

Reclaiming the Narrative

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Rochester's Longest-Running Black Newspaper Aimed to Inform, Uplift; Legacy Lives On In Digital Form

ROCHESTER NY--The *Frederick Douglass Voice* newspaper will take on new life as issues are digitized by the Rochester Museum and Science Center.

The paper was founded during the 1930s as *The Voice* and was until the 1990s, making it the longest running Black-owned paper in Rochester's history.

Reclaiming the Narrative's Leslie Hannon recently spoke with Joan Coles Howard, the last editor of the Frederick Douglass Voice newspaper, and daughter of the paper's founder, Howard W Coles.

In this interview, Coles Howard explains that the paper's mission was to bring all kinds of news -- including, importantly, good news -- to Rochester's Black community.

The interview is part of a series of interviews exploring grassroots and independent news media in Upstate New York and beyond, that can be accessed [here](#).



Joan Coles Howard

Rush transcript

LESLIE HANNON: I'm here today with Joan Coles Howard. She's the daughter of Howard W Coles, the founder and publisher of the *Frederick Douglass Voice* newspaper. She's also a writer and editor herself. For the last two decades, she's been working to preserve her father's legacy as a Black publisher and civil rights pioneer in Rochester. Howard W Coles began publishing *The Voice* newspaper in Rochester New York in 1933. What inspired him to start the paper?

JOAN COLES HOWARD: Well he had worked in some capacity with the *Chicago Defender* newspaper and he was a follower of Frederick Douglass. And I think it was mainly Frederick Douglass, he felt like that was a way to reach people. He had seen it for himself and so that's what he was going to do.

LH: What would you say was the main focus of *The Voice* in terms of the stories it covered?

JCH: Whatever was happening in the Black community--the good... mostly the good... but also the difficult. Not bad, because we didn't report the bad news. We felt like the mainstream media did that for us (laughs). We concentrated on good news and any information that would help as far as housing, jobs, everything related to living conditions for Black people.

LH: I was able to view a copy of The Voice and at the top of the page it listed Frederick Douglass as editor in eternal. Was every edition printed this way and what does that mean?

JCH: Absolutely. It means that he was the mentor. And that he would always be a presence and he would always be given respect for having started his newspaper, even though it didn't that many issues. He started it, and my father was inspired by that. So he was going to be the editor forever!

LH: I read that your father was the grandson of a former slave. How do you think this shaped his passion for his publication?

JCH: That's a good question, I'm not sure. We didn't talk about that a whole lot. We did run a few stories over the years in the paper but I think it just confirmed, reaffirmed that we had a history and we needed to make it knowledge to everybody, give that knowledge to everybody. And to encourage people to search out their own history too, which has gotten way more popular now in this twenty-first century than it was back then.

LH: The Voice newspaper ran for 6 decades before it stopped publication in 1996. How did your father keep the paper going for so many years and who helped him along the way?

JCH: We had actually a lot of supporters, advertisers. Actually, Star Market, which I believe was bought out maybe by Wegmans, but Star was in many of the locations that Wegmans came to be in... Advertising. And, my father, he didn't charge for the paper, but every once in awhile he would when things got a little tight. But it was like 15 cents or something. But yeah, it was through the support of the community.

LH: Finally, can you talk about some of the things you've been doing to preserve your father's legacy including getting copies of the newspaper digitized and doing educational outreach with local youth?

JCH: You know, the digitization of the papers has been my main focus because there is so much history there. We used to hold events at the [Rochester Museum and Science Center] (and probably will again once COVID ends) on my father's birthday and we would invite all of the community to come. We asked people to come and help identify pictures that he had in the collection that we don't know who the people were. There were no names written on the backs of the pictures. And they did that. So we're hoping to be able to do that again. And just help people to, which is what happens as far as the Teen Empowerment group is concerned. The teens are interested in their history and that's why I've been involved with that. It's been encouraging because we need to remember who we are, where we came from, and what we're all about.

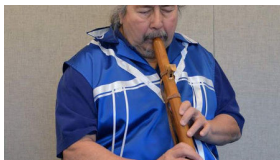
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