

ABOUT LOUIS GREGORY

DISTINCTIONS: ELECTED TO THE FIRST NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE US IN 1922 AND APPOINTED POSTHUMOUSLY AS A HAND OF THE CAUSE BY SHOGHI EFFENDI IN 1951

Author Louis Gregory, a former Washington, DC attorney and graduate of Howard University's School of Law, writes: • "The Baha'i religion ... demolishes all superstitions, all prejudices. • Here racial boundaries disappear as men gaze upon the souls and characters of their fellows ... • Here men and women have the same rights and neither tries to enslave the other.

Louis Gregory continues: • "Here each person must investigate and see the truth for himself. • Here religion and science in their common origin support each other. • Here is encouragement ... to speak one language. • It [the Bahá'í Faith] has the power to unify mankind."

The first Race Amity conference was organized by Agnes S. Parsons (a wealthy white woman prominent in Washington, D.C. society) at the instruction of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. During her second pilgrimage to Haifa (1920), he had said to her: "I want you to arrange in Washington a convention for unity between the white and colored people." For assistance in planning this event, she called upon Louis Gregory and Alain Locke, pictured here beside her.



Agnes Parsons

Louis Gregory

Alain Locke

Source: <https://visionofraceunity.wordpress.com/category/alain-locke/>

27 **A New Creation: The Power of the Covenant in the Life of Louis Gregory***

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30 Bahá'í Studies, in Ottawa, Canada, 30 August 1982.

31

32 **Abstract** Louis Gregory, an African American lawyer, was recognized by his coreligionists as one of the most
33 distinguished North American, Bahá'ís of the first half of the twentieth century. This essay looks at his
34 achievements through the lens of the concept of the Covenant, which it also examines briefly. Gregory focused
35 on three fields of activity: promoting the oneness of humankind, teaching the Bahá'í Faith, and administering its
36 affairs. In each of these fields, which the Bahá'í teachings link with the Covenant, he was guided and energized
37 by the quality of "firmness in the Covenant" and by a dynamic relationship with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi
38 as focal points of covenantal authority. Gregory became both a herald of the Covenant and an enduring
39 example of its transforming power.

40

41 **"O thou who art firm in the Covenant!"** were the words with which 'Abdu'l-Bahá began four of nine letters that
42 He addressed to Louis Gregory. The salutation is not unique; it appears in perhaps three to five percent of
43 'Abdu'l-Bahá's published letters (tablets) addressed to His followers in the West. Most of the recipients are
44 recognized today as having been among the outstanding, active, dedicated early Bahá'ís. Yet the salutation "O
45 thou who art firm in the Covenant!" was never more aptly applied than to Gregory.

46

*"Consider it well," 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, "that every soul who is firm in the Covenant is
47 luminous, like unto a candle which emanates its light on those around it."² No
48 wonder, then, that He described Gregory as "luminous," "shining as a bright light,"
49 and as "pure gold."³*

50 The Covenant has a more abstract, elusive aspect. "Today the dynamic power of the world of existence is the
51 power of the Covenant," 'Abdu'l-Bahá testified (Selections 183.1). "The spirit of the Covenant," He observed, "is
52 the cause of life."⁴

53

54 Repeatedly, [Abdu'l-Baha] used the analogy of a body, in which the power of the Covenant was like "the
55 pulsating power in the arteries of the body of the world," like "the main artery" in "the body of the universe,"
56 energizing and invigorating "all beings."⁵ Thus the power of the Covenant is described as a cosmic force,
57 transcending the confines of our world and its struggle toward unity, order, and enlightenment.

58

*"If it is considered with insight," 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, "it will be seen that all the
59 forces of the universe, in the last analysis serve the Covenant. In the future it shall be
60 made evident and manifest" (Selections 192.1).*

61 When Louis Gregory encountered the Bahá'í Faith in the early 1900s, the Western Bahá'ís recognized the power
62 in 'Abdu'l-Bahá but had relatively little understanding of its source. Neither their religious backgrounds nor the
63 limited Bahá'í literature then available prepared them to grasp the complexities of the Bahá'í teachings on the
64 Covenant or the full implications of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station as the designated Center of the Covenant; indeed,
65 even today, after many years of exposure to these concepts and with a wealth of translated Writings at hand,
66 this development, unique in religious history, remains difficult to understand.

67
 68 Gregory, like most of his contemporaries, had, from his first contact with the Bahá'ís, felt 'Abdu'l-Bahá's
 69 influence. But, by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own account, the changes in Gregory during his first years as a Bahá'í were
 70 overshadowed by the transforming experience of pilgrimage in 1911 to the Bahá'í holy places in Palestine and
 71 his first meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Egypt. Gregory had embarked on his pilgrimage in "faith and assurance,"

72 *'Abdu'l-Bahá observed; through pilgrimage, Gregory added to those qualities and also*
 73 *"found firmness and steadfastness."6 He had gained an awareness of the Covenant*
 74 *and its power that few of his fellow believers shared, especially before 'Abdu'l-Bahá*
 75 *visited the West.*

76 In an article in Star of the West entitled "Impressions of Abdul-Baha While at Ramleh," Gregory conveyed
 77 something of the challenge of comprehending 'Abdu'l-Bahá's unique station. Today the happiness and peace of
 78 the Glory of God (BAHA'O'LLAH) are reflected in the clear Mirror of Ahdul-Baha. Thus by meeting him one meets
 79 all the Prophets and Manifestations of cycles and ages past. It is difficult for one to realize at the time, or for a
 80 long time afterwards, the true honor of such a meeting. To one who realizes even faintly who this Servant of
 81 God is and what powers he represents, such a meeting is high above all the honors of earth. But no soul can give
 82 adequate testimony of what Abdul-Baha may be to any other soul. With mental and spiritual horizon more or
 83 less limited, each pilgrim discerns according to his capacity the Majesty and Power that radiate from the Center
 84 of God's Covenant. At Ramleh, Abbas Effendi might at times be seen walking about the streets.

85
 86 Gregory closed his account by saying: "Thus the friends of the Cause may catch a glimpse of what is in store for
 87 them if he visits America. Nor should we spare any pains or hesitate at any sacrifices to ensure his coming" (6).
 88 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself had encouraged Gregory to write about his experiences. In A Heavenly Vista, the account
 89 of his pilgrimage that Gregory eventually published in booklet form, he told of a special interlude with 'Abdu'l-
 90 Bahá: April 13. During luncheon at the Victoria the Egyptian waiter who seemed always pleased to give me
 91 information about Abdul Baha, advised me that He was in the hotel. About two o'clock I sought His room,
 92 finding Him alone. His smile of welcome was beautiful to see. He was occupied in looking over His
 93 correspondence, and for about an hour no one else came. It seemed a great privilege to he alone with Him, and I
 94 was impressed with His simplicity as never before. I also felt a longing for greater capacity to serve the Cause.
 95 My note-book was in hand and ... Abdul Baha advised me to write. I told Him that I valued the privilege, as the
 96 friends in America would be interested in all that I could see and hear. He permitted me to write with as much
 97 freedom as desired. (15) Thus Gregory returned to America as one of the early Bahá'ís chosen by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to
 98 herald the Covenant.

99
 100 Gregory had gained a deep understanding of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station, along with the will to communicate that
 101 vision to others and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's encouragement to do so. Yet the experience of his pilgrimage was more than
 102 the source of increased understanding and assurance for Louis Gregory. Something extraordinary had
 103 happened. That mysterious, invisible, penetrative aspect of the Covenant had become the motive force in his
 104 life. "He received another life, and obtained another power," 'Abdu'l-Bahá observed. Louis Gregory became
 105 "quite another Gregory," "a new creation."7 The power of the Covenant pulsed within him. Its radiance
 106 illumined his face. For the next forty years, until the last moment of his life, he exemplified the specific
 107 behaviors that one associates with a Bahá'í who is firm in the Covenant. But, even more, he revealed in the
 108 essence of his being the effects of that added, indefinable, cosmic dimension of the Covenant. Thus Gregory not
 109 only heralded the Covenant but became an example of its transforming power. Firmness in the Covenant was
 110 central—both in theory and in practice—to the fields of Bahá'í activity to which he devoted himself: first, as a
 111 proponent of the oneness of humankind; second, as a teacher; and third, as an administrator. In each of these

112 areas his work was directed and confirmed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Center of the Covenant, and by Shoghi Effendi,
 113 through whom the authority of the Covenant continued its unbroken flow. Gregory was steadfastly devoted to
 114 both and unfailingly responsive to their wishes. As his life of service unfolded, it became in itself an illustration
 115 of the dynamics of firmness in the Covenant, as described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

116 *“Whoever is firm in the Covenant and the Testament is today endowed with a seeing*
 117 *eye, and a responsive ear and daily advances in the divine realm until he becomes a*
 118 *heavenly angel.”⁸*

119 In innumerable ways ‘Abdu’l-Bahá made His loyal follower a focus of His efforts to promote the oneness of
 120 humankind—in the purpose He set before Gregory, in the marriage He encouraged, in the tablets He wrote to
 121 white Bahá’ís praising Gregory, in the symbolic act of His calling for Gregory at a Washington, D.C., luncheon for
 122 dignitaries and seating him in the place of honor at His side. During the period of the Guardianship, even though
 123 the relationship between Gregory and Shoghi Effendi was based entirely on correspondence, the pattern
 124 continued.

125 *Shoghi Effendi recognized Gregory as “the exemplary exponent & the ablest*
 126 *champion of this noble ideal that animates our Faith.”¹³*

127 In his letters to Gregory the Guardian consistently supported the oneness of humankind and encouraged an
 128 intensification of race unity activities. He maintained this emphasis throughout the mid-1920s and the later
 129 1930s, both periods of lagging progress in the attempts of the North American Bahá’ís to come to grips with
 130 racial prejudice. A 1926 letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, for example, encourages Gregory with these
 131 words:

132 *“In connection with the idea of certain of the friends that now is not the time to teach among*
 133 *the coloured, Shoghi Effendi feels that . . . we should rather make an effort to help them in*
 134 *their hours of despondent feelings and to encourage them with the hopes of a brilliant future*
 135 *that awaits mankind.”*

136 And in a note penned at the close of the letter Shoghi Effendi reinforced the point:

137 *“The problem of reaching the coloured races ... is ... vital and urgent & should be*
 138 *never neglected ... we should insure the steady & gradual development of our work in*
 139 *such an important field.”¹⁴*

140 The Guardian thus removed any doubt Gregory might have had about the importance of persevering, even
 141 when few seemed to be responding.
 142

143 With the North American Bahá'í community as a whole, Shoghi Effendi practiced what might be termed positive
 144 reinforcement. In 1927, when the newly appointed amity committee, for which Gregory served as secretary,
 145 composed its first circular letter, Shoghi Effendi immediately responded with his first major message on the
 146 subject of race, praising the “splendid document” produced by the committee and posing in challenging terms
 147 the need for supreme effort to eradicate race prejudice among the Bahá'ís (Bahá'í Administration 129–32).
 148
 149 The amity work flourished for years, with Gregory in the forefront of activity. Then—despite Shoghi Effendi's
 150 consistent support— it gradually declined.

151 *After the national amity committee was abolished in 1936, the Guardian wrote*
 152 *Gregory a letter that stressed “the importance & urgency of the racial amity work*
 153 *that challenges & confronts the believers in that continent.”¹⁵*

154 Gregory shared the letter with the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, to
 155 no apparent effect. Finally, in 1939, given nothing positive to reinforce,

156 *Shoghi Effendi brought the problem of race prejudice to the fore once again by*
 157 *addressing it at length in a message to the North American Bahá'ís entitled*
 158 *The Advent of Divine Justice. In that document he called racial prejudice “the most vital*
 159 *and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its*
 160 *evolution” (33–34).*

161 Shoghi Effendi's identification of race prejudice as “the most challenging issue” facing the North American
 162 Bahá'ís marked the beginning of a period of considerable progress, during which Gregory remained in the role of
 163 standard-bearer that he had been given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá so many years before. His concerns and activities fully
 164 vindicated by Shoghi Effendi, Gregory was elected to the National Assembly after a seven-year hiatus; and, when
 165 the National Assembly created a new national race unity committee, he was appointed a member. He remained
 166 in the forefront until age and ill health caused him to retire from active service on the national level in 1946.

167
 168 For nearly four decades Gregory's efforts to eradicate prejudice and discrimination were grounded in and
 169 strengthened by his understanding of the Covenant. In Gregory's mind, as in the Bahá'í Writings themselves, the
 170 oneness of humankind was clearly related to the Covenant and to 'Abdu'l-Bahá as its Center. In concluding his
 171 account of his pilgrimage in Star of the West, Gregory had observed that “the Reality of Abdu'l-Baha ... is found
 172 by promoting that which tends to unity and harmony” (“Impressions” 6). He never minimized the difficulty of
 173 achieving this aim, however.

174 *In 1915, trying to prevent the Washington, D.C., Bahá'í community from breaking apart along*
 175 *racial lines, he wrote a fellow believer that “in proportion as souls become severed and*
 176 *detached, the Divine Reality makes all things possible, and differences based upon human*
 177 *limitations give way. I have not yet reached the place where I see no differences, but hope*
 178 *through Divine Favor to attain it ... The power of the Covenant overcomes all.”¹⁶*
