

14 Leadership

15 Organizer

16 Pilgrimage

17 A New Name

18 The Bahá'í Revelation

19 Los Angeles

Part Three: Love is God (1910-12)

20 Final Years (1910-12)

21 Thábit

Appendix: The Thornton Chase Papers

See also: Notes on the Thornton Chase Papers

See also a PDF of the published book:

[stockman_chase_first_american_bahai_scan.pdf](#) [39 MB]

PREFACE

I approach the subject of this biography with more than just academic or historical curiosity for the life of an important man, now long dead, or pious interest in the first American convert to my religion. Circumstances have tied my life to Thornton Chase's in some unexpected ways. First, there is a series of parallels between our lives.[1] Second, Chase's life has exerted a powerful influence on my own career and intellectual development. One result of my research on Chase's life was my discovery that the study of old documents and newspapers was fascinating and that it better suited my talents than research in geology, the field I had been studying. One day in late December I realized that if I knew the date of death of Thornton's father, I could find his obituary in the Springfield Republican and thereby acquire considerable biographical information. Consequently I ran the half mile to Springfield City Hall to look up his death certificate. While running back to the public library, it occurred to me that I had never run while doing geological research. I realized that research in history excited me much more than research in geology. I began to think seriously about changing my career.

As a result, in the spring of 1980 I experienced a mild career crisis. To help resolve it I decided to say a particular prayer in the Bahá'í prayerbook every day. I chose the one that includes the passage "brighten my eyes by beholding the hosts of divine assistance descending successively upon me from the Kingdom of Thine Omnipotent glory" because it seemed best to describe the nature of the help I needed.[2]

Partly as a result of saying the prayer and partly because I came to believe that research in history of religion suited my talents better than

scientific research, I applied to and later attended Harvard Divinity School to study the history of religion in the United States. Chase's tutor, it turned out, was an alumnus of Harvard, as was Chase's great-great-grandfather.

After resolving my career crisis by making the decision to pursue a doctorate in the history of religion, I continued to say daily the prayer that I had used. Later that year, in the summer of 1980, I learned that `Abdu'l-Bahá had revealed the prayer specifically for Thornton Chase, at his request.

The project, as originally conceived, included a large section detailing the history of the American Bahá'í community. The history subsequently became the two-volume work *The Bahá'í Faith in America, Volume One, Origins, 1892-1900, and Volume Two, Early Expansion, 1900-1912*. Writing them became my first priority. The biography was drafted in the spring and summer of 1987, but the need to complete my doctoral dissertation, then the demands of my job, delayed the editing over a decade.

Separating the biography of Thornton Chase from the history of the early American Bahá'í community has been difficult because the two stories are thoroughly interwoven. Thornton Chase was the most prominent American Bahá'í and the community's leading writer, speaker, and organizer. His papers provide the most complete picture of the community available. Thus Thornton Chase, inevitably, is the most prominent figure in any history of the community to 1912. The Bahá'í Faith was Chase's main priority, and thus the main events of the American Bahá'í community play a dominant role in shaping Chase's life. In the two volumes of history, I have related the events dominated by Thornton Chase as they shaped the American Bahá'í community and have touched upon Chase's personality and past only as they were relevant to the events themselves. In the biography I have mentioned the events of American Bahá'í history only as they affected Chase personally. This distinction is sometimes artificial but is necessary; otherwise, details relevant to Chase but not to American Bahá'í history, or relevant to American Bahá'í history but not to Chase, would be so intermixed that creating a coherent story would be difficult.

As a result, this work focuses on the life of a man. He was a man who was highly introspective in his letters and essays. Chase saw living as one great spiritual act; as he once succinctly put it, "Religion is Life, and Life is Love, and Love is God."^[3] Thus a key subject this book will examine is the delineation of Chase's vision of true life, of living, and of love, and how that vision changed during the different stages of his life.

The theory and practice of psychoanalysis, as described by Erik Erikson in his classic *Childhood and Society* and as applied in his brilliant psychobiographies *Young Man Luther: a Study in Psychoanalysis* and

History and Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence have provided tools useful in studying Thornton's life.[4] Developmental psychology, as it has unfolded over the last twenty years, also provides powerful conceptual schemes for examining the life of an individual, especially one as introspective and reflective as Thornton Chase. It has tentatively identified certain patterns of development through which all human beings pass, patterns that help to draw many conclusions about Chase's life even when the data are meager. Throughout the book, when helpful, theories of developmental psychology will be used to examine the nature of Chase's personality and his growth. No psychological theory has yet been accepted as an exhaustive model for the nature of human beings--indeed, such a universal theory may not be possible--hence my treatment of Thornton Chase should not be regarded as complete. A composition by Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, called The Seven Valleys provides a description of spiritual development as a series of seven stages; they fit Thornton's spiritual development well. However, it should be noted that Bahá'u'lláh's seven stages are an entirely different description of human development than the stages described by developmental psychologists and, unlike the latter, need not occur in a certain order.

Any biography seeks to reveal the private character of its subject as well as the individual's public persona. The surviving sources make this particularly difficult, in the case of Thornton Chase, because the two purges of his papers after his death sought to destroy items of a "private" nature. (See Appendix One for a detailed discussion of the history of his papers.) Consequently, little information is now available on Chase's Civil War experiences, his racial and political attitudes, the dynamics of his marriage and family life, and other intimate aspects of his life. The biography has refrained from speculating about his moods and feelings, leaving it to the reader to speculate about Thornton's personal reactions to events in his life.

To understand Thornton Chase, one must understand the basics of the religion to which he committed himself. Throughout the second part of the book, which deals with Chase's Bahá'í life and activities, there is considerable information about the Bahá'í Faith. For those who seek a summary, the book contains an appendix that gives basic information about the Bahá'í religion.

This book will use the standard system for transliterating words of Arabic and Persian origin used by the Bahá'í Faith. The only exceptions will be words now so common in English that they have become English words (such as Iran, Tehran, Baghdad) and the names of those Middle Easterners who came to the United States, settled, learned English, and adopted a legal spelling of their name that differs from the standard Bahá'í transliteration.

Since the 1920s, the Bahá'í Faith has had a system whereby

translations of the Bahá'í scriptures into English may be checked for accuracy and approved, and thereby become official and authoritative translations. Such translations often do not exist for texts quoted in this book. The reader need only check the citation, which gives the name of the translator and date of translation, to determine whether the translation may be considered authoritative.

Several people provided information and guidance without which this book would not have been possible. Dr. Sharon Parks at Harvard Divinity School has been my principal source of guidance about psychology and human development. Dr. William Hutchison has guided me through the history of religion in America, not only providing information but also pressing me to ask the significant questions. Dr. Betty J. Fisher, chief editor of *World Order* magazine, has encouraged me and served as a source of wise counsel. Drs. John Walbridge and William Maxwell both read the manuscript and made numerous suggestions for its improvement.

The descendants of Thornton Chase deserve special thanks. The members of the family descended from Chase and his first wife have been unstintingly generous with their time, their family photographs, and their memories. I particularly thank Mr. Charles Lawton and Mrs. Margaret Hansen for their assistance. Charles has been particularly helpful in catching errors of spelling, infelicities of style, and nuances of interpretation.

The descendants of Chase through his second wife not only took a stranger into their homes but also provided him with more Southern hospitality in a week than he could have imagined receiving from anyone in a year. All have been generous with their family heritage and have provided most of the photographs that illustrate this work. Among the generous donors are Thornton Chase Nelson, F. Langley Nelson, Michael Nelson, Lavinia Morris Chase, W. March Boal, Louise Boal, Fred L. Nelson, and Joyce Nelson.

Numerous others provided information and documents that were crucial in assembling this biography. Among the institutions are the Boston Public Library; the Brown University Archives; the Chicago Public Library; the City and County of Denver, Colorado, court records; the Colorado State Historical Society Library, Denver, Col.; the Connecticut State Library, Hartford, Conn.; the County Clerk's Office of Del Norte County, Col.; the Dartmouth College Archives; the Denver Public Library; the Harvard University Archives; the Harvard University library system; the Hampshire County, Mass., court records; the Hilton Head Historical Society, Hilton Head, S.C.; the Library of Congress; the Los Angeles County, Cal., court records; the National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Ill.; Newport, R.I., City Hall; the Pennsylvania State Historical Society Library, Philadelphia, Penn.; Providence, R.I., City Hall; Providence Public Library; the Redwood Library, Newport, R.I.; the Rhode Island State Historical Society Library, Providence, R.I.; Rockefeller Library, Brown University; Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church, Providence, R.I.; South Carolina State Historical Society Library, Charleston, S.C.; Springfield, Mass., City Hall; the Springfield Public Library; the Suffolk County, Mass., court records;

and the United States Government Archives, Washington, D. C. Individuals who provided information, answered questions, or assisted my work include R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram, Ruth Colville, Roger Dahl, Patricia Gorman, David Gould, Bill and Marie Griffith, Craig Holman, Harmon Jones, Richard Hollinger, Brenda Kepley, Firuz and Joan Labib, Sophie Loeding, Taraz Martinez, Kenneth Mullen, Robert H. Peeples, Erich Reich, Patricia Riley, Dean and Donna Stansbury, Edna True, Lewis Walker, Isabelle Windust, and Ed Wuhlschleger. My gratitude to them cannot be expressed adequately by words. My greatest thanks, however, go to Thornton Chase for having left the documentation necessary for reconstructing his life and for having been the exemplary Bahá'í that he was.

INTRODUCTION

`Abdu'l-Bahá's praise of Thornton Chase (1847-1912) clearly indicates that Chase is one of the most significant figures in American Bahá'í history. In addition to giving him the title thábit, "steadfast"--one of the most significant spiritual titles to which a Bahá'í can attain--`Abdu'l-Bahá designated Chase's grave a place of pilgrimage, revealed a tablet of visitation (a prayer to say in remembrance of him), and decreed that his death be commemorated annually. Few Bahá'ís have received all three honors. `Abdu'l-Bahá said Chase's "worth" at present "is not known" but "will be inestimably dear" in the future. He added that Chase's services "will ever be remembered," that his books "will be studied carefully by the coming generations," and that Thornton Chase's station in the future "will be known."^[5]

Although `Abdu'l-Bahá is not known to have designated Thornton Chase a Hand of the Cause of God,^[6] His other statements signify that Chase attained to an exceptionally high spiritual station.

One is at a loss to think of another American Bahá'í of Thornton Chase's generation who possessed his capacities. He was exceptionally even-tempered and mild-mannered man. No criticism of him has yet been found. He is not known to have engaged in extended controversy with anyone. His capacity to love anyone, even those who disagreed with him, is repeatedly demonstrated in his words and actions.

Where efforts to develop American Bahá'í organization from 1900 to 1912 are concerned, no one is comparable. He is perhaps the only individual before 1912 who had a thorough understanding of the Bahá'í concept of consultation. His service as chairman of the Chicago House of Spirituality probably accounts for the great success of that body, the only well-functioning Bahá'í consultative body in the Western world during Chase's lifetime. Records show that Chase was the chief instigator of many of the House's activities; he suggested most of the activities that it initiated and then wrote the letters and proposals or did the negotiating necessary for the activities to be carried through to a conclusion. All these achievements suggest that Chase deserves the title of

premier American Bahá'í administrator of the Heroic Age.[7]

Chase's job took him on a three- or four-month tour of much of the United States every year. As such he was probably the most traveled American Bahá'í. In a day before the American Bahá'ís had a national organization and therefore a sense of belonging to a national community, Chase's traveling made him by far the most widely known American Bahá'í on the continent.

Chase's essays and letters also demonstrate his great capacity. At a time when Bahá'í literature was scarce, Chase probably had a more thorough understanding of the Bahá'í teachings than did any other Westerner. He had read--indeed, he edited for publication--most of the works that were available in English. His major work, *The Bahai Revelation*, was the only substantial book on the Bahá'í Faith written by an American before 1912. Chase also wrote a second book describing his pilgrimage to the Holy Land to meet `Abdu'l-Bahá, who was at that time the Head of the Bahá'í Faith. The only other American to have written more than one book on the Faith before 1912 was Arthur Dodge.

But most remarkable of all was Chase's profound grasp of the spiritual essence of the Bahá'í Faith: the individual's effort to know and worship God and the struggle to know oneself. *The Bahai Revelation* is the only significant contribution to mystical literature written by a Bahá'í to date. Perhaps Chase deserves the title premier American Bahá'í mystic as well.

Chase underwent forty-seven years of preparation before accepting Bahá'u'lláh as a divine messenger. This part of his life has never been described in Bahá'í publications in any detail because little was known. Recent research, however, has uncovered quite a large quantity of documents in non-Bahá'í archives describing those years. As a result, a nearly complete spiritual portrait of Chase can now be reconstructed for most of his life. The documents shed considerable light on the development of Chase's understanding of love, a concept that singularly dominated his poetry, essays, books, and letters to individuals, and that ultimately served as the integrative principle in his understanding of the nature of one's relationship to God and the world. The documents also illumine the fierce tests to which Chase was subjected and the victories to which he attained. As a result, future generations can now study Thornton Chase's life as a shining example of how to live, to love, and to worship one's Creator.

Footnotes

[1]New England Yankees both, our Puritan ancestors arrived on these shores only two years apart and settled in towns twenty miles apart. My grandmother and Chase's stepmother both lived in Hartford, Connecticut, and were it not for the ten years separating their

residences, it is quite likely they would have met, as both were uppermiddle class and active in their respective Protestant churches. I grew up twenty miles from Springfield, Massachusetts, Chase's native city, and first heard of the Bahá'í Faith across the river from Springfield in West Springfield, a town where Thornton lived as a child. I received my undergraduate education at Wesleyan University, a few miles from Chase's stepmother's parent's home, and then went to graduate school at Brown University, where Thornton himself had been a student. My office there looked out over the backyard of the Saint Stephen's Episcopal church, which stood sixty feet from my desk; where, I later learned, Chase was married in 1870. The first place outside of New England where I have resided is greater Los Angeles, in the summer of 1976; Chase lived there three years and died there. One of the highlights of my sojourn was a visit to Chase's grave in Ingleside. Subsequent to my research on Chase I moved to the Chicago area, another place where he spent a large portion of his life.

[2]Bahá'í Prayers: A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and `Abdu'l-Bahá (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 57-58.

[3]Thornton Chase to Mrs. A. M. Bryant (copy), 30 November 1908, 3, TC.

[4]Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963); Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962); Erik Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969).

[5]Star of the West 3.13 (4 Nov. 1912): 14-15.

[6]A Hand of the Cause of God is an individual who has been recognized in the Bahá'í Faith for having special spiritual qualities. Only the three heads of the Bahá'í Faith (Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, or Shoghi Effendi) were empowered to give an individual this designation.

[7]The "Heroic Age" is the period of Bahá'í history from 1844 to 1921, when the Bahá'í community had little administrative structure and the Bahá'í community was often dominated by major personalities. It was followed by the "Formative Age" (1921 to the present) when Bahá'í administrative institutions were created and became strong and the Bahá'í community was established worldwide.

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chapter 1

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