The Afro-American

Section B

METRO PROFILE

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Saturday, August 10, 1991

THE AFRO ENTERS ITS 100TH YEAR

HISTORY OF THE AFRO-AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS

By Ida Peters

Twenty-seven years after the Civil War, a former slave set free by the Maryland Emancipation Act of 1863, purchased the name and printing equipment of a one page weekly going out of business. He was John H. Murphy, Sr.

Born 1840

John Henry Murphy was born in Baltimore, Christmas Day, 1840. His father, Benjamin Murphy was a whitewasher. In those days, all back yards had wooden fences and they had to be painted with white creosote paint to keep out rot.

"Uncle Bennie," as he was called was a singer of note. He led the Bethel A.M.E. Church choir for 15 years. His mother, Susan C. Murphy seemed to have impressed him mostly by her patience and insistence on cleanliness about the house.

Served in the Civil War

When President Abraham Lincoln issued a call for colored troops in the Civil War, John Murphy, then 16, enlisted in Company G of the 30th Regiment Infantry, U.S. Colored Troops, Maryland Volunteers and rose to the rank of first sergeant.

The war over, Murphy returned to Baltimore and met and married Martha Howard (1846-1914) of Montgomery County, Maryland. She was a founder of the Colored Young Woman's Christian Association (YWCA) and served as its president for 17 years.

Sunday School Helper

His first venture in the newspaper field was the Sunday School Helper which he set up and printed himself to create interest in Sunday school work. At the time, he was District Sunday School Superintendent of Hagerstown District A.M.E. Church.

He inaugurated the first Sunday School Convention, then called Institutions, which was taken up and adopted as a regular feature of Sunday School work in that denomination.

Auction

When the Northwestern Family Supply Company failed and the Rev. W. Alexander was left with the Afro-American, a one page advertising sheet, on his hands, John Murphy bought the name and printing equipment at auction for $200 down, a sum he borrowed from his wife, in 1892 and maintained it as a continuous weekly publication for 30 years.

Imperial Potentate

Although he was a member of the Elks and a member of Enterprise Lodge of the Prince Hall Masons, he worked hardest for the Shriners of which he became Imperial Potentate.

He was a member of the Board of Managers of Provident Hospital and a former president of the Negro Press Association. At the time of the G.A.R. Encampment in Indianapolis, he was one of the two Post Commanders present.

A member and lecturer in the National Business League in the early 1900's, he was also president of the Negro Publishers Association.

Died 1922

He remained publisher of the AFRO for 30 years until his death in 1922. He left to his ten children, what was then the largest Black newspaper plant in the country operated and manned by 138 employees with a circulation of 14,000.

John H. Murphy Sr. had 10 children, five girls and five boys. All of the children helped at the newspaper, no matter how young, running the hand press, gathering news, mailing, writing, or selling AFRO's.

College in those days for poor Blacks and Whites was out of the question and Black children only attended school thru the eighth grade. George B. Murphy, the second oldest of the children was 16 when he finished the eighth grade.

He was learning the Blacksmith trade for two years before a colored high school was completed in 1885. He was one of two graduates in 1890 . . . the other being Miss Ada Trusty.

He lived at home with his parents helping out with the younger children and was a big help with his $33 a month, day job teaching at School No. 9 at Riggs and Carrollton Ave. and principal of the first night school for colored adults earning $2.50 a night.

He married Grace Lee Hughes, nine years after he started teaching and had seven children. Of them, Howard H. Murphy, James H. Murphy and George B. Murphy, Jr. all served with distinction as AFRO executives.

Photo of John H. Murphy, Sr. (1840-1922) on Dec. 20, 1920 in his study on Druid Hill Avenue in Baltimore. From (L) D. Arnett, Dan, George B., John Jr. and Carl.

The girls in the family, Eva Sue Purdy of Somerset, Pa., Frances Murphy, Lilly Thompson, Rose Oliver of Brazil, Ind. and Harriett Gilbert all attended the Colored Teacher's College to supplement the family income and all as young women, before marriage, played piano at different churches.

In 1922, John H. Murphy, Sr. saddened by the death of his second youngest son, Dan, that same year, called his family together and especially his sons, gave them a mandate.

His legacy to them was a family business, with all stock owned by family members where any member of his family would always have a place to work . . . down to his children's children, down to the last generation.

In 1918, Carl, with a BA from Howard University, MA from Harvard joined the AFRO family as editor. John, Jr. who was teaching printing at Douglass High School with a degree from Hampton Institute joined Arnett, the baby of the family.

Carl was writer, editor and publisher, John Jr., became circulation director who from 1918 through the 1960's pushed circulation to 200,000 plus.

Arnett became the Advertising Director under whose administration AFRO Cooking Schools were started in Baltimore, Washington and Richmond, Career Supplements, Christmas Gift Guides, Vacation Guides were all started.

In 1944, he organized Associated Publishers, a national advertising agency to represent 33 Black newspapers.

Howard Murphy joined the AFRO with his accounting skills from Brown University. Jim Murphy brought his circulation skills from Lincoln University.

Mae Murphy Dyson, became the first child of the brothers to graduate cum laude with a degree in Journalism from Ohio State University. She joined the AFRO as Corporate Secretary and the right hand of her father, Arnett.

John Murphy III (Employed 1937-1986), son of Dan Murphy, became president of the AFRO in 1961, chairman in 1977. A graduate of Temple University, he was publisher of the Washington Tribune when acquired by the AFRO.

Elizabeth Murphy Phillips Moss came in from Howard University and the University of Minnesota. She joined her father Carl in 1938 working as reporter, City Editor, Managing Editor, Publisher until 1974. She still writes the column "If You Ask Me."

From Indiana, Rose Murphy's children, Elizabeth Murphy Oliver, a graduate of Fisk University came in as a reporter, writer and Baltimore City Editor.

Her brother, John J. Oliver, Sr., a graduate of DePauw, Greencastle, Ind. came to the AFRO in the 1930's as Mechanical Superintendent, Composing Room Foreman and President in the 1970's.

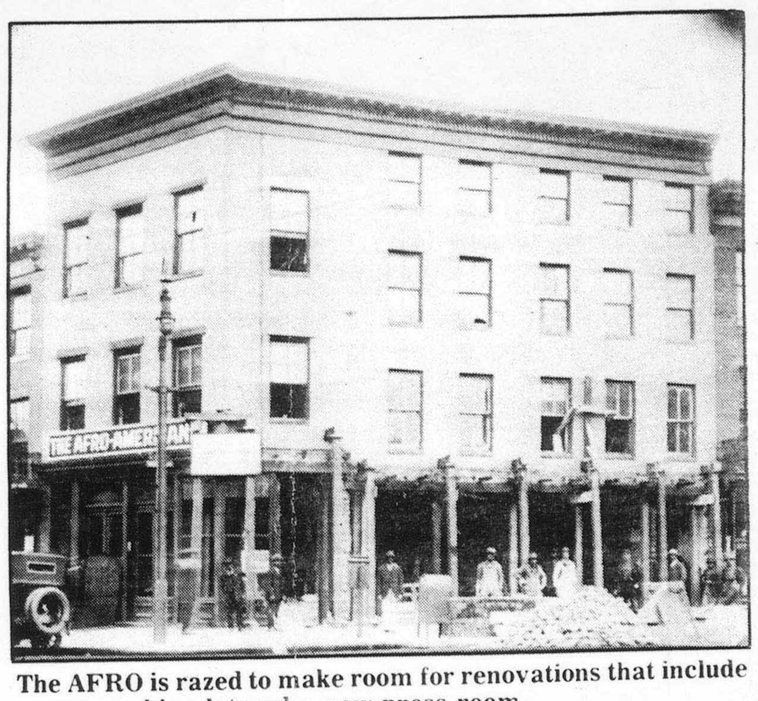
His son, John J. Oliver, Jr., grad of Fisk University, with a Juris Doctor from Columbia Law School is presently AFRO Board Chairman, elected in 1986. He is a member of New York and Maryland Bar.

Ida Murphy Peters joined in 1940, Carl's daughter, the first Black woman to graduate in Advertising and Commerce from the School of Journalism, University of Wisconsin. She served as Advertising Salesman; Washington Advertising Manager; Subscription Manager, Clean Block and Mrs. Santa Director, Entertainment Editor and Public Relations Director.

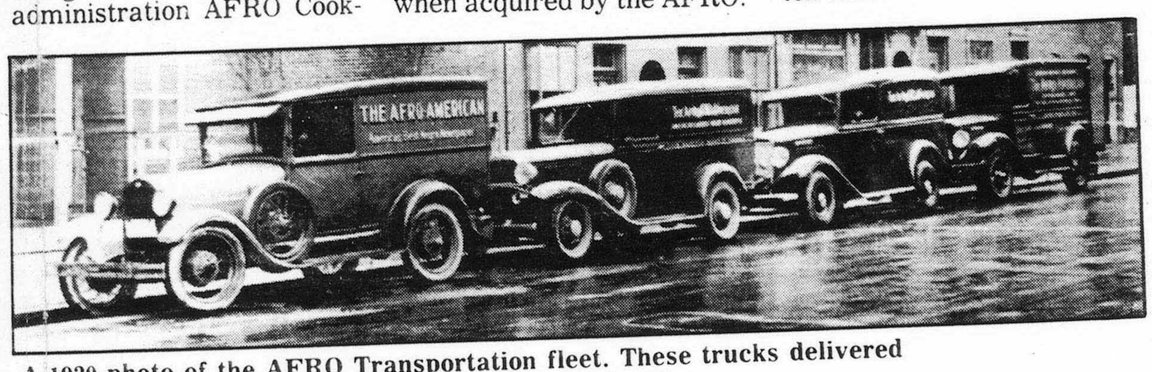
Frances L. Murphy II, a 1944 graduate of the University of Wisconsin with a MA from Johns Hopkins joined in 1945 as writer; Editor, Richmond AFRO; Editor-Manager, Washington AFRO; Chairman of Board of AFRO Group; former professor, State University of New York and professor in Communications, Howard University and now publisher of Washington AFRO.

Her daughter, Frances Murphy Draper, grad of Morgan State U with an MA from Johns Hopkins and U. of Baltimore and MBA and is currently president of the AFRO Group, and Chief Operating Officer.

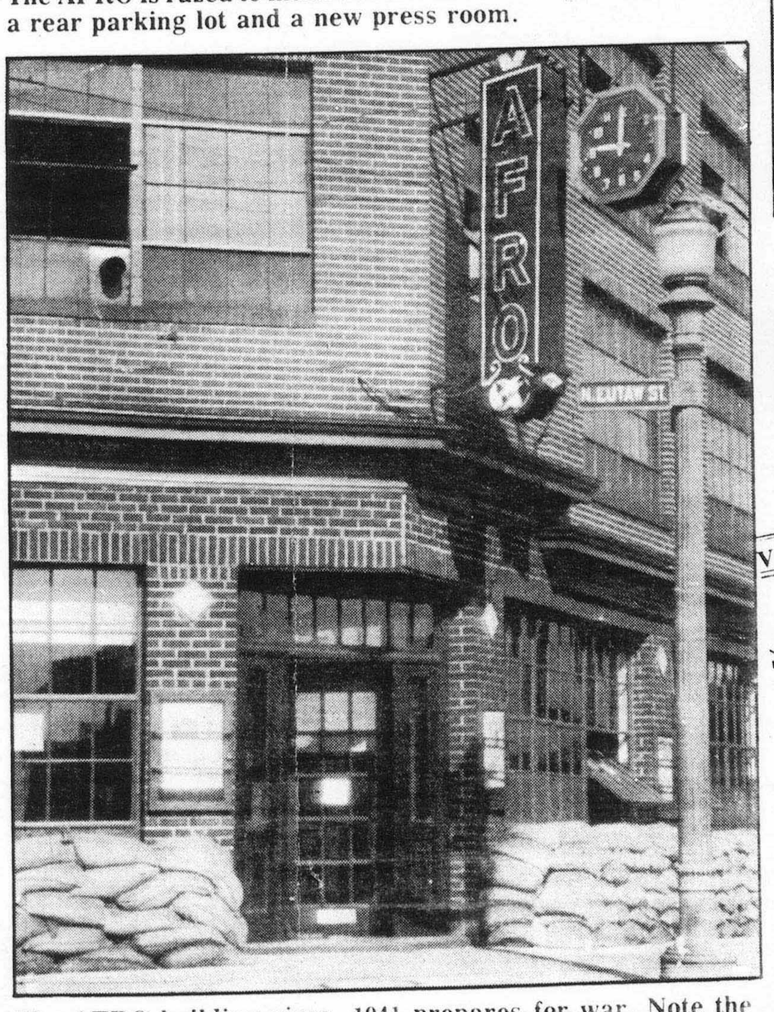
Mrs. Draper's son, Kevin Peck, a graduate of Morgan State University, is advertising manager of the Washington AFRO.



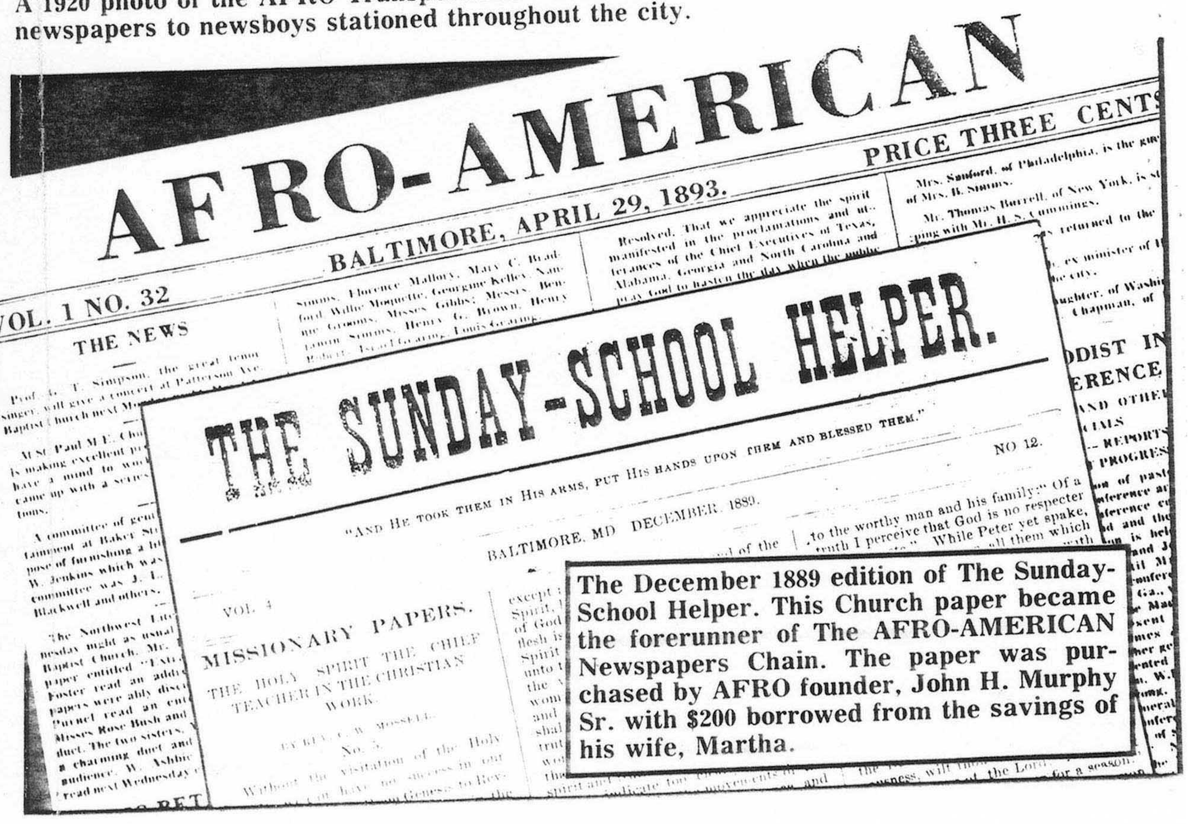
The AFRO is razed to make room for renovations that include a rear parking lot and a new press room.



A 1920 photo of the AFRO Transportation fleet. These trucks delivered newspapers to newsboys stationed throughout the city.



The AFRO building circa. 1941 prepares for war. Note the sandbags surrounding the building.



AFRO-AMERICAN

PRICE THREE CENTS

BALTIMORE, APRIL 29, 1893.

VOL. 1 NO. 32

THE NEWS

THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL HELPER.

"AND HE TOOK THEM IN HIS ARMS, PUT HIS HANDS UPON THEM AND BLESSED THEM."

NO 12.

BALTIMORE, MD DECEMBER 1889.

VOL. 4

MISSIONARY PAPERS.

THE HOLY SPIRIT THE CHIEF TEACHER IN THE CHRISTIAN WORK.

The December 1889 edition of The Sunday-School Helper. This Church paper became the forerunner of The AFRO-AMERICAN Newspapers Chain. The paper was purchased by AFRO founder, John H. Murphy Sr. with $200 borrowed from the savings of his wife, Martha.