

Text

Washington Post 'embarrassed' over gaffe-filled story needing 15 corrections
Brian Flood (Fox News) [accessed Aug. 8, 2019]

The *Washington Post* admitted leadership is embarrassed after the paper was forced to issue a **whopping** 15 corrections to one story about black families struggling to keep their southern farmland.

“We are embarrassed by the **widespread errors** in this freelance article. We have published a detailed correction of each error and updated the story based on re-reporting by *Post* staff,” executive editor Marty Baron told *Fox News*.

The story by Korsha Wilson originally ran on July 23 and has been updated after **a laundry list of gaffes and inaccuracies**. A previous version of this article contained many errors and omitted context and allegations important to understanding two families’ stories. This version has been updated,” the digital version now says before it details all 15 corrections.

The lengthy story is about families who “lived off their land and hoped to pass it down to their children and their children’s children” but run into “challenges black farmers have long faced in their fight for land retention.”

The corrections include everything from misspelling to the omission of “key details” pertinent to the story. This is how the Post described each error:

"The first name of Emanuel Freeman Sr. was misspelled."

"Contrary to what was reported in the initial article, Freeman Sr.’s grandson, Johnny, did not refuse to move off a Halifax, Va., sidewalk for a white woman; he was talking to her, which drew the ire of some white locals, including the Ku Klux Klan. When a crowd gathered at the Freeman home where Johnny fled, gunfire was exchanged, and one family member’s home was set ablaze."

"The 2017 U.S. Agricultural Census compared farmland owned and operated, not simply owned, by white and black farmers."

"The number of children Freeman had with his second wife, Rebecca, was eight, not 10."

"Ownership of Freeman’s property was not transferred to heirs when Rebecca died. In fact, he used a trust before he died to divide his property among his heirs."

"The partition sale of the Freeman estate was in 2016, not 2018, and it included 360 acres of the original 1,000, not 30 acres of the original 99."

"The story omitted key details that affect understanding of ownership of the land. Melinda J.G. Hyman says 'Jr.' and 'Sr.' were left off the names of father and son on documents, and the land was mistakenly combined under Rebecca’s name, meaning some descendants did not receive proper ownership. After requesting a summary of the property, Hyman says, she found her great-aunt, Pinkie Freeman Logan, was the rightful heir to hundreds of acres, but they were not properly transferred to her. In 2016, Hyman says, 360 acres of the original 1,000 were auctioned off after a lengthy court battle, a decision she says she and some other family members dispute."

"The article omitted Hyman’s statement that actions by law firm Bagwell & Bagwell constitute apparent conflicts of interest and omitted firm owner George H. Bagwell’s response denying that allegation."

"A description by agricultural lawyer Jillian Hishaw of laws governing who inherits property when a landowner dies was a reference to the laws in most states, not more than 20 states. She was also generally describing these laws, not referring to Virginia law."

"A study the article said compared the prevalence of estate planning by older white and older black Americans was published in the *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, not the *National Library of Medicine*, and was about possession of advance health directives, not estate planning."

"Tashi Terry said, 'Welcome to Belle Terry Lane,' not 'Welcome to Belle Terry Farm.' The property is named Terry Farm."

"Aubrey Terry did not buy 170 acres with his siblings in 1963; his parents bought the 150-acre property in 1961."

"The eldest Terry brother died in 2011, not 2015."

"The article omitted Tashi Terry's account of some incidents that led to a lawsuit seeking a partition sale of her family's farm and her allegations against Bagwell & Bagwell, which the firm denies."

"A law proposed to protect heirs from losing land in partition sales is called the Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act, not the Partition of Heirs Property Act. 'Tenants in common' are not solely defined as those living on a property; they are all those who own a share in the property. The act would not require heirs living on a property to come to an agreement before it can be sold, but would instead provide several other protections."

Other Washington-based publications noticed the *Post's* gaffe-filled article.

Washingtonian reporter Andrew Beaujon – who first received the statement from Baron – noted that the “gruesome” corrections were in a story written by Wilson, who is a freelancer with previous bylines in publications such as the *New York Times*, *Bon Appetit* and *Food & Wine*.

Beaujon asked, “How did this bloodbath of a correction happen?”

“The correction is certainly thorough with regard to the article's content. What it doesn't answer, however, is any questions about the process this article went through and whether it was representative of how the *Post* handles contributions from freelancers whose training and propensity with regard to accuracy can be difficult to judge,” Beaujon wrote before listing a series of queries about the paper's process.

The *Washington Examiner's* Becket Adams also reported on the “glorious train wreck” that appeared in the *Post*.

“At this rate, it is a wonder the author even got her name right,” Adams wrote. “Kudos to the newspaper for being so thorough and forthright in tackling the many, many problems in Wilson's article.”

Analysis

This text is officially a report, and not an argument. But it appears to be trying to do more than simply report a recent article in the *Washington Post* on the eviction of black farmers that required a number of corrections. It appears to want to discredit the article itself (along with the author and newspaper) in order to diminish the impact or relevance of the report (as suggested in the evaluation below). As such, an implied conclusion would be something like this: “A recent article in the *Washington Post* on the eviction of black farmers was so badly written that the story itself is not worth reading and is not credible” and the support for this conclusion would be the various reports of errors (that are themselves dressed up in highly emotive language such as “gruesome”, “bloodbath”, and so on).

Evaluation

What's interesting in this piece is that it was featured at the very top of the webpage, as well as given a tabloid-like title (as well as written with the various breathless descriptions typical of tabloids (“whopping”, “bloodbath of a correction”, “gruesome corrections”, and so on), and yet its news value is somewhat limited. The intention of the author appears to have been to discredit the newspaper, and yet the fact that the newspaper was correcting its earlier piece – an entirely standard practice for credible newspapers – is hardly newsworthy, and most of the corrections were trivial. The original story itself concerned an interesting part of our national history and helped document one of the causes of wealth-inequality along race lines, and one is left wondering why that rather more important news story is being neglected; I can't help but think that this is a deliberate misdirection by the report under review, where the story that may not align well with the newspaper is ignored, and the report itself is ridiculed.

What makes me most uneasy about this article is that it appears to be written to discredit a newspaper (considered by certain parts of the political right to be a left-leaning newspaper) and to bury the actual content of the article through this misdirection. An attentive reader would understand the trivial nature of the claims, but one less attentive might finish the article thinking that the original story was so deeply flawed as to lack credibility. It is related to the “ad hominem (abusive)” fallacy, attacking the the report itself, rather than the content of the report.