

## EDNA MCKINNEY TIBBETTS

1882 – 1930

*Thou art a maidservant who in the kingdom of God is among the near ones. – ‘Abdu’l-Bahá<sup>1</sup>*



Edna McKinney Tibbetts was one of the first very active American Bahá’ís. She was a daughter of Annie McKinney, who “...heard the Baha’i message from Mrs. [A.M.] Bryant in Denver, Colorado, in about 1898 and from the time of her [Annie’s] acceptance till her death she was a steadfast and faithful believer”.<sup>2</sup> Edna was about 16 years old at the time and she also became a Bahá’í. This was just five years after the Bahá’í teachings were first publically introduced in the United States at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

Edna Morgan McKinney had been born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in August of 1882 to William J. McKinney, an Irish immigrant, and Annie E. Cowan. When Edna was still young, the McKinney family moved to Denver. At the time, Denver was in the midst of a silver boom and people from all over the east coast were moving west to improve their lives. Edna’s father may have found work on one of the transcontinental railroads which were being built at the time: Denver city directories during the 1890s lists a William J. McKinney as a brakeman. Edna’s mother, Annie, worked as a dressmaker. In 1888, Edna’s younger sister, Effie, was born in Denver.

Sometime around 1905, Edna moved back to Philadelphia with her mother and sister. It is not known whether William died or remained in Denver. Back home with her family, Edna’s mother shared the Bahá’í teachings with her sister, Mrs. Mary Jane Revell. “Though actively engaged in church work, she [Mary] was searching, and that search made her receptive to the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh when presented to her by her sister, Mrs. Annie E. McKinney. She proved the truth of these teachings to her own satisfaction by her analysis of Bible prophecies; accepted the Faith, opened her home as a center for meetings, attracted some of her church friends and others to these meetings. ... This stirred up bitter persecution from the minister, which only tended to make her faith more steadfast.”<sup>3</sup>

Once Edna’s aunt, Mary J. Revell, accepted the Faith, the Revell home became a center of activity in Philadelphia. Some years later—on his last day in Philadelphia—Abdu’l-Bahá spent precious hours there, receiving the visitors who crowded on the stairs for a personal interview. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá once referred to the Revell home as the “Bahá’í Home.”<sup>4</sup> Edna’s cousins, Ethel and Jessie Revell, have become known for their distinguished services to Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, at the Bahá’í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, but Edna, her mother, Annie, and her aunt, Mary, each played their own important role in the development of the nascent American Bahá’í community.

Edna and her mother moved from Philadelphia to Chicago in around 1907. Edna worked as a stenographer and Annie continued working as a dressmaker. Nineteen-year-old Effie had married and remained in Philadelphia. The Chicago Bahá’í community at the time included such Bahá’í luminaries as Corinne True and Dr. Susan A. Moody. A March 1907 receipt shows that Edna had seen Dr. Moody as a patient: “*Thank you dear,*” wrote Dr. Moody on the receipt. A short note found in Annie McKinney’s files dated 1921 appears to be an invitation from the Tehran Bahá’í Assembly to Edna to come to Tehran, Iran. Perhaps Dr. Moody, who was then living in Tehran, was behind the request. In any case, no record has been found of Edna’s response to the offer.<sup>5</sup>

The American *Baha'i News* published updates of activities in various communities and in its July 13, 1910, issue it reported that Annie McKinney had hosted a Unity Feast at her home on Wellington Street, Chicago, on June 24.<sup>6</sup> Presumably Edna was there. Then, in its Dec. 31, 1910, issue the *Baha'i News* reported that Edna McKinney was welcomed back to Philadelphia. "Miss Edna McKinney, formerly of Chicago, is now in Philadelphia and expects to make it her home. We are very glad to have her with us at our meetings."<sup>7</sup> The correspondent for the Philadelphia news was Edna's younger cousin, Jessie Revell. Edna was twenty-eight years old and this may have been the first time that she and her mother had lived apart.

The years between 1903 and 1913 were a period of tests and trials in the American community but in 1912 the Baha'is were united in their eagerness to have 'Abdu'l-Bahá visit. They had been reading accounts of His travels in Europe and were petitioning Him to come to the United States. On April 11, 1912, He arrived in New York City.

Throughout His visit, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spent much time in personal interviews. People lined up in halls, reception rooms, and in private homes to await their turn to share their concerns with Him. Edna's first visit with 'Abdu'l-Bahá was with her sister, Effie. She wrote:

June 11, 1912 Philadelphia

Dear Mother:

Am just going to drop you a short line to say that our Beloved has been to this city and our hearts are so full we are almost consumed... Effie and I went to see Him Monday between one and two o'clock and He was in His room alone. He met us at the elevator and took our hands and lead [*sic*] us into the reception room and then talked with us in English... O mother I cannot tell you of it yet I will write it...but every word is engraved on my heart with red hot irons...

Lovingly, your daughter Edna<sup>8</sup>

Later Edna wrote:

Effie was so overjoyed she could not help but cry and He took His thumb and said you must not cry as he rubbed away the tears, her glasses slipped off and He took both His thumbs and rubbed her eyes and said over and over you must not cry and then He left us for a moment, coming back and asking her why she was crying.<sup>9</sup>

Edna asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá if it was all right to speak of personal matters. Assured that it was, the sisters asked for physical healing:

We afterwards asked if it was the proper thing to ask for physical healing as you dear mother had wished us to ask that we be healed. 'Abdu'l-Bahá simply said, 'Very good, very good...' Then He called us in later and gave us a talk, a very short talk, and O mother I cannot write of it yet... I was completely broken when I came out of there and then I had to cry as Effie said we got our answer.<sup>10</sup>

This account was of her first meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but Edna was to be in His presence many times. In fact, from June through December of 1912, she was one of the stenographers who recorded His talks in Philadelphia, Boston, Green Acre, and New York City. Many of those talks were later compiled by Howard MacNutt and published as *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* in 1922. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who chose the title, told MacNutt that this compilation "...is to be undertaken with the utmost carefulness so that the exact text may be reproduced."<sup>11</sup> So exact was the publication that the name of the note taker is prominently displayed for each talk: Howard MacNutt, Joseph Hannen, Esther Foster, Bijou Straun... and Edna McKinney. Twenty of the talks for which Edna McKinney took the notes were included in the compilation.

After ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s departure from America, the Bahá’í community continued its work to erect the Temple which had been approved by Him and for which He laid the cornerstone outside Chicago. In April 1913, the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Temple Unity was held in New York City. Forty-two delegates and alternates attended from twenty-five communities throughout the United States and Canada. Delegates included Martha Root from Pittsburgh, Corinne True from Chicago, and May Maxwell from Montreal, and visitors such as Louis and Louisa Gregory. Edna McKinney was the delegate from Philadelphia.

Like the other delegates, Edna was concerned about raising funds for the Temple: “When the House of Justice is established the believers will contribute one-nineteenth of their income. Can we not now make that a standard for giving to the Mashrak-el-Azkar? In this way, too, we could give of our time—perhaps one hour or one day of each nineteen days to work for the Mashrak-el-Azkar. Make that a holy day, a day whose service shall be utterly and wholly for the erection of the Mashrak-el-Azkar in this time.”<sup>12</sup> During the conference, she was appointed to a committee along with Alfred Lunt, Claudia S. Coles, Roy C. Wilhelm and Corinne True.

At some point after the conference, Edna moved to Boston and became secretary to her fellow committee member Alfred Lunt, a Boston lawyer who had been Sarah Farmer’s legal counsel and who would later serve for many years on the National Spiritual Assembly. While in Boston, Edna traveled to other communities on teaching trips including one to St Johns, Canada (home of Marion Jack) where she spoke five times at a local church. On July 19, 1915, *The Portsmouth Herald* newspaper noted on page 4 that Edna was one of the speakers at a Green Acre program.

Having carefully taken down the contents of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks as they were translated into English, Edna was immersed in the teachings and inflamed by His spirit. Her love for and understanding of the teachings were demonstrated in her own public talks over the following years. In a history of the early Boston Bahá’í community, Anise Rideout said of Edna: “Her heart was on fire; she labored day and night to give the message. ... She gave the message of Bahá’u’lláh in a concise, logical, and clear statement. One could feel the Beloved of the Worlds thru this Faithful firm Believer. Her personality was pleasing. Her modesty beautiful. ... She received numerous Tablets from Abdul-Baha, who loved her and appreciated all her efforts. She made some of the finest reports stenographically of the talks of Abdul-Baha in this part of the country.”<sup>13</sup>

Edna had supported herself as a stenographer, but when she was in her early thirties she embarked on a new career: she returned to Philadelphia and entered the Philadelphia College and Infirmary of Osteopathy. She was an intelligent woman and may have been eager for a new challenge --or there may have been financial considerations. In the April 1914 issue of the college’s newsletter there was an advertisement: “To the ambitious man or woman who aspires to a career of real helpfulness, and who wishes to dedicate his or her energies to the healing arts, there is no more promising field than that offered by the practice of osteopathy. A lucrative practice is assured to every conscientious and capable practitioner.”<sup>14</sup>

The College of Osteopathy offered a four-year program with a rigorous curriculum that included courses on the nervous system, obstetrics, anatomy, bacteriology, histology, dissection, mental diseases, and more. A class photograph shows her in the front row with six other women and thirteen men. On June 2, 1921, Edna graduated as Dr. Edna Morgan McKinney, Osteopathic Physician. Her business card informed clients that she was also “Therapeutically equipped to give all electrical modalities including Light Therapy.”<sup>15</sup>

As Edna was beginning her new profession, the Bahá’í community suffered a heartbreaking loss when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá passed away in November 1921. Only a month before His death, Annie McKinney had received a Tablet from Him: “One must not look at one’s own worth,’ He had told her, “but at the grace

and bounties of God....” He went on to say that the “...friends in Philadelphia are favorites at the threshold of His Holiness Baha’u’llah [...] the foul odor of violation has not reached the nostrils of the friend in Philadelphia.” Both Edna and Annie had received tablets from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá over the years including one that was sent to them upon the death of Effie McKinney Dixon in 1917: “Upon the death of Effie McKinney, I deeply grieve and have begged pardon and forgiveness at the Threshold of the Merciful; that she may abide and shelter under the shade of the Supreme Mercy and may in the invisible realm be immersed in the ocean of the bounties of the Merciful One.”<sup>16</sup>

During these years in Philadelphia, Edna kept up a lively correspondence with Horace Holley, the secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly. She sent him numerous suggestions to take to the Assembly: “I’m always hunting for work for other people to do. There is so much to be done and so few workers.” In response Horace Holley tells her: “Your letter is so full of meat that it will take at least half a dozen working committees to carry out your suggestions properly.”<sup>17</sup>

In June of 1925 Edna told Horace that her grandmother had passed away and that her mother, Annie, had cared for her for the past six years. At one point, she confides in him: “For so many years I was so busy talking about the Cause to others that I didn’t shut up long enough to let the Cause do anything to me and I need it more than most people.”<sup>18</sup> She may have gone on pilgrimage during these years as she mentions an invitation to Haifa. Harlan Ober also noted (in his recollection of Annie McKinney) that “Edna was an active worker and teacher in the Cause and later had the great bounty of a visit to Haifa.”<sup>19</sup>

When Edna and Effie had met with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá they had asked for healing. Both of them may have had chronic health problems. Effie had died in 1917 at the age of 29 and, in the 1920’s Edna’s correspondence mentions her own difficulties. In 1926, she received a note from Shoghi Effendi’s secretary: “Sorry to hear of your weakness.”<sup>20</sup> Two months later she wrote to Horace Holley: “...not feeling well.”<sup>21</sup> On December 22, 1927, Annie McKinney wrote to Horace Holley: “Dr Edna is in the Portsmouth Hospital—since Monday—but expected out in a few days [...] Mrs Gregory invited us to live with her til we left Eliot as Edna was not able to travel. I am still with Mrs Gregory”.<sup>22</sup> A month later, January 1928, Edna informed Horace Holley that she had been ill since she arrived. At some point, Edna and her mother had moved to Farmer Road in Eliot, Maine, not far from Green Acre.

Despite her weaknesses, Edna remained busy with Bahá’í activities. In 1927, a notice appeared in the November issue of the *Baha’i News Letter*: “For some time the friends have felt the need of some readily accessible Bahá’í calendar to coordinate the dates with those on the calendar in current use. This need has now been met by an admirably arranged ‘Perpetual Bahá’í Calendar’ designed by Dr. Edna M. McKinney and published with the approval of Shoghi Effendi.”<sup>23</sup> And, in August 1929, she attended the Third Annual Racial Amity Conference at Green Acre. There was a report on the conference in the 1928-1930 volume of *Bahá’i World* which noted that Edna “...illustrated the ties which bind all men together by the analogy of the atoms and their interdependence. Human interdependence is not a mere sentiment, it is a scientific and spiritual law. It is inescapable. We best commune with God when we love our fellow beings.”<sup>24</sup> Other attendees included Mary Maxwell, Louis Gregory, Agnes Parsons, and Stanwood Cobb.

On February 14, 1929, in what seems to be a very sudden and unexpected move, forty-eight-year-old Edna McKinney married Maine native Franklin C. Tibbetts. Fifty-two-year-old Tibbetts had been married before, had two grown children and was not a Bahá’í at the time of their meeting. He was a yoga lecturer and a chemist who did research in vitamins and minerals. In the fall of 1929, when the stock market had crashed and the country was suffering from unstable financial conditions, in what seems to be yet another sudden and unexpected move, the couple moved to Providence, Rhode Island, and set up a company that was listed as a health food business. The 1930 Providence city directory listed E. Morgan Tibbetts as manager of Laboratory Products Company.

There were no recorded Bahá’ís in Providence at that time and Edna and her mother, Annie, (who also moved to Providence) would have been pioneers to the city. Edna’s life must have been busy in these

months of 1930: a new husband, a new business, an aging mother, her own health issues, and her Bahá'í activities. In a note to the National Assembly informing of a change of address for the group in Providence, she writes that she will send news items later. But this new chapter of her life was to be her last. On October 5, 1930, Franklin Tibbetts sent the following note to Horace Holley:

*Dear Bahai Friend:*

*My wife, Dr. Edna Morgan (McKinney) Tibbetts passed away last night. Funeral Services at Carpenter and Jenkes 331 Elmwood Avenue on Tuesday at 2:00 pm.*

*Yours in Bahai Love,*

*Frank Tibbetts<sup>25</sup>*

Within a year after her move to Providence, Edna McKinney Tibbetts had died of endocarditis, an inflammation of the heart.<sup>26</sup> At the time of her death she was forty-eight-years-old. She was buried in the Pease family plat (the family of May H. Pease, an osteopathic physician who had been Edna's attending physician at the time of her death) at the New Pawtuxet Cemetery in Warwick, Rhode Island.<sup>27</sup>

### **IN MEMORIAM**

**Dr. Edna McKinney Tibbetts, for many years a devoted Bahá'í, departed this life October 4, 1930, and was buried at Providence, R. I., her late home, on October 7. Her funeral was attended by the little circle of attracted friends in Providence and by others who went from Boston, Portsmouth, N. H., and Haverhill. The floral tributes were beautiful and the simple Bahá'í service, consisting of the reading of Tablets and prayers and brief addresses was very impressive to friends and inquirers alike from its spiritual atmosphere.**

Bahá'í News. Nov 1930, 11

### NOTES:

Edna's mother, Annie McKinney, remained in Providence until her sudden accidental death on Christmas Day 1935, at the age of eighty-one.<sup>28</sup> A permit was issued to move her body to Eliot, Maine and her remains now lie in an unmarked grave in the Bahá'í plot in the Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Eliot across from those of Louis and Louisa Gregory.<sup>29</sup>

Edna's husband, Franklin Tibbetts, remained in Providence until the late 1940s. No records have been found of him being active in the Bahá'í community, which grew in Providence in the 1940s. He died in Portland, Maine, in 1964.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Maḥmūd's Diary: The Diary of Mīrzá Maḥmūd-i-Zarqání, Chronicling 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey to America*, Trans. Mohi Sobhani, with assistance of Shirley Macias, Oxford: George Ronald, 1998, 212.

<sup>2</sup> Harlan F. Ober, *Mrs. Annie. E McKinney*, National Bahá'í Archives, Harlan Ober Papers, M193, Box 18.

<sup>3</sup> Jessie and Ethel Revell, *In Memoriam: Mary J. Revell*, Bahá'í World v. IX; 1940-1944, 602.

<sup>4</sup> *Star of the West*, Vol. 5, No. 6, June 24, 1914. Bahá'í Library Online. [http://bahai-library.com/star\\_west\\_volume\\_1&chapter=16](http://bahai-library.com/star_west_volume_1&chapter=16), accessed Oct. 12, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Eliot Bahá'í Archives, Eliot Maine: McKinney Box.

<sup>6</sup> *Bahá'í News*, Vol. 1, Issue 7. [http://bahai.works/Bahai\\_News/Volume\\_1/Issue\\_7](http://bahai.works/Bahai_News/Volume_1/Issue_7), accessed Oct. 12, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> *Bahá'í News*, Vol. 1, Issue 16. [http://bahai.works/Bahai\\_News/Volume\\_1/Issue\\_16](http://bahai.works/Bahai_News/Volume_1/Issue_16), accessed Oct. 12, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> National Bahá'í Archives, Edna McKinney files, M-1/129 Box 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*; Wilmette, Ill: Bahá'í Pub Trust, 1982, xx.

<sup>12</sup> *Star of the West*, Vol. 4, Issue 8. [http://bahai.works/Star\\_of\\_the\\_West/Volume\\_4/Issue\\_8](http://bahai.works/Star_of_the_West/Volume_4/Issue_8), accessed Oct. 12, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> *Early History of Bahá'í Community, Boston Mass*, compiled by Anise Rideout, [http://bahai-library.com/rideout\\_history\\_community\\_boston](http://bahai-library.com/rideout_history_community_boston), accessed Oct. 12, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Graduating Class June 21. Philadelphia College of Osteopathy. *Osteopathic Digest* November 1951.

<sup>15</sup> Papers of Linda Ephraim, Rhode Island: Business card of Edna McKinney, Philadelphia, Undated.

<sup>16</sup> Eliot Bahá'í Archives, Eliot Maine: McKinney Box.

<sup>17</sup> National Bahá'í Archives. Secretary Files (individuals), 1924-1929. Edna McKinney files, M-1/129 Box 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Harlan Ober Papers, M193, Box 18.

<sup>20</sup> Eliot Bahá'í Archives, Eliot Maine: McKinney Box.

<sup>21</sup> National Bahá'í Archives. Edna McKinney files, M-1/129 Box 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Bahá'í News Letter*, No. 20. November 1927, 3-4. <http://www.bahai-news.com/viewer.erb?vol=01&page=1>, accessed Oct. 14, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Louis G. Gregory, *Racial Amity at Green Acre*, *The Bahá'í World*, vol. III, 1928-1930, 181.

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<sup>25</sup> National Bahá'í Archives. Edna McKinney files, M-1/129 Box 6.

<sup>26</sup> Providence, RI, City Archives: death certificate for Edna McKinney Tibbetts.

<sup>27</sup> Cemetery Log, Pease Family Plot, Pawtuxet Highland Cemetery Log, Pawtucket Memorial Park cemetery.

<sup>28</sup> Providence, RI, City Archives: death certificate for Annie McKinney.

<sup>29</sup> Cemetery Log, Bahá'í Plot, Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Eliot, Maine.

<sup>30</sup> Obituary of Franklin C. Tibbetts, *Maine Sunday Telegram*, April 5, 1964.

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