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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE

By the early 1900s, the freedoms that African Americans had gained through Reconstruction had been limited. Blacks were denied the right to vote, jailed for minor offenses, and oppressed by Jim Crow policies. Dissatisfaction with the accommodationism of Booker T. Washington and a major race riot in Springfield, Illinois, in 1908 were major factors that spurred the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

An earlier attempt at forming a national civil rights organization had failed. The Niagara Movement was formed in 1905 and led by W. E. B. Du Bois as a response to Washington's policies. It was poorly funded and organized. After its dissolution, many of its members joined the NAACP.

Labor activist and socialist William Walling published an article in the *Independent* that reported on the riot in Springfield and asked who would come to the aid of blacks and fight for equality. Caucasian social worker Mary White Ovington read the article and was inspired to take action. She met with Walling in his New York City apartment along with Dr. Henry Moskowitz, a Jewish New York labor reformer and social worker. They drafted a call for a campaign to gain the support of a large group of citizens to aid blacks in the fight for equality. This meeting gave birth to the NAACP. The call was issued on Lincoln's birthday, February 12, in 1909, which is recognized as the birth date of the NAACP.

Oswald Garrison Villard, publisher of the *New York Post*, and socialist Charles Edward Russell were also involved in the early stages of the NAACP. And Ovington invited Bishop Alexander Walters of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and Reverend Henry Brooks, the minister of St. Mark's Methodist Episcopal Church, to take part in formation discussions.

Villard authored the call that emphasized the political and civil rights of African Americans. The organization was known as the National Negro Committee when they met for their first conference on May 31 and June 1 of 1909, but it changed its name to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) when it was organized as a formal institution. The association was headed by an executive committee and had its first local office in New York City.

Du Bois was hired in 1910 as director of publications and research, and he launched *The Crisis*, the house journal of the NAACP. After a first run of 1,000 copies, the publication became a quick success, and it had a circulation of 100,000 copies by 1918.

At the time of Booker T. Washington's death in 1915, the association had grown to become the primary black organization in the nation. By 1919, it had grown to 310 branches and over 90,000 members.

Legal and Legislative Battles

The primary impact made by the association was in the legal and legislative arenas. One of the association's first sustained campaigns was for antilynching legislation. The group lobbied Congress for the passage of the Dyer Antilynching Bill, which was defeated in 1922. In the 1930s, NAACP legal staffers

drafted a bill to make lynching a federal crime. This bill failed to pass in the U.S. Senate. Despite its legislative setbacks, the NAACP was successful in raising awareness of the issue by placing newspaper ads that were titled "The Shame of America." Mass meetings and lectures were also used to rally support.

The association's challenge to disenfranchisement started with a case against a "grandfather clause" that was amended to the Oklahoma constitution in 1910. The law stated that "no one could register to vote unless they could read or write." The first NAACP national president, Moorfield Storey, argued the case in the United States Supreme Court in 1915. The Court handed the NAACP an important victory by striking down the statute ruling that it was a violation of the Fifteenth Amendment.

Another important fight against disenfranchisement related to white primaries. States got around the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling prohibiting laws barring blacks from voting in general elections by passing laws establishing white Democratic primaries. Charles Hamilton Houston, dean of Howard Law School and later NAACP special legal counsel, argued an early voting rights case in the Supreme Court. The case, *Nixon v. Herdon*, involved a Texas statute that prevented blacks from voting in Democratic Party elections. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously in 1927 that the law was unconstitutional. The association also fought disenfranchisement cases in the state courts in Virginia, Texas, and Arkansas. In 1944, the white primary was struck down in the *Smith v. Allright* case in the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court ruled that the right to vote was protected by the Constitution.

The association took on hundreds of cases involving segregation in education. In 1935, after Houston was hired by NAACP president Walter White, he won the *Murray v. Maryland* case in the Maryland Supreme Court in 1935. The case concerned graduate and professional schools and was the first of many cases that would lead to the landmark *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954. Another crucial victory was in the *Sweatt v. University of Texas* case. In *Sweatt*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that separate facilities were inadequate under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The association won one of its most historic decisions for a case it initiated when the U.S. Supreme Court decided in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* that the separate but equal doctrine had no place in the

field of education. NAACP special counsel Thurgood Marshall argued the case. Other civil rights battles were fought over segregation in the military and in travel facilities, restrictive covenants, due process, equal protection for blacks accused of crimes, and nondiscrimination in federal employment.

The NAACP faced tensions during the 1950s and 1960s over its efforts for comprehensive civil rights statutes. Its reliance on a policy of legislative and legal challenge was criticized as the roles of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) increased in the Civil Rights Movement.

The association played a major role in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. During the 1970s the NAACP teetered on the brink of disaster when it was forced to post a cash bond of over \$1.5 million when a lower court ruled against it in a lawsuit that the U.S. Supreme Court eventually overturned. In 1991 the organization played an important role in the passage of the Civil Rights and Women's Equity Act.

Recent Leadership

During the Reagan years, Benjamin Hooks, who had been named NAACP executive director in 1977, led a march of 125,000 strong on Washington, D.C., to protest the changes in the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and Equal Employment Commission by the Republican administration. Hooks relocated the national office to Baltimore in 1986 and retired in 1993. During Hooks's tenure, the association led large voter registration campaigns, opposed apartheid in South Africa, and led the fight against the nomination of U.S. Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork. Hooks's replacement, Reverend Benjamin F. Chavez Jr. served a short and controversial tenure. He was removed in 1994 after allegations that he had used organization money to settle a sexual harassment claim and left the association under a mound of debt. Former U.S. congressman from Maryland Kweisi Mfume was appointed as president and CEO in 1995. Mfume restored fiscal stability by retiring the debt in 2000. Mfume also rebuilt the reputation of the association as a leading civil rights organization. However, relations with President George W. Bush's administration were strained as Bush became the first sitting president since the 1920s to refuse to address the group's national convention. Since Mfume's retirement in 2004

the organization has been run by an interim director. Currently the NAACP has 2,200 local chapters and over a half million members.

—*Timothy J. O'Brien*

Further Readings and References

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