

Headline: “Once Upon A Time, The Liberal Free Press Really Disliked Black People”

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What: This is three pages of a eight-page story I wrote for Deadline Detroit after several years of on-and-off research.

Context: While researching slavery, I stumbled across my own newspaper’s vicious racism in the 19th Century, when racial slurs filled the news columns on many days. The Free Press, unlike many institutions with an unfortunate racial past, has never acknowledged its decades of racist coverage.

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3 pages

By **BILL McGRAW**

This article contains language from the 19th Century Free Press that will offend readers.

Almost everything about the Free Press of 1863 was different than the Free Press of 2013.

The newsprint itself had a high rag content that, 150 years later, makes an 1863 paper feel like a thick coffee filter. The news sprawled across eight columns that were dense with type and devoid of photos. Headlines stretched vertically instead of horizontally. A list of names of people checking in to Detroit’s hotels ran on the back page.

And the news stories and editorials were filled with racial slurs, calls for white supremacy and crude depictions of African Americans.

Take the Free Press from Jan. 7, 1863, six days after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation: It published a bitterly sarcastic article about Detroit’s African Americans celebrating the freeing of the slaves. The writer uses the word “nigger” nine times; “darkey” four times and “pickaninny” once. He also guessed the prices young black men in the festivities would have fetched at a slave auction. (Below; “contrabands” was a term for slaves, especially fugitive slaves during the Civil War.)

While the Emancipation Proclamation was an uncommon news story, the racial insults were business as usual in the Free Press for much of the 19th Century. The venom spiked from the 1850s into the 1870s, as the national debate over slavery grew more impassioned and then erupted into the Civil War. During that period, the paper became increasingly strident and made a name for itself as one of the most aggressively racist journals in the country. The Free Press once hinted that citizens should lynch a black man accused of sex crimes. In 1856 it ran an editorial that was headlined “Niggers—Niggers--Niggers.”

Matthew Kunding, who studied stories published by the paper in 1863, wrote in the *Michigan Journal of History* in 2006: “The Free Press used any method it could to degrade blacks and scare its white readers.”

The origins of the Free Press’ racial crisis

Reading the Free Press from 150 years ago can be shocking, even beyond the sight of the racial slurs, because of what the paper would become a century later. By the 1960s, the Free Press had evolved into one of the Midwest’s most tolerant voices. Before it was widely accepted for white institutions to support causes important to African Americans, the paper endorsed Coleman Young, Detroit’s first black mayor, and backed such issues as equal housing, affirmative action and the need for racially representative juries. It won a Pulitzer Prize for its enlightened coverage of the aftermath of the 1967 riot.

The paper’s racism in the 1800s was the result of politics, the nature of journalism and the state of the country. The Free Press has existed for so long – it soon will be 182 years old – that assumptions about newspapers from a 21st Century perspective don’t help make sense of why, in the pages of the 19th-Century Free Press, African Americans were also “plantation savages,” “Ethiopians,” “American citizens of African descent,” “cannibals” and “Lincoln’s sable pets.” The paper constantly told readers black people smelled bad, looked ugly and were simultaneously inferior and threatening.

The Free Press published its first edition May 5, 1831, just as the national debate about slavery was picking up steam. The paper’s two principal backers, Joseph Campau and John R. Williams, had owned slaves when slavery existed in Detroit, prior to the 1820s.

The paper, like most of that era, was an organ for a political party. The Free Press supported the Democratic Party of President Andrew Jackson, and remained a party mouthpiece for decades. By the 1850s, it had also become a newspaper in the modern sense, combining its support for the Democratic platform and candidates – and antipathy for Republicans -- with reporting on crime, commerce and lifestyle.

At the time the Civil War broke out, the Free Press was Detroit’s leading paper. It was known as an advocate for workers and Catholics, and many of its readers came from among the growing number of Detroit’s working class Irish and German immigrants – many of whom were Catholic. The paper also fought attempts to outlaw alcohol, another major issue in the 1850s and one that many Free Press readers similarly opposed.

The Free Press’ anti-black fervor did not exist in a vacuum. Detroit today has chosen to memorialize its history as an abolitionist city whose residents helped slaves reach Canada through the Underground Railroad. Almost totally forgotten is that the city was a Democratic stronghold in an overwhelmingly Republican state.

In the 1864 election, after Lincoln had freed the slaves, he handily won Michigan's electoral votes, but failed to carry Detroit. How much the readers' beliefs influenced the paper and vice-versa is impossible to know, but, clearly, the Free Press had a ready-made audience for its views.

When it came to the war itself, the Free Press was a so-called "Copperhead" paper: It supported the Union Army's efforts only as a way of keeping the nation together. Even though they loathed blacks, the editors maintained they did not support slavery; they believed in states' rights, saying Washington had no standing to force its will about slavery on the nation. And they detested abolition.

According to the Free Press, the United States government was "made by white men, for the benefit of white men, to be administered by white men in such manner as they should determine." But even whites came under attack if they dared to support black rights or the end of slavery. The paper despised Lincoln, calling him "a crude, illiterate, barroom witling."

The Free Press is not eager to explore its past

In recent times, the Free Press' bigoted past lurked in bound volumes of old papers stored in basement at the Detroit Public Library and in various microfilm collections, waiting to be discovered. Few staffers knew about the paper's history, and the story never has been told in detail outside of esoteric academic journals. Free Press executives have shied away from examining the paper's anti-black history or its role in forming attitudes in a region that has long been divided by race

In 1981, "On Guard," a book published by the Free Press to celebrate the paper's 150th anniversary, carried only about a dozen paragraphs that dealt with any aspect of the paper's historic treatment of African Americans. The paragraphs were scattered among the book's 279 pages.

It's unclear if they were clumsily written or carefully crafted, but they succeeded in vastly underplaying the dimensions of the paper's malevolent side. When the book summarized the career of Wilbur F. Storey, right, the Free Press editor identified by modern-day scholars as the paper's most venomous racist, it said: "Storey left behind in Detroit an extraordinary journalistic heritage."