

‘Abdu’l-Bahá Writes to Wichita, Kansas:
The Beginnings of the Bahá’í History of Wichita

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The question of when the Bahá’í history of a locality begins is often not easy to answer, it may not be the same date as the beginning of that Bahá’í community, especially if there is no continuity between groups of believers who have lived in that place. Frequently this is the case. Sometimes the Bahá’í history begins with an article in the newspaper, or the visit of a traveling teacher. Sometimes the beginning is never known.

It is common knowledge that the present Bahá’í community of Wichita began with the declaration of faith of Ron Preuss in 1947. Less common is the knowledge that this is the third Bahá’í community to be in Wichita. The second Bahá’í community was the one consisting of the early pioneers, Pliny and Clara Wiley, who lived in Wichita from 1935-1946. Their efforts led to the declaration of Ron, but there was no direct contact at that time between them. Information and documents have recently come to light regarding the very earliest Bahá’í activity in Wichita. Very little is known about these believers and their existence in Kansas would be totally unknown except for one thing: they wrote to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and He answered them!

In 1902 two tablets were sent at ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instruction to two believers in Wichita in response to their letters to Him. Both of these letters were translated on 19 August 1902 in New York, City by Ali Kuli Khan who sent and received letters between American believers and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. It is likely that the letters to and from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá were sent together because that was common practice of the time.

Very little is known about these two believers in Wichita. One had shared the Bahá’í message with the other and a phrase in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s letter to him indicated that more than one soul had been awakened by his teaching, whether in Wichita or some other place is unknown.

The one who did the teaching was Fred G. Hale. The city directory for 1902 gives his address as 430 S. Market, but the letter was sent to him at 1936 N. Lawrence Ave. He was not a settled resident of Wichita, in fact he did not live in Wichita for very long. He is listed in the city directory only for the year 1902, the 12th and 14th editions, for 1900 and 1903-4, do not contain a listing for him. The one listing, though, indicates that he would not likely be the city very long, his occupation is stated as, “trav man,” meaning traveling sales or business man. His home was on the east coast. In a later letter to Albert Windust he mentioned having “returned back east,” but did not say why or how long he had been in Wichita. His home at the time of that letter was 488 Pavonia Ave., in Jersey City, N.J.

Hale received at least two Tablets from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. In 1905 He sent these to Windust for circulation among other believers, a common practice of the time, and enclosed the text of the two tablets in his own handwriting. He also gives information about Mr. Dyer, the second believer known to be in Wichita.

The text of the Tablets to Hale follow (the spelling is authentic):

“Through Ali Kuli Khan

“To Mr. Fred G. Hale

“(Upon him be Baha’Ullah!)

“Wichita, Kansas

“He is God!

“O Thou who art attracted to the Fragrances of God!

“Verily I read thy letter of Thanksgiving to God. For He hath illumined thy heart with the light of the Mightest Guidance, dilated thy breast through the Fragrance of the Garden of His Kingdom the Abha, caused thee to speak His praise in that remote and extensive country, and hath enabled thee to guide Souls who are attracted to the Beauty of God and enkindled by the fire of His Love at this moment.

“By the Lord of Host. God hath ordained for no body any good greater than this, or any Spirit more shining than this, or any spirit more active than this.

“Were the dominions of the whole and entire earth to be thine, it would not equal this great Dominion which is no other than Spreading the Guidance of God.

“For as much as the earthly dominion is like unto the Kingdom of Edward VII, King of England; his coronation day became unto him the day of griefs, the day of sorrows, and the days of moaning. His joy was changed into abundant sorrows, and the light of happiness was transformed into the darkness of a gloomy night.

“This is the condition of the world, its honor, its dominion, its glory and affluence!

“But as to thee, O thou who art attracted unto God: Thou hast established an eternal and everlasting throne through the Guidance of God, and hast become crowned with a diadem, the gems of which scintillates throughout centuries and ages, nay rather, for cycles and periods.

“This throne cannot be shaken by the powers of the earth and its calamities; nor can incidental obstacles, worldly impediments, or all the diseases and ailments prevent or delay this coronation. For this is under the protection of God and His Preservation, defended by his Guard and in the Stronghold of His Patronage, and is watched over by the eye of His Mercifulness.

“Therefore thank thou God forevermore.

“Deliver my greetings to the attracted maid-servant of God, thy honorable wife, and bear unto her the Glad tidings of the Graces of her Lord.”

Hale adds a note here of his own to Albert Windust in the midst of the text of the Tablet. The note says, “Please note the following must not be circulated it is purely personal to my self and family.” That part is included here because it keeps the text intact and is sweet and touching. It also demonstrates the affection parents should show to their children.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá concludes, “Kiss on my behalf the cheeks of thy beautiful child. Kiss also on my behalf the brow of thy wonderful (or new) son Frederick William. I have named him ‘Abdul-Beha’ (i.e. the servant of Beha); so that this (name) may be a light unto him, whereby his face may be shining in the Kingdom of El Abha.

“Upon thee be greetings and praise!

(signed) Abdul-Beha-Abbas

(translated by A.K. Khan, Aug. 19, 1902 N.Y.)

It is very interesting that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes Wichita. One wonders how many other places He describes. Being the first letter from Wichita, and from Kansas, and the distance from Wichita to Haifa, it would very be a remote and extensive country.

The child mentioned in the letter could have been Hale’s son, Dudley A., born in 1896, or infant Frederick William, born in 1902 in Kansas, very likely Wichita.

In the letter ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is spelled with an E. That was the spelling used in the first years of the 20th century.

A second Tablet to Hale the next year says:

“He is God.

“O thou whom I mention with my heart and tongue; though I do not see thee with my eyes, I do see thee with my heart, and mention thee with the fullness of love, clemency, yearning and attraction, supplicating my Lord that we may meet together at the meeting of His Kingdom and the Pavilion of His Might, where we shall chant the verses of thanks for His Bounty, Generosity, and Gifts, the lights of which have shone upon all horizons, and their effulgences have become intense upon the hearts of the people of harmony.

“O thou my dearly, beloved, Hasten! Hasten! To the gifts of they Lord, the Merciful, come to the Benefactor – avail thyself of this opportunity, and take they portion of this Greatest Treasure in this Promised Day.

“May salutations and praise be upon thee

(signed) Abdul Beha Abbas

(through Anton Haddad, translated in Syria 1903 shortly after his return there and forwarded to me from there)

The last line is a note added by Hale to Windust.

The second believer known to be in Wichita in 1902 was Frank Dyer. Fred Hale wrote that he has the Tablet sent to Dyer but it did not arrive until after he (Fred) had left Wichita and Dyer and left Wichita even before himself, and he does not know how to contact him. He had tried for three years to find him, but was unable to do so. It is likely then that Dyer's Tablet never reached him. The last he had learned was that Dyer had gone to Kansas City, Kansas.

A search found two Frank Dyers in Wichita in 1900 and 1902. One continued his residence into the time of the 1903-4 city directory and beyond. He was the superintendent of schools - not the Bahá'í.

The second Frank Dyer was a bookkeeper, the city directory does not say where. In 1900 he lived at the corner of 19th and Water streets, in 1902 he lived at 1851 N. Lawrence. He was not married. He is not listed in the city directory for 1903-4. Given that he moved at least three times in these four years, was unmarried and that 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed him as "youngman," it is evident that he had not yet settled down in life so his continual movement from place to place is not surprising.

The tablet reads:

"To Mr. F. Dyer (upon him be Beha'Ullah!)

O thou spiritual youth and merciful youngman! Consider the Grace of thy Master: how He hath directed thee to the Fountain of Salvation, until thou has drunk from the Salsabil (clear water of life) of the Guidance of God, in this holy and rich garden! Cling to this Firm handle and make thy feet steady in This path; so that the Bounties of thy Supreme Lord may successively pour upon thee and make thee a sign of His Mighty Knowledge.

Upon thee be greeting and praise!

(signed) Abdul-Beha-Abbas

(translated by A.K. Khan, Aug. 19, 1902. N.Y.)

The existence of these Tablets proves that the Bahá'í history of Wichita begins at least as early as 1902. 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions to Fred Hale that God had "enabled thee to guide Souls..." The names of Fred M. Wyatt and John Meeks Brown have also surfaced as Bahá'ís in Wichita at the same time. If some of those believers were in Wichita and stayed in Wichita after the departure of Dyer and Hale then the Bahá'í community began in 1902, but nothing is known about them so it is not the same Bahá'í community that began later. This period can be considered the first chapter of the Bahá'í history of Wichita.

For a few months in 1908 Mrs. A.M. Bryant lived in Wichita, but further research is necessary to discover more details.

The second chapter began with the arrival of Pliny and Clara Wiley in 1935. They had entered the Bahá'í community in Topeka in 1934 and moved to Wichita the next year. In those years little was known of the Faith by Bahá'ís in Topeka. When Wiley's moved, it is likely they didn't learn much more. Both had been born in Iowa, he in 1875 and she about 1876. They were married in 1902 and had no children. They moved from city to city frequently.

Late in 1946, after consulting with the Guardian, they considered pioneering outside the U.S., but no evidence has been found that they did. No records have been found of their presence in Wichita from 1947 to 1952. After returning, there was no known contact with the Bahá'í community.

Details are sketchy for the remainder of their lives, but he wrote poems that were widely published in newspapers in many states in the U.S. These responded to the concerns and interests of the times. Their appeal is limited. His three main topics were nature, patriotism and religion – generically Christian, with no evidence of Bahá'í content.

It is curious that she died in 1953 in Larned, Kansas, the location of a state mental hospital. That year he reappears, again, in Wichita and remained for the rest of his life. He had no contact with the Bahá'ís. Both are buried in Wichita in Park Cemetery.

The current Bahá'í community dates from the declaration of Ron Preuss in 1947. In any case, the centennial of the arrival of the Faith in Wichita, Kansas occurs (at least) in 2002. This is cause for celebration!