapers, also aiming to be national in scope, but most were short-lived. As was the case with almost all of the newspapers of this period, early African American newspapers suffered from weak circulation and financial struggles, as well as increasing frustration inside what became a quasi-echo chamber.

This essay seeks to understand the extent to which African Americans engaged the larger American public sphere through the medium of the *Freedom's Journal*. This newspaper materialized alongside the development of free African American churches, mutual aid organizations, fraternal societies, and schools. It engaged with issues dominating white society, such as colonization, but from the outskirts, or what some scholars have identified as a counterpublic, as Joanna Brooks describes in "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic."[5] The editors of *Freedom's Journal* sought to engage not only free African American societies in America, but also white Americans, believing that they "should know more of our actual condition; and of our efforts and feelings."[6] Their goal with respect to the public sphere was, quite simply, to change hearts and minds, and convince white Americans to see African Americans as social and intellectual equals.

New York City in the 1820s and the Founding of *Freedom's Journal*

There is a lack of consensus on several matters concerning *Freedom's Journal*, including its reason for publication, its audience, and the split between its editors. The canonical account for why the Cornish and Russwurm began their newspaper was first put forward in 1891 by Irvine Garland Penn, who reasoned that *Freedom's Journal* aimed to counter the hateful rhetoric toward African Americans, specifically by Mordecai Manuel Noah, "the Afro-American-hating

[5] Joanna Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 1 (Jan. 2005), 67-92.
[6] Cornish and Russwurm, "To Our Patrons."

Jew," and who was a newspaper editor, playwright, and politician in the early nineteenth century.[7] In the words of Michael Weingrad, professor of Jewish Studies, Noah was "easily the most prominent and influential Jew" and "an extraordinary individual."[8] Yet, Noah's writings in the *New-York National Advocate* and *New-York National Enquirer* from 1825 through 1827 were demeaning to the character, dress, and dialect of African Americans, even credited with the origin of "African American stereotypes in drama."[9] It is unlikely that countering Mordecai Noah's racialized rhetoric was the sole purpose for the creation of a newspaper. As Jacqueline Bacon emphasizes, giving credit to Noah's words as the motive to begin such an undertaking as a newspaper leads to reductionism of the editor's goals, making them "*objects* rather than *subjects* of history" [original emphasis].[10] In other words, racism was not exclusive to one man. Race relations in New York City were already tense in the 1820s, as free African Americans and poor whites competed for jobs. Tensions were likely exacerbated as complete emancipation neared its target date of July 4, 1827, which would create an even greater labor surplus and competition over housing.[11] The rate of enslaved persons in the State of New York had fallen dramatically in the early decades of the republic, from 20,903 in 1800 to 15,017 in 1810 and dropping to 10,088 by 1820, leading to a non-white population of close to thirty thousand.[12] As a result of the competition between these groups, Blacks in the city were relegated to largely unskilled or

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[7] Irvine Garland Penn, *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors* (Springfield, MA: Willey & Company, 1891), 28; also perpetuating the Noah story is Charles A. Simmons, *The African American Press: With Special Reference to Four Newspapers, 1827-1965* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1998), 9-10.
[8] Michael Weingrad, "Messiah, American Style: Mordecai Manuel Noah and the American Refuge," *AJS Review* 31, no. 1 (April, 2007), 75.
[9] Jacob Crane, "'One Day Our Warmest Friend; The Next Our Bitterest Enemy': Mordecai Manuel Noah and the Black-Jewish Imaginary," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 39, no. 2 (2020), 183 ff. Crane describes the duality of studies of Mordecai: "it seems as if Jewish American and African American studies are examining two entirely different people," 184.
[10] Bacon, "A History of *Freedom's Journal*," 7.
[11] Lois E. Horton, "From Class to Race in Early America: Northern Post-Emancipation Racial Reconstruction, *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 4 (Winter, 1999), 629.
[12] Horton, "From Class to Race in Early America," 639, 641.

domestic work.[13] Moreover, 1820s race relations were so tense in northern states generally, and New York City specifically, that one historian called it a "compounding crisis," which exploded by the 1830s.[14]

In addition to these tensions, at the time of the first publication of *Freedom's Journal*, the American Colonization Society, formed a decade earlier in 1817, had gained momentum and plenty of support, and discussion of it became a prominent feature on the pages of the newspaper. Cornish and Russwurm were adamantly opposed to the popular colonization movement, in particular, the rhetoric coming from some of its most prominent members. In January 1827, Secretary of State Henry Clay addressed the crowd at the tenth annual meeting, declaring: "Of all classes of our population, the most viscous is that of the free coloured. It is the inevitable result of their moral, political, and civil degradation. Contaminated themselves, they extend their vices to all around them, to the slaves and to the whites."[15] Cornish and Russwurm sought to directly counter these words, almost, in fact, word-for-word just two months later in their first editorial, "To Our Patrons." The article disseminated knowledge of the African American community's "moral and religious improvement," as well as "to lay the case before the publick" that the "civil rights of a people [are] of the greatest value."[16] Their method for engaging the broader public was to discuss colonization from both perspectives, so as to engage all interested parties in the debate. In its two years of publication, they also published local, domestic, and sometimes international news (borrowing frequently from other papers, as was the common practice),

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[13] Horton, "From Class to Race in Early America," 642; Erin Bradford, "Free African American Population in the U.S.: 1790-1860," *State Library of North Carolina*, (2008), accessed April 9, 2021, https://www.ncpedia.org/sites/default/files/census_stats_1790-1860.pdf.
[14] James Brewer Stewart, "The Emergence of Racial Modernity and the Rise of the White North, 1790-1840," *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, no. 2 (Summer, 1998), 181.
[15] Henry Clay and The American Society For Colonizing The Free People Of Colour Of The United States, *The Tenth Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States* (Washington: Way & Gideon, Printers, 1827), 21, accessed April 13, 2021, https://www.loc.gov/item/88880154/.
[16] Cornish and Russwurm, "To Our Patrons."

editorials, literary pieces, and letters. Most of the contributions were written by African Americans, including women. *Freedom's Journal* is often perceived as the start of abolitionist newspapers in the early nineteenth century; however, while certainly not ignoring the issue of slavery, it was not the most-often discussed feature of the newspaper.[17] This may be because they were trying to strategically convince white Americans of the inherent value of African Americans by using arguments of a higher moral authority. They may have also been hopeful that the coming abolition of slaves in New York would lead other states to do the same and thus tempered abolitionist rhetoric.

When *Freedom's Journal* began in March 1827, slavery had not yet been abolished in the State of New York, though the institution had shrunk considerably. Large numbers of free African Americans developed their own communities all over the state, particularly in the cities, including Rochester and Albany. In the 1820s, New York City was segregated with regard to public transportation, restaurants, schools, almshouses, and increasingly, churches. In 1821, there was a $250 property qualification requirement for African American voters, which was not imposed on white voters.[18] In response to these limitations and in search of a sense of community and uplift, New York City's free Blacks established churches, fraternal organizations, schools, mutual aid societies, and even a theater for a short period. Remarkably, the African Grove Theatre held plays written by none other than Mordecai Noah and performed by African American actors, earning the theatre, the actors, and the Black community at large additional scorn by the playwright.[19] Further developments in the city include the New York Manumission

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[17] On the paper as the start of abolitionist newspapers, see *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, Herbert Aptheker, ed. (Citadel Press: New York, 1951), 82 ff (the section is titled "The Abolitionist Era."); I.G. Penn, 27-28.
[18] Diana diZerega Wall, Nan A. Rothschild, and Cynthia Copeland, "Seneca Village and Little Africa: Two African American Communities in Antebellum New York City," *Historical Archaeology* 42, no. 1 (2008), 97; and Bennett Liebman, "The Quest for Black Voting Rights in New York State," *Albany Law Review* (August, 2018), 387.
[19] Jacob Crane, "'One Day Our Warmest Friend," 186 ff.

Society, established in 1785 by influential white citizens, including Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, who also helped to establish the 1799 law establishing gradual emancipation to slaves in New York State.[20] An enclave of the city, Seneca Village, was established in the 1820s in the area that became Central Park. By 1822, congregants of the Methodist Episcopal Church had withdrawn to form an independent Black congregation with the establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.[21] The free Black community also boasted the New York African Free School (est. 1789), the New York African Society for Mutual Relief (est. 1808); the Abyssinian Baptist Church (est. 1808); the Free African Church of St Philip (est. 1809); the Free Orphan School (est. 1812), the African Grove Theatre (est. 1821; burned down in 1826), and a second African Free School was established in 1820 due to overcrowding of the original school. The African Dorcas Society was created to supply clothing to free Black school children in need.[22] By September 1827, Samuel Cornish had left *Freedom's Journal* and became an active agent for the Manumission Society in New York City to draw much needed support for the city's schools.[23] However impressive these cultural magnets appear in 1820s free Black communities, they also became targets of white hostility. James Brewer Stewart describes "nervous lower-class whites" who resented "self-assured black people," resulting in steady white harassment of black communities:

> Even the landmarks of 'uplift' that bespoke [Black] elites' greatest successes now contributed to growing racial tensions. Handsome new churches, meeting halls, and school buildings confirmed to working-class white neighbors that African Americans, though deemed a 'degraded race' had sophisticated leaders, ample financial resources,

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[20] "Race and Antebellum New York City: The New York Manumission Society," *New-York Historical Society*, accessed April 2, 2021, https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/history/manumission-society.html.
[21] diZerega, et al, "Seneca Village and Little Africa," 98; and Rury, ""The New York African Free School," 188.
[22] Rury, "The New York African Free School," 190.
[23] Rury, "The New York African Free School," 190. Bacon explains that scholars see Cornish's decision to resign from the paper as an ideological split with Russwurm, who eventually reversed his position to support colonization. She argues that there is no evidence to support this claim; Cornish's name continued to appear as an agent for the paper until its final issue. Bacon, "The History of *Freedom's Journal*," 11.

> and a strong will to strengthen their ties of community. In every northern city, African-American Sabbath observances and school day activities became targets for periodic white harassment.[24]

After emancipation in the summer of 1827, tensions in New York City only increased. These tensions are what the editors of *Freedom's Journal* sought to address. By that time in the early Republic, newspapers were consumed by all classes of people, not just the elite, as literacy rates were quite high in New York and northern states generally.[25]

It is within this disparate context of community-building and anti-Black hostility that Cornish and Russwurm began their challenging enterprise. It should also be noted that there developed an active journalistic climate in the early Republic. Jacqueline Bacon notes that several small newspapers were devoted to specific audiences, such as the *Journeyman Mechanic's Advocate* and the *Mechanic's Free Press*. In addition, there were 137 active newspapers in New York State, and no fewer than twenty newspapers in New York City in 1828.[26] Circulation is much more difficult to ascertain, but it was common for newspapers to be shared and read in restaurants, pubs, fraternal organizations, reading societies, schools, and other public spaces.[27] Cornish's and Russwurm's endeavor was not an easy one, but given the active press presence as well as the newly-thriving free African American community within New York City, it is not surprising to see the first African American newspaper at this time. More

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[24] James Brewer Stewart, "Emergence of Racial Modernity," 192.
[25] John H. Murray, "Generation(s) of Human Capital: Literacy in American Families, 1830-1875," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 3 (Winter, 1997), 413-435.
[26] New York State Library, "The Early History of Newspaper Publishing in New York State," *NYSL* (May 14, 2009), accessed April 17, 2021, http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/nysnp/history.htm. Lionel C. Barrow, Jr. states that there were 843 newspapers in the United States in 1828, 161 of which were in New York State. Of the 843, the majority were weeklies and largely supported by political parties. The average circulation was 1000 subscribers per week. Barrow, Jr., "We Wish to Plead Our Own Cause. Freedom's Journal: The Beginnings of the Black Press," paper presented at the 60th *Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism* (Madison, WI: August 21-24, 1977), 2.
[27] Bacon posits a subscriber base to *Freedom's Journal* of approximately 800, based on the known number of subscribers in *Rights of All*, the newspaper that Cornish edited in 1829 after the demise of *Freedom's Journal*. She notes that a few scholars believe the number is much higher, but that most use the figure of 800 as an estimate. Bacon, *Freedom's Journal: The First African American Newspaper*, 51. Barrow, Jr., says the figure is 800-1000 subscribers, i, 6.

unexpected, perhaps, is the audience they attempted to reach. Within the context of their disadvantaged position, the editors cast a very wide net.

Engagement with the Public Sphere

Though there is some criticism of a truly bourgeois Habermasian public sphere in early America for lacking the "rational-critical discussion" central to it. The theory also demands that people who engage in the public sphere are equals. However, other scholars have sought to modify or improve on Jürgen Habermas's thesis in the American case by conceiving of "counterpublics."[28] Joanna Brooks describes that "Counterpublics foster political and cultural activities that allow working-class and other disfranchised persons to reclaim a measure of subjectivity despite being positioned as the instruments, objects, or properties of the middle class."[29] Since these marginalized groups have historically been excluded from any public rational-critical discussion, print culture was the dominant method of entry into the public sphere, even if ultimately relegated to the outside of it. African Americans, because of their unequal access to political, social, and economic systems, and that they had historically been seen as property themselves (even despite freedom), were "designated for exclusion from the public sphere, which was constituted by propertied men engaged in philosophical and economic exchange."[30] However, the development of thriving free Black communities in New York City, Philadelphia, and elsewhere, reveals a necessary and enlightened discourse among the Black elites who built them. It was common to see in New York's free Black community, throngs of lower-class whites, "seeking fellowship and entertainment," who enjoyed frequenting "grog

[28] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere," 67-92; Guy Uriel-Charles and Luis Fuentes-Rohwer, "Habermas, the Public Sphere, and the Creation of a Racial Counterpublic," *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 21 (2015), 1-20, esp. 4-9.
[29] Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere," 70.
[30] Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere," 72-73.

houses, cellar bistros, theaters, and lottery stalls" and "had always found themselves drawn to African-American street culture."[31] Almost boastful, Cornish and Russwurm wrote an editorial to counter Mordecai Noah's public berating, and they confirm the presence of white New Yorkers who flock to their neighborhoods: "Our streets and places of public amusements are nightly crowded with the . . . characters, of the Major's own complexion."[32] The development of an influx of whites in a free African American neighborhood may have simultaneously exacerbated racial tensions as well as opened the door for an opportunity to reach white audiences, even from the position of being outside the public sphere, rather than from within it. Using this conceptual framework, as well as the creation of *Freedom's Journal* as a medium and the words of Cornish and Russwurm, it is possible to argue that the editors sought to conservatively engage readers beyond the African American community. However, because the scope of their endeavor was so large, it would be disingenuous to argue that their primary audience was not African American readers.

Cornish and Russwurm aspired to reach and unify free Blacks in every state of the nation, though it is apparent that they aimed their words toward the white public as well.[33] The impassioned opening article written "To Our Patrons," states the editors' purpose, desires, and principles. They believe that "persons of color" have been misrepresented to be vice-ridden and thus discredited as an entire body.[34] Through the pages of their newspaper, the editors counter the claim that "any man's character" can be judged "by his personal appearance."[35] To this end, and in the last words of their opening editorial, Cornish and Russwurm explicitly evoke white and Black audiences alike to participate in the *Journal*'s endeavor: "we would respectfully invite our

[31] Stewart, "The Emergence of Racial Modernity," 191.
[32] Cornish and Russwurm, "Major Noah's 'Negroes,'" *Freedom's Journal* (New York, NY: August 24, 1827).
[33] Cornish and Russwurm, "To Our Patrons."
[34] Cornish and Russwurm, "To Our Patrons."
[35] Cornish and Russwurm, "To Our Patrons."

numerous friends to assist by their communications, *and* [emphasis mine] our coloured brethren to strengthen our hands by their subscriptions."[36] In addition, the editors were eager to counter the injustices against them. They write, "Daily slandered, we think that there ought to be some channel of communication between us and the public: through which a single voice may be heard, in defence of *five hundred thousand free people of colour* [original emphasis]"[37] They address another column, "Prospectus," to their brethren and friends, stating that all men are created equal, and that the Constitution affirms their guiding principles. They aimed to be neutral in religion, politics, and to never pursue controversy. A nonpartisan press in the early nineteenth century was highly unusual.[38]

Cornish and Russwurm attempted a conservative approach that included stories of optimism and humility, encouragement of temperance, poems, domestic and foreign news, and bits of trivia, all of which was encouraged and appreciated by their readers. For example, the June 29, 1827 issue includes two letters written to the *Journal*, one from "Libertinus" and the other from "R." Both authors discourage free and soon-to-be-free African Americans from celebrating emancipation day with parades and festivities. Libertinus writes, "Let no act be done to sully the sacred character of the day. The eyes of the world are upon us, our enemies watch us narrowly, to catch each little following."[39] In the July 6, 1827 issue is a letter from a free Virgina man, who, on behalf of all African Americans in the South, expressed his gratitude for a "calm and temperate discussion of the government, of its policy with relation to slavery, together with a feeling and earnest appeal to the southern slave-holders; you must, and cannot fail to produce a

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[36] Cornish and Russwurm, "To Our Patrons."
[37] Cornish and Russwurm, "Prospectus," *Freedom's Journal* (New York, NY: March 16, 1827), 4; reprinted on March 30, 1827 and April 16, 1827.
[38] Jeffrey Pasley, *"The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 10 ff.
[39] "Libertinus," "[Letter] For the Freedom's Journal," *Freedom's Journal* (New York, NY: June 29, 1827), 3.

happy effect."[40] The authors of these articles matched the *Journal*'s quasi-conservative approach, calling for tranquility and reserved joy in what must have been a period of internal and external jubilation for New York's African Americans, so as to not give the 'wrong impression' to white Americans. Parading and celebrating in the streets may verge on riotous behavior to outsiders; or perhaps, white New Yorkers may have preferred not to share the nation's Independence Day with free African Americans.[41] In addition, it seems clear that the editors' goals of reaching their white 'friends' had not come to fruition to the degree that they had hoped. Months of publishing—from March to July, 1827—had earned them no letters to the editor from white authors.

Despite the lack of response, Russwurm continued to pursue a white audience by showcasing literary pieces by Black authors who had been celebrated by white literary societies and whose works had been printed in newspapers addressed to white audiences. In June 1827, Cornish and Russwurm reprinted a poem from the *New Haven Chronicle*, which editorialized "that this race, depressed, degraded and trampled upon as they are by the whites, are not entirely brainless, as some seem to suppose."[42] In addition, in March 1829—the final month of publication of the *Freedom's Journal*—Russwurm published an essay on slavery by George R. Allen. He included with it several declarations of praise by New York Manumission Society members, who stated that this twelve or thirteen-year old young man had influenced "white ideas about African talents and capabilities."[43] Although it is unknown the breadth of the *Journal*'s white audience, Professor Dickson D. Bruce concludes from these exceptional examples that, "It was not uncommon for the *Journal* to stress this kind of testimony when it reprinted works by

[40] "A Free Coloured Virginian," "[Letter] For the Freedom's Journal," *Freedom's Journal* (New York, NY: July 6, 1827), 2-3.
[41] In fact, there was much discussion and debate over moving the day of celebration to July 5th, Bacon, *Freedom's Journal: The First African American Newspaper*, 69-71.
[42] Bruce, Jr., *Origins of African American Literature*, 169.
[43] *Freedom's Journal* (New York, NY: March 14, 1829); Bruce, Jr., *Origins of African American Literature*, 169.

black authors, often unknown, that had originally appeared in other publications; it confirmed, rather than compromised, the paper's claims to represent an efficacious African American voice to the larger world.[44] Russwurm's regular reprinting of such literary works not only offers the *Journal*'s Black audience a measure of pride, but also provides evidence of the sophistication and success of Black authors to white audiences—or, the public sphere.

Reception

Despite these attempts to reach a wide and varied audience, it is almost impossible to know who was reading *Freedom's Journal*. It is certain to have had broad African American patronage. Its agents, advertisements, and even meager subscriptions allowed for the publication of the *Journal* every Friday consistently for two years; it also published numerous letters to the editor during its existence. Gauging a white audience, however, is much more difficult. In this period, it was common practice for newspapers to borrow columns from other newspapers. When *Freedom's Journal* first began, several white-owned and edited newspapers around the northeast reported on the undertaking of the *Journal* in praising terms, to promote it and wish the editors success. In late March, the editor of the *New York Morning Chronicle* wrote that *Freedom's Journal* "has just made its appearance in this city . . . it is devoted to the improvement and amelioration of the colored population. The editors are both men of color, and this number of their paper is certainly very respectable. They write with modesty and good sense, and as their object is laudable, they deserve encouragement."[45] Within days, this article was reprinted in the *Rhode-Island American*, the *Essex Register,* the *Eastern Argus*, and the *New-Bedford Mercury*

[44] Bruce, Jr., *Origins of African American Literature*, 170.
[45] Editor, "Freedom's Journal," *Essex Register* (Salem, MA: March 22, 1827).

and by the end of the month, the *Haverhill Gazette*.[46] By August 1827, the *Middlesex Gazette*, editorialized that "A paper bearing this title, and edited by two coloured persons, has been published in New-York for several months past. It is very respectable in its appearance, and it is conducted with considerable ability and industry. Its professed object is to disseminate intelligence among the ignorant and degraded blacks."[47] The *Salem Gazette* praised Cornish as a "clergyman of respectable talents and acquirements," and hoped that "the publishers will be cheered with a liberal support. The colored population of the city can yield such a support if they are as ambitious as they should be."[48] News of the nation's first African American newspaper had spread far beyond New York City. It appeared, for the moment, that Cornish and Russwurm might achieve their goal.

A few newspaper editors must have continued to read the *Journal*; occasionally Russwurm's original writings were printed in other newspapers. These, however, can be considered insignificant pieces because did not denote that they were originally written by Russwurm or that they had specifically come from an African American newspaper, nor did they mention issues related to African Americans. The articles tended to be short stories or general informational pieces, such as "What Shall I Eat?," "Miscellany," and "Farming with a Vengeance."[49] That same year, the *Providence Patriot & Columbian Phenix* (*PJLP*) reprinted an article promoting humility, a theme that was common to the *Journal*, called "Don't Carry Your Head too High," but there is nothing to indicate Black authorship or that it originated in a

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[46] *Rhode-Island American & Providence Gazette* (Providence, RI: March 20, 1827); *Essex Register* (Salem, MA: March 22, 1827); *Eastern Argues* (Portland, ME: March 23, 1827); *New Bedford Mercury*, (New Bedford, MA: March 30, 1827). I have been unable to access the *New-York Morning Chronicle*. The short piece that ran in March 1827 and was copied contradicts later editorials, representing New York's African Americans as a "nuisance," Bacon, *Freedom's Journal: A History of the First African-American Newspaper*, 39-40.
[47] *Middlesex Gazette* (Middletown, CT: August 1, 1827).
[48] *Salem Gazette* (Salem, MA: March 30, 1827).
[49] *Haverhill Gazette* (Haverhill, MA: March 31, 1827); *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth, NH: April 3, 1827); *Norwich Courier* (Norwich, CT: May 9, 1827); and *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics* (Portsmouth, NH: September 1, 1827).

Black-owned newspaper.[50] Nearing the first anniversary of *Freedom's Journal*, the *PJLP* printed an editorial from the *New York Observer* stating that "the editor of *Freedom's Journal* has renounced his opposition to the colonization society and will hereafter advocate its views."[51] Despite this early recognition and praise from other newspaper editors, others were more critical of the *Journal*'s approach. The weekly *New York Mirror and Ladies' Literary Gazette* wrote a scathing opinion of the *Journal* in October 1827:

> *Freedom's Journal*— A paper bearing the above title, designed to advocate the cause of our coloured population, and superintended by two persons of that class, is published in this city. When its establishment was in contemplation, the plan was applauded by many benevolent persons, as educated to improve and enlighten those for whose perusal it was intended; and it certainly might have this tendency, if properly conducted. Its main object should be, to make its readers peaceable and orderly members of society; but we have heard many complaints that its language and sentiments are more likely to foster a spirit of insubordination and hostility. The colonization plan has almost universally met the approbation of the most zealous and active friends of the African race, and the most enlightened members of that class; but this journal is utterly opposed to it. It seems seriously to uphold the Utopian plan of raising coloured people, in all respects, to a perfect equality with the whites. That this can ever be accomplished, no one of sane mind, we should think, could ever for a moment believe; and those who pretend to look upon the scheme as practicable, would do well to remember, that he who seeks to achieve impossibilities, will assuredly be a loser by the rashness of the attempt.[52]

This opinion was reprinted in Connecticut's *Middlesex Gazette*, which drew upon at least one additional regional newspaper. The paper's editor wrote that *Freedom's Journal* "produced an unhappy effect on the blacks of New Jersey" and that the Black editors' plans to bring about full equality with whites "must be discountenanced by every man of common sense."[53] These examples, along with the scant mentions of or attribution to *Freedom's Journal* during its entire two years of publication suggest that the newspaper's engagement with the public sphere was limited and chiefly one-directional. Even following Russwurm's shocking announcement of

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[50] *Providence Patriot & Columbian Phenix* (Providence, RI: February 16, 1828).
[51] *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics* (Portsmouth, NH: March 1, 1829).
[52] *New York Mirror Ladies Literary Gazette* 5, no. 13 (New York, NY: October 6, 1827).
[53] *Middlesex Gazette* (Middletown, CT: October 10, 1827).

support for colonization, only one newspaper made mention of it. Other than to the *Journal*'s stunned Black patrons and agents, the news never made it out of New York.[54]

Conclusion

In the opening editorial of *Freedom's Journal*, the editors made their case for equality: "We form a spoke in the human wheel."[55] Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm envisioned themselves and their newspaper as part of the larger American public sphere, an imagined space in which they could hold and participate in public debates over colonization, abolition, civil rights, and equal treatment for African Americans, not just in New York City, but in all cities and states of the nation. The tempered and moderate tone of the newspaper initially earned the editors praise by editors of other newspapers. While the domestic and international news items, literary pieces, short stories, biographies, histories, and debates over colonization remained constant throughout the span of the newspaper's existence, *Freedom's Journal* also became increasingly outspoken against injustice, blatant prejudice, inequalities, and violence against African Americans. Weighing in strongly against the colonization issue, publishing stories about lynchings, murder, as well as responding to the slander of Mordecai Noah, among others, *Freedom's Journal* was hardly neutral. White readership cannot be fully assessed, but the lack of response in letters to the newspaper indicates that it was probably very low. This might be because of a lack of interest by white Americans, believing they had little connection to a Black-oriented paper. It could be because Russwurm's blatant language seemed off-putting to white society and so he was relegated to a counterpublic. Dickson Bruce offers perhaps the most

[54] I have conducted an exhaustive search of the Readex archives of Early American and African American Newspapers to discern whether there were other newspapers that referred to or reprinted articles from *Freedom's Journal.* To the best of my knowledge, these are the extant findings by way of the Readex database, which does not include the *New York Observer* or *New York Morning Chronicle*. However, the *Observer* was frequently borrowed from by other newspapers.

[55] Cornish and Russwurm, "To Our Patrons."

precise analysis: “Even to acknowledge a role for blacks in the discussion of colonization was to admit them into the realm of public discourse, into the American public sphere.”[56] To admit Black Americans into the public sphere was akin to their being intellectually, socially, and politically equal with white Americans, and would have further meant that the institution of slavery must be abolished.

[56] Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *The Origins of African American Literature, 1680-1865* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 139.

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