National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909 to advocate legal resistance to segregation and fight for civil and political liberties for African Americans. It began as an interracial organization made up of professionals, intellectuals, and philanthropists. The founders intended the phrase *colored people* to mean persons of all shades other than white.

The association grew in part out of an earlier organization, the Niagara Movement (1905–10), which was made up of black intellectuals led by W. E. B. DuBois. The Niagara Movement’s demands for full social and civic equality for black Americans stood in opposition to the philosophy of leading African American educator, Booker T. Washington, who believed blacks should not try to fight segregation, but rather accommodate themselves to it while improving their lives economically. Suffering from lack of funds and the absence of a permanent headquarters and staff, the Niagara Movement lost impetus in 1909 and disbanded in 1910. DuBois and several other members of the Niagara Movement then devoted their energies to establishing the NAACP.

The idea for the NAACP came from two white social researchers, William English Walling and Mary White Ovington. Their program immediately attracted a number of distinguished black and white Americans who served as officers, coordinators, and
From its founding, the NAACP was an integrated organization. African American and white members of the Washington, D.C., branch pose for this portrait during a 1917 meeting.

board members. Among these early members, in addition to Ovington, Walling, and DuBois, were the anti-lynching journalist Ida B. Wells, settlement leader Jane Addams, black activist and suffragist Mary Church Terrell, radical publisher Oswald Garrison Villard, and investigative journalists Lincoln Steffens and Ray Stannard Baker. Prominent Jewish Americans were also involved, including social settlement worker Henry Moskowitz and Columbia University Literature professor Joel E. Spingarn. Spingarn’s brother, Arthur, established the NAACP’s Spingarn Medal, still awarded today for outstanding achievement by a black American in any field.

The NAACP embarked on a series of court challenges to residential segregation, barriers to voting rights, exclusion of African Americans from juries, and restrictive real estate contracts. The latter prevented whites from selling houses to African Americans in order to keep white neighborhoods from being integrated. Case by case, NAACP lawyers established precedents that helped win rights for all minorities.

Starting with its nationwide protest of the racist film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which depicted Reconstruction-era African Americans as irresponsible and dangerous and members of the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan as heroes, the NAACP began its long crusade against racial stereotyping and the violence that attended it. Its first major campaign concentrated on efforts to stem the epidemic of lynching that had plagued the United States since the 1880s. Risking personal safety, NAACP members conducted firsthand investigations of racial violence and published a review of 30 years of lynching records. They lobbied Congress year after year to pass a federal antilynching bill. Although the bill never passed, the exposure and political pressure generated by the crusade did help to reduce the incidences of lynching.

Active in pursuit of economic equality and employment opportunities for African Americans during the 1930s and 1940s, the NAACP went on to play a major role in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, initiating the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and joining with the Congress on Racial Equality and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in working for racial integration throughout the South. The NAACP continues today as the nation’s largest advocacy group for the rights of minorities.