

# Howard, James Henry (1861–1936)

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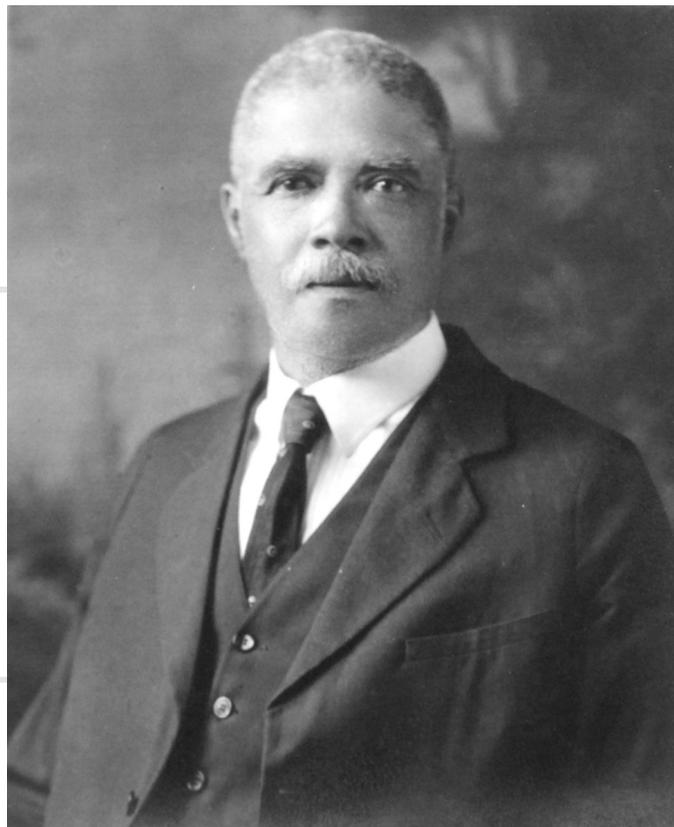
James H. Howard was a federal government clerk, physician, pioneer of Seventh-day Adventism in Washington, D.C. and eloquent opponent of racial segregation in the church.

## Early Years

James Howard was born in 1861 in Brookeville, Maryland, near the town of Sandy Spring, approximately 15 miles north of Washington, D.C. His parents, John (1830-1901) and Rebecca Howard (b. 1830), were among the free black residents of a rural community founded by Quakers during the colonial era. James was the first child born to the farming couple, followed by a sister, Martha Ann (b. 1863), and two brothers, John (b. 1865) and Flodoardo (b. 1870).<sup>1</sup>

As a teenager, James proved to be an academic prodigy. He completed a bachelor of arts degree at Howard University in Washington, D.C., in 1879 at age 18, becoming the youngest person to graduate from the college—at that time and for decades to come. He also graduated at the top of his class, delivering a valedictory oration on “Civic Reform” at the commencement ceremony.<sup>2</sup> He went on to earn an M.D. at Howard Medical School in 1883, again at the top of his class, and added a master of arts degree from Howard in 1885.<sup>3</sup>

On September 7, 1885, James married 39-year-old widow Isabella (Belle) Marion Cook. Belle’s first husband was John Hartwell Cook, attorney and dean of the Howard University School of Law at the time of his death from tuberculosis in 1879. Their son, Will Marion Cook, became an innovative and influential musician and composer.<sup>4</sup>



James Henry Howard.

Photo courtesy of DeWitt S. Williams.

## Adventist Pioneer in the Nation's Capital

Rather than practice medicine for a livelihood, Dr. Howard entered federal government service in 1886 as a clerk in the Record and Pension Division of the War Department. It was a coveted white collar position that, along with his intellectual attainments, gave him, at 25, highly-respected status with a promising future in the upper echelons of Washington, D.C.'s large black community.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Howard's acceptance of Seventh-day Adventism less than two years later, in 1888, "caused a sensation" in the extended Howard University community, according to Kelly Miller, professor and dean for many decades at the school and a public intellectual of national influence. Howard's "erstwhile friends and neighbors" shook their heads at the apparent folly of "so promising a young man needlessly throwing away his career," wrote Miller in his syndicated newspaper column.<sup>6</sup>

Seventh-day Adventists were then "all but unknown among colored people," Miller noted, and the same could be said about awareness of the church in the nation's capital as a whole. The city did not yet have an Adventist congregation when Howard accepted the message, only a city mission begun in 1886, based in a house rented on Vermont Avenue, from which a small team of workers disseminated literature door-to-door and on the street. It was from one of them, Georgia Harper (later the wife of church leader W. A. Spicer), who joined the Washington, D.C. mission as a Bible instructor in 1887, that Dr. Howard was first introduced to Adventism.

Sometime during the next few months he became one of the mission's earliest converts and very likely the first African American in Washington, D.C. to become a Seventh-day Adventist.<sup>7</sup> The church could hardly have found a more vigorous, winsome, and well-placed advocate among the city's black population that, at approximately 90,000, was then the largest in the nation. In February 1889, the first Seventh-day Adventist church in Washington, D.C. was officially organized, with James and Belle Howard among the 26 charter members.<sup>8</sup>

## No Compromise With the Color Line

The interracial composition of the Washington church from the start was, in Dr. Howard's thinking, an important validation of Adventism as a last-day reform movement. Thus, he was chagrined to see a racial separation policy for the church's embryonic work in the American South proposed in the October 29, 1889, issue of the *Review and Herald*. Robert M. Kilgore, the General Conference superintendent for the southern field (District No. 2), contended that the poor attendance at evangelistically-oriented preaching services conducted at a recent camp meeting and workers' institute near Nashville had been due to the intermingling of the races on the campgrounds, which put off white passers-by. Kilgore regarded the disappointing results as demonstrating the impracticality of defying the color line in the South and proposed that the General Conference session, already underway in Battle Creek by the time the article appeared in print, adopt a policy to govern the church's southern mission accordingly.<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Howard saw Kilgore's recommendation as a devastating contradiction to the defining ideals of Adventism. Writing in protest to General Conference president Ole A. Olsen, Howard urged that exclusion of some believers from full and equal participation in church fellowship on account of race contradicted pure gospel principle and could not be justified on grounds of expediency. He warned the church president that "if we compromise with this worldly hatred that Americans call 'prejudice,' while professing to have the love of Christ in our hearts, to have the purest light of the gospel, to be looking for the early advent of the Savior, and to be keeping the commandments," Adventists would be considered "the most pronounced hypocrites of all professing Christians."<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Howard did not stake his own convictions about the truth of Adventism on how well the church performed in race relations. But, he explained to Olsen, no matter how fervent his own enthusiasm, he could not be an effective advocate for the faith in Washington's black community without having a good answer to the inevitable question, "Are your people as hypocritical as the rest of the churches on the race question?" During his first two years as an Adventist he had been confident about his reply but now, after reading Kilgore's article in the denomination's central paper, he told Olsen, "my heart and lips hesitate to answer" because "I am not sure what the defined *practical* position is on the question."<sup>11</sup>

Howard appreciated the kindly pastoral intentions of Olsen's reply, but the ministry of Ellen White appears to have been the main factor that helped him not only get past his disappointment but gain a renewed fervor for the Adventist message. In June 1891, Ellen White's son, William C. White, knowing that Dr. Howard would be interested, mailed to him a copy, in pamphlet form, of the talk, "Our Duty to the Colored People," that his mother had just given in March to a group of church leaders in Battle Creek. In it, Ellen White declared, in forceful and repeated terms, racial equality and inclusion to be principles of the gospel. She also specifically repudiated the 1889 color line policy proposal that had prompted Howard's protest.<sup>12</sup>

The admonitions in Ellen White's 1891 message, such as, "You have no license from God to exclude the colored people from your places of worship," and, "They should hold membership in the church with the white brethren,"<sup>13</sup> cemented the confidence Dr. Howard and like-minded believers in the Washington church placed in her prophetic gift. It also gave them certitude that their refusal to recognize any color distinctions in church fellowship and governance was in harmony with Ellen White's testimonies and that those who called for separatist policies as an expedient adaptation to societal conditions were out of harmony with the prophet's counsel.

The Washington, D.C. congregation thrived in the 1890s with Dr. Howard perhaps the congregation's leading "soul-winner."<sup>14</sup> Rosetta Douglass Sprague, daughter of Frederick Douglass and an Oberlin College class mate of Belle's, was among those won to Adventism through the Howards' efforts.<sup>15</sup> Overall, by 1899, the Washington church had grown to about 150 members, nearly 50 of them African American.<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Howard's vision of a racially egalitarian fellowship living out the "pure light of the gospel" seemed to have been realized in substantial measure. "This church is a living miracle of the power of God, composed as it is of the two races," wrote Albion F. Ballenger on December 25, 1899, during a months-long period of pastoral-evangelistic ministry at the Washington church. "The harmony which prevails is a great surprise to the members of other churches," he added.<sup>17</sup> It was not simply the refusal to implement a color line but the extent to which the church united large proportions of both races on a basis of equality. In doing so, they countered the national trends that prevailed in an opposite and racially repressive direction with the onset of the "Jim Crow" era.

## Conflicting Models for Church Race Relations

However, the increasing intensity of the troubling societal trends combined with growing evidence of receptivity to Adventism on the part of black Americans contributed to a new crisis over denominational race relations in 1902-1903. Washington, D.C., was the main venue and James H. Howard a central figure in the conflict.

Arthur G. Daniells gave attention to the race question soon after his election as General Conference president in 1901 and became convinced that to thrive among both races the church would have to accommodate dominant social norms for keeping the races separate in churches, public meetings, and institutions. At the Southern Union organizational meetings in Nashville in January 1902, he urged adherence to an unwritten policy to that effect. He also developed a plan for implementing it in Washington, D.C., and thereby establish a model for the denomination's work throughout the United States.<sup>18</sup>

The General Conference hired two evangelists, Lewis C. Sheafe and Judson S. Washburn, to hold concurrent, racially separate evangelistic tent efforts in Washington during the summer of 1902. After the meetings concluded they were to organize the new converts along with the church members into two racially distinct churches.<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Howard, along with Andrew Kalstrom, elder of the Washington church, vigorously opposed the plan. They had heard some Adventist ministers refer to testimonies from Ellen White cautioning against defying entrenched customs of racial segregation where doing so might stir severe reprisals but saw no indication of clear or authoritative changes to the principles she had laid down in 1891. They regarded the actions of denominational leaders to enforce a separation of the races as a clear contradiction of Scripture and the testimonies of Ellen White. Furthermore, Dr. Howard contended, such a move would completely undercut the high regard that many Washingtonians of both races held for Adventists for "following the Christian course in that they did not separate their members on account of race."<sup>20</sup>

The separation proceeded in late September in 1902. Dr. Howard saw it as a tragic and embarrassing offset to the increase in favorable public attention generated by the surprising success of Sheafe's meetings, which drew an attendance that included both races and sometimes numbered in the thousands. About 40 members of the Washington church, constituting a little over half of the white members, formed what became known as the

Memorial Church, pastored by J. S. Washburn. Around 30 of the white members stayed with the black congregants and took the name First Seventh-day Adventist Church of Washington, D.C.<sup>21</sup> Bolstered by Sheafe's evangelism, the First Church reported 168 members—122 black and 46 white—in early 1903.<sup>22</sup>

The struggle in the nation's capital over the formulation of the pattern or mold for Adventist church race relations continued in 1903 with the stakes raised higher than ever by the move, that summer, of denominational headquarters from Battle Creek, Michigan, to Washington, D.C. In more fervent, urgent tones than ever, Dr. Howard urged an immediate change in direction as a last-ditch measure to begin repairing the damage caused by the separation implemented in 1902. He and Kalstrom pressed for a genuinely interracial evangelistic effort in the summer of 1903 in which new believers would be taught "the true principle involved as to the relation of the races in the church" and all those "willing to have part in such a gospel exemplification" would be welcomed into fellowship.<sup>23</sup>

Without a course correction of this kind, Dr. Howard warned, "the mistakes made in this place now will surely spoil the pattern for the future, both for the world and for the cause of truth."<sup>24</sup> In the strongest terms he could muster, he sought to impress upon A. G. Daniells that the integrity of Adventism's witness and impact on American society was in jeopardy:

I tell you plainly, Brother Daniells, with all respect, that you and your committee are grievously wrong in your course and policy on the race question. And you are wrong at a time when the world is growing worse in this respect and so much needs your wise and corrective influence. . . .<sup>25</sup>

The outcome of the 1902-1903 crisis—affirmation of racially-defined congregations—was a devastating setback for Dr. Howard, but he neither gave up the struggle nor faltered in his loyalty to Seventh-day Adventism. Nor was the outcome a total defeat. Daniells, in conjunction with the transfer of the General Conference headquarters to the Washington, D.C., area, expanded his model for church race relations to include the interracialism practiced at the First Church as an acceptable option. After Sheafe, with Daniells' encouragement, organized the People's Church, which was predominantly-black, in late 1903, the General Conference president was quite happy to point out that the Adventist denomination now had three congregations in Washington, D.C. covering the full range of racial preferences—black, white, and mixed.<sup>26</sup>

Tensions between Dr. Howard's First Church and the General Conference eased for a time but did not disappear. He was included among the speakers at a service on August 24, 1903, to dedicate the new, temporary headquarters of the General Conference and the Review and Herald Publishing Association, located a few blocks from the U.S. Capitol building. On that occasion he expressed faith that the Lord "shall restore to us the years that have been lost to us, or at least that have been to a large degree blighted, and we shall go forward with blessing and success, and also with joy."<sup>27</sup>

## Protest and Loyalty

Signs of movement toward the healing and restoration Dr. Howard envisioned appeared during the ensuing two years of relative calm. By 1907, though, another full-blown racial crisis had developed in which he was again a pivotal figure. Racial inequity, especially with regard to health and educational institutions, led the People's Church, under L. C. Sheafe, to sever its connection with the denomination in January 1907.<sup>28</sup> Opinion was divided at the First Church as to whether to do likewise, and esteem for Dr. Howard was such that his counsel would likely decide the matter. Much was at stake, including the possibility of a separate and independent black Adventist denomination because the combined membership of the two congregations constituted around 20% of the entire African American Adventist membership, estimated at 1,300.<sup>29</sup>

At a meeting on March 30, 1907, Howard cast his influence in favor of remaining in the denominational fellowship, thus thwarting momentum toward schism:

No condition brought about by the errors of our Conference brethren would justify Brother Sheafe in taking the extreme position that he did.

Don't separate from the cause. Men don't own the cause nor the denomination. Don't let us move one peg from the organized work. I shall not move, even if all others move.<sup>30</sup>

Although an accommodation to the color line, akin to the Kilgore proposal that had elicited his initial protest in 1889, had prevailed and would become all but universal in the American Adventist church for decades to come, Dr. Howard's faith and loyalty to his church remained unshaken. He did not surrender principle but rather refused to surrender an identity that he also declared as his highest allegiance in 1889. "I am more a Seventh-day Adventist than a colored man," he wrote in his first letter to O. A. Olsen.<sup>31</sup> No mistakes by church leaders could alter or redefine the race-transcending equality conferred by that identity and he would not give it up.

## Education and Lay Evangelism

Little evidence survives to document Dr. Howard's outspokenness on church race relations beyond 1907, but silence on his part seems unlikely. It is clear that for the rest of his life he remained a buoyant and irrepressible witness to his faith and sought to portray the church's work in the best possible light. Kelly Miller described him as "a lay evangelist who worked in and out of season without orders, rank or pay, but merely for the joy of advancing the cause to which he had devoted his life." Miller recounted that whenever he met Dr. Howard on the street "he essayed to persuade me to become an Adventist even as he was," placing in his hands "circulars and literature" that expressed the biblical basis for the church's teachings. At the same time, Dr. Howard always maintained "the never failing courtesy of the true gentleman that he was."<sup>32</sup>

Devastated by the death of his wife, Belle, in 1923, Dr. Howard left home without telling anyone where he was going. When a letter finally arrived, distraught relatives and friends were relieved to know that he was alive and well in Ethiopia. He reported meeting and developing a rapport with Emperor Haile Selassie. This connection smoothed the way for Dr. Howard, in fulfillment of a long-held aspiration, to found an Adventist school for girls, using his own funds.<sup>33</sup> This was probably the beginning of the Girls' School at Kabana, located on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, referred to a few years later in denominational periodicals.<sup>34</sup>

After about a year in Ethiopia, Dr. Howard returned to federal government service in Washington, D.C., from which he retired in 1931. In 1927 he married public school teacher and long-time First Church member Retha Dillard (1869-1958).<sup>35</sup>

Once again demonstrating the high value he placed on Adventist education, Dr. Howard, along with his niece, Dr. Eva B. Dykes, stepped up to meet a need at home in Washington, D.C. He had been a mentor and father figure to his niece who, in 1921, became the first African American female to complete requirements for a Ph.D. <sup>36</sup> In 1929 Dr. Howard along with Dr. Dykes, then a professor at Howard University, mortgaged the home that he had only recently turned over to her in order to fund expansion of the church school jointly operated by the city's two black Adventist churches—First Church and Ephesus—into a 12-grade secondary school named Washington Union Academy. The local churches took the initiative after attempts to gain the financial support of wider church entities for establishing an Adventist school in the mid-Atlantic region that would welcome black young people had been repeatedly frustrated.<sup>37</sup>

In early November 1934, Dr. Howard underwent surgery at Washington Sanitarium that discovered a “cancerous condition.” Church members offered fervent prayers on his behalf, followed by praises to God when X-rays taken a few days later showed no trace of the cancer.<sup>38</sup>

A year later, though, the cancer returned, necessitating Howard's hospitalization. In the meantime, the board of Washington Sanitarium, a General Conference institution, voted a policy on August 29, 1935, “confining our services to colored to the work absolutely necessary and that [it] be carried on in an inconspicuous way, using the basement of the Hospital.”<sup>39</sup> Dr. Howard easily met the new criteria for “colored” patients and was again admitted for treatment at Washington Sanitarium. However, apparently to make his presence as “inconspicuous” as possible, he was discharged with a nurse assigned to care for him at home. The nurse quickly found that it was impossible to provide adequate care for him at home and urged that Dr. Howard be returned to the Sanitarium.<sup>40</sup> He died there on January 6, 1936, at age 74.<sup>41</sup> It appears that during his final illness his treatment was compromised by the color distinction that he had long protested as having no place in God's church and work.

## Legacy

A newspaper article in 1919 accurately described James H. Howard as a “pioneer and pillar” of Seventh-day Adventism in Washington, D.C.<sup>42</sup> No one did more to build up the city’s first Adventist church, begun 15 years before the transfer of General Conference headquarters and the development of the Takoma Park suburb as an institutional center for the denomination. No one did as much as Dr. Howard to foster the church’s remarkable, countercultural embodiment of interracial fellowship and equality during the era known as the nadir of race relations in American history.

Though long-observed, he left a legacy of prophetic protest. He modeled “speaking truth to power”—an unflinching boldness in holding the church and its leaders accountable to its high calling. At the same time, he exemplified “speaking the truth in love,” with a genuineness and humility that aligned with the message he sought to uphold.

Ahead of his time, he witnessed a denominational retreat from the race-transcending ideal that he regarded as an essential part of the faithfulness to God’s commandments that is to characterize His last-day church. Nevertheless, Dr. Howard demonstrated an unshakable loyalty, based on the conviction that no leaders could claim ownership of the church and its identity nor could God’s purpose for it be defeated.

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