

Louis C Tyree

Letter from Louis Clarkson Tyree to

Letter from Louis Clarkson Tyree to
Raymond Pace Alexander, May 9, 1931
Courtesy of University Archives
University of Pennsylvania

Perseverance in a Precarious World

Louis Clarkson Tyree (1884–1963) found support in Newburyport as he pursued higher education and became a lawyer in early 20th-century America.



TOP: "Sues for an Auto Accident," *Newburyport Daily News*, August 15, 1913
 Courtesy of *Newburyport Daily News*

MIDDLE: "He is Working His Way," *Newburyport Daily News*, January 15, 1906
Courtesy of Newburyport Daily News

**BOTTOM: Class of 1912,
Clark University**
*Courtesy of Clark University,
Robert H. Goddard Library
Clark University Archives and
Special Collections*

BACKGROUND:
Louis Clarkson Tyree, 1906
*Courtesy of the Indiana History
Society, Frances O. Patterson
Papers, 1862-1969, Mo470*

TWENTY-YEAR-OLD LOUIS (LEWIS) CLARKSON TYREE moved a thousand miles to Newburyport in 1904 to seek an education. He left behind his family in Indianapolis—Civil War veteran Charles Tyree who worked as a janitor and day laborer, and Lucy Tyree, who raised him and his five surviving siblings. With the goal of attending the prestigious Phillips Exeter Academy, he boarded at Newburyport’s historic Wolfe Tavern, where he worked as a porter while attending Newburyport High School. Despite support for Tyree, the community was not always the most hospitable place for Black residents. For example, as Tyree was on a path leading towards law school, the *Newburyport Daily News* published a story in 1911 mocking Black attorneys including racial slurs and racist dialect. Nonetheless, Tyree saved money and successfully secured scholarships to attend and graduate from Phillips-Exeter. Then in 1912, he became the first African American graduate of Clark University, despite having been “greatly discouraged . . . and on the point of leaving school two or three times.”

After college, Tyree returned to live and work in Newburyport. While Tyree directed a Wolfe Tavern guest towards the old Green Bridge, Richard C. Calhoun, a millionaire dry goods merchant, accidentally struck him with his luxury Packard car on Winter Street. The Newburyport community rallied around Tyree and held a benefit dance with a “large attendance.” The event was held right here on Pleasant Street in Griffin Hall to help him with his medical expenses. That fall, he applied to Harvard Law School, and received a \$150 scholarship from the Harvard Club of Newburyport to help defray the \$250 annual tuition. As a law student in 1913, Tyree worked with a Newburyport attorney to sue Calhoun for reckless negligence. He won a judgment of \$500.

Tyree had to adapt constantly. He ran out of money and had to leave Harvard Law School, but eventually secured a Master of Laws degree from Boston University. Tyree fulfilled his educational achievements against a national backdrop of race riots and massacres directed at the progress of Black Americans, cresting in the aftermath of World War I. Hundreds of Black people were killed in cities across the country including in Chicago, Tyree's future home. Black Americans, however, emerged with a shared purpose that would propel the civil rights movement in the coming decades.

Tyree worked in Chicago as an attorney for the rest of his life, including advocating for civil rights. In response to the infamous 1931 conviction of the “Scottsboro Boys,” he coordinated meetings for the National Bar Association to take action on behalf of these nine Black teenagers falsely accused of rape in Alabama. Louis C. Tyree died at the age of 79, just as the modern civil rights movement reached its peak with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. *Text by Georgie Vining, Kabria Baumgartner, and Cyd Raschke (2023)*