

## History of the NAACP

***Jewish activists and philanthropists played a significant and often underrecognized role in the founding and early development of the NAACP in 1909. In the wake of the 1908 Springfield, Illinois race riot—a violent eruption that underscored the persistence of racial terror in the North as well as the South—a coalition of Black and white reformers came together to confront lynching, disenfranchisement, and systemic discrimination. Among them were Jewish leaders whose moral convictions, financial resources, and organizational experience proved instrumental in shaping the new civil rights movement.***

***Henry Moskowitz was one of the original members of the organizing committee that issued the historic “Call” for a national conference on racial justice, deliberately released on February 12, 1909, the centennial of Abraham Lincoln’s birth. That Call, signed by approximately sixty individuals—including W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell—marked the formal beginning of what would become the NAACP. Jewish signatories and supporters stood alongside African American intellectuals and white progressives in a bold declaration that racial injustice was a national moral crisis requiring sustained, organized resistance.***

***Philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Company, became one of the organization’s most important financial backers. Beyond direct support to the NAACP, Rosenwald later funded thousands of schools for Black children across the segregated South, demonstrating a long-term commitment to educational equity and institutional capacity-building. His contributions strengthened the NAACP’s early stability, allowing it to develop a national structure, support legal challenges, and expand anti-lynching advocacy.***

***Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch brought prominent moral and theological voices to the movement. Their leadership reflected Reform Judaism’s strong engagement with social justice and civic reform. They framed racial equality not only as a constitutional***

***obligation but as a religious and ethical imperative. Lillian Wald, founder of the Henry Street Settlement in New York, contributed organizational expertise and reform networks that helped connect the NAACP to broader Progressive Era social movements. Wald's work among immigrant communities and the urban poor reinforced the principle that civil rights struggles were interconnected with labor rights, public health, and social welfare reform.***

***Jewish involvement in the NAACP was often grounded in both universal ethical traditions—particularly the concept of Tikkun Olam (repairing the world)—and in lived historical experience. Many Jewish Americans, particularly immigrants or children of immigrants, were acutely aware of antisemitic persecution in Europe, including the Russian pogroms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These shared experiences of discrimination and exclusion fostered a sense of solidarity with African Americans confronting racial terror, segregation, and political disenfranchisement in the United States.***

***The collaboration between Jewish reformers and African American leaders helped define the NAACP's early identity as an interracial organization committed to democratic processes, constitutional litigation, and public advocacy. W.E.B. Du Bois, the organization's only Black executive in its early years and founder of The Crisis magazine, worked within this multiracial coalition to develop strategies that combined research, legal challenges, public education, and protest.***

***The Spingarn family—Joel and Arthur Spingarn—later played particularly influential roles in the organization's governance and growth. Arthur Spingarn served as NAACP president for many years and helped sustain the organization financially and administratively through critical periods. Their enduring commitment ensured continuity, institutional development, and the strengthening of the NAACP's legal defense strategies, which would later culminate in landmark civil rights victories.***

***This early partnership between Jewish activists and African American leaders established a powerful model of interracial collaboration against injustice. It demonstrated that the struggle for civil rights***

***required both moral conviction and material support, both grassroots activism and institutional leadership. The alliance helped lay the structural and philosophical foundation upon which the NAACP would grow into the nation's largest and most influential civil rights organization, shaping anti-lynching campaigns, voting rights advocacy, and constitutional litigation for decades to come.***