

Knight, Rachel

“Anna”

(1874–1972)

DOROTHY KNIGHT MARSH

Dorothy Knight Marsh was born in Soso, Mississippi. After a career as a business owner, she retired to Mississippi and spends her time continuing the Knight Family Legacy. Dorothy Knight Marsh is a published author of the book, *From Cotton Fields to Mission Fields, the Story of Anna Knight*.

Rachel “Anna” Knight was an African-American Adventist missionary nurse, teacher, colporteur, Bible worker, and conference official.

Early Life

Rachel “Anna” Knight was born on March 4, 1874 in Jasper County, Mississippi!¹ Her father, Newton Knight, a white farmer and ex-Confederate soldier, fought in the early stages of the Civil War. He later regarded the conflict as a rich man’s war and returned to Mississippi to take care of the women and children who were left behind.² Anna’s mother, Georgeanne, who had been emancipated from slavery, was of racially mixed heritage. Anna and her two sisters, Lessie and Grace, and her brother, Howard, lived with their mother along with aunts and uncles in a small, overcrowded house in the Knight community, located on the southwestern border of Jasper County, about ten miles north of the town of Laurel. Although their daily life was austere, through energetic labor and frugality, the family managed to purchase 160 acres and livestock. Within the confines of their communal existence, they grew their own food, planted cotton, and sold timber as a cash crop.

Anna was the most inquisitive child in the family. She grew up with a thirst for the wealth of knowledge that could be acquired outside the Knight community (called Six Town) in Mississippi. Barred by race from attending the local school, she learned to read and write by bartering for books with her white cousins who attended school. Anna helped her cousins with their chores and, in exchange, they taught her how to read. She would go to the creek bed, smooth out the sand, and practice forming the letters of the alphabet in the sand with a stick. By the age of 14, she knew enough to teach other children. Using boards painted with wet soot as the



Rachel "Anna" Knight.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

blackboard, and with chalk from the creek bed, she wrote out the alphabet while the children sounded out the letters. Although her teaching style was primitive, it served its purpose, since no formal education was allowed for mixed-race children in that community.

Baptism and Education (1889–1898)

Few outsiders visited Six Town. When a salesman came to the town soliciting subscriptions for the *Home and Fireside* magazine, there was little money to spare in the Knight household. Anna begged her mother for a dollar to subscribe, and then, after receiving the magazine, she sent in her name to receive free samples of additional magazines and other reading matter. Eventually, in 1891, she received a bundle of Seventh-day Adventist periodicals from W. W. Eastman in Texas and a copy of *Signs of the Times* from Edith Embree, an employee at the magazine office in Oakland, California. Embree was part of a Young People's Literature and Correspondence Band and thus kept in touch with Anna, sending new issues of the magazine and an occasional letter. After nearly six months of intensively studying the literature and Bible lessons Edith had sent her, comparing everything with the Bible, Anna resolved to be baptized and join the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

At this time the Adventist work in the American South was in its earliest stages and had no organized presence in Mississippi. The Adventist church nearest Anna's home was located some 400 miles away in Graysville, Tennessee, about 35 miles northeast of Chattanooga. Edith Embree put Anna in contact with L. Dyo Chambers and his wife, who resided in Graysville, where Chambers served as secretary-treasurer of the Southern Missionary Tract Society. Against the admonitions of her family, Anna took the step of traveling on her own to Tennessee, using the proceeds from a bale of cotton she shared with her brother to pay for the train ticket. At Chattanooga, Chambers met her and accompanied her to Graysville. There, along with two other young people, Anna was baptized in a creek on a cold, rainy day at the conclusion of a Week of Prayer in late December 1892.³

A loving Christian couple, the Chamberses opened their home to Anna and arranged for her to attend the Adventist school, Graysville Academy. Because of her light complexion, Anna's racial identity was not immediately obvious, and upon the advice of her father she had not spoken of it. But soon after her enrollment, some parents made angry demands and threats based on reports from their children. Anna was prohibited from attending classes, though she remained at the school, sharing a room with the matron. The matron taught Anna individually, while Anna assisted the matron with her work.

After the school term concluded, Anna returned home to the Knight community a different person. Her family was not interested in her new lifestyle or the beliefs that had radically changed her way of thinking. The resulting conflicts made her transition to Adventism as a young girl difficult, both for her and her family. Nevertheless, faced with the choice of remaining with her family or moving forward with her new-found faith, she chose to move forward. She took her share of the money earned harvesting cotton and returned to the Chambers' home in Tennessee in December 1893.

Anna's first real opportunity for formal education came when the Chamberses arranged for her to attend Mount Vernon Academy in Ohio, beginning in September 1894. After that school year at Mount Vernon, in the summer of 1895 Anna served as cook for the camp meeting held in Chattanooga. Two medical missionary nurses who had trained at Battle Creek Sanitarium, Emma Washburn and Rosa Star, helped Anna plan healthy menus. They encouraged her to study nursing at Battle Creek Sanitarium and wrote letters of introduction on her behalf, as did Elder Chambers. After a preparatory year at the industrial school connected with the Sanitarium, Anna entered the nurse's training course and graduated as a missionary nurse in 1898.

Mission School in Mississippi (1898–1901)

After graduation, Knight returned home to Mississippi under the sponsorship of the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association (MMBA). She opened a mission school in a one-room log cabin near Gitano, not far from her home. Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, the famed director of Battle Creek Sanitarium and head of the MMBA, ensured that she had the necessary books, charts, and other supplies. Twelve students were enrolled, consisting mostly of her relatives in the Knight community who were still denied opportunity to attend the other schools in the area.

The following summer, Knight, aided by counsel from and a donation solicited by her Battle Creek classmate Julia Luccock, dedicated the proceeds from her four acres of cotton toward building a new, well-equipped school, and the community contributed free labor. Enrollment doubled to twenty-four. Knight also established two well-attended Sunday schools held in nearby churches. As a result of her descriptions of the dire effects of alcohol in her health and temperance lectures, local moonshiners saw a decline in demand for their illicit product. They tried to halt Knight's progress with violent threats and harassment. Although her resolve was tested, she refused to be intimidated. She carried a revolver and a rifle and knew how to use them. Guards were posted to watch the school overnight. Beyond these pragmatic measures, Knight persevered in prayer and trust in God as her higher source of strength.

In 1900, Knight was called upon to teach first aid classes at a Summer Institute for colporteurs and other students, held at the Graysville school in Tennessee. The pupil who had been excluded from the classroom on account of race eight years before now returned to the same school as a teacher.

Pioneering Missionary to India (1901–1907)

In 1901, Anna Knight was summoned to Battle Creek, Michigan, by Dr. Kellogg to serve as an official delegate at the General Conference, representing the self-supporting medical missionary work done by graduates of Battle Creek Sanitarium. While in Battle Creek, Knight accepted a call to accompany J. L. Shaw and his wife for missionary service in India, along with a second nurse, classmate Donna Humphrey. Knight's love for the people she served in Mississippi made the decision difficult, but her concerns were alleviated when her recently

married friend Julia Luccock-Atwood and her husband, Parker, agreed to continue the work of the Gitano school. In the fall of 1901, Knight and her fellow workers set sail for Calcutta. She thus became not only the first African-American female Seventh-day Adventist missionary sent anywhere but also the “first black woman to be sent to India by a mission board of any denomination.”⁴

Upon her arrival in India, Knight began work as a nurse at a modestly equipped sanitarium recently established in Calcutta. However, she was soon called to the mission station at Karmatar that, along with a school, operated a small orphanage, a dispensary, and a printing press. Knight served wherever needed — as a bookkeeper, teacher, nurse, and helper at the printing press. After recognizing a lack of fresh vegetables at the school, she drew upon her early experiences in Mississippi to teach the students how to plant a garden. Soon the school reaped a bountiful harvest unlike anything they had even seen.

Indicative of her ardent passion to be used by God to spread the Adventist message among the people of the northwestern part of India, Knight branched out to acquire new skills as a nurse and teacher and to take on new roles as a colporteur and as Bible worker. The latter work became her top priority.

Knight’s six-and-a-half years on the Indian subcontinent would take her to the cities of Calcutta, Allahabad, Simla, Amritsar, Ambala, Ludhiana, Jullundur, and Lahore, as well as to small villages. She became acquainted with the Hindi language and worked with the village people. Also in India, Knight became aware of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), which provided a safe place for young women to stay and a venue to hold health lectures and other classes. This connection with the YWCA would prove to be valuable preparation for a later phase of her ministry back in the United States.

Not long after the sudden, tragic death of her friend and co-worker, Donna Humphrey, on March 4, 1903, Anna received disheartening news from home: moonshiners had renewed their opposition and burned the school in Gitano. As a result, the Atwood family left and the students were now without a teacher or a building. Not yet eligible for a furlough, Knight wrote to local and General Conference leaders urging that a new teacher be sent to rebuild the school. She also sent assurances to her community in Mississippi that she would return as soon as she qualified for a furlough.

After receiving a two-year furlough in 1907, Knight boarded the S.S. Mombasa to begin the journey home. She wasted no time carrying out her plans to rebuild the school and resuming her work as teacher. By this time, Knight’s sister Grace was old enough to assist in the classroom. Time had also softened the hearts of her family. Her uncle provided a cabin for the new school, and the community at large pitched in to help rebuild. In addition to operating the small mission school, Knight also worked as a part-time Bible worker for the Mississippi Conference.

Mission Leadership in the American South (1909–1945)

In 1909 Knight was called to another mission field and left Grace in charge of the school. Since the time Knight had become an Adventist in 1892, the church's endeavors to reach African-Americans, approximately 90 percent of whom then resided in the South, had taken substantial strides forward. Ellen White's persistent advocacy and the remarkable initiative in steamboat-based evangelism launched by her son, J. Edson, in 1895 had raised the "southern work" to prominence in Adventist mission.

In view of the great needs of this field, denominational officials asked Knight to remain in America, calling her to work in Atlanta, Georgia. Her new assignment required her to operate a small sanitarium (or treatment room) and serve as a Bible worker in the city's large black community. She also agreed to chair the board of the struggling, two-teacher Adventist school and, through personal sacrifice and persistent appeals, resolved urgent needs for heating and desks, and placed the school on a more solid footing.

During her time in Atlanta, Knight connected with leaders in the community and lectured in the city's black colleges about her experiences in India. In this way she broke down the resistance to her work and to that of Seventh-day Adventists that she initially encountered from the well-educated, prosperous sector of Atlanta's black citizens. Thus, she gained the support of prominent women of several denominations in organizing the first local YWCA in Atlanta. The new YWCA offered courses on home nursing, healthy cooking, and first aid, and presentations to large gatherings on health, temperance, social purity, and personal hygiene. In her capacity as a Bible worker, Knight gave an average of 500 Bible readings per year during her time in Atlanta, with particular success during the final year at winning converts to the Adventist message.

In 1913, Knight was called to a high level of leadership as associate home missionary, missionary volunteer, and educational secretary for the Southeastern Union Conference. As such she was charged with overseeing church schools and mobilizing members for all facets of lay ministry in the black Seventh-day Adventist churches throughout the states of Georgia, North and South Carolina, eastern Tennessee, and most of Florida. In 1919 she transferred to the same position in the Southern Union Conference, then composed of western Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and the Florida panhandle. She returned to the Southeastern Union in the same capacity in 1925. Then, when the Southeastern and Southern Union conferences merged in 1932, Knight continued carrying out the same responsibilities throughout the combined territories in the new Southern Union.

In 1945, the structure of the Adventist Church in the South was transformed to create the regional black conferences approved by the General Conference committee the previous year. The Colored Department at the union conference level was thereby eliminated, and Knight's position along with it. She was invited to serve in departmental work in one of the regional conferences, but, now more than 70 years old, she decided to retire. However, she continued working until successors were in place in the two new regional conferences established in the Southern Union— in the South Atlantic Conference until March 1946, and in the South Central Conference until November of 1946.

Thirty-four schools, including four junior academies, were under Knight's supervision as her work at the Southern Union conference drew to a close in 1945. Seeing that these schools met academic and health standards, and conducting weekend institutes to organize and train church members to conduct Bible studies, community health outreach, the Young People's Missionary Volunteer society, and Sabbath school, had required virtually ceaseless travel. Knight kept careful records, and in her autobiography, *Mississippi Girl* (1952), gave a statistical summary of her work since 1911: "I have held 9,388 meetings and have made 11,744 missionary visits. My work required the writing of 48,918 letters, and in getting to my appointments I have traveled 554,439 miles."⁵

In 1922 Knight organized the National Colored Teachers Association of Seventh-day Adventists and served as the first and only president of this association for the remainder of her life. Her role in organizing the first Colored Youth Congress, held on the campus of Oakwood College (now Oakwood University) in Huntsville, Alabama in 1934, exemplified her passion for the youth of the church.

Legacy

In 1945 Anna Knight retired at Oakwood College. She was awarded the Medallion of Merit by the General Conference Education Department on November 17, 1971. She was only the thirteenth person to receive the award at the time. At Oakwood, the Anna Knight Education Building and the Anna Knight Center for Women's Leadership, dedicated in 2016, bear testament to her legacy.

Throughout an era of severe oppression and segregation in American race relations, Knight challenged the status quo by enlisting in the gospel work and serving without fear both in the American South and across the globe in India. She died on June 3, 1972 at age 98 and is buried in the Newton Knight family cemetery in Jasper County, Mississippi.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. The source for information in this article not otherwise specified is the author's biography of Anna Knight: Dorothy Knight Marsh, *From Cotton Fields to Mission Fields: The Anna Knight Story* (self-published, Lulu, 2016).
2. Newton Knight's story was dramatized in the 2016 film *Free State of Jones*. See Richard Grant, "The True Story of the 'Free State of Jones,'" *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2016, accessed July 3, 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-story-free-state-jones-180958111/>. See also Victoria E. Bynum, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
3. Anna Knight, *Mississippi Girl* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1952), 27–31, 41.
4. Louis B. Reynolds, *We Have Tomorrow: The Story of Seventh-day Adventists with an African Heritage* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1984), 323.
5. Knight, *Mississippi Girl*, 223.

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