

Chase, Thornton (1847–1912)

First person in the West to become a steadfast Bahá'í; one of the founders and chief builders of the Chicago Bahá'í community; included by Shoghi Effendi among a number of prominent early Bahá'ís of the West whom he designated as "Disciples of 'Abdu'l-Bahá."

ARTICLE OUTLINE:

- Family and Early Life
- Years of Spiritual Search
- Activities as a Bahá'í

ARTICLE RESOURCES:

- Notes
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FAMILY AND EARLY LIFE

James Brown Thornton Chase was born on 22 February 1847 in Springfield, Massachusetts. His parents, Jotham Gould Chase and Sarah Cutts S. G. Thornton Chase, were New Englanders of English stock and Baptist religious background. His father, a wealthy businessman, was also a singer and an amateur scientist. The death of Thornton's mother eighteen days after he was born

profoundly shaped his subsequent development. Jotham remarried three years later, and the couple soon adopted three girls, but Chase and his stepmother seem not to have bonded. Chase described his childhood as "loveless and lonely," with "neither mother, sister nor brother."¹ The inner vacuum he felt apparently set him on a quest for love that culminated in his mystical interests.



26th US Colored Troops on parade, 1865. Library of Congress.

For four years, from the age of thirteen through sixteen, Chase lived in Newton, Massachusetts, with the Reverend Samuel Francis Smith, a prominent Baptist clergyman. In July 1863 Chase was accepted by Brown University, but, instead of attending, he enlisted in the Union Army to fight in the Civil War. In early 1864, just before his seventeenth birthday, Chase went to Philadelphia for one month's training in a school for officers of

black infantry units. By May, Chase was second in command of one hundred men, Company K of the Twenty-sixth United States Colored Troops. Two months later, on 5 and 7 July, the unit fought two battles in South Carolina, south of Charleston; Chase was slightly wounded by an exploding cannon, which permanently impaired the hearing in his left ear. By the end of the war in April 1865, he had been promoted to captain and headed his own company.

YEARS OF SPIRITUAL SEARCH

After the war Chase attended Brown University but dropped out before completing his second semester. He returned to Springfield, where he worked as a salesman for his father's timber business, and on 11 May 1870 he married Annie Elizabeth Allyn of Bristol, Rhode Island. The couple had two children: Sarah Thornton (1871) and Jessamine Allyn (1874). Chase started his own specialty lumber business in Springfield, directed the choir of the First Baptist Church, and served as an officer in one of the city's musical organizations.

In 1872 Chase's business failed. Unable to obtain work in Springfield, Chase moved to Boston, where he obtained a meager living through singing and acting. In 1873, in the midst of loneliness, poverty, and a sense of failure, Chase had an experience of God's love, of love "unspeakable," of "absolute oneness."² The experience pulled him back from the brink of self-destruction, renewed his hope, and gave further

impetus to his religious search.

When employment opportunities in Boston proved inadequate, Chase moved to Fort Howard (Green Bay), Wisconsin, where he taught school for a time. Then he moved to Chicago, where he acted in McVicker's Theater, one of the better-known theaters in the city. He subsequently obtained teaching and music jobs in Kansas and lived for a time in Del Norte, Colorado.

While Chase searched for meaningful work, Annie and the two children remained in Springfield with her mother, waiting for him to settle and support his family. Finally, in the mid-1870s, she moved back to Rhode Island and in March 1878 sued Chase for divorce. He begged her to reconsider, but the court granted her petition. She remained in Newport, Rhode Island, where she died in 1918. Chase's older daughter, Sarah, married in 1895 and had five children before dying suddenly in 1908. Chase's second daughter, Jessamine, who never married, became a schoolteacher and musician, like her father. She died in 1947.



Thornton Chase. National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

Chase apparently was devastated by the divorce. Sources indicate that he went into the mountains of Colorado for a time, wandering in search of gold and silver, until he rallied and picked up the pieces of his life. On 6 May 1880 he married Eleanor Francisca Hockett (5 January 1858–12 August 1933), and the couple set up residence in Pueblo. Once again, Chase became extremely active in music, directing a succession of musical and theatrical groups. Drawing on his experience as a prospector, he invented and patented a prospector's pick. He also began to publish poetry in local newspapers and magazines; one poem, which focuses on Jesus's love for humanity, highlights Chase's religious faith.

In 1882 Chase moved to Denver and joined the local Swedenborgian church. Swedenborgianism, which emphasized a metaphorical interpretation of the Bible and stressed a mystical approach to Jesus and Christianity, differed from the strict Protestantism of the Baptist Church of Chase's childhood. After five years, however, the Denver church became wracked by doctrinal disputes. At about that time, Chase abandoned it and all other Christian churches. He initiated a broader religious search and began to read a wide variety of books about religion.

Chase continued to earn his living in various ways, as a journalist, an actor in Denver, and an operator of a music store. In 1888 he was hired by the Union Mutual Life Insurance Company as an agent and soon became the manager of its entire Colorado operation. In 1889 the company promoted him and moved him to its Santa Cruz and San Francisco offices. Chase's only son, William Jotham Thornton Chase, was born in Santa Cruz on 28 June 1889 (d. 2 March 1967).

In California, Thornton Chase continued his religious search, combining it with his work. In 1893 he published a booklet called *Sketches* that uses biblical and religious stories to explain why people should purchase life insurance for themselves. The booklet reveals Chase as a religious seeker familiar with all the major religions.

ACTIVITIES AS A BAHÁ'Í

About 1893 Union Mutual transferred Chase to Chicago, the headquarters for all company operations west of the Appalachian Mountains. In early 1894 Chase was writing a poem about God when a

business colleague entered his office. The colleague was intrigued by the poem and told Chase about a man who claimed that God had recently "walked upon the earth."³ Chase investigated and discovered that the man was Ibrahim Kheiralla, a Bahá'í from Beirut who had recently come to the United States, and that he taught the coming of [Bahá'u'lláh](#), a Messenger of God, in fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Chase and a small group of Chicagoans began to study the Bahá'í Faith with Kheiralla. Chase indicates that 5 June 1894 was a crucial date for the class; probably it was the day the class was organized. By 1895 Chase had completed the class and had become a Bahá'í. At least three other Americans completed the class and accepted the new religion before Chase, but subsequently these three lost interest in the Bahá'í Faith. Thus, 'Abdu'l-Bahá recognized Chase as "the first American believer,"⁴ and [Shoghi Effendi](#) later described him as "indeed the first to embrace the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh in the Western world."⁵

Classes on the Bahá'í Faith were organized in Chicago and later in Enterprise, Kansas; Kenosha, Wisconsin; Ithaca, New York; New York City; Philadelphia; and Oakland, California. By 1899 about fifteen hundred Americans had become Bahá'ís, including seven hundred in Chicago. Chase gave a class on the Bahá'í Faith, wrote numerous letters to interested seekers, and taught the Faith widely during his frequent travels for his company.

In 1899 American Bahá'ís returning from a pilgrimage to the Bahá'í holy places in Ottoman Palestine (See: [Bahá'í World Center](#)) brought to North America rudimentary knowledge of the Bahá'í administrative system (See: [Administration, Bahá'í](#)). Chase became actively involved in administering the Chicago Bahá'í community, first in November 1899, when the community elected officers, and then in March 1900, when the community elected a ten-member Board of Council. Chase was one of the 1899 officers and a member of the 1900 board. Starting in 1898, Ibrahim Kheiralla began to insist on a formal role as leader of the American Bahá'ís. Chase was one of those who tried unsuccessfully to help Kheiralla realize the inappropriateness of his demand, and subsequently Chase played a central part in reorganizing the Bahá'í community independently of Kheiralla.

In 1900 and 1901 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent four knowledgeable Persians —'Abdu'l Karím Tihrání, Hájí Mírzá Hasan Khurásání, Mírzá Asadu'lláh Isfahání, and Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl Gulpáygání—to the United States to deepen the Bahá'ís' knowledge of their religion.

Chase arranged for the latter two visitors to stay in the Chicago Bahá'í Center and moved into the center with them when his wife had to go to New England for a year to handle legal matters connected with the death of his stepmother in Springfield.

Having acquired a deep understanding of the Bahá'í teachings during his time with the Persians, Chase soon emerged as the principal organizer of the Chicago Bahá'í community. In May 1901 he coordinated an election that replaced the Board of Council with a new consultative body, which was first called the Chicago House of Justice and then the Chicago House of Spirituality. By 1902 Chase was serving as chairman of the House of Spirituality, an office he retained until he moved to California in 1909. Chase had learned about the Bahá'í principle of consultation from the Persian teachers and emphasized its importance, thus becoming the first American Bahá'í to champion it. Chase also wrote many circular letters that the House of Spirituality sent to Bahá'í communities throughout the United States and Canada, explaining the Bahá'í holy days and the period of fasting, thereby establishing their observance in North America.



Thornton Chase. National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

Chase's writing experience proved useful in the effort to edit and publish Bahá'í literature. In 1900 Chase and three other Chicago Bahá'í businessmen founded the Behais Supply and Publishing Board of Chicago. In the fall of 1902, the publisher was legally incorporated as the Bahai Publishing Society. It soon emerged as the principal publisher of Bahá'í literature in the English-speaking world and became a major force behind the standardization of the spelling of Persian and Arabic Bahá'í names and terms. Chase was the principal editor of the society's literature and one of its principal financiers. The society published several Bahá'í pamphlets that Chase wrote.

In 1907 Chase was able to go on pilgrimage to Ottoman Palestine. Though he could be with 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Acre for only three days, the experience transformed Chase. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, highly impressed by Chase's qualities, conferred on him the title *Thábit* (Steadfast).

On returning home Chase wrote an account of his pilgrimage that was published in 1908 as *In Galilee*. The short work gives a detailed and poignant description of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's home and family in Acre, as well as a moving description of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself. The work remains an important example of the genre commonly known as pilgrim's notes; thoughtful and reflective, it is of higher quality than most.



Thornton Chase climbing Mount Carmel, 1907.
National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

Next, Chase turned his thoughts to an introductory book on the Bahá'í Faith, *The Bahai Revelation*, published in 1909. One of the most comprehensive and accurate introductions to the Bahá'í Faith written by an early Western Bahá'í, the work emphasizes the Bahá'í teachings as a vehicle for personal spiritual transformation. It continued to be reprinted until the 1920s.

In late 1909 the Union Mutual Life Insurance Company, concerned about the amount of time Chase was spending on his religious activities, transferred Chase to Los Angeles, hoping that a location remote from Bahá'í activity would decrease his opportunities to serve his religion. Chase considered resigning from the company, but at the age of sixty-two he found it impossible to obtain another job, and he had to support his wife, his son in college, and his elderly mother-in-law, none of whom had become Bahá'í. Consequently, Chase had no choice but to accept the new position, even though it paid much less than he had been earning.

Chase still traveled extensively for his company as far north as Seattle and as far east as Denver, travels that gave him opportunities to visit the rapidly developing Bahá'í communities of the Rocky Mountain and Pacific states. At home he helped to organize the Los Angeles Bahá'ís. In 1910 they elected Chase a member of their first five-member governing board and established their first monthly meetings. During this period Chase returned to writing poetry, primarily on the Bahá'í Faith.

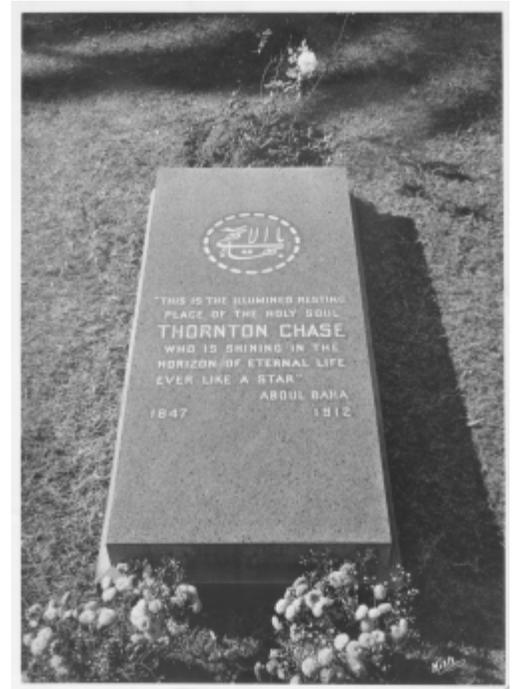
Thornton Chase became ill, suddenly and unexpectedly, while traveling in late September 1912. Following abdominal surgery, he lay gravely ill in a Los Angeles hospital. On 27 September the Bahá'ís wired the news to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who was visiting the United States at the time and had stopped briefly to rest in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, en route to San Francisco. 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His party were saddened by the news. Chase died on the evening of 30 September, just a day before 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived in California, and was buried on 4 October in Inglewood Park Cemetery. Bahá'ís throughout the United States sent messages eulogizing Chase for his intelligence, his consultative approach to problems, his constant advocacy of the need for organization, and his loving disposition.

'Abdu'l-Bahá made a special trip to Los Angeles to visit Chase's grave. On 19 October, accompanied by about twenty-five Bahá'ís, He took a tram to the cemetery, walked solemnly and directly to the gravesite, and carefully covered it with flowers. He then chanted Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Visitation, which

is recited in the Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh and the [Báb](#), and a prayer for the departed. 'Abdu'l-Bahá reportedly praised Chase's qualities: "During his lifetime he bore many trials and vicissitudes, but he was very patient and long-suffering. He had a heart most illuminated, a spirit most rejoiced; his hope was to serve the world of humanity. . . ." 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated that Chase "will not be forgotten" and that his worth was not known then but would become "inestimably dear." 'Abdu'l-Bahá instructed the Bahá'ís to visit Chase's grave, to bring flowers on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's behalf, and to "have the utmost consideration for the members of his family."⁶ At the end of His visit, 'Abdu'l-Bahá knelt and kissed the grave.

Shoghi Effendi, in *God Passes By*⁷, his history of the first Bahá'í century, mentions the "poignant sight" of 'Abdu'l-Bahá kissing the tombstone of "His beloved disciple" as one of the scenes from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the West that will never "be effaced from memory."⁷ Shoghi Effendi also included Chase among outstanding early Bahá'ís of the West whom he designated as "Disciples of 'Abdu'l-Bahá."⁸

Adhering to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's instructions, the American Bahá'í community holds an annual commemoration at Chase's grave on the Sunday nearest to the date of his death. His importance as an early North American Bahá'í thinker, publicist, administrator, and organizer is still underappreciated, however. In many ways Chase's death left a gap in the North American Bahá'í community that remained unfilled until the rise to prominence in the early 1920s of Horace Holley, the chief developer of Bahá'í organization in the United States and Canada.



Grave of Thornton Chase, Inglewood, California. National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

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Notes:

1. Thornton Chase, letter to Julia Culver, 27 May 1909, Thornton Chase Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States, Wilmette, IL.
2. Thornton Chase, letter to Louise Waite, 1 Sept. 1909, Chase Papers.
3. Quoted in Carl Scheffler, "Thornton Chase: First American Bahá'í," *World Order* 11 (1945): 153.
4. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, new ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, 2004 printing) 257.
5. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 288.
6. Quoted in Ahmad Sohrab, "Abdul-Baha at the Grave of Thornton Chase, Los Angeles, California, October 19, 1912," *Star of the West* 3.13 (1912): 14–15.
7. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 291–92.
8. "Disciples of 'Abdu'l-Bahá," *The Bahá'í World*, vol. 3: 1928–30 (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1930) 84–85; and vol. 4: 1930–32 (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1933) 118–19.

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Other Sources and Related Reading:

- Much of this article is based on Robert Stockman's *Thornton Chase: First American Bahá'í* (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2002). See also Stockman's *The Bahá'í Faith in America*, vol. 1: *Origins, 1892–1900* (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985) and *The Bahá'í Faith in America*, vol. 2: *Early Expansion, 1900–1912* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995). A biographical sketch appears in O. Z. Whitehead, *Some Early Bahá'ís of the West* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1976) 1–12. For an account related to Chase's passing, see "Thornton Chase, February 22, 1847–September 30, 1912," *Star of the West* 3.12 (1912): 5–7. See also Mahmúd Zarqání, *Mahmúd's Diary: The Diary of Mírzá Mahmúd-i-Zarqání Chronicling 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey to America*, trans. Mohi Sobhani and Shirley Macias (Oxford: George Ronald, 1998) 293, 336–37; and H. M. Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Bahá: The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: George Ronald, 1987) 309–10. The Thornton Chase Papers in the National Bahá'í Archives, United States, contain approximately fifteen hundred letters and about sixty-seven essays and talks by Chase and a hundred letters to him.
- Published works by Thornton Chase include *The Bahá'í Revelation* (New York: Bahai Publishing Committee, 1928) and available online at http://bahai-library.com/file.php5?file=chase_bahai_revelation&language=All  (accessed 13 Jan. 2009); and *In Galilee*, published in *In Galilee, and, In Wonderland* (Los Angeles: Kalimát, 1985) and available online at <http://bahai-library.com/books/galilee.html>  (accessed 13 Jan. 2009). Chase also published three pamphlets: *Before Abraham Was I Am* (Chicago: Bahai Publishing Society, 1902 [i.e., 1903]); *The Serpent* (Chicago: n.p., 1900); and *What Went Ye Out for to See?* ([Chicago: Bahai Publishing Society], 1904). See also an article entitled "The Gift of God," *World Order* 11 (1945): 147–51, and excerpts from his letters published as "Impressions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His Station," *World Order* ns 25.1 (1993): 12–23.

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