

The NAACP's Spingarn Medal

by Don Neal



As America's oldest civil rights organization, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) remains a fixture in fighting for civil rights and social justice for all.



In 1914, Joel Elias Spingarn (May 17, 1875–July 26, 1939) established the Spingarn Medal, awarded annually by the NAACP for outstanding achievement by an African American. His will included a bequest to fund the Spingarn Medal in perpetuity. More than 100 people have been awarded the Spingarn Medal. Of them, 24 men and eight women have also been commemorated on a U. S. postage stamp. The women are the focus of this one-page exhibit.

Joel Elias Spingarn was an American educator, literary critic, civil rights activist, military intelligence officer, and horticulturalist. He was born in New York City to an upper middle-class Jewish family. He graduated from Columbia College in 1895. He served as a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University from 1899 to 1911.

Politics was one of his lifetime passions. In 1908, as a Republican, Spingarn ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the U. S. House of Representatives. Spingarn, one of the few White Americans who decided in the 1900s decade to support the radical demands for racial justice being voiced by W. E. B. Du Bois, was a delegate to the national conventions of the Progressive Party in 1912 and 1916. At the first of those conventions, he failed in his attempts to add a statement condemning racial discrimination to the party platform and subsequently took up the cause of racial justice. As an influential liberal Republican, Spingarn helped realize the concept of a unified Black movement by joining the NAACP shortly after its founding and was one of the first Jewish leaders of that organization, serving as chairman of its board from 1913 to 1919, its treasurer from 1919 to 1930, and its second president from 1930 until his death in 1939.



In 2009, Joel Spingarn was among twelve civil rights leaders honored with images appearing on six American postage stamps issued to mark the centenary of the NAACP.

The Moorland–Spingarn Research Center (MSRC), located on the campus of Howard University in Washington, D. C., is recognized as one of the world's largest and most comprehensive repositories for the documentation of the history and culture of people of African descent in Africa, the Americas, and other parts of the world. It is named for two benefactors whose collections provided the foundation upon which later development could be built. In 1914, Jesse Edward Moorland (September 10, 1863–April 30, 1940), a Black theologian, community executive, civic leader, and book collector who was an alumnus and trustee of Howard University, donated his private library, at that time considered to be one of the most significant collections of Black-related materials in existence. In 1946, Howard University acquired the large personal library of Joel Elias Spingarn's brother, Arthur Barmette Spingarn (March 28, 1878–December 1, 1971), an attorney, social activist, and prominent collector of books, newspapers, manuscripts, and other materials produced by Black people. He succeeded his brother, Joel, as president of the NAACP in 1940 when the legal arm of the organization was spun off into the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and served as the NAACP's president until 1965.



1935: Mary McLeod Bethune (July 10, 1875–May 18, 1955) was an educator who was active nationally in African-American affairs and was a special adviser to President Franklin D. Roosevelt.



1979: In 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks (February 4, 1913–October 24, 2005) courageously refused to give up her seat on a municipal bus to a White man and became an iconic figure in the civil rights movement.



1939: Marian Anderson (February 27, 1897–April 8, 1993) was a contralto singer. She performed a wide range of music from opera to spiritual. She became the first Black American to perform at the Metropolitan Opera.



1958: Daisy Gatson Bates (November 11, 1914 – November 4, 1999) played a leading role in the Little Rock Integration Crisis of 1957. She mentored nine Black students who enrolled at all-White Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The students used her home as an organizational hub.

1992: Barbara Jordan (February 21, 1936– January 17, 1996) was a lawyer, educator, and politician. In 1976, she became the first Black American, and the first woman, to ever deliver a keynote address at a Democratic National Convention.



1983: Lena Horne (June 30, 1917–May 9, 2010) was a dancer, actress, singer who appeared in film, television, and theatre. whose career spanned more than seventy years, Horne advocated for human and civil rights and took part in the March on Washington in August 1963.



1993: Dorothy Height (March 24, 1912–April 20, 2010) was a civil rights and women's rights activist and a leader in the civil rights movement and considered a member of the March on Washington's "Big Six." She was the president of the National Council of Negro Women for 40 years.



1994: Maya Angelou (April 4, 1928–May 28, 2014) was a memoirist, popular poet, and civil rights activist best known for her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), and for reciting her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at the first inauguration of Bill Clinton (1993).