

# Roy Wilkins

Journalist and Civil Rights Leader  
1901-1981

by David Conrads

Roy Wilkins, the grandson of slaves, devoted his life to improving the social, political, and economic status of African Americans. As a young man, he spent eight years in Kansas City before taking a position with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in New York City. He came to national prominence as the leader of the NAACP during the crucial years of the civil rights struggle.

Wilkins was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and raised by relatives in St. Paul, Minnesota, after the death of his mother. He attended an integrated high school, where he served as editor of the newspaper. His interest in journalism continued at the University of Minnesota, where he worked for both the college newspaper and a local black weekly. In 1923 he was hired by Chester Franklin, founder and publisher of the *Kansas City Call*.

During his eight-year stint as a reporter and, later, managing editor, Wilkins chronicled episodes of racial injustice in Kansas City and championed the cause of civil rights in the *Call's* editorial pages. He also served as secretary of the Kansas City branch of the NAACP. It was during a national convention in Kansas City that he met Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP, who later offered Wilkins a job in the organization's national headquarters.

Wilkins left Kansas City for New York in 1931. In 1934, in addition to his duties as White's chief assistant, he succeeded W. E. B. DuBois as editor of the *Crisis*, the NAACP's monthly magazine. After White's death in 1955, Wilkins became the leader of the nation's largest civil rights organization, a position he held until 1977.

Unlike more militant groups that emerged in the 1960s, the philosophy of the NAACP was to fight injustice primarily through litigation and lobbying. During Wilkins' tenure, membership in the organization grew from 25,000 to more than 400,000. His calm and thoughtful leadership earned him the respect of Presidents and working-class blacks alike.



## Sources

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