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West Chester's Baha'i Roots

By Jim Jones

With most of the news about religion today emphasizing disputes of various types between factions of the world's major religions; it is worth reflecting on West Chester's reputation for religious toleration. That reputation is of long duration, beginning in the 17th century when the Friends (Quakers) who first settled here allowed Presbyterian Scots, Lutheran Germans, Mennonite Rhinelanders and Irish Catholics to move in. That tradition continued in West Chester and resulted in 12 churches by 1879, 13 by 1896 and 20 churches by 1932. During the 20th century, it also resulted in the foundation of a Baha'i congregation.



Baha'i is a religion that was founded in Persia in the first half of the 19th century. It unites all of the major world religions by viewing all monotheisms (one-god belief systems) as expressions of the same single creator. That places Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Krishna, and Buddha on the same level, and adds figures like Adam, "the Bab" and Baha'u'llah to the list of divine Manifestations. The basic expression of the Baha'i view is that the world is one country and everyone is a citizen of that country.

The first record of Baha'i members in the West Chester area dates from around World War I. That was a time when many people in the USA and especially Europe -- which had lost millions of its citizens -- were horrified by the results the first "industrial war" in history. Along with diplomatic efforts like the Versailles Treaty and League of Nations, there were many non-governmental efforts to prevent future wars, such as the creation of the "universal" language of Esperanto. In such an environment, the unifying religion of Baha'i spread easily.

The Baha'i message reached the USA even earlier, however. It was mentioned at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 by a Christian at the Parliament of the World's Religions. From there, it spread to the areas around Chicago and New York, and received a boost from the Hearst newspaper family. In 1911-1912 Abdu'l-Baha toured the United States, and in 1927 the son of Baha'u'bab spoke in New York City at the Baha'i Center led by Mrs. Mary Hanford Ford.

One of the first Baha'i followers in the West Chester area was Dr. Leslie Pinckney Hill, the president of Cheyney State Teachers College (now Cheyney University) and one of the founders of the West Chester Community Center (now known as the Melton Arts & Education Center). Dr. Hill worked with Alain Locke, an influential figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, on the National Baha'i Race Amity Committee.

At the beginning of World War II, a group of Baha'i began to hold regular meetings in West Chester. The instigation appears to have been a visit by Madame Ali Kuli Khan, the wife of the

Persian representative to the Versailles Peace Conference, to an apartment at 17 S. Church Street.

The apartment was occupied by Jeannette Sharpless, born Jeannette Lear in 1886 in Snowshoe, Pennsylvania, about ten miles north of State College. She came to the southeastern part of the state to attend the Presbyterian School of Nursing in Philadelphia, and after she graduated, she remained in the area. Ms. Lear married Albert W. Sharpless, a member of the family that owned the Sharpless Creamery and Dairy in West Chester. Her brother Clarence also settled in West Chester and became a partner of Martin Lorgus in the Morris Nurseries located on the present site of Henderson High School.



Jeanette Lear Sharpless circa 1910

Sharpless and her husband bought a house on W. Miner Street in 1926, but unfortunately, he died in January 1931 leaving her with two children. Fortunately, he also left an estate worth over \$130,000, so she was able to stay in the house, at least at first. But some time before the beginning of 1941, she moved to the apartment at 17 S. Church Street. After the visit by Madame Khan, Sharpless began to hold regular Baha'i meetings.

In that first year, the group met on Sunday evenings for worship service and Tuesday evenings to study the religion. In 1944 they moved down the street to 27 S. Church Street, and after World War II was over, Sharpless organized a program to commemorate the 1819 birth of the "Bab" (a Baha'i prophet) on October 20, 1945.

In the late 1940s, their meeting place moved several times. They met in the Farmers & Mechanics Building (2 W. Market) in 1947, moved a half block east to 22 E. Market in 1948, and met at 154 E. Gay in 1955. Sometime after that, Mrs. Sharpless moved to the home of her daughter in Massachusetts where she died on June 5, 1960. Her obituary noted that she was "a member of the Baha'i faith."

Today, the Baha'i religion claims more than five million followers in 204 countries. Locally, there are congregations in Tredyffrin, Wilmington and Swarthmore, and members in West Chester. For more information, visit www.bahai.org or bahaibookstore.com.