

John William and Daisy Edna Ligon House, 573 E. Lenoir St, Raleigh, NC

Compiled and edited by Brent A. Pitts, May 2024

History of the house

The Ligon House (c. 1914) at 573 E. Lenoir St sits on a 0.32 acre double lot (iMAPS). Residents, descendants, and neighbors called it 'the big house'. Owned for 75 years by the Ligons, a prominent Raleigh family, this two-story Craftsman-style house features six- over one-pane windows, an eyebrow dormer, and Craftsman-style porch supports. || LIGON HOUSE: 3-bay hipped-roof house with original 6-over-1 double-hung sash windows; attached 1-story porch with hipped roof, Craftsman-style supports, matchstick balustrade, awning; eyebrow attic dormers; aluminum siding; original interior side chimneys. Owned and occupied by the Ligons since 1914. Directories list early residents as Daisy Ligon (1914), Rev J. W. Ligon (1921-22), J. W. Ligon Jr (1925), and Daisy Ligon (owner, 1938.) (Abridged and edited from National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, East Raleigh-South Park Historic District; prepared by Elliot K. Wright, Joyce Marie Mitchell, Bruce Kalk, and Terri Myers, April 1990; <https://files.nc.gov/ncdcr/nr/WA1846.pdf>, pp. 10, 98).

Peril and concern

Regarding the house and its fate, the pendulum has swung from despair to hope and back for at least twenty years. At this writing, 573 E. Lenoir St remains unoccupied and neglected. Several windows on the façade are boarded up. The roof reportedly needs replacement. No obvious repairs have been made since 2021, when a new owner promised restoration and preservation of the house.

About 2004, Jeff Moore, a descendant of Rev Ligon, undertook to preserve the house and to repurpose the property as 'Ligon Square', which he hoped would provide new office space for nearby Shaw University and a prominent venue for community gatherings (*News & Observer*, 26 Aug 2004, pp. 1A, 18A). Later newspaper reports (as well as current conditions) indicate that this initiative was not successful.

In early 2007, staff writer Ryan Teague Beckwith reported that a coalition led by Bruce Lightner had obtained a reprieve for the house, which the Raleigh City Council had recently slated for demolition. Following this success, Lightner expressed his wish that the coalition could either buy the property from the heirs or help them to finish their rehabilitation of the house [*News & Observer* (8 Feb 2007), p. 3B].

By 2021, Josh Shaffer wrote in the *News & Observer* that the house had been sold, reporting also that the new owner, Hoss Holdings LLC, had committed to restoration and preservation of the house (23 Dec 2021, p. A5). Among planned first steps: 'tarping all of the holes in the roof to prevent further deterioration of the structure'. Nearly three years later, however, the house's façade still has boarded-up windows as seen earlier in the photo accompanying Shaffer's article.

Biography of John William Ligon

Rev Dr John William Ligon was a respected community leader, pastor, businessman, and educator in Raleigh, North Carolina. Born in Wake County in 1869, he held multiple local pastorates and served for 26 years as both teacher and principal in Wake County public schools (<https://www.wcpss.net/Page/45919>). He held four degrees from Shaw University, including an honorary doctor of divinity conferred in 1925.

John William Ligon was born in Wake County, NC, on 12 Nov 1869. He died in Raleigh on 28 June 1925. On 27 Dec 1899, he married Daisy Edna Jones (1874-1957) with whom he had five children: Leonard W., Maye Edna, Johnsie E. C., Hazel E., and John William Ligon Jr ([findagrave.com](https://www.findagrave.com)).

Young Master Ligon attended rural schools in Wake County. Speaking of this period, he says: 'From the age of thirteen to eighteen, I was in school only three weeks. I did not attend school for over six months in any one year, being forced to earn money to pay for my schooling. I studied while out of school.'

Rev Ligon was industrious and a hard worker from his youth up. For several years, he operated a grocery store in addition to his other pursuits. After the Bible, Rev Ligon particularly enjoyed reading general history and the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson ([findagrave.com](https://www.findagrave.com)).

Rev Ligon's daughter Maye states, 'He instilled in us the value of good books and good reading. When each one of us was born, he bought a book about Negroes or by a Negro. One child had Dunbar and somebody had DuBois, and so forth. He bought good books, encyclopedias, and dictionaries for the home library' (*Culture Town*, p. 85).

Research by Shaw University Archivist Marie Stark-Farrow in May 2024 confirms that Rev Ligon took an A. B. degree at Shaw U in 1897. In 1907, he received two masters degrees, an A. M. and an M. D. (almost certainly a master of divinity, not a medical degree). Rev Ligon's daughter Maye states, 'He graduated from Shaw, then got his degree in theology from Chicago. That was theological, a divinity school' (*Culture Town*, p. 85). Ms Stark-Farrow reports further that Rev Ligon taught English, German, and Latin in Shaw U's College Department in 1909. Rev Ligon received an honorary doctor of divinity degree in 1925, the year of his death.

Master Ligon joined the Grove Baptist Church at about seventeen years of age. Some five years later, he was called to the ministry. He was licensed by his church, then ordained in 1902. He pastored Raleigh's Blount St Church for five years, Mt Pleasant for two years, and Springfield Baptist Church beginning in 1911.

He was a successful pastor. He freed the Blount St Church from a long-standing debt and shepherded many new members into the congregation.

Such was his popularity that in 1912 he was unanimously chosen as Moderator of the Wake Baptist Association which had 7000 members at the time.

He was also Secretary-Treasurer of the Union Publishing Co, publisher of the *Union Reformer*, the official organ of the Union Baptist Convention of NC. Rev Ligon served as manager and editor of this journal ([findagrave.com](https://www.findagrave.com)).

He was well known as an educator. He was interim principal at Raleigh's Washington Graded and High School. He was principal of Raleigh's Garfield graded (later Crosby-Garfield) school from 1900 to 1919. Before these appointments, he taught in other Wake County graded schools ([findagrave.com](https://www.findagrave.com)).

Regarding Rev Ligon's dismissal as principal of Garfield in 1919, his daughter Maye recalls, 'He was kicked out of there because he dared to be a man. Black people in Raleigh had gotten together that year and they had decided they were going to run for some of these public offices. C. E. Lightner, Clarence Lightner's daddy, was running. I believe he was running for mayor and my daddy ran for commissioner along with others. The superintendent of schools called [my daddy] in and asked him some questions. They fired him because he dared to be a man. At least, that is what he said' (*Culture Town*, p. 85).

Maye continues, 'Where I live now [573 E Lenoir St] was called a "red light" district. [My daddy] moved into this section on a dare. He was principal of the school, and these women and all—prostitutes—were in this area. At times, when the children were out there, he would see these women coming out and the men going in, so he would call the police officers and so forth. Policemen would come down and put them out, and so some of the men dared him. One said, "Ligon, you won't let anybody live in my house. Why don't you buy it?" So Daddy said, "Yes, I will". So he bought the house over there. That was around 1901' (*Culture Town*, pp. 85-86).

According to the Raleigh City Directory for 1909-10 (Richmond: Hill Directory Co, 1919; archive.org), the Garfield graded school was located at 316 S. Swain St (p. 31), approximately two blocks north of Rev Ligon's home at 573 W. Lenoir St. A report from 1916 shows Rev Ligon as principal of the school of 455 students, an increase of 28 students over the previous school year [*Report of the Raleigh Township Graded Schools, Raleigh, NC, Session 1915-16* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1916, pp. 8, 10; <https://digital.ncdcr.gov>)].

Nearly three decades after Rev Ligon's death, John W. Ligon High School opened in 1953, replacing Washington Graded and High School as the only all-Black institution of secondary education in Raleigh. Named for Rev Ligon, the high school was seen as a model for Black education throughout NC, attracting a large number of students and a highly-educated teaching staff from the local Black colleges [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ligon_Middle_School_\(North_Carolina\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ligon_Middle_School_(North_Carolina))]. The school is now rebaptised Ligon Magnet Middle School.

John William Ligon was by all accounts a lion among men.

Staff reporter Treva Jones reports that Rev Ligon's name is inscribed in a shrine to 25 local civil rights activists. Located at the Martin Luther King Jr Memorial Gardens in Raleigh, the shrine is a water monument consisting of 12 tons of polished black granite. A concealed pump sends a gentle cascade of water across the names inscribed on the shiny surface of a granite slab. The tribute accompanying Jones's article states: 'The Rev John W. Ligon,

1869-1925, pastor of Tupper Memorial Baptist Church and an influential minister and educator' [News & Observer (5 Apr 1997), p. 4B].

In reporting the 70th anniversary of Ligon Junior / Senior High School in April 2024, Alicia Adcock notes: 'It was obvious that the Legacy of being Excellent and Legendary was at the forefront because of the person for whom the school was named: John William Ligon, a phenomenal man and father, educator, pastor, principal, political figure, and newspaper editor, to name a few of his roles' (adapted and abridged from *The Carolinian*, <https://caro.news/70th-anniversary-of-j-w-ligon-jr-sr-high-school-held/>; accessed 8 May 2024).

Rev Dr Ligon is buried in Raleigh's Mount Hope Cemetery, 120 Prospect Ave (findagrave.com).



Former home of Rev John William and Daisy Edna Ligon, 573 E. Lenoir St. Photo by Brent A. Pitts, 12 Sept 2023.

Chavis Heights housing project pre-construction, E. Lenoir St, Raleigh, NC. Pre-existing housing. **The John W. Ligon house, 573 E. Lenoir St, appears in background.** Photo by Albert Barden, 1940. Albert Barden Collection, State Archives of NC, Raleigh. N_53_16_1909





'... an Influential Citizen'

John William Ligon was an educator, minister and community leader. He was principal of Crosby-Garfield School in southeast Raleigh from about 1900 to 1919. He was fired after declaring his intention to seek public office, according to his daughter, Maye Ligon, quoted in the book "Culture Town: Life in Raleigh's African American Communities" by Linda Simmons-Henry and Linda Harris Edmisten.

"He was kicked out of there because he dared to be a man," Maye Ligon said.

J.W. Ligon was pastor of Tupper Memorial Baptist Church and also served as managing editor

of The Union Reformer, a Baptist newspaper. He is credited with cleaning up an old red-light district located near the Crosby-Garfield School.

According to a Ligon High School yearbook: "John W. Ligon was an Influential Citizen and his counsel was sought by men and women throughout the State. He always stood for the right and never winked at a crooked deal. He was straightforward and a Christian gentleman."

Source: *News & Observer*, 1 Sept 1995;
<https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-news-and-observer-john-w-ligon/146841360/>.



Location of the Ligon house, 573 E. Lenoir St. Source: *News & Observer* (8 Feb 2007), p. 3B.

John W. Ligon's card, Shaw University graduate card-file. Courtesy of Shaw University Archivist Marie Stark-Farrow (May 2024).



Further reading

Barbee, Jennie M., *Historical sketches of the Raleigh Public Schools, 1876, 1941-1942*

Beckwith, Ryan Teague, 'Plea saves Ligon house; restoration next', *News & Observer* (8 Feb 2007), p. 3B.

Caldwell, A. B., ed., 'John William Ligon', in *History of the American Negro*, North Carolina Edition (Atlanta: A. B. Caldwell, 1921; books.google.com), vol. 4, pp. 96-99;

Jones, Treva, 'Like a mighty river . . . Fighters for justice are honored on King assassination anniversary' [News & Observer (5 Apr 1997), p. 4B].

Shaffer, Josh, 'Ligon House bought, preservation planned in southeast Raleigh', *News & Observer* (23 Dec 2021), p. A5.

Shaw University Bulletin (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1911-13),
<https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/32315?ln=en&v=uv#?xywh=209%2C989%2C1457%2C845&cv=183>

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Simmons-Henry, Linda, and Linda Harris Edmisten, *Culture Town: Life in Raleigh's African American Communities* (Raleigh: Raleigh Historic Districts Commission, 1993), pp. 85-87.

Wright, Elliot K., Joyce Marie Mitchell, Bruce Kalk, and Terri Myers, National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, East Raleigh-South Park Historic District (April 1990);
<https://files.nc.gov/ncdcr/nr/WA1846.pdf>.

Notes

Rev Ligon's daughter Maye states that her father was 'from right in Raleigh, out here on Creedmoor Road. My mother was Daisy Jones Ligon from Charlotte. They met while attending Shaw University' (*Culture Town*, p. 85).

The date of the house's construction was disputed until recently. The *News & Observer* reported that the house at 573 E. Lenoir St 'was built by Ligon in 1922' (*News & Observer*, 26 Aug 2004, p. 18A). According to today's iMAPS, the house was built in 1923, two years before Rev Ligon's death at age 55 (see the Biography above). More recent *News & Observer* articles agree that the house was built in 1914, however. See *Culture Town*, p. 86, for a picture of the Ligon House at 573 E. Lenoir St. The authors agree that the house was built 'about 1914' (p. 86).

According to Raleigh city directories for 1905 and 1921-22, Rev J. W. Ligon lived at 575 E. Lenoir St, the Bilyeu-Ligon House, in those years. The Ligon grocery store was located at 571 E. Lenoir St (National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, East Raleigh-South Park Historic District; prepared by Elliot K. Wright, Joyce Marie Mitchell, Bruce Kalk, and Terri Myers, April 1990; <https://files.nc.gov/ncdcr/nr/WA1846.pdf>, pp. 10, 98). The authors of *Culture Town* call the grocery store 'Leonard Ligon's grocery store', stating that it was located on the corner of Lenoir and Swain Streets (p. 92). Leonard W. Ligon was Rev Ligon's son.

Jennie M. Barbee writes, 'In 1910, the Chavis and Garfield schools were sold, necessitating the moving of the Garfield school to the property on East Lenoir. The new Garfield school was a two-story brick building with eight rooms. J. W. Ligon was principal . . . During Harry Howell's administration, the two schools were consolidated as the Crosby-Garfield School. Crosby became the primary, Garfield the grammar' (*Historical sketches of the Raleigh Public Schools, 1876, 1941-1942*, p. 56).

The Tupper Memorial Baptist Church is located at 501 S Blount St in Raleigh. The first church on the site, called the Second Baptist Church, was completed in 1866. After this building was demolished in 1912, a new church was erected and called the Blount Street Baptist Church. In 1940, this church's name was changed to Tupper Memorial Baptist Church in honor of its founder and first pastor, Dr Henry Martin Tupper of New York. Tupper Memorial Baptist Church and its predecessor churches were the seedbed for the creation of Shaw University (adapted and abridged from www.tuppermbc.org).