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**Researching the New Orleans–
Chicago Jazz Connection: Tools and
Methods**

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RESEARCHING THE NEW ORLEANS–CHICAGO JAZZ CONNECTION: TOOLS AND METHODS

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the tools and methods used to investigate the New Orleans–Chicago migration and to offer some examples of the working method involved and the problems one encounters. Our perspective of this pivotal event in jazz history will remain unclear until we focus our research efforts with greater precision upon the musicians and the music included in this migration.

When researching the New Orleans–Chicago connection, the jazz scholar must confront two sacred legends of jazz history. Firstly, there is the legend that it was the closing of the fabled Storyville (the historic New Orleans “red-light district”) by the Navy Department on November 12, 1917, that resulted in a major exodus of musicians from the city; secondly, that this migration was directed exclusively north along the Mississippi River toward Chicago. In fact, the migration of well-known New Orleans musicians began as early as 1902–1903 and continued long after the closing of Storyville. Furthermore, the economic impact of Storyville’s closing upon musicians has been greatly exaggerated. Richard B. Allen put the situation in perspective when he stated that “there were almost as many sporting houses in New Orleans after 1917 as before, and therefore no fewer job opportunities. . . . [E]ven those jazzmen who did leave the Crescent City maintained close ties, . . . visiting there frequently, often dropping in for years at a time” (Starr 1980, 100). Likewise according to the legend, jazz came “up the river from New Orleans to Chicago.” That may be an attractive odyssey, but it is bad geography and worse history. The Mississippi River does not flow through Chicago; the closest one could get on a riverboat would be Moline, Illinois, across the state from Chicago.

The best way to get to Chicago from New Orleans was to go north on

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the “Green Diamond”—the symbol appearing on the rolling stock of the Illinois Central Railroad. This was the route New Orleans musicians took when they headed north, and Louis Armstrong was among them. The most celebrated and well-known date in the chronology of the New Orleans–Chicago migration is August 9, 1922—the date Louis Armstrong arrived in Chicago to join the King Oliver band (Armstrong [1954] 1986, 227–228). The certainty of this date is attributable to the fact that it is found in Armstrong’s autobiography which, as Dan Morgenstern writes, “has the distinction of being the first book published about a jazz musician” (and by a jazz musician at that); he goes on to state that its authenticity “is not in question” (Armstrong [1954] 1986, ix). Although Armstrong’s birth date of July 4, 1900, has recently been questioned by James Lincoln Collier (1983, 18–21), August 8, 1922, the date of his departure from New Orleans and his arrival the next day in Chicago at the Illinois Central’s Twelfth-Street Station, has survived all scrutiny. It is by this standard of certainty that all dates relating to the New Orleans–Chicago migration are measured. Unfortunately, such certainty is more difficult to establish in other cases, as we shall see.

Chicago’s black-owned newspapers played a critical role in making Southern blacks aware of the economic, educational, and social opportunities awaiting them in the North. This was especially the case during the “Great Black Migration” of 1916–1920 when approximately fifty thousand Southern blacks migrated to Chicago, creating the South-Side Black Belt so vital to black culture in Chicago. The *Chicago Defender*, the oldest surviving black-owned newspaper in Chicago, founded in 1905 (see Appendix), carried personal messages and ran editorials that championed migration; these were often read and discussed in the homes and churches of the South. At the time of World War I, two-thirds of the *Defender*’s readers lived in the South. Since its circulation was around 200,000 and it was estimated by the *Defender* that in these homes and churches five people read each copy, this weekly paper probably reached more than 650,000 people in the South (Steiner and Sengstock 1966, 1/21/1922).

The *Defender* carried columns devoted to news events in the emigrants’ cities of origin so that its readers could keep up with things “down home.” For example, the *Defender*’s Crescent City column for September 16, 1916, carried news of a party at the home of New Orleans trombonist Honoré Dutrey for which the George McCullum, Sr., band provided the music. Dutrey was soon to leave New Orleans for Chicago and King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band (1919), but in the meantime his friends in Chicago could keep up with his activities by reading the *Defender*. In addition to reports from New Orleans, there were also items on events in

New York and Los Angeles, which at that time were more likely to be points of destination than origination for the readers. The *Defender* also played a vital role in keeping the black community informed of events in the entertainment world through “coming soon” notices, advertisements, and show business gossip. Columnists and critics like Sylvester Russell (beginning in 1910), Tony Langston (from 1917), and bandleader Dave Payton (in the 1920s) reviewed performances and commented on the entertainment scene on the South Side.

When attempting to trace the settlement patterns of recent immigrants to Chicago in the early decades of this century, one finds that the United States Census Schedules can provide valuable information. Because of an agreement between the Census Bureau and the National Archives, however, these schedules are not made public until seventy-two years after they were taken. Since the census is taken once every ten years, the only Census Schedules available for this century are those of 1900 and 1910.

Census documents can be found in some university libraries, in large public libraries, in some local historical society libraries, in research libraries such as Chicago’s Newberry Library, and, as is the case in Chicago, at the regional branches of the National Archives. The Census Schedules are reproduced on microfilm and are accessible by means of an alphabetically coded index of surnames called Soundex. This index is used extensively by genealogists and individuals trying to trace their family trees. With the surname and the first name of an individual and a little luck, one can locate the following very useful information: the street address; the name of the head of the household; the names and relationship of all family members; the names of boarders or roomers at that address; the race and sex of all residents; the date of birth, birthplace, age, and marital status of all residents; the number of years at that address; the occupation, trade, or profession; and citizenship information. For researchers concentrating on a specific geographic area where there were few single-family dwellings, such as Chicago’s red-light district or South-Side Black Belt, the Census Schedules are especially helpful. In the transient world of the early jazzmen, rooming houses and hotels served as residences for many musicians.

In the 1870s the infamous “Levee District,” extending west from State Street to the Chicago River between Polk and Sixteenth Streets, was comparable to New Orleans’s fabled Storyville. Later the Santa Fe Railroad purchased the area and forced the vice district further south. By 1910 Chicago had a very well-defined red-light and entertainment district on the near South Side. The district was known as the “Tenderloin” and was the place where black and white entertainers, musicians, actors, and other

show business people lived and worked. The center of the new district was Twenty-second and State Streets. Here a black newcomer with musical ability might find both employment and a residence. As was the case with Storyville, Chicago's district was established to keep prostitution from spreading outside its boundaries but not necessarily to legalize it within them (Rose 1974, 1). The result was a form of de facto legalization. Chicago's district was never a legal vice area, but it was allowed to flourish before 1912 because of a lack of law enforcement, the absence of any public outrage, and the support of organized crime through graft and the corruption of public officials. As happened in New Orleans, the suppression of vice led to the dispersion of the red-light district; vice simply moved out from the district into adjacent neighborhoods, much to the distress of the good citizens. But, at least in Chicago, these were neighborhoods of declining respectability for the most part (Reckless 1933, 12).

Of the more than twenty cities with a population of 100,000 or more which closed their red-light districts between 1912 and 1917, Chicago was among the first to do so in 1912 (Reckless 1933, 2). New Orleans did not do so until 1917, to the accompaniment of nationwide publicity, as we all know. Unfortunately for researchers and interested readers, no one has documented life in Chicago's red-light district as Al Rose has done for Storyville in his book *Storyville, New Orleans* (Rose 1974) and as Ernst Bellocq has done with his remarkable photographs—some of which are included in Rose's study.

Regrettably, the Census Schedules of 1910 for Chicago's red-light district offer little evidence to indicate the presence of a significant number of musicians from New Orleans. This, even though the Chicago Vice Commission reported in 1911 that it had investigated 250 saloons in the district and found that "In the majority of saloons the entertainment consists of piano playing and singing" (Reckless 1933, 99). Of course, they were primarily concerned with vice, not music, but the report seems to describe ideal working conditions for a musician such as New Orleans pianist/vocalist "Professor" Tony Jackson, who emigrated to Chicago in 1905 (Blesh and Janis 1971, 160). In spite of his reputation in New Orleans and the fact that he worked only in the "choice spots" in Chicago (Blesh and Janis 1971, 162), Jackson did not receive any attention in the *Chicago Defender* until 1914 when he appeared at the Elite No. 2 with drummer Don Causby. If his name does not appear on the Census Schedules of 1910, perhaps it is because he was living with a married sister or because he was out-of-town or simply not home on the date of enumeration. In any case, there are many Jacksons in Cook County, and more evidence

about Tony Jackson may be available in 1992 when the 1920 Census Schedules are made public.

Among the most valuable resources for researching the New Orleans–Chicago connections are the oral histories deposited at the William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive of Tulane University. The New York Times Oral History Program has made available on microfilm complete transcripts of 45 of these interviews and 182 others in summary/digest form. Most of these interviews were conducted in 1958 and 1959, but they do date as late as 1972. Other oral history archives holding interviews related to this topic are to be found at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University and in the small collection of the Jazz Institute of Chicago, deposited in the Chicago Jazz Archive of The University of Chicago.

Scholars using oral histories as research tools should be aware of the potential dangers of relying entirely on the recollections of the memoirists. Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has observed that “The besetting sin of the historian has been to tidy up the past, to impute pattern to accident and purpose to fortuity,” while on the other hand, “Oral History gives adequate scope to the play of contingency, change, ignorance and sheer stupidity” (Schlesinger [1973] 1987, 58). The elements of chance and serendipity should be added to Schlesinger’s list. Some of the pitfalls of oral history interviews can be reduced by careful planning on the part of the interviewer. “A good interviewer possesses patience, courtesy, knowledge of the individual’s career, and most of all, the ability to *guide* the interviewee through the labyrinthine recollections, self-evaluations, and when necessary, self-revelation” (Welburn 1986, 87). The following discussion reveals some of the problems and some methods of solving them.

One of the first New Orleans musicians to migrate to Chicago in this century was violinist/conductor Charles A. Elgar. He was born in New Orleans on June 13, 1879—a date on which all the sources, including Elgar himself, agree (Charters 1963, 29, 39; Chilton 1985, 105; Rose and Souchon 1984, 41; Elgar [1958] 1978, 1). The same sources, except for Elgar, also agree that he left New Orleans for Chicago in 1913. Elgar was interviewed on May 27, 1958, in Chicago by jazz historian, archivist, and New Orleans’s adopted son, William Russell. In the interview, Elgar ([1958] 1978, 5) states that he left New Orleans in November 1902—a full decade earlier than the year given by the reference books cited above. The questions are, of course, who are we to believe? What evidence can be found to support, deny, or document this earlier date? And what difference does it make in the New Orleans–Chicago connection?

As oral historians know, one cannot automatically extend belief and

credibility to the memoirist's recollection of specific dates and places—especially after the passage of more than fifty years. Corroboration of the testimony must be sought. Elgar recalls that when he arrived in Chicago, Local 208 of the American Federation of Musicians—the first black local in the A.F. of M.—had just been given its charter and had elected another New Orleans native, Alexander Armant, as its first president (Elgar [1958] 1978, 5). Indeed, Local 208 did receive its charter on July 4, 1902 (Spivey 1984, 10), and Armant served as its first president from 1902 to 1904 (Spivey 1984, 62). Armant's emigration from New Orleans took place some time before 1900. According to the Census Schedules of the Twelfth Annual Census of 1900, he was born in Louisiana in 1863 and had been renting an apartment at 2723 South Wabash in Chicago for two years; his occupation at that time was listed as "music teacher."

John Chilton, in his excellent reference work *Who's Who of Jazz*, claims that Elgar himself served as president of Local 208 "for many years" (Chilton 1985, 105); Elgar, in his interview, however, states that although he was active in Local 208, he was never president since that would have forced him "to give up my music activities" (Elgar [1958] 1978, 6).

Further evidence of Elgar's presence in Chicago before 1913 is found in the *Chicago Defender* beginning with the issue of July 30, 1910, where Elgar advertises his availability as a teacher of violin and brass (Steiner and Sengstock 1966, 7/30/1910). Apparently he had expanded his expertise to include the brasses after arriving in Chicago. On the other hand and at the other end of this connection, jazz historian Samuel Charters places Elgar in the violin section of the Bloom Philharmonic Orchestra of New Orleans (a Creole symphonic orchestra) in 1903 (Charters 1963, 53). Whether or not Elgar left New Orleans in 1902 or was still there in 1903, he certainly arrived in Chicago well before 1913. Notices of his presence and availability as a teacher, performer, and leader appear regularly in the *Defender* beginning in 1910.

Of greater importance, however, are Elgar's recollections of the New Orleans musicians he knew and who joined him in Chicago. According to his 1958 interview, in 1915 Elgar sent for Manuel Perez and his five-piece band to come to Chicago and work for Mike Fritzel at the Arsonia Cafe on Madison and Paulina Streets (Elgar [1958] 1978, 10). The band consisted of Manuel Perez, cornet; Lorenzo Tio, Jr., clarinet; Eddie Atkins, trombone; Frank Haynte (also spelled Haynie), piano; and Louis Cottrell, Sr., drums. A five-piece band is somewhat small for a New Orleans jazz band in this period, but Natty Dominique—one of Perez's New Orleans students—stated in his Jazz Institute of Chicago interview of ca. 1981 that Perez worked regularly in the District with a five-piece band—the same

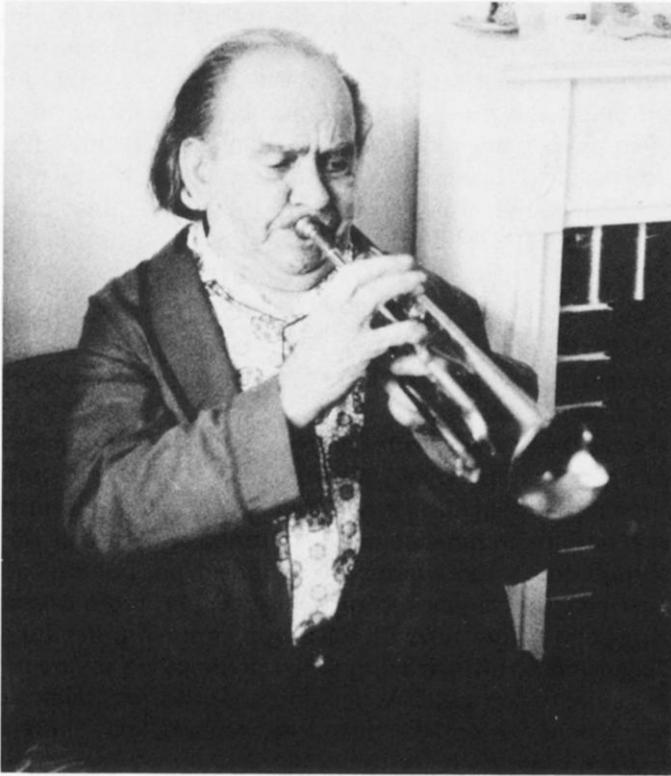


Figure 1. Natty Dominique. Photograph courtesy of the Jazz Institute of Chicago Collection, Chicago Jazz Archive of the University of Chicago

band with which Dominique would play when he “sat in” for his tutor (Dominique ca. 1981, 15–16). A photograph of a band that is probably Perez’s appears in *A Pictorial History of Jazz* (Keepnews and Grauer 1971, 10) with a caption that places the band in the District in New Orleans at Tom Anderson’s Cafe before 1915. A picture of Perez fronting another five-piece band, appears a few pages later, and according to the caption, it was his “1915 band, probably the first to fill a regular dance job in Chicago” (Keepnews and Grauer 1971, 13). When comparing the two photographs, one notices that the instrumentation is different—the New Orleans band has trumpet, clarinet/saxophone, banjo, piano, and drums, while the Chicago band has cornet, trombone, drums, and two other musicians whose instruments are not shown, although one of them appears to be sitting on a piano bench. If this is the band for which Elgar sent in 1915, the two other Chicago musicians are clarinetist Lorenzo Tio, Jr., and

pianist Frank Haynie (Haynte). According to Al Rose, the minimum size for a New Orleans jazz band was five (Rose 1987, 228). Photographic evidence indicates that most bands of that period had six to eight musicians, with seven being the most common number. According to Rose, "A proper seven-piece band also included piano and drums, plus guitar (banjo) and bass." But if the band had to be reduced, "the way you cut a seven-piece band down was first to drop the banjo/guitar player, then the bass" (Rose 1987, 228). Perhaps Perez did this to form his Chicago band, but in any event a five-piece band consisting of cornet/trumpet, clarinet, trombone, piano, and drums was not a Chicago invention nor the exclusive contribution of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band and its many white imitators.

Concerning the important and intriguing question of when the first New Orleans black jazz band appeared in Chicago, John Steiner, the dean of Chicago jazz historians, has written: "A jazz band had not yet been heard in Chicago [before 1912] despite the years of jazz popularity in New Orleans" (Steiner [1959] 1974, 143). This first link with the New Orleans ensemble tradition is obviously essential for our understanding of the future development of jazz in Chicago and its dissemination to the world through the fledgling recording industry there.

In his 1985 paper titled "Recalibrating the Early Chronology of New Orleans Jazz," read at the Vancouver meeting of the American Musicological Society, Professor Lawrence Gushee questioned the date of the Chicago arrival of the Manuel Perez band. In his abstract he states that "The arrival of Manuel Perez's band in Chicago is almost certainly 1917, not 1915" (Gushee 1985, 64). Other testimony on this matter can be added utilizing several of the resources and methods discussed here.

If Natty Dominique's ca. 1981 recollection is reliable, his teacher, Manuel Perez, and he traveled to Chicago together in 1912 by train (Dominique ca. 1981, 18–19). If this testimony can be corroborated, it means that the Perez band would have been the first New Orleans black band to play in Chicago. On the other hand, in his 1958 Chicago interview, some twenty-three years closer to the events in question, Dominique states that "Perez came here after I did . . . in 1915 or 1914" (Dominique [1958] 1978, 7). Since Dominique's testimony is inconsistent in this matter, let us return to that of Charles Elgar.

Elgar's 1958 interview is specific on three important points regarding the Manuel Perez band: the date of arrival (1915), the reason for coming (Arsonia employment), and the personnel of the band. The standard reference sources all support that date of arrival and the reason for going to Chicago (Charters 1963, 45; Chilton 1985, 257; Rose and Souchon 1984, 99;

and Steiner [1959] 1974, 145). In addition, these sources also lend support to similar information for Eddie Atkins, Louis Cottrell, Sr., and Lorenzo Tio, Jr.—members of the Perez band. However, as Professor Gushee points out in his 1985 paper, Louis Cottrell, Jr. (son of the famous drummer), who was interviewed for the Tulane archive, places his father in Chicago not before 1917, with a very specific and detailed recollection. Furthermore, Elgar's memory of other events in that period is less than accurate, which casts doubt on some of his testimony. For example, Elgar places "Bill Johnson's outfit" (the Creole band) in Chicago only after the Original Dixieland Jazz Band was organized there in 1916; this is clearly contradicted by the dates of the *Defender's* notices and reviews of the Creole Band in 1915.

One might reasonably ask why the appearance of the well-known Perez band from New Orleans at the Arsonia Cafe on the West Side would not have also attracted the attention of the *Defender*. Owner Mike Fritzel's club was not a "black and tan" but a white-only club frequented by gangsters and syndicate hoodlums. As was the case in similar clubs in New York and elsewhere, the ownership and the clientele were white, but the entertainers were often black—though not exclusively so. The *Chicago Defender* simply did not advertise or promote clubs its columnists and readers could not attend.

In any case, none of the information developed here seriously challenges the priority of the Creole Band as the first New Orleans group to play in Chicago. That priority is clearly established by a series of "coming soon" notices that appear in the *Defender* beginning January 9, 1915, in anticipation of their opening on February 1, 1915, at the Grand Theater on Thirty-first and State Streets. The Manuel Perez band, however, would certainly be the strongest candidate for the second black New Orleans band to come to Chicago, whether their arrival was as early as 1915 or as late as 1917.¹

Researchers of the New Orleans–Chicago connection should not ignore the potential resource of television documentaries and even commercial telecasts preserved on videotape. One such example is a videotape of the 1961 Garry Moore-hosted *Dupont Show of the Week: "Chicago and All That Jazz."* This videotape was shown in Chicago at the new Museum of Broadcast Communications as part of the exhibition *Jazz on Television*, on loan from the New York Museum of Broadcasting. One of the bands on

1 I am grateful to Professor Lawrence Gushee for his recent communication in which he shared his notes of an interview with Manuel Perez conducted by William Russell in 1943. In this interview Perez states that he "went to Chicago in early 1917 for Mike Fritzel" (Gushee 1987). This additional testimony certainly tips the scales in favor of 1917 as the year the Manuel Perez band arrived in Chicago.

the show had impressive New Orleans and Chicago credentials: Red Allen, trumpet; Buster Bailey, clarinet; Kid Ory, trombone; Lil Hardin Armstrong, piano; Johnny St. Cyr, banjo; Milt Hinton, bass; and Zutty Singleton, drums. Allen, St. Cyr, and Singleton were all born in New Orleans, while Ory's birthplace was La Place, Louisiana, a few miles upriver from New Orleans. Hinton was raised in Chicago; Armstrong lived there; Bailey studied there; and all seven had historic working and recording relationships with either King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton, or Louis Armstrong in Chicago—in some cases with all three.

To see any jazz on commercial television is rare indeed, but to see a historic group of New Orleans–Chicago musicians still alive in 1961 and still playing well is nothing short of miraculous. Their authentic performance of Jelly Roll Morton's "Jelly Roll Blues" (originally titled "Chicago Blues") features close-ups that focus on such techniques as Kid Ory's manipulation of a bucket mute with his left hand to effect a "wa-wa" sound while growling from the throat at the same time—no easy accomplishment on the slide trombone.

In addition to television and videotape resources, the large amount of historical footage featuring these and many other artists in the film media should not be overlooked. David Meeker's book *Jazz in the Movies* (1981) is the best guide to such appearances.

A comprehensive study of the impact of New Orleans jazzmen and their music on Chicago and of Chicago's impact upon the immigrants has yet to be written, and a response to the question of what happened to New Orleans musical traditions and styles when they reached Chicago in the early decades of this century is beyond the scope of this paper. Some of the important questions to be considered by such studies, however, may be briefly suggested here.

Jazz historians generally agree that jazz changed from an ensemble to a solo art during the third decade of this century. This change of texture has usually been attributed to the impact and influence of the virtuoso artistry of Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet. A slightly different perspective, however, is provided by New Orleans bassist Pops Foster who writes: "In the early days . . . [n]one of the guys took their horns down for a chorus to let another guy play a solo. When the band knocked off [began to play], the whole band romped on a tune from your left hand to your right corner [i.e., from beginning to end]" (Foster 1971, 75). This description certainly fits the New Orleans ensemble style, but Foster is equally perceptive in reporting a change of style when he observes that: "About 1920 or '21 guys started taking down their horns after they'd blown a chorus. Now the rhythm guys are the only ones who work hard"

(Foster 1971, 76). In other words, the front-line instruments no longer played all or at least most of the time, and the music consisted of a series of “choruses” (solos) accompanied by the rhythm section. A documented study of how this change of style evolved and developed is one of the important questions for the future in researching the New Orleans–Chicago connection. Some of the other areas to be investigated are the following: changes in instrumentation and their effects upon the style and texture of the music; the change in repertory as the popular songs and dance music played in Chicago in the 1920s expanded the traditional New Orleans repertory; the gradual acceleration of tempos within the expanded repertory and the gradual disappearance of the traditional New Orleans “slow drag” tempo.

The history of early jazz is the record of an art form nurtured in the crucible of New Orleans, exported to Chicago, where it was forever changed, and transmitted from there to the world.

APPENDIX

Chicago's Historic Black Newspapers

1878–1915	<i>The Conservator</i> Founded by Ferdinand Barnett (the husband of Ida B. Wells)
1885–1926	<i>The Chicago Appeal</i> Founded by C. F. and John Q. Adams
1899–1931	<i>The Broad Ax</i>
1903–1922	<i>The Illinois Idea</i>
1905–1932	<i>The Whip</i> Founded by Joseph Bibb
1923–193?	<i>The Chicago Bee</i> Founded by Anthony Overton
1905–	<i>The Chicago Defender</i> ² Founded by Robert Abbott

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² A weekly from its founding until 1954, when it became one of the two black dailies in the country.

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