

The First Black US Newspaper

John Browne Russwurm (1799–1851), journalist and editor, was born a slave in Jamaica.

John was sent by his white father to Quebec in 1807 to go to school. In his early teens Russwurm rejoined his father in Portland, Maine, where he was given an opportunity to continue his intellectual development. In 1824, Russwurm enrolled in Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, from which he graduated in 1826 with one of the first bachelor's degrees earned by an African American in the United States.

Migrating to New York, Russwurm formed a partnership with Samuel Cornish, a black Presbyterian minister, to found a newspaper. The result of their partnership was Freedom's Journal, the first African American newspaper in the United States, launched on 16 March 1827. Freedom's Journal was offered for sale in the United States, Canada, England, and Haiti. David Walker, one of the newspaper's agents, first published his powerful Appeal in Freedom's Journal, lending support to the paper's editorial contention that the time had come for black Americans to plead their own cause in their own way.

In September 1827, Cornish resigned from his editorial duties to devote himself to the ministry. Russwurm continued as sole editor until March 1829, when he turned the newspaper over to Cornish, who renamed the paper the Rights of All and kept it financially afloat for another year. By the time the newspaper ceased publication in 1830, Russwurm had moved to Liberia, where he became editor of the Liberia Herald and superintendent of education in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. Russwurm's decision to emigrate to Liberia angered some of his black compatriots in the American antislavery movement, who felt he was deserting the cause. To Russwurm, however, Liberia offered a genuine opportunity for African Americans to put racial prejudice behind them and build a just and workable society. Russwurm remained a committed African colonizationist for the rest of his life.