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Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement

Sometimes, especially as events recede into the past, we think of great social movements as happening "somewhere else," led by remote figures from far away. The Civil Rights Movement is becoming part of our national historical background, remembered only in a few highlighted events or national figures. But the truth is that the reason the movement was as successful as it was, was because of the foundation laid by community leaders throughout the United States for generations before the days when bus boycotts and non-violent demonstrations drew national attention. Graduate student Shirley Green here places northwest Ohio black community leaders in the context of the national movement which has done so much to change the social life of our country.



▶ George and Myrtle Phillips, seen here in their wedding photograph were influential educators in their Cincinnati community.

The origins of the American Civil Rights Movement of 1955 to 1968 can be traced to the Reconstruction Era, a period of amazing transition for American blacks, especially in the South. The Freedmen's Bureau was established by the federal government to provide assistance to newly freed blacks in the form of food, clothing, housing, education, and protection from intimidation and violence—especially in their use of the right to vote. As newly freed slaves tried to adjust to their new status as American citizens, black groups created schools and colleges to educate their children; they formed organizations to protest segregation and to improve the lots of blacks everywhere. The end of Reconstruction policies saw the gains made by federal legislation and programs offset by the losses created by white backlash in the form of the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow laws. The most pervasive of these laws was the Supreme Court ruling, *Plessy v Ferguson* in 1896, which upheld the legality of racial segregation.



Ella P. Stewart, Toledo pharmacist, also became an influential civic reformer, goodwill ambassador, civil rights leader and women's rights advocate. Center for Archival Collections. General Photograph Collection. ➤

As southern blacks moved to the North in droves during the Great Migration, in an attempt to escape racism and find better economic opportunities, they would soon realize that blacks in the North also suffered from racial discrimination as well. The early decades of the 20th century represented a nadir in American race relations. Widespread racism was left unchecked. Jim Crow had become deeply entrenched in U.S. society. Blacks in the south were denied the basic right to vote and blacks throughout the nation were affected by racial segregation in terms of public transportation, education, and housing.

Ella P. Stewart and George A. Phillips were born into this period of polarized race relations. Ella Nora Phillips Stewart was born on March 6, 1893 in Stringtown, West Virginia. She attended high school at the age of twelve at Storer College— the only school in the region that accepted black students. She married Charles Myers and began a family. She had one daughter who died at a young age from whooping cough. Advised by friends to turn her attention to new concerns, she began working as a bookkeeper at a local drug store, where she developed an interest in pharmacy which would affect the rest of her life. George Augustus Phillips was born on December 22, 1885 to Reverend Lloyd Phillips and Georgiana (Howard) Phillips in Washington Township, Paulding County, Ohio. He graduated from Paulding High School in 1907 and began teaching. Although he then farmed for a few years, he went back to teaching in 1917 when he moved to Cassopolis, Michigan—a decision that would serve him well.

Following the tradition of self-help groups established in the Reconstruction Era, many individuals and groups within the black community rose up to meet the challenges of discrimination and inequality. W.E.B. DuBois and others established the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1911. The association's charter proclaimed its mission:

To promote equality of rights and to eradicate caste or race prejudice among the citizens of the United States; to advance the interest of colored citizens; to secure for them impartial suffrage; and to increase their opportunities for securing justice in the courts, education for their children, employment according to their ability and complete equality before the law.

George and Myrtle Phillips pay their respects at the Booker T. Washington monument at Tuskegee. Phillips was a great admirer of Washington's work, and this trip to Alabama was to visit the school founded by a man who had done much to inspire Phillips' own work in education. 📌



Ida B. Wells, another co-founder of the NAACP, teacher and later journalist, fought against inferior school systems for black children and challenged segregation in public transportation. As a journalist, she would spearhead an anti-lynching campaign that raised awareness about that abhorrent practice. Booker T. Washington helped to establish the Tuskegee Institute in 1881 as a part of his vision to see the advancement of the black race through economic independence, self-help, hard work, and a practical education. He would also found the National Negro Business League (NNBL) to promote "commercial, agricultural, educational, and industrial advancement" of African Americans in 1901.



📌 Employees of William "Doc" and Ella Stewart's Pharmacy, seen here about 1945.

Many blacks hearkened to the advice of DuBois, Wells, and Washington and sought to advance themselves and their race through education and entrepreneurship. Ella P. Stewart and George A. Phillips are prime examples of that philosophy. As a young woman, Ella P. Stewart decided to go into the field of pharmacy. She was initially denied entry into the University of Pittsburgh's School of Pharmacy due to racial discrimination; however, she persisted and gained admission. She was segregated from other students, but graduated with high marks and passed the state exam in 1916, to become the first licensed African American female pharmacist in Pennsylvania and one of the earliest practicing African American female pharmacists in the country. She and her husband, William Stewart, opened the first black-owned pharmacy in the city of Toledo in 1922.

After graduating from Paulding High School in 1907, George Phillips began a career in teaching. He would later attend Western Michigan State College in Kalamazoo, Michigan during the early twenties and graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1924. He obtained a second degree from the University of Cincinnati in 1927 and went on to teach in the Cincinnati Public School system for many years. He became principal of the Harriet Beecher Stowe School in 1934 and was responsible for directing and guiding the education of most black students in the Cincinnati school district.

Ella P. Stewart, President of the National Association for Colored Women, leaves by train for the 1952 Los Angeles convention. ▶

Women had played a strong role in improving the conditions for black Americans. Ida B. Wells' anti-lynching campaign was one example of this. Mrs. Wells was a veteran of the women's club movement that addressed the needs and concerns of African Americans on a local basis. The creation of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) served to unite those clubs. The association was the product of a merger in 1896 of the National Federation of Afro-American Women and the National League of Colored Women, two organizations that had risen out of the African American women's club movement. Founders of the NACW included Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida Bell Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell. The group's motto "Lifting as We Climb", referred to their dedication to the advancement of the black race. They tackled important political issues of the time, including suffrage and lynching. They also continued the work of earlier women's groups in their offering of social services not otherwise available to the African American community, such as child care facilities, residences for young women and homes for the aged. Ella P. Stewart became involved in the women's group movement in her early years in Toledo. Through her work with a local women's group, the Enterprise Charity Club, Stewart developed a reputation of leadership that led to her eventual election in 1944 as President of the Ohio Association of Colored Women. She would later become the president of the NACW from 1945-1952. During her presidency, the NACW lobbied effectively for many progressive measures: passage of anti-lynching and anti-poll tax legislation, fair employment practices legislation, equal opportunity for housing and education, the support of black-owned businesses, and the development and expansion of endowment and scholarship funds for young black women.



With the 1954 Supreme Court ruling *Brown v Board of Education* and the official dismantling of Jim Crow and segregation, the civil rights movement picked up steam and became even more active in its quest to aggressively challenge, on a national and local level, the laws that prevented full citizenship for African Americans. People like George Phillips and Ella P. Stewart maintained their vigilance in fighting for the rights and needs of the black community. Ella Stewart pushed for desegregated seating in movie theaters in Toledo. She also became one of the first members of the Toledo Board of Community Relations—a group charged with creating social justice, equal opportunity and a harmonious environment. The Board also sought to address unlawful discriminatory practices, interference with civil rights and any strains on racial and cultural relationships. In Cincinnati, George Phillips retired from the school system after over thirty years of service. He led Harriet Beecher Stowe School and its feeder schools to many improvements and would eventually earn an honorary doctoral degree from the University of Cincinnati for his years of service.

The history of the civil rights movement in America is filled with major events and important people of the 20th century. Important achievements are: the legal victory of *Brown v Board of Education* that overturned the doctrine of "separate but equal", passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that banned discriminatory practices in employment and public accommodation, passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that ensured voting rights for all and passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 which banned discriminatory practices in housing. The history of the movement is also filled with the hard work and efforts of lesser-known individuals who, throughout their lives, fought for human dignity and world peace. As exemplified through the lives of Ella P. Stewart and George A. Phillips, black Americans in all walks of life participated in individual acts of activism on a local and personal level that would eventually lead to a larger more comprehensive movement that would change the course of American history.

—Shirley Green

THE PHOTOGRAPHS IN THIS ISSUE feature the images taken from the Ella P. Stewart Collection (**MS 203**) and the George and Myrtle Phillips Collection (**MS 377**), available to researchers at the Center for Archival Collections.

See also:

- [African-American Legacy Project](#)