

March 2020

Looking Back ... Louis Edward Waller

Former Pennsylvania State Conference President

In March 11, 2020, Louis Edward Waller (1928-2009) was posthumously inducted into the Washington County Historical Society's Hall of Fame. This article written by the Historical Society takes a brief look back at this extraordinary figure in Washington's County's history.



Looking Back ... Louis Edward Waller

By Washington County Historical Society



The barrier-breaking achievements of Louis Edward Waller during life are immeasurable. The honors and awards he so deservedly received are seemingly innumerable. Indeed, Lou Waller was a beacon of civic leadership for an entire community. He was a pioneering leader... in civil rights... in business... in philanthropy and community service. This one man's name means so much in Washington County... but how did it come to be that way?

Lou Waller's grandfather, Luke Waller, was born into slavery in rural North Carolina and became a sharecropper, raising tobacco. Lou Waller's father, Louis Thomas Waller, came north to work in the coal mines in the 1920s, and married Hattie Davis. They settled in Marianna, Pa. And there in Marianna, in 1928, Louis Edward Waller entered the stage of our County's history.

The Waller family moved to the city of Washington in the early 1930s, and young Louis Waller attended school here. As a student, Lou excelled most in those subjects that called for his creative talents. But Lou Waller's school years were not only academic learning – there were also hard lessons in racial prejudice. Pre-World War II America, including Washington, PA., was still a highly segregated system and Lou grew up as a witness to that destructive system.

Upon graduation from Washington High School, Lou Waller earned a degree from Dean Tech in Pittsburgh. After serving in the U.S. Army, he entered the business world as a draftsman and then spent a decade in the sales of fabricated steel products.

However, professional competence did not shield Lou Waller from racial bias. Lou was among many that suffered this reality first-hand. At one job, for example, Lou was told to go in the back so he wouldn't have to be seen by customers. In another case, when Lou's wife Shirley gave birth to their first child in the hospital, she was not permitted to recover in the same room as a white mother who had just given birth. Instead, Shirley recovered in the hallway.

So, as Lou Waller climbed the business ladder in the late 1950s, he also felt the need to ascend to a higher calling when he took office as President of the NAACP's Washington Branch in 1959 at the age of 31.

Among the many initiatives of his tenure at the NAACP, Waller helped bring about a public discourse toward the elimination of de facto segregation in Washington's school system which had persisted even after *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. The swimming pool at Washington Park was integrated in 1961. And in 1964, Lou Waller organized and led the 'March to the Post Office' to urge passage of Civil Rights legislation. The March was an iconic moment captured in time. Lou Waller was just 35 years old.

The official history of the NAACP's Washington Branch recorded that ***“At a time when communication was sorely needed between the black and white communities, Lou Waller’s talents surfaced and were invaluable. He was able to communicate the needs, frustrations and problems of the black community...”***

When describing his particular approach to the cause, Lou himself said: ***“Yes, you can get people’s attention by throwing pebbles at the window, but you get more attention if you are able to be where the decisions are made...”***

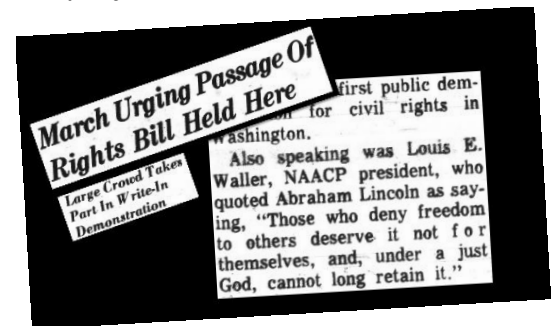


In recognition of these accomplishments, Lou Waller received the NAACP’s Human Rights Award in 1965. In 1970, Waller was appointed as President of the Pennsylvania State Conference of NAACP Branches.

Meanwhile, Lou Waller’s remarkable business career was flourishing in the 1960s and 1970s with McAnallen Corporation, where he became General Manager and then President. In 1986, his extensive experience in the building contracting sector led to his founding of Waller Corporation. Under his leadership, Waller

Corporation became an award-winning contracting firm engaged in projects across southwestern Pennsylvania.

Lou Waller’s strong religious faith guided his course in life – he was a life-long member of Nazareth Baptist Church and served the Church as a deacon and trustee. In addition, Waller enjoyed the immeasurable happiness of being a devoted husband to his wife Shirley and father of three remarkable children.



Lou was devoted to his community with the ***firm belief*** that ***“the only way to serve God is to serve people.”*** In addition to the NAACP, nearly 40 different organizations in our community benefited from his direct leadership and philanthropic efforts over the years, including Washington Hospital, Washington Financial Bank, Waynesburg University and the Washington County Community Foundation.

After his passing in 2009, Shirley Waller described her late husband quite well with three simple words... he was ***a joiner... an artist... a builder...*** Indeed, Louis Edward Waller’s life is a testament to what can be built... with a strong faith, a pure heart and a willingness to serve.