

Newspaper Publisher, John Sengstacke, Research Paper

John Sengstacke was born on November 25, 1912 in Savannah, Georgia. It was in John's heritage to become a newspaper publisher because his uncle, Robert S. Abbott, was the reputable founder and publisher of the *Chicago Defender*. The *Defender* is one of our nation's most read black-owned newspapers. "Begun as a weekly on Abbott's kitchen table in 1905, the *Defender's* reporting and editorializing on the differing social climates of the segregationist South and the industrialized North are credited with triggering the Great Migration of African Americans out of Dixie in the years following World War 1. (Fitzgerald, 2000)" Initially, the *Defender* was widely read mostly in the North; but eventually it was also distributed underground in the South. Abbott's newspaper became one of the first African-American publications to reach over 100,000 readers.

Robert S. Abbott saw potential in his nephew so he trained him since he was young and financed all his schooling so that one day John could inherit the *Defender*. John graduated from Hampton Institute in 1934. That same year he became Vice President and General Manager of The Robert S. Abbott Publishing Company. In 1940 when Abbott died, 27-year-old John became the president and publisher of the *Chicago Defender*. Once John was promoted he did not hesitate to help the African-American community. Shortly after his uncle's death in 1940, he founded the Negro Newspaper Publisher Association and served as president for seven terms. The aim of this organization was to unify African-American newspaper publishers. It is currently known as the National Newspaper Publishers Association and has over 200 members.

Sengstacke went above and beyond just being a newspaper publisher because he was also an activist fighting for black rights, desegregation, and integration of the military. He gained influence by working with several presidents including Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. President Truman appointed John Sengstacke to the committee that was in charge of desegregating the military. In addition, Sengstacke helped create jobs for African-Americans in the U.S Postal Service, and he convinced President Roosevelt to allow the first African-American reporter to attend a White House news conference.

John's newspaper chain became known as Sengstacke Enterprises. In addition to the *Defender*, Sengstacke also owned the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Tri-State Defender* in Memphis, and the *Michigan Chronicle* in Detroit. The *Chicago Defender* was a weekly publication until 1956 when Sengstacke turned it into a daily publication, making it the largest Black-owned daily newspaper. Over the years the *Defender* has proved to be a crucial voice for African Americans and has printed "stories that challenged discrimination on nearly every front. (Christian, 1998)" It has published articles by W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Every August the *Chicago Defender* holds a celebration known as the Bud Billikin Day Parade, which has become one of the nation's largest African-American community celebrations.

John Sengstacke was editor and publisher of the *Defender* until he passed away at age 84 on May 28, 1997. In 2000, he was awarded the Presidential Citizens Medal by President Bill Clinton.

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