

Davis, Thomas H.

(c. 1866–1911)

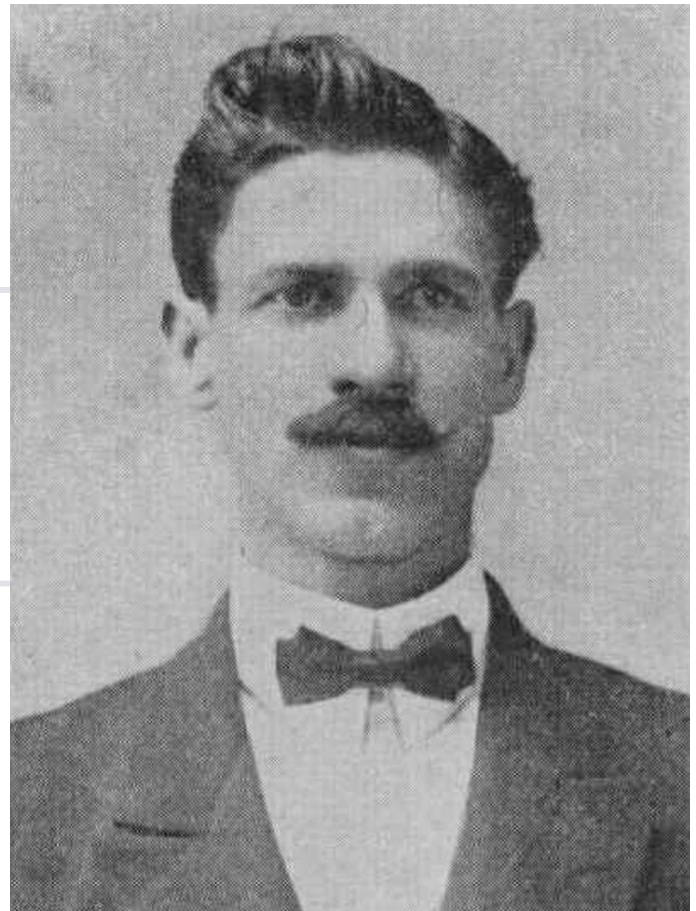
DANIEL OSCAR PLENC

Daniel Oscar Plenc, Th.D. (River Plate Adventist University, Entre Ríos, Argentina), currently works as a theology professor and director of the White Research Center at the River Plate Adventist University. He worked as a district pastor for twelve years. He is married to Lissie Ziegler and has three children.

Thomas H. Davis was a pioneering missionary to South America, especially in Chile and Ecuador. He was a pioneer in Chile in 1894 and in Ecuador in 1904. He highlighted the significance of literature evangelism. He was one of the main agents of the Adventist mission on the west coast of South America.¹

Early Life

Little is known about the early years and conversion of Thomas H. Davis. He was born in the United States, probably in 1866, and studied at Healdsburg Academy in California.² He began canvassing in California at the beginning of the 1890s. There he received the invitation of the Foreign Mission Board to work in Chile as a support worker with Frederick William Bishop (1864–1929). Both were single, young, and without knowledge of the local culture.³ He accepted the call with the decision to testify to all the people with whom he related. Davis and Bishop left San Francisco, California, with a few dollars, some bags with books, personal clothes, and some blankets. They arrived at the harbor of Valparaíso, Chile, on December 8, 1894, after traveling for 54 days. They knew only a few words in Spanish.⁴ Clair A. Nowlin (1865–1961), one of the first three canvassers of the East Coast Mission who had arrived in 1891, received them at the harbor.⁵ Nowlin oriented their beginnings in the new territory. The only book in Spanish they brought was *Patriarchs and Prophets*, published in Britain. To learn Spanish, Davis and Bishop turned to an alternate reading of the Bible in English and Spanish.



Thomas H. Davis

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist archives.

Davis and Bishop began offering publications in English to foreigners living in Valparaíso, especially the doctrinal book *Bible Readings for the Home Circle*.⁶ Davis sought foreign immigrants in the south of the country, among whom he sold *The Great Controversy*. On his part, Bishop traveled to the north of the country, where he won over Julian Ocampo, the first Chilean Adventist pastor. In the city of Santiago, capital of the country, Davis and Bishop reached the first conversions, including the Baptist pastor Enrique Balada and his wife, Prudencia Núñez.⁷

After Bishop's marriage about three years after his arrival, Davis remained the only canvasser in the country. His missionary vocation led him to visit the entire national territory and to prospect beyond its borders. Davis sold copies of *The Great Controversy* and editions of *Signs of the Times* in English and French.

Granville H. Baber (1852–1936), first pastor sent to the West Coast Mission, arrived on November 29, 1895. His mission was to build on the foundation laid by Bishop and Davis.⁸ He performed the first baptisms and organized the first congregations. Among those baptized were future church leaders such as Victor Thomann, Eduardo Thomann, and Carlos Krieghoff.

Thomas H. Davis was one of the main protagonists in the founding stage of Adventism in Chile (1894–1901):⁹ Since 1900 he used the missionary magazine *Signs of the Times* when visiting nonpenetrated territories.¹⁰

In the first stage of his ministry, Thomas H. Davis served in Chile for six years. In 1901 he married Susana Balbuena, a young woman from Angol, one of the first Adventists in Chile,¹¹ and temporarily returned to the United States for health reasons. He said: "I am very sorry that I had to leave the work so soon because of an illness. . . . I would not feel as much leaving this great work, which is more precious than life, if there was one or several others who could replace me in the sale of our books."¹² There they grieved over the loss of their first child.¹³

Pioneering in Ecuador (1904–1908)

Thomas H. Davis returned to South America in 1904, this time as a pioneer in Ecuador.¹⁴ Before traveling, he enquired about the reality of Ecuador and sought support to open work there through the church's review.¹⁵ Davis' family arrived in Guayaquil, Ecuador, on August 30, 1904.¹⁶ Based in Guayaquil, Davis distributed a large number of books and treatises.¹⁷ Following the railway line between Guayaquil and Quito, he distributed publications in all towns and cities. He suffered opposition: they threw stones, bricks, and sticks, and burned his Bibles and books.¹⁸ That initial intolerance toward Adventism gradually gave way in Ecuadorian society as the missionaries and their message were better known.¹⁹ However, baptisms were delayed.²⁰ Davis sold *Patriarchs and Prophets*, by Ellen G. White, and small books, as well as *Signs of the Times*.²¹ The work was consolidated with the arrival of the first pastor in Ecuador, George W. Casebeer, in 1905.²² The first baptisms came three years later.²³

In Ambato his wife, Susana, pregnant with their third child, got sick of a tropical disease and died on July 15, 1907, a few days after a baby girl was born.²⁴ Davis was left alone with the newborn and his other children, 5 and 2. The missionary managed to work and take care of his eldest daughters, but the little girl had to be handed over for adoption to the worker Guillermo Steele and his wife. Davis wrote to José W. Westphal: "Well, Brother Westphal, I am very sad, since death has claimed my dear wife. . . . Brother Yépez was at that time in Quito, so he was alone. We buried Susana under a blackberry tree in the cemetery. As I wrote to Brother Casebeer, I am not discouraged, but very sad, truly. I want to stay in Ecuador for some time and see the work begin, though."²⁵

In fact, Davis continued in that field for more than a year. He received support from Mrs. Casebeer, who helped him care for his daughters.²⁶ At the beginning of 1908 he remained in Ambato caring for his daughters.²⁷ From that year on, William Steele replaced G. W. Casebeer in Ecuador and Davis was appointed director of canvassing of the East Coast Mission, being replaced in Ecuador by the Chilean canvasser Octavio Navarrete, with good success.²⁸

Final Years

Davis returned to Chile in 1908 as canvassing director, making a stop in Peru.²⁹ Under his leadership the number of canvassers in different parts of the country grew, and the sale of Adventist publications increased significantly. He lectured training courses on canvassing and supervised the publications work. His was an organizational and training task in Chile, Bolivia, and Peru.³⁰ His health, however, started to decline.³¹

Davis had a second marriage; he married Gertrudis Leiva, who collaborated with the Sabbath School department and accompanied him to the end.³² Living and working conditions affected Davis' health. When he felt that his health was deteriorating, Davis moved to the River Plate Sanitarium and Hospital, in the province of Entre Ríos, Argentina. Despite all the efforts, his life could not be saved, and on November 26, 1911, he died of intestinal bleeding. He was buried in Aldea Jacobi, Entre Ríos, in a place unknown today.³³ "On the afternoon of the following day all the brothers in the neighborhood and the workers of the Sanatorium gathered in the building of the academy to express their feelings of sadness and see for the last time the face of one who was a pioneer of the canvassing work in Chile and Ecuador. . . . That night, in the soft moonlight in the cemetery near Crespo, his body would be buried waiting for the day of the resurrection of the faithful to participate with all the saved, of the inheritance of the saints in Christ."³⁴ Joseph W. Westphal said on that occasion: "Brother Davis was one of the two missionaries sent to Chile, and he was the one who prepared the way for this message in Ecuador. He is the first Seventh-day Adventist missionary sent to the territory of the South American Union, which has lost his life in the labor camp."³⁵

The name of Thomas H. Davis remains a symbol of the missionaries who opened the way for preaching on the west coast of South America. His passion for evangelization through publication, his intrepid pioneer spirit, and

his permanent dedication to the mission of the church inspire the present messengers of hope. He also contributed to foreign mission by bringing Adventists closer to people who would become local leaders and successful missionaries.

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NOTES

1. For a biography of Thomas H. Davis, see: Daniel Oscar Plenc, *Misioneros en Sudamérica: Pioneros del Adventismo en Latinoamérica* [Missionaries in South America: Pioneers of Adventism in Latin America], 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: South American Spanish Publishing House, 2008), 63-72; Sergio E. Becerra, "Thomas H. Davis," in Daniel Oscar Plenc, Silvia Scholtus, Eugenio Di Dionisio, Sergio Becerra, *Misioneros fundacionales del adventismo sudamericano* [Pioneer Missionaries of South American Adventism], 3rd ed. (Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos: River Plate Adventist University Editorial, 2012), 85-98; Ketty de Zambra, "*Thomas Davis, pionero en Chile y Ecuador*" [Thomas Davis, Pioneer in Chile and Ecuador], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], April 1994, 14; Leopoldo Zambra Ríos, *No con ejército, no con fuerza, sino con su Espíritu* [Not With an Army, Not With Force, but With His Spirit] (Santiago, Chile: Adventist Book Center, 1994); Joseph W. Westphal, "[*Obituario*] (Obituary): Davis, Thomas H.," *ARH*, February 8, 1912, 23.
2. J. H. McEachern, "Pioneering in Chile, South America," *ARH*, September 18, 1919, 28.

3. Frederick W. Bishop, born in England, emigrated to the United States. At age 28 he accepted the Adventist faith in California. He was baptized and began to evangelize through publication. For two years he studied at Healdsburg Academy (currently Pacific Union College) in California. He volunteered his services, and the Foreign Mission Board of the General Conference assigned him to Chile, along with Davis. He began his ministry in Valparaíso and Iquique, among English-speaking immigrants. Bishop settled in Chile permanently, married Petronila Neuman, and had eight children (Benjamín, Eduardo, Tomás, Lidia, Alicia, Minnie, María, and Flora). Bishop died in Los Ángeles, Chile. Zambra Ríos, 131, 132. Frederick W. Bishop, "Early Experiences in Giving the Third Angel's Message in Chile," *ARH*, November 20, 1919, 16, 17.
4. Thomas H. Davis, "Five years in Chile," *The Missionary Magazine*, May 1900, 216.
5. On his trip to Chile, Nowlin had visited southern Argentina, the Falkland Islands, the Strait of Magellan, and Punta Arenas, in Chile.
6. Frederick W. Bishop, "Colporteur Work in Chile," *ARH*, May 1895, 79.
7. Enrique Balada, Baptist pastor of Spanish origin, had contributed to the Bible societies. He lived 11 years in Argentina, then moved to Chile, where he married Prudencia Núñez. In 1896 they made contact with the canvassers, in Santiago. In 1909 he was ordained an Adventist pastor. His daughter Amera married Walter Schubert.
8. Granville Henderson Baber (1852–1936), born in West Virginia, United States, studied at Battle Creek College. He was sent to Chile in 1895 as the first ordained pastor. After his return in 1902, he was a Bible teacher in Tennessee for 11 years (Allen Moon, "Our Work and Workers in South America," *The Missionary Magazine*, March 1898, 81). Granville H. Baber, "Chile," *ARH*, January 28, 1896, 11.
9. In 1899 it is mentioned that Davis is the only active canvasser in Chile. Cf. G. H. Baber "Chile," *ARH*, August 22, 1899, 11, 12.
10. Granville H. Baber, "Chile," *ARH*, February 22, 1898, 11.
11. "Obituario [Obituary]: Davis, [Susana Balbuena de]," *ARH*, September 5, 1907, 31.
12. Zambra Ríos, 129.
13. Ibid.
14. Joseph W. Wesphal, "Tidings From the Neglected Continent," *ARH*, July 21, 1903, 14; "Nota," *ARH*, August 18, 1904, 20; "Two new fields have recently . . .," *ARH*, November 3, 1904, 24.
15. Thomas H. Davis, "Ecuador," *ARH*, January 13, 1903, 10; Thomas H. Davis, "Ecuador," *ARH*, April 21, 1904, 15, 16.
16. Thomas H. Davis, "Ecuador," *ARH*, December 1, 1904, 19.
17. Ibid.

18. Thomas H. Davis, "Ecuador," *ARH*, April 13, 1905, 12, 13.
19. G. W. Casebeer, "The Work in Ecuador," *ARH*, February 20, 1908, 16, 17.
20. J. W. Westphal, "The Third Angel's Message in Ecuador," *ARH*, December 12, 1907, 14.
21. Thomas H. Davis, "Ecuador," *ARH*, March 29, 1906, 18.
22. G. W. Casebeer, "Ecuador," *ARH*, January 11, 1906, 16, 17.
23. G. W. Casebeer, "Ecuador," *ARH*, September 27, 1906, 19, 20.
24. "Obituario [Obituary]: Davis, [Susana Balbuena de]."
25. Joseph W. Westphal, "South America," *ARH*, November 21, 1907, 7; Miguel Augusto Rivas, "La iglesia cumple cien años en la República del Ecuador" [The Church Celebrates One Hundred Years in the Republic of Ecuador], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], August 2004, 15.
26. G. W. Casebeer, "The Work in Ecuador," *ARH*, February 20, 1908, 16, 17.
27. Thomas H. Davis, "Ecuador," *ARH*, April 2, 1908, 18.
28. Joseph W. Westphal, "The South American Union Conference," *ARH*, June 11, 1908, 13; Thomas H. Davis, "Ecuador," *ARH*, July 23, 1908, 19.
29. Thomas H. Davis, "From Peru to Chile," *ARH*, December 31, 1908, 16.
30. Ibid.; Thomas H. Davis, "Canvassing in Chile," *ARH*, April 29, 1909, 16.
31. Westphal, "[Obituario] [Obituary]: Davis, Thomas H.;" Joseph W. Westphal, "Necrologías" [Obituary], *Adventist Review*, January 1912, 15.
32. Gertrudis moved to the United States in 1924 and was a Bible worker in California, as well as a teacher in Arizona. She returned to Chile in 1935 and died in 1944, in Puiggari (now Libertador San Martín), Entre Ríos.
33. Westphal, "[Obituario] [Obituary]: Davis, Thomas H.;" Westphal, "Necrologías" [Obituary]. The Ellen G. White Research Center of Argentina built a grave and placed a plaque in recognition of the ministry of Thomas H. Davis.
34. Zambra Ríos, 37.
35. Ibid., 38.

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