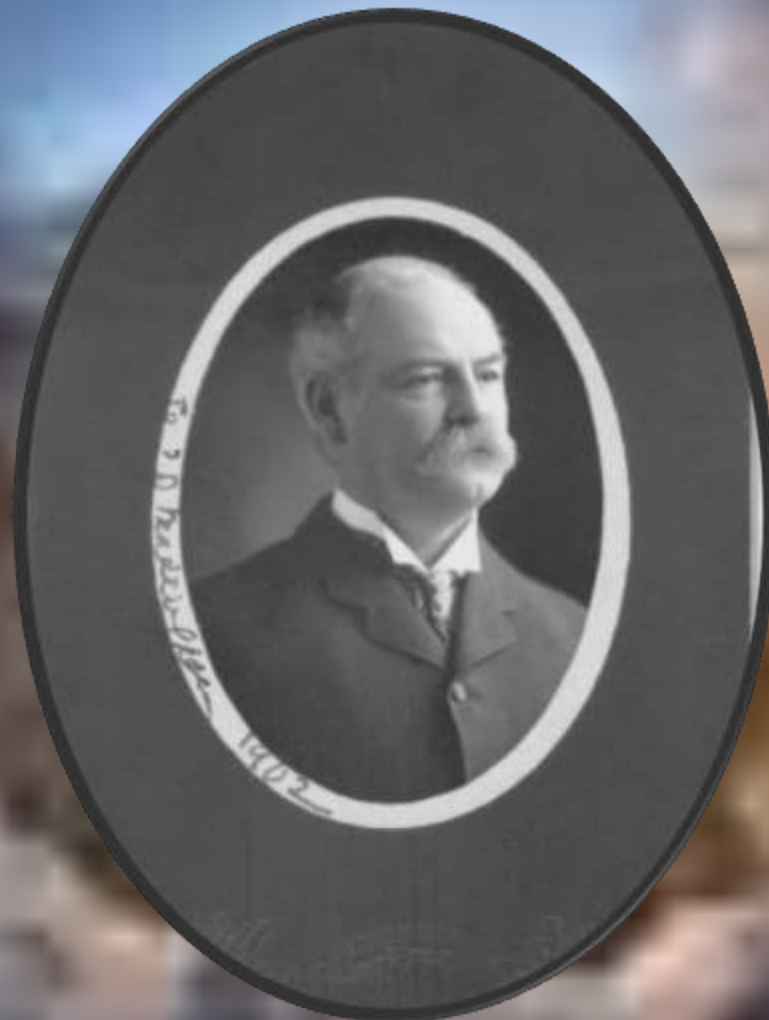


# Thornton Chase 1847-1912

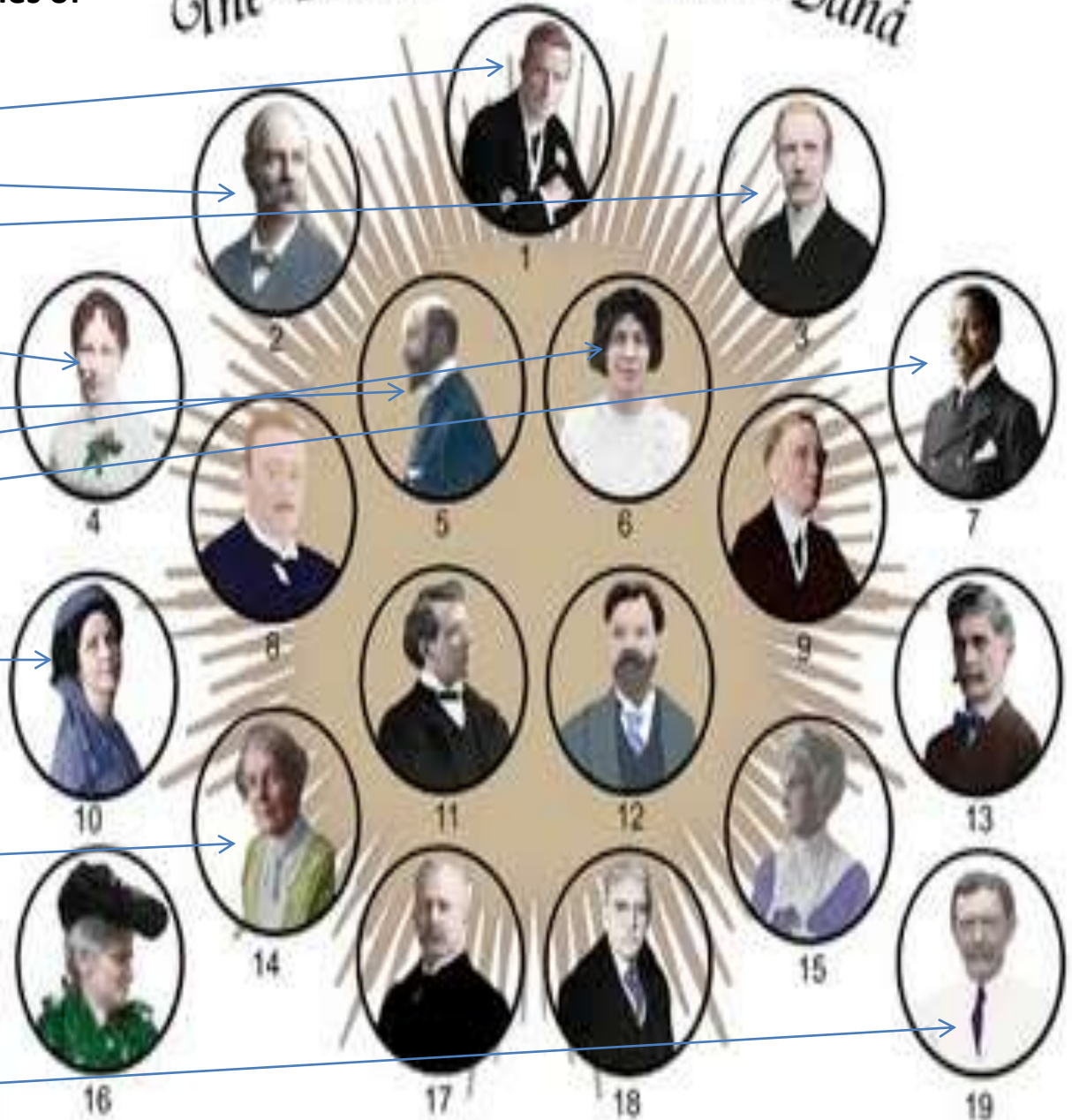


Layout and research by Zabine Van Ness

The Guardian post-humously graced several of the early believers of the West with the station of “Disciples of Abdu’l Baha”

# The Disciples of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

- John Esslemont
- Thornton Chase
- Howard MacNutt
- Sarah Farmer
- Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney
- Lillian Kappes
- Robert Turner
- Arthur Brauns\*
- William Randall
- Lua Getsinger
- Joseph Hannan
- Chester I. Thatcher
- Charles Greenleaf
- Isabella D. Brittingham
- Mary Virginia Thornburgh
- Helen S. Goodall
- Arthur P. Dodge
- William H. Hoar
- J.G. Augur



## Early hero and heroines of our Faith in the West



*Clockwise from bottom left: Thorton Chase, Lua Getsinger, Isabella D. Brittingham, Lillian Frances Kappes, Robert Turner, Howard McNutt, Sarah Farmer, Dr. John E. Esslemont*

*Photo credit: Dr. Duane Troxel*

# A loveless and lonely childhood



He was born James Brown Thornton Chase on 22 February 1847 in Springfield, Massachusetts to parents of English stock and Baptist religion. His father was a singer, amateur scientist, and wealthy businessman. Chase's mother died eighteen days after he was born, an event that profoundly shaped Chase's subsequent development. Chase's father remarried three years later and the couple adopted three girls. Apparently three year-old Thornton was not wanted; the United States 1850 census shows that he was living with a foster family in West Springfield. Chase himself describes his childhood as "loveless and lonely," and the inner vacuum he felt apparently set him on a quest for love, which culminated in his mystical interests.

# Promoted to captain at the tender age of 18



For four years, aged thirteen to sixteen, Chase lived in Newton, Mass., with the Rev. Samuel Francis Smith, a prominent Baptist clergyman. In July 1863 Chase was accepted to Brown University, but instead of matriculating, in early 1864 – just before his seventeenth birthday – Chase went to Philadelphia to attend a school for officers for black infantry units. By May, 1864 Chase was second in charge of one hundred men, Company K of the Twenty sixth United States Colored Troops. On July 5 and 7 the unit fought two battles south of Charleston, S.C.; Chase was wounded by an exploding cannon, permanently injuring the hearing in his left ear. In 1865 he was promoted to captain and commanded Company D of the 104th U. S. C. T.

# Early life and marriage



Brown University



May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1870



Chase began to attend Brown University in September 1866 but dropped out before completing the second semester. He returned to Springfield, where he became a salesman for his father's lumber business. On 11 May 1870 he married Annie Elizabeth Allyn of Bristol, Rhode Island, and they had two children: Sarah Thornton (1871-1908) and Jessamine Allyn (1874-1947). Chase started his own speciality lumber business, directed the choir of First Baptist Church, and served as an officer in one of Springfield's musical organizations.

# An experience of God's love and oneness



**Boston Theatre District**



In 1872 Chase's business failed. Unemployed, he moved to Boston, where he obtained a meager living as an actor and singer. 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." The experience pulled him back from the brink of destruction, renewed his hope, and set him on a religious search.

## And now we are in the 1880's



Chase earned his living in various ways, as a journalist, an actor in Denver, and as 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 their entire Colorado operation. In 1889 they promoted him and moved him to their California office. On 28 June 1889 Chase's only son, William Jotham Thornton Chase, was born. Chase published a booklet called Sketches that explains why people should purchase life insurance for themselves, using biblical and religious stories to illustrate its major points. The booklet reveals Chase as a religious seeker familiar with all the major religions. About 1893 Union Mutual promoted Chase to superintendent of all agencies west of the Appalachians. This necessitated a move to Chicago.

# Dr. Ibrahim Kheiralla arrives in this country



PASSENGER LIST  
District of New York, Port of New York.  
The steamer SUEVIA  
Arrived at New York, N.Y., on December 2, 1892.

No.	Name	Age	Sex	Profession	Place of Birth	Remarks
1	Abdul Aziz	28	Male	Merchant	Constantinople	at port 1st class
2	Abdullah Pasha	27	Male	Merchant	Constantinople	Chicago 1st
3	Abdullah Pasha	27	Male	Merchant	Constantinople	Chicago 1st
4	Abdullah	27	Male	Merchant	Constantinople	Chicago 1st
5	Abdullah	27	Male	Merchant	Constantinople	Chicago 1st
6	Abdullah	27	Male	Merchant	Constantinople	Chicago 1st
7	Abdullah	27	Male	Merchant	Constantinople	Chicago 1st
8	Abdullah	27	Male	Merchant	Constantinople	Chicago 1st
9	Abdullah	27	Male	Merchant	Constantinople	Chicago 1st
10	Abdullah	27	Male	Merchant	Constantinople	Chicago 1st

Portion of the Passenger Manifest of the S.S. Suevia entering New York Harbor on December 2, 1892  
Ibrahim Khayrullah is Passenger No. 9

“Ibrahim George Kheiralla was born at Mount Lebanon in Syria and educated at Beirut University. He moved to Cairo where he went into business. While there he learned about the Baha'i Faith and accepted it in 1890. His business adventure took him to come to the Chicago World Fair in 1893 .He established his residence in Chicago, and began to teach actively and systematically the Cause he had espoused. Within the space of two years he had communicated his impressions to 'Abdu'l-Baha, and reported on the remarkable success that had attended his efforts. In 1895 an opening was vouchsafed to him in Kenosha, which he continued to visit once a week, in the course of his teaching activities. By the following year the believers in these two cities, it was reported, were counted by hundreds. In 1897 he published his book, entitled the Babu'd-Din, and visited Kansas City, New York City, Ithaca and Philadelphia, where he was able to win for the Faith a considerable number of supporters.

# 1894 - How it all began with some classes



Most sessions dealt with Biblical Prophecies being fulfilled by Baha'u'llah.



The mystery key to all knowledge was given to the class attendees at the end of the sessions, namely The Greatest Name.



*In the end the new convert would write a letter of declaration to Abdu'l Baha to be confirmed and accepted into their newly found Faith and community.*

One day 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 was teaching that God had recently "walked upon the earth." Chase investigated and discovered that the teacher was Ibrahim Kheiralla, a Bahá'í from Beirut who had recently come to the United States. Chase and a small group of Chicagoans began to study the Bahá'í Faith with him. Chase indicates that 5 June 1894 was a crucial date for the class; probably it was the day the class began

# Becoming a Baha'i in 1895



Thornton Chase became a Baha'i in Chicago in 1895 through a colleague friend by the name of William F. James --according to his life-long friend Carl Scheffler. Thornton's friend had apparently met a Baha'i earlier by the name Ibrahim Kheiralla who had recently come to America from Beirut and had settled in Chicago. Thornton was reportedly writing a poem about God when his friend entered his office and intrigued by what he was doing told him of a man who claimed that God recently "walked upon the earth." The person who made such a claim, Thornton was told, was Ibrahim Kheiralla. Ibrahim Kheiralla had further indicated to Thornton's friend that Baha'u'llah was the new Messenger of God and that His coming had fulfilled all biblical prophecies. Thornton became very interested to meet Ibrahim Kheiralla and subsequently joined a small group of Chicagoans to study the Bahá'í Faith with Kheiralla. The class was apparently organized on June 5th, 1894. By 1895 he had completed the class and become a Bahá'í. At least three other Americans completed the class and accepted the new religion before him, but subsequently they left the Bahá'í Faith. Thus Chase should be considered the first American to become and remain a Bahá'í, and not the first American Bahá'í per se.

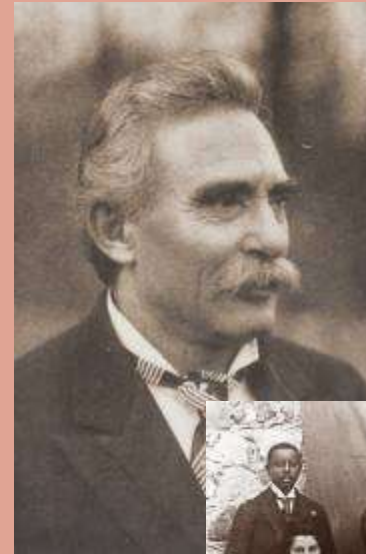


Classes on the Bahá'í Faith were organized in Chicago, and later in Enterprise, Kansas; Kenosha, Wisconsin; Ithaca, New York; New York City; Philadelphia; and Oakland, California. By 1899 about fifteen hundred Americans had become Bahá'ís, seven hundred in Chicago itself. Chase himself taught a class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

## 1900 - The first split occurs in the Kenosha community



Kenosha early Baha'i community



1898 first  
Western  
Pilgrimage



Upon his return from the first Western Pilgrimage in 1898 Khayrullah realizes he lost his battle for leadership. In March 8<sup>th</sup> 1900, at a meeting in Kenosha publically announces his doubts about Abdu'l Baha's leadership of the Baha'i community. Dr. Khayru'lláh violates Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, establishes pact with Mírzá Muhammad-'Alí and works against 'Abdu'l-Bahá, trying to seize control of the Faith in the West. Almost none of the American Bahá'ís follow his lead; they remain faithful to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Khayru'lláh would continue spreading his poison for two decades, but unsuccessful, finally returns to Syria

## 1900-1901 Abdu'l Baha sends visitors to help the friends



Mirza Abu'l Fadl and Ali Kuli Khan  
(Persian consulate in the US (Baha'i))



**In 1900 and 1901 `Abdu'l Bahá sent `Abdu'l-Karím-i-Tihrání, Hájí Mírzá Hassan-i-Khurásání, Mírzá Asadu'lláh, and Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl to the United States to deepen the Bahá'ís. Chase arranged for the latter two to stay in the Chicago Bahá'í Center, and moved into the center with them when his wife had to go east for a year to handle legal matters connected with the death of Chase's stepmother in Springfield. Chase acquired a deep understanding of the Bahá'í teachings during his time with the Persians.**

# Finally time for his own pilgrimage has arrived



Thornton Chase and Mirza Abul Fadl in Cairo, Egypt

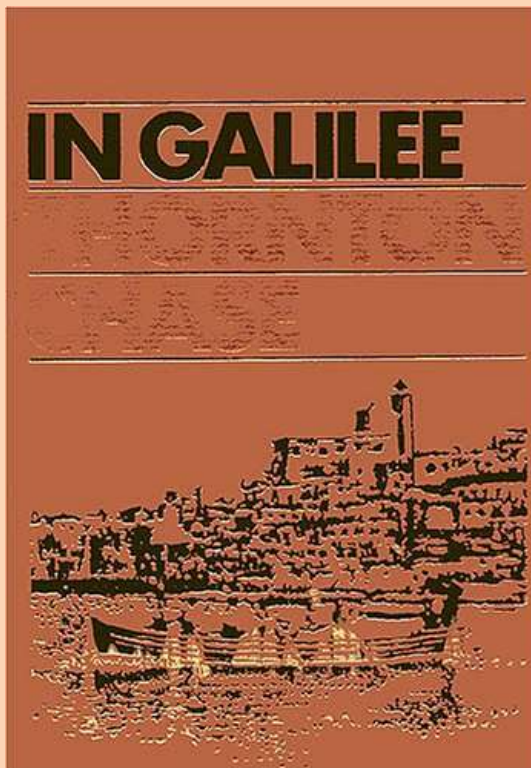
In 1907 Chase was able to go on pilgrimage. Though Chase was able to be with `Abdu'l Bahá in Akka for only three days, the experience transformed him. `Abdu'l Bahá, highly impressed by Chase's qualities, conferred on him the title thábit, "steadfast."

# Thornton Chase

the author

Bahai  
revelation

Thornton Chase



On returning home Chase wrote an account of his pilgrimage, which was published under the title *In Galilee* in 1908. The short work gives a detailed and poignant description of `Abdu'l-Bahá's home and family in Akka, as well as a moving description of `Abdu'l Bahá himself. The work remains one of the most important examples of the genre commonly known as pilgrim's notes. Chase then turned his thoughts to an introductory book on the Bahá'í Faith. Published as *The Bahai Revelation* in 1909, this work was one of the most comprehensive and accurate introductions to the Bahá'í Faith written by an early American Bahá'í. It continued to be reprinted until the 1920s. The work emphasized the Bahá'í Faith and its teachings as a vehicle for personal spiritual transformation. Chase was the principal editor of the society's literature and one of its principal financiers.

# Time to pull together the American community and stay firm in the covenant



Chase soon emerged as the principal organizer of the Chicago Bahá'í community. In May 1901 he coordinated the election of 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, an office he retained until moving out of Chicago 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, informing them of Bahá'í Holy Days and the fast, thereby establishing their observance in North America.

# Celebrating the beginning of building the Temple in Chicago



design submitted by French Canadian architect Louis Bourgeois.



Corinne True  
"Mother of the Temple"  
1861-1961

Inspired by the example of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in Ashgabat, the Bahá'ís of Chicago put the idea of the project forward in 1903 and received strong support from 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In 1906–07, after several years during which other concerns took precedence, the Chicago Bahá'ís gained a renewed commitment to the project, particularly through the efforts of Corinne True and through directions 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave to pilgrims who visited Him in early 1907. 1909 Tent was erected to mark the building of the Temple in the future. Note Thornton Chase marked with an X. This became the project to unite the Baha'is around the country with a common goal.

# California and the Northwest here we come



Nathan Fitzgerald..travel companion with Thornton Chase to meet Hyde Dunn in Seattle in 1905, and shortly after Clara Dunn in Walla Walla,WA. This historic meeting would lead to the opening of Australia.

In late 1909 the Union Mutual Life Insurance Company, seeking to reduce Chase's devotion to religious activities, transferred him to Los Angeles. Chase considered resigning from the company, but at age 62 another job was impossible to find. He had to support a wife, a son in college, and an elderly mother in law, so he accepted the new position, even though it paid much less. Chase still traveled extensively for his company as far north as Seattle and as far east as Denver, and these travels gave him opportunities to visit the rapidly developing Bahá'í communities of the Mountain and Pacific states. He also returned to writing poetry, primarily on the Bahá'í Faith. He helped to organize the Los Angeles. Bahá'ís; in 1910 they elected a five-member governing board that included Chase as a member. They also established their first monthly meetings.



## **Ode to the Center of the Covenant by Thornton Chase**



On August 9, 1912, Thornton wrote a poem about 'Abdu'l-Bahá that was published in the Star of the West:

To the Center of the Covenant: 'Abdu'l-Baha Abbas.  
May the Souls of all Mankind be a Sacrifice to Him!

**O Thou David of the Promised Kingdom of GOD!  
Thou Princely Leader of all Humanity!  
Thou Warrior against the Tribes of Infidelity!  
Thou Conqueror of Darkness and Radiator of Light!  
Thou Bearer of the Banner of Divine Peace and Prosperity to the Nations!  
Thou First Born in the Kingdom of Baha! Beloved of GOD and Men!  
Thou First Citizen of the Royal and Holy City!  
Thou Branch of the LORD, Beautiful and Glorious!  
Thou Greatest Branch from the Ancient Root!  
Thou Fruit bearing Branch of the Divine Tree!**

**This "Ode to the Center of the Covenant" which was composed by Thornton Chase a few weeks before his death was read in the holy presence of Abdul Baha. He indicated his wish to have it published in the Star of the West. It was therefore published in Vol. 4, no. 11.**

## His passing 30<sup>th</sup> September 1912



Shoghi Effendi, in [\*God Passes By\*](#), 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."<sup>7</sup> Shoghi Effendi also included Chase among outstanding early Bahá'ís of the West whom he designated as "Disciples of 'Abdu'l-Bahá."<sup>8</sup>

Thornton Chase died on 30 September 1912 in Los Angeles, of complications following unsuccessful surgery. [ 'Abdu'l Bahá was on a train en route to California at the time; He immediately changed his plans and went to Los Angeles to visit Chase's grave. There he praised Chase's qualities highly, instructed the Bahá'ís to hold a commemoration of Chase annually at his grave, and encouraged Bahá'ís to visit the gravesite. Chase's importance as an early North American Bahá'í thinker, publicist, administrator, and organizer is still underappreciated and that 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.