

Our Missouri Podcast

Title: Episode 15: The African American Press in Missouri

Guest: Debra Foster Greene

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KEVIN WALSH: Welcome to *Our Missouri*, a podcast about the people, places, culture, and history of the 114 counties and independent city of Saint Louis that comprise the great state of Missouri. Each episode focuses on a topic related to the state ranging from publications about Missouri's history to current projects undertaken by organizations to preserve and promote local institutions. The *Our Missouri Podcast* is recorded in the J. Christian Bay Rare Books Room at the State Historical Society of Missouri's Columbia Research Center, and is generously provided to you by the State Historical Society of Missouri. And now, here's your host, Sean Rost.

SEAN ROST: Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening, or at whatever hour you are tuning in to listen to the *Our Missouri Podcast*. My name is Sean Rost and I will be your guide as we explore the memories, moments, and misfortunes from our Missouri. Today, we are joined by Debra Foster Greene, professor emerita of history at Lincoln University. As a Lincoln graduate myself, I am excited that Dr. Greene is here to talk with us about her research on the African American press in Missouri because she is one of my mentors and she is someone I really admire personally and scholarly. So, thank you Debra for joining us today and welcome to the *Our Missouri Podcast*.

DEBRA GREENE: Thank you. It's wonderful to be here.

SEAN ROST: Now, how did you come to research African American newspapers in Missouri?

DEBRA GREENE: Well, it was really serendipitous because of the fact that I came to Missouri in 1982 to the University of Missouri to study history. I had planned to get a master's and go back home to Mississippi, and Dr. Arvah Strickland, who was then my advisor, says, "There's nothing you can do with a master's in history. You have to get a PhD." Okay. So, I studied under Strickland for about three years. Turned twenty-five [and] realized I never had a job. So, I quit my program and went to work. And then, ten years later, I came back to the University of Missouri, and, in the interim, I had been employed by the Missouri Department of Economic Development. I was a minority business specialist. And so, doing that kind of work got me interested in minority business development. Fortunately for me, in the interim, the University of Missouri had hired Dr. Robert Weems whose specialty was African American business. So, I came back as his student, and I was looking to do a study of the oldest still operating African American business in Missouri. I thought it would be a bank, it turned out to be the *Saint Louis Argus* newspaper. But, I'm from the Deep South, southwest Mississippi, and we kind of believe in the supernatural always being present, and as a high schooler I was the editor of my school newspaper, and my first idea for college was to major in journalism. So, here the newspaper came back to me like twenty years later. But, it was just serendipitous. The *Argus* happened to be

the oldest still operating African American business in Missouri. And lucky for me, the State Historical Society [of Missouri] had the full run of the newspaper from 1915 to the present. So, I did like the 20th Century from 1915 to 2000. But, the newspaper itself, the *Argus* newspaper itself began in 1912. So, I had the resources and the interest.

SEAN ROST: What are some conclusions that you took away from your project? Some things that you thought about and that you discovered along the way.

DEBRA GREENE: Well, when you research the newspaper, it's almost trying to—I felt like I was trying to put my arm around a bear. It just kept moving. It was so big because of the fact that when you're studying newspaper you're studying the full run of a community—their economic life, their political life, their social life, their athletic life. Some of the things in the *Argus* that couldn't come out in my project twenty years ago was the fact that the Mitchells were very big sportsmen. They were in to baseball. They were in to basketball. They were in to boxing. They sponsored teams. They did all of those types of things because that was their basic interest. And then on top of that, anyone who was anybody in the African American community in Saint Louis or nationally came through and they were either interviewed or had some connection with a newspaper. So, there were so many possible things to do in terms of studying the newspaper. My interest really was studying it as a business. So, one of the critiques I got after I did it was that, "You didn't do it the correct way." But, my intention was not the study the newspaper as an entity for the community, but to study the newspaper as a business and how the Mitchells handled their business, which is really, in and of itself, interesting because they made it through the Great Depression when a lot of businesses did not make it through the Great Depression. The other thing that I found fascinating about studying the *Saint Louis Argus*, and it is reflective of a lot of African American businesses in the late 19th and early 20th Century, was that these people are doing business just like everybody else is doing business. The *Argus* starts with J.E. Mitchell, his brother William, and two other investors, and they all invest money. They buy shares. On several occasions before the 1920s, the *Argus* opened its doors to other investors. They invested in other businesses. There were shareholders across the city who invested in these other businesses. Interestingly enough, a couple of the other businesses that they invested in were banks. So, they did the People's Finance Corporation, which was a bank that didn't make it through the Depression, and the New Age Savings & Loan, that did make it out. But, after the 1930s, or during the 1930s, it did become a federal savings and loan association. Unfortunately, it didn't make it through the 1980s through the savings and loan crisis. But, they invested in other businesses. The thing that interests me, also, is that a lot of these people who are starting businesses they sacrificed a lot in their personal lives because many of them either married late and then don't have any children or they don't marry at all. That is men and women. In order to have these larger lives.

SEAN ROST: Now, was there any connection as you were looking at the project with the Mitchells and yourself? Thinking of kind of your research where you're a southerner—I believe they were from Alabama—

DEBRA GREENE: Uh-huh.

SEAN ROST: And then they moved to Missouri. Did you see any connections there as you were going through the project?

DEBRA GREENE: They moved from the South because of racial segregation. As a matter of fact, the family story for J.E. Mitchell and Mattie, his first wife, was that J.E., during his late teens, had had an altercation with another white young man in his community. He had left Coosa County, Alabama, and gone to Atlanta. It was in the late 1800s—so it's about 1890 or so—he served in the Spanish American War—not only did he serve in the Spanish American War, but he served in the Philippines. So, he comes back with a love for, and an interest in, the Philippines. You see that come in the early 20th Century—popping up in the newspaper. But when he got back—now, we're talking about almost a decade later—so, when he gets back, he comes to Coosa County to marry his childhood sweetheart, Mattie, and he is arrested by the local sheriff for this old fight. The sheriff tells him, "The only thing I can tell you to do is leave the South." So, when I was looking initially—fifteen years ago—at the *Saint Louis Argus*, I had heard people were moving in to Saint Louis because of the Fair—the World's Fair. But, when I started looking at the census and the number of African Americans who come into Saint Louis during that time period, that doesn't bear out because 1900 and 1910 the African American population of Saint Louis only raises two percent. So, that doesn't say that people are just running to Saint Louis because of the World's Fair. So, fifteen years later, that's something I would re-write, re-think, or do some further research on because a two percent rise in the population does not say that people are coming to Saint Louis because of the World's Fair. They show up—Mitchell and his wife, Mattie, show up probably about 1903. So, maybe a year before the Fair that they show up. The other thing is that—and one of the things I want to discuss or get over in my talk—Mitchell becomes kind of the last of his kind. There are six newspaper that I want to talk about in my talk. I'm looking at the men who—and unfortunately they are—well, maybe not unfortunately—but, they are men in that first generation. Initially, you're going to find people like Mitchell who're not educated. They are not men of letters. But, they go into the business because there is an opportunity. But, the business is not only a business, it's an opportunity to influence the community. So, they understand that and they do not take that for granted. By the time we get to the 1920s when we see the *American* newspaper, the *Saint Louis American* newspaper, that business is started by a group of educated men. All of them have professions. Most of them are doctors and lawyers. And as a matter of fact, the first publisher is Nathan Benjamin Young, Jr. He is a young attorney. As a matter of fact, he is a Yale [University] educated attorney. From Alabama as well. His father—who was the President of Lincoln University—Nathan B. Young, Sr., asks him to come. He's in Alabama. He's trying cases. It's dangerous in the early 20th Century to be doing that in the South. So, he comes to Saint Louis because he says, "There's a group of young professional men and they are starting a newspaper." They're really starting a newspaper to be an alternative voice to the *Argus* because by the early 1920s the *Argus* is the only black newspaper. And so, when they come in, it's a conglomerate of guys who've invested their money into the business. They choose one of their own—Young—to be the publisher of the business. They also choose another Lincoln University graduate by the name of Nathaniel Sweets, and after maybe two or three years, Sweets owns the business. But, they choose him as the businessman and the ad solicitor. He's really good at it. He's really interested in the business of the newspaper. Young, of course, he's invested his time in being a lawyer and he's interested in doing lawyering. He eventually becomes a judge of some

significance in Saint Louis. But, the businesses of the newspaper became very, very fascinating to me.

SEAN ROST: You mentioned *American*, which was started in '28—

DEBRA GREENE: 1928.

SEAN ROST: And then the *Argus*. What are the other four newspaper that you're going to focus in on?

DEBRA GREENE: Well, I'm looking at the *Argus* and the *American* in Saint Louis. I'm going to look at—I'm going to talk about the [Kansas City] *Call* and the *Kansas City Sun*. The *Kansas City Sun* is a late 19th Century newspaper started by a man very much similar to J.E. Mitchell with the *Argus*. Not a man of letters, but a man of influence in his community. And then, I'm going to look at two mid-Missouri newspapers. One was the *Professional World* that was published in Columbia from 1901 to about 1903 by a Lincoln University graduate. And then, another one is called the *Western Messenger*. The *Western Messenger* is the newspaper for the black, or what you see in that newspaper, or the colored Baptists. I'm looking at that one simply because of the fact that it had the largest circulation of readers in the early 20th Century. I'm getting all this information from a historian by the name of George Everett Slaven, who graduated from the University of Missouri, and in the late 1960s he did his dissertation on the African American press in Missouri. So, it's from him we find out that in the state of Missouri between about 1870 to 1960 [or] 1968 when he's finishing up his project about sixty African Americans newspaper are established. Now, that doesn't count in the '60s you're going to have a lot of underground newspapers, Black Power newspapers, leaflets, or newsletters. Doesn't count any of those. And then, Dr. Julius Thompson, who also was here with the history faculty at the University of Missouri, did his dissertation on the *Jackson Advocate*, so he had a big voice in the history of African American press and African American journalism. From his work, we find that between the late—well, probably starting with the first documented African American newspaper—the *Freedom's Journal* with [John] Russwurm and [Samuel] Cornish in 1827—he's counting, probably by the early 1970s, mid-1970s, about 2,000 African American newspaper are founded in the United States. So, what I'm looking at also is that they have kind of a cycle. That first cycle is looking at abolition and getting rid of slavery. The second cycle, which I'm interested in, is how they impact racial uplift. I'm looking at that because another University of Missouri graduate—Dr. Lawrence O. Christensen—did some work on Saint Louis. He was interested in really the black community and the black community in politics, but he does do a kind of political biographical sketch of John Wesley Wheeler, who became the publisher of the *Saint Louis Palladium*. In a 1974 or so article that he published in the *Missouri Historical Review*, at the very end of the article he says he's very conservative, he kind of followed Booker T. Washington philosophy, and he had an opinion on what really was public decorum in the African American community. Be clean. Don't be noisy. Have a job. All of those types of things. I would argue that that's really not exclusively Washingtonian. A number of African American women—Anna Julia Cooper and others—are saying the exact same thing. As a matter of fact, I just read Mary's Church Terrell's biography, and in her biography and then in a critique of Terrell—and I can't remember the name of the book, but I think it's Deborah Gray White who talks about the fact that one of her speeches is a challenge to her community as to bringing the

black community, the masses of African Americans up to the level of what middle class and educated blacks were. So, that's the challenge that everyone is given. So, I'm looking at how the newspaper plays this role in that because as I looked at the *Argus* one of the things that interests me was that Mitchell hammered this whole idea of creating businesses and economic empowerment. This whole idea of: "If you create a business, then you can employ African Americans and they won't have to beg for jobs from the white community. They won't have to be the first people fired from jobs in the white community. But, you have to create businesses, and if we're going to create businesses, you have to patronize those buildings in order for those businesses to make it beyond the first generation." Which was the big issue for African American businesses. Many of them did not outlive their owners. The *Argus* does. The *Call* does. But, the *Kansas City Sun* does not. I guess the *Palladium* does because Wheeler is not the first publisher of the *Palladium*. He takes over the *Palladium*. We really don't know when the *Palladium* started, but he's not the first publisher of it. He begins an association and then eventually he is the publisher.

SEAN ROST: Before we return to our conversation, let's take a step back in time with Bob Priddy to an event from this week in history in a "Missouri Minute."

BOB PRIDDY: I'm Bob Priddy with this "Missouri Minute" about a Civil War fight for control of the Mississippi River. Cape Girardeau was an important military goal in the Civil War for both sides because it was a major communications point and an important supply depot. The city became a battleground in 1863 when Confederate General John Marmaduke—later a Governor of Missouri—moved into the state to disrupt federal fortifications and find recruits. Cape Girardeau was his main target—important because it was helping supply [U.S.] Grant's siege at Vicksburg. But Union General John McNeil smelled the trap that Marmaduke laid for him in the attacks at nearby Bloomfield, and instead of retreating to the west, he went back to Cape Girardeau where he had four defensive forts. He might still have suffered heavy losses if Confederate messengers to Joseph O. Shelby and Marmaduke had not been captured before they could tell their commanders what was up. Marmaduke gave McNeil thirty minutes on April 26, 1863, to surrender. McNeil refused, and then counterattacked, and by two o'clock that afternoon more federal troops were headed to Cape Girardeau on the river. The advantage was lost, and the Confederacy, again, had to pull back into Arkansas. I'm Bob Priddy for the Center for Missouri Studies.

SEAN ROST: Now, when we think about the African American press in the early 20th Century as you're talking about when a lot of these are being founded, this is a point when white newspapers aren't publishing information about the African American community. Do you think it was important then for these newspaper to not only promote businesses, promote interests, but also to give voice to a community of this uplift idea?

DEBRA GREENE: Well, one of the things that Cornish and Russwurm say in *Freedom's Journal* is that they're publishing *Freedom's Journal* in 1827 to give voice to a community that hadn't had a voice. Ore, to give an alternative voice to a community that is—they're in New York—so the *New York Daily World* is writing very derogatory things about colored people at that time. And so, they want to give the alternative. These are the things that the black community is doing. These are the things that the black community is interested in. But, what I'm

finding is the assumption that white newspapers are not writing about black people is not totally true. Some of the things are negative, but, for example, there are no copies of the *Western Messenger*, but all the information I found out from the *Western Messenger* came from the *Word* and that was the white Baptist newspaper. They're only talking about the Reverend Goins—John Goins. Reverence John Goins becomes the person that they've hired to make congregations among the colored people. The white Baptists are looking at this as an opportunity to reach the "unchurched." So, if we go out and we have a black man to go out and make these congregations they will choose the Baptist faith rather than some other faith. So, in the *Word*, they're writing about the activities of Reverend Goins. Sometimes they write positively. Sometimes they write not so positively about what they're doing. One of the articles I came across was [about] how much money Reverend Goins was making. "We're donating this amount to him, and then he has this job." Reverend Goins was making like \$150 a month in the early 20th Century. I don't know how much that was, but I'm like, "He's really making bank here." But, when he died, there is a very respectful obituary in the *Word* because of his long period of work. The interesting thing about also is that the *Western Messenger* under Reverend Goins did a political announcement that urged the readers to vote for a particular party against another party, and in the *Word* it says, "That was a blunder. We're donating all this money to you and you're saying that. It would be catastrophic if this other party, whom we probably support, wins." So, shortly thereafter, the *Western Messenger* moved from Jefferson City to Saint Louis and Reverend Goins was no longer the editor of the newspaper. But, without the *Word*, I would not have been able to find anything out about Reverend Goins or the *Western Messenger*.

SEAN ROST: Yeah. Looking at those newspapers, you've got Saint Louis and Kansas City covered, and central Missouri. Do you know of any other smaller communities that would have had African American newspapers, or at least some form of them?

DEBRA GREENE: Well, there is a jewel of a resource and it is called the *Negro Year Book*. In the *Negro Year Book*, it lists all of the associations that African Americans have created. So, you have the teachers, the preachers, the business leagues, the undertakers, funeral directors. So, you have all of those. Most of the fraternal organizations like the Eastern Star and the Masons. But, you also have a list of the newspapers throughout most of the states. And so, in the state of Missouri, we had, for a short period of time, one in Saint Joe, one in Macon, Missouri, one in Hannibal—I think that is about it. Macon because of the fact that there was a Western University which was noted for training African American preachers. It moves to Kansas City. Would not have known that either.

SEAN ROST: It really gets a pulse on—

DEBRA GREENE: Yeah.

SEAN ROST: The Year Book gets a pulse on all these operations and businesses. That's really fascinating.

DEBRA GREENE: Uh-huh.

SEAN ROST: I think the Saint Joe one was called the *Protest*—or *National Protest*, I think it was called.

DEBRA GREENE: I thought it was the *Enquirer*. But, I'm not sure if it is or not. I have it somewhere in there. Or the *Advocate* or something like that.

SEAN ROST: For those people who are coming to your talk on April 30th, what do you that they take away from everything that they'll learn when they are there?

DEBRA GREENE: Well, I really would like to focus my talk on the actual individual men who created these businesses. The interesting thing to me is that in the second generation—say for example with the *Call*. When Chester Franklin dies, the *Call* is in the hands of women. When [Nelson C.] Crews died, the *Kansas City Sun* is in the hands of his editor who is a woman. When Mitchell dies, then his sister-in-law, Nannie Mitchell Turner, is—with her son—really the leader of these newspapers. But, what I want to do is look at the individual people who are involved in [and] who start these newspaper. I've done a lot of research in it, and I know there's criticisms of the census, but the census also provides—if you look really, really closely—a lot of information. Say, for example, the young man who starts the *Columbia Professional World*. He went to Lincoln University, but he was also from New Bloomfield, Missouri. His dad was a farmer, and you find all that out in the census. So, why would this young man who really comes from very humble beginnings get the opportunity, go to Lincoln University—he actually ends up on the first Board of Curators for Lincoln University when it becomes a university and they no longer have a Board of Regents he is on the Board of Curators. And, there must not have been a rule about being all from the same party because everybody on that first Board of Curators is a Republican—every one of them.

SEAN ROST: So, it would have been—yeah—that would have been the [Arthur] Hyde/[Sam] Baker years of the strong Republican support.

DEBRA GREENE: Exactly. So, I'm going to be looking at them as the individuals who start these businesses because the press is really a researched—the African American press is a highly researched institution. But, the people who start it, and for whatever reason they start it, however they were able to continue it, the challenges that they meet. If we look at what's left now, we have the *Saint Louis Sentinel*, which was started in 1968 by Howard B. Woods. Woods had been with the *Argus* before he went to Washington. So, it's a still operating newspaper. But, the one that really faced the 1980s when so much of written journalism changed was the *American*. They faced it by accepting the new skills and tenants of journalism in the 1980s, and that was the Ginnett Model. Lots of color. So, the current publisher said—he's a medical person—he's a dentist—he said, "When I took over, I started listening to those people who were in the field. Those people who were in the field said, 'These are the things you have to do. You have to have a web presence. You have to no longer charge for the paper. You basically have to give it away.'" So, the *Saint Louis American* has a huge web presence. It has an online newspaper. They claim that they're giving away like 77,000 copies every week of that newspaper. But, they've survived into the 21st Century. I can't determine whether or not the *Call* is still operating because Lucile Bluford passed away in 2003. I can't determine whether or not the *Argus* is still operating because Dr. Eugene Mitchell, who was its publisher, passed away sometime in the first decade of

the 21st Century, but he had sold the newspaper somewhere around 2003 as well. Don't quote me on those dates because I'm specifically sure, but what I'm saying is that those newspapers went into different hands, but they went into different hands at a time period when print journalism is under tremendous change. To people who probably didn't have or don't have the skills or the money to run a newspaper in the way that the American has been able to run their newspaper. So, I want to do the personal side because that's of interest to me. The people are pretty interesting, and I've found out some really interesting things about them in looking at this particular study.

SEAN ROST: Okay. We hope to have a packed house on April 30th for your presentation. Thanks for joining us today.

DEBRA GREENE: Thank you.

SEAN ROST: Thanks for listening to this week's episode. As always, I am your host, Sean Rost. The show's producer is Brian Austin. The opening and concluding credits are narrated by Kevin Walsh. If you are interested in more of the people, places, culture, and history around our Missouri, check out the following upcoming events:

If you're in the mood for a little bluegrass music to kick off your summer, Rolla is the place to be on May 19th for Ozark Pickin' Time. This afternoon of music and memories will be held at the Cedar Street Playhouse in Rolla and features Jimmie Allison and Midnight Flight, Jerry Rosa and the Rosa String Works Band, and Marideth Sisco and Accomplices. This event is free and open to the public, though registration is appreciated. While you're there, be sure to check in with staff from the State Historical Society of Missouri to learn how the Historical Society is preserving the state's rich musical history.

National History Day in Missouri is looking for educators, historians, writers, filmmakers, museum staff, and community members to join them at this year's state contest to judge student projects. The state contest will be held on April 27, 2019 at the University of Missouri-Columbia. To thank you for your essential participation in National History Day in Missouri 2019, the State Historical Society of Missouri will provide a light breakfast and lunch, plus a travel stipend of up to \$50 for judges whose round trip mileage exceeds 75 miles. National History Day in Missouri is a unique opportunity for middle and high school age students to explore the past in a creative, hands-on way by producing a documentary, exhibit, paper, performance, or website on a topic of their choosing. To learn more about National History Day in Missouri, including judge orientation and how to start a program at your own school, please visit shsmo.org/nhdmo/.

On April 30th, join Debra Foster Greene, professor emerita of history from Lincoln University, for her presentation entitled, "To Educate and Elevate: The African American Press in Missouri." Part of the African American Experience in Missouri Lecture Series, this presentation will be held at the Memorial Student Union's Stotler Lounge on the University of Missouri's campus and is sponsored by the Missouri Humanities Council, the University of Missouri's Division of Inclusion, Diversity & Equity, and the State Historical Society of Missouri.

If you are planning to attend the 2019 Family History Conference in Saint Charles on May 8-11, 2019, be sure to visit the State Historical Society of Missouri's exhibit booth to learn more about how to preserve genealogy and local history.

Finally, coming up this summer, the *Our Missouri Podcast* will launch a four-part series celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission and moon landing. In an effort to document the history of the moon landing and grow the Historical Society's oral history archive, we will be collecting stories from listeners who are interested in speaking about their memories of this historic event. These "Memories of the Moon Landing" conversations will be preserved in the Missouri Innovation & Exploration Oral History Project (C4352), with some of the stories being featured on the podcast. If you are interested in contributing your story, please contact us by email at "ourmissouri@shsmo.org."

KEVIN WALSH: Thank you for listening to the *Our Missouri Podcast*. If you would like to learn more about the podcast, including past and future episodes, information about guests, and upcoming events, please visit our website at shsmo.org/our-missouri.