

# Leonora Stirling Armstrong

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Leonora Stirling Armstrong was among the earliest Bahá'í Pioneers to journey to South America -- one of a handful of courageous souls who arose in response to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's call for pioneers during His Own lifetime, and the first Pioneer to settle permanently in Latin America.

She was born Leonora Stirling Holsapple on June 23, 1895 in Hudson, New York to Samuel Norris Holsapple and Grace Stirling. Even though Leonora attended church regularly, she was disappointed with her experiences there. When she was about thirteen, her maternal grandmother, 'Mother Stirling', who had found the Bahá'í Faith after many years of spiritual searching on her own, introduced Leonora to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh. Sensitive by nature, Leonora was deeply attracted to the Teachings of the Faith. This attraction was reinforced by Mother Stirling's example of devotion to the Cause. Leonora then began to memorize passages and prayers from the Writings and began to share the Message with her classmates and friends.

After Leonora graduated from Cornell University, she taught Latin in high schools and actively promoted social welfare. During this time, she befriended many prominent early believers, including the Obers and May Maxwell. Leonora once said, "May, more than anyone else, helped me to feel the great love of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the reality of love, which I had longed to feel, and a deep bond was formed between us, which gave me the greatest joy I had known." [i]

Upon reading 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan unveiled at the Bahá'í Convention in 1919, Leonora immediately wrote to the Master, offering herself in service. Leonora said, "The hope of the Master's became my highest aspiration and then, early in 1920, I read His Tablet to Martha Root, commending her teaching work in South America and stressing the importance of its being followed up by others, it at once seemed to me that here there might be a definite task for me." Martha Root had opened the frontier of South America with her historic visit in 1919. Leonora wrote to Martha about an opportunity to arise in a similar service, and Martha responded, strongly encouraging Leonora to pioneer.

And so the decision was made and the journey began. On January 15, 1921 Leonora set sail from New York to Brazil on a divinely-inspired adventure that would last more than 60 years. In the beginning, Leonora suffered from loneliness and malnutrition. However, as she slowly began to learn Portuguese, she was better able to support herself. She found that teaching English was a valuable way to meet new people and interest them in the Faith.

Just a few short months after settling in Santos, in the south of Brazil, Leonora learned of the passing of her beloved grandmother who had taught her the Faith. Later that year, she learned of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who she had so longed to meet during His lifetime. Before His passing, in June 1921 from Bahjí, 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed the second of two Tablets written for her. This Tablet was a source of great joy and comfort to her in the years ahead. The Master had addressed the envelope simply "Brazil. To the Maidservant of God, Leonora Stirling Holsapple." Astonishingly, it reached her - the Master probably had not doubted that it would.

In the Tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to Leonora as a "Herald of the Kingdom", and calls upon her to "thank God" that she has "enlightened" her "sight, and art giving light to the sight of others, too."<sup>[ii]</sup>

Shoghi Effendi later wrote to Leonora: "Your name I assure you will adorn the annals of the Cause and will inspire many a Bahá'í pioneer in the future."<sup>[iii]</sup>

Leonora's six decades of service as a tireless pioneer for the Cause is the mark of greatest human endeavor. She carried the Message wherever she went, in whatever social service capacity she served. She also translated much Bahá'í literature into Spanish and Portuguese. Her work was marked by a strength and capacity for service that was extraordinary. She became known in the press for her outstanding efforts as "Nurse of the Poor."

In 1927, Leonora became the first Bahá'í to visit and speak of the Cause in Colombia, Venezuela, Curacao, Trinidad, Barbados, Haiti, British Guiana and Dutch Guiana, thus complementing and completing Martha Root's unfulfilled intention of raising the Call of God in all the Latin American countries.

During the 1930s, more traveling teachers visited South America and additional pioneer settlers gradually strengthened the work Leonora had begun. In February 1940, May Maxwell came to visit Leonora, and they spent some wonderful days in Rio. Leonora's beloved friend passed in Buenos Aires not long after their visit.

The following year, in 1941, Leonora married an Englishman she had known for many years, Harold Armstrong. He would support her through the years of unwavering Bahá'í services ahead. During the next twenty years, Leonora and her husband lived in various places around Brazil and adopted and raised several children.

In 1961, the first National Spiritual Assembly of Brazil was established. Leonora could now be assured that the activities she had begun would be continued. In 1973, the Universal House of Justice appointed her to membership on the Continental Board of Counselors in South America.

Leonora continued her tireless efforts by serving for seven years as Counselor until her passing in October 1980. As Ruhíyyih-Khánúm has written of Leonora, "The study of a life as Leonora's, a life of complete consecration to Bahá'u'lláh and His teachings, a life of ceaseless work which lasted till a few hours before her passing at the age of eighty-five, a life in which it never even occurred to Leonora that she was sacrificing - such a life is a manual for every generation of Bahá'ís to study and presents an enduing challenge to all those who would follow in her footsteps." [iv]

[i] The Bahá'í World, 1979-1983, "Leonora Stirling Armstrong", pg. 734

[ii] Ibid, pg. 735

[iii] Ibid

[iv] Ibid, pg. 738