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Research Note

History of the Corinne True Center

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Abstract

The Corinne True Center for Bahá'í History was established as an agency of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States in January 2024, in response to a perceived need for an institution dedicated to the study of Bahá'í history, texts, and thought, after the Wilmette Institute reoriented its mission towards social transformation. This research note describes the Center's origins, the reasoning behind its name and scope, and the development of its infrastructure. It then surveys the Center's subsequent initiatives, including a book club of more than 325 members, Arabic and Persian language courses, conferences at Green Acre Bahá'í School, a university symposium at Binghamton, and the forthcoming online series *Mirrors: Studies in Bahá'í History, Texts, and Thought*.

The Corinne True Center developed out of the perceived need to strengthen and systematize the study of Bahá'í history, defined broadly. After the Universal House of Justice issued its 2013 letter[1] to the Canadian National Spiritual Assembly about goals and direction that the Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS) for North America should pursue, the ABS increasingly turned its attention to issues related to social transformation, which was the focus of the House of Justice's letter.

Before 2013, the Wilmette Institute[2] was a core institution focusing on both history and social transformation. However, after that letter came out, and after the staff of the Institute studied a letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia about the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre for Learning[3]—which encouraged that analogous institution to focus on preparing the Bahá'ís for social action and public discourse—the Wilmette Institute also decided that it had to focus on those areas. With the steady expansion of the Institute's staffing to include several persons who had doctoral degrees in Education and a deep personal commitment to developing the community through the core activities of children's classes, junior youth programmes, study circles and devotional gatherings, the Wilmette Institute began to orient its mission statement, purpose, and learning outcomes to social transformation. This made attention

1 Universal House of Justice, letter addressed to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada dated 24 July 2013 https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20130724_001/1#762007903 [accessed 7 August 2026].

2 Website available at https://wilmetteinstitute.org/ [accessed 7 August 2026].

3 Universal House of Justice, letter addressed to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia dated 4 January 2009. Available in *Messages from the House of Justice 2001-2022: The Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age* (Evanston IL: Bahá'í Publishing), pp. 242-246 https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/muhj-2001-2022/muhj-2001-2022.pdf?baeb0d92 [accessed 7 August 2026]. For more information on the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre for Learning, see their website https://bcly.bahai.org.au/ [accessed 7 August 2026].

to Bahá'í history, texts, and thought considerably less important; indeed, some Institute staff questioned why the Institute should be offering courses on such topics at all.

As a result, there was a felt need to create a separate institution that would continue supporting Baha'i history, texts, and thought. In August 2023, with his time as Director at the Wilmette Institute drawing to a close, Robert Stockman met with Kenneth Bowers, secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, about the creation of an entity to continue the work. They agreed on a mission statement: "to foster the study of Bahá'í history, Bahá'í sacred texts, Bahá'í philosophical and theological concepts, and world religions from a Bahá'í and comparative perspective."[4] It was agreed that while a private entity certainly could be established to focus on this area, an agency of the National Spiritual Assembly could also be created for that purpose. It was best to avoid the word "institute" so as not to cause confusion with the Wilmette Institute. "Center" seemed to be the best alternative. But what should its area of interest be called? The term "Bahá'í Studies" could raise the question of why the Association for Bahá'í Studies wasn't sufficient. Furthermore, the Universal House of Justice had been discouraging its use when endowed chairs focusing on the Faith were set up[5]. Consequently, it was decided to use the term "Bahá'í history," defined in as broad a way as possible. "History" implies development of a community over time, and development involves more than people and actions; it also involves discourse, commentary, research, and publishing. In other words, "history" in a very broad sense can encompass topics such as Bahá'í theology, philosophy, commentary on Baha'i texts, and study of world religions. That was the rationale for using the term "Bahá'í history" and avoiding the term "Bahá'í Studies."

The term "Center" and the phrase "Bahá'í history" constituted only half of the name. Ultimately, we decided to name it for Corinne True (1861-1961), the Hand of the Cause of God, who was central to the effort to build the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois. She is often called the "mother of the Temple," but she is also known for having been the host of regular deepening sessions about the Bahá'í Faith in her home for decades. The study of the Bahá'í revelation was very dear to Mrs. True's heart. Consequently, naming the Center for her seemed particularly appropriate. The full name "Corinne True Center for Baha'i History" was approved by the National Spiritual Assembly in mid-January 2024, along with the mission statement and the membership of its Executive Committee. The National Assembly added one caveat: the Center should focus on serving the Bahá'í community and could turn to serving the academic community only with the National Spiritual Assembly's permission.

As Robert Stockman had been intimately connected with the development of many of the Wilmette Institute's programs and had learned the software that made them possible, it was possible for him to set up the Corinne True Center very quickly. Much of the software the Wilmette Institute was using was also used by other agencies of the National Spiritual Assembly, such as the *Cvent* registration system, which was immediately available for registering students for online courses and collecting their payments, as was *Constant Contact*, used by most of the agencies of the National Spiritual Assembly to send out newsletters. Within ten days of the National

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4 As stated on the Centre's website https://corinnetruecenter.org/ [accessed 7 August 2026].

5 A senior academic position funded by a permanent gift or endowment that supports the position in perpetuity, several universities have established endowed chairs specifically for the study of the Bahá'í Faith, including the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, USA, the Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore, India, and the Chair for Bahá'í Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel.

Spiritual Assembly's decision, it was possible to put out the Center's first newsletter and announce its first course.

The Center also needed a website. After consulting with some experts, a particular company was contacted via its web texting system, and in less than an hour, the Corinne True Center had its own website with its name,[6] *WordPress* software, and *Moodle* course delivery software. Since the *Moodle* software was identical to the systems that the Wilmette Institute and the Graduate Theological Union had been using, courses could be imported into it in a few minutes, ready to be modified and used. The Wilmette Institute had been offering courses for graduate credit on Baha'i history, texts, and theology to GTU's graduate students, and those courses now came to the Center as well. The Center also obtained *Zoom* for its courses and *Streamyard* for its webinars.

All of those services—a newsletter, a website, webinars, and online courses— were ones the Wilmette Institute had already been offering, and within a month all were ongoing. An unexpected development occurred when Gisu Mohadjer contacted Robert Stockman and proposed that the Center offer a book club that would involve reading a different biography or history every month. That service began two months later and has been very successful. Currently, the book club has more than 325 members and they can receive 10% discounts to purchase books from the U.S. Bahá'í Publishing Trust and George Ronald.

The Center pursued several new initiatives. One was offering courses to teach the Arabic and Persian languages. The purpose of the courses was not to raise up new translators of the Writings because the number of hours of study that such an effort would involve exceeded the resources of the Center; rather, it was to help Bahá'ís acquire a basic grasp of the two languages so that they could look words up in dictionaries and gain a sense for the technical meanings of the words. To date, about 100 people have taken courses in Arabic and Persian. In addition to Arabic I, II, and III, the Center is now offering an Arabic reading course.

The Center has gradually expanded its capacity to support the academic study of the Faith. In 2024 it offered a panel on Bahá'í history at the Association for Bahá'í Studies North America's annual conference. In June of 2025 it sponsored a weekend-long conference at Greenacre Bahá'í School. This conference had fourteen speakers and was attended by some 65 people. A second conference was held June 5-7, 2026, and was equally successful.

The inaugural Greenacre conference gave the Corinne True Center confidence that it could offer a similar kind of program at a university, and with the National Spiritual Assembly's permission it held a symposium on Bahá'í history at Binghamton University of the State University of New York on April 10, 2026. The symposium had eight speakers arranged in four panels of two speakers each. Each panel had a Binghamton University faculty member as the chair. Twenty faculty and students attended, and interest in expanding study of the Faith at the university was expressed. The Center plans to continue offering symposia at universities in order to bring Bahá'í history and thought into the realm of public discourse.

The Center's newest initiative is the publication of an online series tentatively titled *Mirrors: Studies in Bahá'í History, Texts, and Thought*. The National Spiritual Assembly of the United States has approved three co-editors and an editorial advisory board of nearly 20 Bahá'ís who are active in academia or who have published significant works on the Faith. The first volume will probably appear towards the end of 2026. It will be published using *BE Press*, which is a common journal publishing software system. The series has prompted a proposal to the National Spiritual Assembly

[6] See footnote 4

to broaden the subtitle of the Corinne True Center to "for Baha'i History, Texts, and Thought," which better matches its mission statement.

As it looks towards the future, the Corinne True Center aims its services to reach three different audiences. One is an academic audience, which is the smallest and most specialized. The largest audience is the rank and file of the Bahá'í community and their friends who want to study Bahá'í history, texts, and thought more deeply through the discussion of books, watching webinars, and attending online courses. The middle group consists of Bahá'ís who wish to get more deeply engaged in Bahá'í scholarship but have neither the training nor the time to do work at the academic level. For those Bahá'ís, the Center offers more advanced online courses, webinars on more difficult topics, and the opportunity to present their work at the annual Green Acre conference. For the Bahá'í community's continued development, all three audiences are important and must be addressed. The vision of the Corinne True Center is to continue developing ways to serve all of them.

Author biography

Robert H. Stockman obtained his doctorate in history of religion in the United States from Harvard University. He is the author of four books of Bahá'í history, one introductory textbook on the Faith, a booklet about the Bahá'í Faith and nonviolence, and various articles on Bahá'í history and theology. He also edited *The World of the Bahá'í Faith,* a 51-chapter survey of the Faith published by Routledge. He was Director of the Wilmette Institute 2000-2022 and currently is Director of the Corinne True Center for Bahá'í History. He is an instructor of religious studies at Indiana University South Bend.