



‘Abdu’l-Bahá Goes to Washington

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Published: April 20, 2012 | Last modified: July 7, 2013

Permalink: <http://239days.com/2012/04/20/abdu-baha-comes-to-washington/>

LITTLE MARZIEH KHAN BOUNCED across the pavement, passed beneath the tall marble arches, and shuffled through the glass doors of Washington’s Union Station, looking for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Above her a massive barrel vault, graced with octagonal coffers, crowned the cavernous Great Hall.¹ Hundreds of little black squares dotted the marble tiled floor that unfurled at her feet. She could examine them closely because her eyes were so close to the ground. Marzieh was only four years old.

This morning—Saturday, April 20, 1912—‘Abdu’l-Bahá had boarded the 8 a.m. train to Washington, DC, from New York’s Pennsylvania Station.² But in order to avoid the kind of brouhaha that had greeted the *Cedric*, he had kept his arrival time a secret.³ That’s why Marzieh’s parents—Florence Breed of Boston and Ali-Kuli Khan of Iran—had received a panicked telephone call at lunchtime: “Hurry! The Master is arriving at the station in half an hour!” They dropped their knives and forks, picked up the children, and ran into the street to catch a public victoria.⁴

The Khans arrived at Union Station with five minutes to spare: the train pulled in at 1:33 p.m.⁵ Mother rushed into the flower shop and bought two bouquets. Rahim, Marzieh’s elder brother, received violets; she got red roses.⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá loved flowers.

Marzieh caught her first glimpse of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as he walked toward them along the train platform, trailed by three Persian members of his party. At the

¹ “Union Station, [Washington, D.C.], waiting room,” photograph, between 1921 and 1922, Library of Congress: *National Photo Company Collection*, accessed July 4, 2013, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/npc2008010891/>.

² Alice Ives Breed to Thornton Chase, 1 May 1912, Thornton Chase Papers, National Bahá’í Archives, Wilmette, IL; Joseph H. Hannen, “Abdul-Baha in Washington,” *Star of the West* 3, No. 3 (April 28, 1912): 6.

³ Agnes Parsons, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in America: Agnes Parsons’ Diary, April 11, 1912–November 11, 1912* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1996), 9.

⁴ Marzieh Gail, *Arches of the Years* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1991), 79.

⁵ Gail, *Arches*, 79; Hannen, “Abdul-Baha in Washington,” 6.

⁶ Gail, *Arches*, 79.

gate he stopped to greet the children, taking Rahim by the hand.⁷ “Pass along—don’t block the passage,” a guard said.⁸

She looked up at ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as he paced along the walk beside the tracks. Atop his left shoulder, lying almost fully open, Marzieh spied a silver curl. She had curls, too. They were black and made with a curling stick.⁹ They fell to her shoulders on either side of her face, framing her olive complexion and big dark eyes.¹⁰

That was the only visual image she would ever recall of that day with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. But she would always remember the electricity that permeated the air all around him, a “feeling of something always going on.”¹¹

In front of the station two cars and a carriage awaited the party,¹² and, as they walked back out under the arches with the others, they could see the silhouette of the Capitol building beneath the sun.¹³

Marzieh sat on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s lap all the way up Massachusetts Avenue.¹⁴ They drove around the big white library where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was going to talk that evening. It was in a grassy park right in the middle of the road.¹⁵ They turned right at Dupont Circle, which was near where the President lived, and arrived a few minutes later at Mr. and Mrs. Parsons’s big house at the corner of 18th and R Streets.¹⁶ That’s where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was going to stay.

⁷ Gail, *Arches*, 79.

⁸ Hannen, “Abdul-Baha in Washington,” 6.

⁹ Gail, *Arches*, 79–80.

¹⁰ “‘Abdu’l-Bahá with Children of Ali-Kuli and Florence Breed Khan in Khan home in Washington D.C.,” photograph, G. V. Buck, March 24, 1912, National Bahá’í Archives, Wilmette, IL, accessed July 6, 2013, <http://centenary.bahai.us/photo/abdul-baha-children-ali-kuli-and-florence-breed-khan-khan-home-washington-dc>. Marzieh, wearing her curls, stands at left.

¹¹ Gail, *Arches*, 80.

¹² Parsons, *Diary*, 9; Gail, *Arches*, 80; Hannen, “Abdul-Baha in Washington,” 6. Sources differ as to the number of vehicles that met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Agnes Parsons mentions only Mrs. Alice Barney-Hemmick’s car, in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá rode, and her own carriage. Marzieh Gail mentions “three autos,” identifying Mr. Hippolyte Dreyfus’s car specifically. Dreyfus was Barney-Hemmick’s son-in-law, but Gail differentiates Barney-Hemmick’s car, in which she rode with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from Dreyfus’s car, in which her mother, Florence, rode.

¹³ “CAPITOL, U.S. VIEW FROM UNION STATION,” photograph, Harris & Ewing, 1918, Library of Congress: *Harris & Ewing Collection*, accessed July 7, 2013, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/hec2008007497/>; “Weather Conditions,” *Washington Herald*, April 21, 1912, from Library of Congress, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, accessed July 7, 2013, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045433/1912-04-21/ed-1/seq-8/>. The Capitol is almost exactly south-southwest of Union Station, which means that at 1:33 p.m. the sun would have been almost directly above the Capitol dome when viewed from the station entrance.

¹⁴ Gail, *Arches*, 80; Robert H. Stockman, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in America* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 2012), 90.

¹⁵ Hannen, “Abdul-Baha in Washington,” 7. The Carnegie Library stands in Mt. Vernon Square, a rectangular patch of trees and grass that intersects Massachusetts Avenue NW about halfway between Union Station and Dupont Circle.

¹⁶ Sources suggest that the automobiles took the most direct route from the station to their destination. Agnes Parsons writes that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was “*immediately* brought to our house.” Parsons, *Diary*, 9 (italics added). “Abdul-Baha was driven *at once* to the home of Mr. and Mrs. A. J. Parsons 18th and ‘R’ Streets. . . .” Hannen, “Abdul-Baha in Washington,” 6 (italics added). The most direct route from Union Station to the Parsons’ was up Massachusetts Avenue NW, turning right onto 18th Street just before Dupont Circle.

We don't know what Marzieh did for the rest of that exciting day. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá rested, then took a carriage ride through the Mall in the late afternoon, before his speech to 600 people at the Carnegie Library. He walked along the terrace on the western side of the Capitol, and gazed out over the city as the sun slowly dropped to the horizon, shedding yellow, purple, and orange across the sky.¹⁷

¹⁷ Charles Mason Remey, "The Master Abdu'l Baha in Washington" (unpublished typescript, August 23, 1934), Charles Mason Remey Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, IL.

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FOOTNOTE/ENDNOTE:

Jonathan Menon, “‘Abdu’l-Bahá Goes to Washington,” *239 Days in America*, ed. Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett, April 20, 2012, <http://239days.com/2012/04/20/abdul-baha-comes-to-washington/>.

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Menon, Jonathan. “‘Abdu’l-Bahá Goes to Washington.” *239 Days in America*. Edited by Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett. April 20, 2012. <http://239days.com/2012/04/20/abdul-baha-comes-to-washington/>.

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Menon, Jonathan, and Robert Sockett, eds. *239 Days in America*. <http://239days.com/>.

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