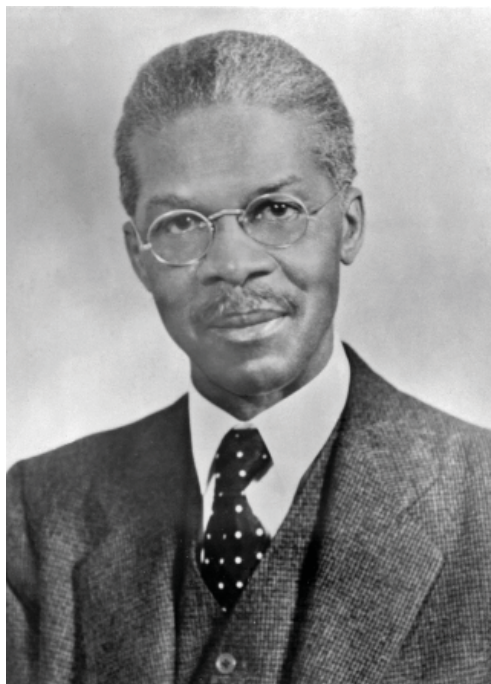


Louis Gregory

JOHN S. HATCHER



Louis Gregory was born June 6, 1874, in Charleston, South Carolina, the child of former slaves who had gained their freedom during the Civil War. His father died when Gregory was only four years old. At seven, he witnessed the lynching of his grandfather—a widely respected man in the community—and this event had a profound effect on Gregory's life purpose.

During his elementary schooling, Gregory attended the first Charleston public school that was open to both African-Americans and whites. When he graduated, he received the honor of giving the graduation speech, which he titled, "Thou Shalt Not Live for Thyself Alone."

Gregory attended Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he studied English literature. He then attended the prestigious Howard University in Washington, D.C., received his Bachelor of Law degree in 1902, and was subsequently admitted to the Bar. When he began work for the United States Department of the Treasury, he met Thomas H. Gibbs, the first to share with Gregory information about the Bahá'í Faith.

After attending a lecture by Lua Getsinger in 1907, Gregory began rigorously studying the religion. Two years later, he felt confirmed in his beliefs, declared himself a Bahá'í, and dedicated himself to the service of his beloved Faith. He wrote to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who responded by encouraging Gregory to achieve major accomplishments in race relations, both within the Bahá'í Faith and in the American community as a whole.

This is why, in 1910, Gregory stopped working as a lawyer and began a long and relentless period of service to the Bahá'í Faith, holding meetings, traveling, lecturing about the need for race unity, and writing articles on this same theme. Ironically, he had to give talks either to African-American audiences or, on other occasions, to gatherings of whites, because at the time, racially integrated assemblage was against social norms and, in some places, illegal.

Eventually, Gregory received a message from 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraging integrated meetings. By then, upper-class white Bahá'ís were

accustomed to racially integrated meetings, something 'Abdu'l-Bahá made clear should be the aim of the whole Bahá'í community.¹ Not satisfied to teach in one area or one community, Gregory initiated a major lecture tour about the Bahá'í Faith in the South, visiting such cities as Richmond, Virginia; Durham, North Carolina; Charleston, South Carolina; and Macon, Georgia.

It was around this time that Gregory also began to participate in the budding Bahá'í administrative order. In 1911, he was elected to Washington's Working Committee of the Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly, the first African-American to serve in that position. In March of the same year, Gregory sailed from New York to go on pilgrimage at the request of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Whom he met in person, together with the future Guardian of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi. It was also during this pilgrimage that 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged Gregory and Louisa Mathew, a white Englishwoman who was also a pilgrim, to get to know each other. Their meeting marked the beginning of a blessed relationship destined to shake one of American society's most pernicious prejudices.

1 For this and other specific references, see Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America* (US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) and Louis Venters, *No Jim Crow Church: The Origins of South Carolina's Bahá'í Community* (University Press of Florida, 2015).

With the confluence of all these events, the following year, 1912, was an *annus mirabilis* for this remarkable young man. In April, he was elected to the national Bahá'í "executive board"—a precursor of the National Spiritual Assembly—and in this position he assisted in organizing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the United States. During this visit, 'Abdu'l-Bahá thanked Gregory for his many efforts, and brought about an incident that is long remembered for its symbolism and social impact. While in Washington, 'Abdu'l-Bahá attended a reception held by the Persian chargé d'affaires and the Turkish ambassador. On that occasion, 'Abdu'l-Bahá took it upon Himself to move the place-names at the large table so that Louis Gregory—the only African-American present—was seated at the head of the table, next to Himself.

In September of this same year, Gregory and Mathew married, becoming the first Bahá'í interracial couple in the United States. During their many travels together, they received a range of vastly different reactions, especially since interracial marriage was either illegal or unrecognized in a majority of states. Nevertheless, by December 1916, Gregory had traveled to fourteen of the sixteen southern states, speaking primarily to student audiences—a herculean effort that Gregory repeated the following year, when he set off on a second speaking tour.

At the end of the First World War, the Ku Klux Klan's activities resulted

in an increase in lynchings in South Carolina. Despite this danger, Gregory was determined to be active in the wider community as well. He helped found chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in South Carolina in 1918, and many of the initial organizers of the NAACP were Gregory's personal acquaintances.

After the remaining letters containing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Tablets of the Divine Plan* arrived,² Gregory was elected to a Bahá'í committee focused on propagating the Faith in the American South. Gregory decided the best way to respond to this mandate was a two-pronged approach. First, he presented the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith on race to social leaders and to the general public. Second, he initiated a more extensive trip that lasted from 1919 to 1921, often accompanied by Roy

² *Tablets of the Divine Plan* collectively refers to 14 letters (tablets) written between March 1916 and March 1917 by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Bahá'ís in the United States and Canada. Included in multiple books, the first five tablets were printed in America in *Star of the West* - Vol. VII, No. 10, September 8, 1916, and all the tablets again after World War I in Vol. IX, No. 14, November 23, 1918, before being presented again at the Ridván meeting of 1919. Because of the difficulty in communication during World War I, These tablets were sent incrementally, contained in fourteen letters written and sent between March of 1916 and March of 1917 by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Bahá'ís to the United States and Canada.

Williams, an African-American Bahá'í from New York City.

It was during this same period that—inspired by guidance from 'Abdu'l-Bahá—Gregory instigated the first "Race Amity Conference," which was held in May 1921 in Washington, D.C. The following year, Louis Gregory became the first African-American to be elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, a body to which he would be successively elected in 1922, 1924, 1927, 1932, 1934, and 1946.

In 1924, Gregory toured the country for a number of speaking engagements, including one in which he shared the stage with fellow African-American Bahá'í and prominent thinker of the then-developing Harlem Renaissance, Alain LeRoy Locke. In the 1930s, Gregory helped start a Bahá'í study class during a brief visit to Atlanta. He then stayed in Nashville for a time, to respond to inquirers from Fisk University who eventually helped found Nashville's first Local Spiritual Assembly.

Continuing his efforts and in obedient response to Shoghi Effendi's call for Bahá'ís to fulfill the goals of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, Mr. and Mrs. Gregory traveled to Haiti in 1934. The couple taught the Bahá'í Faith to local Haitians, though the government of Haiti asked them to leave because of tensions between Haiti and the American government.

Wherever he was needed, Gregory went, especially throughout the American South. For example, in 1940,

when the Atlanta Bahá'í community was struggling over integrated meetings, Gregory was among those assigned to resolve the situation. Similarly, in early 1942, Gregory spoke at several black schools and colleges in West Virginia, in Virginia, and in the Carolinas. He also served on the first Assembly Development Committee, whose goal it was to support the production of materials for the growth of the Bahá'í Faith in South and Central America.

Finally, in 1944 and 1945, Gregory, now in his seventies, traveled through five southern states where articles about him received public and press attention. His talks and work on the Race Amity conventions, organized by Bahá'ís, would appear in a variety of newspapers.

In December 1948, Louis Gregory suffered a stroke. Louisa's health was also in decline, so they stayed at their home on the grounds of Green Acre Bahá'í School in Eliot, Maine. It was there that Gregory died, at age seventy-seven, on July 30, 1951. On August 6, 1951, Shoghi Effendi sent the following cable to the American Bahá'í community: "Profoundly deplore grievous loss of dearly beloved, noble-minded, golden-hearted Louis Gregory, pride and example to the Negro adherents of the Faith. Keenly feel loss of one so loved, admired and trusted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá." In this same message, he adorned Gregory with the posthumous mantle of "Hand of the Cause of God": "Deserves rank of first Hand of the Cause of his race.

Rising Bahá'í generation in African continent will glory in his memory and emulate his example. Advise hold memorial gathering in Temple in token recognition of his unique position, outstanding services" (*Citadel of Faith* 163).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The research on Louis Gregory is plentiful and rich with moving vignettes from the life of this remarkable soul. Most prominent among these works is the substantial biography by Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America* (US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982). More recently, Janet Ruhe-Schoen has published a fine description of Gregory's teaching work titled *Champions of Oneness: Louis Gregory and His Shining Circle* (US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2015). Finally, as cited above, there is significant discussion of Gregory's work in South Carolina in Louis Venters' history *No Jim Crow Church: The Origins of South Carolina's Bahá'í Community* (University Press of Florida, 2015).