



## At 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue

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THE PARSONS' HORSES CLOPPED along the driveway at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue shortly after noon on Sunday, April 28, 1912.<sup>1</sup> Through the trees 'Abdu'l-Bahá could see the large pediment, supported by eight white ionic columns, which sheltered the northern entrance to the executive mansion. The carriage, which carried him, Dr. Fareed, and Mrs. Parsons, rolled forward beneath the mottled shadows in the cool afternoon air.<sup>2</sup>

President Taft had invited 'Abdu'l-Bahá to visit him at the White House at 12:30.<sup>3</sup> On Friday morning 'Abdu'l-Bahá had spoken at the President's church, All Souls Unitarian on Harvard Street.<sup>4</sup> And on Saturday, members of the Taft family had attended an evening reception that Mrs. Parsons had held for 300 dignitaries in the capital.<sup>5</sup>

William Sulzer, the Democratic Congressman from New York, had also come to the Parsons' for a private interview with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He was Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and said later that he felt he had just talked with the prophet Elijah, and Moses. Shortly afterward, another invitation arrived: this one came from Champ Clark (D-Missouri), the Speaker of the House of Representatives, who asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá to address Congress the following week on his vision of world peace.<sup>6</sup>

The horses came to a halt under the main entrance portico of the executive

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Mason Remy, "Reminiscences of My Visit to the Master in England the Autumn of 1911" (unpublished typescript, August 23, 1934), Charles Mason Remy Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, IL, 7–8.

<sup>2</sup> Agnes Parsons, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in America: Agnes Parsons' Diary, April 11, 1912–November 11, 1912*, ed. Richard Hollinger (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1996), 58; "Weather Conditions," *Washington Herald*, May 29, 1912, from Library of Congress, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045433/1912-04-29/ed-1/seq-2/>. Clouds would roll in later in the afternoon and showers were expected in the evening, but the sun shone for ten hours and the temperature at noon in Washington was reported by the U. S. Weather Bureau as 57°F.

<sup>3</sup> Alice Ives Breed to Thornton Chase, 1 May 1912, Thornton Chase Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, IL.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph H. Hannen, "Abdul-Baha in Washington," *Star of the West* 3, No. 3 (April 28, 1912): 7.

<sup>5</sup> Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd's Diary: The Diary of Mírzá Mahmúd-i-Zarqání Chronicling 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey to America* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997), 65.

<sup>6</sup> Breed to Chase, 1 May 1912.

mansion. But before ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had a chance to dismount, a White House aide rushed out to make President Taft’s apologies.<sup>7</sup> He had been campaigning in Boston this week in advance of the Massachusetts Republican Primary, which was coming up on Tuesday. But he had only arrived back in Washington at 4 a.m. this morning and would have to leave again for New England on the 6:35 p.m. train.<sup>8</sup> Politics was an unpredictable business, and the President had to postpone.<sup>9</sup>

As for addressing Congress, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was the one who had to decline.<sup>10</sup> He had to be in Chicago. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had invited him to give a major address to their Fourth Annual Conference on Tuesday, and he was scheduled to lay the cornerstone for a new Bahá’í temple in the village of Wilmette, Illinois, on Wednesday afternoon.<sup>11</sup> He was leaving Washington by train tonight.

From the White House, the carriage drove south to the White Lot, an oval-shaped park just beneath the White House’s south lawn.<sup>12</sup> Eleven years from now President Coolidge would start a new American tradition here by lighting the first National Christmas Tree.<sup>13</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Mrs. Parsons, and Dr. Fareed took a walk through the American elms that ringed the oval roadway, and then drove back to the Parsons’ home at 18th and R Streets for lunch.<sup>14</sup> After several more interviews and a few last minute visits, the horses trotted down Massachusetts Avenue and back to Union Station, where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his party departed on the 5:25 p.m. train to Chicago.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Remy, “Reminiscences,” 8. A previous version of this article incorrectly interpreted Remy’s remarks to mean the carriage pulled in under the portico outside the west wing of the White House. However, at that time it did not have a portico like it does today. Remy was therefore talking about the mansion.

<sup>8</sup> “President Plans Attack on Colonel,” *Washington Times*, May 28, 1912, Sunday Evening Edition, from Library of Congress, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026749/1912-04-28/ed-1/seq-1/>.

<sup>9</sup> Breed to Chase, 1 May 1912.

<sup>10</sup> “He [Congressman Sulzer] got an invitation from Champ Clark for Abdul-Baha to speak to Congress on The Most Great Peace this week, but he left Washington Sunday on the 1,25 P.M. [sic] train for Chicago.” Breed to Chase, 1 May 1912.

<sup>11</sup> “Speakers Encourage and Tell of Advance,” *Chicago Defender*, May 4, 1912; “The Brotherhood of Man: An Address Delivered at the Chicago Conference by ABDUL BAHÁ of Persia,” *The Crisis* 4, No. 2 (June 1912): 88–89; Honoré J. Jaxon, “Dedication of the Mashrak-el-Azkar Site,” *Star of the West* 3, No. 4 (May 17, 1912): 5–7.

<sup>12</sup> Parsons, *Diary*, 58. Today we call this park the Ellipse.

<sup>13</sup> “White House Carols and Brilliant Tree Usher in Christmas,” *Washington Post*, December 25, 1923.

<sup>14</sup> “By 1894 the roadway around the Ellipse was illuminated by seven electric lamps. Hundreds of trees were planted in the region outside of the Ellipse, while a row of elms surrounded the central open lawn.” Historic American Buildings Survey, “White House Grounds and Ellipse (Reservation No. 1),” 1993, HABS No. DC-689, Library of Congress: *Historic American Buildings Survey*, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pnp/habshaer/dc/dc0700/dc0798/data/dc0798data.pdf>; Parsons, *Diary*, 58.

<sup>15</sup> Parsons, *Diary*, 58–59.

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### **FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:**

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