

**APPLICATION FOR THE RENAMING OF THE SQUARE
AT ABERCORN AND EAST WAYNE STREET**

**PROPOSED NAME: ABBOTT SQUARE
IN HONOR OF ROBERT SENGSTACKE ABBOTT**

APPLICANT: MARTHA KEBER

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Savannah, Georgia 31401

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Born into humble circumstances on St. Simons Island in 1868*, the son of formerly enslaved parents, Robert Sengstacke Abbott seemed an unlikely challenger to the racist status quo that prevailed in Georgia and throughout the Jim Crow South at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet through hard work and determination, Abbott rose to national prominence as founder and editor of the influential Black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*.

Before his first birthday, Robert had lost his father, Thomas Abbott. His widowed mother, Flora Abbott, returned to Savannah in 1869 to build a new life. Literate, hard-working, and determined to support her son, she became an assistant teacher at the Sengstacke Academy near Fahm Street, where Black children and adults packed classrooms to gain the education needed in the new world of freedom. Her biracial employer, John Herman Henry Sengstacke, appreciated her intelligence and hard work. The two married in 1874 and Robert Abbott came under the tutelage of the man who shaped his life.

In 1876 Sengstacke became the pastor of the Pilgrim Congregational Church in Woodville, a small community at that time located about three miles west of Savannah. Robert grew up in a devout Christian home as Rev. Sengstacke established nightly Bible readings and strict observance of the Sabbath. But Robert's stepfather also taught him to recognize social injustice in all its forms. He and Robert sat in on trials in Savannah and Hinesville courts where Black defendants were routinely denied fair treatment.

Through his stepfather's example, Robert Abbott also learned of the power of the printed word. The minister published two newspapers in Woodville, the *Gospel Trumpet* and the *Woodville Times*. Newspapers furnished the topics for prayer meetings at Pilgrim Congregational Church and members discussed contemporary issues, especially racial discrimination. As a teenager, Robert began learning the printer's trade by working part-time at the *Savannah Echo* and with his stepfather on the *Woodville Times*. In 1889, Robert Abbott enrolled at Hampton Institute in the printing program.

*birthdate confirmed by baptismal records and the 1870 Census

After a successful college experience at Hampton, Abbott moved to Chicago where he earned his law degree at Kent School of Law as the only Black man in his class. However, clients shunned the new Black attorney and Abbott returned to the printing trade. In 1905, he founded his own newspaper, the *Defender*. No doubt Abbott saw the *Defender* as a living memorial to Rev. Sengstacke who died in 1904. In Abbott's words: "Before I started on my life's work—journalism—I was counseled by my beloved [step]father that a good newspaper was one of the best instruments of service and one of the strongest weapons ever to be used in defense of a race which was deprived of its citizenship rights." To defend the Black race from lynchings, economic and social discrimination and to promote access to prosperity and equality were goals Abbott set for his newspaper. The first issue appeared on May 5, 1905.

At first the *Defender* was a one-man operation as Abbott edited, financed, and sold the paper himself. He laid out the paper on his landlady's kitchen table, personally solicited advertisements, and sold the four-page weekly newspaper door-to-door for 2 cents each or a year-long subscription of \$1.

In the words of Langston Hughes, Robert Abbott's *Defender* became the "voice of the voiceless." It was always Abbott's intent to defend the Black race from social, political, and economic injustice. As a northern newspaper, the *Defender* had more freedom to denounce issues outright, and its editorial position attacked racial inequities head-on. Screaming headlines, militant prose, vivid images and red ink were used to capture the reader's attention and convey the horrors of lynchings, rapes, assaults, and other atrocities inflicted on Black Americans. Abbott focused national attention on Jim Crow laws passed by southern states that marginalized Black citizens' rights. Schools, cemeteries, theaters, and street cars were segregated; voting rights were restricted or denied altogether; even the Bibles used to swear in witnesses at trials were separated by race. Abbott articulated the aspirations, fears, and grievances of Black citizens more clearly and effectively than any other newspaper.

The *Defender* had to be smuggled into the south because white distributors refused to handle it; in Georgia it was a criminal offense to possess an issue of the *Defender*. Nonetheless, the newspaper was passed from person to person and read aloud in barbershops and churches. It was

in large measure owing to Black pullman porters who secretly carried the newspapers on their south-bound trains that the *Defender* had such an impact throughout the south. It was estimated each newspaper purchased may have passed through the hands of four or five additional readers.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 created a labor crisis in northern industries. For decades, factories in the north depended on a seemingly limitless flow of European immigrants who eagerly accepted the low wages offered by American industry. The war cut off this source of willing workers just as northern industry ramped up to meet the needs of European armies. At the same time, economic setbacks in the south left Black farmers and laborers with a bleak future. Boll weevils, storms, floods, and the tightening of credit made farming unprofitable. Abbott saw the dire conditions in the south as an opportunity to bring southern workers north where factory jobs were plentiful and the pay was higher and regular. Most importantly, these workers could escape the racial oppression in the south. Abbott evoked the images of the Israelites bound for the promised land to escape the Pharaoh's persecution. The *Defender* routinely published railroad schedules from southern cities, Help Wanted ads from factories and businesses in the north, and letters from recent arrivals.

By the summer and fall of 1916, the "Great Migration" was underway. In Savannah, 2,500 men boarded two "labor trains" in July and August, 1916, bound for Pennsylvania. In the September 2 edition of the *Defender*, a photograph shows people dressed in their Sunday best gathering by the railroad tracks outside of Savannah waiting for yet another labor train. Above the photograph was the headline "The Exodus." Abbott encouraged migration, urging people to come north for jobs and higher salaries, for schools for their children, and most importantly for their safety, their rights, and their dignity. By 1918, some 1.3 million southern Blacks made the trip north with additional thousands in the following decade.

Robert Abbott was a self-made man who became one of the most important Black leaders in the United States, a role model for business success in a time of segregation. When he died in 1940, the *Journal of Negro History* eulogized him as "one of the richest and most influential Negroes to appear in American life. . . . the Chicago *Defender* became just what Abbott intended it to be—the world's greatest weekly, at least with respect to the Negro race."

Interest in Abbott's life remains high. The definitive biography, *The Lonely Warrior*, by Roi Ottley was published in 1955. Recently, Ethan Michaeli wrote a comprehensive history of the newspaper, entitled *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America*. Rave reviews greeted its publication in 2016.

CRITERIA MET

“a noteworthy person associated with the City of Savannah, Chatham County, the State of Georgia or the United States of America”

Robert Abbott grew up in Woodville and Savannah, attending the Chatham County Public School in Woodville and Beach Institute. Even after he left the city as an adult, he did not forget Savannah and the needs of its children. Abbott resurrected the Sengstacke Preparatory Academy founded by his stepfather, Rev. Sengstacke, in 1901. The school had deteriorated during the pastor's last illness so Abbott named himself President of the school and his sister Rebecca Sengstacke as principal. For decades the school at the corner of Roberts and Bay Streets welcomed Black children from Woodville and nearby neighborhoods. Among the alumni of the academy is former Chatham County Commissioner Priscilla Thomas who, at the age of six years old, met Robert Abbott in one of his visits to the academy.

On the national stage, Abbott led the fight against racial discrimination from 1905 until his death in 1940. Indeed, the impact of Robert Abbott's work extended beyond his lifetime. His crusade for racial equality foreshadowed the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act and other federal legislation of the 1960s. The Great Migration promoted by Robert Abbott changed the racial demographics of the United States. No longer would the Black population be concentrated in the rural south. Former residents of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi relocated to Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

“Consider . . . the residents and businesses directly impacted; community diversity; historical significance of preexisting name or location; appropriateness and compatibility of the request in relation to the existing area, the impact on emergency service delivery, continuity and stability.”

The square to be renamed is a green space ringed by beautiful examples of mostly nineteenth century residential and church architecture. Since 1856, the square was notable for Massie School, the first free public school in the city. It was intended for white children. The square was named after South Carolina politician John C. Calhoun. Recently, however, a healthy discussion as to the appropriateness of Calhoun's name for this square resulted in the decision to search for an individual whose values were more inclusive.

Renaming the square in honor of Robert Abbott would be a bold act for community diversity as no square in the Historic District as yet bears the name of a Black person. The Woodville neighborhood would see one of their own in a place of prominence. For the many visitors who pass through the square it would be an opportunity to learn about the accomplishments of Robert Abbott. Black History tours would likely make the renamed square an important part of their presentations. Abbott's work with education, specifically the Sengstacke Academy, is compatible with the Savannah-Chatham County Board of Education's historic classroom and educational exhibits at Massie School.

I do not expect any negative impact if the square is renamed in honor of Robert Abbott. Although an Abbott Street exists in the West Savannah neighborhood, I doubt that emergency services would confuse the two. An historical marker, "Robert Sengstacke Abbott Boyhood Home," located near the corner of Bay and Albion Streets, has been in place since 2008 but I see no conflict with the marker. Indeed, renaming the square for Abbott might encourage residents and tourists alike to visit the marker.

SOURCES

Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers, Chicago Public Library, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, Illinois.

Chicago Defender.

Hoskins, Charles Lwanga. *W. W. Law and His People: A Timeline and Biographies*. Savannah: Gullah Press, 2013.

Michaeli, Ethan. *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

Ottley, Roi. *The Lonely Warrior: The Life and Times of Robert S. Abbott*. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1955.

“Robert Sengstacke Abbott,” *Journal of Negro History* 25, No. 2 (April 1940): 261-262.

Savannah Tribune.



CITY OF SAVANNAH—CITY COUNCIL

Detric Leggett
District 2

May 11, 2023

City of Savannah
P.O. Box 1027
2 East Bay Street
Savannah, GA 31401
Squares@savannahga.gov

Re: Support for Renaming the Square at Abercorn St. and Easy Wayne St. "ABBOTT SQUARE"

To Whom It May Concern,

I, Alderman Detric Leggett, officially endorse the naming request for consideration to name the public square located on Abercorn and East Wayne Streets, to 'ABBOTT SQUARE' in accordance with City Ordinance and the process outlined within 'Article E. Naming of Public Property, Facilities, and Streets'.

I look forward to this application advancing within the process as required by City Code.

Thank you for your consideration of this nomination.

Regards,

Alderman Detric Leggett
District 2
City of Savannah, Georgia