



## Even Though the World Should Go To Smash

By Jonathan Menon

Published: April 22, 2012 | Last modified: January 16, 2015

Permalink: <http://239days.com/2012/04/22/even-though-the-world-should-go-to-smash/>

ALMOST COMPLETELY SEPARATED FROM Agnes Parsons’s social world—both psychologically and physically—lived the African American citizens of Washington. In 1912, the world’s second-largest black community called Washington home, having been overtaken in sheer numbers by New York just before 1900. But whereas in New York the African American community was only a drop in a very large bucket, almost one-third of Washington’s inhabitants were black.<sup>1</sup>

Washington was a *Southern* city, filled to the brim with Southern attitudes about nation, society, culture, and race, many of which were reflected, one way or another, in the group of Bahá’ís that had percolated up among the lettered streets since 1898, when the community had been founded, and 1899, when Phoebe Apperson Hearst had begun holding meetings in her Washington home.<sup>2</sup>

Nothing resembling a unified opinion on race could be found among the capital’s Bahá’ís.<sup>3</sup> By 1912 some of them—the few who were aware of the racial implications of their new religion—were already holding integrated meetings. Thirty years later, one of them reflected on the situation: “Even where all the believers were free from prejudices some felt that it would upset inquirers after the truth if they were confronted too soon with signs of racial equality. . . . On the other hand, others were [insistent] that such principles should be upheld and applied even though the world should go to smash.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of Population: 1910, Vol. III, Reports by States Nebraska-Wyoming, Alaska, Hawaii, and Porto Rico* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1913).

<sup>2</sup> Anita Chapman, “History of the Washington DC Bahá’í Community,” Bahá’í Community Washington DC, accessed July 8, 2013, <http://www.dcbahai.org/component/content/article/30-community/51-history-of-the-washington-dc-bahai-community>.

<sup>3</sup> Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), 31. The main sources for the racial attitudes among early Bahá’ís in Washington, DC, are Louis Gregory’s recollections and letters, and Joseph Hannen’s letters and community reports that were published in *Star of the West*. In 1982, Gayle Morrison first knitted together these disparate sources into a unified account in her biography of Louis Gregory. References to Joseph Hannen’s published reports may be found on pages 328 and 329 of her book.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Gregory, quoted in Morrison, *To Move the World*, 34.

But most Washington Bahá'ís, due to custom, habit, avoidance, or simple lack of knowledge, remained untouched by the issue. Little did they suspect that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was about to disabuse them of their beliefs about race, and confront them with an entirely new perspective on the meaning of social equality.

Enter Louis George Gregory, a thirty-seven-year-old, Fisk- and Howard-educated African American lawyer from Charleston, South Carolina. As president of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association, the oldest African American organization in Washington, he was one of the most prominent members of the capital's African American community. He had eagerly followed the developments of W. E. B. Du Bois's Niagara Movement, and later characterized his own views on the race issue at that time as "radical and wide-eyed," a "program of fiery agitation in behalf of a people. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Louis Gregory first learned of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in late 1907 from a colleague – a cultivated, southern white gentleman who shared his office at the Treasury Department. Gregory attended a discussion with Bahá'ís at the old Corcoran building as a favor to him.<sup>6</sup> He was not interested in religion. Earlier in his life he "had been seeking," he said, "but not finding truth, had given up."<sup>7</sup>

Yet as he heard more about 'Abdu'l-Bahá and this new faith, Louis Gregory came to believe he had found the divine reply to the famous prayer Du Bois had penned after the Atlanta Riot, "in the Day of Death, 1906":

*Bewildered we are, and passion-tost, mad with the madness of a mobbed and mocked and murdered people; straining at the armposts of Thy Throne, we raise our shackled hands and charge Thee, God, by the bones of our stolen fathers, by the tears of our dead mothers, by the very blood of Thy crucified Christ: What meaneth this? Tell us the Plan; give us the Sign!*

*Keep not thou silence, O God!*<sup>8</sup>

"Heaven and Earth heard that piercing cry," wrote Louis Gregory in a 1936 review of Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, "uttered by one, echoed by millions." "Earth and Heaven answered."<sup>9</sup> After investigating the new religion for eighteen months, Louis Gregory became a Bahá'í in June, 1909.

---

<sup>5</sup> Louis Gregory, quoted in Morrison, 24.

<sup>6</sup> "I think that this is something that will interest you. I am too old to investigate it. You are young and I would like you to do so." Harlan F. Ober, "Louis Gregory," in *A Compendium of Volumes of The Bahá'í World: An International Record, I-XII*, comp. Roger White (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981), 651.

<sup>7</sup> Louis Gregory, quoted in Morrison, 25.

<sup>8</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "A Litany of Atlanta," in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922; Project Gutenberg, 2004), <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/1/1/9/8/11986/11986.txt>.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Gregory, quoted in Morrison, 27.

By this time, at least fifteen African Americans had joined the community in the DC area,<sup>10</sup> but ‘Abdu’l-Bahá singled Louis Gregory out. “I hope,” he wrote in response to Gregory’s first letter to ‘Akká in 1909, “that thou mayest become . . . the means whereby the white and colored people shall close their eyes to racial differences and behold the reality of humanity, and that is the universal unity which is the oneness of the kingdom of the human race. . . .”<sup>11</sup>

Then, in the spring of 1911, Louis Gregory visited Ramleh, Egypt, where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was staying in preparation for his first visit to Europe. During their first conversation ‘Abdu’l-Bahá immediately cut “to the substance of the issue.” “What of the conflict between the white and colored races?” he asked.

“This question made me smile,” Gregory wrote, “for I at once felt that my Inquirer, although He had never in person visited America, yet knew more of conditions than I could ever know. I answered that there was much friction between the races. That those who accepted the Baha’i teachings had hopes of an amicable settlement of racial differences, while others were despondent. Among the friends were earnest souls who wished for a closer unity of races and hoped that He might point out the way to them. He further questioned: ‘Does this refer to the removal of hatreds and antagonisms on the part of one race, or of both races?’ Both races, was my answer, and He said this would be done.”<sup>12</sup>

“Work for unity and harmony between the races,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá told him. “The colored people must attend all the unity meetings. There must be no distinctions.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> The 1906 Census lists 74 Bahá’ís in the D.C. area, fifteen of them Negroes. Chapman, “History,” website.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Louis Gregory, trans. Mirza Ahmad Sohrab, 17 November 1909, Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, National Bahá’í Archives, Wilmette, IL, quoted in Morrison, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Louis G. Gregory, *A Heavenly Vista: The Pilgrimage of Louis G. Gregory* (Washington, DC: R. L. Pendleton, 1911; repr., Ferndale, MI: Alpha Services, 1997), also available online, <http://bahai-library.com/pilgrims/louis.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory, *Heavenly Vista*.

## How to Cite this Article

The formatting below is from the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th Edition. For other academic citation styles, please adapt accordingly. Since the **239 Days** site and its contents may be updated from time to time, we recommend you include a “Last modified” date, which is provided at the top of both the web and PDF versions of this article.

### **FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:**

Jonathan Menon, “Even Though the World Should Go to Smash,” *239 Days in America*, ed. Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett, April 22, 2012, <http://239days.com/2012/04/22/even-though-the-world-should-go-to-smash/>.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Menon, Jonathan. “Even Though the World Should Go to Smash.” *239 Days in America*. Edited by Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett. April 22, 2012. <http://239days.com/2012/04/22/even-though-the-world-should-go-to-smash/>.

### **HOW TO CITE THE *239 Days in America* WEBSITE IN A BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Menon, Jonathan, and Robert Sockett, eds. *239 Days in America*. <http://239days.com/>.

## Terms of Use

**239 Days in America**™ and the 239Days.com website is licensed under a Creative Commons 3.0 License as specified at this link: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>. **This PDF file** is shared with you with the following additional terms:

YOU MAY quote from this PDF file with proper attribution. Your citation must include the author's name and the **239 Days in America** project's name. You may download and print this PDF file, and you may share individual PDF files in print or electronic form.

Although we want to make our work easy to share, we also wish to maintain the unity and integrity of **239 Days in America** as a whole. Therefore,

YOU MAY NOT republish or rebroadcast our PDF files in a public forum—such as by uploading them to a blog, app, or other web property, publishing them in print form, or distributing them widely using electronic means—without our prior written consent. We invite you to discuss such opportunities with us by contacting the Editor-In-Chief at [editor@239Days.com](mailto:editor@239Days.com). Otherwise, please share the permalinks displayed at the top of each file.

YOU MAY NOT extract pages from this file, recombine this PDF file with other documents, assemble its contents into any free or paid product, app, ebook, collection, compilation, or archive, nor remove this page of Terms. The **Adobe PDF**™ security features employed in this document have been selected to prevent such use. You may not circumvent these security features in any way.