

Civil rights project on walter white



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At the turn of the 19th century, life in the United States was rapidly changing. The Second Industrial Revolution, along with lingering tensions from the Civil War, provided challenges as well as opportunities for many Americans. Walter White was born in 1893 to parents and was the fourth of seven children. His father was a postal worker and his mother a teacher; his family was considered one of the most influential black families in Atlanta. Their membership in the First Congregational Church signified just how influential they were, as this was a symbol of status for African Americans in the late 19th and early 20th century

Walter White had light skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. Out of thirty-two great-great grandparents, only seven of White's were black. His great grandmother, who was a slave, was sexually assaulted by her master, William Henry Harrison, and had six children by him. One of her children, White's grandmother, was also sexually assaulted by her master, and had four children by him, one being White's mother. White could have chosen to identify as white, but he decided he could not be part of a race filled with so much hatred, which he observed first hand during the race riots of 1906.

As his family was part of the elite social class, White along with all of his siblings, went on to receive a college education. He attended Atlanta University, where W. E. B. DuBois actually taught two of his older siblings. The White family and W. E. B. DuBois were quite close, and although White and DuBois had different opinions regarding the methods of gaining equality, they had similar overarching visions of an equal society.

After White's graduation from Atlanta University in 1916, he became an insurance salesman. Around the same time, he helped found the Atlanta branch of the NAACP and became one of its secretaries. Shortly after its establishment, the Atlanta branch of the NAACP met with success when they were able to prevent the public school system from eliminating seventh grade in black middle schools.

After a few years as a secretary, White was approached by James Weldon Johnson, the national secretary of the NAACP, who enjoyed White's political abilities so much so that the national board of the NAACP gave him title of assistant national secretary. Following this promotion, White moved to New York City. There, his primary work became investigating lynchings and race riots. Due to his light complexion, those who were participants in these acts of violence would speak candidly to him about their involvement. White would write reports and submit them to the NAACP, who would then publish them.

One of the first race riots White investigated took place in Little Rock Arkansas and is known as the Elaine Race Riot. Black sharecroppers had been holding meetings to discuss organizing a labor union, and the surrounding white landowners, disliking the talk of labor unions, had tried to suppress the meetings. The black sharecroppers put guards in place to defend their meetings and when the two parties clashed, it ended in a white man's death. The outrage from white landowners had led to the death of over two-hundred black sharecroppers.

White, undercover as white reporter from the Chicago Daily News, was granted an interview with the governor of Arkansas, Charles Hillman Brough. From this interview, White gained the governors approval to investigate and interview the state's militia, who had killed the sharecroppers. White published his findings in four different magazines, including the NAACP's, which led to a retrial held by the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court decided that the previous ruling in the Elaine Race Riot had been unconstitutional, as many of the members in attendance in the trial were armed, which was interpreted as intimidation of the court.

Furthermore, twelve of the seventy-nine black defendants were sentenced to death, while the remaining sixty-seven were given sentences of over twenty years. None of the white participants who had killed black sharecroppers were ever tried.

Due to the nature of this work, White often found himself in dangerous circumstances. When those whom he had interviewed discovered his true identity, White was in danger of lynching and death himself. However, the likelihood of this violence did not deter White, and he continued investigating, going so far as to almost joining the Klu Klux Klan undercover. He investigated forty-one lynchings as well as eight race riots, and went on to write a book entitled " The Rope and the Faggot" which detailed his investigations. His book is still considered a first-hand accurate account of the violence and lynchings that took place in the early nineteen hundreds.

Although working as assistant secretary to the NAACP and investigating lynchings was White's main focus, he was also a key participant in the

Harlem Renaissance. He would often buy manuscripts from writers such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, introduce writers to publishers, and promote concerts of black musicians such as Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes. Many of the musicians who received public attention during the Harlem Renaissance have White to thank for his promotion of their music.

He himself wrote two books during this time. "Fire in the Flint" tells the story of a young black man who is killed by whites after he becomes race conscience. "Flight" is a fictional account of a young black woman seeking fame and fortune during the Harlem Renaissance by blending into the white scene. She later returns to her race, seeking spiritual fulfillment. White's books received mixed reviews, even though both works were critically acclaimed, but his contributions to the Harlem Renaissance were officially recognized in 2010 when he was inducted into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame.

In 1930, White became the NAACP's official secretary, following the retirement of James Weldon Johnson, their former secretary. After White's promotion, he put his full focus on involving the NAACP in political matters. One of their first cases was the Scottsboro trial. Two white girls accused nine black men of rape. In Thomas Dyja's book "Walter White" he describes the scene as such: "[the] Scottsboro boys looked to be prime lynching material: dirt poor, illiterate, and of highly questionable moral character even for teenagers" (121). At this time, the Communist party was seeking to secure allegiance with the black community in the United States. Both the NAACP and the Communist party sought to be the party to represent African

Americans, and the Scottsboro trial was something both parties wanted involvement with.

Unfortunately, the Communist labor advocacy International Labor Defense arrived on the scene prior to the NAACP. Due to this, the families of the nine black men accused chose to be represented by the Communist party. Pratt, the author of 1971 book "Walter White", discusses why the Communist party's representation of blacks was bad news: "Communism meant that blacks have two strikes against them: blacks were aliens in white society where skin color was more important than initiative or intelligence, and blacks would also be Reds which meant a double dose of hatred from white Americans" (14). Ultimately, the Communist party failed in representing the black community and the NAACP proved itself reliable in later political cases.

For example, White orchestrated the campaign against President Hoover's nomination for Supreme Court. Hoover's nomination, John Parker, was a previous governor of North Carolina who was known for his ignorance towards African American problems and his distaste of free labor. White's campaign was successful, and was a key campaign in proving the NAACP's ability in political matters.

Following this successful campaign, the NAACP, with White as their driving force, went on to oppose other candidates running for government office. They especially targeted those in the South known for their prejudice towards African Americans. In states where there was a considerable black minority, the NAACP had significant success in blocking many nominations.

In succeeding presidencies, White continued to have success in garnering support for civil rights. During Franklin Roosevelt's Presidency, White had direct access to the White House because of his close friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt. The first lady actually became a significant member of the NAACP's national board of directors. Because of these connections, White and the NAACP were quite successful in their anti-lynching campaigns, almost resulting in official legislation outlawing the practice; unfortunately, the bill was blocked by Southern Democrats.

Furthermore, White's participation in A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement lead to President Roosevelt issuance of a national ban on racial discrimination.

In Truman's presidency, White's close work with Truman secured a national report on civil rights in 1947, officially know as " To Secure These Rights". Of course, the work of White and the NAACP is most widely recognized in the famous court case Brown v. The Board of Education which established the former idea " separate but equal" to be unconstitutional.

White's work to promote equality went further than the United States borders. During World War II, White traveled to the Pacific investigating accusations against African American soldiers. He continually promoted the idea of dismantling European colonialism and providing equality, especially to those of his own race. Twice, White was sent to the United Nations as an official United States delegate.

Although White was recognized as an extraordinary force in the NAACP, he faced criticism in his personal life. He was divorced from in first wife in 1949

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and remarried a white South African in the same year. He received harsh disapproval from his colleagues and friends following the marriage, Some, including his own sister, went so far as to say that he had always wanted to be white,. His son, Walter White Jr., changed his name to Carl Darrow in an effort to express his disgust and to separate himself from White. However, White simply ignored the criticism and continued to promote integration. White continued his duties as national secretary until his death in 1955.

In his eulogy, The New York Times stated White's contribution to civil rights as " the nearest approach to a national leader of American Negroes since Booker T. Washington" (par. 4). Walter White died at the age of sixty-one, although his life work could fill close to one-hundred years.

White could have chosen a simple life and identified as white. But he felt so strongly about black oppression and injustice that he could not stand by, and instead devoted his life to civil rights. His promotion of black artists and authors during the Harlem Renaissance gave voice to those oppressed, and gave America a unique culture and history. His own works, such as " Fire in the Flint" and " Flight", provided a deeper understanding of the 1920s and are still relevant works of literature today.

Because of his investigations of lynchings and race riots, America has first hand accounts of the violence that took place in the 20th Century. Although many white supremacists would like to deny their involvement in lynchings, White has captured their candid descriptions, and the lives that were wrongfully taken have been given a semblance of justice. Furthermore, White's close work with the NAACP was crucial in establishing it as political

force. His work with the Scottsboro trial, as well as the campaign to block Supreme Court Nominee John Parker, were key events in proving the NAACP's competence concerning political matters.

Without White, it is hard to say how the NAACP would have progressed and grown. It is certain however, that White had a lasting impact. His light complexion and desire to see a cultural change in the United States brought the NAACP and America closer to a truly equal society. Although White never lived to see true integration, he practiced it in his own heart and sphere of influence. White was a civil rights activist when many chose to be complacent. He was before his time and paved the way for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

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