

THORNTON CHASE: First American Bahá'í

It takes courage to stand out and be the first in your entire country to do something new. The first Bahá'í in the United States was Thornton Chase.

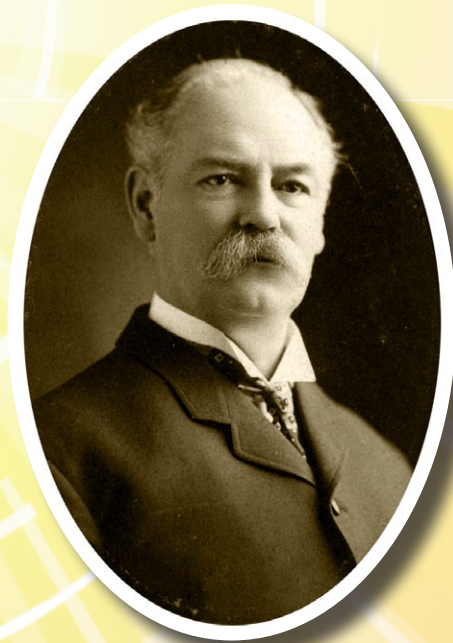
Thornton was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1847. Tragically, his mother died just 17 days after he was born. His father remarried, but Thornton was never close to his stepmother. He described his childhood as “loveless and lonely.”

Thornton was raised as a Baptist, and from his teen years, he constantly asked questions about religion and tried to deepen his understanding of God.

At age 16, Thornton joined the Union Army in the Civil War. Responsible and self-disciplined, he was quickly promoted. By 18, he was captain of a 100-man company of soldiers. After the war, he started a lumber business in Massachusetts. Unfortunately, the business failed, and jobs were scarce. In 1873, he left home and traveled the country, seeking work.

The First Bahá'í

Thornton lived in many states, including Wisconsin, Kansas, and Colorado. He worked as an actor, singer, journalist, and silver miner, among other jobs. Thornton struggled to support his wife and two daughters. His first marriage ended in divorce, but he remarried a few



Thornton Chase was the first American to become a Bahá'í. He felt that the Bahá'í Faith inspired “a great desire to be of use in every possible waking moment to . . . God’s creatures.”

years later and had a son.

Throughout his many challenges, Thornton continued his spiritual search. He studied world religions and often wrote poetry about God and faith.

In 1888, Thornton finally found success in his career working for an insurance company. He settled in Chicago. Then, in 1894, he heard about the Bahá'í Faith from a Lebanese Bahá'í living in the U.S. Thornton’s life changed forever. The following year, at age 48, he became the first American Bahá'í. He eagerly shared his new faith with others. Within two years, there were more than 60 Bahá'ís in Chicago.

Bahá'í Leadership

Thornton Chase became a leader in the Bahá'í community. In 1900, he was elected to serve on the first Bahá'í governing body in Chicago. He traveled widely and gave talks about the Faith. He also helped start the Bahá'í Publishing Society, edited translations of Bahá'í writings into English, and wrote two books about the Faith.

In 1907, Thornton went to ‘Akká, in what is now Israel, to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the leader of the Faith at that time. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encouraged Thornton, and gave him the title *Thábit*, which means “steadfast.” Thornton wrote about his visit, which strengthened his faith: “It was as if, after long journeyings, weariness, trials and searchings, we had at last reached home.”

Thornton was living in California when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited the U.S. in 1912. He eagerly awaited the chance to see Him again. Sadly, Thornton grew sick and passed away on September 30, 1912, the day before ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reached California.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá prayed at Thornton’s grave and asked the Bahá'ís to visit there every year. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “This revered personage was the first Bahá'í in America. He served the Cause faithfully and his services will ever be remembered throughout ages and cycles.”