Born in Frederiksted, St. Croix, on October 11, 1884, during Danish occupation of the islands, Ashley L. Totten was baptized and later confirmed in the state church of the Danish West Indies, the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

As an adult in 1915, he departed for New York City and subsequently served his country as a bugler on the USS Algonquin.

With spiritual values deeply entrenched, he was most depressed when confronted with discrimination practiced in his church in New York City. However, not completely dismayed, he formed a group in the Bronx and worshipped in a private home conforming to the true traditions of Lutheranism. The church was relocated to the Young Women's Christian Association building but was later permanently established at 126th Street near Lennox Avenue.

Totten is also credited with assisting in the organization of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. This union, like others of its kind, helped to solve major problems facing workers. This particular union was formed to protect black porters especially from unfair labor practices and served as advocate for civil rights.

His humanitarian qualities also extended to the improvement of life for his fellow Virgin Islanders wherever they lived. For example, when he learned of the racism and inhumane practices occurring in his homeland during naval administration of the islands, he, along with another Virgin Islander, Elizabeth Anna Hendrickson, founded and administered the Protective League. Still concentrating on conditions at home, he also founded the American Virgin Islands Civic Association, which had as its focus the economic and political advancement of the territory.

His crusade for human rights was acknowledged both at home and abroad. President Harry S. Truman appointed him to the Board of Directors of the Virgin Islands Corporation; he was chairman of the draft board in Harlem and vice president of the Trade Union Division, Liberal Party, of New York City. In this capacity he testified before a congressional committee in behalf of the Virgin Islands.

He was married to the former Violet Victoria and had two sons, Walter and Bertrand, by a previous union. Ashley L. Totten died on January 26, 1963, and was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery, New York City.