

Destination Freedom (1950)

Brian Kavanaugh

“You have just heard the first in a new radio series presented by station WMAQ in the interests of human freedom. The spirit of Paul Revere, portrayed by Maurice D. Copeland, will return next week at this same time to narrate another chapter in the story which we call *Destination Freedom*.”

Thus concluded the episode of *Destination Freedom* titled “Magic Words” from October 15, 1950. It had been two months since the repeat episode “Last Letter Home” had been broadcast in the same timeslot – one of 97 episodes penned by Richard Durham, which featured stories of Black historical figures and folklore and starred Black actors in many of the leading roles. This new episode and the ones that followed, however, were significantly different. The stories now featured more “traditional” (white) patriotic stories and heroes, and Black actors and characters were rare. Additionally, many of the stories – especially in the second half of the season – were fictional. They were meant to prove a point, rather than tell an historical tale.

Richard Durham had copyrighted *Destination Freedom* July 4, 1948 – just after the premiere episode of the original series. When NBC executive William Murphy attempted to impose deadlines and other controls on Durham for missing script deadlines for the premiere episode, Durham shot back a letter to Murphy dated July 7, 1948, noting that he had copyrighted the show and threatening legal action for any violation of that copyright.

When WMAQ announced in October 1950 they were bringing *Destination Freedom* back with a different format and without him, Durham immediately filed a cease-and-desist order. The station claimed they had created the series and that Durham had merely been a staff author – and besides, it was “just another sustaining public service show”.

Ultimately, Durham sued NBC, first in Chicago, then in New York, demanding \$250,000 in damages from the network. It eventually reached the New York Supreme Court in 1956 but appears to have been settled out-of-court before any ruling was made. The terms of the settlement have not been discovered, but Durham retained the copyrights to *Destination Freedom*.

While some sources have lumped the two series together, they were two different and distinct series. The 1950 series may have had the same name, but it had a quite different format and even claimed to be a “new radio series” in the inaugural episode. More importantly, WMAQ and NBC did not have the rights to use the name, and eventually had to affirm Durham’s copyright and presumably pay a settlement for infringing on it.

Whether it was low ratings, the pending lawsuit, or some combination of the two, the new series lasted less than a year and spawned fewer than 40 episodes.

Reference:

Williams, S. D. (2015). *Word warrior: Richard Durham, radio, and freedom*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.