

Philip Alexander Bell and the San Francisco *Elevator*

by John H. Telfer, excerpted from "Blacks in the West" Monograph No. 1
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In the San Francisco *Daily Morning Call* of April 27, 1889, there appeared this notice: "... the tall reverend looking colored man who used to promenade the streets, occasionally entering into argument with someone or other, died at his house on Thursday evening, after a protracted illness." And so there passed from the scene one of the most interesting and little-known Negro leaders of a century ago, Phillip Alexander Bell, pioneer San Francisco newspaper editor. He was born in 1808 and lived 81 years.

P. A. Bell has not yet been granted much recognition in California history, nor is he well known even to Bay Area Negroes. But as the record of his life and his early struggles for civil rights becomes clearer, his stature in modern eyes is sure to grow.

Arriving in California in 1860 at the age of 52 after long editing and publishing experience in the east, he helped found in 1865 the *San Francisco Elevator*, the strong and independent weekly newspaper voice of Negro aspirations in northern California. Under his editorship from its beginning and with few interruptions for the next 24 years, the paper continued to be published until 1898, nine years after Bell's death. In 1947 the Library of Congress made microfilms all obtainable copies of the *Elevator*. A few more have turned up since then. In the Bay Area the microfilm may be seen at the California Historical Library in San Francisco and the Bancroft Library at the University of California in Berkeley.

Some indication of Philip Alexander Bell's place in the estimation of his contemporaries may be gained from these words of Frederick Douglass in a letter to Bell in 1868:

I remember with pleasure my first knowledge of you. It was gained from the *Colored American*, thirty years ago, the first publication by colored men I ever saw-- and you were one of its editors. I cannot tell-- no living man can tell -- what joy and hope I felt when, newly from slavery, I looked for the first time upon the *Colored American*. Can this really be true, thought I. Is this really the work of colored men? Slavery and slander had done their work. They had made me doubt the ability of my race... Since that time I have never entirely lost sight of Philip A. Bell, nor lost faith in the future of my people. Tried and true friend of our common cause, among the first of our race to assail with your pen (mightier than the sword) the malignant ramparts of slavery and caste -- May it also be yours to see the black man made equal before the law.¹

Bell was an early associate of Samuel E. Cornish, who had been the partner of John B. Rustwurm in founding the very first Negro newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, in 1827. Rustwurm immigrated to Africa soon after that, and Cornish continued to edit it and its successors for the next 20 years. Cornish was one of the major figures in abolitionist journalism.² Bell and Cornish established the *Weekly Advocate* in Philadelphia in January 1837.³ Later it was moved to New York as the *Colored*

American and Bell continued to edit it until about February 1840 when Charles B. Ray became editor.

Philip Bell was a northerner, born in New York. His parents were Letty and Alexander (Aleck) Bell, and all of his family were born free except his great grandmother, who was over 80 years of age when Philip was born. His mother had a dark complexion, almost black, but with high cheekbones and long wavy hair which indicated Indian blood. His father may have been a mulatto, for Bell spoke of his Uncle James as being one, the inference made that this was his father's brother. Alexander Bell was a steward on an East Indian merchantman, and was far away from home for long periods. Philip was close to his mother, very likely because of an impediment in his speech which rendered it difficult to understand. He was a delicate, awkward child, and seldom played with other children because they taunted him about his speech. He was irritable, nervous, and high-tempered. During the long hours he spent with his mother she showed him pictures in the Bible, Pilgrim's Progress, and Robinson Crusoe, and he learn to read from these books before he started to school. There were two other children in the family, a brother six years older named Fred, and a sister (name unknown) who was three years older.⁴ All that is known of these two is that about 1813 his brother was a fifer in a regiment station on Governor's Island, New York City.⁵

In seeking to understand the formative influences in Bell's early life, his education must be noted. He grew up in the period when Abolition sentiment was growing in the north and both white persons and Negroes concerned to lift the colored race recognized the urgent need for schools dedicated to their education and advancement. Young Bell was fortunate in being chosen to attend one of the best of these, the African Free School in New York City.⁵

This privately financed school, where Bell associated as a fellow student with many Negroes who came to prominence in later life, had been founded in 1816 by the Episcopal Synod of New York in New Jersey for a four-year Academy. In addition to the standard branches of study, "exercises in speaking and composition shall be kept up through the whole course."⁶ One can believe from the quality of the school output that these disciplines were firm.

In addition to collections to finance the school taken in many churches after a special "African sermon" each year, African Societies were formed in several large cities to aid this project. Typical were the provisions in the constitution of the African Society of Newark setting the membership fees "at five cents at entrance and \$.50 annually for every free person of color and every slave who brings written permission from his or her master or mistress, shall be a member upon paying \$.25 upon entrance and the same sum annually. None but male members shall vote." Special notice was taken of efforts by the free Negroes and slaves to support the school. One female slave saved up to \$4.15 for the purpose; "the whole total in a single town the African Association of New Brunswick, was \$44.55 paid in one year."⁷

Two of Bell's classmates at the African Free School were Ira Aldridge, Shakespearean actor, and James Fields, who later with Bell was the founder of the Negro I. O. O. F. In 1822, at the age of

14, Bell went onto the classical Academy of John E. Tompkins at 187 Broadway. In 1830 Bell, Aldridge, and Fields, along with five others (among them David Ruggles, who later conducted an abolitionist bookstore and was a pamphleteer,) founded the Philomathean Literary Society in New York which again brought together several of those from the African School. Others who attended the African Free School and may have been his companions there were Dr. James McCune Smith and the Rev. Alexander Crummel.⁸

P. A. Bell knew most of the important Negro and white leaders of the civil rights movements of his period, many of them through long association and in part through his long years as editor of the *Colored American* in New York. As early as 1837 we find him the secretary of a political and civil rights meeting of Negroes in New York City.⁹ When his *Elevator* carried the obituary of Horace Greeley in 1872, its editor wrote a long piece praising the famous New York Abolitionist (with reservations about Greeley reputed support of African colonization plans) and concluded, "We knew Mr. Greeley since 1837."¹⁰

Another important leader of his period, the Rev. Alexander Crummell, whose brother Henry worked for Bell in New York, was also a good friend. Crummel is generally regarded as the leading nineteenth century Negro intellectual, an Episcopal minister who obtained his degree from Cambridge and went to Liberia as a pastor and teacher.¹¹ In the *Elevator* in 1872 Bell published a letter from a correspondent who is giving information of the return of the Rev. Crummel from Liberia commenting that his hair and beard were white, his steps and voice failing and that he wished to be remembered to Philip Bell. Bell's comment was that Crummel was one of his earliest and dearest friends.¹²

The extent of Philip Bell's activities in the Underground Railroad are not known, but he did tell some of his experiences and associations, which indicate that he was active to some degree. Reminiscing in the *Elevator*, he told of an event of his childhood involving his family and the Underground Railroad. In 1816 (Bell was eight years old) a slave named Margaret Green was brought by her master from Charleston, S. C., for their annual visit to New York City, arriving in the spring and returning home in the fall. That time there was a law in New York which permitted visitors to retain slaves in the state for a period of nine months after their arrival and registration.

Margaret Green wished to stay in New York, and enlisted the aid of Mrs. Lavinia Smith and Mrs. Sally McCune, mother and aunt of Dr. James McCune Smith, who brought the girl to Bell's home. Bell and his sister were sent with the escaped slave to the home of the great grandmother "who lived on Mercer Street above Prince" where the slave was hidden. A few weeks later Bell's great uncle, who kept an Intelligent Office procured a situation for the girl in the country where she lived for several years.¹³

In 1873 there appeared in the *Elevator* an advertisement for William Still's book, "The Underground Railroad." In response to this Bell wrote a column on the same page in which he told of some of his own experiences. He said that his efforts were unorganized, and that he had associated with the number of others in these efforts, among whom was Dr. David Ruggles, who

formed the Vigilante Committee in 1838 which was the first organization for aiding fugitive slaves and was the basis for the Underground Railroad. Another person named was Samuel E. Cornish, spoken of elsewhere in this paper, who Bell said was "not a working man, but his advice was always sound." A third associate was Thomas Downing, with "heart, hand, house, and purse open." Downing was a noted Abolitionist and well-to-do caterer of New York (also called an oysterman).¹⁴ In a letter from Downing to Bell published in the *Elevator*, Downing speaks of a son named Phil Bell Downing, from which we may surmise that a very close relationship existed between the two men.^{15a}

In 1860 Bell arrived in San Francisco, and within two years had founded in connection with Peter Anderson, the first Negro newspaper in San Francisco, the *Pacific Appeal*.^{15b} As the Civil War was ending in 1865 the Executive Committee of the Association of Colored People of the City and County in San Francisco decided to establish their own newspaper and called P. A. Bell to be the editor. The Executive Committee agreed to support the paper for the first six months, then Bell was financially to be on his own.

A clear statement of principles in every issue showed that integration was to be a major objective of the new paper: "the *Elevator*, a weekly journal of progress, equality before the law."

This paper is the organ of the Executive Committee, and will advocate the largest political and civil liberty for all American citizens, irrespective of creed or color. Such are our general principles and objectives, but we will have an addition thereto, a special mission to fulfill; we will labor for the civil and political enfranchisement of the Colored people – not as a distinct and separate race, but as American citizens. We solicit patronage of all classes, as we intend to make the *Elevator* a real-life paper, and evidence of the progress of the age

Subscription rates were modest, five dollars a year, and copies were \$.15 each. Advertising rates were: Six lines or less, \$.50 per insertion, \$.25 for subsequent insertions. The publishing committee for the *Elevator* was: P. A. Bell, editor, William H. Yates, James R. Starkey, R. A. Hall, James P. Dyer, F. G. Barbados, and S. Howard.

As a minority paper the *Elevator* had financial struggles from the start and its columns from time to time carried polite or frantic appeals to subscribers to pay up. Editorial threats to cut off the paper seem not to have been taken very seriously and in fact to have been acted upon only occasionally. When the Executive Committee handed over the enterprise at the agreed time, Bell took responsibility for a small debt. Three years later he said there had been double this amount due from country subscribers but that this hadn't been paid. On the contrary, it has been fearfully accumulating until now there's between \$400 and \$500 due from subscribers and agents. If we could make a tour through the country we might collect about half of what is new to us."¹⁶

He went on to list items in the monthly balance sheet of the *Elevator* until it's problems in 1868.

Our weekly expenses are at least \$50. The average cost of issuing each number of the *Elevator* is \$36. Incidental expenses, such as rent, carrying, etc., is \$14. Our income is as follows: we have 210 city monthly subscribers; about 20 of that number are several months in arrears, and we are loath to cut off those who have taken the paper since its first issue and whom we believe will eventually pay. We have 44 yearly subscribers in this city who are prompt in paying, whenever called upon. Our receipts from the country do not exceed \$50 per month, and our advertising patronage about the same. The majority of our agents are good, reliable men, who are currently for the interest of the *Elevator*, knowing its failure would inflict an irremediable injury on our cause, and would reflect disgracefully on the colored people of California. Some of our agents remit promptly, monthly or quarterly, some semi-occasionally, and a few not at all. Last year, after notifying our subscribers and agents through our columns, and repeatedly importuning them with private correspondence, we were compelled, in order to curtail our expenses coming to cut off 100 papers. We are in the same predicament now ... in conclusion, we require about \$220 per month to pay the actual and contingent expenses of the paper, without calculating our personal expenses. Our receipts do not exceed \$200 per month-- leaving a deficit of \$20 per month. We believe if those who profess an interest in the success of this journal would make the necessary efforts, we would be placed beyond the possibility of a failure. We have sent bills to parties who in arrears, and unless they remit soon we must stop their papers. Many profess great interest in our journal, and urge us continue sending it, saying they will pay in time. We want the money NOW. If they cannot send all, send part. Send it by Express, by Post Office money orders, by registered letters, in greenbacks -- any way, so that you may send it.

The *Elevator* occupied room no. 9 in the Phoenix Building, corner of Sansome and Jackson Streets, when it was started in the spring of 1865. In June 1867 the newspaper was moved to 622 Battery St., between Jackson and Pacific, and in December of the same year to 1614 Battery Street, this location evidently provided more space, for Bell wrote of the opening of a long-contemplated reading room on the premises, and that desk room was to let.

Which of the four corners of Sansome and Jackson was occupied by the Phoenix Building is unknown although further research might reveal photographs and maps which would give this information. Because the entire area was gutted by the fire and an earthquake of 1906, there is nothing left to give an idea of what Bell's surroundings were like. According to a Courier and Ives print of a birds-eye view of San Francisco dated 1878, the Customs House and Post Office occupied the block where the Customs House now stands and Bell's office was on a corner across the street. The corners other than the Custom House at Sansome and Jackson are now occupied by a parking lot, a shop, and an office, while the block on Battery where Bell later moved is now entirely occupied by a lithographing firm. This whole district was part of the Barbary Coast, which ran from the waterfront to Grant Avenue and was bounded on the north and south by Broadway and Clay.

The *Elevator* was founded as the Civil War was ending with Reconstruction just ahead. Both long-free Negroes and those newly freed faced mountainous problems in struggling to achieve a place in American society. The 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the federal constitution would have to be fought for, then applied locally where the people lived. Bell and his associates recognized their central task in this crisis and stated in this way:

There are two questions which seem to demand attention of the thinking man among us: Shall we sustain our schools and our paper, or shall we be without educational facilities for our children, and without a voice in the formation of that public opinion which rules the empire? ... schools form the public mind – the press guides and controls it. Mind is power. Then we must educate and develop mind.

How precarious education for Negro children in San Francisco 100 years ago can be seen from the apparently arbitrary closing in 1868 of the only school for color children by General Cobb, a Texan who had become the City Director of Public Schools. In 1867, soon after being elected, Cobb had declared this Broadway school should be removed because, being contiguous to a white school, it was a nuisance.²¹ He returned to the attack early the next year with the proposal that the school be removed to remote location and all color teachers be replaced by white teachers.

According to Bell, this Broadway school had been going well with a near regular attendance and student progress "until General Cobb commenced his crusade against the school. We charge him with malignant and persistent opposition to our school because of our color. Ever since he has been on the Board he has endeavored to have that school broken up. He first pronounced it as a nuisance; now he says the black children behave worse than the white children. How consistent! He has achieved his object and he cannot be surprised if we are indignant."²²

Yet the self-respecting editor refused to fight Cobb in ways he considered personal. "Vituperation is not argument, nor is ridicule proof." But Cobb was vulnerable on the basis of his previous treatment of Negroes in Texas and at this point Bell struck hard. He charged Cobb was once a slave trader in Galveston, Texas, and that his practice was to take slaves from planters for debt and sell them again. "He still retains the brutal instincts of his former degrading business." The Director of Schools was driven to admitting that he had owned ten or a dozen Negroes, but tried to evade the charge of trading. But the editor would not let him off. "We have proof and we can produce time and place, name and identity." It must have come as considerable shock to the Texan to find he must now contend in public with an intellectual of the same race some of his members he had once owned and sold as animals.²³

A committee of Negroes interviewed state and county school superintendents and several members of the Board of Education. They got promises and even hoped for two schools better located for Negro children. But after several years of stop-gap measures, we find P. A. Bell made chairman in 1872 of a state-wide committee to raise money to fight for Negro entry into public schools. In April, 1870, California new school laws provided that "the education of children of

African descent and Indian children shall be provided in separate schools. Upon written application of at least 10 children, a separate school shall be established. Further, "the same laws, rules, and regulations which apply to schools for white children shall apply to schools for colored."²⁴

These provisions, anticipating the "separate but equal" doctrine of the 1890s, by no means satisfied Bell and his associates. 80 years before the historic school desegregation decision of 1954, they began an attack on the law as "unjust and unconstitutional... as it abridges the privileges and immunities of citizens of the United States... It is moreover arbitrary in its discrimination." Although official recognition of the correctness of this position was long in coming, the tattered issues of the *San Francisco Elevator* bear witness to those who stood for full democracy in American life.

"Set us right before the law" was the major theme of California Negro pleas in the early Reconstruction period. By this they meant the common rights of citizens, the political franchise, the advantages of the free school system, and equality before the courts. But they looked beyond these technical civil liberties to equality with others in developing the economic resources of the country "with all its avenues to wealth." "Give us these, in common with the other race, and we will be right before the law."²⁶

Before the 15th amendment was born in 1870 the *Elevator* argued steadily for its passage and for repeal of California's on exclusion of Negroes from the franchise. On October 17, 1867, a public meeting was held at the A. M. E. Church on Powell Street to prepare a petition to the California Senate and Assembly. S. Denenton was chosen chairman, and P. A. Bell, secretary of a committee to present the plea to the legislature. It identified the petitioners as colored citizens of California, native born American citizens, of full age, average intelligence, who "are noted for being a law-abiding class, respecters of all the statutes in the land ... and they are taxpayers. By the organic law of this state your petitioners are deprived of the Right of Suffrage, and we respectfully pray" that you recommend a Constitutional Amendment granted suffrage to colored American citizens.²⁷

Support came from some white newspapers, including a satirical piece in the *Vallejo Recorder* which Bell thought worth re-printing in the *Elevator*:

The Negroes in California are native born Americans, as their fathers were before them for many generations. They are as intelligent, honest, industrious, economical, and law abiding as the average of American citizens. But some of them are black. The purity of the ballot box must not be tarnished by a ballot dropped in by a hand that is not pure white. White is the saintly color, and the white men are all saints, and the ballot box is a sanctified institution... Negroes are liable to be saucy, and must be made to feel that they are our inferiors, there are two or three thousand Negroes in California, and if too many of them are granted the right of suffrage they may vote down the whites. They are sharp, and although they approach the legislature very modestly, they must be closely watched. If

they want to get the bulge on us, the 100,000 white voters of California are gone up. Just see what the Israelites due to the Egyptians, all because Moses and Aaron and a few more of those free fellows were allowed to be citizens and to hold office under the Egyptian monarch.²⁸

In this case, the Republican Negroes did not get concessions from the Democratic Legislature, and had to wait until 1870s to vote.

The breath of P. A. Bell's concerns, his dedication and vision, the loyalties and friendships that held him, and the struggles he led or supported, tempt one to investigations far beyond the limits of this paper. Here we must be content to point to a few major activities and save space for a bit of the flavor of the man as a conclusion.

August Meyer describes the National Convention of 1869 as ending the first period of the Reconstruction Convention movement. It met in Washington, D. C. so Bell did not attend, but even though absent he was chosen at the end to be at representative for California. One issue at Washington was the relation of Negro workers to organized labor. Their general rejection by most existing unions had led to sentiment for setting up Negro unions, yet others fear separation of any sort while calling for integration. Long debate was inconclusive and dissatisfied workers called a Colored National Union Convention to meet in Washington in December 1869. The delegates called for united work for ratification of the 15th amendment.²⁹

Bell was a warm and sociable man, sometimes displaying a keen humor. On occasion he loved dancing and wines. Once in a tribute to a beloved Negro friend he wrote "...He was proud of his southern blood, we boasting about northern lineage. He a strict temperance man-- we were called the Sybarite."³⁰ He was active in the social life of the city. In 1864 he was listed among a group of 12 men who served as a committee in charge of a picnic at Hayes Park.³¹ In 1868 a Grand Carnival Ball, a masquerade and fancy-dress affair, was to be at the Turn Verein Hall, with P. A. Bell serving on the arrangements committee of five men.³²

A frequent contributor to the columns of the *Elevator* was "Semper Fidelus," a pen name for Mrs. Joan Trask. A description of editor Bell was in her letter of June 29, 1868:

Mr. Bell is an old gentleman of good mind and cultivation-- of rough exterior, impulsive, slightly given to boasting of his vigor at 60, fond of wit and wine, not fond of women, unforgiving of his enemies, loving of his friends, somewhat imprudent as an editor -- praising and overrating the talents of his contributors, making them satisfied with their contributions instead of provoking them to greater application.

Bell sometimes opened the volumes of the *Elevator* as readily to criticism as to praise of himself. On the occasion of a benefit performance in 1870 for the *Elevator*, "Ion" was presented at the opera house with Bell in a leading part. The next *Elevator* issue quoted the critic of the *Golden City* as describing the benefit play as a marked success, enjoyed by all present. However, "As

Adrastus, editor Bell was not over impressive. He knew his lines and spoke them with moderate force, but his action was awkward. He made a terrible mess of the dying scene. When the time comes for him to pass his earthly checks in earnest, we hope he'll shuffle off this mortal coil in a more graceful manner."³³

However, Bell's public appearances did not always meet with such criticism. When he first came to San Francisco he appeared at a literary festival and received acclaim for his dramatic reading.³⁴ The following month he gave a series of four programs of readings at the old St. Cyprian Church building. The review of this appearance said, "Notwithstanding an unfortunate impediment in his speech, it is evident his study of elocution has been thorough."³⁵ In 1862 Bell appeared in a lecture entitled "Hebrew Slavery in Contrast with American Slavery."³⁶

Generosity to members of his own race was Bell's life-long habit. An incident involving a white editor showed the same impulsive sympathy. A Mr. McDonald, editor of the *Oakland Transcript* describe how he went broke when his earlier paper, *The Flag*, went down. He found himself on the street, without a dollar. Bell over in San Francisco learned of his plight and with a friend gave and raised a total of \$50 for Mr. McDonald within an hour.³⁷

But hard going overtook the *Elevator* in the early '70s and Bell sold out his interest to Alexander Ferguson who also became editor. "I cheerfully retired from the cares and responsibilities of editorial life," was his final message to the readers on July 20, 1872. The election campaign was starting, and Ferguson transformed the *Elevator* into a political organ, giving all out support for Ulysses S. Grant's bid for reelection.³⁸

A letter from Bishop Thomas M. D. Ward in New Orleans came to Bell which hinted at the evident state of mind of the weary editor which led to his resignation. Bell took the paper back from Ferguson after the November election, and soon published Bishop Ward's earlier letter which may have done much to revive Bells courage:

I have heard that you have withdrawn from the *Elevator*. I know the hardships, the suffering and the mental anguish you pass through; but good friend, could you have heard that I have heard regarding the high character of the paper, your wounded heart would rejoice and be glad. Generations yet unborn will lisp your praise; yea! The present age is placing your name among the very ablest American journalists.³⁹

Search reassurance must have prevailed, for Bell took up his burden again. In resuming proprietorship Bell paid warm compliments to Captain Alexander Ferguson's accomplishments in his brief period of four months, saying that the paper now had a "a larger number of permanent subscribers than any paper ever published by colored man in California."⁴⁰

An example of Bell's steady belief in equality and integration was his objection to a coroner's jury of 12 Negroes for decision in a Negro murder in 1874. In an editorial he said, "We desire to be treated as citizens, irrespective of color. Holding these sentiments, we regret to learn that

Coroner Rice selected twelve colored men to sit as a jury in the case of Lewis Berry who was murdered by his son...If we are called upon to perform the duties of citizenship, make no discrimination. If it is thought advisable to select colored men in any case, let an equal portion be white men. We do not wish to be colonized.”⁴¹

A flash of the old warrior’s fire comes through in what is apparently his final editorial, September 11, 1886:

The Republican Party claims that the colored voters should vote for the nominees of the Republican Party on any and all occasions... The colored voter is looked upon, and one sense, as being the property of the Republican Party, and has no right to think or exercise his own political judgment, relative to men and measures... There was a time in the memory of man before his political instincts were cultivated, that the Republican Party could say to the black voters, that you take the buzzard and I will take the turkey, and he was unable to discern the difference and went away satisfied. But as time passed and the political scales continue to fall from the black voters’ eyes, he commits to see the trick... and demands a portion of the turkey... which the Republican Party of California refuses him the smallest morsel.⁴²

With 11,000 colored voters in California, Bell said such treatment would never keep the Negro vote in line.

No reference to his wife has been found, but the obituary of a daughter-in-law, Mrs. Zadock F. Bell, appears in the *Elevator*, for June 10, 1870, together with a reference to the bereaved husband. He was supported after 1885 by a society of ladies in San Francisco and Sacramento, and was only moved from his room to the almshouse to secure better care for him a few days before the end in April, 1889 ⁴³

What we see in the enthusiasms, the indignations, the persistent struggles of this brave editor are reflections of the stated American creed of the dignity of the individual, of the basic quality of all men, and certain inalienable rights to justice. Bell felt these values deeply. Without an apology or hesitation he demanded that his people be allowed to share them. To this crusade he gave his whole life.

(The author, Mr. Telfer has served as a minister in the Congregational Church, Education Director, packinghouse workers in the south, and is presently instructor in ...)

For bibliography, please refer to the original printed copy, available at the Society.

