

# Student Activism, the NAACP, and the Albuquerque City Anti-Discrimination Ordinance, 1947–1952

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On 12 September 1947, George Long, an African American student at the University of New Mexico, was refused service at Oklahoma Joe's café in Albuquerque and sparked a boycott of local businesses that did not serve racial minorities. The boycott began a five-year campaign that resulted in 1952 in the passage of the Albuquerque City Anti-Discrimination Ordinance, which outlawed racial discrimination in the city. The victory was secured through a combination of student activism, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) branch involvement, and broad community participation, including the cooperation of white civic leaders and Hispanics.<sup>1</sup>

The story of the Albuquerque campaign for a city antidiscrimination ordinance shows that the writing of African American history continues to expand into new frontiers. Recent scholarship has broadened historians' understanding of the African American civil rights movement both in timeframe and

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The author wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers, who gave very precise and helpful advice, and would also like to express his gratitude to the editor, Durwood Ball, who showed great patience throughout the development of this article. Lee Sartin's research has focused on the NAACP and civil rights. His first book, *Invisible Activists: Women of the Louisiana NAACP and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1915–1945* (Louisiana State University Press, 2007), won the Landry Prize for best book on a Southern topic. He has also written *Borders of Equality: The NAACP and the Baltimore Civil Rights Struggle, 1914–1970* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013) and coedited *Long is the Way: One Hundred Years of the NAACP* (University of Arkansas Press, 2009). Recent articles have focused on World War I and the NAACP. He is currently writing a textbook on comparative U.S. civil rights movements for Routledge. He is a member of the Royal Historical Society.



Fig. 1. Oklahoma Joe's Postcard. Oklahoma Joe's refusal to serve George Long, an African American student at the University of New Mexico, sparked a boycott and a civil rights campaign that led ultimately to the passage of the Albuquerque City Anti-Discrimination Ordinance. Courtesy of Tichnor Brothers Collection, Print Department, Boston Public Library, Mass.

geographical location. Especially valuable is Quintard Taylor's seminal *In Search of Racial Frontiers: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990*. Scholars have begun to explore the progress of activism and the general rights struggle in western states, regions, and cities such as Seattle, San Francisco, and other locales over the span of the twentieth century. Even with this trend toward examining the place of the West in the civil rights struggle, New Mexico is not usually seen as a state churning with African American civil rights activism. However, the story of the antidiscrimination ordinance campaign in Albuquerque showcases an organized and effective rights struggle in the West that took place before the traditional start of the civil rights movement in the American South in 1955. The campaign also illustrates the importance of grassroots leadership in the long civil rights struggle and highlights youth activism within the black community.<sup>2</sup>

In 1947 students at the University of New Mexico began a direct action and nonviolent campaign that developed into the passage of city and statewide ordinances banning discrimination in public spaces. The campaign propelled one activist, Herbert Wright, into a national leadership role as an NAACP youth advisor during the height of the civil rights movement. This local campaign for an antidiscrimination ordinance in Albuquerque exemplifies the emergence of postwar student and youth activism that led, in combination with civil rights

organizing by the NAACP, to a nationwide civil rights movement. The NAACP branch in Albuquerque was part of this reinvigorated activism and, alongside other liberal-minded social and political groups and individuals, pushed to attain civil rights. The goal was to fulfill the second half of the NAACP's war-time Double-V campaign: victory abroad against Nazism and at home against white supremacy. The demographic realities of New Mexico presented the NAACP with unique organizational complications as it pursued civil rights. New Mexico's black community was small and Hispanics formed the largest minority group. The demographic makeup of the state made it essential for the NAACP to expand its membership beyond the African American community.

Albuquerque had a long-established and stable NAACP branch by the 1940s. The first recorded branch was founded in 1914, when the black population of the city was a mere 244. The Albuquerque branch kept abreast of national issues and their particular impact on the African American population of New Mexico. By the 1960s, Black Power elements of the civil rights struggle accused the NAACP in Albuquerque of being a narrow bastion of and for middle-class interests. To these Black Power elements, the reputation of the Albuquerque NAACP was that of a mere "defensive organization" that relied on national victories for its political value but "had no effect on the local scene and its particular problems."<sup>3</sup> The city branch, however, saw itself as a mainstream civil rights group able to deal with the complex issues of minority discrimination in a region where Hispanics vastly outnumbered African Americans and where racial segregation was based on *de facto* practices not uniformly observed across the state. School segregation in New Mexico, for example, was generally enforced only along the border shared with Texas, whereas lunch counters, theatres, and cinemas were often segregated throughout the state. In the early 1940s, the KiMo Theatre in Albuquerque restricted African Americans to the balcony and to the rear of the main floor, even when seats were available in forward sections.<sup>4</sup>

In 1951 Hobart Lee LaGrone (1898–1966) was president of the Albuquerque branch of the NAACP, "the lone active Branch" in the state. The substantial distance between cities made statewide organizing and cooperation difficult. New Mexico came under the authority of the NAACP's Southwest Regional office along with Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas, with the office being in Dallas, Texas. LaGrone, however, suggested to the national office that linking New Mexico to Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and Arizona (and possibly Nebraska) made more sense, for it would promote common cause in "a region that is sparsely settled by Negroes and which has a healthy backlog of liberal-minded citizens of other racial groups."<sup>5</sup>

LaGrone noted that the New Mexico population was "made up of several ethnic groups—Anglo-Americans (white), Spanish-American, Indian, and Negro."

He observed that “There is possibly as much racial animosity toward the Spanish-speaking group as there is toward the Negro group, but of course, they enjoy, because of their numerical preponderance and political strength, a certain amount of social freedom not enjoyed by the Negro group.” In 1950 the population of Albuquerque was 96,815, a nearly three-fold increase from the 33,449 residents of 1940. The rapid population growth strained Albuquerque’s housing and infrastructure. Although it is a complex task to distinguish between different racial groups in New Mexico at this time, it has been estimated that in 1950 those with Spanish surnames (an imprecise calculation of the Hispanic population) in Bernalillo County amounted to 30 percent of the overall population, while the black population totaled 1.1 percent. The black population of the city was 547 in 1940, rising to only 613 by 1950, and was concentrated in the urban center of Albuquerque.<sup>6</sup>

Membership in the Albuquerque Branch of the NAACP tended to fluctuate, depending on issues and campaigns at any given time. During the particularly eventful year of 1947, when students organized a boycott of segregated stores, the tally stood at 307. By 1951 the branch membership in Albuquerque was 193. Although seemingly a sizable drop, this figure still suggests that a significant number of the city’s black population had NAACP membership. While the Albuquerque branch membership numbers may look small and insubstantial, Albuquerque was in fact the hub of the NAACP in New Mexico. NAACP membership statewide was only 680 in 1947. The city branch membership, which must have also included Hispanic and white members, reflected the national NAACP’s interracial beginnings and integrationist aspirations.<sup>7</sup>

In the postwar period, the NAACP in New Mexico was a coalition of different ethnicities, religious groups, emerging civil rights leaders, and local political elites. Some of the prominent citizens in the city’s NAACP during the 1940s were Hispanics who, LaGrone wrote, “supported us in our local fights.” Their participation suggests that common forms of discrimination affected both groups and that Hispanics and African Americans often found common cause. Some whites also joined the organization; in 1944 the branch treasurer was a white woman, Kathryn Crissey, who was a teacher in the city. In 1946 LaGrone informed the national office that the success of the city’s branch would depend on selling “a large proportion of memberships to persons outside our racial group.” He reported that 25 percent of “our membership has been non-Negro in the past three years.”<sup>8</sup>

The NAACP branch in Albuquerque saw discrimination in terms of prejudice towards a broad non-white population (not just African Americans) and in a national and global setting. Indeed, LaGrone connected the struggles against discrimination in New Mexico with international relations: “New

Mexico becomes the focal point in Inter-American relations since it is the point in the United States where Spanish and Anglo-American meet. Most of the South and Central American countries have proportionally larger colored populations than the U.S., and they will be keenly interested in racial relations here, as an example of American democracy.”<sup>9</sup>

From 1940 the branch gave a subscription of the monthly NAACP journal *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* to the local library as an educational tool for the community. The branch also campaigned against potential discrimination in the local draft board. It was particularly concerned about middle-class blacks being drafted into labor work. In 1943 the daily newspaper *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal* in “conference with the [local NAACP] branch president, announced that hereafter, racial designation in news items whether national or local, will be dropped entirely” to avoid stereotyping, a highly progressive measure for its time.<sup>10</sup>

The Albuquerque branch also organized the broader community against poll tax bills that occasionally appeared in the state legislature. NAACP branch president LaGrone was also local branch secretary of the National Committee to Abolish the Poll-Tax. Local representatives from major faith groups, namely Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, united to pressure New Mexico senator Carl Hatch to block such a tax at the federal level. In so doing, they foiled the imposition of another impediment to minorities’ ability to vote, especially in the South, where state poll taxes were the norm. However, as LaGrone lamented, “The local newspapers took the attitude that since the poll tax was no issue in the State [New Mexico], the matter had no great local interest.” LaGrone worked with the local Ministerial Alliance, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the State Federation of Labor, the American Society of University Women, the Knights of Columbus, and the Anti-Defamation League to lobby for substantive New Mexico civil rights legislation. The coalition also lobbied Congress and the U.S. president for a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to ensure equal opportunities for minorities in federally subsidized industries. The New Mexico FEPC passed in 1949, albeit with limited legal reach.<sup>11</sup>

In 1951 a student from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) studying in California was refused service in an Albuquerque café during a short train stop. The student was told, “We don’t serve Negroes here.” The incident revealed the international reach of racism during the Cold War, and the local NAACP actively highlighted the incident. The student received an apology from the city in a motion supported by City Commissioner Don Wilson. Commissioner Wilson had a working relationship with the local NAACP, an association that illustrates the close links between white political elites and the small black community. Those links helped maintain social calm in the city.<sup>12</sup>

Such cross-group alliances were common and practical in a city where the black population was small but shared common interests with Hispanic groups. Lynching had historically terrorized both African Americans and Hispanics, and remained a daily threat to both groups in some U.S. regions. The oppressive forces the two groups faced were not always enough to create cooperative practices in the early twentieth century, however, because some Hispanic groups, such as LULAC (founded in 1929), promoted a white identity (and Hispanic only membership). The emphasis on Hispanic identity often separated LULAC from black groups, although that began to change in the 1940s and 1950s in the more liberal Albuquerque (but not in other states such as Texas). Nevertheless, NAACP support for federal anti-lynching legislation affected Hispanics as well as African Americans. LaGrone's work for the NAACP tapped into many national efforts against minority discrimination to help shape the local agenda in Albuquerque and New Mexico.<sup>13</sup>

LaGrone had served as NAACP branch secretary for a number of years before becoming its president in early 1943. LaGrone was a fairly typical member of the NAACP in this period. He was part of the black bourgeoisie. His father, a former slave from Mississippi, had left the state for the relative freedom of the West, moving to Oklahoma a year before it became a territory and then to Texas. Hobart LaGrone was born in Texas in 1898 and moved to Oklahoma, where he married Daisy, a home economics teacher, in 1926. The new couple then moved to Washington, D.C., but by 1930 they had moved back west to New Mexico. He worked for the U.S. Postal Service as a postal carrier and was the co-owner of the LaGrone Funeral Parlor from 1937 to 1941 with his younger brother, Oliver (1906–1995), a renowned sculptor. During World War II he served as a chaplain and a captain. He also became a friend of Roy Wilkins of the NAACP national office in New York City.<sup>14</sup>

LaGrone's presidency produced an upward tick in activism for the Albuquerque branch. One of the galvanizing issues in 1943 was public school segregation. LaGrone complained to Thurgood Marshall, "We have mixed schools in all parts of the state except those countys [*sic*] adjoining the state of Texas to the east and south." By 1950 LaGrone had identified eight segregated schools in New Mexico, all "bordering on the Texas state line." In correspondence with Marshall, chief counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, LaGrone expressed his desire to test the constitutionality of segregation in these schools. He sought a potential female plaintiff for the case and, additionally, an amendment to clarify the State School Code to "wipe out the separate school get up . . . in the Southern part of our State."<sup>15</sup>

Although segregation was not legally authorized by New Mexico statute, minorities still had to endure indignities resulting from regional variations in

racial tolerance in the state. In public schools, African American students were invariably separated from their white peers in commencement ceremonies up to the mid-1930s, and they could not play competitive sports against some high school teams (especially if playing against a school from the southeast of the state or from Texas). In 1947 Roswell High School refused to play Albuquerque High School unless it dropped three black football players from its team roster. An *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Tribune* editorial condemned such racism, praised the three players as “skilled, aggressive players and a credit to high school athletics,” and supported the cancellation of the game.<sup>16</sup>

Segregated New Mexico schools for African Americans tended to not be “accredited High Schools” and their graduates had to take extra classes to secure admission to the University of New Mexico. The Albuquerque NAACP branch argued that a division of public funds between segregated schools was expensive and redundant. Branch secretary Margretta Ellis, writing in *The Crisis*, declared, “If the funds used in maintaining the separate schools were used in a single set up, school facilities for all could be improved.” The NAACP argued that the estimated six million dollars needed to bring the few segregated schools up to educational standards via the “separate but equal” rule would be a waste of tax payers’ money. The Albuquerque NAACP branch saw integration as the only practical solution in which all students would benefit.<sup>17</sup>

However, not all black teachers in New Mexico (or elsewhere) concurred with the NAACP on public school integration. The principal and two teachers of Booker T. Washington School in Las Cruces and a teacher from the Negro School in Hobbs spoke against integration before the state legislature. Black teachers—and parents and students—had great pride in their schools, and they believed that shared racial heritage and experience enabled black teachers to empathize with their students’ personal and academic challenges. In African American schools, teachers and students could pursue education away from excessive white scrutiny and interference. Black teachers also worried that under integration they would be let go and their white peers kept on at the affected schools.<sup>18</sup>

The postwar Red Scare also intimidated African American educators and integration proponents. Diehard segregationists cried “Red” against the NAACP to defeat any talk of wholesale integration of public schools, even in New Mexico. LaGrone was investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation for his friendships with persons who had left-wing sympathies and for his name appearing on a mailing list of the International Workers Defense League dating back to the Scottsboro Case in the 1930s. LaGrone explained to a correspondent: “The investigation is aimed at intimidating me. My record is clear and clean however and if left-wingers happen to be among my friends it is merely coincidental and because they are friendly.”<sup>19</sup>



World War II gave impetus to branch organizing and campaigning in Albuquerque, but membership remained low—only 307 members by 1947—and the branch made a concerted effort to increase its rolls. The branch also worked to develop its youth wing, particularly in the student population of the University of New Mexico. Programs for youth development and campaigns for civil rights tended to march in tandem with the NAACP's pursuit of racial equality. In discussions regarding the establishment of youth community centers in Bernalillo County, the Albuquerque NAACP branch "insisted that these projects be interracial." Centers already established, such as the Carver Youth Center, were seen by the branch as aimed exclusively at blacks and reinforcing separatism. The NAACP believed that operating integrated youth facilities (including schools) would teach different ethnic groups to get along in society and instill true American values of equality and inclusion. Older people—white, brown, and black—might still be prejudiced or separatist, but the younger generation could be socialized into the values of integration and democracy. The NAACP and its branches saw integration as a learned experience or sociological condition that needed to be established early in childhood.<sup>20</sup>

Involving black youth, therefore, was a way to recruit "new blood" to the civil rights movement and to help build "tomorrow's leadership." Youth participation could inspire people of all ages to engage in social activism. The NAACP acknowledged that the baby boom and unprecedented affluence were fueling the early stages of a youth-centered culture in America, a development that coincided with the expansion of higher education and its extension to veterans through the GI Bill. The postwar era was a propitious moment to grow and field a vigorous movement for civil rights.<sup>21</sup>

This vision of youth activism was often couched in parental terms. The local NAACP branch assumed the role of the adult, taking care of younger activists. In this set-up, youth were adjuncts in the organization, not autonomous units. The local branch of the NAACP took on the responsibility to develop young individuals into proper American citizens. Adults in the branch would "nurture by an understanding and intelligent leadership . . . the work of these young people [who] will form the reserve force for the older members of the branch." Yet some adults held reservations over whether "the emotions of youth [are] keeping up with their acceleration in physical and intellectual development." College students had entered a transitional stage in their development, and they were highly vulnerable to people and influences of all kinds. Questionable ideologies (or the quest for instant gratification), if they were unchallenged, could produce the wrong type of adult or mislead the budding activist during these formative years.<sup>22</sup>

NAACP leaders saw the establishment of college chapters as a productive vehicle for advancing civil rights. The universities would expose students to a



broad range of intellectual influences, and the student chapters could develop a new generation of black leadership. This new generation could take civil rights activism further toward success by building a network of local community organizers that would eventually create a national movement. However, the practical issue of organizing college students required careful deliberation by NAACP leadership at the national and local levels.

From Albuquerque LaGrone discussed with national headquarters a number of complications regarding student activism. First, to help pay their tuition, many students worked off-campus jobs, which could prevent them from greater commitment to militancy and activism. Second, colleges were often reluctant to allow the NAACP onto campus and to allow students to undertake activism, so diplomacy was required to work with administrators and faculty. Third, student turnover, particularly from graduation, limited their presence in the community and thus participation in their university chapter. Graduation annually removed leadership from the chapter and required ongoing recruitment from the new student body. The difficulties of student activism had scuttled previous attempts to organize students in New Mexico. Reporting to national headquarters in 1947, LaGrone wrote of "several abortive attempts [at student organizing], due largely to our inability to get together during the vacation period a group large enough to organize" a college branch, although "we were successful on September 23rd." The NAACP at the national level well understood the problems that LaGrone raised. The "age vs. youth conflict" was a persistent issue, and "adult branches" often balked at sponsoring "youth groups because they require supervision." The "large turnover in leadership" as "youth go off college campus" was also cited as a problem. At the start of the academic year of 1947, the conditions appeared to be "ripe for building an organization" at the University of New Mexico, despite previous failures and the complications posed by student activism. LaGrone began to pursue the necessary diplomacy, arranging a meeting with the dean "for the purpose of setting up a college chapter on campus." In Albuquerque, the city adult branch appears to have found the investment in student activism to be worthwhile and there were no signs of generational tension between the two groups.<sup>23</sup>

Two students were particularly important to the activism at the University of New Mexico in the late 1940s. George Long from Alabama came to the University of New Mexico in 1946 after serving in the U.S. Army as a second lieutenant during World War II. He studied political science and geology and later enrolled in the University of New Mexico Law School, becoming the first African American to graduate from there in 1952. A year later, he wrote about his experience of civil rights activism and his role in campaigning for and writing the Albuquerque city ordinance.<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 2. George Long. Courtesy of *The Mirage*, 1947, p. 60, University of New Mexico, [http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/unm\\_yearbooks/24](http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/unm_yearbooks/24).

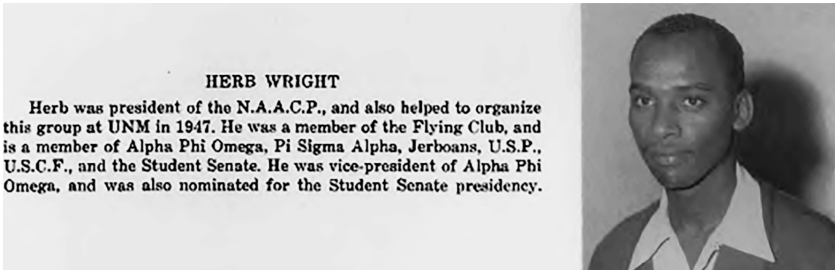


Fig. 3. Herbert Wright. Courtesy of *The Mirage*, 1951, p. 261, University of New Mexico, [http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/unm\\_yearbooks/27](http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/unm_yearbooks/27).

Starting at the University of New Mexico in 1947 at the age of twenty, Herbert Wright brought to the campus extensive experience with civil rights and social justice organizations. A Methodist, he had co-chaired the Rocky Mountain Region of the Intercollegiate Southern Christian Association, been a researcher for the Quaker International Summer Service Political Science Institute, been a member of the Intercollegiate Zionist Federation, and been active in the American Veterans Committee and the United World Federalists. Wright had served as president to the Houston NAACP youth chapter under the auspices of Lulu B. White, a notable female leader of the regional NAACP. Wright had also been a Southwest representative for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). He served in the Eighty-Second Airborne Division from February 1945 to August 1947. The Eighty-Second was one of the earliest army combat divisions to integrate all-black units into its structure.<sup>25</sup>

After arriving at the University of New Mexico, Wright was one of the first black students to become a member of the Alpha Phi Omega fraternity on the campus. Originally from Houston, Wright had hoped to study medicine but “being a Negro, he could not enter the Medical school at the University of Texas.” So he set his sights on the University of New Mexico, which had no medical school at the time, and switched to political science, a course of study that complemented his civil rights and social justice activism.<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 4. Herbert Wright with Fellow Members of Alpha Phi Omega. Wright is second from left in the second from top row. Courtesy of *The Mirage*, 1951, p. 101, University of New Mexico, [http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/unm\\_yearbooks/27](http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/unm_yearbooks/27).

Long and Wright lived during “those formative years following World War II” and took advantage of the “New Deal for Veterans.” The GI Bill gave them and hundreds of thousands of other veterans access to a vast array of new opportunities, including home ownership and higher education. Long and Wright were part of a postwar push on the part of black veterans for expanded access to higher education. The push was exemplified in the NAACP case before the U.S. Supreme Court, *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), which sought to open the way for black veterans to study law at segregated white colleges under the GI Bill. In their pursuit of education, Long and Wright travelled to New Mexico where racial segregation was not as harsh as in their home states of Alabama and Texas.<sup>27</sup>

The confluence of issues, organizations, personnel, and leadership in the postwar political climate resulted in a major attempt to outlaw all racial discrimination in the city of Albuquerque. The process underwent four distinct phases: first, a staging for the refusal of service of a black student at an establishment near (but not on) the campus; second, organizing the student body; third, general boycotting of private businesses that discriminated on the basis of race; and fourth, organizing a university branch of the NAACP. The first two phases happened within a short time period, while the second two both required

longer term organization and campaigning. The object was to secure the wider community's acceptance of the broader goal of integration and community involvement in the specific antidiscrimination ordinance campaign. NAACP national officers such as Ruby Hurley, youth secretary, advised that the Albuquerque branch should seek broad community cooperation so that "Branch, Youth Council and College Chapter can work together" in order to apply suitable political pressure on the City Commission.<sup>28</sup>

The civil rights campaign began in the fall semester that Wright arrived at the University of New Mexico. On 12 September 1947, the editor of the student newspaper, *The New Mexico Lobo*, "employed a well-known journalistic ruse" by sending a reporter along with an African American student, George Long, to Oklahoma Joe's, a café near the campus. Long was refused service and asked to leave. The article covering the incident appeared in the 15 September issue and a "sizable group of irate students on the campus demanded an immediate student council session, to be followed by a general student assembly." The Associated Students of the University of New Mexico initiated a boycott of Oklahoma Joe's, understanding that it was an off-campus private business over which the university itself had little direct influence. A special committee of the student council formed a group to investigate the matter as "students have created the need for positive action." After three days the lack of trade forced the café's owner, Joe Fiensiler, to capitulate "temporarily" to the students' demands, despite his protestations that he was merely following "fraternity dictates in refusing service to Negroes."<sup>29</sup>

On 22 October, the students undertook a university-wide referendum on the issue of a general boycott against any business that discriminated on the basis of race. The measure passed by a three-to-one margin with a 70 percent turnout among the student body. This campaign also facilitated the organization of an NAACP chapter at the University of New Mexico, which took more definitive shape in January 1948. Ruby Hurley of the national NAACP office believed that the local campaign issue made it imperative to formalize a college chapter. She advised Herbert Wright to apply for a charter immediately even if the campus lacked the stipulated minimum of fifty members to start a chapter. It was critical to seize on the enthusiasm of the students, develop their ideas, and propel their activism.<sup>30</sup>

Herbert Wright was central to the chapter's formation. Also helping him were the university minister, Rev. Henry Hayden, and Henry Hornsby, an African American veteran and author from Dallas. Hornsby's memoir, *Trey of Sevens*, about his experiences in the 777th Field Artillery Battalion had, according to Wright, "been the talk of the campus for the last two weeks." The college chapter worked well with the city branch and relied on it for legal advice, while



Fig. 5. Founding Members of the NAACP Branch at the University of New Mexico in 1948. Courtesy of *The Mirage*, 1948, University of New Mexico, [http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/unm\\_yearbooks/25](http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/unm_yearbooks/25).

the student body directed its activism toward a successful boycott of a city Walgreen's drugstore in January 1948.<sup>31</sup>

One problem facing the University of New Mexico chapter was that Wright, its most visible and effective leader, took time out from his studies and was away from campus to pursue other campaigns. In his absence, the chapter lost its long-term strategic focus. When Wright returned to the University of New Mexico at the start of the fall semester in 1948, he discovered that the chapter had fallen into factionalism over some members looking to support former U.S. vice president (1941–1945) and Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace in the presidential election that same year. Wright believed that this sticking point would have been simple to resolve if the chapter had been aware of the non-political affiliation policy of the NAACP.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the internal friction, the campus chapter achieved some successes during 1948. The chapter convinced the university officially to drop the “questions pertaining to race and religion on the official [college] application blank.”

Similarly, the university agreed to admit no fraternity “whose constitution, or bylaws of its parent organization, discriminates or segregates against persons because of racial origin or religious belief,” which in Wright’s case appears to have been applied. The college chapter also sought a “Negro History curricula” as part of university courses. Integrating female dormitories was another object of the campus chapter’s campaign. No university policy had formally excluded black female students, but *de facto* social pressures had prevented them from actively seeking integrated living accommodations on campus. These, however, were college-oriented reforms, whereas Wright was able to give the college chapter a wider social and strategic focus that looked beyond the campus.<sup>33</sup>

During 1950 African Americans continued to experience discrimination in off-campus services, compelling the local NAACP campaign to seek a citywide ordinance to outlaw all discrimination. In May 1950, Emmanuel Talley of CORE visited the University of New Mexico campus and was taken to the Lobo Café, “an institution which was known to discriminate against Negroes.” Talley told the students that he would leave “peacefully” if the manager asked him, but he was “struck on the head by the cook with a bottle of catsup. . . . The police were summoned and the cook [was] arrested on the charge of Assault and Battery. A fine of \$30.00 was levied on him. It was paid for him by Mr. Talley.” A lawsuit, however, was filed against the café manager.<sup>34</sup>

By 1950 the campaign became part of the mainstream political process. City Commissioner Don Wilson, working with local activists, suggested the creation of a Mayor’s Committee to “study the pattern of discrimination here before we attempt to pass an ordinance.” The ordinance eventually put forward for Albuquerque was based on one proposed in Portland, Oregon (which was defeated in a referendum by petition in 1950), “with the penal provisions of the New York city ordinance attached.” Herbert Wright was appointed Program Chair for the college chapter and organized the local campaign for the next year. By October 1950, the University of New Mexico Student Senate gave its unanimous support for a proposed ordinance to “eliminate all discrimination in Albuquerque places of business because of race, creed or religion.” This included “Spanish-Americans” as well as African Americans. Albuquerque’s committee was established in the same month to undertake a “survey of discrimination in the city.” Professor Lyle Saunders of the university’s Sociology Department became chair of the committee and claimed that he would get the survey done within a month, although it eventually took until November 1951 for the committee to release its findings in favor of the ordinance. Wright, president of the NAACP college chapter, activist George Long, Joe Passaretti, president of the Associated Students, and Hobart LaGrone of the city NAACP branch all appeared before the committee and the commission to advocate for the ordinance.<sup>35</sup>



The City Commission of Albuquerque put the committee report through various subcommittees. For the ordinance to become law it required three readings at separate commission meetings. Other city business and a discussion over the constitutionality of the ordinance caused delays, probably procedural maneuvers by opponents of the law, but the city commission eventually passed the Anti-Discrimination Ordinance on 12 February 1952 (Abraham Lincoln's birthday). Long stated that the "ordinance prohibits discrimination in places licensed to serve the general public, and provides for violations." A person found guilty of violation of the law was to be "fined not less than one hundred dollars nor more than three hundred dollars, or shall be imprisoned not less than thirty days nor more than ninety days."<sup>36</sup>

Political opposition collected petitions in an attempt to force the ordinance to be submitted to a state referendum. The leader of the Referendum Group, "young southerner" Bill Upchurch, called the ordinance "more of this old socialist stuff being forced on us by Truman and his gang. It's a question of whether or not we'll have private ownership." However, Upchurch and his supporters fell far short of a serious political opposition and were unable to generate substantial social backlash against the ordinance. To initiate a referendum the petitioners had to acquire 15,000 signatures; they only attracted approximately 1,800 names.<sup>37</sup>

Overall the ordinance was successfully implemented in Albuquerque due to a coalition of students, civil rights groups, and sympathetic politicians and religious organizations. The importance of leadership from students at the University of New Mexico cannot be overstated. A number of works have begun to examine the vitality of civil rights struggles before 1960. Albuquerque exemplifies this trend of local struggles, which complemented postwar efforts to open higher education to minority veterans. Through alliances with similarly-oriented Hispanic groups and local politicians, the Albuquerque NAACP and student groups were able to achieve the first civil rights ordinance in the Intermountain West.

Why did the ordinance of 1952 not provoke a substantial backlash in Albuquerque like those that would dog the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s? In part, there was little backlash because of the localism of the campaign that originated in the higher education establishment. The emphasis on local issues and solutions may have been less threatening to a broader community that did not see the small number of African Americans in Albuquerque as a substantial threat to their way of life. Further, the numerically small black population was able to organize effectively alongside the larger Hispanic minority and influential white liberals. In this manner, the Albuquerque city ordinance was part of a growing movement in urban areas across the country in the post-war period. The Albuquerque ordinance also exhibits the regional aspects of



the struggle for civil rights, demonstrating that there was more latitude for race relations in some places in the West, where the black population was not perceived as a sizable threat. Regional dynamics may also explain why youth movement groups, especially at a university, were able to work well with adult NAACP branches. The concept of youth was broad; the NAACP youth councils had ages that ranged up to the mid-twenties age group (the voting age was twenty-one). Many of the student members of college chapters had fought in World War II. At the same time, the small number of activists meant that cooperation between ethnic groups and age groups was pivotal for gaining an effective campaigning and political voice. Personalities cannot be underestimated in this process, however, and it would appear that LaGrone and college student leaders saw their methods and aims as being entirely compatible. Such a close relationship would not be the case later on, as tensions between adult, student, and youth groups became the norm.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, the issue of generational tensions between NAACP branches does seem to have depended on local conditions and personalities. The example of Albuquerque suggests that in some places and times youth, student, and adult groups could cohere around a program and pursue activism in the context of a consensus and in so doing achieve local successes. The story of student activism in the postwar period is an area of study that has developed significantly in recent years and challenges the popular presumption that student activism did not have an impact prior to 1960.<sup>39</sup>

Studies of civil rights activism in the West show that these were not simply isolated incidents, but were given coherence by the NAACP, nationally, regionally, and locally. These Western movements predate the formal civil rights movement of 1954–1968. They complicate and rewrite the standard narrative by revealing activism in the West, often in conjunction with other minority groups. Indeed, these expanding narratives, both geographic and temporal, contribute to the growing understanding of activism in the long civil rights movement.<sup>40</sup>

The campaign for the Albuquerque antidiscrimination ordinance challenges the Montgomery to Memphis narrative of a southern-focused popular history of the civil rights movement. Cooperation between students, activists, and community groups were integral to political processes across the nation and, as the example of Albuquerque demonstrates, across the American West. Cooperation like that seen in Albuquerque attained surprisingly positive results. In the West, civil rights organizing and campaigning did not necessarily create substantial political backlash that could prevent the passage of antidiscrimination laws or, more generally, their implementation. The New Mexico state legislature, with a realistic and practical template to follow, passed an antidiscrimination law similar to the Albuquerque ordinance in 1955 to cover the entire state. Campaigns

like that in Albuquerque developed local, regional, and national leadership. On 5 July 1951 Herbert Wright became the youth advisor at the national office of the NAACP in New York City and a successful organizer of youth and student groups, although his extensive role has not yet been fully covered by historians.<sup>41</sup>

## Notes

1. *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Tribune*, 15 October 1947, folder 7, box II: E82, MSS 34140, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records, 1842–1999, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [hereafter NAACP Papers]; and George Long, “How Albuquerque Got Its Civil Rights Ordinance,” *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, November 1953.

2. Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998); Bruce A. Glasrud, ed., *African American History in New Mexico: Portraits from Five Hundred Years* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013); Joan Singler, *Seattle in Black and White: The Congress of Racial Equality and the Fight for Equal Opportunity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011); Paul T. Miller, *The Postwar Struggle for Civil Rights: African Americans in San Francisco, 1945–1975* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Matthew C. Whittaker, *Race Work: The Rise of Civil Rights in the Urban West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); and Jonathan Watson, “The NAACP in California, 1914–1950,” in *Long Is the Way and Hard: One Hundred Years of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)*, ed. Kevern Verney and Lee Sartain (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009), 185–99.

3. Roger W. Banks, “Between the Tracks and the Freeway: African Americans in Albuquerque,” in *African American History in New Mexico*, ed. Glasrud, 175.

4. By 1946 NAACP and liberal pressure led the main performance and movie theatres of Albuquerque to forego this discriminatory practice. *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Tribune*, 1946, clipping, and H. L. LaGrone to Gloster Current, 25 November 1946, both in folder 1, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers.

5. Other branches in the state appeared and stabilized in the early 1950s. George M. Cooper, “The Modern Civil Rights Movement in New Mexico,” in *African American History in New Mexico*, ed. Glasrud, 206; “Albuquerque NAACP branch presents Dr. Ralph Bunche in lecture,” 5 May 1952, H. L. LaGrone to Roy Wilkins, 12 March 1951, and Gloster Current to Rev. Jerry W. Ford, 25 November 1949, all in folder 2, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; H. L. LaGrone to Walter White, 22 April 1946, folder 1, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; and Bruce A. Glasrud, “Introduction: Under the Radar: Blacks in New Mexico History,” in *African American History in New Mexico*, 15.

6. Octaviano Ambrosio Larrazolo (1859–1930) of New Mexico was the first Hispanic U.S. Senator, appointed to fill an unexpired term in 1928. H. L. LaGrone to Gloster Current, 15 October 1946, folder 1, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; and Robert Turner Wood, *The Postwar Transformation of Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1945–1972* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: Sunstone Press, 2014), 82, 371n1.

7. H. L. LaGrone to Roy Wilkins, 18 October 1947, folder 1, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; Banks, “Between the Tracks and the Freeway,” 174; and Cooper, “The Modern Civil Rights Movement in New Mexico, 1955–1975,” 201.

8. It is difficult to know the exact racial composition of the branch as no membership lists were found in the archives. A. L. Mitchell to E. Frederick Morrow, 15 January 1940, and H. L. LaGrone to Roy Wilkins, 27 March 1944, both in folder 7, box II: C-114, NAACP Papers; and H. L. LaGrone to Lucille Black, 31 May 1946, folder 1, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers.

9. H. L. LaGrone to State Senator Leonard Ginn, 16 March 1945, folder 7, box II: C-114, NAACP Papers.

10. *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Tribune*, September 1951, folder 2, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; "Albuquerque New Mexico branch news," 19 February 1943, William Pickens to H. L. LaGrone, 24 May 1940, H. L. LaGrone to Roy Wilkins, 27 December 1943, and H. L. LaGrone to Senator Chavez, 19 January 1944, all in folder 7, box II: C-114, NAACP Papers.

11. H. L. LaGrone to Roy Wilkins, 4 February 1946, and H. L. LaGrone to Roy Wilkins, 11 June 1947, both in folder 1, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; and H. L. LaGrone to Clarence Mitchell, 26 January 1949, and Madison Jones to H. L. LaGrone, 5 May 1949, both in folder 2, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers.

12. H. L. LaGrone to State Senator Leonard Ginn, 16 March 1945, folder 7, box II: C-114, NAACP Papers.

13. Even in Albuquerque, alliance between the two minority groups was a recent phenomenon. As late as the 1920s, there were no Spanish surnames on the NAACP rolls in the city. William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848–1928* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2013), 125–26; Wood, *The Postwar Transformation of Albuquerque*, 47–48; Brian D. Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 2, 8; and "Blacks and Latinos Build Coalition in Texas," *The Crisis*, November–December 2005.

14. *The Crisis*, March 1951, 195; H. L. LaGrone Obituary, *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal*, 19 April 1966; "Ex-Sculptor LaGrone Hard at Work at 87," *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal*, 16 January 1994, 4; and Daisy M. LaGrone Bullhorse Obituary, *DeKalb (Ill.) Daily Chronicle*, 9 April 2005.

15. Roy Wilkins to H. L. LaGrone, 17 February 1943, and H. L. LaGrone to Thurgood Marshall, 22 September 1943, both in folder 7, box II: C-114, NAACP Papers; Madison Grant to Gloster Current, 14 September 1946, folder 1, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; H. L. LaGrone to Gloster Current, 2 January 1950, and H. L. LaGrone to Clarence Mitchell, 26 January 1949, both in folder 2, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; and Banks, "Between the Tracks and the Freeway," 175–76.

16. H. L. LaGrone to Roy Wilkins, 18 October 1947, folder 1, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Tribune*, 9 October 1947; and *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Tribune*, 10 October 1947.

17. Margretta Ellis, "The Negro Enemy," *The Crisis*, November 1951; and Margretta Ellis to Gloster Current, 16 February 1951, folder 2, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers.

18. By the 1952–1953 academic year there were African American teachers on the school staff in Albuquerque. Margretta Ellis to Gloster Current, 1 March 1951, folder 2, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; R. L. Chambers, "The Negro in New Mexico," *The Crisis*, March 1952; and Charise Cheney, "Blacks on *Brown*: Intra-Community Debates over

School Desegregation in Topeka, Kansas, 1941–1955,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 481–500.

19. H. L. LaGrone to Walter White, 19 May 1948, folder 1, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; and H. L. LaGrone to Herbert Wright, 12 January 1953, folder 7, box II: E-82, NAACP Papers.

20. H. L. LaGrone to Lucille Black, 10 July 1945, and H. L. LaGrone to Lucille Black, 26 June 1945, both in folder 7, box II: C-114, NAACP Papers; H. L. LaGrone to Gloster Current, 15 October 1946, and H. L. LaGrone to Roy Wilkins, 18 October 1947, both in folder 1, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; and H. L. LaGrone to Henry Lee Moon, 5 December 1951, folder 2, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers.

21. Roy Wilkins address to Freedom Fund Dinner of Chicago NAACP branch, 12 June 1959, folder 6, box 54, MSS75939, Roy Wilkins Papers, 1901–1980, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [hereafter RWP].

22. Roy Wilkins address to Freedom Fund Dinner of Chicago NAACP branch, 12 June 1959, and Roy Wilkins speech to Jamaica, New York, branch Freedom Fund Dinner, 26 October 1959, both in folder 6, box 54, MSS75939, RWP; Resources in Negro Youth, February 1940, and Workshop I, Youth: Meeting the Challenge of Change, report, 49th Annual NAACP Convention, Cleveland, Ohio, 8–13 July 1958, both in folder 6, box II: E-45, NAACP Papers; and Rebecca de Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World: Young People and America's Long Struggle for Racial Equality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 236–37.

23. H. L. LaGrone to Ruby Hurley, 6 October 1947, and H. L. LaGrone to Roy Wilkins, 16 October 1947, both in folder 7, box II: E-82, NAACP Papers; and NAACP memo for files, 22 May 1956, folder 5, box III: E-53, NAACP Papers.

24. “George Long,” BlackPast.org, accessed 30 June 2017, <http://www.blackpast.org/aaw/long-george-2010>; and Glenn C. Altshuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *GI Bill: The New Deal for Veterans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 134–39.

25. Merline Pitre, *In Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900–1957* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 25; Walter White to Gloster Current, memo, 20 June 1947, folder 7, box II: C-335, NAACP Papers; and Lulu White to Gloster Current, 15 May 1951, Biographical Sketch of Herbert L. Wright, and Herbert Wright to Gloster Current, 1 May 1951, all in folder 2, box II: E-57, NAACP Papers.

26. Robert Langford, field director, Hadley School for the Blind, Illinois, to Roy Wilkins, 26 June 1959, folder 3, box III: E-53, NAACP Papers.

27. Robert Langford, field director, Hadley School for the Blind, Illinois, to Roy Wilkins, 26 June 1959, folder 3, box III: E-53, NAACP Papers; and Altshuler and Blumin, *GI Bill*, 134–39.

28. Ruby Hurley to David C. Coleman, 11 February 1948, folder 7, box II: E-82, NAACP Papers.

29. Most fraternities were segregated, although nominal integration had begun in certain colleges and states. Illinois fraternities started integrating in 1946. This suggests that Wright’s inclusion into a campus fraternity may have been a local (and, perhaps, an informal) decision—but was not unprecedented. Matthew W. Hughey, “Rushing the Wall, Crossing the Sands: Cross-Racial Membership in U.S. College Fraternities,” in *Brothers and Sisters: Diversity in College Fraternities and Sororities*, ed. Craig Torbenson and Gregory S. Parks (Madison, Wis.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 259;

*Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Tribune*, 15 October 1947, folder 7, box II: E-82, NAACP Papers; Long, "How Albuquerque Got Its Civil Rights Ordinance"; and Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 284.

30. Ruby Hurley to Herbert Wright, 11 February 1948, folder 9, box II: E-82, NAACP Papers.

31. Herbert Wright to Ruby Hurley, 20 January 1948, folder 9, box II: E-82, NAACP Papers; and Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 284–85.

32. Herbert Wright to Ruby Hurley, 3 September 1949, folder 9, box II: E-82, NAACP Papers.

33. Herbert Wright to Ruby Hurley, 3 September 1949, Ruby Hurley to Herbert Wright, 11 February 1948, and Herbert Wright to Ruby Hurley, 15 March 1948, all in folder 9, box II: E-82, NAACP Papers.

34. Richard Stephenson to Ruby Hurley, 7 June 1950, folder 9, box II: E-82, NAACP Papers.

35. Richard Stephenson to Ruby Hurley, 7 June 1950, *The Daily Lobo*, 20 October 1950, *The Daily Lobo*, 24 October 1950, and Herbert Wright to Ruby Hurley, 1 November 1950, all in folder 9, box II: E-82, NAACP Papers; Long, "How Albuquerque Got Its Civil Rights Ordinance"; and 1950 Civil Rights Ordinance defeated, Archives and Records Management, Office of the City Auditor, City of Portland, Oregon, accessed 13 July 2017, [www.portlandoregon.gov/archives/article/284517](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/archives/article/284517).

36. Albuquerque NAACP branch presents Dr. Ralph Bunche in lecture, 5 May 1952, folder 2, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; and Long, "How Albuquerque Got Its Civil Rights Ordinance."

37. H. L. LaGrone to Walter White, 22 May 1952, folder 2, box II: C-115, NAACP Papers; Annual branch activities report, Albuquerque, 1952, folder 3, box II: 271, NAACP Papers; and Albert Rosenfeld, "New Mexico's Fading Color Line: Albuquerque Shows the Way," *Commentary*, September 1955, 203–11.

38. In 1938 the NAACP set the age membership of youth councils at sixteen to twenty-five. It was not until 1958 that the NAACP annual conference debated whether the age bracket should be lowered from twenty-five to twenty-one. Committee on Youth Services, National Social Welfare Assembly, 22 October 1959, folder 6, box III: E-53, NAACP Papers; Thomas Bynum, *NAACP Youth and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1936–1965* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013), 155; Glasrud, "Introduction: Under the Radar," 18–19; Lee Sartain, *Borders of Equality: The NAACP and the Baltimore Civil Rights Struggle, 1914–1970* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), 144; and Clive Webb, *Rabble Rousers: The American Far Right in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 21.

39. Gretchen Cassel Eick, *Dissent in Wichita: The Civil Rights Movement in the Midwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); de Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World*; Martha Biondi, *Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 2012); Ibram Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); Bynum, *NAACP Youth*; and Alexis Monique Johnson, "'What role we, as Negro youth of America, could play': a new history of the Louisville NAACP youth, 1937–1955" (master's thesis, University of Louisville, 2015), *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, 2206, <https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/2206>.

40. Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233–63; Will Guzman, *Civil Rights in the Texas Borderlands: Dr. Lawrence A. Nixon and Black Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Bruce A. Glasrud, "Early NAACP Struggles in Texas, 1914–1932," *Journal of South Texas* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2016):24–33; Whittaker, *Race Work*; and Keith Jerome Crudup, "African Americans in Arizona: A Twentieth Century History," (Ph.D. diss., Arizona State University, 1998).

41. Gloster Current to Walter White, memo, 3 July 1951, folder 2, box II: E-57, NAACP Papers; Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (London: Allen Lane, 2011) 171; Sartain, *Borders of Equality*, 122–23; and "Danbury man who debated Malcolm X to speak at church program Friday night," 7 October 2009, *Danbury (Conn.) Newstimes*, accessed 12 July 2017, <http://www.newstimes.com/opinion/article/Danbury-man-who-debated-Malcolm-X-to-speak-at-163114.php>.

