

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." The experience pulled him back from the brink of destruction, renewed his hope, and set him on a 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 one of the city's better-known theaters; subsequently he obtained teaching and music jobs in Kansas. Finally he settled in Del Norte, Colorado. Meanwhile Annie had remained in Springfield with her mother and two daughters, waiting for her husband to settle and provide his family support. She finally 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 lived the rest of her days in Newport, Rhode Island, dying in 1918. Chase's older daughter, Sarah, married in 1895 and had five children before dying suddenly in 1908. Chase's other daughter, Jessamine, never married, but became a school teacher and musician like her father; she died in 1947.

Chase apparently was devastated by the divorce. Sources indicate that he went into the Colorado mountains for a time, wandering in search of gold and silver. He remarried on 6 May 1880 and settled in Pueblo. Once again he became extremely active in music, directing a succession of musical and theatrical groups. He invented and patented a prospector's pick. He began to publish poetry in local newspapers and magazines; one poem focuses on Jesus's love for humanity, thereby highlighting Chase's devotion to Jesus.

In 1882 Chase moved to Denver and joined the local Swedenborgian church. Swedenborgianism emphasized a metaphorical interpretation of the Bible and stressed a mystical approach to Jesus and Christianity; thus its Christianity was much less doctrinal than the Baptist Church of Chase's childhood. After five years, however, the Denver church was wracked by doctrinal disputes, and 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 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 Santa Cruz and San Francisco offices. On 28 June 1889 Chase's only son, William Jotham Thornton Chase, was born. In California Chase continued his religious search. He even combined it with his work; in 1893 he 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 transferred Chase to Chicago, the headquarters for all company operations west of the Appalachian Mountains. 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. 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 Chase, but subsequently the three 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 (see United States). Chase himself taught a class on the Faith, wrote numerous letters to interested seekers, and taught the Faith widely during his frequent travels for his company.

In 1899 American Bahá'í pilgrims returned from a pilgrimage to Akka and they brought to the United States knowledge of the Bahá'í organizational system. Chase became one of the leading organizers of the Chicago community, first in November 1899, when the community elected new 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. When Ibrahim Kheiralla became increasingly alienated from the Bahá'í community in 1899 and 1900 Chase was one of the leaders of the effort to reconcile Kheiralla with the other American Bahá'ís. When reconciliation became impossible Chase was a leader of the effort to organize the Bahá'í Faith independently of Kheiralla.

In 1900 and 1901 `Abdu'l-Bahá sent `Abdu'l-Karím-i-ihrání, Hájí Mírzá Hassan-i-Khurásání, Mírzá Asadu'lláh, and Mírzá Abu'l-Fal 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.

Chase soon emerged as the principal organizer of the Chicago Bahá'í community. In May 1901 he coordinated an election that replaced the Board 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 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.

Chase's writing experience proved useful in the effort to edit and publish Bahá'í literature. Chase and four other Chicago Bahá'í businessmen founded the "Behais Supply and Publishing Board" in 1900; in the fall of 1902 it 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 Middle Eastern 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 early Bahá'í pamphlets written by Chase.

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."

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.

In late 1909 the Union Mutual Life Insurance Company, concerned about the quantity of time Chase was spending on his religious activities, decided to transfer 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 age 62 another job was impossible to find, and he had to support his wife, his son in college, and his elderly mother-in-law. Consequently Chase had no choice but to accept the new position, even though it paid much less. However, 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 their first governing board, and Chase was a member. They also established their first monthly meetings.

Thornton Chase died suddenly and unexpectedly on 30 September 1912 in Los

Angeles, of complications following unsuccessful surgery. `Abdu'l-Bahá was in the United States at the time, on a train en route to California; 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. Bahá'ís throughout the United States eulogized Chase for his intelligence, his consultative approach to problems, his constant advocacy of the need for organization, and his loving disposition. Chase's importance as an early American Bahá'í thinker, administrator, and organizer is still underappreciated. In many ways Chase's death left a gap in the American Bahá'í community that remained unfilled until Horace Holley's rise to prominence in the early 1920s.

Bibliography. Relatively little has been published on Thornton Chase to date. A biographical sketch in O. Z. Whitehead, *Some Early Bahá'ís of the West* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1976) remains the only published treatment. Considerable information can be gleaned from Robert H. Stockman's *The Bahá'í Faith in America, Origins, 1892-1900: Volume One* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985). Much of this article is based on Robert H. Stockman's unpublished biography of Thornton Chase. The Thornton Chase Papers, located in the National Bahá'í Archives in Wilmette, Ill., contain approximately fifteen hundred letters by him, a hundred letters to him, and about sixty-seven essays and talks by him.

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