While the first person to introduce the Bahá’í Faith to South Carolina was a native son, the founder of the state’s first Bahá’í community came from half a world away in the medieval city of Königsberg, East Prussia. A vocal instructor who immigrated to New York in 1895, Margaret Klebs became a Bahá’í in New England. In 1912, two years after Louis Gregory’s first teaching trip, Klebs settled permanently in the Augusta area, a New South urban-industrial center that spanned the border of South Carolina and Georgia. Her move to the Augusta area was critical to the development of the Bahá’í Faith in the Deep South. With only a scattering of Bahá’ís in the region—one in Austin, two in Jacksonville, a struggling little group on Mobile Bay, and perhaps a handful of isolated new believers as a result of Gregory’s 1910 foray—Klebs’s arrival represented an additional outpost of the religion and the beginning of a new local community that would eventually serve as a base of expansion into other nearby cities and towns, especially in South Carolina.

During more than a quarter century that Klebs spent in the Augusta area, the American Bahá’í movement underwent dramatic changes, as the final decade of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry gave way to a new period of administrative development under his immediate successor, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith. In terms of both administrative development and approaches to race, the Augusta-area community is a useful lens for viewing an important moment in American Bahá’í history. Far from distant outliers, Margaret Klebs and the Augusta-area Bahá’í community she built and nurtured became active participants in this critical transitional period, both shaping and being shaped by developments at the national and regional levels. By the mid-1930s, the Augusta-area community was larger and better
organized than most in the South and reflected many of the changes in the national movement, with a local governing council functioning according to standards introduced by Shoghi Effendi, a regular schedule of activities for members and seekers, a dedicated meeting facility, and a growing roster of members. Such a well-developed local community stood in stark contrast to the situation in the rest of South Carolina. During the same quarter century, despite repeated visits by traveling teachers, the lack of experienced Bahá’í settlers elsewhere in the state severely impeded the emergence of additional local communities.

In terms of race, the work of Klebs and others in the Augusta area indicated a relatively high degree of receptivity to the faith not only among southern blacks, as Louis Gregory had already demonstrated, but among whites of various class backgrounds as well. However, unlike the early Washington community described in chapter 1, by the middle of the 1930s the Augusta-area Bahá’ís had achieved at best only partial racial integration. Along with the experiences of others in the region, the struggle with race in the first local Bahá’í community in South Carolina (and Georgia) helped inform a new approach to teaching, introduced by the faith’s international leadership and subsequently adopted across the South, which in turn spurred the emergence of more thoroughly integrated local communities elsewhere in South Carolina during the 1940s. As both an administrative base and a contributor to the faith’s regional racial policy, then, Augusta was not just the first local Bahá’í community in South Carolina but its “mother community.”

From Unified Germany to the United States

When Margarethe Sophia Klebs was born there in June 1862, the Baltic Sea port city of Königsberg was a cosmopolitan provincial capital in the Kingdom of Prussia, an industrializing, militaristic, and authoritarian state with grand ambitions in Europe. During Margarethe Klebs’s early childhood, her country led the fractious German-speaking states of north-central Europe toward economic and political unification. As Klebs grew to adulthood, the confident new German Empire rose as a world political and economic power, and the more fortunate among its citizens enjoyed unprecedented degrees of material prosperity. Klebs was part of a “distinguished and cultured” family in the empire’s leading state; one of her brothers became a prominent surgeon in Munich, and one of her uncles, a bacteriologist, discovered the bacillus that causes diphtheria. Klebs herself received an excellent education, studying piano and voice with some of the best teachers in Germany,
France, and Italy. Possessed of self-confidence and an independent spirit, Margarethe Klebs made her own living as a vocalist and music teacher. In 1895, unmarried at age thirty-three, she left Europe for the United States. Her bacteriologist uncle had already resettled there, practicing medicine at a sanatorium in Asheville, North Carolina, before accepting a teaching position at Rush Medical College in Chicago; a cousin, also a physician, followed the next year, treating tuberculosis in Alabama and then also in Chicago. But unlike her relatives, Margarethe Klebs did not gravitate to the Midwest or, initially, to the South. Striking out on her own, she settled in New York City and adopted an anglicized spelling of her first name, Margaret.¹

In her new country, Margaret Klebs continued to teach music, sometimes as a private instructor and sometimes in academic settings, and she often ventured far from New York. Around the turn of the century, for example, she held a teaching position at the Presbyterian College for Women in Columbia, South Carolina, and was a member of the Southern Educational Association. At least by 1911, she had returned to South Carolina and was living and working among the wealthy northerners who wintered at the luxury hotels, golf courses, and polo grounds of Aiken and North Augusta, South Carolina, and nearby Augusta, Georgia. She was also an early and regular patron of Green Acre, an unusual summer colony in southern Maine. Founded in 1890 as a resort hotel by Sarah J. Farmer, a daughter of New England transcendentalists, Green Acre was billed as a nonsectarian oasis for the comparative study of religion and philosophy. With speakers ranging from Swami Vivekananda to W. E. B. Du Bois, it attracted a diverse array of poets, artists, intellectuals, freethinkers, and spiritual seekers from Boston, New York, and other cities of the Eastern Seaboard. Margaret Klebs was right at home. She routinely spent her summers in one of Green Acre’s rustic cottages, teaching private students, arranging musical programs for the other guests, attending lectures, and enjoying the natural beauty of the riverside setting.²

Green Acre also provided Klebs with her first encounter with the Bahá’í Faith. Early in 1900, faced with financial difficulties and ill health, Sarah Farmer took a cruise on the Mediterranean. On the ship she met two old friends who had become Bahá’ís and were on their way to Palestine to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and they encouraged her to join them. Farmer did so, and was immediately transformed by the experience. “Heart too full for speech,” she wrote in her diary after her first audience with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “—received by my Lord.” During the 1900 summer season at Green Acre, she taught a class on “The Persian Revelation,” and one of her early and enthusiastic students was Margaret Klebs. It is unclear whether or not Klebs identified herself as a
Bahá’í as early as 1901, when she was working at Presbyterian College in Columbia, but she certainly did so by the time of her return to South Carolina in 1911, when she sent a contribution from North Augusta to the building fund for the Bahá’í temple in Chicago. During ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit to the United States the following year, Klebs was one of the five hundred people who met him at Green Acre, where he spoke on Bahá’í concepts of education and human development, predicted that the first Bahá’í university and the second temple in the United States would be built on the property, and engaged in intimate conversation with many individuals. More than twenty years later, Margaret Klebs recalled fondly her time with “Him who walked with holy feet on the ground of our cherished Green Acre.” “Never to be forgotten,” she said, was the sight of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá with Sarah Farmer, permanently disabled after a fall and unable to continue her life’s work, “driving slowly around the Green Acre fields. Blessed are we who could witness it.”

As with many early North American Bahá’ís who interacted personally with him, Margaret Klebs’s encounters with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had a profound effect, setting the course of her life’s work and fueling her personal faith for years to come. Either at Green Acre in August 1912 or later that fall during his

![Figure 3.1. Margaret Klebs (1862–1939) on the porch of her cabin at Green Acre Bahá’í School, Eliot, Maine, date unknown. During her quarter century of residence in the Augusta metropolitan area, Klebs remained closely connected with the mainstream of the national Bahá’í movement in part through summers spent at Green Acre. Used with permission of the Eliot Bahá’í Archives, Eliot, Maine.](image-url)
second visit to Washington, D.C., Margaret Klebs had a personal interview with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in which he directed her to return to the South and dedicate her life to teaching the faith there. By the winter of 1912–1913, Klebs was back in Aiken and North Augusta, South Carolina, and she followed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instructions until the end of her life more than a quarter century later. Her pattern was to spend the summers at Green Acre, where lectures, study groups, and interactions with other believers kept her connected to the main currents of American Bahá’í thought and practice, and the remaining nine months or so in the Augusta area, teaching music classes and private students, staging recitals and concerts to benefit local charities, and attempting to build a new Bahá’í community from scratch.4

Louis Gregory appears to have introduced the faith in the Augusta area for the first time during his 1910 tour. He probably spoke at Haines Normal and Industrial Institute, a private school for black children, and Paine College, both in Augusta, and he may have also spoken at Schofield Normal and Industrial School, another black institution, in Aiken. Even so, Klebs’s move was a step forward for the faith in the Augusta area. Even as Gregory’s trip through the Carolinas and Georgia had indicated the potential receptivity of the region’s people, especially African Americans, to the Bahá’í message, its aftermath had also highlighted the limitations of an approach to teaching that relied on itinerant lecturers without some method of following up with interested individuals and groups. Klebs’s move provided part of an answer, at least for one of the metropolitan areas Gregory had visited. By pursuing her livelihood and making friends and acquaintances in Augusta, North Augusta, and Aiken, Klebs could come in contact with seekers on her own and teach them individually, nurturing a new Bahá’í community through interpersonal contact over an extended period of time. When other Bahá’í teachers did visit, she could greatly enhance their effectiveness by making arrangements and securing publicity in advance and by maintaining contact with those who had expressed an interest in the faith.5

Sister Cities on the Savannah

When Margaret Klebs moved to the environs of Augusta, she was making her home in an old city that embodied all the contradictions of the New South. Located on the Savannah River at the Fall Line, the rocky shoals marking the transition from the Piedmont to the broad Coastal Plain, the area had been inhabited by Native Americans for at least four thousand years, and in the early decades of the Carolina colony the native settlement of Savannah