

Farnsworth, Eugene William (1847–1935)

SAMUEL GOMIDE

Samuel Gomide is a freshman in high school, and currently lives in Maine. He has twice lived in the north of Brazil where his father taught systematic theology at the Adventist seminary.

Born into one of the first Sabbath-observing Adventist families, Eugene W. Farnsworth served for more than fifty years as a minister, administrator, college teacher, and evangelist.

Early Life

Eugene William Farnsworth was born on November 27, 1847, in Washington, New Hampshire, to William and Sarah Farnsworth (1807-1888; 1812-1855).¹ William and Sarah married on December 2, 1830,² and were among the members of the Christian Brethren congregation in Washington, New Hampshire, that embraced the Second Advent message in 1843. In either 1844 or 1845, William began observing the seventh-day Sabbath and soon several others in the church did so as well, thus becoming the first company of Sabbath-keeping Adventists.³

William and Sarah Farnsworth had eleven children, Eugene being the ninth.⁴ After losing his mother to death at age seven, Eugene and his siblings gained a loving stepmother in Cynthia Stowell (1830-1917), who married William Farnsworth in 1855 and bore him another eleven children.⁵

Growing up in New Hampshire, Eugene had a three month school year, and when he was about 13 his father kept him out of school.⁶ As a child and teenager, Eugene and his family attended church Sabbath after Sabbath, but at nineteen he had not made a religious commitment. One day a bashful Eugene was hoeing corn when John N. Andrews approached, picked up a hoe, and struck up a conversation with Eugene while working beside him.

“Have you thought what profession you would choose for your lifework?” inquired the preacher.



Eugene W. Farnsworth, 1883.

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

"I would like to be a lawyer," said the youth.

"You might do worse," was the kindly reply. "And what then?"

Having traced his prospective future past the days of his education, to become the best attorney in the State, to acquire a family and wealth, to grow old and finally die, Elder Andrews then fixed his piercing black eyes upon the lad before him, and throwing all the emphasis and love he could express into the words, asked, "And, my boy, WHAT THEN?"⁷

Farnworth never forgot the encounter, nor Andrews' admonition, "My boy, you take hold of something that will help you to span the chasm, something that will land your feet safely on the other side, where you will be safe for eternity."⁸

In December 1867, Andrews, along with James and Ellen White, held meetings in Washington, New Hampshire.⁹ In a meeting at which Ellen White had messages to bear for specific people in the congregation, Eugene wished to himself that she would call out his father, for he knew William was secretly chewing tobacco while professing to have abandoned the habit. Soon she turned to William and gave him a stirring rebuke.¹⁰ Eugene recalled that Ellen White "read life after life like an open book; and from that day to this I have had the firmest confidence in the spirit of prophecy."¹¹ After the meetings, Eugene and about seventeen other young people were baptized by P.C. Rodman in a hole cut through ice two-feet thick.¹²

Education, Ministry, and Marriage

After his twenty-first birthday, Eugene traveled from New Hampshire for Waukon, Iowa, using money saved from making tens of thousands of shingles. At Waukon he attended school for two years while working to meet his expenses.¹³ Then, after tutoring for a year, Eugene was offered a position as a teacher at the then-appealing salary of \$1,000 a year. But with encouragement from George I. Butler, he dedicated his life to gospel ministry and was issued a ministerial license in June 1874.

His preaching came to be in demand for evangelistic efforts and camp meetings throughout the United States over the next two decades.¹⁴ In June of 1877, he succeeded George I. Butler as president of the Iowa-Nebraska Conference, serving a one-year term in which evangelism continued to be his main activity.¹⁵

On September 30, 1879, Eugene Farnsworth married Carrie J. Eggleston (1857-1882) of Hamilton, Missouri, at a camp meeting.¹⁶ She had been converted early in her youth and baptized by J. T. Mitchell. Little more than a year into their marriage, she contracted tuberculosis and after fighting the disease nearly a year and a half, died on August 4, 1882, at the age of twenty-five.¹⁷ Despite the devastating loss, Farnsworth ministered at several camp meetings that year and pushed on with evangelism.¹⁸

Farnsworth served another year as president of the Iowa Conference in 1883-1884¹⁹ (the state of Nebraska had become a separate conference). During that year, on October 27, 1883, Farnsworth married Lizzie Hornby, (1845-1891) of Port Stanley, Ontario, Canada.²⁰ She and her parents had moved to Davenport, Iowa when she was eight years old and at the age of twenty joined the Baptist church. After reading Seventh-day Adventist literature, she joined the church in 1873. She was elected secretary of the Iowa Tract and Missionary Society in the spring of 1878, holding the position for seven years.²¹

Educator, Administrator, and Overseas Evangelist (1885-1915)

In 1885 Farnsworth went to New England, where, among other things, he held meetings in his home town of Washington, New Hampshire. He also went to the aid of the churches in Arkansas, where some members were being prosecuted for working on Sunday.²²

Lizzie's health began to decline after she suffered a nervous prostration in the winter of 1886. Nevertheless, she taught missionary classes at Battle Creek College in the fall and winter of 1886-1887.²³ Eugene traveled extensively fulfilling varied responsibilities and was elected Home Mission Secretary of the General Conference in December 1887.²⁴ When the General Conference divided the North American territory in 1889 into six administrative districts (an intermediate step towards the union conferences organized in 1901), Farnsworth was appointed superintendent of District 4, comprised of Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Manitoba, Canada.

Lizzie spent time in differing climates, such as Florida and Colorado, seeking to recover her health, but without lasting success. For the second time in ten years, Farnsworth lost a wife when Lizzie went to the grave on July 17, 1891.²⁵

After joining the faculty of Union College (Nebraska) as a teacher of English Bible in 1892,²⁶ Farnsworth married Vesta J. Olsen, (1855-1932) of Poy Sippi, Wisconsin, on November 27, 1893.²⁷ She had previously been the wife of A. D. Olsen, brother of General Conference president O.A. Olsen. After the death of her husband in 1890, she moved to Oakland, California, where she served as secretary of the International Sabbath School Association.²⁸

In his first year as Bible professor at Union, Farnsworth baptized 100 of the 600 students enrolled.²⁹ On August 8, 1896, he and his wife sailed to Australia, where they lived near the home of Ellen White.³⁰ Their evangelistic efforts over the next eight years helped pioneer the Adventist work there and in New Zealand. The couple's next assignment took them to England for another year of overseas evangelistic ministry, 1904-1905.³¹

In March 1905 the Farnsworths traveled back to America where Eugene was elected president of the Atlantic Union Conference.³² Four years later, he accepted a call to teach Bible and pastoral training at the Washington Foreign Mission Seminary³³ (now Washington Adventist University) in Takoma Park, Maryland.³⁴

In 1910, Farnsworth moved on to another one-year assignment as pastor of the Battle Creek church.³⁵ From there, he was called to the west coast where he served for four years as president of the newly-formed California Conference, shortly after the division of the California-Nevada Conference into three entities at the beginning of 1911.³⁶

Later Life

After stepping back from official responsibilities, Farnsworth again traveled widely, speaking at churches, schools and camp meetings throughout the United States and Canada. In 1923 the Farnsworths moved from the environs of Pacific Union College in northern California to southern California where they made their home in Glendale.³⁷

In 1925, Farnsworth underwent surgery at the Glendale Sanitarium, which revealed cancer spreading in his abdomen. The doctors deemed his case hopeless and informed him of the situation. He responded: "Doctors, you have given me up. Now I shall appeal my case. I shall take it to a board of physicians where Jesus Christ sits as Chairman of the board, and He can cure a cancer as easily as He can cure any other disease! I propose to take my case to Him."³⁸

Fellow ministers anointed him and held a season of prayer on October 19, 1925. At the 1926 General Conference, Farnsworth testified, "I haven't had a pain in my body since that time....The last vestige of that cancer is gone."³⁹ He wrote a booklet entitled "Divine Healing" and gladly responded to the many requests that began streaming in for him to pray for the sick, which he was glad to do. In this, he saw another evangelistic opportunity.⁴⁰

His wife Vesta passed away on July 31, 1932.⁴¹ In December 1933 a passing car struck the 86-year-old Farnsworth as he was making his way to church, "breaking a small bone in his foot and another in his right hip, and seriously bruising his left arm."⁴² The accident confined him to bed for two years as nurses, and his sister-in-law, Nora E. Cady cared for him.⁴³

Eugene W. Farnsworth died on a Sabbath morning, December 7, 1935, at age 88.⁴⁴ His was an eventful life, defined by the dedication to service he made as a youth. He lived out that dedication for more than fifty years in many fields of labor spread over three continents, impacting the lives of thousands.

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NOTES

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2. Frank Edson Parlin, *The Parlin Genealogy: The Descendants of Nicholas Parlin of Cambridge, Mass.* (Cambridge, MA, 1913), 122.
3. E.W. Farnsworth autobiographical reflections in "Symposium of the Pioneers," *ARH*, June 4, 1926, 1; E.W. Farnsworth, "William Farnsworth obituary," *ARH*, February 19, 1889, 126; *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. edition (1996), s.v. "Washington, New Hampshire Church." Evidence regarding the number of people in the church who became Sabbath keepers and exactly when is contradictory; see Arthur W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1961), 116, 397-400.
4. Farnsworth's *ARH* obituary states that he was the sixth child but the records compiled by the Proctors and Parlin list him as the ninth.
5. F. Wheeler, "Sarah Farnsworth obituary," *ARH*, August 7, 1855, 23; Cottrell, "Eugene W. Farnsworth obituary;" Proctor and Proctor, 70.
6. "Symposium of the Pioneers," *ARH*, June 4, 1926, 2.
7. Cottrell's summary of the story in his *ARH* obituary of Farnsworth; told in greater detail by Farnsworth in "Symposium of the Pioneers."
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12. White, "Sketches and memories of James and Ellen G. White XLIV," 8; Eugene Farnsworth Genealogical Information, accessed April 16, 2020, Adventist Digital Library, https://adventistdigitallibrary.org/adl-366763/genealogical-information-eugene-farnsworth?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=7d95d8c145be83c7e478&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=1; Cottrell, "Eugene W. Farnsworth obituary."
13. Cottrell, "Eugene W. Farnsworth obituary."
14. *Ibid*. See also reports of Farnsworth's meetings in the *ARH* from 1874 and onward.
15. Geo. I. Butler and L. McCoy, "Iowa and Nebraska Conference," *ARH*, June 21, 1877, 195.

16. Eugene Farnsworth Genealogical Information, Adventist Digital Library.
17. E. W. Farnsworth, "Death of Mrs. Farnsworth," *ARH*, August 22, 1882, 537.
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38. Eugene W. Farnsworth, "Divine Healing," *ARH*, January 18, 1934, 3; See also George Thomason, "A Physicians Statement," *ARH*, May 24, 1934, 20; General Conference Committee, October 13, 1925, 1051, General Conference Archives, accessed April 28, 2020, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1925.pdf>.
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41. Ibid, 21; Fulton, "Vesta J. Farnsworth obituary."
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44. Ibid.

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