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Essay

The Other Hearst: The First Western Pilgrimage

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Abstract

Phoebe Apperson Hearst (1842–1919) was a woman of extraordinary wealth and influence whose philanthropy shaped education, social reform and opportunities for women. Much of her legacy is understood through what she deliberately achieved with her wealth: establishing institutions, supporting education and advancing the position of women. Yet alongside these achievements was a deeply curious woman with a love of travel and a desire to encounter people, places and ideas for herself, who found herself drawn into the emerging Bahá'í community at a formative moment in the Faith's early growth in the West.

This essay considers Hearst's life through the familiar lens of wealth, deliberate choices and social impact, tracing the enduring legacy of her reformist work. It then explores another strand whose significance has received less attention: her 1898–99 pilgrimage to Haifa and 'Akká, where she encountered 'Abdu'l-Bahá and a diverse group of fellow travellers, including her African American butler, Robert Turner. What if the pilgrimage is considered alongside her social reform—not as an alternative, but as another deliberate act whose less obvious repercussions may have extended far beyond the journey itself, perhaps even beyond what Hearst herself could have understood at the time?

Many people may have seen or at least heard of the acclaimed film *Citizen Kane*, directed and produced by Orson Welles in 1941. The film tells the story of a media tycoon—his media empire, political ambitions, lavish lifestyles and romantic scandals. Whilst not officially about William Randolph Hearst, it was clearly and unapologetically inspired by him, so much so that Hearst refused to allow any mention of it in his own newspapers.

William Hearst carefully built his reputation through both his career and personal life, though much of it stemmed from the wealth of his parents. In fact, even after his father passed away, William had to go through his mother to access his father's fortune, which had been made during the mining boom. At the time, William was 30 years old. While the Hearst name is most often associated with him, turning our attention to his mother, Phoebe Hearst, brings a different narrative to light—particularly for those familiar with education and social reform in the United States in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Reform does not always come from rebellion. Sometimes it comes from the quiet certainty of conviction and contributing to social discourse.

An interview in 1894 with the *Chicago Times*, entitled "Business Women, Take Notice", offers a revealing glimpse of Phoebe Hearst, whose genteel elegance concealed a remarkable force of character:

> No trace of her decided executive ability can be detected in Mrs Hearst's appearance. She has a kind, sweet face, with bright gray eyes. Her hair is dark and very slightly threaded with gray. Her voice is melodious, and her manner sympathetic. She dresses in excellent taste.

> Her gowns are stylish, yet not elaborate. The jewelry she wears is always in keeping with her costume.[1]

Phoebe Hearst was not seeking to overturn society but to improve it, acting on principles that had been deeply planted in her from an early age. During the Gilded Age, industrial expansion, and the struggle for women's rights she did not seek to tear down walls. Instead, she opened doors where she could, and where no door existed, she used her fortune to make one. Guided by conviction and armed with education, influence and wealth, Phoebe expanded opportunities for those whom society had too often left standing outside. Though shaped by the privileges of wealth and not immune to its limitations, her philanthropy consistently targeted the fault lines of her society with remarkable clarity. Unbeknownst to Phoebe, some of her more overt decisions—taken beyond the scrutiny of her peers and public persona—advanced her stated causes while also generating wider effects she did not fully recognise at the time, contributing in parallel to a pivotal moment within an emerging movement of spiritual renewal.

Phoebe Hearst was the wealthiest woman in California at one time, but her reputation did not only rest on wealth. It gave her a voice and a means to champion the advancement of women not through protest, but by expanding their access to education and financially empowering them to step into positions to contribute and influence. Such choices did not emerge suddenly; they were rooted in principles and experiences that had shaped her from an early age.

Early life and Family

Born in 1842, Phoebe spent much of her childhood on a rural farm in Missouri with hard-working parents, living as a family in a single storey log cabin. It was a period marked by reverence for religion, when women were expected to embody the ideals of what historians have called the "Cult of True Womanhood,"[2] a value system that trained women for domestic roles and defined them by a largely subservient nature. A woman was to have a strong moral position, but she was also considered to be physically and emotionally weak. Education was provided to enhance her domestic abilities. Thinking was deemed unfeminine.

Raised in the Cumberland Presbyterian faith, Phoebe was influenced early on by her parents' more progressive reformist beliefs. An only child for her first nine years, she received the education expected of a young lady, as well as the additional education typically reserved for a son. Phoebe took lessons from both her parents and spent most of her time with her father, becoming a skilled rider and learning to manage the books in her father's store. Capable of marrying well, she also possessed the skills and confidence needed for independence, and work ethics to fulfil both. By the time she was in her early teens she knew French and played the piano. By her late teens, she was a respected schoolteacher to the children of the workers at the Maramec Iron Works.

Born Phoebe Apperson, she had known George Hearst from childhood, the two having grown up in the same farming community. George left to seek his own fortune which resulted in him building a vast empire of mining companies. He was less educated than Phoebe, plain but of good character. His fortune came from his talent and knowledge of the land which was potentially learned from the Shawnee Indians.

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1 Judith Robinson, *The Hearsts: An American Dynasty* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1991)

2 Susan M. Cruea, 'Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement', *ATQ: 19th Century American Literature and Culture,* 19.3 (2005), pp. 187–204.

When Phoebe and George Hearst married, he was 42 and she was 19; though young, she was far from naïve. Her ambitions—to travel, to see the world, and to become more than a Missouri housewife—likely drew her to George Hearst. He could offer Phoebe the world. While she was more formally educated than George, he was wise and admired her intellect and maturity. They made a strong match. Though unaware of the full extent of George's wealth, Phoebe understood she was marrying someone who would support her desire to expand her horizons—particularly in promoting education and women's independence. Phoebe was both inspired and capable, and George recognized that and he provided the means for Phoebe to search for a life of consequence.

Social and economic progress at the time was mostly horizontal, experienced by a few. Economy and governance had a hierarchy. New technology, expanding transportation, a growing workforce, rich resources, and powerful business leaders were driving industry forward[3], yet not everyone was benefiting, and certainly women were experiencing the downside. Contributions of women were often overlooked in the late 1800s, and this marginalisation continues in many historical accounts about the time written, as the avenues through which progress is recognised and rewarded were largely reserved for men. Most attention that was given to women was more for their social activities, domesticity or fight for equality[4].

At the time of George's death in 1891, Phoebe was just 48 years old and was raising their only child, William Randolph Hearst. She had become well known and respected within the gilded circles of families such as the Carnegies and the Vanderbilts. She moved comfortably among them, a model of upper-class with refined taste and expensive interests—particularly in art collecting—but she was not defined or blind to the struggles of others. At the height of his political career, heavily funded by his fortune from his mining empire, Phoebe's husband was appointed to the U.S. Senate in 1886. Phoebe had become familiar with the limits and dark side of party politics and the harshness of the press that came with it. She chose instead to stay on the periphery, before and after George's passing, and later during her own son's political career. Instead, Phoebe was passionate about the importance of education, and she was very aware of her unusual, privileged position.

Fortune and Influence

After George Hearst's death, Phoebe Hearst became the sole beneficiary of a mining empire, while their 30-year-old son received little to none of the estate's direct control. Phoebe emerged as the principal steward of the Hearst wealth, and she rose to the challenge. Where many men either doubted her ability or attempted to take over seeing it unfit for a woman to be left to manage such a fortune, Phoebe kept a firm hold of both the affairs of business and personal finances.

Phoebe and Will had been very close. Up until his death, George was often away for both business and political reasons leaving Phoebe and Will as each other's companion. Phoebe introduced Will to her passions for travelling and art. Once he was old enough, Will began to explore the world for himself, drawn more to the attention, excitement, and pleasures that money could provide. He engaged with wealth in a markedly different way from his mother, moving beyond the confines of Gilded Age social circles and, perhaps, seeking to establish a reputation in

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[3] Peter Dobkin Hall, *The Organization of American Culture, 1700–1900: Private Institutions, Elites, and the Origins of American Nationality* (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

[4] Kathryn P. Hearst, 'Phoebe Apperson Hearst: The Making of an Upper-Class Woman, 1842–1919' (Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 2005). https://www.proquest.com/openview/d58e57920e5107a19f2a222fc3e8f645/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y [accessed 23 June 2026].

his own right. He associated with well-known figures, dabbled in politics, and invested in newspapers, often leaving Phoebe anxious about both his personal direction and the reputation of the family name as she heard and read rumours of Will's actions. However, at times he would still acknowledge or support his mother's causes, offering occasional gestures towards her philanthropic work and an understanding that women were capable equals.

In 1894 Will, as the owner of the *San Francisco Examiner*, handed over the forty-page Christmas issue to be entirely produced by women. Providing taxis and accommodation for the female journalists to keep them safe and rested, men were relegated to accompany rather than lead. The proceeds from the issue were donated to charities of the women's choosing.

Among the wealthy of the Gilded Age, industrial fortunes were often seen as evidence of divine favour, personal merit, or business genius, reinforcing beliefs in social Darwinism and a natural hierarchy in which success justified elevated social status, potentially even seeing the Hand of God as blessing them and their fortunes. Phoebe Hearst, however, adopted a different perspective: she viewed her fortune not as proof of superiority but as a responsibility to serve the public good, especially through education. After George Hearst's death, she channelled her wealth into initiatives supporting early childhood education, teacher training, and broader educational access for women and children, including racially and ethnically diverse communities.[5] Phoebe addressed the root causes of poverty through her deep concern for the education of children. She focused particularly on pre-school-aged children, having observed many poor children left unsupervised on the streets. Working collaboratively with others, she helped establish free kindergartens, which proved highly successful. In response to this success, teacher-training schools were also established for both Black and White students.[6] The movement spread from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. It also led to the creation of Mothers' Meetings, which were designed to provide support, practical skills training, and health education for mothers.[7] This represents the perfect example of Phoebe framing wealth less as a privilege to display and more as a responsibility to serve others, understanding both the struggles and the solutions.

Phoebe Hearst was also deeply involved in suffrage work, aligning herself with the more measured, reformist suffragists rather than the later militant tactics associated with suffragettes. The following quote by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a writer, feminist and lecturer at the time captures the mood of the movement well:

> Only as we live, think, feel, and work outside the home, do we become humanly developed, civilized, socialized.[8]

Phoebe was acutely aware of her own power and the influence her wealth and social position afforded her, which enabled her to secure roles on numerous boards and civic institutions. Her approach closely reflected what is now described as *civic feminism*—a form of activism centred on women's participation and leadership in public life through established social and political structures. Rather than direct confrontation, it emphasized practical engagement, institution-building, and policy influence to expand opportunities and improve conditions for women. For

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5 Alexandra M. Nickliss, *Phoebe Apperson Hearst: A Life of Power and Politics* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

6 Ibid.

7 Robinson, *The Hearsts: An American Dynasty*.

8 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Boston, MA: Small, Maynard & Company, 1898).

example, when Phoebe was a young mother herself, she had become a supporter of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), assisting it financially to provide lunch and reading rooms to shield girls and young women from the dangers of prostitution and correction. It did not push any religious agenda and it remained broadminded in its political position. As Phoebe became the largest donor after becoming a widow, her generosity opened doors for her to have a more meaningful association with the organisation and she would help promote its brand.

Phoebe also understood the power of the press. Long before the Hearst name became synonymous with newspapers, she had witnessed how the media could shape public opinion, influence politics, and build reputations. The late 1890s brought newspapers into big business[9]. Both her husband, George Hearst, and later her son, William Randolph Hearst, acquired newspapers not merely as businesses but as instruments of influence and expansion, often in fierce competition with rival publishers. Phoebe herself experienced both sides of this power. The Hearst family frequently found themselves the subject of political commentary and societal gossip, yet she also recognised that the press could be a force for good, using it at times to draw attention to her philanthropic work and the causes she championed.

The First Western Bahá'í Pilgrimage

The broader social reform movement in the United States in the late 19th century was accompanied by an increased religious fervour. With wealth and improved transportation came travel, both within the United States and outside, bringing more diversity and curiosity. On 11 September 1893, at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the first Parliament of the World's Religions convened, marking an early milestone in modern interfaith dialogue[10]. Although the gathering was dominated by Protestant Christian voices, it also included representatives of Buddhism, Judaism, and Hinduism, among others. One of its more significant moments was the introduction of the Bahá'í Faith to a Western audience. This came not through an official delegate, but via a paper by Henry H. Jessup[11], a missionary based in Syria who drew on the scholarship of Edward Granville Browne. In closing, Jessup quoted words attributed to Bahá'u'lláh, calling for unity, tolerance, and peace—sentiments that resonated strongly with Christian ideals of the time.

It is known that Phoebe Hearst attended the exposition, but unknown if she attended the Parliament of Faiths; however, given its prominence, it is possible she read about the Parliament of Religions, or even knew someone who was present. While the exact path is unclear, the ideas expressed that day—particularly the emphasis on unity and shared spiritual values—were part of a broader cultural current that would, in time, reach her.

Her official introduction to the Bahá'í teachings came from Edward and Lua Getsinger. They did not move in the same circles as Phoebe, but they knew of her; in fact, Edward had read about Pheobe in a paper, and was inspired to contact her directly in 1898. Up to this point, Phoebe had worked tirelessly for equality while operating within a social structure that largely resisted it. It is

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9 Monika Krause, 'Reporting and the Transformations of the Journalistic Field: US News Media, 1890–2000', *Media, Culture & Society,* 33.1 (2011), pp. 89–104.

10 For a contemporary account, see Barrows, J.H., *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893*. (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), vol. 1, https://ia902907.us.archive.org/15/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.178981/2015.178981.The-World-Parliament-Of-Religions-The-Columbian-Exposition-Of-1893-Volume-I_text.pdf [accessed 26/06/2026].

11 *The Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), 24 September 1893, p. 2, https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-inter-ocean-1st-newspaper-mention-ba/309755/ [accessed 23 June 2026].

not difficult to imagine that the spiritual and social principles at the heart of the Bahá'í Faith—still only some fifty years removed from its origins in the East—would have resonated deeply with her. Her introduction to these ideas helped reframe her commitment to equality, not simply as a social or political aim, but as a broader spiritual truth that transcended the limitations of her time.

Within a year of hearing about the teachings of this new Faith in 1899, Phoebe made a bold decision. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings spoke loudly in support of her own work: can it be true that a man in the East was advocating gender and race equality, unity and global harmony? Phoebe, ever the practical seeker of knowledge, truth, and the advancement of the oppressed, naturally resolved to travel and meet the source of these teachings for herself. She placed herself front and centre in organising, funding and inviting a group of 15 individuals. This was arguably the most impactful of Phoebe's projects. Fuelled by her thirst for knowledge, adventure and the desire to take others with her, she organised this journey within a month. She wanted to meet the personage who brought to life the words that spoke to her soul. It was not only the journey itself - California, to Paris, to Italy to Egypt to Palestine - Phoebe may have seen this as one of her adventurous trips, unafraid of the unknown, curious of the unseen, but what was actually happening may well have not been her own making. She was being guided by the hands of a greater plan, a calling from across the continent, the same that had brought the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to her. Phoebe organised the first Bahá'í Western Pilgrimage, without realising it.

The passengers that joined her were made up of 12 American women, one American man, one African American butler, and one Lebanese teacher. It was common practice for those entering the Faith to be lead in a 13-lesson course by the Lebanese teacher Ibrahim Kheirella. The group studied the course together, en route to their destination. Though the travellers consisted mainly of upper-class women, Phoebe brought along Robert Turner, her trusted African American butler. This arrangement was rare and would have defied typical expectations in elite travel circles, but Phoebe was not bound by social conventions. As this group left behind the familiar world of the United States, they were gradually loosened from former attachments; during their voyage, their engagement with the teachings deepened, and their circumstances turned their hearts increasingly toward the centre of the words they had come to follow.

The first group of Western pilgrims arrived in Haifa in small parties with the permission of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, arriving on 10 December 1898[12]. This occurred during a period when 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Bahá'ís remained under close surveillance by the Ottoman authorities, who viewed the community with suspicion and often regarded it as a potential political threat. Despite this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had earned local respect in 'Akká for his service to the poor and his reputation for wisdom and moral authority.

'Abdu'l-Bahá and His family had first arrived there as prisoners some thirty years earlier, and although the severity of confinement had eased over time, the Faith and its followers were still carefully monitored. In this context, the arrival of Western pilgrims marked a significant and historic milestone. For the Bahá'ís in the Haifa and 'Akká region, it was the first opportunity to meet Western believers—and, for some, their first encounter with Western visitors altogether. It stood as a powerful indication of the growing reach of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings beyond the Middle East.

Arriving in secrecy and relying entirely on interpreters due to barriers of language and culture, their presence carried profound meaning. Their visits were spread safely over days, and in small

[12] A full account of the pilgrimage can be found in Kathryn Jewett Hogenson, *Lighting the Western Sky: The Hearst Pilgrimage and the Establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in the West* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2010)

groups so as not to attract attention. But what a sight it must have been to the locals to observe these women in white, carrying themselves with grace and class from the docks, to the coffee houses, and finally into the presence of ʻAbdu'l-Bahá. To the local believers, the sight of these travellers was a breathtaking confirmation that the Faith had reached the West, embodied in an unexpected group of wealthy white women and her butler. Robert Turner, born into the legacy of slavery and newly acquainted with the Bahá'í teachings only months earlier, arrived in ʻAkká as the first African American believer[13].

It was in one of these meetings that Robert Turner became the focus. This pilgrimage was not just a visit, it was a turning point in which the Bahá'í principle of racial unity was brought to life. Initially Robert was not on this journey as a pilgrim but as a stoic, loyal butler to Phoebe, someone she had relied on after her husband's passing. Robert's first encounter with the Bahá'í teachings came not through deliberate inquiry but by chance, as he overheard conversations among Phoebe's guests while serving tea back in California. So when he accompanied the pilgrims on this epic voyage, he planned to retain the same position he was comfortable in, an employee in the background, attentive and silent. However, his position on this trip shifted as the boat set off from New York.

Phoebe made a point of inviting Robert into her circle of wealthy American women to hear and learn of the same spiritual truths. This was unusual at a time when racial segregation and discrimination, institutionalised through the infamous Jim Crow laws, were in full force. Imagine in this context reading words that spoke of equality of race and gender. Then, as he accompanied his companions to Akka, standing in the background as he always did, and hearing the voice of ʻAbdu'l-Bahá beckoning him forward to be in His presence. In this pivotal meeting, Robert Turner hesitated out of humility but soon obeyed allowing himself to take centre stage. There was no better way to understand equality than to witness ʻAbdu'l-Bahá's living example—a man who did not merely tolerate diversity, but actively embraced and showered everyone with love. This pilgrimage was no ordinary visit; it was the birthplace of a new social construct. ʻAbdu'l-Bahá praised Robert for his character and encouraged him to remain committed.

As the members of the pilgrimage group visited ʻAbdu'l-Bahá in small numbers, coming and going from Egypt, it was Lua and Edward Getsinger who were permitted and wanted to stay. They were in the company of the Holy family for three and a half months. Though Kheiralla, their guide and teacher of the Bahá'í faith, had been instrumental if not responsible for 10 cities in the United States having hundreds of people studying and declaring their beliefs in the Bahá'í Faith, this additional three and a half months was also a time for the Getsingers to clarify and understand key teachings of the Faith directly from ʻAbdu'l-Bahá, and in many cases learning that some of Kheiralla's interpretations and intentions were misleading the burgeoning community. ʻAbdu'l-Bahá confirmed that Kheiralla did not hold a position in the Faith, which he sought, and there would be no salary from the wealthy to support him, as he requested. With this disappointment and darkened ambitions, Kheiralla stirred disunity and further untruths back in America. The deepening of the Getsingers provided an antidote to the disunity in the community upon their return to America. They worked tirelessly with others to dispel Kheiralla's calumnies and thwart

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13 For more on the early African American Community, see Richard Hollinger, 'The Spread of the Bahá'í Faith among African Americans, 1898–1925', in *The Bahá'í Faith and African American Studies: Perspectives on Racial Justice*, ed. by Loni Bramson and Layli Maparyan (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), pp. 43–84.

his desire to be a leader himself, thus becoming instruments of unity acting directly on letters sent by ʻAbdu'l-Bahá to the American Bahá'ís.

Phoebe herself spent three days in Akka. She recorded her experience in letters written afterwards:

> It seems to me a real Truthseeker would know at a glance that He is the Master! Withal, I must say He is the Most Wonderful Being I have ever met or ever expect to meet in this world. The He does not seek to impress one at all, strength, power, purity, love and holiness are radiated from His majestic, yet humble, personality, and the spiritual atmosphere which surrounds Him and most powerfully affects all those who are blest by being near Him, is indescribable. His ideas and sentiments are of the loftiest and most chaste character, while His great love and devotion for humanity surpasses anything I have ever before encountered. I believe in Him with all my heart and soul, and I hope all who call themselves Believers will concede to Him all the greatness, all the glory, and all the praise, for surely He, is the Son of God—and "the spirit of the Father abideth in Him."
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> Regarding the Household, I found them all quiet, Holy people living only for the purpose of serving in the Cause of God. They dress very plainly, but with a grace that gives a sort of grandeur to their most humble abode. The purity of their morals is evident from their calm, benign and guileless faces which characterize them as a people. To become spiritually more and more like them, and like the blessed Master is my daily supplication unto God.[14]

These first-hand experiences, conveyed through Phoebe Hearst's own letters, were vital in reaching the grassroots of this emerging Faith. Rather than appealing for financial support or passive followers, the message called for committed individuals—champions of social change, religious renewal, and independent investigation. This vision deeply resonated with Phoebe, strengthening her resolve to advance women's independence, not only in securing the vote, but in expanding their meaningful participation in wider society and industry.

The pilgrimage gave context and a stage to the events already described, yet what followed would unfold with significance and far-reaching consequence. The waves of action, clarity and conviction that travelled back to the West, as well as the filling of the hearts, not only affected the United States, but also the new community of Bahá'ís in Europe.

Faith and Service

Phoebe had been inspired from a young age to be the independent woman, educated, of faith and with conviction, and her heart was ignited by ʻAbdu'l-Bahá and the teachings of the Faith, telling her that what she strived for were spiritual truths for all. Following the pilgrimage, Phoebe's philanthropic work did not change in passion. What seemed to shift was the emphasis on unity, moral education and bringing women more to the forefront of the progress of society.

Phoebe Hearst's commitment to women's advancement extended beyond funding education; she also created opportunities for women to apply their skills professionally. A striking example is her support of Julia Morgan, the first licensed female architect in California[15]. At a time when Julia

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[14] Phoebe A. Hearst, "Two Letters of Mrs. Phoebe A. Hearst", *The Bahá'í World*, 7 (1936–1938), pp. 801–02 (written 1899), https://bahai-library.com/hearst_two_letters_1899 [accessed 6 June 2026].

[15] For more on Julia's life, see Mark A. Wilson, *Julia Morgan: Architect of Beauty* (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2007).

Morgan—despite her exceptional ability as a draftsman—was often underpaid and overlooked because of her gender, Phoebe supported her career. Several of Julia Morgan's earliest and most important commissions came directly from or through Phoebe Hearst. Phoebe commissioned Julia Morgan early in her career to design additions to her Hacienda del Pozo de Verona home. Phoebe included her on significant projects, for example the Hearst Memorial Mining Building in memory of Phoebe's husband and institutional buildings, like the Hearst Hall for Women, University of California, Berkley. Morgan also worked on the University of California campus plan funded and championed by Phoebe. Julia Morgan would later go on to work on Hearst Castle with Phoebe's son, William. This patronage illustrates how Phoebe's influence operated in a practical and transformative way: not through overt protest, but by deliberately elevating qualified women into positions of authority and visibility, helping shift them from the margins into professional prominence.

Furthering her earlier work with the YWCA, Phoebe wanted to transform her own property into a conference centre, opening up her Hacienda dwelling. The 1912 Hacienda conference was an elite-leaning but forward-looking YWCA training retreat supported by Phoebe Hearst, focused on preparing women for leadership and service. It reflected Progressive Era ideals by treating education not just as academic instruction, but as leadership training rooted in moral and civic development through structured learning, discussion, and reflection. The conference also aimed to strengthen women's roles in public life through organised institutions, encouraging cooperation and social responsibility among those engaged in reform movements. While it showed early movement towards broader inclusion and social diversity, it still operated within the constraints of its time and was not fully multicultural or interfaith in the modern sense[16].

There are numerous examples of Phoebe Hearst's influence and the sustained force for good she embodied throughout her life—across education, philanthropy, and the advancement of women within society. Yet among these, one decision stands apart for its enduring historical and spiritual significance. In choosing to organise and fund the first Western Bahá'í pilgrimage, Phoebe moved beyond advocacy within established structures and helped catalyse a moment of profound transformation. This initiative may also be understood, from within a Bahá'í interpretive framework, as a response to a deeper spiritual summons associated with 'Abdu'l-Bahá—one in which Phoebe Hearst functioned less as an independent agent and more as an instrument through which a wider, divinely oriented purpose was realised. This journey was not simply an act of personal devotion, an adventure, but a bridging of worlds—linking East and West, privilege and humility, principle and lived experience. It brought into vivid reality the ideals she had long pursued: unity across race, gender, and class, expressed not in theory but in action. Through this act, Phoebe Hearst's legacy was not only one of reform within her own society, but of participation in a wider, global movement—one that affirmed the spiritual foundations of the equality she had spent her life striving to advance.

Phoebe Hearst understood the boundaries of society. She was not a rebel, but she did question and want to be a part of reform. She went right up to those boundaries, partly to understand them, but also to be seen by those on the other side. She did not seek power for its own sake, yet in an era when wealth conferred both influence and status, she also earned respect through her education and her capacity for independent, critical thought. This intellectual foundation informed her efforts to understand the social ills and inequalities of her time and to pursue practical, action-based remedies. The pilgrimage ultimately drew Phoebe Hearst closer to her calling, affirming both

[16] Nickliss, *Phoebe Apperson Hearst: A Life of Power and Politics*, pp. 331-335

her philanthropic mission and the steady process through which she sought to align faith with meaningful social reform - an influence whose effects continued to echo well beyond her own lifetime.

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Author biography

Katherine Lee holds an MSc, with a background in Organizational Psychology, exploring how inner conditions shape our workplaces, form the foundations of culture, values and results in pro-social behaviour. She is currently a Safety Coordinator and Research Culture Consultant in the Department of Physics at the University of Cambridge, supporting inclusive and responsible research environments. Alongside this work, she dabbles in screenwriting and studies figures such as Phoebe Hearst. She has a fascination with the human story and human capacity, finding the extraordinary within the ordinary. This curiosity drives both her work and her storytelling, exploring transformation and the unseen forces that shape us through narrative.