

The Inspirational Life of Robert Sengstacke Abbott

By Bruce W. Whitmore



Robert Sengstacke Abbott—1868-1940

Abraham Lincoln, drawing insight from the Bible, declared in an 1858 speech on the future of the United States that “a house divided against itself cannot stand.”¹ This truism sweeps from the family hearth to any group, community, nation—right to the heart of civilization, itself. There are numerous fundamental realities of humanity that can help keep any “house,” any group, strong and resilient. These include unity, harmony, understanding, respect, compassion, and especially love of the human race. These concepts are at the heart of the Robert S. Abbott Race Unity Institute.

The Institute’s purpose is to help our community become a truly wonderful place in which to live. A place where each person can fully develop his or her God-given talents and skills, and then apply these capabilities to the betterment of everyone. A place where the cultural heritage of each individual is appreciated and celebrated. A place where each citizen, irrespective of race, religion, education, financial standing, or any other consideration will automatically reach out a helping hand to any neighbor in need.

To fully appreciate the motivation and dedication underlying the Abbott Institute, one must first understand why it was named in honor of Robert Sengstacke Abbott, a man who “ranks as a leader with the giants of his time.”² This is his story:

Robert was born on 28 November 1868 to Flora and Thomas Abbott.* Thomas, prior to Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, had been the slave butler to Captain Charles Stevens, owner of one of the smaller St. Simons Island, Georgia, plantations. Originally from Denmark, Captain Stevens had become prosperous sailing cargo-laden ships along the Georgia coast. The plantation is noteworthy in that lying within its 500 acre boundary are the ruins of the colonial fort, Frederica, commissioned by the British in 1736 to protect the new colony of Georgia from Florida's Spaniards and today a national monument operated by the National Parks Service.

During the Civil War, just prior to the occupation of St. Simons Island by Union troops, the Stevens family along with most of the island's residents fled to the Georgia mainland. Thomas remained behind and hid the family's belongings, everything from the household silver to the furniture. Unlike most of the island's residents who lost everything during the war, the Stevens' belongings were later successfully retrieved.

As a free man, Thomas moved at the end of the war to Savannah, Georgia. There he met and married Flora Butler, a hairdresser at the Savannah Theater, one of the country's oldest live-performance playhouses. Opened in 1818, the theater is still in operation today.

Almost immediately after their marriage the couple moved back to St. Simons Island where Thomas opened a small grocery store. His entrepreneurship, however, met with little success. Shortly after the birth of Robert, the couple's only child, Thomas contracted tuberculosis and died in 1869. Even though Thomas was no longer the slave property of the Stevens family, he was buried in a marked grave in the family cemetery, a very uncommon occurrence in the South and a testament to the family's respect for him.



1868 birthplace of Robert Sengstacke Abbott, St. Simons Island, Georgia.

* There has been confusion in some publications regarding the date of Robert's birth, but 28 November 1868 is the date recognized by Robert's biographer, Roi Ottley, as well as the date listed in Robert's obituary. That date was also Thanksgiving in 1868 and several sources note that he was born on Thanksgiving day. Interestingly, Thanksgiving was a loosely celebrated event up to that time. On the day of Robert's birth, however, President Andrew Jackson issued a proclamation stating that henceforth Thanksgiving would be an official United States holiday.

Following Thomas' death Flora returned to Savannah where she soon married John Sengstacke, the bi-racial son of a German sea captain. John's father had become quite successful in this country and had purchased the freedom of a slave girl, Tara, whom he subsequently married. John was the couple's first child. He never knew his mother, however, for she died shortly after the birth of John's younger sibling. After Tara's passing John's father took his children to be raised by relatives in Germany for he wished to avoid the racism they would have endured had they remained in America.

As a young adult, John Sengstacke returned to the United States, settling in the small community of Woodville near Savannah. He became both an ordained Congregational minister and a grade school teacher intent on improving black education in Woodville. In addition, he studied the printing trade and eventually became a newspaper publisher.

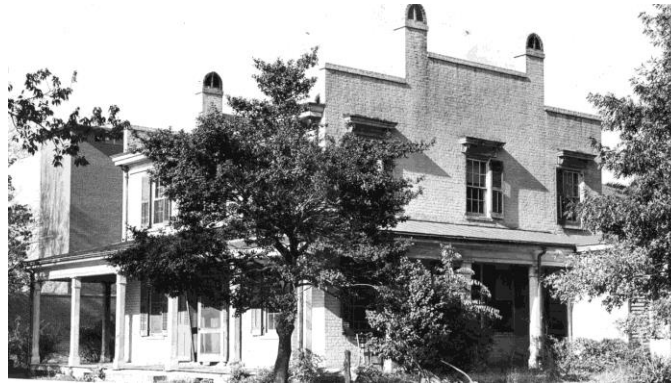
When John and Flora married, five-year-old Robert's last name was changed to that of his new stepfather. The couple would be blessed with seven more children in the next several years. John possessed a strong work ethic which he imparted to Robert and his other children. One of Robert's first jobs at either age eight or nine was as a grocery errand boy. Flora insisted that of the 15 cents he earned weekly, a dime must be paid toward his room and board. As a teenager one of his jobs was working as a printer's devil—an apprentice who performed such tasks as mixing tubs of ink and fetching type.

Robert was not quite 18 years old when he enrolled in a college preparatory program at Savannah's Beach Institute, established in 1867 as the city's first school for the education of African-Americans. Robert was one of only three dark-skinned students. Each suffered the prejudicial taunts of their lighter-skinned classmates.

After expending considerable effort persuading his stepfather, Robert transferred to Claffin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Claffin also was not a good fit for Robert and he subsequently decided he was more suited to learning a trade. He applied to Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia. Although accepted, he had to wait for admittance as the student body was at maximum capacity. During this period he returned to apprenticing in a Savannah print shop. He also helped his stepfather launch a local newspaper, the *Woodville Times*. Robert had already celebrated his 21st birthday by the time he entered Hampton. The trade he elected to pursue: printing.

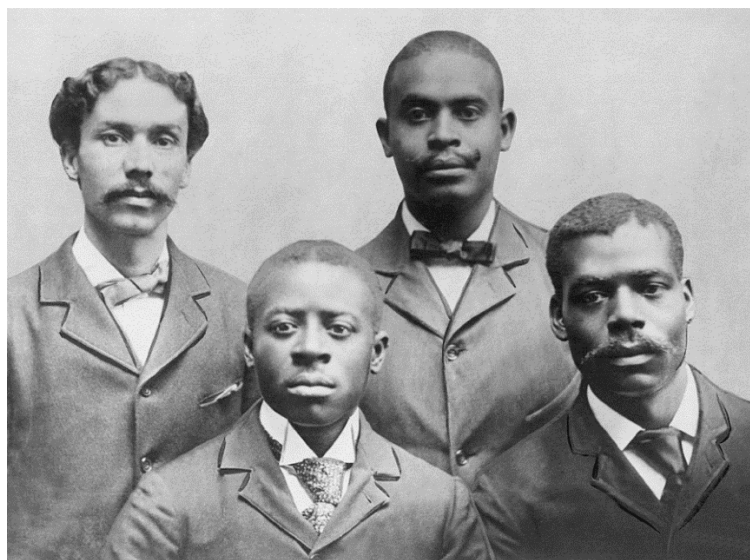
Robert continued to experience prejudice at Hampton. He was also socially quite clumsy and this set him further apart from his fellow students. A white teacher, Hollis Frissell, reached out to Robert and helped him work through many of his problems. The relationship had a profound impact on the young man, who recounted of their first meeting: "...His friendliness was such as to extract from me all the inner thoughts and impulses to which heretofore I had given scant expression. I told him, among other things, that I could not understand why there should be so much prejudice.... His last argument was in effect that I should so prepare myself for the struggle ahead that in whatever field I should

decide to dedicate my services, I should be able to point the light not only to my own people but to white people as well.”³



One of the earliest buildings on the Hampton campus, today known as Hampton University.

Robert had an exceptionally fine tenor voice and was the first freshman student ever admitted to the Hampton Quartet. There was a second reason for his membership, however: school officials felt they were more successful when sending darker students on fund-raising missions. Nonetheless, Robert’s experience with the singing group was of great importance to his development of self-esteem. This was especially true when the quartet traveled to Chicago to perform at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition, a celebration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ arrival in the New World attended by more than 27 million visitors.



The Hampton Quartet. Robert is on the left in the first row.

Robert graduated from Hampton in 1896. His subsequent efforts at establishing a career were unsuccessful and at 28 years of age he returned to his childhood home in Woodville. He eventually found part-time employment as both a printer and a schoolteacher. He fell in love with a black girl from his church, but her father disapproved of his dark skin and forbade her to associate with him. Heartbroken, he traveled to Chicago and enrolled in Kent College of Law, adding Abbott back to the end of his name for the first time. His decision reportedly caused his stepfather much sorrow.

Two years later Robert graduated with a bachelor of law degree, the only African-American in his class. He opened a law office first in Gary, Indiana, and then in Topeka, Kansas, but both efforts were failures. He returned to Chicago intent on establishing a practice in the bigger city, but a prominent, fair-skinned black lawyer, Edward H. Morris, convinced him that success would elude him in Chicago as well. His dark skin tone was too much of an impediment. He eventually gave up all hope of practicing law and never attempted to pass the Illinois bar exam.

Robert returned to the printing field but even though he was a member of the printer's union he could only find periodic, short-term work. He once commented he learned what it was like to stand in the breadline of a prominent white church and be told to step aside for a white man or to be turned down for a job even though the white immigrant who was hired could speak no English. Then he met a Chicago politician who persuaded a printing house doing considerable work for the city to hire him, even though it meant relaxing their rule against hiring blacks. The work was steady but the pay was pathetic and his job of setting type for railroad time tables was hardly fulfilling. If he made any errors he had to correct them on his own time.

Of this period Robert wrote, "I would go hungry and probably would have starved to death but for the generosity of some folk who would loan me a dime now and then. Even when I did work, I did not earn enough money to pay back rent, repay loans and eat three meals, too. Consequently I was always broke. Such was my experience during the early days of struggle in Chicago."⁴

During these years Robert lived at a boarding house owned by Henrietta P. Lee, a widow with three children. Robert endeared himself to Mrs. Lee and she mothered him as if he was another son. Her strong belief in him and her feeding and housing him on endless credit were huge factors in both his survival and eventual success.

Following the death of his stepfather in 1904 plus an aborted attempt with his sister, Rebecca, to open a school he named the Sengstacke Memorial Military and Mechanical Academy, Robert decided at the age of 37 to launch a newspaper. This was something he had been thinking about periodically for the previous half-decade. Yet it seemed likely this new endeavor was destined to become yet another failure, especially since Chicago

already had three marginally successful black newspapers which served an African-American population of less than 40,000.

Roi Ottley, the author of Robert's biography, *The Lonely Warrior*, notes:

When he announced the new venture many people laughed, even ridiculed the idea. As yet, no one had recognized his imagination as talent, nor his aptness for gathering rumor and hearsay and weaving them into stories, which he often did to the delight of his friends. They only saw the obvious: that Abbott was no master of the King's English; that when he spoke he split verbs, fumbled his tenses, and dropped his final consonants.⁵

Robert's first small victory was in finding a printer who agreed, reluctantly, to await payment until after each issue of the new paper had been sold. He then rented desk space in a nearby real estate office and furnished the closet-sized area with a folding card table and a borrowed kitchen chair. His remaining capital for launching his new enterprise was 25 cents which he used to buy notepads and a few pencils. Among his sources for news was the Choral Study Club in which Robert sang along with 150 other members. After rehearsal each night he would return to his "office" to write the rather plain-vanilla articles for his paper's first issue.

The Chicago Defender first appeared on 5 May 1905. It was the size of a handbill (16 by 20 inches), and consisted of four pages, each with six columns. A streamer on the front page declared, "The Only Two-Cent Weekly In the City."⁶ Robert had 300 copies printed, folding each himself. He managed to sell the entire printing.

Robert repeated the process each week. The quality of his articles improved steadily. Through his experiences with racial prejudice he began commenting with considerable insight on the problems and concerns of the black community. His command of written English also improved. Yet despite his efforts the paper almost failed two months later. A primary reason it didn't was Robert's landlady, Mrs. Lee. She allowed him to move his meagre operation into her kitchen and even permitted him to paint *The Chicago Defender* on the transom of the boarding house's front door.

Demand for the newspaper slowly grew until it reached a weekly press run of 1,000 copies. By 1908 production costs ran about \$13 a week, but the paper remained a one-man operation. Robert couldn't even give himself a salary. While he was scouring area neighborhoods for stories, several friends assisted him gratis by collecting out-of-town news and writing editorials. When the *Defender* became available at newsstands in 1912, Robert would deliver the bundles of papers each week to the various concessions. It was not until 1915 that the *Defender* became the size of a standard newspaper.



Artist's conception of Robert at work in Mrs. Lee's kitchen in 1905.

A massive and rapid transition, however, was on the immediate horizon. By the start of World War I the paper's circulation had expanded into several states and the number of weekly copies had risen dramatically to over 100,000. Roi Ottley estimates that on average each copy was passed on to five different people meaning a half-million weekly readers. Thanks to Robert's many and diverse talents and his steeled determination, the paper had become the largest African-American publication in the country.



Robert with some of his key lieutenants in the mid-1920s.



Defender reporters during the 1930s.

What elevated the *Defender* to national prominence were not only Robert's keen entrepreneurial skills but his fierce opposition to racism. He endeavored ceaselessly to educate his race to demand their right to equality and to make the world aware of the atrocities his people had endured. He once quipped, "With drops of ink, we make millions think!"⁷ Even today Robert is widely regarded as the greatest single force in African-American journalism. Lawrence D. Hogan commented in his 1984 study of this country's black newspapers that Robert "was the pioneer for the Negro press as Hearst was for the White metropolitan press."⁸

Also driving Robert was a growing belief in the inevitability of the unification of the human race. Experiences such as his friendship with his white teacher, Hollis Frissell, contributed to this belief. The event Robert considered the most important along this road of discovery, however, occurred on 30 April 1912. At the time the *Chicago Defender* had only two other staff members; Robert would not stand at the helm of a large publishing enterprise for another half-decade.

That spring day found reporter Robert at Hull House, a settlement house founded by scholar and philanthropist Jane Addams in 1889 to provide tenement dwellers in Chicago's slum areas with a center for a higher civic and social life. The speaker was a resident of the Holy Land, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í Faith. At the time 'Abdu'l-Bahá was traveling throughout the United States, sharing the principles of His Father's teachings. Key among them was God's command for humanity to overcome all forms of prejudice and that all peoples must recognize they are part of only one race, the human race. The theme of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's address at Hull House were the many "points of partnership" that existed between the two races while there was but one point of difference: color.

Shall this, the least of all distinctions be allowed to separate you as races and individuals? In physical bodies, in the law of growth, sense endowment, intelligence, patriotism, language, citizenship, civilization and religion you are one and the same. A single point of distinction exists; that of racial color. God is not pleased with, neither should any reasonable or intelligent man be willing to recognize inequality in the races because of this distinction.

But there is need of a superior power to overcome human prejudices; a power which nothing in the world of mankind can withstand and which will overshadow the effect of all other forces at work in human conditions. That irresistible power is the love of God. It is my hope and prayer that it may destroy the prejudice of this one point of distinction between you and unite you all permanently under its hallowed protection.⁹

Years later Robert recalled that when he went to the podium at the end of the speech, 'Abdu'l-Bahá placed His hand on Robert's head and said that "He would get from me some day a service for the benefit of humanity."¹⁰

There are numerous examples of the influence upon Robert of the concept of the unity of the human race. Perhaps the most evident is found in a list of nine goals he formulated for inclusion in the *Defender's* masthead and which remained there long after his death. First on the list was "American race prejudice must be destroyed." The list concluded with "Full enfranchisement of all American citizens."¹¹

Robert's interest in the Bahá'í Faith followed decades of searching for a spiritual home. Raised a Congregationalist, he had joined the Episcopal Church when he became an adult and, several years later, he became a Presbyterian. In all three he had been subjected to racism. He seemed content with Christian Science until that group established separate places of worship for the two races. Roi Ottley noted in his biography that Robert's judgment of religions was based on the same standard he applied to everything else: was racial equality practiced?

Robert's attraction to the Bahá'í teachings is evidenced by the numerous articles on the Faith which appeared periodically in the pages of the *Defender*. An article in 1916 ended with the statement that "The Defender is the only race paper that has followed this great movement," while in an article several years later Robert stated that "I know of no religion that is more sincere in its invitation to humanity than Baha'ism [whose] tenets are absolutely in opposition to any difference based on color or creed," and in yet another article, after articulating what he perceived to be shortcomings of other religions, he declared that "we should find an abiding joy, a spiritual haven for our souls in Baha'ism."¹² Robert and his wife frequently attended Bahá'í events and Robert officially joined the Bahá'í Faith in 1934, the second African-American of national stature to do so.¹³

Another major ingredient in the recipe for the *Defender's* success was Robert's ability to surround himself with creative people and form them into a cohesive team. It took several years to assemble this group but the result was "an atmosphere of camaraderie, in which each one assumed personal responsibility for the progress and success of the paper." It became a tradition that once the galley proofs (a preliminary version of the paper) for each edition were completed, the staff would spend one or two evenings proofreading together, for any error was intolerable to Robert. "They often chipped in ten cents apiece to buy meat and vegetables for supper" and then "they would all sit down like one family to eat."¹⁴

There was never any question, however, that Robert was their undisputed leader. Often when there were differing opinions, particularly regarding an editorial, he would slip away and change or replace the questioned piece. He then sent these changes directly

to the print room with “R.S.A. MUST” scrawled across the document’s top. This designation “became famous as the final word—indeed, an eleventh commandment.”¹⁵

During World War I, Robert managed to anger the Woodrow Wilson administration on several occasions with his editorials on the poor treatment of African-Americans by the armed forces. Then, on 15 May 1917, less than five weeks after the United States officially entered the war, Robert launched a very different campaign: he began encouraging Southern blacks to move to northern cities where there would be abundant opportunity to improve their lives. Roi Ottley commented: “The man’s crusade to bring Southern Negroes north was perhaps the most gigantic project he attempted and his most notable achievement. Nearly a million migrated on his urgings.”¹⁶



An African-American family migrating north.

Historians credit Robert with single-handedly launching the migration. Dr. Charles S. Johnson, first black president of Nashville’s Fisk University, declared that “the *Defender* became one of the most potent factors in a phenomenal hegira that began to change the character and pattern of race relations in the United States.”¹⁷

“The Great Northern Drive,” coupled with the *Defender’s* detailed reports of the rampant racism in the Southeast, infuriated many local and state officials throughout the South. Distribution of the *Defender* was forced to become a clandestine operation, especially since several southern towns legally banned the publication. One of the most common ways to supply the newspaper became sending copies with porters on southern-bound trains, a practice that continued even after Robert’s death.

At a 2007 celebration of Robert's life held in Brunswick, Georgia, one of the guest speakers was the Honorable Orion L. Douglas, then Judge of the State Court of Glynn County, Georgia. Orion recalled how as a boy in Savannah during the mid-1950s he would meet the train each week. His uncle was a porter and would give him a bundle of the latest edition of the *Defender* which Orion would promptly sell.

Three decades before Orion's career as a newsboy began, as the campaign for blacks to move northward was gaining traction and copies of the *Defender* were routinely finding their way into southern communities, Robert faced a new challenge he was never able to overcome. Death threats became so numerous that he never again dared to travel in the South. National circulation of the *Defender*, however, continued to increase despite the opposition and reached more than 230,000 copies a week by 1920 with more than two-thirds of the papers being sent outside Illinois.

In 1921 the *Defender* moved into its own facilities, a remodeled synagogue. A few weeks later Robert's mother, Flora, ceremoniously pressed an electrical switch to start for the first time a high-speed rotary printing press, a huge technological step forward for black journalism. Unfortunately, there were no black printers capable of running the new press and Robert relied on a union crew of whites for the next eight years.



Robert's mother, Flora, in front of the new high-speed press in 1921.



Flora and Robert.

Robert's frugality as a businessman not only kept operating costs low but contributed to his growing wealth. In the mid-1920s he became one of this country's first millionaires of African-American descent, drawing a weekly salary of \$2,000, the equivalent today of \$27,300. The focus of the paper also expanded beyond racial conflict to topics such as sports, the arts, fashion, stories of blacks from other parts of the world, and numerous articles and editorials about crime in the Windy City. Robert also launched a column written by a local doctor which focused on such topics as hygiene, nutrition and infant care. The column also encouraged abstinence from alcohol and gambling. Robert's continuing efforts to improve the role of African-Americans in the workplace resulted in measurable progress in Chicago, particularly in the city's fire and police departments.



Robert and his chauffeur in front of one of the many luxury cars he owned.

Robert's importance in the community also continued to increase, marked by his election as president of the Hampton alumni association and honorary degrees from Morris Brown College in Atlanta and Wilberforce University in Ohio, the oldest private African-American university in the country. In 1919 Robert was appointed by Governor Frank Lowden to the Illinois Race Relations Commission which subsequently undertook multiple studies regarding the impact of Robert's Great Northern Migration, all duly reported in the *Defender*. At the time more than 5,000 African-Americans were coming each week just to Chicago, with many more arriving in other northern cities. Robert's later travels to Europe and South America also were extensively documented in the paper, adding further to his stature.

Roi Ottley painted a marvelous word picture of Robert in *The Lonely Warrior*, a portion of which follows:

He stood squarely on principle.

The strange thing is that he was not characteristically a ruthless or violent person. He was in fact a mild man who liked flowers and poetry. He was indeed absurdly timorous. Those who had read his flaming editorials and were awed by the power he held in his hands were quite disappointed when they saw him. Maybe they were surprised to meet not a wild-eyed radical but a polite, soft-voiced man, even given to kissing ladies' hands. Seen in a different context, he would have been mistaken for a simple bookkeeper suffering from occupational myopia, or, perhaps, for an inoffensive professor from a Southern state college.

His life was shot full of such paradox.

The blood coursed in the man's veins was pure Negro. He was in fact distinctly black—a fact of profound meaning to his story. He was slightly bulky but erect, with silky skin and bland features. He carried himself with a curious elastic grace, but, at the same time, stiffly. Of medium height—five feet some six or seven inches—but rather long-legged, he liked to be photographed wearing a top hat, cutaway coat, striped trousers, spats and carrying a gold-headed cane. His eyes were remarkable: shrewdly luminous, and never at rest. Both his face and his speech seemed somewhat arid until the eyes lighted them up. His voice was high-pitched but not unpleasant. But among the character traits of Abbott we must mention first, and above all, his stubbornness, his tenacity.

He chain smoked cigars. He never learned to drive an automobile, though he had several. He remembered the names of few people. He referred to one woman twenty years in his employ as "that girl in circulation." He forgot even his secretary's name. But every staff member bears witness to the fact that he never

forgot an order he had given. If he gave instructions for a story to be written, he afterwards carefully perused the paper to find that particular article, and if it failed to appear he was quick to call the culprit to account. He was in fact shrewd, suspicious and calculating and not above the use of guile, but his moral courage was indisputable.

He was a gentleman, high-minded and nearly puritanical, but he never forgot any injury done him, particularly racial, no matter how slight. His manners were impeccable, almost courtly. He had a great sense of dignity, even nobility.... He rarely showed emotion. He seldom laughed and only infrequently smiled, though he had, at times, a droll sense of humor.¹⁸

When Robert did laugh it was rich, captivating and bordered on being raucous. One event that surely resulted in his having a huge laugh occurred one day when a lawyer verbally accosted him on the street, complaining loudly about the *Defender's* reporting of a particular event. After thoroughly berating Robert, the lawyer disparagingly dismissed him, saying, "Your paper don't go anywhere but 'round the corner, so I don't care what you say about me!"¹⁹

Robert accepted the criticism good-naturedly, but when he returned to his office he wrote a one-paragraph notice to the effect that the lawyer would give a dime to any child who came to his office with a bottle top. Robert placed the story on the front page. Shortly after the *Defender* reached newsstands that week, the lawyer's office was deluged with hundreds of youngsters bearing bottle tops and clamoring for the promised ten cents!

Ottley continued:

Though sensitive and sometimes standoffish, Robert had a magnetic personality and could be conspicuously urbane. He was basically a friendly person with a touch of the common man. He talked with every and anybody. He had no hobbies, no relaxations, except entertaining friends by singing. He played bridge and attended the opera, but really liked neither. He rarely read books, though he had an extensive library. His idea of a good time was to walk the streets of the South Side and watch his people. His appearance of humility, bordering on the apologetic, was disarming to whites as well as blacks. But few people ever reached him sufficiently to develop any intimacy. Underneath he was often tense, uneasy and aloof....

The man was also an incredible combination of showman and black parson. He was a salvationist and messiah as well as super-opportunist and pragmatist. His

penury was legendary. Yet he gave away thousands and was swindled out of thousands more.²⁰



A young newsboy selling the *Defender* in Chicago in the 1940s.

Among the examples of Robert's largely unknown generosity is that he paid entirely for the college education of all ten of his brother's and sister's children, even providing for their clothing and all other incidentals. As a graduation present to two of his nieces he sent them to Europe where they stayed nearly a year. He also purchased a new boarding house for his former landlady, Mrs. Lee, and then gave her a significant amount of the *Defender's* stock.

Another account of Robert's bigheartedness involves the Stevens family of St. Simons Island, descendants of Captain Charles Stevens who had held not only Robert's father in slavery, but also several of his aunts and uncles. At the end of the 1920s the Stevens household comprised six people including two daughters and two grandchildren. Like many during the depression, the family fell on hard times. Interestingly, they chose to appeal to Robert for help. Even more interestingly, his response was most positive. Not only did he provide significant financial assistance for nearly six years, but he saw to the education of the grandchildren. He established a warm, personal relationship with the family. In other words, his life mirrored what he so often preached in the pages of the *Defender*: we must all learn to live together in unity and friendship.

In the early 1920s Robert added a youth section to the newspaper, which he named Bud Billiken. For more than a decade a charm doll, known as a Billiken, had been extremely popular in the United States. Elephant-like with pointed ears, short arms and a

mischievous smile, Billikens were believed to bring luck to their owners. The new Bud Billiken section (Bud being short for buddy) quickly became very popular.

The role of Bud Billiken expanded in 1929 when Robert directed one of his staff, David Kellum, to create an event as a thank-you for the paper's newsboys. Bud Billiken Day was founded and that first year featured a small parade with a few cars and trucks and several marching children. Kellum also enticed the famed comedians Freeman Gosden and Charles Cornell, stars of an enormously popular radio show at the time, *Amos 'n' Andy*, to ride in the parade. Robert led the parade regally seated in his Rolls Royce.

The parade was soon followed by an annual talent contest which several people would credit for the start of their musical careers including Nat King Cole. There was also the founding of the Bud Billiken Club for children which emphasized honesty, trustworthiness, obedience to parents and respect for others. The club was credited with significantly reducing juvenile crime in Chicago. Kellum would later write: "through its exchange of letters with children of various races all over the world, including Africa, South America, Germany, and Italy and by the inclusion of white Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts in the Bud Billiken parade, the Billiken club succeeded in breaking down the solid wall of segregation that had separated white and black children."²¹ Bud Billiken had become a "'fairy godfather' who makes children happy."²²

The parade continues today as a major yearly event in Chicago. In addition to celebrities, it has hosted numerous politicians, beauty queens, athletes and others famed for various reasons. Among them are Bo Jangles, Lionel Hampton, Jackie Robinson, James Cagney, Frank Sinatra, Hopalong Cassidy, Michael Jordan, Joe Louis, Spike Lee, Duke Ellington, Muhammad Ali, Adelaide Hall, Lena Horne, Oprah Winfrey, Ethel Waters, Cab Calloway, Diana Ross, Paul Robeson, Billie Holiday, and President Harry S. Truman. Robert's nine-decade-old symbol of pride, happiness and hope attracts more than a million people each year while 25 million more watch it on television. Only one parade in the United States is larger: the Pasadena, California, New Year's Tournament of Roses.



Former President Harry S. Truman, left, Robert's nephew, John Sengstacke, and Chicago's Mayor Richard J. Daley at the head of the 1956 parade.



Scenes from recent Bud Billiken parades.

1929 also saw Robert launch his first attempt to publish a black magazine, *Abbott's Monthly*. Despite the stock market crashing four weeks before the first issue appeared, the monthly initially succeeded. However, with the nation economically devastated and experiencing massive unemployment, the magazine was inevitably doomed and survived for only four years.

The *Defender* also faced hard times and an uncertain future, but by the end of 1933 was again profitable, even if only marginally. That same year Robert was diagnosed with tuberculosis, the disease his father had been stricken with 64 years earlier. For nearly

three years Robert struggled to remain at the helm of the newspaper, but eventually he had to be confined to bed almost continuously. He was 71 when he passed away on 29 February 1940 from a combination of the tuberculosis and Bright's disease. He was buried in Chicago's Lincoln Cemetery.

The 9 March 1940 issue of the *Defender* was devoted almost entirely to recounting Robert's life and accomplishments. An article describing his funeral contained a long list of individuals who attended, including the most prominent of Chicago's citizens. Among the thoughts penned by the newspaper's longtime editor, Lucius C. Harper, were the following:

The dean of Negro journalism is dead. Even his contemporaries who often doubted the wisdom of his course in life will not deny him that honorable title in death. He hewed through the forest of doubt and despair with an honest heart and a determined spirit. He gained victory by fighting uphill, almost all the way. He loved life and its vexing problems. Courage for the fray was never lacking.

Robert S. Abbott divided Life into four dynamic words...Love, Ideals, Faith and Energy. He worked them threadbare on the road to success. He swept aside doubters, scoffers...padded his ears against the broadcast of "It Can't Be Done," and built an everlasting monument to his long and tiresome labor—*The Chicago Defender*.

He educated his race to demand their rights as men. He brought them out of the swamps of shackles and discouragement into the promised land of hope and liberty. The South despised him for his courage, and with death threats forbade him to return to the land of his birth. He knew no defeat. Even death to him was a victory over pain....

His early life as a journalist and abolitionist against wrong was one of toil, poverty and hardship. His natural instincts were never warped, or wrinkled or numbed by learning. His mind was strong for the love of his race; his sense of justice keen and his sympathies so deep that they were even able to withstand a higher education. He never lost the common touch; he was a militant defender of the lowly. He believed in his race and in God....

Lucky are the sons of black men when such martyrs and faithful servants to a race as Robert S. Abbott are born upon earth. Above their neglected cradles sing the morning stars and around their humble homes, hushed and expectant, await the early breezes that shall drive away the fog and mist before the rising sun so a race of men, bruised by shackles, can see clear to progress and achieve.

Farewell, "Chief," you have pointed to a star...may it give light to our weary feet along the pathway to hope as it did to you in your yesteryears of hardships.²³

Robert received numerous accolades over the years, such as a Chicago elementary school being named in his honor. Both his Chicago home and his childhood home in the Woodville neighborhood of Savannah, Georgia, are listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

One of the most interesting of these tributes involved one of the 2,710 liberty ships mass produced in several American shipyards during World War II. These ships were vital to the transfer of war materiel from the United States to both Great Britain and the Soviet Union. By the end of the war 1,554 of these ships had been sunk.

Launched into the San Francisco Bay at Richmond, California, on 13 April 1944, the *S.S. Robert S. Abbott* was one of only 13 liberty ships named for outstanding African-Americans. Even the ship's history is compelling, for it was later given by the United States to Russia where it was renamed the *Kamenets-Podolsk* in honor of 23,600 Jews who had been slain in a Hungarian town of the same name during a two-day period by Nazi troops.



1944 launching of the *S.S. Robert S. Abbott*.



Robert's Chicago home, now listed in the National Register of Historic Places.



Obelisk raised by Robert to honor his father and his favorite aunt, Celia.
Located on the grounds of Fort Frederica National Monument, St. Simons Island, Georgia.

Five years before his death, Robert wrote the following editorial for the *Defender* which clearly summarizes his greatest achievement and his most ardent expectation for the future:

For twenty-five years I have hearkened to the sacred advice of my [step] father, and have endeavored to give expression to my love for him, my Race and humanity through the columns of *The Chicago Defender*. I have been accused of red journalism, of insincerity, of incompetence, but in spite of all adversities I have faithfully and diligently striven to make known and alleviate the suffering of my people.

I have endeavored to bring to the attention of the reading public all the inhuman treatment, discrimination, segregation, disenfranchisement, peonage and all other injustices directed at my people.

I have not yielded to sentiment, but have endeavored, by the help of God, to serve aright as He gave me the ability to see the right. And, at the end of twenty-five years, I rejoice in the consolation and satisfaction which follows a successful pursuit in the task undertaken and the principles espoused.

And now, thank God, the day is coming, yea, the day is almost here, when every land, from orient to Occident, from pole to pole, from mountain to shore, and from the shore to the farthest isle of the sounding sea, at last will throw off the yoke of doubt, forget biased conceptions of human rights, and join in glad acclaim by helping to usher in the glad era of an enlightened civilization and the universal acknowledgement of the brotherhood of man.²⁴

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