

Blake, Charlotte (Lottie) Cornelia Isbell (1876–1976)

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Dr. Charlotte (Lottie) Isbell Blake served the church as a pioneering physician, hospital administrator, medical missionary, and teacher. She is distinguished as the first African-American Seventh-day Adventist to become a licensed physician.

Early Life (1876-1896)

Charlotte (Lottie) Cornelia Isbell was born on June 10, 1876 to Thomas E. Isbell (1853-1941) and Frances (Fannie) Louise Diuguid Isbell (1855-1931) in Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia.¹ Lottie was born in the home of her maternal grandfather, John Charles Diuguid, a free Black man who owned a blacksmith shop and the property adjacent to the Helm House where General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant to end the U.S. Civil War.² She was the first of the eleven Isbell children. Six of her siblings died in infancy: Sarah E. (1877-1880), Charles (1879-1880), Faith (1886), Hope (1886), Ethel (1890), and Gertrude E. (1897-1900). Two of the four who survived into adulthood, Mamie Louise (1882-1910) and Raymond David (1888-1917), did not reach age 30. The other two, Thomas Oscar (1884-1972) and Veola Garry (Cox) (1894-1990), like Lottie, experienced long lives.³ In pursuit of better economic opportunities and to escape the harsh challenges of post-Civil War violence and racial prejudice the Isbell and Diuguid families relocated to Columbus, Ohio when Lottie was three years old.



Dr. Lottie C. Blake

Photo courtesy of Oakwood University.

There Thomas worked as a carpenter and Fannie worked as a seamstress while caring for home and their growing family.

The Isbells, who were devout Christians, helped to establish the Union Grove Baptist Church in Columbus. The church began with a Sunday story hour for the children of the neighborhood run by Fannie, which soon developed into a formal Sunday School. With the parents of the children being drawn into attendance, the church was born. Lottie remained Baptist until in 1896 when at age 20 she, her sister Mamie, and their mother converted to the Seventh-day Adventist Church along with two of Lottie's aunts, Alice Diuguid Bowman (1857-1944) and Grace Diuguid (later, Kimbrough) (1878-1960).⁴

Advanced Education (1894-1902)

At the time of her conversion to Adventism young Lottie had just completed a two-year teachers' training course following graduation from high school in 1894 and was planning to teach in the same public schools of Columbus, Ohio where she had been educated. However, her decision to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church took her in a different direction, launching her onto an extraordinary path of medical missionary service. Lottie's Bible instructor and new church members soon recognized her exceptional gifts and intellect. She accepted their advice to study at the Adventist Nurses' Training School, established in 1883 at the Battle Creek Sanitarium in Michigan.⁵

After enrolling in 1896, Lottie, along with other students, lived in the home of the well-known physician and head of Battle Creek Sanitarium, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, and worked under his direction. Kellogg recognized Lottie's potential and mentored her as he often did for promising students.⁶ When she completed the nursing program with the intent of becoming a missionary nurse somewhere in Africa, he guided her to study medicine at the American Medical Missionary College in Battle Creek (Adventism's first medical school, a forerunner to Loma Linda University in California). Again, Lottie followed advice and graduated at the top of her class from the American Medical Missionary College in 1902.⁷ Lottie Isbell thus became the first African-American Seventh-day Adventist to become a degreed medical doctor.⁸

Entry into Medical Ministry (1902-1905)

Dr. Kellogg advised Dr. Isbell to give up her aspirations for service in the mission fields in Africa, and rather to serve in the southern United States. He recommended that she practice medicine and establish a sanitarium and nurses training center for Blacks. Once again, she followed his advice. She accepted a call to serve as the director of the Rock City Sanitarium in Nashville, Tennessee, recently founded in 1901.⁹ The beginnings were truly rocky for this institution. The well-informed, sophisticated Black community in the Nashville area did not readily accept the natural remedies offered by Dr. Isbell at her sanitarium and treatment rooms. There was an academic community with the presence of Fisk and Walden universities and they had become accustomed to

what they felt were the more advanced approaches to medicine practiced at the Meharry Medical College, also located in Nashville. They labeled Dr. Isbell's hydrotherapy disdainfully as "rag treatments."¹⁰

In the face of this rejection Dr. Isbell moved her treatment rooms to the Hillcrest community just north of Nashville, hoping the rural populations would be more receptive to her natural approaches to medicine than urban Nashville residents had been. Instead, she met the same resistance as did her white male counterpart, Dr. Louis A. Hansen, who offered natural remedies to white populations in Nashville and its surrounding area. Nevertheless, Dr. Lottie Isbell's labor there was not in vain. Her Rock City Sanitarium was the forerunner of the Riverside Sanitarium and Hospital that was the first Black Seventh-day Adventist medical facility in that region. Nellie H. Druillard, whose leadership and philanthropy brought new life to the institution in 1927, turned it over to the General Conference in 1935 and it was expanded into a modern hospital that served the Black residents, and then all residents of the Nashville, Tennessee metropolitan area until its closing in 1983.¹¹

However, in 1903, in view of the resistance, along with the fact that she was not able to establish a nursing school for Blacks in Nashville, Dr. Isbell accepted a new call to Alabama to serve as resident physician at the Oakwood Manual Training School near Huntsville. At the time of this call an epidemic had broken out among the orphans who resided at the Oakwood school, and Dr. Isbell made the seriously ill children her immediate priority. As she ministered successfully to the children at Oakwood, she also gave time and energy to service in treatment rooms run by her former Battle Creek nursing school classmate, Dr. J. Jim Pearson, in Birmingham, 101 miles (162.3 kilometers) from Huntsville.¹² She served in the Birmingham treatment rooms for the next three years but continued commuting to Oakwood where she was endeavoring to establish a nursing school. She realized her dream in 1905 with opening of a nurses training program at Oakwood that has continued to the present.¹³ Dr. Lottie Isbell is recognized as the first black teacher and the first with a terminal, doctoral level degree to serve at Oakwood.¹⁴

Lottie Isbell's initiation into the medical profession would likely have been too challenging for a less determined individual. One author, who characterized her as brilliant, born to triumph, and a descendant of royal Ibo blood, shared an illustrative incident that attests to her tenacity and resilience:

At the turn of the century in the deep South, a radiant, confident, brown-skinned young lady of 28 years enters a room filled with all white males. A crushing silence descended. Without acknowledging their stares, Dr. Lottie Isbell, a practicing physician for two years, takes her seat and begins to write her exam. Once the men overcome their shock of seeing a black woman physician, they make every effort to let her know she is [not] welcome. She is treated as an alien from outer space. No one dares sit beside her or utter a word to her.

The next morning the Proctor announces that Dr. Lottie Isbell scored a perfect paper. Suddenly, the doctors rushed to her desk and each one tries to sit as close to the brilliant young physician as possible. The doctors openly copied her answers word for [word]. The year was 1904. Dr. Lottie Isbell had scored another triumph.

She was now a licensed physician for the state of Alabama.¹⁵

Balancing Medicine, Mission Work, and Family (1905-1957)

It was during these career-formative years that Dr. Isbell met and began to correspond with Pastor David Emanuel Blake. Born to George and Eliza Blackwell Blake on August 24, 1877 in St. James Parish, Jamaica, British West Indies, David Blake had migrated to South Lancaster, Massachusetts. He converted to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1901 through Bible study with W.W. Eastman and had come to study for pastoral ministry at the South Lancaster Academy (later Atlantic Union College). Upon graduation he entered the ministry in Florida in 1905.¹⁶ Charlotte Cornelia Isbell and David Emanuel Blake united in marriage in Birmingham, Alabama on September 18, 1907.¹⁷

With encouragement from church leaders the new couple moved to Nashville shortly after their marriage where Lottie re-established the Rock City Sanitarium and David pastored a church while studying medicine at the Meharry Medical College. In addition, David served with Lottie who had been convinced to reopen treatment rooms for natural remedies at the sanitarium. They served there until 1912 at which time David graduated from Meharry as a physician. Upon his graduation the Blake family moved to Columbus, Ohio where David organized a small group of believers into what grew into the current Columbus Ephesus Church and both he and Lottie practiced medicine.¹⁸

Although life in Columbus was comfortable, the Blakes accepted a call to the mission field. In early 1913 David left Columbus to begin mission work in Panama and to establish a home for his young family in the town of Empire.¹⁹ By that time the Blakes had three daughters, Frances Elizabeth (1908-1999), Sarah Katherine (1909-1986), and Marcia Louise (1912-1993). Later that same year Lottie and the girls joined David and soon after their fourth daughter, Alice Evelyn (1913-2014), was born. Four years later their fifth child, a son, David (1916-1975), was also born in Panama. For the next four years the two physicians served as self-supporting medical missionaries in the Canal Zone, Panama. David practiced medicine and engaged in evangelism from the small church they raised up and Lottie practiced medicine while devoting most of her time to the care and education of their five children. For a while Lottie also taught the children of several wealthy families in her little school.²⁰

Just after the only hospital in Colón closed due to the completion of the canal in 1913, the Blakes secured a lease on twelve rooms for their medical work in a large building in Cristóbal, the American settlement adjacent to Colón. Then they acquired much-needed medical equipment through the Isthmian Canal Commission from that same hospital closing.²¹ The needs for medical care were great and the Blakes' services were well received in Panama. However, because conditions in Panama took a toll on the family's health with all members suffering from malaria at some point while there, they decided to move to another mission location.

The Blakes next went to serve as medical missionaries in Port au Prince, Haiti where they were again well received in providing medical care while raising up another church.²² However, with five children for whom to

care they soon were no longer financially able to sustain their ministries. In May 1916 General Conference leaders responded to their plight and sought to encourage the physician team in their self-supporting medical missionary work with their vote of an appropriation of \$200 for church and school buildings and a grant-in-aid of \$150 for Dr. David Blake for establishing mission work in Cape Haitien.²³ Soon, though, due to public agitation from revolutions and the U.S. Marine Corps occupation of the nation, and finally, more bouts with malaria, the Blakes decided to move their family back to the United States via a brief stay in Jamaica with David's family. Lottie and the children remained in Jamaica for several months before rejoining David, who had journeyed ahead to Charlestown, West Virginia to establish another medical practice for the two.²⁴

The physician team prepared to serve together in the American South once again. However, this was not to be. Before they could begin their work, Dr. David Blake suffered a severe chill after venturing into the cold rain, developed pneumonia almost immediately, and died one week later on October 31, 1917. Lottie was left to raise the five children and carry on the medical work alone.

After struggling for several months to provide for her children Dr. Lottie Blake applied for and on April 28, 1918, was granted \$8.00 per week in temporary sustentation funds from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. At that time the four children for whom Lottie was most concerned were ages 3, 6, 8, and 10. Alice, age 5, had already gone to live in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with Lottie's Aunt Alice Diuguid Bowman who had joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church with her back in 1896. The other four children were taken to live with other family members. To Lottie's chagrin, these family members, who had been practicing Seventh-day Adventists, had become vexed by newly imposed segregation policies or practices in Adventist congregations and had left the church. Although Lottie experienced some of the same vexations, she remained loyal to the Seventh-day Adventist Church throughout her life and was adamant that her children be raised Adventist and remain in the Adventist church.²⁵

In her application for sustentation Dr. Blake indicated the family had no home of their own. She declared in her application: "My children are now with my parents, not Adventists. I hope to secure such help that I can have them under my supervision and yet be free to do enough medical work to support, as soon as possible."²⁶ Thus, Dr. Lottie Blake began a new phase of life.

In 1920, after reordering her life to meet her new circumstances, Dr. Blake decided to return to full time medical practice in Charlestown, West Virginia and remained there for the next five years. At the end of this period she moved back to Columbus, reunited with her children, and practiced medicine there for the next 15 years from 1920 to 1935.²⁷

Finally, Dr. Blake moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where she practiced medicine twenty-two years from 1935 to 1957.²⁸ For a portion of that time she partnered with Dr. Stark O. Cherry before his death in 1945.²⁹ She continued the practice alone and specialized in women's and children's medicine. However, she is acclaimed in

the medical world for her discovery of a cure for “Smokey City” pneumonia, a serious respiratory illness caused by the polluted air that was characteristic of Pittsburgh and other large cities at that time.³⁰

Retirement and Final Years (1957-1976)

At age 81 Dr. Lottie Isbell Blake retired from the practice of medicine in 1957. In her career Dr. Blake passed six medical board examinations. She was licensed and practiced medicine in Tennessee, Alabama, Ohio, Panama, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania. The American Medical Association honored her for more than fifty years of medical practice.³¹

During these 50 years Dr. Blake served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an employee for 15 years with official appointments in the Alabama, South Carolina, and West Virginia conferences. Throughout her lifetime of professional service Dr. Blake maintained faithful service to the local church in personal ministries as choir director, church treasurer, and Sabbath School teacher. She continued her ministry even in her retirement years by giving Bible studies and distributing religious literature. For her final years Dr. Lottie Blake settled with her daughter, Alice Evelyn Blake Brantley in Huntsville, Alabama and died there on November 16, 1976 at the age of 100.³²

Legacy

Perhaps young Lottie followed in the footsteps of her maternal grandmother, Sarah Duiguid, who practiced folk medicine and midwifery in a time when qualified physicians were scarce, especially among Black populations.³³ She took this legacy of service to a higher level of professionalism through pioneering medical ministry and will long be remembered as an iconic medical missionary and educator. “But,” wrote Louis B. Reynolds, “the traumatic memory of her experience in the South pursued her throughout her long career.” He quotes Dr. Blake as reflecting, “If there is any logical explanation required to throw light in the direction my life is taken, maybe it was the desire to save black young people from similar scenes, similar traumatic experiences.”³⁴

Dr. Charlotte Isbell Blake left a legacy of faith, loyalty, stamina, professionalism, intellectual prowess, and humility to her church and her family. Her legacy is evidenced through her many relatives and mentees who were inspired by her service and have themselves given their gifts and talents to the church as medical professionals, missionaries, educators, and church leaders.

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