Just more than 50 years ago, public water fountains were labeled “white” or “colored” in the South. The signs there directed white people to use one fountain, and black people to use the other one. Restrooms and public schools were segregated by race, too. African Americans could not use department store fitting rooms or sit at lunch counters. They had to ride in the back of buses or in special cars on trains. Just about everywhere they went in the southern states, African Americans were treated like second-class citizens and told to use inferior facilities.

In the 1950s, the modern civil rights movement began to change all that, and this issue highlights some of the most pivotal moments in that struggle. The fight for civil rights, however, began before the 1950s.
At the turn of the century, for example, African American journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett defied death threats to write articles that exposed the evils of lynching mobs. In 1909, a group of black people and white people founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP is the oldest and largest civil rights organization in the United States.

When black soldiers returned to the United States after fighting in World War I (1914–1918), many were not willing to resume life in a segregated society. They had fought for the country, and now they were prepared to fight for their rights. They began to form local and state organizations to press for change.

During the 1930s and the Great Depression, African Americans participated in “don’t buy where you can’t work” campaigns. During World War II (1939–1945), black workers joined trade unions, protested employment discrimination, and challenged racial inequality. When another generation of black soldiers returned from fighting overseas, they also refused to accept a return to a segregated society. They tried to register to vote throughout the South.

And in 1955, about 13,000 African Americans in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, turned out to support voting rights and protest racial violence. Journalist Simeon Booker described it as the “state’s largest civil rights meeting in almost fifty years.”
Their experiences prior to the 1950s and 1960s convinced black activists that by joining together and speaking out, they could bring about change. Two men in particular played important roles during these early years.

**LEGAL BRAIN**

Charles Hamilton Houston (BELOW) was a key figure in the early legal struggle against segregation. Born in 1895, Houston graduated from Amherst College. He served in a segregated army unit in France during World War I and then attended Harvard Law School.

He became a teacher and vice dean of the all-black Howard Law School. In that position, he trained the next generation of black attorneys to use the law as a tool for social change. He insisted that his students be “sentinels guarding against wrong.” He became the chief lawyer for the NAACP. Houston and his team of attorneys won many important legal decisions.

Indeed, from the 1930s onward, Houston, his students, and his colleagues gradually chipped away at the laws upholding segregation. Houston argued cases on behalf of African American railroad workers in the South, who were excluded from all white unions that threatened their access to jobs. He tackled racial segregation in graduate education and housing.

Houston’s approach to change was methodical and took a good deal of time. But his efforts were rewarded in 1954, when the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that separate but equal schools were unconstitutional (see page 6). Houston had laid the legal foundation for that landmark decision, which put the federal
government on the side of supporting racial equality.

**FAMOUS ACTIVIST**

A. Philip Randolph (RIGHT) was another early civil rights pioneer. Born in 1889, he moved from Florida to New York in 1911, where he became a radical journalist and activist. As the leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, he led the all-black union to an unprecedented victory in the mid-1930s. He attacked labor discrimination and promoted black unionization as a vehicle for social change.

Randolph became the nation’s best-known black activist. During World War II, African Americans were excluded from most new jobs in the defense industry and segregated in the armed forces. In early 1941, Randolph formed the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), promising to bring 100,000 black protesters to the nation’s capital. “We loyal Negro American citizens demand the right to work and fight for our country,” the new organization insisted.

Randolph used his influence to force President Franklin D. Roosevelt to issue an executive order. The president created the Fair Employment Practice Committee aimed at opening up jobs to black workers. Randolph later challenged President Harry S. Truman to end racial discrimination in the military.

“We are creatures of history,” the 80-year-old Randolph observed in 1969, “for every historical epoch has its roots in a preceding epoch.” He knew that the modern civil rights revolution drew ideas, methods, inspiration, and even personnel from earlier eras. Randolph insisted that his generation “stood on the shoulders of the civil rights fighters of the [post-Civil War] Reconstruction era and they stood upon the shoulders of the black abolitionists.”

The famous events highlighted in these pages led to enormous shifts in American attitudes regarding race issues. But it is important to remember the many people who first challenged racial inequality. Those individuals and organizations established the solid foundation upon which the modern civil rights movement was built.

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