

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt — Advocate for Civil Rights

Eleanor Roosevelt's support of African American rights was one of the highlights of her activities as first lady. Her fearless advocacy for justice pulled her into political controversies that were unprecedented for the wife of a president. The First Lady's initiatives in support of the rights of African Americans offer an excellent window into the society and politics of the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. Eleanor Roosevelt was passionately committed to the ideals of social justice. She viewed racial discrimination as a blatant form of injustice that had been tolerated for too long. She actively cultivated relationships with civil rights leaders, and she was at the center of major events in civil rights history, among them the controversy that arose in 1939 when the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow Marian Anderson to sing in Constitution Hall. Through her activism, she hoped to rally public opinion in favor of civil rights. As First Lady, she also knew that she was uniquely situated to have the ear of the president, and she was fully prepared to use this access to promote any cause in which she believed.



United States stamps depicting Eleanor Roosevelt were issued October 11, 1963, in Washington, D.C.; October 11, 1984, in Hyde Park, New York; and September 10, 1998, in Cleveland, Ohio.

Born Anna Eleanor Roosevelt on October 11, 1884, she was a political figure, diplomat, pacifist, and activist. She was the First Lady of the United States from 1933 to 1945, during her husband President Franklin D. Roosevelt's four terms in office. Through her father, she was a niece of President Theodore Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt died November 7, 1962.

In 1939 classical singer **Marian Anderson** was on a national tour. She was scheduled to give a concert for Howard University in Washington DC. When the university tried to book a venue at Constitution Hall controlled by the Daughters of the American Revolution organization, they were told that the hall was for White performers only. When word of this reached Walter White, Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, he saw an opportunity to publicize this injustice. He sought help from his friend and DAR member Eleanor Roosevelt. The DAR refused to budge so Mrs. Roosevelt then asked Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, a former member of the NAACP, if they could hold an outdoor concert at the Lincoln Memorial instead. Ickes agreed and even introduced Ms. Anderson.

First Lady Eleanor-Roosevelt, wife of the Chief Executive, talks to five-year-old **Geraldine Walker** at the ceremonies inaugurating the slum clearance in Detroit, Michigan.



First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt continued her support for civil rights by going to President Franklin Roosevelt to propose racial equality in the United States. In such a move, the First Lady supported the efforts of **A. Philip Randolph** and others to promote the establishment of the Tuskegee Army, the first Black pilots trained on U. S. soil. These pilots eventually fought air missions during WWII that helped to win the war. Before that time, Jim Crow laws prohibited the training of Black pilots in the U. S. During this period of Jim Crow laws when the U.S. military was still segregated, a Civil Rights Movement was taking shape right under the noses of those who opposed it most. The Tuskegee Army became known as Red Tails. A. Philip Randolph's reputation as the most dangerous Black man in America did not deter Mrs. Roosevelt from stepping in with whatever assistance her image could lend the civil rights issues. The First Lady even flew with a Tuskegee Airman to cement her support for the Black pilots' program.



Franklin D. Roosevelt's isolation from Civil Rights came to an end due to the influence of two amazing women. The warm friendship between **Mary McLeod Bethune** and Eleanor Roosevelt (literally) opened the Oval Office door to a brilliant Black educator and civil rights advocate. FDR came to admire Mrs. Bethune and listened to her concerns with real interest. In 1936, FDR named her head of the new Office of Minority Affairs in the National Youth Administration, making Bethune the most highly placed Black woman in the administration. Bethune was aided by the close friendship she'd forged with first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who saw eye to eye with Bethune on civil rights and women's issues. The two went out of their way to appear together in public, in a conspicuous rejoinder to Jim Crow.



In the spring of 1941, with war raging in Europe and the likelihood that the United States would soon be drawn into the conflagration, Eleanor Roosevelt asked to be given an aerial tour of an airfield still under construction and in desperate need of funding. Assisted by the pilot, the First Lady climbed aboard the single engine, two-seater Piper Cub and off they soared. Upon exiting the plane at the end of her 40-minute flight, Roosevelt confidently announced, "Well, he can fly alright!" Her endorsement, along with a widely distributed photograph of the smiling First Lady and the celebrated Black pilot, the late **Charles Alfred "Chief" Anderson**, garnered much attention for the newly established program to train Black pilots at the Tuskegee Institute — just as the First Lady, an ardent supporter of civil rights, knew it would.



May 7, 1941, **Alain Locke** and Eleanor Roosevelt, patrons of the arts, at the dedication of the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago, a community-based organization dedicated specifically to Black artists.



Eleanor Roosevelt and Dr. James McClendon, board members of the NAACP, go over the 1947 program with NAACP executive officers Walter White and **Roy Wilkins** as **Thurgood Marshall** looks on. Mrs. Roosevelt joined the NAACP during Franklin D. Roosevelt's first term in 1934 and began working with leader Walter White to outlaw lynching. This work earned her a lot of enemies, as well as some death threats. Critics of her husband, like J. Edgar Hoover, spread racist rumors that she was mixed race; in the 1950s, the Ku Klux Klan put a \$25,000 bounty on her head. Her work also caused a rift between her and her husband, whom she never could convince to support anti-lynching legislation.



On June 29, 1947, as the first American president to address the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Harry Truman pledged his support for upholding the civil rights of all Americans. **Walter White**, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, and Eleanor Roosevelt accompanied President Truman to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D. C., where Truman delivered the closing address of the 1947 NAACP convention.



In 1955, Eleanor Roosevelt met NAACP activists **Rosa Parks** and E. D. Nixon, the union leader and civil rights advocate who helped launch the Montgomery bus boycott, the event that propelled Martin Luther King, Jr. into the national spotlight. Rosa Parks, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Auerhine Lucy Foster (the first African American to enroll at the University of Alabama) pose together prior to a civil rights rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City in May 1956.



Jackie Robinson joined the NAACP board in 1957 believing in their work. In his role as fundraising chair for the NAACP Freedom Fund Campaign, Robinson traveled all over the country. Invites came regularly for Robinson to speak at all kinds of events. Eleanor Roosevelt and **Jackie Robinson** (center) at the Manhattan School for Boys, June 16, 1959.



First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was an advocate for civil rights and an ardent supporter of **Martin Luther King, Jr.** from his Montgomery bus boycott days until her death six years later. For the next several years, Roosevelt and King enjoyed frequent correspondence. When King was arrested for perjury on his income taxes in February 1960, Roosevelt joined the Committee to Defend Martin Luther King and the Struggle for Freedom in the South. King called Mrs. Roosevelt "perhaps the greatest woman [of] our time," praising "the courage she displayed in taking sides on matters considered controversial" and her "unswerving dedication to high principle and purpose." Eleanor Roosevelt presented Martin Luther King, Jr. with an award from the Americans for Democratic Action circa 1961.



First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt hosted a tea on October 26, 1951, to study some of the dolls that were submitted to a "color jury" to decide on the most acceptable color for the first "anthropologically correct" Negro doll. The Saralee dolls were created by a Florida businesswoman and social activist Sara Lee Creech (left) and speech teacher and friend Maxeda von Hesse. Creech's close friend, anthropologist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston provided encouragement, strategic planning, and contacts for influential Black leaders and scholars across the country. Also on the jury were Walter White, Executive Director of the NAACP, and **Dr. Ralph Bunche**, Nobel Prize laureate and director of the U. N. Trusteeship Department. Ideal Toy Company manufactured the Saralee dolls from 1951 to 1953.



Former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt receives the Mary McLeod Bethune Human Rights Award from **Dorothy Height**, president of the National Council of Negro Women, New York, November 1960. As First Lady, Roosevelt had championed many social justice causes.



Two champions of civil rights, **Lena Horne** and Eleanor Roosevelt in Mrs. Roosevelt's Manhattan apartment, prior to their appearance on *The Frank Sinatra Timex Show: Here's to the Ladies*. It was Sinatra's third special for ABC and Timex and was broadcast on February 15, 1960.