

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

OF THE

BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

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To the American Bahá'í Community

Dearest Friends,

As this new century hastens toward the opening of its sixth year, a signal occurrence in the history of the Bahá'í Faith on the North American continent is being marked, for though accounts differ on the specific date, it is 150 years ago that Robert Turner, the first American of African descent to embrace this newest of the world's major religions, was born.

At the time of its occurrence, Mr. Turner's arrival in this world was not a cause for widespread celebration, nor is it likely that it was even much noticed. Since it happened sometime between the autumns of the years 1855–56, some seven years before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and in the state of Virginia, one of eleven that seceded from the Union rather than submit to any curtailment of its practice of slavery – that “peculiar institution” by which it trafficked in the lives of human beings – it is entirely possible that Robert Turner was quietly born in bondage.

A world away, historical forces had, by the time of his birth, already been set in motion that would ultimately collide with and forever alter the lives of Robert Turner and his nation. Out of the spiritual torpor, moral decay, and social unrest that characterized 19<sup>th</sup>-century Persia, a new religion, the Bahá'í Faith, had emerged, with a mission that was breathtakingly ambitious and global in scope: to effect a transformation of human consciousness, enabling all people, everywhere, to recognize the simple, incontrovertible truth that under the skin we are the same – brothers and sisters in one great human family.

As Robert Turner grew to manhood, Civil War and a presidential assassination were succeeded by a turbulent period of Reconstruction, while both he and the United States remained unaware of the Bahá'í Faith. Then, in 1893, the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago became the catalyst that brought into incandescent contact the two elements – an infant nation full of promise as yet unredeemed and an embryonic world faith with a vision for a new world order that would require for its building the ingenuity and organizing skills of Americans. By 1898, Phoebe Apperson Hearst, philanthropist, widow of the former U.S. Senator from California, and matriarch of the wealthy and prominent Hearst family, had been sufficiently set aflame by this new light to organize the first American pilgrimage to 'Akká, where 'Abdu'l-Bahá remained a prisoner of the Turkish government. She would doubtless not have considered making such a journey without the company of Robert Turner, who had sometime in his young adulthood found employment in her household as her “faithful, dependable, and wise” butler.

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However progressive the schooling or social education of this little party predominantly composed of white Americans of European ancestry might have been, it is unlikely that anything could have prepared them for the marked consideration, kindness, and warm affection 'Abdu'l-Bahá showed Robert Turner throughout their sojourn with Him. By His actions, the Master made it crystal clear that in the great adventure of reconstructing the world in accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, people of color would not be invited along as an afterthought. They would play a central role in the enterprise, as equal and respected collaborators in shaping its course and in leading it.

Details of Robert Turner's life to flesh out the bare bones we presently possess will have to await the explorations of future Bahá'í scholars. They will come, as will the institutions providing social, educational, and charitable services that will assuredly be named in his honor, for Robert Turner's place in the annals of the American Bahá'í community is lofty and indisputable. The Master's prediction that he would be "*a door through which a whole race would enter the Kingdom*" has already seen the first light of fulfillment in the immortal contributions to the Faith's development made by such entrants through that door as Hand of the Cause of God Louis G. Gregory; former Universal House of Justice member Amoz Gibson; former Counselors Dr. Magdalene M. Carney and Dr. Sarah M. Pereira; and former National Spiritual Assembly members Dr. H. Elsie Austin, Ellsworth Blackwell, and Matthew Bullock—all Americans of African descent who paved the way for contributions yet to be made by legions of African Americans of present and future generations, all of them proudly carrying the torch lit by Robert Turner, that "*ignited and enkindled candle among the colored race.*"

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Robert C. Henderson  
Secretary-General