



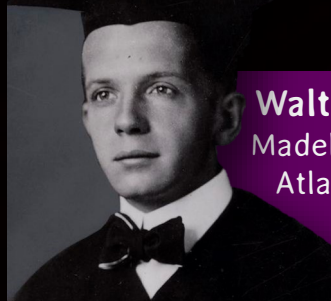
# The Clerk's Black History Series

**Debra DeBerry**  
Clerk of Superior Court  
DeKalb County

**Walter Francis White**

(July 1, 1893, - March 21, 1955)

"Civil Rights Activist"



**Walter Francis White**, was born July 1, 1893 in Atlanta, Georgia to George and Madeline White. His mother and father, were graduates of Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University). At the age of twelve, Walter witnessed a murderous riot where local whites attacked and killed two dozen black Atlantans and injured hundreds more in 1906. Walter graduated from high school in 1912 and completed Atlanta University in 1916. The influence and strength of his educational resources led Walter to begin

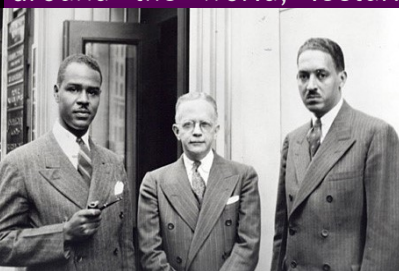
working in the field of social justice activism. In 1918, Walter moved to New York City and began working at the national headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), at the request of James Weldon Johnson.

Walter's parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were of mixed race, equally, black and white, giving Walter blonde hair, blue eyes and light skin, which he used to his advantage. "Passing" for white allowed Walter to infiltrate "Whites Only" groups and meetings that an obvious black appearance would have prohibited. His education and background coupled with his appearance gave him a unique way of serving through part of his career with the NAACP.

Walter's first job with the NAACP was as a secretary's assistant. But a short time later, he began working as an undercover agent, traveling thousands of miles every year between 1918 and 1927, investigating lynchings in the South. His appearance provided safety as he traversed through the hostile Southern states, interviewing local whites about reported lynchings and attacks. Most white people were oblivious to Walter's true racial identity and they spoke freely, sharing gut-wrenching details of their lynchings and assaults on local black communities. Walter took notes. In total, he reported first-hand on forty-one lynchings, eight race riots and two major cases of peonage.

In 1931 Walter succeeded James Weldon Johnson as the national secretary of the NAACP. His deep south investigative work helped change the trajectory of public opinion that would eventually secure future federal anti-lynching, anti-poll-tax and anti-segregations laws.

During World War II, Walter visited the European, North African and Pacific theaters of war, reporting on the experiences of black servicemen on American military bases for the New York Post and other periodicals. In 1945, he sent a letter to President Truman detailing discrimination in the US Armed Forces and requesting the President hold accountable those who would withhold military promotions based on race. In his lifetime, Walter F. White traveled extensively, including two trips around the world, lecturing and investigating racial discrimination. He made thousands of public speeches, wrote five books - including two novels, one hundred articles for national magazines, while writing two weekly columns year after year - appearing in both black and white publications.



Walter Francis White died March 21, 1955, in New York City. He was 61 years old.

