

NAACP White Woman Founder: Mary White Ovington moved a country. Born into a wealthy abolitionist family in 1865, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery, she attended a prestigious girls' school in Brooklyn then Harvard Annex, now Radcliffe College. As a young woman she helped found Brooklyn's Greenpoint Settlement in 1895 and worked there without remuneration until 1903 to improve conditions for the working class. She joined the Social Reform Club where she became aware through Booker T. Washington that racism existed in the North, not only in the South. She had never thought of Negroes as a separate class. This transformed her.

She began to study the status of Negroes in the North. She investigated their housing conditions, their health, their opportunities for employment, or not. She interacted with the many educated Negroes in New York and learned from them about discriminatory race issues, specifically educational and enfranchisement roadblocks put up by whites. She decided her future reform work would be to improve conditions for colored people.

In 1904 she met W.E.B. DuBois of Harvard and they began a dialogue centered on social reform. She supported his work through fundraisers and, as a reporter for the *New York Evening Post*, she promoted and publicized his efforts to end racial discrimination in America. She grew to believe that something of major proportion had to be done that would move the country.

Ovington was part of the Cosmopolitan Club, a group of about thirty black and white citizens who, since 1906, had been meeting in private homes to discuss improved race relations. In 1908 she organized a public meeting in a New York restaurant. It was considered scandalous and unfavorable press coverage nationwide cursed her.

That summer, race riots exploded and raged for days in Springfield, Illinois, home of the great emancipator Abraham Lincoln. Lynching and violence in Springfield's streets shocked and shook the country as mobs of whites, many distinguished citizens, killed and wounded hundreds of blacks and drove thousands from the city.

Multiple articles about the riots appeared in newspapers and magazines far beyond the boundaries of Illinois. One in *The Independent* titled "Race War in the North" by William Walling, himself a white man, described atrocities by whites committed against colored people.

Walling wrote of how the spirit of the abolitionists needed to be revived, that the Negro must be treated on a plane of absolute political and social equality or the war on race would transfer to the North. He ended his article with a seemingly unanswerable hypothetical question: "Yet who realizes the seriousness of the situation, and what large and powerful body of citizens is ready to come to their [the Negro's] aid?"

The article reached Ovington who was living in a New York Negro tenement after months of having lived in the South. Her surroundings, her investigations, her interracial experiences, her abolitionist roots, and now these riots confirmed her belief something of major proportion had to be done to move the country. She did realize the seriousness of the situation about which Walling wrote and she had an answer to his hypothetical question. Ovington wrote to Walling.

Walling did not respond for some time, when he did, they met in New York the first week of January 1909. Dr. Henry Moskowitz, a white man in the administration of the New York city mayor's office, joined them. Oblivious of what was to come, no minutes were recorded.

In a small New York apartment, in the midst of rampant racial unrest, groundwork to establish what was to become the NAACP began. And, it began as an interracial organization by a white woman of privilege, conviction, and courage when Ovington proposed a stalwart nationwide interracial organization be formed. After she cited her studies, investigations and knowledge about unjust treatment of Negroes in the North, the meeting ended with a formal call for a national conference to discuss her proposal.

The “Call” was signed by sixty influential people, most from Ovington’s inner circle. Sixteen were women, four from Hull-House, Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Mary McDowell, and Lillian Wald, also Ida B. Wells. Others included: DuBois, Moskowitz, Walling, Wm. Lloyd Garrison, and Francis Grimke. All but Wells, Grimke, and DuBois were white.

A committee was formed from these supporters and a National Negro Conference was held in New York later that same year. The following year at a second conference the organization was formalized and named the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Ovington’s efforts assured that over a third were women and arranged for black women to have active roles.

Throughout a tumultuous period to organize an uncharted black and white endeavor, Ovington worked tirelessly. She was the chief fund-raiser and conference organizer, traveled the country recruiting supporters and starting local branches. She served as board member, executive secretary and chairman. Most of her contributions were unpublicized.

Honored by the board in 1931 as the “Mother of the New Emancipation,” Ovington continued her work until 1947 when poor health and her 82 years of age left her unable to serve as the NAACP white woman founder who moved a country.

Sources: *Freedom’s Daughters*, Lynne Olson; *NAACP 100 Celebrating a Century 100 Years in Pictures*, Gibbs Smith Press; www.25.uua.org/uuhs/duup/articles/marywhiteovington.html.