

Bahá'í Houses of Worship Mashriqu'l-Adhkár

Wilmette, Illinois, USA, 1953

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Bahá'u'lláh

O people of the world! Build ye houses of worship throughout the lands in the name of Him Who is the Lord of all religions. Make them as perfect as is possible in the world of being, and adorn them with that which befitteth them, not with images and effigies. Then, with radiance and joy, celebrate therein the praise of your Lord, the Most Compassionate. Verily, by His remembrance the eye is cheered and the heart is filled with light.

(Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas – The Most Holy Book, §31)

Bahá'í House of Worship for North America

The Continental Bahá'í House of Worship for North America is in Wilmette, Illinois, a suburb north of Chicago, on the shore of Lake Michigan.

It is an intricate concrete masterpiece with thoughtful details that reflect oneness for humanity. It took a half century to build, and was dedicated in 1953.

Bahá'í House of Worship for North America

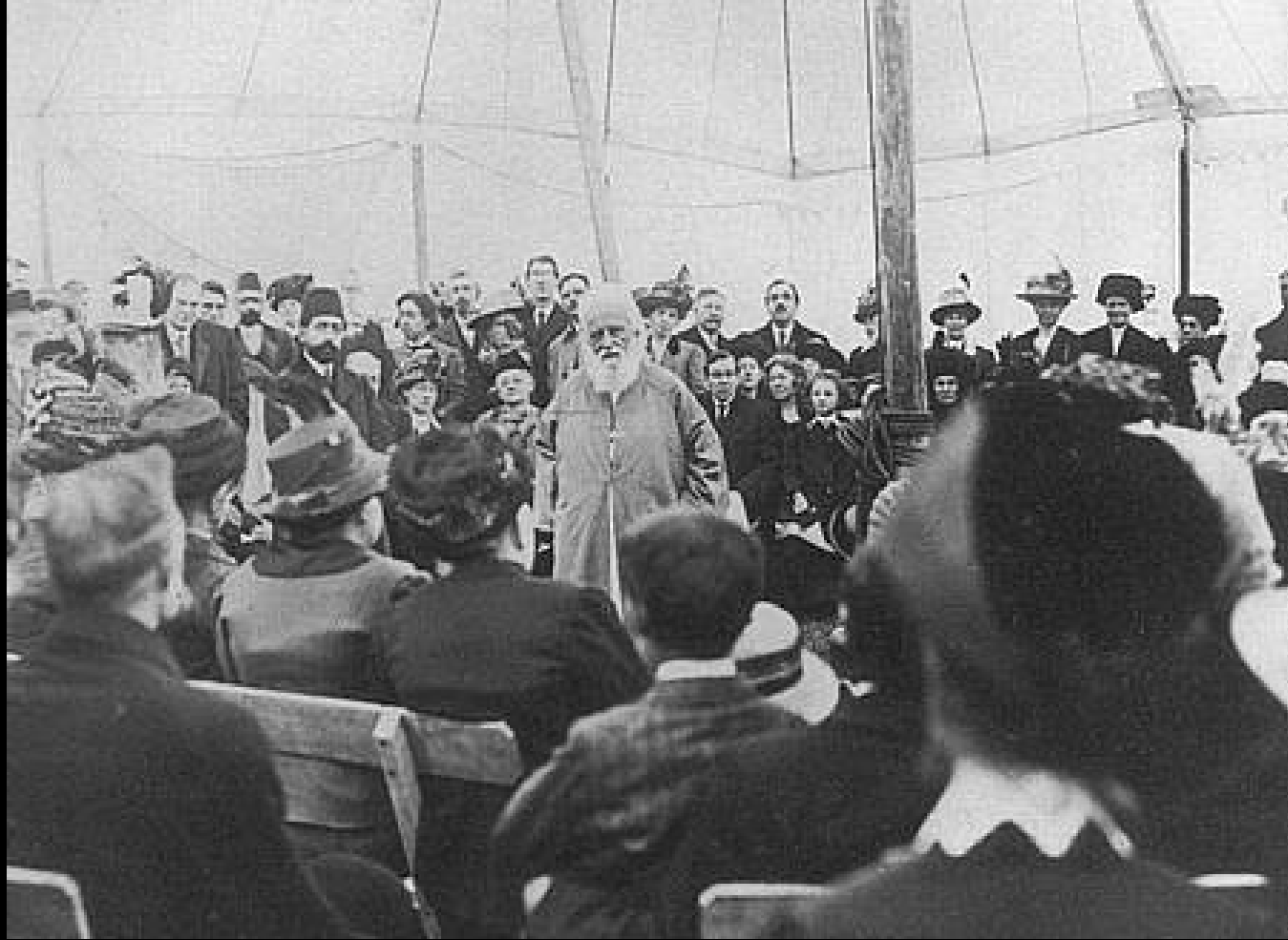
The Bahá'í Faith was introduced to the United States at the Parliament of the World's Religions meeting in Chicago in 1893. By 1900, there were nearly 1,000 Bahá'ís living in the U.S. and Canada. Plans to construct a Bahá'í temple in the Chicago area emerged in 1903, but it would be another 50 years before the temple was finished.

Two lots were purchased along Lake Michigan in 1907, in what was then Grosse Pointe (now Wilmette). Raising funds for the temple's construction proved difficult, as it was financed by individual contributions from Bahá'ís around the world. Two World Wars and the Great Depression slowed things down.

Revised from <http://www.architecture.org/learn/resources/buildings-of-chicago/building/bahai-house-of-worship/>

Wilmette
USA





'Abdu'l-Bahá dedicated the site of the House of Worship during His visit to America in 1912. A tent had been erected on the property, and He first gave a talk.



After the talk 'Abdu'l-Bahá, followed by His audience, left the tent and requested that Nettie Tobin's stone (a simple stone that had been brought earlier by this poor old lady as her offering) be brought to Him. The stone had been lying several feet northwest of the tent and had probably been pointed out to Him by Corinne True earlier. He walked back and forth on the property and, after asking where the center of the land would be, turned to someone who showed Him the approximate point.

As the stone was being carried to where 'Abdu'l-Bahá stood, Irene Holmes of New York stepped forward and handed Him a leather case. Inside was a golden trowel she had hoped would be used for laying a cornerstone within the foundation of the building. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tried to use the trowel to dig a resting place for the dedication stone, but it was too dull to cut through the spring grass. He placed the trowel in its case and asked for more practical tools. When it was discovered that plans had not been made to have such tools available, one of the young men ran to a nearby house to borrow an ax. "Like an athlete", 'Abdu'l-Bahá took it and "swung it high in the air." "After several blows," wrote Louise Waite, He "cut through the resisting turf and reached the earth below."



'Abdu'l-Bahá dedicating the site, Wilmette, USA, 1912

The scene inspired the Bahá'ís to sing-first the "Benediction" and then "Tell the Wondrous Story," both written by Mrs. Waite. In the meantime another young man, Herbert Anderson of Chicago, had run west in search of a shovel. He found a work crew on the Northwestern Elevated tracks about four blocks south, and convinced them to loan him one of their shovels, which he whisked back to the ceremony. As the shovel was handed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Corinne True reportedly stepped forward and encouraged Him to let a woman participate in the ceremony. Turning to Lua Getsinger, He bade her to come forward despite her resistance. It was not until He called her a second time that she responded, grasped the shovel, and turned the first earth. Following her was Corinne True, after which, one by one, individuals of many races and nationalities-Persian, Syrian, Egyptian, Indian, North American Indian, Japanese, South African, English, French, German, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Jewish-were called forward to participate in the digging.



Digging the hole to place the dedication stone, 1912

Now that a rather large hole had been dug, 'Abdu'l-Bahá reached down and scooped up handfuls of dirt, which He shared with several individuals.

Then He “consigned the stone to its excavation, on behalf of all the people of the world.” After retrieving the golden trowel, He pushed the earth back around the stone and declared: “The Temple is already built.”



Building the Wilmette Temple

Construction began in 1920. The building's architect, Louis Bourgeois, was a French Canadian who joined the Bahá'í faith more than a decade before working on the temple. He began his work on the structure in 1920 and moved his studio to a building across the street from the site, to be closer to his project. Bourgeois felt the design of the temple needed to reflect the Bahá'í belief of oneness for humanity, as well as the unity of all religions. In describing his design, he said, "There are combinations of mathematical lines, symbolizing those of the universe, and in their intricate merging of circle into circle, and circle within circle, we visualize the merging of all religions into one."

The building combines neoclassical symmetry, Gothic ribbing, a Renaissance dome, a Romanesque clerestory and Islamic arabesque tracery with the suggestion of minarets. The carvings on the nine exterior pillars reference various world religions with symbols like the Star of David, crucifixes and the Islamic star and crescent. The gardens contain both rectangular approaches and circular gardens, reflecting Eastern and Western influences.

Building the Wilmette Temple

Selecting a material to realize Bourgeois' elaborate designs proved difficult. Limestone, granite, terra cotta and aluminum were all considered before concrete was selected. One critic strongly disapproved, calling it "the most repellant object imaginable" since it lacked beauty of the surface and weathered poorly. But John Earley, a fifth generation stone carver who came from a family of ecclesiastical artists, made the concrete beautiful. Inspired by Italian pebble mosaics, Earley developed a method of exposing the larger pebbles in the aggregate of the concrete mixture. This gave the concrete a warmer appearance. On the Bahá'í Temple he used two types of quartz to give the exterior an almost luminescent quality. The result inside and out is stunning, resulting in the structure sometimes being referred to as the "Temple of Light and Unity." Neither Bourgeois nor Earley saw the completed temple. The formal dedication for the superstructure took place in 1953.

<http://www.architecture.org/learn/resources/buildings-of-chicago/building/bahai-house-of-worship/>

Dedication 1953

The Wilmette House of Worship was dedicated by Ruhiyyih Khanum, the wife of the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, on 2 May 1953. The ceremony included a viewing of the portraits of The Bab and Bahá'u'lláh which normally can only be seen during pilgrimage to the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel.



Ruhiyyih Khanum presenting the Guardian's message of dedication



Wilmette Temple Dedication 1953

Intercontinental Teaching Conference 1953

An All-America Intercontinental Teaching Conference was held at the Masonic Hall in Chicago on 3-6 May 1953 immediately after the dedication. It marked the launching of the Ten Year Spiritual Crusade planned by the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to open to the Faith all the remaining countries and territories on the planet that had been mentioned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Tablets of the Divine Plan. I remember sitting in the front row at the session when Ruhiyyih Khanum at the podium on the stage in front of me raised the call of the Guardian for Bahá'ís to arise to pioneer for the Faith to one of these places, many that people had never heard of, and become "Knights of Bahá'u'lláh". Many people I knew went up on that stage. I was only 10, but from that day forward, my goal in life was some day to become a pioneer and help the Bahá'ís in some far off land.



Bahá'í All-America Intercontinental Teaching Conference, Chicago, Illinois, May 3-6, 1953.

Intercontinental Teaching Conference 1953
Hands of the Cause to the right, children on stage in the center

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Arthur and
Keith Dahl
(second row, far left)

Conference
at
Dedication
Chicago, USA
1953



Architecture of the Wilmette Temple

All temples share certain design features, including domes and gardens. Each temple is nine-sided because Bahá'ís consider the number nine—the highest single number—a symbol of oneness, comprehensiveness and unity. In Wilmette, the temple includes nine entrances and nine verses above the doors and the alcoves. Of all the temples, the Wilmette house of worship is the oldest. It has been named a National Historic Landmark, one of the Seven Wonders of Illinois and is visited by 250,000 people a year. Aside from being called the “Temple of Light and Unity,” the 1100-seat Wilmette building is known as the “Mother Temple of the West” by Bahá'ís around the world. Today, it remains the only Bahá'í temple in the U.S.

Bahá'í
National
Convention
1961

Wilmette, USA





Nancy Phillips and Joyce Dahl, 1944



Arthur L. Dahl, Jr. and the Bishops, 1945

National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of the United
States 1961:

Borrah Kavelin, Amos Gibson,
Charlotte Linfoot, Charles
Walcott, Sarah Pereira, Arthur
Dahl, Hugh Chance, David Ruhe
(five would be elected to the first
Universal House of Justice two years
later)



Bahá'í World Centre Gardens

Element from
Wilmette
House of Worship

