



# Minneapolis, Flour Power, and the Ideal Virtues of Man

By Caitlin Shayda Jones

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THE UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER rolled across the limestone riverbed, slid over the concrete spillway, and rushed through steel steam turbines, pouring forth on its long journey south to St. Louis and New Orleans.<sup>1</sup> St. Anthony Falls was the focal point of a city that was the world leader in flour milling: Minneapolis, Minnesota. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke at the industrial center on September 20, 1912.<sup>2</sup> He talked about the need for moral progress in addition to the industrial and financial progress so evident in America.

“If we review history,” he told his audience, “we will observe that human advancement has been greatest in the development of material virtues. Civilization is the sign and evidence of this progression.”<sup>3</sup>

Civilization in Minneapolis had been built on St. Anthony Falls, the only major natural waterfall on the Upper Mississippi River.<sup>4</sup> The white settlers of the Minnesota Territory harnessed the power of the falls for industrial use. They built a V-shaped dam to divert water on either side of the river and power mills along its banks.<sup>5</sup> First came the sawmills, chewing through the logs of white pine floated down from the forests up north.<sup>6</sup> During the 1870’s, flour mills began to take over.<sup>7</sup> Minneapolis soon became known as “The Flour Milling Capital of the World,” passing Budapest as the world’s leading processor of grain in 1897; by 1900 its mills ground more than fourteen percent of America’s flour.<sup>8</sup> The wheat came in across the northern Plains by rail, was processed in Minneapolis, and shipped out to destinations in the Eastern

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<sup>1</sup> John O. Anfinson, “St. Anthony Falls: Timber, Flour and Electricity,” in *River of History: A Historic Resources Study of the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area* (St. Paul, MN: National Park Service, 2003): 117–119, <http://www.nps.gov/miss/historyculture/upload/HRS-full-comp.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 2nd ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), 325–328.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>4</sup> Anfinson, “St. Anthony Falls,” 117.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 123–130.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>8</sup> David B. Danbom, “Flour Power: The Significance of Flour Milling at the Falls,” *Minnesota History* 58 (Spring/Summer 2003), 273, 277, accessed February 7, 2015, <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHHistoryMagazine/articles/58/v58i05-06p270-285.pdf>.

United States for export and domestic distribution.

“Throughout the world,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said in Minneapolis, “material civilization has attained truly wonderful heights and degrees of efficiency—that is to say, the outward powers and virtues of man have greatly developed, but the inner and ideal virtues have been correspondingly delayed and neglected.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s audience in Minnesota could see the material power he discussed all around them, stemming from the unceasing march of the water that drove their mills.<sup>9</sup>

As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá set out across America in 1912, Minnesota’s flour industry was reaching its peak. Culture and sophistication had followed. “Minneapolis has built for herself a social fabric that is in every way creditable to the high standard of Western civilization,” Harper’s Weekly had observed in 1890.<sup>10</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá argued for more. “It is now the time in the history of the world,” he asserted, “for us to strive and give an impetus to the advancement and development of inner forces—that is to say, we must arise to service in the world of morality, for human morals are in need of readjustment.” “The minds of men,” he said, had to “increase in power and become keener in perception . . . so that the ideal virtues may appear.”<sup>11</sup>

Minneapolis’s milling industry started to collapse after 1916.<sup>12</sup> Steam power, then electricity, began to equalize the advantage which St. Anthony’s rushing water had given Minneapolis over other cities aspiring to compete.<sup>13</sup> Wheat fields along the Red River Valley exhausted themselves from repetitive planting.<sup>14</sup> Farmers on the southern plains developed new harder brands of winter wheat, which were superior for making bread and could be processed closer to the source in Kansas City.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the Interstate Commerce Commission ruled that flour, in contrast to raw wheat, was a manufactured product which should be shipped at a higher rate. This meant that it now made better economic sense to send unprocessed grain further east along the iron rails to be processed closer to market.<sup>16</sup> By 1930 Buffalo had supplanted Minneapolis as America’s flour capital.<sup>17</sup>

“There are many meetings in the world,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “thousands of them perhaps being held at this very moment, mostly for social, political, scientific or commercial purposes; but our gathering here tonight is for God, for heavenly purposes.” If spiritual advancement was to occur, it necessitated its own structures, its own enterprises. The ideal virtues that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá discussed, which included

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 325.

<sup>10</sup> Danbom, “Flour Power,” 272.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 325–326.

<sup>12</sup> Anfinson, “St. Anthony Falls,” 133.

<sup>13</sup> Danbom, “Flour Power,” 283; Anfinson, “St. Anthony Falls,” 133.

<sup>14</sup> Danbom, “Flour Power,” 283;

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Anfinson, “St. Anthony Falls,” 133.

“insight,” “memory,” “the power of love,” and the “ability to prove the existence of God,” would strengthen as these societal structures gradually emerged.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 325.

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### **FOOTNOTE/ENDNOTE:**

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