

Patterson, James Elisha (1857–1922)

DEWITT S. WILLIAMS

DeWitt S. Williams, Ed.D. (Indiana University) lives in Maryland after 46 years of denominational service. He pastored in Oklahoma, served as a missionary in the Congo (Departmental and Field President), and Burundi/Rwanda (President, Central African Union). He served 12 years in the General Conference as Associate Director in both the Communications and Health and Temperance Departments. His last service was Director of NAD Health Ministries (1990-2010). He authored nine books and numerous articles.

James Elisha Patterson was the first black Seventh-day Adventist to go out from the United States as a foreign missionary.

Early Life and Conversion

Born November 15, 1857 on the island of St. Vincent, British West Indies, Patterson came to the United States in 1874 at age sixteen. He went first to New York and then migrated to California. He and his wife, Mary, who was born in Jamestown, Virginia in 1855, had at least four children. The first, Alberta, was born in 1883 in Battle Mountain, Nevada. Their sons Walter (1890), William (1891) and James (1894) were all born in California. James Patterson was naturalized in California, October 5, 1899.¹

As a young man, Patterson became a sailor, then a cook and eventually a chef. He later became the first black man to be hired as a steward by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. He became financially successful and bought a house on Mason Street in San Francisco. Patterson supplemented his income by participating in the lucrative but unsavory practice of smuggling Chinese people into the United States for ill-paid labor, often under oppressive conditions²

At some point prior to 1892, the direction of James Patterson's life changed after he was swept overboard during a violent storm in the Indian Ocean, only to be swept back onto the ship by another huge wave. Convinced that he had been rescued in a miraculous way by God's mercy, he devoted his life to God's service and thereafter became a Seventh-day Adventist.³ He gave much of his wealth to the church and became a colporteur. The family had to move several times and their living conditions deteriorated.⁴

Bringing Adventism to Jamaica

When Patterson went to Jamaica in June 1892 to disseminate the Adventist message by selling literature, the island had no Adventist churches and no Adventist presence. Earlier that year, Lewis Chadwick, president of the International Tract and Missionary Society, spent 18 days in Jamaica during an extensive trip to identify countries where the Adventist message was most likely to gain a hearing. Chadwick recommended that an "experienced canvasser" be selected to introduce the nation to Adventism by selling books. He regarded Jamaica as a "hopeful field," but added:

The one or ones who go there to work, must expect to meet many difficulties unknown at home, and must go prepared to work hard and perseveringly in order to make their going successful. To the right one there is chance for good work, and I hope and pray that the Lord, whose work it is, may himself direct in the selection of someone to engage in the sale of our books in this island.⁵

During the first few months of his work, Patterson found that one of the biggest problems he had to deal with was reaching white owners of large plantations. In a letter sent September 7 to the International Tract and Missionary Society headquarters in Battle Creek, Michigan, Patterson reported:



James Elisha Patterson
Photo courtesy of DeWitt S. Williams.

I had to work mostly with the second and third classes of people here. In many instances I had to send the book in to be looked at while I stood at the door and waited. A white person would be allowed to enter and give a canvass, and by thus doing could create an interest and doubtless take an order, and then of course would have no difficulty in delivering; while I meet with a good many postponements on account of having to work mostly with the poorer class...I am very thankful for the small books and tracts which were sent me with my order for books; they have done much good.⁶

Despite the difficulties, his work was beginning to bear fruit: "Five have accepted the truth, and met with us for worship last Sabbath, and were out last evening to prayer meeting. Many of the ministers are warning their congregations against reading the spurious literature which is being spread in the city."⁷

In 1893 other colporteurs and a young minister, Albert James Haysmer, and his wife, came to Jamaica to carry forward the work Patterson had begun. A church organized in Kingston in 1894 with 35 members, growing to 74 during the year that followed.⁸

Patterson met with great success especially in selling *Bible Readings for the Home Circle*. The impact of one copy became evident four years later when Haysmer met a young former Salvation Army captain in South Field. In a home he was visiting, the young man noticed the book that Patterson had sold and began looking through it.

He accidentally turned to the Sabbath question, and as he read, he thought, "What does this mean?" He borrowed the book, and studied it carefully; and being honest, the result was, of course, his acceptance of the truth. He soon became full to overflowing with the message, and was expelled from the [Salvation] Army, but not until he had laid before them the light which God had given him. Several months have passed, and as the result of his faithful labors, twenty are now keeping the Sabbath with him.⁹

Pitcairn Cook and Sanitarium Chef

In 1896, Patterson was the cook and steward on the fifth of the six missionary voyages of the ship *Pitcairn* to Pitcairn island and other islands in the South Pacific. The ship left the Oakland, California wharf on May 19, 1896 and arrived back in Oakland in November 1896.¹⁰

Though listed as part of the crew, separately from the ministers, medical personnel, and teachers who constituted the missionaries, Patterson apparently was also doing what he did best – spreading the Adventist message through literature. "Some of the crew had taken a leading role selling Christian literature," wrote Herbert Ford in his history of the *Pitcairn* voyages.¹¹

From 1899 to at least 1902, Patterson worked as the chef at St. Helena Sanitarium in northern California. Several of his vegetarian recipes were published in *Signs of the Times* and the *Pacific Health Journal*.¹²

Missionary Dentist in Panama

The colporteur spirit having stirred him again, Patterson's next recorded missionary venture took him to Panama in 1910. His first canvassing report recorded: "37 hours, 56 orders for 'Heralds' and 8 orders for 'Coming King,' Spanish." Patterson's fluency in Spanish served him well in Panama. He also spoke French and German.¹³

A few months later, Charles F. Innis, who was "in charge of the book work" in Panama, reported:

Brother Patterson will soon take up the work in Panama City with "Salud y Hogar" ("Home and Health"). Then we are planning to send him to Cartagena, Colombia. This will be pioneer work for him. Recently he took eleven orders in the government building at Colon, including the governor, Secretary of State, and other officials.¹⁴

Patterson became seriously ill in 1915 and spent three years at the United States Marine Hospital in San Francisco working as a porter and undergoing treatment for "chronic tuberculosis." In 1918, desiring to go once again to the West Indies, Patterson, applied for a new passport. A letter from the United States Public Health Service attached to the application recommended approval: "He is anxious to go to St. Vincent in the West Indian islands to benefit his health, and it is believed this trip will be of decided benefit to him."¹⁵

A few months later, a request in the "Wanted for Missionary Work" section in the August 12, 1919 edition of *Signs of the Times* gave evidence that, whatever the health benefit, mission remained the central purpose driving James Patterson: "J.E. Patterson, Kingstown, St. Vincent, B.W.I. desires clean copies of the *Signs Magazine*, tracts, *Life Boat*, and other of our papers, to be used in missionary endeavor in that community. Send postage paid."¹⁶

That is the last mention of James Patterson yet discovered in denominational sources. However, the autobiography of his son, William L. Patterson, reveals that the elder Patterson had taken a course in dentistry in the United States and had opened a dental office in Panama to support himself and his missionary activities.

Legacy

William Patterson rejected his father's religious teachings and devoted his life to radical politics. He became a prominent leader in the Communist Party, U.S.A. and head of the International Labor Defense (ILD) which provided legal representation for communists, trade unionists and African Americans in cases involving political or racial persecution, such as the prosecution of the Scottsboro nine in the 1930s.

In 1922, William Patterson passed through Panama City and met with his father. The two had neither seen nor communicated with each other for several years. James's absences from home for years at a time during his missionary trips had also distanced him from his son.

Not realizing that James was suffering from tuberculosis, William noted that he "was terribly emaciated and looked like a very sick man." Yet, he felt impressed by his father's accomplishments: "The unlettered boy who had started out from Kingston as a sailor was now a dentist." As William saw it, his father had been "forgotten by the church to which he had given his life and all else he possessed."

They talked for an hour, then embraced. Then: "He knelt down for pray for my welfare. There was no greater understanding between us now than there had been in my childhood. But I admired him. He was a man. He was, according to his lights, a good man, even though his kind of thinking was alien to me."¹⁷

Shortly thereafter, James Patterson returned to Jamaica, where he died in 1922.¹⁸ Though never ordained, credentialed, nor salaried, he was the first African American Seventh-day Adventist to undertake missionary work in foreign lands. Not only that, he introduced Adventism to Jamaica where, as of 2018, the Seventh-day Adventist church reported more than 314,000 members, 10.7% of the entire population.¹⁹

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NOTES

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