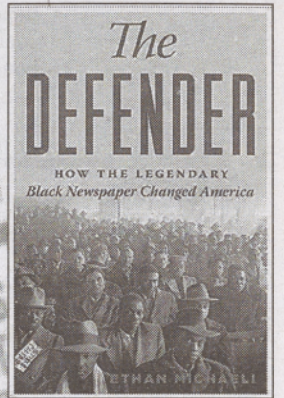
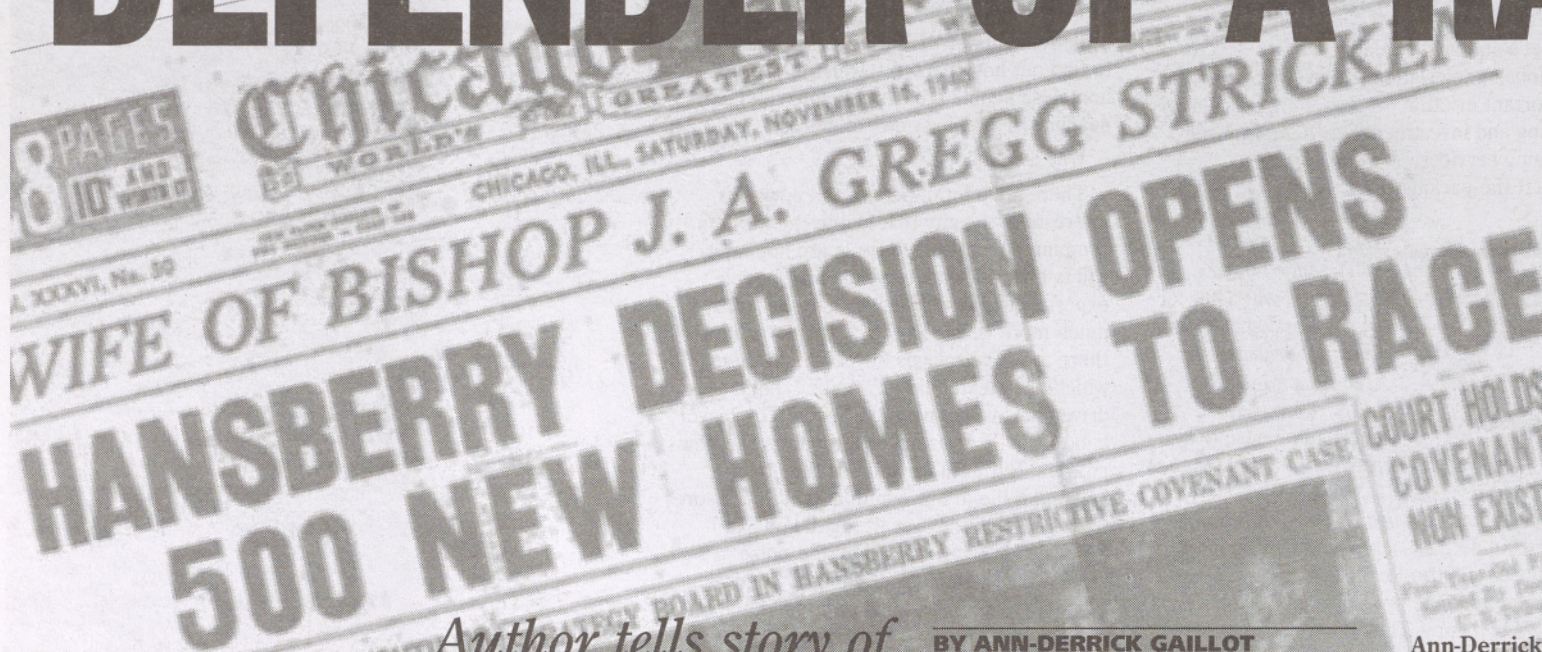


DEFENDER OF A RACE



"The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America" by Ethan Michaeli

Author tells story of Chicago Defender, one of the nation's most influential African-American newspapers

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT
STAFF WRITER

When African-American lawyer and printer Robert Abbott started *The Chicago Defender* newspaper from his landlady's kitchen table in 1905, he had one mission in mind for his new publication: to be a defender of race against the violence and disenfranchisement America reserved for African-Americans.

Over the next 110 years, *The Defender* would grow from its humble beginnings being distributed by Pullman porters along rail lines to become one of the most popular and influential African-American newspapers in the country. Its pages would expose the horrors of Jim Crow-era lynchings across the South and feature the writing of such influential African-American writers and journalists as Ida B. Wells, Langston Hughes and Willard Motley. More than just recording history, *The Defender* made it in its editorial pages, speaking out against segregation and racial violence, most notably playing a pivotal role in encouraging the Great Migration of African-Americans to the North during World War I and integration of the armed forces in World War II.

Journalist and author Ethan Michaeli had no idea of *The Defender's* history when he walked into the newspaper's offices for a job interview in 1991. A white Jewish kid from New York, he was fresh out of college and eager for the excitement of the newspaper world. The fact that he would be working at a black newspaper was, at the time, just a side note. However, over the course of his five years as a copy editor and then investigative journalist, Michaeli would come to learn all about *The Defender's* heritage as a black publication and its role in American history.

Michaeli has told the entire story of the paper in his new book, *"The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America."* Michaeli spoke with *Street Roots* by phone from his home city Chicago about *The Defender's* impact and the lessons its story holds for news writers and readers today.

Ann-Derrick Gaillot: Robert Abbott started *The Defender* out of his landlady's kitchen with almost no money. How did its being a community funded newspaper affect its trajectory?

Ethan Michaeli: Robert Abbott, the founder of *The Defender*, was a trained printer, and he knew that the printing industry was undergoing a dramatic technological revolution. Printing, which had been slow and expensive, suddenly changed so that you could show up at a printing press with some handwritten pages and a few dollars and essentially get a newspaper printed up which you could then sell. He did not immediately get the rousing support of everyone in the community, who had never seen a mass-circulation newspaper for African-Americans before. It took some very difficult years of committed work from Robert Abbott and a small coterie of allies before the newspaper really caught on. And then it became, really, a national sensation, the first national communications vehicle for African-Americans.

A.G.: How much did the program he had with the Pullman porters help propel *The Defender* to national popularity?

E.M.: The Pullman porters were essential to *The Defender's* success. Frank "Fay" Young, who was a dining car operator, was one of the first people to begin working with Robert Abbott. He was able, because of his job, to collect newspapers from around the country and bring them to *The Defender's* office where he and Robert Abbot would sit together and go through the papers looking for articles that could be rewritten from an African-American point of view. Fay Young started working with other Pullman porters to get the paper distributed all over the South. Porters were selling subscriptions and supplying small businesses with stocks of newspaper on a regular basis. The fact that small-business owners, sharecroppers and



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CHICAGO DEFENDER CHARITIES
Robert Abbott, founder of *The Chicago Defender*, stands with his newsboys in this undated photo from the 1920s.



John Sengstacke, his brother Whittier, and Louis Martin are pictured in 1940. Soon after beginning work at *The Defender*, Martin was detailed to manage *The Michigan Chronicle*, a publication based in Detroit's fast-growing African-American community.