

Sebastian, William Henry (1871–1962)

DEWITT S. WILLIAMS

DeWitt S. Williams, Ed.D. (Indiana University) lives in Maryland after 46 years of denominational service. He pastored in Oklahoma, served as a missionary in the Congo (Departmental and Field President), and Burundi/Rwanda (President, Central African Union). He served 12 years in the General Conference as Associate Director in both the Communications and Health and Temperance Departments. His last service was Director of NAD Health Ministries (1990-2010). He authored nine books and numerous articles.

William Henry Sebastian, a pioneer of the black Adventist work, joined the work of the Southern Missionary Society led J. Edson White in 1900, and later ministered in the Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia conferences.

Early Life (1871-1899)

William Henry Sebastian was born in Marietta, Pennsylvania, September 28, 1871, to William Franklin and Missouri Sebastian. He had four sisters; two older – Jane and Amanda, and two younger – Annie and Mary.¹ His father served several years in the U.S. Colored Infantry during the Civil War and raised his family in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church.²

In 1896, William, now 24 and living in Washington, D.C., purchased *Bible Readings for the Home Circle*, *Eden to Eden*, *Hymns and Tunes*, *Early Writings*, and *Gospel Workers*. He had a great desire to learn more about the Bible. After reading and studying these books William became a Seventh-day Adventist. In Washington he met Dr. J. H. Howard, a staunch Seventh-day Adventist, who encouraged him to go to Battle Creek College and prepare for the ministry. William so impressed an English woman living in Washington – a Catholic lady who became acquainted with him through a cousin – that she gave him \$75 to purchase a railroad ticket to Battle Creek, Michigan to attend college. After he began his studies in 1898, this same lady sent him several checks while he was there to pay for his tuition and to support him.³

Early Ministry (1900-1920)

The early ministry of William Sebastian was very productive but poor health limited his accomplishments in later years. In 1900, J. Edson White, who had sailed down the Mississippi river in the steamer *Morning Star* to take the message of Christ to the black people in the South, visited Battle Creek and invited Sebastian to join the work as a Bible instructor and teacher in Yazoo City, Mississippi.⁴

The work of the Southern Missionary Society under White's direction in had flourished in Mississippi. This success stirred a reaction from white Mississippians who became increasingly concerned about Adventist efforts to improve the condition of blacks in that area. The white youth of Yazoo City, no doubt reflecting their parents' attitudes, began to taunt F. R. Rogers, the white teacher at the Lintonia Adventist School, whenever they spotted him walking down the main street of the city. The brazen adolescents took pleasure in grabbing Rogers' coattails while simultaneously chanting the maligned phrase, "Nigger lover! Nigger lover!" At other times they pelted him with brickbats.⁵

Seeing that Rogers' personal safety was at risk Edson White searched for qualified black teachers to replace him. The *Gospel Herald* reported the change:

This fall the school at this place (Lintonia, a suburb of Yazoo City) was begun with colored teachers. M.C. Strachan as principal, W.H. Sebastian and one assistant as the teachers. The schools in the Cotton Belt never open with large numbers, as many of the children are in the cotton fields until after the holidays; but the membership in this school is



W. H. Sebastian
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larger than it ever has been at this season of the year. From reports received, we judge that the membership is nearly 90, and the attendance about seventy. We expect this to be largely increased when the cotton picking season is over. An interesting work is being done in this suburb of Yazoo City; plans are being laid to bring in some industrial work as soon as the Society is able to do it. A bakery can be established without large expense.⁶

Work was difficult in Mississippi and Sebastian contracted malaria several times and suffered many brain seizures. While working in Vicksburg, Mississippi, J. Edson White called Sebastian and the other black workers of the Southern Missionary Society together to visit his mother on the *Morning Star* that was docked in the lake. Ellen White had just returned from Australia and remained in California for some months until, in the spring of 1901, she came east to attend the General Conference of 1901. With her son, W. C. White, her secretaries, and several others she stopped to see Edson and spoke at the dedication of a new church and school building. In later years Sebastian would often fondly remember Ellen G. White's talks and the pleasant smile and words of encouragement that she had for the gospel workers as she urged them to continue working in that difficult field.⁷

Sebastian was threatened and even shot at several times. He often thanked God for preserving his life while he did pioneering work going from house to house in Mississippi.

I have been close to death's door many times. I have gone to the limit of my strength and have borne great taxing burdens and have been called to look after more than one apostasy. God has blessed my labors in establishing church schools. The condition of my health grew worse under the taxing labor.⁸

In 1902 Sebastian was ordained to the gospel ministry in Nashville, Tennessee.⁹ He was a prolific writer and early church papers often carried stories that Sebastian wrote about his work and his faith.

While working in Vicksburg (1903), William married Georgia French, a nurse from Ohio that he had met at Battle Creek College.¹⁰ They partnered in ministry until her untimely death in the early 1910s.¹¹

In 1906 Sebastian was called to the Georgia Conference to be the first pastor of a small group in Atlanta, Georgia.¹² This church, later called Berean, is now the largest African American church in the state. Sebastian was later called to Decatur, Alabama, to Dayton, Ohio, then to several places in Virginia – Lynchburg, Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Danville.¹³ In all of these places he conducted tent efforts, gave Bible studies and began the first colored Adventist church of the area.

Later Life (1921-1962)

The condition of his health continued to deteriorate while he was at Danville, Virginia, and in 1921, because of illness and several attacks of brain fever, Sebastian was placed on early sustentation at age 49.¹⁴ With rest and medical care his health improved somewhat and he married Lula Bennett Green (born September 1, 1879) in December, 1922.¹⁵

Elder Sebastian took every opportunity that he had to recount his wonderful experiences in hearing and seeing Sister White and playing "The Old Rugged Cross" on his handsaw. He and his wife continued, in a less taxing way, to do outstanding work in sharing their faith by distributing literature, engaging in Harvest Ingathering, visiting the sick, witnessing and other missionary work. After he fully retired in 1947, the Sebastians moved to his hometown of Marietta, Pennsylvania in 1948 and finally to Pine Forge, Pennsylvania in 1956.¹⁶

William Henry Sebastian died November 2, 1962 at age 91 and is buried next to his parents in the Bethel A.M.E. gravesite in Marietta, Pennsylvania.¹⁷

SOURCES

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NOTES

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