

# The Amazing Nashville Bahá'í Community in the 1960s

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Dr. Magdalene M. Carney

From the Editor's (laureate of the United States).

There

were Casey and Alice Walton, Georgia

Desk Miller, Winston Evans, and Mary Wat-

kins, editor at the Methodist Publishing

House. All of their amazing stories are

JOHN S. HATCHER much too lengthy and noteworthy to detail here.

T A N B ' At the time, I was merely a soph-

C 1960 omore at Vanderbilt, having studied

the Faith intensely for two years, a bit

I declared myself a Bahá'í on the 31st nervous, but also keen to respond

to of December 1959 while I was home the queries that—in my

mind—would in Atlanta on spring break from Van- enable the Local Spiritual Assembly

to derbilt University. Weeks later, I found determine if I was sufficiently

worthy myself one night standing before the and informed to become a member of

impressive array of individuals who the community led by this stellar

group of notables—educators, editors,

constituted the Local Spiritual Assem- poets,

poets, bly of Nashville, Tennessee. There was musicians, mathematicians.

my brother—William S. Hatcher, five Suffice it to say that I

"passed," was joyfully accepted into their

years my senior—who had responded midst, and spent the next three years getting

to everything I could think to ask about to know and love them, and, most im-

the Bahá'í Faith and who had declared portant of all, establishing in my

in June 1957. I had come up for his heart and mind what a Bahá'í community

graduation and met some of the inter- should be, how it should feel, and

esting people who would later become how it should conduct its affairs.

an important part of my life. Bill, of That foundation has stood me in

course, later went on to write books good stead for sixty years, and I

on the Faith and serve on the National

hap-

Spiritual Assemblies of Switzerland, pily utilize this opportunity as editor

Canada, and Russia. of the Journal of Bahá'í Studies to

There was Dr. Sarah Pereira (later a present brief life sketches of two in- member of the National Spiritual As- dividuals from that community in our ssembly of the United States and then continuing attempt to celebrate those

an Auxiliary Board member); Erma African-American Bahá'ís whose Hayden, a concert pianist later to serve lives, works, and reputations represent

on the National Teaching Commit- some of the fruitful results stemming

tee of the United States; and her hus- from the longtime emphasis on racial band, Robert Hayden, a professor and equality in the American Bahá'í

poet (later to become a member of the munity, a legacy begun most prom- University of Michigan faculty and inently by Hand of the Cause of God the first African American to be poet Louis Gregory, and carried on to this

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day by a multitude of dedicated souls and steadfast devotion to his beliefs

who have rendered such amazing ser- as a Bahá'í. Among his most widely

vice to the Bahá'í Faith and to society acclaimed poems alluding to the his-

at large. torical plight of African Americans are

In this issue, we will briefly re- "Middle Passage"—a poetic rendering count the life stories of Dr. Robert of the Amistad affair—his paeon son-

Hayden—who, as I mentioned, was a net "Frederick Douglass," and "Run-

member of the Local Assembly when I agate Runagate," a tribute to Harriet

declared my faith in Bahá'u'lláh—and Tubman. Likewise, his poems "The

Dr. Magdalene Carney, who joined that Prophet," "Bahá'u'lláh in the Garden

same community in 1962, having been of Ridván," and "The Dawnbreaker" taught the Faith by Sarah Pereira, then are possibly the best poems about the

Professor of Romance Languages at Faith that have yet been penned. Tennessee State University. Raised in the Detroit ghetto

(iron-ically known as "Paradise Valley"),  
D .R E. H (1913–1980) Hayden was from his youth entranced by language, poetry, and the concepts of justice, freedom, and identity. It is with no small amount of irony that After we might characterize Hayden as either "Bahá'í poet" or "African-American poet"—indeed, as the first African-American poet laureate of the United States—before we first classify him simply as a poet, since he disliked the idea of being a "hyphenated" poet. H. He received no small amount of criticism for not allowing himself to be both Rob-classified by some narrower identity. "I object to strict definitions of what a members poet is or should be," he maintained. Nashville, "We're living in a time when individual literature quality is threatened by a kind of mechanizing anonymity, and by regimentation" (quoted in Hatcher, *From the Bahá'í Auroral Darkness* 74). his activities. Hayden concentrated on heavy teaching load and on writing poetry whenever he could, and Erma assumed the position of supervisor of music for Nashville public schools. Rejecting the tension imposed on him by the rising pressure among

African-American writers and artists to focus his poetic gifts on becoming politically active, Hayden was widely criticized for rejecting what he considered the constricting label of "Black field, poet." But around this same time, in 1966, he achieved global acclaim by winning the Grand Prize for Poetry at the first World Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar, Senegal, for his collection of verse *Ballad of Remembrance*. From this point forward, his career ascended. He published a succession of well-received volumes of verse, and in 1967 he recorded his poems for the Library of Congress and was appointed poetry editor of the *Bahá'í* magazine *World Order*. That summer, he was appointed poet-in-residence at Indiana State University, and in 1968, visiting professor of English at the University of Michigan. In 1969, he served as the Bigham Professor at the University of Louisville, and that summer as visiting poet at the University of Washington. In 1975, Hayden received the Academy of American Poets Fellowship, and he topped off the decade by being offered a professorship at the University of Michigan, shortly after which he was first offered the position of poet laureate, a position he accepted in 1977 and for which he was reappointed in 1978.

cancer. In February of 1980 he died, but not before the department of African-American Studies at the University of Michigan paid tribute to contribution he had made to the an honor he treasured above all because it helped vindicate the stand he had taken in the 1960s and afterward by refusing to make his polemical or to cater to the demands of what he called "the minotaurs of edict,"<sup>1</sup> the "monsters of abstraction" that "police and threaten us."<sup>2</sup> There is much more one could say about his life and his art, that a number of fine scholars are currently undertaking. My own work *From the Auroral Darkness* (George Ronald 1984) has recently been succeeded by Derik Smith, Associate professor of English at Claremont McKenna College, who in 2018 published *Robert Hayden in Verse* with the prestigious University of Michigan Press, a highly praised book that won the 2019 College Language Association Book Award. Hayden's poetry continues to be studied and anthologized, especially in college texts. For example, "Winter Sundays," his touching and memorable tribute to the love his father bestowed on him, is one of

In the meantime, he was also awarded honorary doctorates at Brown University in 1976 and at Fisk in 1978.

It was during the last year of his

1 From Hayden's "Ballad of Remembrance" in A Ballad of Remembrance.

D.C., that Hayden began to feel ill. Mourning

Upon his return to Ann Arbor, Michigan, he discovered he had contracted

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Finally, as I note in my own study of his life and art, his wife Erma was seen

In

by the Bahá'í community as intimately sure of

involved in the Faith on the local and remote or

national level, while Hayden seemed her

isolated, laboring at home in his austere profession as poet. And yet, as I also "Mag"

point out, he has doubtless attracted on a

more people to study the Bahá'í Faith she

than he would have had he dedicated an

his days to the usual activities meant sisters.

to teach the Faith, rather than laboring away at searching out precisely the best, the most exact words to fashion parents

the verses he left behind. possibly

pursue other objectives they had in-

D.M. M.C. education

(1929–1991)

Because she was descended from

Like Robert Hayden, Magdalene Carney rose from a most unlikely beginning as

most anthologized poems of the twentieth century.

2 From Hayden's "In the

Time" in Words in the Mourning Time.

her, one would always be on the right track, whatever the task at hand.

short, she was her own person,

herself, but never prideful or

disdainful of anyone who came to

for assistance.

The eldest of eight children,

(as she liked to be called) grew up

farm where she labored and where

was expected by her parents to set

example for her brothers and

And early on she knew that the most important manner in which she could excel at this task, help her

emerge from dire poverty, and

stilled in her, was to pursue

as far as it would take her.

slaves who had no such opportunity, she viewed education not only

to bloom like a sunflower emerging tall and bright in an untended field. I met her when she first became a Bahá'í, in the Nashville community in 1962, after having been introduced to the Faith by Dr. Sarah Pereira. Upon being given a pamphlet about the Bahá'í teachings, she knew immediately she had discovered the path by which she could channel her plentiful talents and achieve her lifelong objectives as an educator and a dedicated servant to humankind. My immediate impression of her—shared by so many who met her—was that this was one of the most authentic human beings I would ever encounter. She was a loving person, a light in the darkness, neither shy nor restrained. One sensed that she knew exactly what she was doing and that by emulating Leadership for her work leading and organizing a nonviolent desegregation moral, of the public school system in Canton, Mississippi. Using the funds she received from this award, she went to the University of Massachusetts, where she earned her doctorate in education.

a means by which she could make a difference, but as a mandate she could serve her family life proceeded apace—humankind as whole, focusing particularly on franchised African American women. So it was that she excelled studies, graduating magna cum laude from Tennessee State University in Nashville, then receiving her MA degree from the highly regarded Peabody College in Nashville, ing in English and Education. She remained in Nashville for next fifteen years (1967–1982), ing in the public schools and ing student teachers. And it was this era of the Civil Rights that Mag was awarded a Ford Foundation Fellowship in Educational

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desire to excel in every aspect of lives, encouraging the spiritual, social, and intellectual development of growing Bahá'í communities. She participated in the United Nations Conference on Women in Kenya in 1985 and gave a keynote speech for

the  
 Firm in a conviction she already had, European Bahá'í Women's Conference  
 but that was confirmed and enhanced in the Netherlands in 1989, two  
 years  
 by her study of the Bahá'í Writings, before her passing.  
 Carney believed that racial prejudice, As one of the many tributes to  
 her  
 indeed prejudice of any kind, was an spirit and legacy, the National  
 Spiritual  
 emotional commitment to a false un- Assembly of the United States estab-  
 derstanding of reality. Consequently, lished the Magdalene Carney Bahá'í  
 she taught that preventing or treating Institute in West Palm Beach,  
 Florida,  
 prejudice could only be accomplished which today is utilized as a  
 teaching  
 by first gaining access to both the center for courses on the Bahá'í  
 Faith  
 minds and hearts of others and then and as a training center.  
 re-educating both. My most lasting personal memory  
 Because the motive force and bul- of Mag will always be a conversation  
 wark in all these accomplishments was I had with her at a Bahá'í summer  
 her in-depth understanding of and un- school in Florida. I had for a long  
 while  
 stinting devotion to the Bahá'í Faith, stewed over a dilemma resulting  
 from  
 she was a stalwart and effective Bahá'í a major decision I had to make  
 regard-  
 teacher. Her charisma and the mag- ing my life and career. I presented  
 her  
 netism of her remarkable smile and as honestly as I knew how the pros  
 and  
 even more remarkable character were cons of the two options I had, as  
 well  
 irresistible. as the consternation and turmoil  
 that  
 In 1970, she was elected to the having to make a decision was causing  
 National Spiritual Assembly of the me. Her response was as helpful as  
 it  
 Bahá'ís of the United States, and she was timely and terse: "Just choose  
 one  
 was re-elected successively for the and do it!" she said firmly. It was  
 ex-  
 following thirteen years, until she was actly what I needed to hear.  
 appointed to serve at the Bahá'í World  
 Centre in Haifa, Israel, as a Counsellor  
 with the International Teaching Centre.  
 From this time on, until her death in

Haifa in 1991, she traveled to Africa,  
Europe, and various island nations  
where she imbued the members of ev-  
ery community she touched with the  
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Dr. Robert E. Hayden

— The Amazing Nashville Bahá'í Community in the 1960s (Used by permission of the curator)