

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Bahá'ís of the Washington, DC Metro Area Unveil Grave Marker for Pocahontas Pope, the City's First African American Bahá'í

April 30, 2018, Washington, DC— On May 19, 2018, Bahá'ís in the DC metro area will remember Pocahontas Pope (1864-1938) — the first African American member of the Bahá'í Faith in Washington, DC — by unveiling a memorial marker for her grave in National Harmony Memorial Park.

The event, which will honor Mrs. Pope's memory with a program including musical selections, readings and prayers, will take place from **11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.** at **National Harmony Memorial Park, 7101 Sheriff Rd., Slade section, Hyattsville, MD 20792.**

Pocahontas Pope was honored in her lifetime as the “source of light” by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the head of the Bahá'í community at the time and the son of the Bahá'í Faith's founder, Bahá'u'lláh. But her resting place fell into obscurity after 1960 when her grave, along with 37,00 others, was moved from Columbian Harmony Cemetery to National Harmony Memorial Park. None of the original markers were retained, rendering her grave essentially anonymous.

Mrs. Pope was a community leader, accomplished seamstress and dedicated public servant, particularly in advancing the education of black students. After joining the Bahá'í Faith, she hosted Bahá'í gatherings in her home in Northwest DC that brought many people of color to the Bahá'í community, at a time when societal norms in DC called for segregation of the races. In doing so, Mrs. Pope lived out the fundamental Bahá'í principles of the unity of the races and the elimination of all forms of prejudice and racial inequality.

Recently, thanks to the research efforts of local Bahá'ís, Mrs. Pope's grave was located and her story was rediscovered. Inspired by Mrs. Pope's life and legacy, DC metro Bahá'ís launched an effort to grant Mrs. Pope's memory the honor it deserves.

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About the Bahá'í Community of Washington, DC

The Bahá'í community of Washington, DC strives to put the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith into practice through active community building. Throughout Washington, DC, nearly 1,000 people from all belief backgrounds participate in more than 100 activities organized by the local Bahá'í community. The community welcomes all to Sunday morning programs, devotional gatherings, children's classes, study groups and junior youth empowerment programs. Through these local endeavors, the DC Bahá'í community creates environments where diversity is celebrated and young people are inspired to practice virtues and render service to others. The Bahá'ís of DC have a strong legacy of working to build racial unity. In 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, spoke about interracial harmony at Howard University's Rankin Chapel, marking one of the earliest racially integrated gatherings in the city. Prominent African-American Bahá'ís spent formative years in DC, including Alain LeRoy Locke,

“the dean” of the Harlem Renaissance; Louis Gregory, a Howard-educated attorney; and Helen Elsie Austin, a U.S. foreign service officer and the first African American woman to serve as assistant attorney general in Ohio.

About the Bahá'í Faith

Bahá'u'lláh, (1817-1892), whose name means “The Glory of God,” is considered by millions around the world as the divine educator for this age, whose coming was foretold by all of the divine messengers of the past. In his writings, Bahá'u'lláh outlines a framework for the development of a global civilization centered around the recognition of the oneness of humanity, offering a compelling vision of a future world defined by justice, peace and prosperity.

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that the successive founders of the world's religions – among them Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus Christ and Muhammad – are manifestations of God, who each brought a message suited to the age and place in which it was revealed. In essence, the religion of God is one and is progressively unfolding. The international Bahá'í community, numbering more than 5 million, is quite possibly the most diverse organized body of people on the planet. In fewer than 200 years, it has become a global faith present in every country in the world with adherents from virtually every national and religious background, including about 2,100 indigenous tribes, races and ethnic groups.

About Pocahontas Pope

Pocahontas Pope was born Pocahontas Kay about 1864 in Halifax County, NC to a well-known local family. In 1884, she married John W. Pope, an active faith leader, school teacher and elected commissioner in Rich Square, NC. As North Carolina implemented Jim Crow laws that made public life and elected positions dangerous for black citizens, the Popes moved to Washington, DC in 1898, where John Pope worked for government agencies. Pocahontas Pope was deeply involved in many public causes relating to education of black students and was a leader of the Second Baptist Lyceum (the Second Baptist Church) and other African American institutions in Washington, DC.

Motivated by the fundamental Bahá'í principles of the oneness of humankind and freedom from prejudice, two early white Bahá'ís, Pauline and Joseph Hannen, shared the Bahá'í Faith with people of color in what was then a segregated city. This included Pocahontas Pope, who in 1906, became the first African American in the metropolitan area to become a Bahá'í. She held frequent meetings at her home at 12 N St. NW and included among her circle individuals who later became Bahá'ís, such as Coralie Cook, Harriet Gibbs Marshall and Alain LeRoy Locke.

‘Abdu’l-Baha (1844-1921), the son Bahá'u'lláh, was the head of the Bahá'í community at that time. Pocahontas Pope wrote her declaration of faith to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and received a response that said in part: “Render thanks to the Lord that among that race thou art the first believer, that thou hast engaged in spreading sweet-scented breezes, and hast arisen to guide others... [T]he pupil of the eye is black, it is the source of light. Thou shalt likewise be.” Ms. Pope would have met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in one of his visits to Washington, DC in 1912.