

Taylor, Charles O.

(1817–1905)

DOUGLAS MORGAN

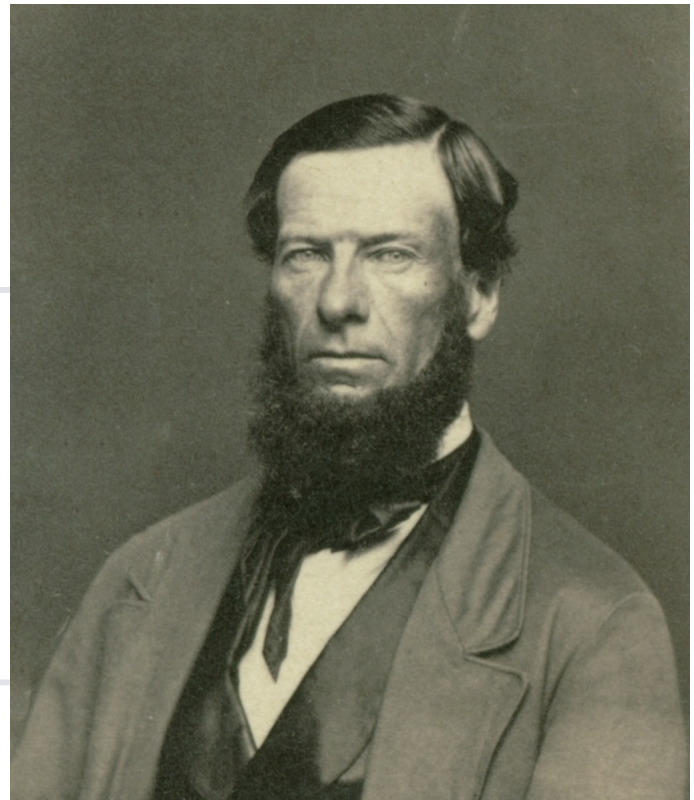
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Charles O. Taylor, a pioneer preacher in upstate New York, is best known as the first minister to disseminate the Seventh-day Adventist message in the Deep South of the United States.

Pioneer Minister in New York

Born November 15, 1817, Charles Taylor was a young farmer in northern New York, near the Canadian border, when he accepted the second advent message preached by William Miller in the early 1840s.¹ Charles, like his younger brother, Daniel, remained firm in believing Christ would return soon despite traumatic disappointment when He did not do so as expected in 1844. However, the brothers ended up moving in different directions as they sought fuller understanding. Daniel became a prominent minister and author in the Advent Christian Association.² Charles, on the other hand, saw light in the “third angel’s message” proclaimed by the founders of Seventh-day Adventism. He began preaching the message around 1854, while continuing to maintain the family farm in Champlain, Clinton County, New York. He married Matilda Whipple (1823-1880), also of Clinton County, in 1849.³

By the time Seventh-day Adventists organized as a denomination in 1863, Taylor was recognized as one of the group’s leading ministers in New York state. In May 1863 he was one of four delegates sent by the New York Conference to Battle Creek, Michigan, to organize the General Conference. He was chosen to serve on the credentials committee along with John N. Loughborough and Isaac Sanborn.⁴ In November, the New York Conference voted recognition of Taylor, along with John N. Andrews, Roswell F. Cottrell, and Nathan Fuller as



Charles O. Taylor

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“duly authorized and approved evangelical ministers” of the conference.⁵

Taylor’s years of involvement in the early formation of the church were marred by personal tragedy. He and Matilda lost all three of their children to diphtheria during the same year—1865. Five-year-old Hiram died on July 24. Thomas, their oldest, was eight years old when he succumbed to the disease on October 15, followed rapidly by their youngest child and only daughter, three-year-old Gracy, on October 17.⁶

Pioneer Missionary to the South

Taylor was credited with “raising up several churches” in the New York Conference, and he ministered there for the remainder of his life, except for the seven years spanning 1876 to 1883.⁷ Those were the years of the unlikely mission that made him one of the six “principal Adventist pioneers to the South,” as identified by church historian Arthur W. Spalding, and the first to enter the Deep South—Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.⁸

It was a formidable challenge, to say the least. Prior to the 1870s, Seventh-day Adventism had been an entirely Northern movement pervaded by abolitionist sentiment. Resentment toward the North, still raw and bitter in the South during the chaotic aftermath of the Civil War thus added a strong barrier to the obstacles that Adventists faced everywhere they sought to evangelize. Suspicion, misrepresentation, and the pressures of family, employers, and church ties that discouraged potential converts tended to be stronger in the South and the further south the stronger.

Taylor’s attention may have been drawn to the South as a mission field by hearing reports of interest in the Adventist message expressed by individuals in western North Carolina in response to literature sent by two women active in Tract Society work—one in Mill Grove, New York, and the other in Haverhill, Massachusetts.⁹ Yet it is not clear how he became convinced that it was his calling to meet the need by striking out on his own on a risky, unprecedented mission that required considerable personal sacrifice. Regardless, not long after the New York and Pennsylvania Conference annual session and camp meeting ended on September 12, 1876, Taylor hitched his team of horses to a wagon and headed south with his wife, Matilda, at his side. By early November they reached Quitman, the county seat of Brooks County in southern Georgia, a journey of some 1,200 miles (by modern highways) from their farm in Adams Center, New York.¹⁰

Georgia

Unaware of any seventh-day Sabbath observers in the entire state, Taylor found in Quitman a friendly hearing from a group of Primitive Baptists who “were glad to have northerners coming among them.”¹¹ He made the town his initial base of operation, raising up a small group up Sabbath-keepers in Brooks County over the next few months, and traveling to other parts of the state as opportunity arose.¹²

In September 1877 he traveled some 200 miles north to Griffin, Georgia, in response to an invitation from Dr. J. A. Killingsworth, who, along with his wife, had been observing the seventh-day Sabbath since 1872.¹³ They thought that they were the only ones in Georgia doing so until Killingsworth read Taylor's report from Quitman in the *Review*. Killingsworth facilitated speaking opportunities and contacts with key individuals in the Griffin area, including a Methodist minister and a prominent physician. Despite this, Taylor's work in Griffin proved controversial. "False reports" stirred opposition, making it difficult to secure a venue for meetings. However, Taylor reported that another "gentleman," apparently of some influence, arranged for him to speak in the city hall, telling detractors that, if necessary, "he would take his gun and stand by me."¹⁴

A letter from Killingsworth published in the *Review* about the happenings in Griffin, considered alongside a life sketch of Taylor by S. H. Lane, sheds light on the approach Taylor took in his mission to previously-unentered and somewhat hostile territory. First, Taylor "made many friends . . . despite his Northern birth."¹⁵ He possessed a "mild disposition" though firm in his convictions, according to Lane, who worked with him in New York. With this trait, Taylor apparently succeeded in defusing opposition and creating openness to his message. He was also a "sociable man," who read widely, kept informed about current events and issues and "wove truth into his conversations." He thus attracted to the gospel message at least as many through personal interaction as he did through preaching at public meetings.¹⁶

Second, Killingsworth highlighted the fact that Taylor spoke "from house to house and in the churches" as opportunities arose.¹⁷ In circumstances where the standard series of public evangelistic meetings was not possible, Taylor moved in a somewhat ad hoc fashion, speaking wherever "the way opened."¹⁸

Third, Killingsworth referred to Taylor's distribution of "reading matter."¹⁹ In his own reports Taylor repeatedly referred to his use of tracts and periodicals and their effectiveness both in strengthening the interest expressed by those to whom he spoke and in creating an initial interest in readers that he then reinforced through personal contact or preaching.²⁰

Though the addition of three new Sabbath-keepers to a small nucleus of believers was the only immediate effect in Griffin, Killingsworth expressed confidence that through Taylor's labors "ere long the words, 'Seventh-day Adventist,' will become familiar household words in Georgia."²¹ Though the comment was overly exuberant if taken as literal prediction, further evidence for the efficacy of Taylor's approach would stem from an encounter with William F. Killen of Houston County in central Georgia.²²

Killen, plantation owner, attorney, and one of the most influential public leaders in the county, was also a devout Baptist who had long cherished a desire to become a "faithful preacher of the pure gospel of the Son of God."²³ Taylor's stop while passing through Houston County on the way to Griffin in 1877 resulted, without any preset agenda, in Killen's opportunity to hear Taylor "talk privately on the Lord's Sabbath, and other Bible subjects." Taylor left some literature with him and soon sent more. The reading thoroughly convinced Killen and within weeks he and his family were observing the seventh-day Sabbath.²⁴ Killen became an ordained Seventh-day

Adventist minister in 1880, serving on a self-supporting basis until his death in 1894. Four of his sons and at least two daughters canvassed denominational literature and two of the sons became ministers.²⁵

Black freedpeople, whom Killen held in slavery until 1865, just a dozen years prior, but now worked on the land as sharecroppers, proved receptive to the message. These included a “colored minister,” Edmund Killen, who never became a formally-recognized Seventh-day Adventist minister but won several to the faith through his preaching.²⁶ When W. F. Killen arranged for Taylor to hold five meetings at the county courthouse in Perry in early April 1878, Taylor observed: “The freedmen improved the opportunity of attending, as the meeting was in the court-house. They were much interested, and urged me to send a minister of their own color to speak the truth to them.”²⁷ Though his write-ups did not address racial conditions directly, Taylor reported positive experiences speaking to “colored” listeners in varied settings and circumstances during his mission to the South.²⁸

North Carolina

Sometime in 1878, Taylor moved his home base from southern Georgia, to Reynolds, in the central part of the state, where he had raised up a company of believers. After about a year, he and Matilda pulled up stakes again and made their way to Watauga County in western North Carolina.²⁹ In Boone, Taylor found four families who were keeping the Sabbath as a result of the literature sent from Tract Society workers in the North.³⁰

Taylor worked in North Carolina only about six months, but by the time he left, the first Seventh-day Adventist church in the state, initially known as the Watauga Church, was established.³¹ L. Patterson Hodges, whom Taylor baptized in the summer of 1879, was ordained for gospel ministry in November 1880 at the same meeting in which Columbus F. Fox and Samuel H. Kime received preaching licenses.³²

Alabama and Mississippi

Heading back to the Deep South, Taylor located at Bladon Springs in Choctaw County, western Alabama, in December 1879. Jesse M. Elliott (sometimes spelled Ellett), a Southern Unionist who lost his sight while fighting for the Union army in the Civil War, had stirred considerable interest in the Adventist message in this region in 1877 as a self-supporting preacher.³³ A. O. Burrill, an ordained minister sent by the General Conference followed with further evangelism and organization of two churches with a combined total of some 50 members in 1878.³⁴ Instability and attrition ensued, however, and the General Conference Committee received a request in April 1879 for Taylor’s help in Alabama. He labored there for much of December 1879 through March 1880, reporting that six new members had been added and several more had taken temperance pledges.³⁵

In January 1880, sandwiched between his efforts in Alabama, Taylor spent a week in Jackson County, Mississippi, seeking to encourage Peter H. Clark, whose family he believed to be the only seventh-day Sabbath observers in the state, to devote himself to preaching the message. Taylor then proceeded to New Orleans, Louisiana,

apparently becoming the first to preach the Seventh-day Adventist message in that city.³⁶

Later that year, Matilda Taylor became seriously ill. Her husband took her to Battle Creek Sanitarium, but her body had broken down beyond recovery. She died at the sanitarium of “a derangement of the stomach and a complication of diseases” on October 31, 1880, at age 56. After she was funeralized at Battle Creek Tabernacle on November 5, her husband took her to Adams Center, New York, for burial.³⁷

Taylor did not linger long at his home. By February 1881 he had resumed his mission in the Deep South, locating again at Bladon Springs, Alabama, to work in association with J. M. Elliott. In addition to nurturing the believers there, both preachers evangelized at various locales in Alabama and neighboring Mississippi.³⁸ The rigors endured by the 64-year-old preacher can be glimpsed in a report he published in the *Review* about journeying to fulfill appointments in Washington County, Alabama, during the third and fourth weeks of May 1882:

On starting to fill my appointment in this county, my health was so poor that I thought I could hardly endure the ride on horseback, but I started, calling on the Lord and trusting in him. I was called to Choctaw county by the death of sister Rogers. I rode over two hundred and fifty miles in about ten days, and felt in good cheer and strength when I got through. To our God, who, made the heavens and the earth, be all the praise.³⁹

A camp meeting held in Choctaw County in the Fall of 1882 provides a window on the hard won fruit of Taylor’s labor in the Deep South. Attendees came from Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama, about 120 in all, nearly half of them children. Small by later standards, it was the largest Southern meeting held by Seventh-day Adventists to date. Taylor was one of four main speakers and W. F. Killen of Georgia, to whom he had related the Adventist message four-and-a-half years earlier, was another. The encamped believers made known their high regard for Taylor’s ministry in voting a resolution “to request the General Conference to continue the labors of our much beloved brother, Eld. C. O. Taylor, with us” and pledging to “help hold up his hands by heeding his counsel and paying our tithes into the treasury for the support of the work here.”⁴⁰

Final Years

Six months later, in May 1883, with plans well-laid for another camp meeting in the fall, Taylor announced, “I close my labors with this people for the present.” Three other laborers, he explained, had been raised up to preach publicly and carry forward the work in the region.⁴¹ Marriage plans apparently also precipitated his departure from the South because less than a month later, in June 1883, he married Mary Jane (“Jennie”) Haskell (1838-1913) of Norfolk, New York.⁴²

Taylor resumed ministry in the New York Conference and, despite experiencing a stroke at age 84 in January 1902, continued preaching after recovering. Nor did a second and more severe stroke in August 1903 entirely silence him. Taylor and his wife accepted the hospitality of Brother and Sister S. T. Crosbie in Buck’s Bridge, New York, where the preacher held forth each Sabbath, preaching a short sermon from his chair to the small

congregation that met in the home. The Taylors returned to Norfolk for the difficult, final year of his life, which came to an end on August 9, 1905, at age 87. He was buried alongside his first wife and their children in Adams Center, New York.⁴³

Legacy

Beginning near the time of the movement's inception in 1854, Charles O. Taylor preached the Seventh-day Adventist message for 50 years, taking a prominent role in establishing its lasting presence in New York state. He initiated the church's work in the Deep South when he ventured to Georgia in 1876. He also conducted pioneering ministry in Alabama, Mississippi, and North Carolina, and evangelized for briefer periods in Florida, South Carolina, and Louisiana.⁴⁴ His work contributed to the slow build-up of momentum in every state, except Kentucky and Tennessee, that would later comprise the Southern Union Conference, which became by far the largest union in the North American Division with a membership of 317,416 as of 2022.⁴⁵

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NOTES

1. S.H. Lane, "Another Pioneer Fallen," *ARH*, September 7, 1905, 19.
2. Douglas Morgan, "Taylor, Daniel T. (1823–1899)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, July 7, 2022, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=9JDW>. This article also provides a brief overview of the development of the differing Adventist denominations after 1844, as does Denis Fortin, "Advent Christian Church," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, February 15, 2023, accessed February 22, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=H8SW>.
3. Lane, "Another Pioneer Fallen," 19; "Charles Taylor" in 1850 United States Federal Census, and "Charles O. Lagler [Taylor]" in 1860 United States Federal Census, both in Champlain, Clinton, New York, accessed February 23, 2023, Ancestry.com; "Matilda Whipple Taylor," *Find A Grave*, Memorial ID 75734788, August 31, 2011, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/75734788/matilda-taylor>.
4. "Report of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists," *ARH*, May 26, 1863, 204.

5. "New York Conference Report," *ARH*, December 1, 1863, 2.
6. Hiram P. Taylor obituary notice, *ARH*, August 22, 1865, 95; Thomas W. Taylor and Gracy C. Taylor obituary notice, *ARH*, November 7, 1865, 183; C.O. Taylor, "Report From Bro. Taylor," *ARH*, November 7, 1865, 183; "Charles Taylor" in 1865 New York State Census, accessed February 22, 2023, Ancestry.com.
7. Lane, "Another Pioneer Fallen," 20.
8. Arthur W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists*, Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1962), 171.
9. J.O. Corliss, "The Work in the South," *ARH*, December 16, 1880, 397. Corliss does not identify the Tract Society women by names, but L. P. Hodges later identified Lucy A. Sargent of Haverhill as one of them; see J.J. Rowe, "L. Patterson Hodges obituary," *ARH*, February 27, 1894, 143; "Lucy A. Hammond," *FamilySearch*, accessed March 2, 2023, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/about/LW5Q-F2W>.
10. Taylor must have been in attendance at the annual conferences session because he published advance notice and information about in the August 24, 1876, issue of the *Review*. Under the "Business Department" heading in the November 9, 1876 issue he gave notice that his address was now Quitman, Brooks Co., Georgia.
11. C.O. Taylor, "Georgia," *ARH*, January 4, 1877, 5. The Primitive Baptists emerged in Georgia early in the 19th century and, as Taylor noted, had significant points of contact with Seventh-day Adventism, such as a rigorous commitment to Scripture and practice of foot washing. On the other hand they differed sharply from Adventism in their strict Calvinist belief in predestination. See John G. Crowley, "Primitive Baptists," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, August 2, 2018, accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/primitive-baptists>.
12. C.O. Taylor, "Quitman, GA," *ARH*, September 20, 1877, 101.
13. Killingsworth, who earned a diploma at Dr. Russell Trall's Hygieo-Therapeutic College, as did John Harvey Kellogg and other Adventists, died in 1882, just five years after Taylor's visit to Griffin; see C.O. Taylor, "Dr. J.A. Killingsworth obituary," *ARH*, June 20, 1882, 396.
14. C.O. Taylor, "Georgia," *ARH*, October 18, 1877, 126.
15. "Letters From the Southern Field," *ARH*, October 25, 1877, 135.
16. Lane, "Another Pioneer Fallen," 19.
17. "Letters From the Southern Field."
18. Taylor, "Georgia," October 18, 1877.

19. "Letters From the Southern Field."
20. See for example, C.O. Taylor, "Reynolds, Ga.," *ARH*, March 14, 1878, 86.
21. "Letters From the Southern Field."
22. Kevin L. Morgan, "Killen, William Francis (1836–1894)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed March 1, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=9CGB>.
23. C.O. Taylor, "Reynolds, Ga.," *ARH*, January 3, 1878, 7.
24. "Letters From the Southern Field."
25. Morgan, "Killen, William Francis (1836-1894)."
26. Taylor, "Reynolds, Ga.," March 14, 1878; Morgan, "Killen, William Francis (1836-1894)."
27. C.O. Taylor, "Reynolds, Ga.," April 18, 1878, 127.
28. See, for example, Taylor, "Georgia," in *ARH*, January 4, 1877 and October 18, 1877.
29. C.O. Taylor, "The Cause in the South," *ARH*, May 15, 1879, 159; C.O. Taylor, "South Carolina," *ARH*, June 12, 1879, 190.
30. C. O. Taylor, "North Carolina," *ARH*, July 10, 1879, 22.
31. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. edition (1996), s.v. "Carolina Conference."
32. Corliss, "The Work in the South," 397; Rowe, "L. Patterson Hodges obituary," 143; Spalding, *Origin and History*, Vol. 2, 179, 181..
33. C.O. Taylor, "New Orleans, La.," *ARH*, February 5, 1880, 93; Shane Hochstetler, "Gulf States Conference," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed March 1, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=B9E8>.
34. A.O. Burrill, "Alabama," *ARH*, March 21, 1878, 62.
35. General Conference Session Minutes, April 17, 1879, 140, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives; C.O. Taylor, "The Southern Field," *ARH*, February 19, 1880, 125; C.O. Taylor, "Bladon Springs, Ala.," *ARH*, March 18, 1880, 189.
36. Taylor, "New Orleans, La.," 93; Spalding, *Origin and History*, Vol. 2, 182.
37. U. S[mith], "M[atilda] W[hipple] Taylor obituary," *ARH*, November 4, 1880, 302.

38. C.O. Taylor, "Alabama," *ARH*, March 8, 1881, 155; C.O. Taylor, "The Southern Field," *ARH*, March 21, 1881, 186-187; J.M. Elliott, "Alabama," *ARH*, February 8, 1881, 90.
39. C.O. Taylor, "The Southern Field," *ARH*, June 20, 1882, 395.
40. A.O. Burrill, "Alabama Camp-Meeting," *ARH*, November 7, 1882, 698.
41. C.O. Taylor, "Alabama," *ARH*, May 29, 1883, 348.
42. Lane, "Another Pioneer Fallen," 19; Emma L. Lawrence, "Mary Jane Haskell Taylor obituary," *ARH*, September 4, 1913, 22.
43. Lane, "Another Pioneer Fallen," 19-20; S.B. Whitney, "An Old Pioneer Fallen," *New York Indicator*, August 23, 1905, 1; S.H. Lane, "Among the Churches," *New York Indicator*, December 30, 1903, 1.
44. Previously cited sources document activity by Taylor in all of these states except Florida, mention in Spalding, *Origin and History*, Vol. 2, 179, 182.
45. *Annual Statistical Report 2022*, 25, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Online Archives, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2022.pdf>.

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