

# Tay, John Ives (1831–1892) and Hannah (Severens) (1844–1923)

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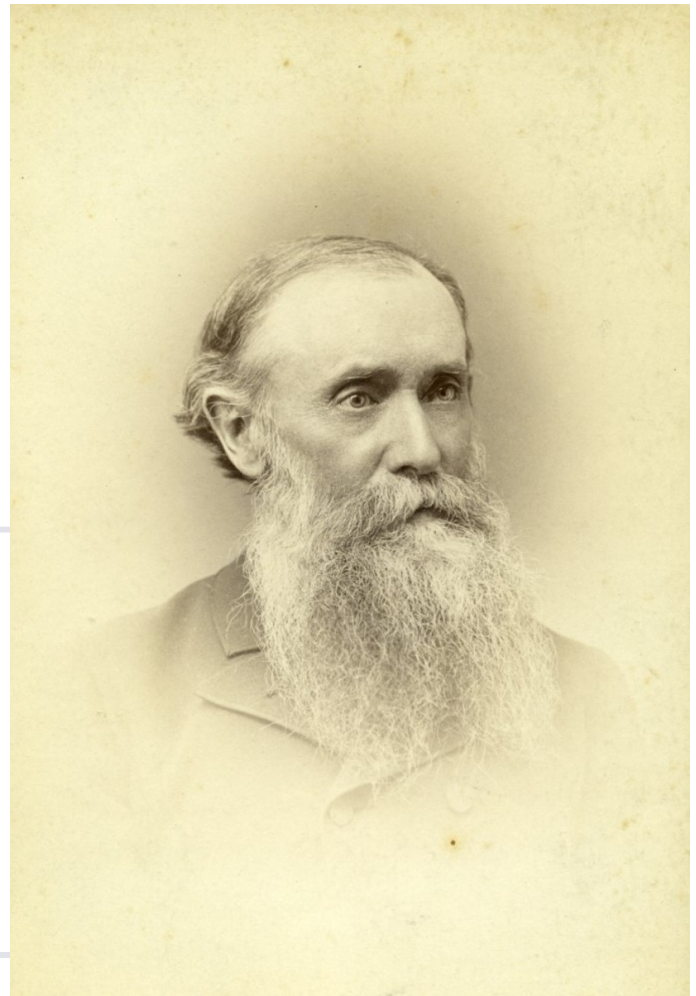
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John Ives Tay was a carpenter, machinist, and inventor. Hannah Tay was a seamstress. Together they served as pioneer Adventist missionaries across the Pacific Ocean.

## Early Lives and Conversion to Adventism

John was born February 1, 1831, in Chelmsford, Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> He was the oldest of the three children born to Captain Benjamin Tay Jr. (1805-1870) and Hannah, neé Larkom (b. 1809).<sup>2</sup> At the age of 16, he sailed on his father's ship bound for India.<sup>3</sup> Upon his departure his mother gave him a Bible and a copy of *The Mutiny on the Ship Bounty*. He next appears in the 1850 Census record as living with his family in Salem, Massachusetts; by 1860 he was working as a carpenter. During the American Civil War, he served as a ship hand on board the *USS Ohio* and *USS Housatonic*. At the end of the war, he was discharged as an Ordinary Seaman.<sup>4</sup>

Hannah was born with her twin sister, Mahittable (who went by "Mittie"), on September 8, 1844, in Woburn, Massachusetts. Her parents were Urial (1811-1904) and Mary Jane Hall (1818-1907). John and Hannah wed on



John I. Tay

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

June 21, 1866, and later moved west to California. Here in 1869 John patented a system for hanging window shades,<sup>5</sup> and two years later another patent for improving curtain fixtures.<sup>6</sup> John became a salesman and repairer of sewing machines.<sup>7</sup> J. N. Loughborough described how John became acquainted with Adventism:

His attention was first called to the message by looking over and reading the prophetic chart in the shoe shop of Brother J. W. Conkrite, while the latter was repairing Brother Tay's shoes. Brother Cronkrite had the chart hanging back of his shoe bench, so that the people might look at it while he was doing their work. If they wished further light, he had the reading matter at hand for them in the drawer of his shoe bench.<sup>8</sup>

A few weeks later in 1873, John, along with his wife, Hannah, and her twin sister, Mittie, became Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>9</sup>

The next year John represented the not yet fully organized Oakland congregation, at the first session of the California State Conference.<sup>10</sup> In 1875 John was part of a committee of five to provide supervision and support to the construction of a new publishing house, soon to be dubbed, Pacific Press.<sup>11</sup> He was one of the five signers of the articles of incorporation on April 1, 1875.<sup>12</sup> He put his personal funds behind the project donating \$25.<sup>13</sup> He also was active as part of the California Tract and Missionary Society.<sup>14</sup> The Tays had a heart for mission giving \$50 in 1878 to assist with the newly started British Mission.<sup>15</sup> On May 11, 1880, John, always innovative and creative, patented another invention, the mechanical stairway-elevator.<sup>16</sup> He also served in his local Oakland church congregation serving as both a deacon and church treasurer in 1883.<sup>17</sup>

## Pioneer Missionaries

John's childhood dream of visiting Pitcairn was reignited through his friendship with a sea captain who had recently visited Pitcairn and talked to him about the people there.<sup>18</sup> In 1886, he decided to travel to Pitcairn Island to do missionary work. He sailed on the *Tropic Bird* from San Francisco on July 1 and arriving in Tahiti on July 29. That October he secured passage on the British man-of-war *Pelican* and arrived October 18, 1886.<sup>19</sup> The magistrate protested that John could not stay, but after an island assembly the next morning, the islanders voted to have him stay. The earliest recounting states that:

Bro. John I. Tay . . . established his headquarters at Papaete, a city of Tahiti, one of the Society Islands, and from that place he visits neighboring islands as opportunity presents. From time to time we have had encouraging news of the success that has attended his efforts; but a private letter received by the last mail from America brings the best news of all. Bro. Tay had spent a month or two on Pitcairn Island, and as the result of his labors, all the inhabitants of the island, 110, including children, had commenced to keep the Sabbath of the Lord. Bro. Tay made a favorable impression on the captain of the man of war on which he made the voyage, and the captain introduced him to the head man of the island as a man whom the Lord had sent to them. As a consequence, he was warmly welcomed, and listened to without prejudice. The men all signed the covenant to

keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus, and Bro. Tay writes for a minister to come down there and organize a church.<sup>20</sup>

In a later account, W.A. Spicer cites a diary as evidence, that on October 30, 1886, the entire church on Pitcairn Island “unanimously kept the seventh-day Sabbath of the Lord our God.”<sup>21</sup> Five weeks later John returned on the yacht, *General Evans*. This initial visit garnered interest among Adventists in sending missionaries to Pitcairn and to other islands in the Pacific Ocean. Around this time, John developed a process for canning unfermented grape juice, perhaps in order to transport it back with him to the mission field for the celebrating the Lord’s Supper.<sup>22</sup>

When the General Conference Committee met in April 1888, they decided to send Tay back with Elder Andrew J. Cudney (1854-1888) to Pitcairn Island. Cudney left May 20, 1888, on the bark *Sonoma* for Honolulu. Tay traveled directly to Tahiti (for the second time) on the *Tropic Bird* intending to meet Cudney there. While in Hawaii, Cudney bought the *Phoebe Chapman* at an auction for \$1,000. It could accommodate ten people in addition to the crew and left Honolulu on July 31, 1888. Cudney intended to pick up Tay in Tahiti. Tay had left San Francisco July 5, 1888 and arrived in Tahiti on August 8. Tay waited in Tahiti for six months for Cudney, but he never arrived. In a letter, Tay wrote:

After three months had passed, having heard that Brother Cudney had bought a vessel and was fitting her up, I met a man who had come from Honolulu, who described the vessel to me. He said a house had been built on the main deck for the missionaries to live in. The vessel had sand for ballast and was loaded with furniture. When I learned these particulars concerning the vessel I concluded that it was very unsafe. Having waited in vain for six months I decided to return to my home in Oakland.<sup>23</sup>

Later, thanks to missionary offerings, a new vessel was built dubbed *The Pitcairn*. This missionary schooner was more robust. A new group of missionaries traveled on the new ship in search of Cudney and his lost ship and to do missionary work among the people living at Pitcairn Island. John was “enthusiastic” about the new missionary vessel.<sup>24</sup> He utilized his carpentry expertise and background as a sailor to “superintend the construction” of it.<sup>25</sup> The vessel cost \$18,000 and could accommodate up to 30 people. The Tays, under Captain J. M. Marsh (1855-1892), along with Edwin H. (1855-1940) and Ida (1861-1946) Gates and Albert J. (1863-1929) and Hattie (1862-1900) Read set sail from San Francisco on October 20, 1890.<sup>26</sup> They arrived at Pitcairn on November 25 and soon baptized 82 believers.<sup>27</sup> They next proceeded to Suva, Fiji, where Hannah and John Tay were dropped off to do missionary work. Tragically, John died from influenza on January 8, 1892. He was buried in Fiji.<sup>28</sup>

After her husband’s death, Hannah traveled to Australia.<sup>29</sup> Then, on August 8, 1892, she returned on the steamer *Monowai* to her home in Oakland, California.<sup>30</sup> She subsequently lived near family. The 1920 census lists her as living with her widowed sister, Mittie.<sup>31</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Massachusetts, Vital Town Birth Records, 1620-1850, database accessed from Ancestry.com [2/15/23]. John Tay's gravestone has 1834 as Tay's birth year (see More Photos). However, 1831 is supported by several more reliable sources: 1) the U.S. vital records for Massachusetts, which has a record of Tay's birth on February 1, 1831, and 2) the U.S. Census Records (cf. 1860, 1870, etc.). For other sources, see the Ancestry genealogical tree created by Michael Campbell [here](#).
2. For detailed genealogical information, see: <http://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/tools/tree/189197579/invitees/accept?inviteId=51eb04b1-1dd8-416c-b124-ae6bfa55bad6> [accessed 2/15/23].
3. See biographical information in J. O. Corliss, "The Pacific Islands as a Mission Field: How the Third Angel's Message was Carried to Pitcairn," *ARH*, February 14, 1888, 102-103; W. M. Clemens, "The Missionary Ship," *The Meriden Daily Journal*, July 2, 1891, 2.
4. Massachusetts Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines in the Civil War, vol. VIII, 753. Database accessed from Ancestry.com [2/15/23].
5. <https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/9f/a4/1b/6e05ccfc97da24/US97726.pdf> and <https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/80/8a/4a/172c1cca04eabe/US97727.pdf> [accessed 2/15/23]. Special thanks to Kevin M. Burton for bringing these patents to my attention.
6. <https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/2b/73/08/1d7080438f4415/US116929.pdf> [accessed 2/15/23].
7. J. N. Loughborough, "The Prophetic Spirit," *Bible Training School*, February 1918, 182-183. An advertisement for Wheeler & Wilson sewing needles appears in the *Oakland Tribune*, May 8, 1877, 2, noting he was located at 965 Broadway. Later, advertisements for repair of sewing machines appeared in the *Oakland Tribune*, February 8, 1886, 1. The advertisement reported that repairs were done at 729 Twelfth Street and that Mrs. Tay made buttonholes by hand.
8. J. N. Loughborough, "Fishers of Men," *Pacific Union Recorder*, September 28, 1916, 2-3.
9. Tay's name appears under "Receipts" in *ARH*, September 2, 1873, 96; see also *ARH*, December 23, 1873, 16.
10. "Proceedings of Cal. State Conference," *ARH*, November 10, 1874, 158; *Signs of the Times*, October 22, 1874, 63.
11. [James White], "The Present and Future," *Signs of the Times*, February 25, 1875, 124.
12. "Articles of Incorporation of the 'Pacific Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association,'" *Signs of the Times*, April 8, 1875, 176.
13. "California Publishing Fund," *Signs of the Times*, May 27, 1875, 232.
14. "Annual Meeting of the California Tract and Missionary Society," *Signs of the Times*, September 12, 1878, 266.
15. "British Mission," *Signs of the Times*, October 2, 1879, 296.

16. <https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/a5/fa/61/c49927d96b40cf/US227459.pdf> [accessed 2/15/23].
17. "Last Sabbath in Oakland," *Signs of the Times*, March 8, 1883, 120.
18. "Dedication of the 'Pitcairn,' and the First Voyage," *The Church Officers' Gazette*, January 1914, 14.
19. J. O. Corliss, "The Pacific Islands as a Mission Field: How the Third Angel's Message was Carried to Pitcairn," *ARH*, February 14, 1888, 102-103.
20. "Among the South-Sea Islands," *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, March 1887, 43.
21. W. A. Spicer, "In Other Lands," *Youth Instructor*, February 7, 1911, 14.
22. J. I. Tay, "Unfermented Wine," *Pacific Health Journal and Temperance Advocate*, December 1889, 374-375.
23. W. M. Clemens, "The Missionary Ship," *The Meriden Daily Journal*, July 2, 1891, 2.
24. See note in *Signs of the Times*, December 9, 1889, 752.
25. W. C. W[hite], "Our Missionary Ship," *ARH*, August 19, 1890, 501.
26. M. C. Wilcox, "The Dedication of the Missionary Ship," *ARH*, October 14, 1890, 636-637.
27. L. Flora Plummer, "The Ship 'Pitcairn'," *The Church Officers' Gazette*, April 1916, 8, 9.
28. See note in *The Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, August 15, 1892, 256.
29. See note in *The Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, May 15, 1892, 160.
30. See note in *The Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, August 15, 1892, 256.
31. Cf. 1920 United States Federal Census, Year: 1920; Census Place: Lancaster, Worcester, Massachusetts; Roll: T625\_746; Page: 6A; Enumeration District: 93, accessed from *Ancestry.com* [2/15/23].

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