

# How the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Began

By  
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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE  
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## HOW THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE BEGAN

By MARY WHITE OVINGTON  
(As Originally printed in 1914)

THE National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is five years old—old enough, it is believed, to have a history; and I, who am perhaps its first member, have been chosen as the person to recite it. As its work since 1910 has been set forth in its annual reports, I shall make it my task to show how it came into existence and to tell of its first months of work.

In the summer of 1908, the country was shocked by the account of the race riots at Springfield, Illinois. Here, in the home of Abraham Lincoln, a mob containing many of the town's "best citizens," raged for two days, killed and wounded scores of Negroes, and drove thousands from the city. Articles on the subject appeared in newspapers and magazines. Among them was one in the *Independent* of September 3d, by William English Walling, entitled "Race War in the North." After describing the atrocities committed against the colored people, Mr. Walling declared:

"Either the spirit of the abolitionists, of Lincoln and of Lovejoy must be revived and we must come to treat the Negro on a plane of absolute political and social equality, or Vardaman and Tillman will soon have transferred the race war to the North." And he ended with these words, "Yet who realizes the seriousness of the situation, and what large and powerful body of citizens is ready to come to their aid?"

It so happened that one of Mr. Walling's readers accepted his question and answered it. For four years I had been

studying the status of the Negro in New York. I had investigated his housing conditions, his health, his opportunities for work. I had spent many months in the South, and at the time of Mr. Walling's article, I was living in a New York Negro tenement on a Negro street. And my investigations and my surroundings led me to believe with the writer of the article that "the spirit of the abolitionists must be revived."

So I wrote to Mr. Walling, and after some time, for he was in the West, we met in New York in the first week of the year 1909. With us was Dr. Henry Moskowitz, now prominent in the administration of John Purroy Mitchell, Mayor of New York. It was then that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was born.

It was born in a little room of a New York apartment. It is to be regretted that there are no minutes of the first meeting, for they would make interesting if unparliamentary reading. Mr. Walling had spent some years in Russia where his wife, working in the cause of the revolutionists, had suffered imprisonment; and he expressed his belief that the Negro was treated with greater inhumanity in the United States than the Jew was treated in Russia. As Mr. Walling is a Southerner we listened with conviction. I knew something of the Negro's difficulty in securing decent employment in the North and of the insolent treatment awarded him at Northern hotels and restaurants, and I voiced my protest. Dr. Moskowitz, with his broad knowledge of con-

ditions among New York's helpless immigrants, aided us in properly interpreting our facts. And so we talked and talked voicing our indignation.

Of course, we wanted to do something at once that should move the country. It was January. Why not choose Lincoln's birthday, February 12, to open our campaign? We decided, therefore, that a wise, immediate action would be the issuing on Lincoln's birthday of a call for a national conference on the Negro question. At this conference we might discover the beginnings, at least, of that "large and powerful body of citizens" of which Mr. Walling had written.

And so the meeting adjourned. Something definite was determined upon, and our next step was to call others into our councils. We at once turned to Mr. Oswald Garrison Villard, president of the N. Y. Evening Post Company. He received our suggestions with enthusiasm, and aided us in securing the co-operation of able and representative men and women. It was he who drafted the Lincoln's birthday call and helped to give it wide publicity. I give the Call in its entirety with the signatures since it expresses, I think, better than anything else we have published, the spirit of those who are active in the Association's cause.

"The celebration of the Centennial of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, widespread and grateful as it may be, will fail to justify itself if it takes no note of and makes no recognition of the colored men and women for whom the great Emancipator labored to assure freedom. Besides a day of rejoicing, Lincoln's birthday in 1909 should be one of taking stock of the nation's progress since 1865.

"How far has it lived up to the obligations imposed upon it by the Emancipation Proclamation? How far has it

gone in assuring to each and every citizen, irrespective of color, the equality of opportunity and equality before the law, which underlie our American institutions and are guaranteed by the Constitution?

"If Mr. Lincoln could revisit this country in the flesh, he would be disheartened and discouraged. He would learn that on January 1, 1909, Georgia had rounded out a new confederacy by disfranchising the Negro, after the manner of all the other Southern States. He would learn that the Supreme Court of the United States, supposedly a bulwark of American liberties, had refused every opportunity to pass squarely upon this disfranchisement of millions, by laws avowedly discriminatory and openly enforced in such manner that the white men may vote and black men be without a vote in their government; he would discover, therefore, that taxation without representation is the lot of millions of wealth-producing American citizens, in whose hands rests the economic progress and welfare of an entire section of the country.

"He would learn that the Supreme Court, according to the official statement of one of its own judges in the Berea College case, has laid down the principle that if an individual State chooses, it may 'make it a crime for white and colored persons to frequent the same market place at the same time, or appear in an assemblage of citizens convened to consider questions of a public or political nature in which all citizens, without regard to race, are equally interested.'

"In many states Lincoln would find justice enforced, if at all, by judges elected by one element in a community to pass upon the liberties and lives of another. He would see the black men and women, for whose freedom a hundred thousand of soldiers gave their

lives, set apart in trains, in which they pay first-class fares for third-class service, and segregated in railway stations and in places of entertainment; he would observe that State after State declines to do its elementary duty in preparing the Negro through education for the best exercise of citizenship.

"Added to this, the spread of lawless attacks upon the Negro, North, South, and West—even in the Springfield made famous by Lincoln—often accompanied by revolting brutalities, sparing neither sex nor age nor youth, could but shock the author of the sentiment that 'government of the people, by the people, for the people; should not perish from the earth.'

"Silence under these conditions means tacit approval. The indifference of the North is already responsible for more than one assault upon democracy, and every such attack reacts as unfavorably upon whites as upon blacks. Discrimination once permitted cannot be bridled; recent history in the South shows that in forging chains for the Negroes the white voters are forging chains for themselves. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand'; this government cannot exist half-slave and half-free any better to-day than it could in 1861.

"Hence we call upon all the believers in democracy to join in a national conference for the discussion of present evils, the voicing of protests, and the renewal of the struggle for civil and political liberty."

This call was signed by: Jane Adams, Chicago; Samuel Bowles (Springfield *Republican*); Prof W. L. Bulkley, New York; Harriet Stanton Blatch, New York; Ida Wells Barnett, Chicago; E. H. Clement, Boston; Kate H. Claghorn, New York; Prof. John Dewey, New York; Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, Atlanta; Mary E. Dreier, Brook-

lyn; Dr. John L. Elliott, New York; Wm. Lloyd Garrison, Boston; Rev. Francis J. Grimké, Washington, D. C.; William Dean Howells, New York; Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch, Chicago; Rev. John Haynes Holmes, New York; Prof. Thomas C. Hall, New York; Hamilton Holt, New York; Florence Kelley, New York; Rev. Frederick Lynch, New York; Helen Marot, New York; John E. Milholland, New York; Mary E. McDowell, Chicago; Prof. J. G. Merrill, Connecticut; Dr. Henry Moskowitz, New York; Leonora O'Reilly, New York; Mary W. Ovington, New York; Rev. Dr. Charles H. Parkhurst, New York; Louis F. Post, Chicago; Rev. Dr. John P. Peters, New York; Dr. Jane Robbins, New York; Charles Edward Russell, New York; Joseph Smith, Boston; Anna Garlin Spencer, New York; William M. Salter, Chicago; J. G. Phelps Stokes, New York; Judge Wendell Stafford, Washington; Helen Stokes, Boston; Lincoln Steffens, Boston; President C. F. Thwing, Western Reserve University; Prof. W. I. Thomas, Chicago; Oswald Garrison Villard, New York *Evening Post*; Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, New York; Bishop Alexander Walters, New York; Dr. William H. Ward, New York; Horace White, New York; William English Walling, New York; Lillian D. Wald, New York; Dr. J. Milton Waldron, Washington, D. C.; Mrs. Rodman Wharton, Philadelphia; Susan P. Wharton, Philadelphia; President Mary E. Woolley, Mt. Holyoke College; Prof. Charles Zueblin, Boston.

It was thus decided that we should hold a conference, and the next two months were busily spent arranging for it. Among the men and women who attended those first committee meetings were, Bishop Alexander Walters, Mr. Ray Stannard Baker, Mr. Alexander Irvine, Dr. Owen M. Waller, Mr. Gay-

lord S. White, Miss Madeline Z. Doty, Miss Isabel Eaton, besides many of the New York signers of the Call. It was agreed that the conference should be by invitation only, with the one open meeting at Cooper Union. Over a thousand people were invited, the Charity Organization Hall was secured, and, on the evening of May 30th, the conference opened with an informal reception at the Henry Street Settlement, given by Miss Lillian D. Wald, one of the Association's first and oldest friends. The next morning our deliberations began.

We have had five conferences since 1909, but I doubt whether any have been so full of a questioning surprise, amounting swiftly to enthusiasm, on the part of the white people in attendance. These men and women, engaged in religious, social and educational work, for the first time met the Negro who demands, not a pittance, but his full rights in the commonwealth. They received a stimulating shock and one which they enjoyed. They did not want to leave the meeting. We conferred all the time, formally and informally, and the Association gained in those days many of the earnest and uncompromising men and women who have since worked unfalteringly in its cause. Mr. William Hayes Ward, senior editor of the *Independent*, opened the conference, and Mr. Charles Edward Russell, always the friend of those who struggle for opportunity, presided at the stormy session at the close. The full proceedings have been published by the Association.

Out of this conference we formed a committee of forty and secured the services of Miss Frances Blascoer, as secretary. We were greatly hampered by lack of funds. Important national work would present itself which we were unable to handle. But our secretary was

an excellent organizer, and at the end of a year we had held four mass meetings, had distributed thousands of pamphlets, and numbered our membership in the hundreds. In May, 1910, we held our second conference in New York, and again our meetings were attended by earnest, interested people. It was then that we organized a permanent body to be known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Its officers were:

National President, Moorfield Storey, Boston; Chairman of the Executive Committee, William English Walling; Treasurer, John E. Milholland; Disbursing Treasurer, Oswald Garrison Villard; Executive Secretary, Frances Blascoer; Director of Publicity and Research, Dr. W. E. B. DuBois.

The securing of a sufficient financial support to warrant our calling Dr. DuBois from Atlanta University into an executive office in the Association was the most important work of the second conference.

When Dr. DuBois came to us we were brought closely in touch with an organization of colored people, formed in 1905 at Niagara and known as the Niagara Movement. This organization had held important conferences at Niagara, Harpers Ferry, and Boston, and had attempted a work of legal redress along very much the lines upon which the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was working. Its platform, as presented in a statement in 1905, ran as follows:

Freedom of speech and criticism.

An unfettered and unsubsidized press.

Manhood suffrage.

The abolition of all caste distinctions based simply on race and color.

The recognition of the principle of human brotherhood as a practical present creed.

The recognition of the highest and best training as the monopoly of no class or race.

A belief in the dignity of labor.

United effort to realize these ideals under wise and courageous leadership.

In 1910 it had conducted important civil rights cases and had in its membership some of the ablest colored lawyers in the country, with Mr. W. Ashbie Hawkins, who has since worked with our Association, on the Baltimore Segregation acts, as its treasurer.

The Niagara Movement, hampered as it was by lack of funds and by a membership confined to one race only, continued to push slowly on, but when the larger possibilities of this new Association were clear, the members of the Niagara Movement were advised to join, as the platforms were practically identical. Many of the most prominent members of the Niagara Movement thus brought their energy and ability into the service of the Association, and eight are now serving on its Board of Directors.

Our history, after 1910, may be read in our annual reports, and in the numbers of *THE CRISIS*. We opened two offices in the *Evening Post* building. With Dr. DuBois came Mr. Frank M. Turner, a Wilberforce graduate, who has shown great efficiency in handling

our books. In November of 1910 appeared the first number of *THE CRISIS*, with Dr. DuBois as editor, and Mary Dunlop MacLean, whose death has been the greatest loss the Association has known, as managing editor. Our propaganda work was put on a national footing, our legal work was well under way and we were in truth, a National Association, pledged to a nation-wide work for justice to the Negro race.

I remember the afternoon that *THE CRISIS* received its name. We were sitting around the conventional table that seems a necessary adjunct to every Board, and were having an informal talk regarding the new magazine. We touched the subject of poetry.

"There is a poem of Lowell's," I said, "that means more to me to-day than any other poem in the world—" "The Present Crisis." "

Mr. Walling looked up. "The Crisis," he said. "There is the name for your magazine, *THE CRISIS*."

And if we had a creed to which our members, black and white, our branches North and South and East and West, our college societies, our children's circles, should all subscribe, it should be the lines of Lowell's noble verse, lines that are as true to-day as when they were written seventy years ago:

“Once to every man and nation comes the  
moment to decide,  
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood for  
the good or evil side;  
Some great Cause, God’s New Messiah,  
offering each the bloom or blight,  
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and  
the sheep upon the right,  
And the choice goes by forever ’twixt that  
darkness and that light.

“Then to side with Truth is noble when we  
share her wretched crust,  
Ere her cause bring fame and profit, and  
’tis prosperous to be just;  
Then it is the brave man chooses, while the  
coward stands aside,  
Doubting in his abject spirit, till his Lord  
is crucified,  
And the multitude make virtue of the  
faith they had denied.”

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