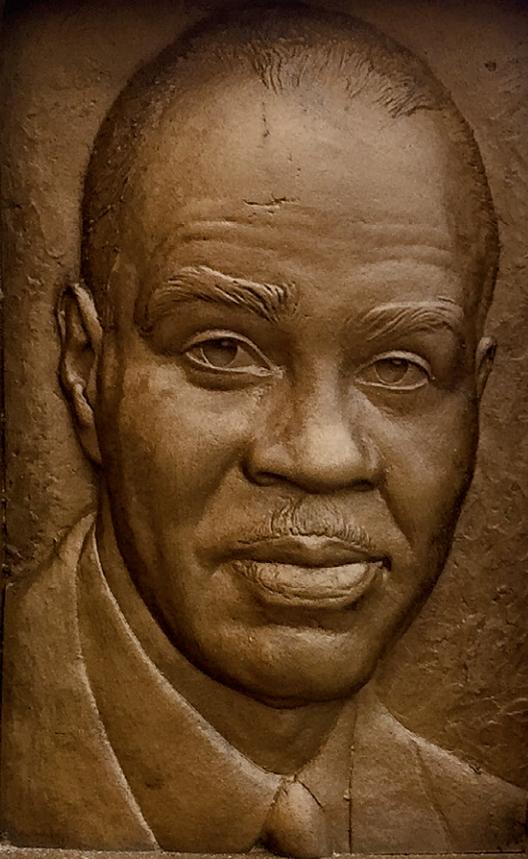


# Roy Wilkins in Minnesota

REMEMBERING A  
CIVIL RIGHTS HERO



ROY WILKINS  
1901-1981

National Civil Rights Leader  
Former Saint Paul Resident  
ACP National Executive Secretary,  
1955-1977

The only likeness of Roy Wilkins in the Spiral for Justice sculpture on the Minnesota Capitol Mall is contained in an outer wall, among a series of small pull-open inserts.

## Lisa Heinrich

Just a five-minute walk from the former site of Mechanic Arts High School in St. Paul stands a memorial to one of its most illustrious graduates, Roy Wilkins, a pivotal figure in the twentieth-century civil rights movement. Unlike other luminaries honored with a memorial on the State Capitol Mall, Wilkins is not represented by a traditional statue. *Spiral for Justice*, a sculpture and plaza erected in 1995 on the southwest side of the mall, rather, is an artistic yet enigmatic work.

Efforts to commemorate Roy Wilkins in Minnesota began shortly after his death in 1981 and continued for years thereafter. While some proposals succeeded, others failed to materialize or were diminished. In addition to *Spiral for Justice* on the Capitol Mall, major public honors that did come to pass were the naming of the Roy Wilkins Auditorium in the St. Paul Civic Center (now Xcel Energy Center) and an endowed chair at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. An examination of these and other efforts to honor Wilkins provide an opportunity to reacquaint readers with the life and accomplishments of the man known to many as "Mr. Civil Rights."

Roy Wilkins (1901–81), a 1923 graduate of the University of Minnesota, spent 46 years with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The 22 of those years that he served as its top executive (1955–77) were focal years of the civil rights movement. During his tenure, the NAACP spearheaded efforts that led to significant victories, including *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Wilkins was one of the chief planners of the 1963 March on Washington, the 1965 Selma to Montgomery marches, and the 1966 March Against Fear. On August 30, 1963, he was on the cover of *Time* magazine. He also led the campaign for the Fair Housing Act of 1968. He consulted with five presidents—John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter.<sup>1</sup>

### ROY WILKINS AND MINNESOTA

Though he was born in St. Louis, Minnesota was always home to Roy Wilkins. After his death, his widow, Aminda, described Wilkins's attachment to the state: "He talked about Minnesota. Minnesota was home to him. Everything in Minnesota was better than everything anywhere else. A real chauvinist. He even told me when we were

vacationing once in Scotland that their golf courses were not as good as the ones in Minnesota." In another interview she said, "Certainly the man's character was formed there. He always talked with pride [about it]." In his 1981 autobiography, *Standing Fast*, Wilkins observed that Minnesota was not only the place where he learned the brutal realities of race relations in twentieth-century America, but also the place where he learned that people of differing backgrounds could live well together. Throughout his life, Wilkins's commitment to racial integration remained steadfast, a position that put him at odds with 1960s radical currents within the movement.<sup>2</sup>

When he was five years old, one year after his mother died of tuberculosis, Wilkins and his two siblings were sent to St. Paul to live with their maternal aunt, Elizabeth Williams, and her husband, Samuel. Samuel Williams managed the personal railroad car of the president of the Northern Pacific Railroad. The Williamses lived at 906 Galtier Street, an integrated neighborhood—"Swedes and Germans, French, Irish and Jews," as Wilkins described it in *Standing Fast*. Young Roy was the only black student at Whittier Grammar School, but he was comfortable surrounded by other working-class children from his neighborhood.<sup>3</sup>

At the integrated Mechanic Arts High School, Wilkins initially enrolled in a challenging pre-engineering curriculum, but after being encouraged to develop his writing skills by his English teacher, Mary E. Copley, he moved in a new direction. In his junior year, he was named editor of the school's literary magazine, *The Cogwheel*. This achievement earned Wilkins a mention in *The Crisis*, the nationally circulated NAACP magazine he later went on to edit. In his senior year, he edited the Mechanic Arts yearbook and was salutatorian of his graduating class of 1919.<sup>4</sup>

During his college years at the University of Minnesota, Wilkins served as secretary to the local chapter of the NAACP. He was the first African American reporter for the *Minnesota Daily*, serving as its night editor. He helped organize a chapter of Omega Psi Phi, the first all-black fraternity at the university and the first black group to be pictured in the university yearbook. He worked summer jobs during his college years caddying at the St. Paul Town and Country Club, handling baggage at St. Paul's Union Station, making artillery shells for Minneapolis Steel and Machinery, cleaning up at a Swift and Company slaughterhouse, and waiting tables in the dining car for Northern Pacific Railroad.<sup>5</sup>

In 1920, in response to the lynching of three African American circus workers in Duluth, Wilkins wrote, "I lost my innocence on race once and for all." In 1923 he helped organize a branch of the Urban League in the Twin Cities



Wilkins was the first black reporter and night editor of the *Minnesota Daily*; 1923 Gopher yearbook photo.

by raising \$575 from a dance. He also served as chair of the Urban League as well as of the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center. Wilkins graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1923 with a bachelor's degree in sociology and a minor in economics.<sup>6</sup>

After graduation, he worked for one year as reporter and editor for the *St. Paul Appeal*, a weekly African American newspaper. Wilkins left Minnesota in 1924 to take a job at another African American newspaper, the *Kansas City Call*. He worked there eight years, eventually becoming managing editor. In 1929 he married Aminda "Minnie" Badeau, a social worker. In the autumn of 1931, Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, appointed Wilkins to be his executive assistant. Wilkins would remain with the NAACP for the rest of his career. When W. E. B. Du Bois, the founding editor of *The Crisis*, left the NAACP in 1934, Wilkins replaced him at the helm of this monthly magazine. In 1955, Wilkins succeeded White as chief executive of the organization. Upon his retirement in 1977 at age 76, Wilkins was named executive director emeritus. Roy Wilkins died in September 1981, soon after completing his autobiography, *Standing Fast*.<sup>7</sup>

### HONORING THE HOMETOWN HERO

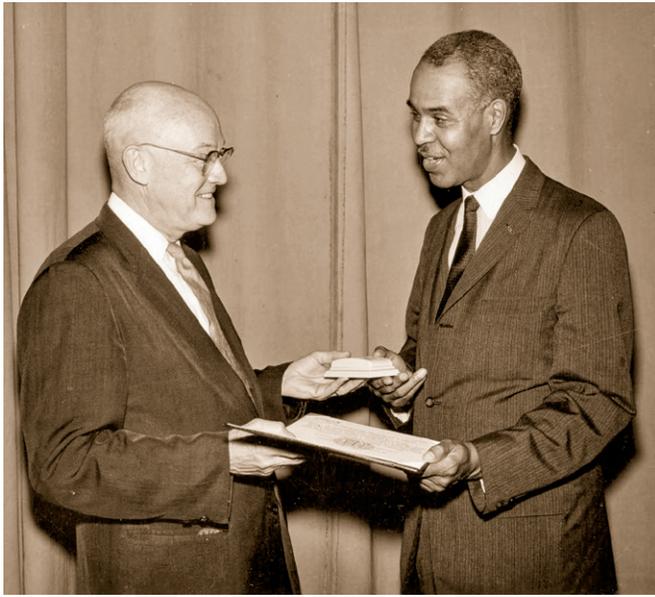
As a national figure, Wilkins accrued some recognition in Minnesota during his lifetime. In 1960, during Wilkins's tenure as executive secretary (the title was later changed to executive director), the NAACP national convention was held in St. Paul. St. Paul NAACP president Don Lewis, who worked closely with Wilkins in the 1950s and 1960s, spearheaded the drive to "Bring Roy Home!" and hold the convention in St. Paul. That same year, on May 4, Wilkins received a distinguished alumnus award from Mechanic Arts High School, and he received a similar honor from

his other alma mater, the University of Minnesota. Sixteen years later, at commencement ceremonies on June 7, 1976, the university also awarded Wilkins an honorary doctor of laws degree. The 1977 national conference of the NAACP was held in St. Louis (the city where Wilkins was born). To honor his impending retirement, Wilkins received a plaque sent by Mayor George Latimer on behalf of the city of St. Paul as well as a scroll signed by a dozen former Mechanic Arts High School classmates, presented by Don Lewis, now director of the St. Paul human rights department.<sup>8</sup>

Soon after Wilkins died in 1981, efforts stepped up to recognize him in Minnesota, spearheaded in large part by two men, Paul D. Moe and Jesse M. Overton II. Both Moe and Overton were involved in the local NAACP; Overton was president of the St. Paul chapter. All of Overton and Moe's efforts to memorialize Wilkins were endorsed by the NAACP at the local, state, and national levels. In 1983, the St. Paul NAACP chapter invited Aminda Wilkins, Roy's widow, to speak. While she was in town, Overton met Aminda, who shared Overton's and Moe's interest in memorializing Roy. Through their activities over the next 12 years, Overton and Moe became friends with Aminda, who often affectionately referred to them as "my boys in Minnesota." In a 1990 letter to Moe, Aminda Wilkins wrote: "I shall be forever grateful to you and Jesse for your forceful efforts to memorialize an extraordinary man who called Minnesota home."<sup>9</sup>

During the Minnesota legislative session following Wilkins's death, Paul Moe's brother, then state senator Donald Moe of St. Paul, authored a tribute to the deceased leader, which the state senate passed as a resolution on March 13, 1982. The tribute read, in part, "On September 8, 1981, America lost a great civil rights leader. . . . Every major congressional and judicial decision in the past 50 years that advanced the cause of civil rights bears the imprint of this man," and concluded: "Roy Wilkins was among the greatest of Minnesotans. His life and work deserve honor in our state."<sup>10</sup>

The Minnesota senate resolution memorializing Wilkins was followed by the dedication of the Wilkins Townhomes on December 15, 1982. Still in use in 2020,



*Wilkins receiving an Outstanding Alumni Award from University of Minnesota administrator Malcolm Willey, 1960.*



*University of Minnesota president C. Peter Magrath bestowing Wilkins with an honorary doctor of laws degree, 1976.*

the Wilkins Townhomes are a 23-unit rental development for low- and moderate-income families in St. Paul's Summit-University neighborhood. They are located on three sites: 587-613 Ashland Avenue, 608-618 Holly Avenue, and 795-799 Marshall Avenue.<sup>11</sup>

The senate resolution and the townhomes dedication were two small steps toward giving the large figure of Roy Wilkins the recognition he deserved in his home state. Still, Moe, Overton, and Aminda Wilkins were among those who felt these efforts were hardly commensurate with his national and international stature. Several larger memorial efforts followed.

THE NEXT PROJECT EVOLVED out of several suggestions to name local sites or streets after Wilkins. Aminda Wilkins had expressed her desire for a St. Paul street to be named after her late husband and worked with the NAACP toward that end. This wasn't an unrealistic goal—Louisville, Kentucky, where Wilkins had never even lived, named a street after him. Yet this idea proved to be challenging to implement in Minnesota; it would not come to fruition.

Moe and Overton first proposed renaming the section of Interstate 94 between St. Paul and Minneapolis after Wilkins a year after his death. As Paul Moe explained in a 1984 interview, “[My] efforts to rename a section of Interstate 94 in the Twin Cities also ended in failure. I kept on running down trails and running into a dead end. . . . Finally, it just sort of died on a vine. . . . I really, frankly, cannot understand why there is any reluctance to paying tribute to this giant.” This was the stretch of I-94 that had



*Aminda Wilkins and Peter Moe.*

destroyed the historically black Rondo neighborhood, which played a part in resistance to this proposal in many quarters of the African American community.<sup>12</sup>

In September 1982, the NAACP submitted a petition to the St. Paul City Council proposing that Selby Avenue be renamed Roy Wilkins Boulevard. Overton and Dr. James Shelton of the St. Paul Urban League had circulated the petition among residents and business owners along Selby Avenue; according to Overton, everyone they contacted signed the petition except for one business owner. Some



*One of the three Wilkins Townhomes, this one on Ashland Avenue in St. Paul.*

Selby businesses, however, submitted a counter-petition objecting to the renaming.<sup>13</sup>

This impasse led St. Paul's Public Works Committee to ask Mayor George Latimer to establish the Roy Wilkins Memorial Task Force to consider how St. Paul could best create a fitting memorial to Roy Wilkins. Latimer appointed the task force in December 1982; Joseph Errigo Jr. was selected as chair.<sup>14</sup>

The Roy Wilkins Memorial Task Force held an open forum in January 1983 to gather input from the community, then met six times over the next three months to consider the broad-ranging suggestions, which included renaming virtually every street and building in St. Paul. During these meetings, the task force determined the priorities they wanted to include in their recommendations to the City of St. Paul: naming a building after Roy Wilkins and developing an educational component to ensure ongoing appreciation for Roy Wilkins's contributions to the nation's social, legal, and political fabric. In addition, they suggested a statue or bust and a plaque at the State Capitol.<sup>15</sup>

Errigo submitted the task force's recommendations to the mayor and city council on April 14, 1983. The report stated, "The Roy Wilkins Memorial Task Force unanimously recommends that the St. Paul Civic Center and new auditorium, planned for construction, be named the Roy Wilkins Center." Moreover, it noted, "All members of the task force were concerned that the naming of the Civic Center—significant as such an action is—is not enough to ensure that this and future generations will benefit from the example this man's life provides. . . . Therefore, the task force recommends that a Roy Wilkins Education Committee be designated." Errigo also sent a letter dated

November 22, 1983, to the Civic Center Authority: "The St. Paul Civic Center and the new auditorium was the unanimous choice of the task force."<sup>16</sup>

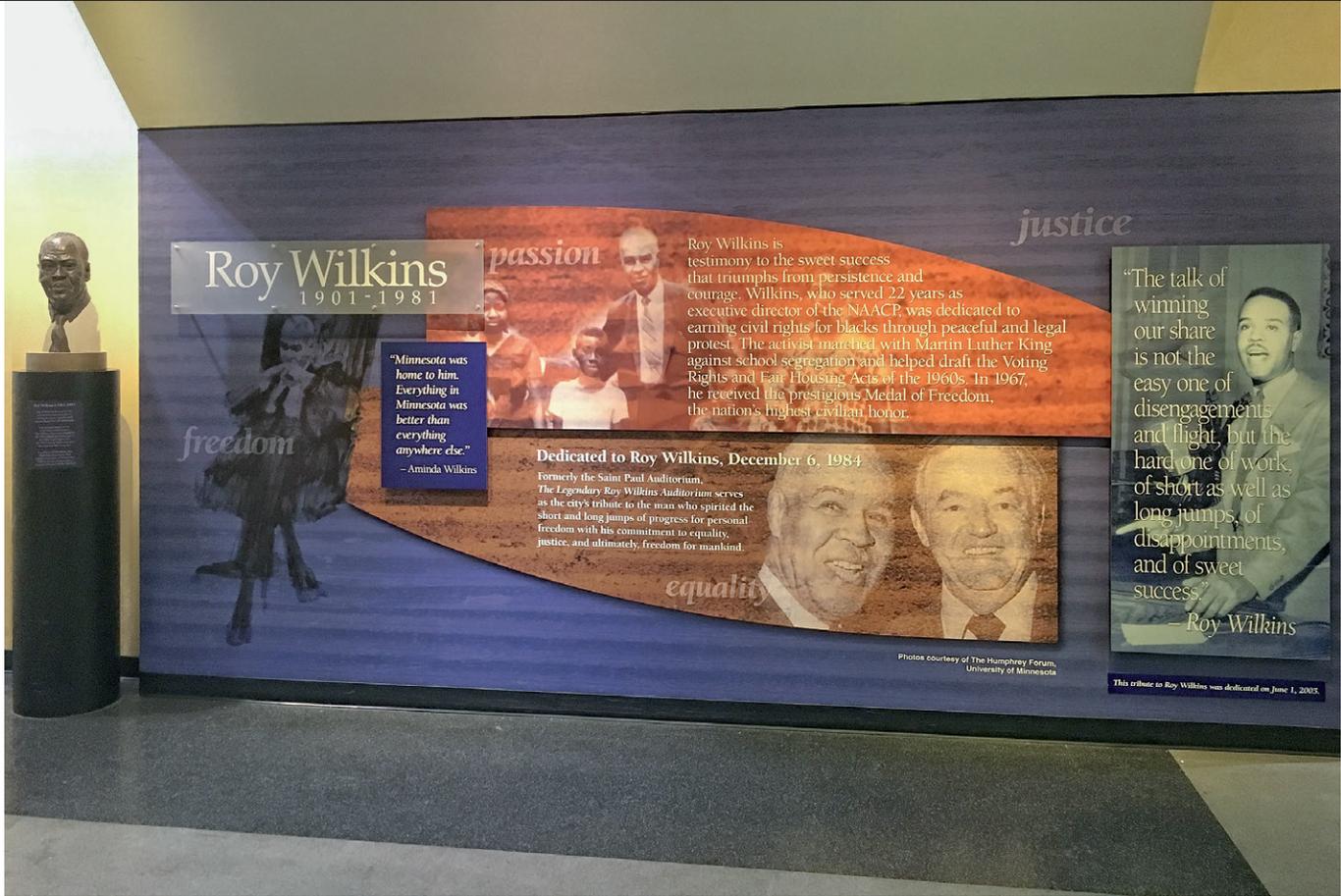
In the end, however, Roy Wilkins's name was assigned only to the auditorium and not to the entire civic center complex, much to the disappointment of Aminda Wilkins. Not only did the street name she wanted never come about, but the plaque in the state capitol building and the educational component also never came to fruition.

The Roy Wilkins Auditorium dedication was held on December 6, 1984. The evening began with an open house that featured Aminda Wilkins unveiling two artworks memorializing her husband: a bronze bust of Roy Wilkins by local sculptor J. Paul Nesse and an oil painting by local artist Donald Walker. New York Yankees outfielder and St. Paul native Dave Winfield assisted Aminda Wilkins with the unveilings, while dignitaries in attendance included Georgia state senator Julian Bond, who gave the keynote address. The new building was open for tours to the public as well as to those attending the unveilings.<sup>17</sup>

## **ROY WILKINS CENTER FOR HUMAN RELATIONS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Establishing an endowed academic chair in Roy Wilkins's name was another goal of Aminda Wilkins. On her 1984 trip to Minnesota for the opening of the Roy Wilkins Auditorium, Aminda met with Harlan Cleveland, the founding dean of the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs on the University of Minnesota's West Bank campus. The two discussed where to site an endowed chair, and the following year Cleveland met with Roy Wilkins Foundation officials in New York. In December 1985, Cleveland then met with Paul Moe and Jesse Overton to chart a fundraising plan.<sup>18</sup>

With \$2 million required to endow a chair at the Humphrey School, fundraising began with a \$1 million appropriation from the Minnesota legislature. In addition to his brother Donald, Paul Moe had another brother who also served in the Minnesota state senate, Roger Moe of Erskine, then senate majority leader. Roger Moe



Tributes to Roy Wilkins inside the Roy Wilkins Auditorium in downtown St. Paul.

orchestrated approval of a bill proposing funding. Overton recalled the “unforgettable experience” of sitting in the senate balcony, watching senators approve the appropriation unanimously late in the evening, with no absentee legislators even at that hour.<sup>19</sup>

The University of Minnesota and the Wilkins Foundation worked together in the late 1980s to raise the remaining funds needed for the endowment. Funds came from 200 individual donors (the most of any endowed chair at the University of Minnesota), as well as from corporations and foundations. Aminda Wilkins’s extensive ties with the black community as well as with major philanthropists in Minnesota and New York, where she lived, were crucial to raising needed funds. G. Edward Schuh, who in 1987 succeeded Cleveland as dean of the Humphrey School, was “a phenomenal fundraiser and influential dealmaker,” according to Samuel L. Myers Jr., who has held the endowed Wilkins chair since its inception in 1992.<sup>20</sup>

Schuh worked with Moe and Overton to organize a horse race at Canterbury Downs in Shakopee. The Inaugural Roy Wilkins Purse took place on June 26, 1986. Aminda Wilkins received two dozen red roses and had her photograph taken with the owners of the Santa Anita racetrack, who were in attendance. Benjamin Hooks, Wilkins’s successor as executive director of the NAACP, was also in attendance. Schuh joined forces with Aminda Wilkins and

the Wilkins Foundation to produce a fundraising benefit concert the same weekend as the event at Canterbury Downs by cabaret singer and pianist Bobby Short at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul. Short attended a reception before the concert at the University Club, where those attending were given Roy Wilkins medallions. In addition to performing gratis, Short also covered the cost of flying in three band members.<sup>21</sup>

The Roy Wilkins Center for Human Relations and Social Justice and its endowed chair was formally established in 1992 as part of the Humphrey School of Public Affairs. It is fitting that the Wilkins Center is contained within a building and school named after Minnesota senator and US vice president Hubert H. Humphrey, whom Wilkins knew and worked with on civil rights issues. The center continues the legacy of Wilkins by working to find solutions to racial and ethnic inequality through teaching, research, and citizen education on issues Wilkins sought to improve: race relations, employment policy, institutional racism, housing, criminal justice, education, affirmative action, and social policy. The interdisciplinary center draws upon scholars from around the university as well as key thinkers and policy shapers throughout the country and world.<sup>22</sup>

The Wilkins Center is the only endowed center and chair in Wilkins’s memory in the United States; indeed,

Plaque outside the Wilkins seminar room at the Humphrey School (formerly Institute) of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.

at the time of the search for the first holder of the Wilkins chair, Schuh noted, "To our knowledge, this is the only endowed chair in this nation dedicated to the memory of a national civil rights leader." In a 2017 interview, Myers observed the center also "tries to connect global and local" issues, as exemplified by a minimum wage study it did for the City of Minneapolis in October 2016.<sup>23</sup>

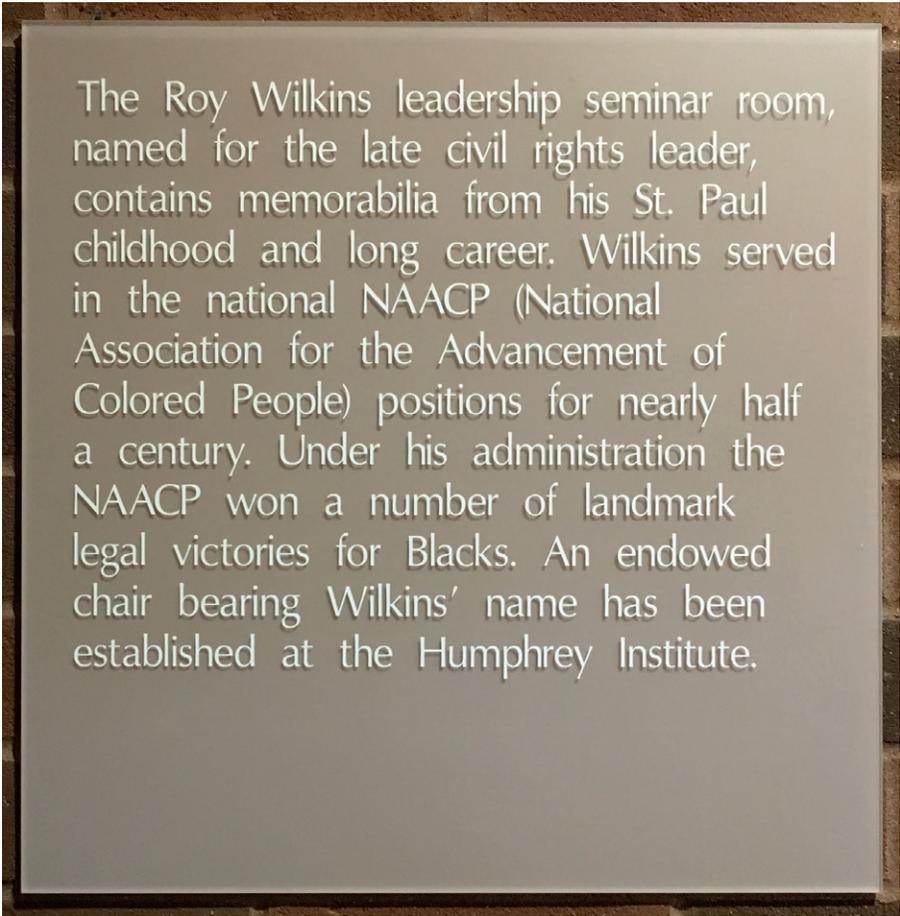
Within the Humphrey School building is the Roy Wilkins Seminar Room (room 215). Wilkins's portrait and a plaque with a brief description of his achievements hang outside the room. Inside the room is a collection of photos of Wilkins at various times in his life, as well as shelves filled with bound theses completed by students in the master's program. Myers noted that it's extremely difficult to name a room for someone other than a major donor. Moe said Harlan Cleveland and Robert Terry, then director of the Reflective Leadership Program at the Humphrey School, were instrumental in having the room named for Wilkins.<sup>24</sup>

In 1996, Wilkins's alma mater honored him again by naming a new dormitory Roy Wilkins Hall. The building at 1212 University Avenue Southeast in Minneapolis is still in use as a dormitory.

### **ROY WILKINS MEMORIAL ON CAPITOL MALL: SPIRAL FOR JUSTICE**

Across the 18 acres of green space that make up the Minnesota State Capitol Mall are monuments, memorials, and works of art honoring events and remarkable achievements of Minnesotans. A sculpture remembering Roy Wilkins and his civil rights achievements stands in a prominent place along John Ireland Boulevard. Created by Atlanta artist Curtis Patterson II, *Spiral for Justice* is not a typical statue but a 50 × 75-foot abstract sculptural work.

After languishing since first proposed by the legislature in 1985, plans for this monument gained momentum



The Roy Wilkins leadership seminar room, named for the late civil rights leader, contains memorabilia from his St. Paul childhood and long career. Wilkins served in the national NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) positions for nearly half a century. Under his administration the NAACP won a number of landmark legal victories for Blacks. An endowed chair bearing Wilkins' name has been established at the Humphrey Institute.

in 1990. That spring, the Minnesota Council on Black Minnesotans approached Senator Donald Moe and Representative Richard Jefferson about proposing legislation to commemorate Wilkins on the Capitol Mall. They did so, and the legislature consequently appropriated \$300,000 and authorized the Capitol Area Architectural Planning Board (CAAPB) to establish a memorial. Donald Moe, who had worked on getting a memorial since shortly after Wilkins's death, said in a press release dated October 22, 1990, that he was pleased that action had finally been taken, noting, "It is long overdue."<sup>25</sup>

That fall, the CAAPB began working with a community advisory committee and with architectural advisors to select a site from 12 potential ones. CAAPB's chosen site was approved on March 6, 1991. A year later, in March 1992, the planning board set up an eight-member artist selection panel and publicized the opportunity nationally through 75 arts publications. From that outreach, 150 artists expressed interest; requests for qualifications were sent to them and to another 80 African American artists. From the 55 artists who responded, a screening committee recommended 22. In May, the artist selection panel recommended six from that group; in June the panel selected Curtis Patterson, who had also created

commemorative works honoring Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, and Jesse Owens.<sup>26</sup>

Over the next three years, Patterson created a nontraditional memorial to Roy Wilkins. The primary feature of the sculpture is a spiral formed by a series of 46 obelisks of ascending height, representing the 46 years of Wilkins's leadership of the NAACP. The spiral terminates with an 18-foot African reliquary element. According to the artist, "The reliquary is symbolic of Mr. Wilkins." The spiral is surrounded by three six-foot walls, "symbolizing barriers created by racial segregation and other efforts to impede the progress toward achieving equality." The spiral ascends above and through those walls. Each of the walls has integrated benches and retractable doors on the opposite side of the wall behind the benches. "This arrangement allows viewers to explore features of the sculpture without disturbing others, who may be resting on the benches," wrote Patterson. Small doors along the outer side of the walls open to display a portrait of Wilkins and quotations from his speeches and writings.<sup>27</sup>

Due to a delay in the fabrication of the sculpture, the Roy Wilkins Memorial was not complete in time for the dedication that had been planned to coincide with the NAACP conference taking place in Minneapolis in July 1995. Nevertheless, the festivities were not to be delayed. Instead of the finished sculpture, the ceremonial unveiling revealed a painting of it. *Insight News*, an African American weekly newspaper, reported that on one of the hottest days of the year, July 13, "the 86th Annual National NAACP Convention shifted from the cozy, air-conditioned Minneapolis Convention Center to the Minnesota State Capitol grounds in St. Paul."<sup>28</sup>

More than 300 people attended. Roger Wilkins, Roy's nephew, and NAACP president Rupert Richardson spoke. As the only living heir of Roy Wilkins, Roger spoke of his uncle's "generosity and unselfish behavior," and his advice to "have pride in your work, give back to your people, and above all, be honest."<sup>29</sup>

Though the monument was nearly complete and the dedication had taken place, serious fundraising continued. The total cost was \$500,000 and the state legislature had allotted \$300,000 for the artwork, plus \$4,300 in CAAPB landscaping funds. Phyllis Harvin, co-chair of the Roy Wilkins Community Advisory Council (an expanded version of the community advisory committee that had helped with site selection), told the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* that the council had been raising money for two years, noting, "Donations have come from state NAACP chapters, corporations and individuals attending events such as dinners sponsored by the Minneapolis and St. Paul Urban Leagues."<sup>30</sup>

Upon completion of the monument the following November, Roger Wilkins and Rupert Richardson returned to Minnesota for a second dedication. November 3, 1995, turned out to be one of the coldest days of the year, but, undaunted, approximately 60 people turned out.<sup>31</sup>

After the first dedication, *Insight News* had reported "Many were elated over the memorial and felt it should have been done years ago." But fans of traditional memorials that include statues or other likenesses were disappointed. This would have included Aminda Wilkins, had she still been alive. (She died in 1994.) Roy Wilkins's likeness is there, but it is hidden unless a viewer spends the time to discover it. Not only did the abstractness of *Spiral for Justice* disappoint many, including those who thought it did not fit in with the rest of the Capitol Mall tributes, but also it was initially hard to discern that the installation was a tribute to Roy Wilkins. A plaque that made this explicit was added later (see cover photo).<sup>32</sup>

## WILKINS'S LEGACY

The question remains: Is Minnesota's recognition of Wilkins sufficient to his achievements? For those who think not, the following factors may help explain why more has not been done.

First, he was not born in Minnesota and did not die here. Perhaps because he moved away as a young man, Wilkins has received somewhat less recognition in his home state than nationally. In a 2005 historical profile of Wilkins in the University of Minnesota alumni magazine, writer Tim Brady wrote, "In his home state of Minnesota, Wilkins' life and times were shamefully neglected for many years." Brady noted that when Wilkins debated journalist James J. Kilpatrick at Northrop Auditorium in 1964, the local newspapers didn't even mention that Wilkins was a proud Minnesotan and a graduate of the state's flagship university.<sup>33</sup>

Second, he was considered too moderate for the turbulent times at the end of his career. Though he led the NAACP to become "the most important and powerful association for minorities in America," expanding its membership from about 25,000 to over 400,000, Wilkins's approach was considered too rational for some. He believed strongly that the way to move his race forward was through the courts and the legislative system. He considered militancy and black separatism, which grew prominent in the 1960s and 1970s, to be reverse racism. As such, he was scorned as an "Uncle Tom" and even was put on one black militant group's hit list for assassination.<sup>34</sup>

In an interview given to *Ebony* magazine in 1974, Wilkins stated, "If you decided to really fight back, you had to be



*Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins, lawyer and later US Supreme Court associate justice Thurgood Marshall, at an event marking the fiftieth anniversary of the 1909 founding of the NAACP.*

prepared to die. . . . If we had chosen the path of violence 40 or 50 years ago, we would have committed genocide on ourselves." Wilkins steadfastly stood by his beliefs over the years and worked tirelessly to improve the lot of African Americans. In a June 2, 1982, speech to the University of Minnesota Black Alumni Association, James S. Griffin said Wilkins was "a gentle man who possessed a tremendous amount of self-discipline and a voice of reason."<sup>35</sup>

Third, Wilkins stayed out of the limelight. His style was a marked contrast to that of Martin Luther King Jr. The two worked together on various causes but were not close friends. Brady notes, "Wilkins was rational and cool, a man who thought the best tools available in building change were diligence, persistence, and organization. He mistrusted leaders who used their positions to rouse emotions that were quickly dissipated. . . . [Quoting Gilbert Jonas, a longtime NAACP colleague,] 'his patience with men of the cloth often wore thin. His own soft-spoken, erudite style of speaking was (perhaps deliberately) in utter contrast to the garrulous, gesticulating, rhythmic, and often fever-pitched style of Negro ministers.'"<sup>36</sup>

Fourth, underlying racism needs to be considered. Paul Moe stated there was absolutely a racial element in Minnesota's treatment of its native son, treatment that stemmed not from meanness but from a lack of awareness, the invisible nature of African Americans from whites' view. Moe called it ignorance and benign neglect. Historian and educator David V. Taylor, a native of St. Paul, recalled, "I remember the sculpture on the Capitol grounds being . . .

controversial, with a profound sense of disappointment. It seemed to have been placed as far away from the Capitol building as possible."<sup>37</sup>

Overton stated that many involved in creating the memorials lost sight of Roy Wilkins and became intent on "sunshining themselves." He said the process became a political nightmare and those involved should have respected the wishes of Wilkins's widow, who wanted a street in his name and a statue of him.<sup>38</sup>

Nationally, Roy Wilkins earned substantial recognition, but more could be done to keep his story and

his ideals alive in Minnesota. He viewed this state as his home. When he died in 1981, flags across the country were flown at half-staff. He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor, and, after his death, the Congressional Medal of Honor. During his lifetime, he was awarded honorary degrees from 51 colleges and universities ranging from Harvard to the University of California. While Roy Wilkins's civil rights work was not as dramatic as Martin Luther King's, his efforts to integrate American society and achieve equality and freedom for African Americans had commensurate long-term effects.<sup>39</sup>

Both the successes and disappointments of efforts to commemorate Wilkins in Minnesota demonstrate how such efforts are never simple and straightforward but instead are dependent on a complex network of financial considerations, bureaucracy, politics, and cultural, racial, and social beliefs. Popular knowledge of Wilkins and his legacy has faded with passing years. He deserves to live on in our hearts and minds, and in our culture and society. ▣

## Notes

The author would like to extend special thanks to Paul D. Moe and Jesse M. Overton II, who were invaluable resources for this story. The author appreciates the CAAPB's assistance, especially that of Paul Mandell, the board's principal planner. Dr. Samuel Myers, who occupies the Wilkins chair at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, kindly agreed to an interview for this story and provided valuable assistance.

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9. Jesse Overton and Paul D. Moe, interview, July 21, 2016; Paul D. Moe, interview, Oct. 19, 2016; Aminda Wilkins to Paul Moe, Mar. 20, 1990.
10. Paul D. Moe papers, lent to author.
11. Program, dedication ceremony for the Roy Wilkins Townhomes, Task Force records, Box 2.
12. Jesse Overton and Paul Moe, interview, Oct. 19, 2016; Kaszuba, "Wilkins Legacy Bears a Low St. Paul Profile," 12A; David V. Taylor, letter to editor, July 9, 2018.
13. Minutes, Dec. 13, 1982, Task Force records.
14. Minutes, Dec. 13, 1982, and "Public Notice Regarding Roy Wilkins Memorial," Jan. 12, 1983—both Task Force records. Members of the task force in addition to Errigo were John Rupp, Rory Callahan, Anne Conley (Lexington Hamline Community Council), Gordon Erskine (Merriam Park Community Council), Esther Johnson (Snelling-Hamline Community Council), Bradford Benner, David Taylor (Macalester College), Rev. Earl Miller, and Doug Kelm.
15. Minutes, Feb. 1, Mar. 16, and Apr. 5, 1983, and Roy Wilkins Memorial Task Force recommendation, Apr. 14, 1983—all Task Force records.
16. Roy Wilkins Memorial Task Force recommendation, Apr. 14, 1983, and Joseph Errigo, chair, Roy Wilkins Memorial Task Force, to Jerome Lantry, Civic Center Authority Chair, Nov. 22, 1983—both Task Force records.
17. "Summary of the Roy Wilkins Auditorium Opening, Thursday December 6, 1984" and program, "Roy Wilkins Auditorium Dedication Ceremony," both Task Force records; Monsour, "Wilkins' Heritage Lives On." The bust has been incorporated into a display in the corridor outside the auditorium, but the oil painting seems to have disappeared.
18. Paul Moe to Aminda Wilkins, Dec. 19, 1985. The Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs was founded in 1977; the name was changed to the Humphrey School of Public Affairs in 2011.
19. Dr. Samuel Myers Jr., Endowed Chair, Roy Wilkins Center for Human Relations and Social Justice, Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, interview, July 26, 2017; Paul Moe, interviews, July 21 and Oct. 19, 2016; Overton and Moe interview, Oct. 19, 2016.
20. Myers interview; "University of Minnesota to Fill Wilkins Chair," *St. Paul Recorder*, Feb. 8, 1990, 1, 10; Humphrey School of Public Affairs website. Significant corporate funders of the Roy Wilkins Chair include Honeywell, Inc., the Burlington-Northern Foundation, the General Mills Foundation, the Taconic Foundation, the Cowles Media Foundation, and the Roy Wilkins Foundation.
21. Overton and Moe interview, July 21, 2016; Myers interview; Moe interviews, July 21 and Oct. 19, 2016. The 1986 Roy Wilkins Purse was the only such event held.
22. Roy Wilkins Center for Human Relations and Social Justice, Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs; "University of Minnesota to Fill Wilkins Chair"; Melanie Sommer, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, email to author, Dec. 10, 2019.
23. Roy Wilkins Center; G. Edward Schuh, "In Search of a Roy Wilkins Chairholder," *Minneapolis Spokesman and St. Paul Recorder*, n.d., 2; Myers interview; Sommer email.
24. Myers interview; Moe interview, July 21, 2016.
25. Russell Fridley, Director of the Minnesota Historical Society, to Gary Grefenberg, Secretary of the Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board (CAAPB), Jan. 7, 1985, and "Current Chronology: Roy Wilkins Memorial," Feb. 10, 1993, and "Roy Wilkins Memorial Planning on Track," news release from the Office of State Senator Donald Moe, Aug. 10, 1990—all Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board files, MNHS. According to Little in "An Artistic Memorial to a Minnesota Legend," 17, \$300,000 was the standard amount for a memorial.
26. "Current Chronology: Roy Wilkins Memorial."
27. "Spiral for Justice," submitted by Curtis Patterson, CODA: Collaboration of Design + Art, <https://www.codaworx.com/project/spiral-for-justice-the-state-of-minnesota>.
28. Rose McGee, "Scorching Heat Doesn't Wilt Friends, Admirers of Roy Wilkins," *St. Paul Insight News*, July 25, 1995.
29. "Memorial Honors a Native Son and Civil Rights Leader," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, July 14, 1995, and McGee, "Scorching Heat Doesn't Wilt Friends."
30. Lisa Grace Lednicer, "Roy Wilkins Memorial Still Lingers in Artistic Limbo," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 14, 1995, 1A; "Community & Corporate Support Still Sought for Wilkins Memorial," *Minneapolis Spokesman/St. Paul Recorder*, June 1–6, 1995. According to the article, "Major contributions in the last four months have come from the Bigelow Foundation, Cowles Media, Dayton Hudson Foundation, General Mills Foundation, Honeywell, Roberta Mann Foundation, Medtronic, Minneapolis Foundation, NSP, Norwest Bank, St. Paul Pioneer Press, St. Paul Companies, St. Paul Foundation, US West, and West Publishing."
31. Chip Johnson, "Capitol Memorial Recognizes Work of Roy Wilkins, Civil Rights Leader," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Nov. 4, 1995, 1C.
32. McGee, "Scorching Heat Doesn't Wilt Friends."
33. Brady, "Remembering Roy Wilkins," 27, 25.
34. Krebs, "Roy Wilkins, 50-Year Veteran of Civil Rights Fight"; Charles L. Sanders, "A Frank Interview with Roy Wilkins," *Ebony* (Apr. 1974): 35–44.
35. Sanders, "A Frank Interview," 38, 40; Griffin, Minnesota Black Alumni speech.
36. Brady, "Remembering Roy Wilkins," 24.
37. Moe interview, Oct. 19, 2016; Taylor letter to editor.
38. Overton interview, Oct. 19, 2016.
39. "Roy Wilkins History," Roy Wilkins Auditorium website, via St. Paul RiverCentre website; Aminda Wilkins to Paul D. Moe, Apr. 16, 1989; Brady, "Remembering Roy Wilkins," 24.

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Color photo on cover, p. 321 (bottom), 322, 323, 324, Lisa Heinrich; cover, Roy Wilkins portrait, p. 326, MNHS; p. 318, Laura Weber; p. 320, 321 (top, left and right) images courtesy of the University of Minnesota Archives.



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