

# Alain LeRoy Locke: Father of the Harlem Renaissance

By: Paige Platter

Alain LeRoy Locke was born on September 13, 1885. He was the only child of the first black employee of the U.S Postal Service, Pliny Ishmael Locke, and his wife Mary Hawkins Locke.

Mary was a teacher and sparked Alain's love for learning. An article from *The Washington Post*, in 1902, Locke graduated from Central High School in Philadelphia. In 1907, Locke graduated from Harvard University with degrees in English and Philosophy. He was also an honorary member of the Phi Beta Kappa fraternity. After graduation he was selected as a Rhode Scholar; at the time the board would not meet the candidates in person but some of the selectors knew he was African American.



When Locke got to Oxford he was denied admission to several colleges and several Rhode Scholars from the South refused to attend the same college or events with Locke. Locke was finally admitted into Hertford College where he studied Literature, philosophy, Greek, and Latin. In 1910, he attended the University of Berlin where he studied Philosophy. In 1910 Locke wrote that the "primary aim and obligation" of a Rhodes Scholar "is to acquire at Oxford and abroad generally a liberal education, and to continue subsequently the Rhodes mission [of international understanding] throughout life and in his own country. If once more it should prove impossible for nations to understand one another as nations, then, as Goethe said, they must learn to tolerate each other as individuals" (Alain Locke at Oxford: Race and the Rhodes Scholarships).

In 1912, Locke received an assistant professor position at Howard University where he became a member of the Phi Beta Sigma fraternity. He returned to Harvard in 1916 to pursue a doctorate in philosophy. He received it in 1918. Locke then returned to Howard University as the chair of the Department of Philosophy. During this time he began to teach classes on race relations, the first to do so. This led to his dismissal in 1925 (*The Black 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential African-Americans, Past and Present*). He was reinstated in 1928 and remained there until his retirement in 1953.

Even though he was retired, Locke never stopped supporting black youth. He was a guest writer for the March 1925 issue of the periodical *Survey Graphic* titled "Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro" which featured Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance. In December of that year, he expanded the issue into *The New Negro* which was a collection of writings by African Americans including five of Locke's works. Locked also mentored Zora Neale Hurston, the author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Not only was he a pioneer of the Harlem Renaissance, Locke was also a gay man and would use his position of power, to support other gay African Americans a part of the movement (*Hidden History: Alain Locke is the Key (Part II)*).

After retirement, Locke moved to New York City, however, he suffered from heart disease. After a six week illness, Locke died at Mount Sinai Hospital on June 9th, 1954.