

Beardsley, James Irving (1879–1942)

SAMUEL LONDON

Samuel London, Ph.D., is a professor and chair of the Department of History and Political Science at Oakwood University, Huntsville, Alabama. He is the director of the Oakwood Office for the Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists. London wrote the book *Seventh-day Adventists and the Civil Rights Movement* (University Press of Mississippi, 2010). Samuel and his wife Laura reside in Priceville, Alabama.

A staunch advocate of Seventh-day Adventist education, James Irving Beardsley, the first president of Oakwood Junior College, served the denomination for more than thirty years as a teacher, principal, college president, and conference administrator.

James was born on May 31, 1879, to James Wellington Beardsley (1859–1892) and Amelia Jane Gray (1859–1924) in Quinnesec, Michigan. The family moved to South Dakota, and there he obtained his elementary education. In 1900 Beardsley entered Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, where he completed his secondary education and earned a college degree in 1908.¹ On September 30, 1909, he married Aural Brown Jordan (1884–1959) in O'Brien, Iowa.² The couple had six children: Eldred Jordan (1910–1971), Mabel Alberta (1911–2006), Harriet Aural (1913–1913), Dorothy Shermah (1914–2008), Oliver Bennett (1917–1995), and Marietta Elizabeth (1920–1921).

After graduating from Union College, Beardsley served as the Educational and Young People's Missionary Volunteer secretary for the South Dakota Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in 1908 and 1909. In the fall of 1909 he became the principal of Alberta Industrial Academy in Lacombe, Alberta, Canada. While there, from 1912 to 1914, Beardsley simultaneously served as both principal and Educational and Young People's Missionary Volunteer secretary for the Western Canadian Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Afterward, the family moved to the United States, and for a year Beardsley worked on a farm in Iowa. In 1915 he became the Home Missionary secretary for the Nebraska Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. He remained in this position until 1917.³



James Irving Beardsley.

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

That year Beardsley accepted an invitation from the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists to become the first president of Oakwood Junior College in Huntsville, Alabama.⁴ His predecessor, Clarence Jesse Boyd (1877–1966), left a detailed strategy to further develop the campus. Beardsley augmented the plan and persuaded the General Conference to purchase the Ford Farm, thus adding to the acreage of the college grounds. Noticing the devastation caused by the boll weevil, in 1920 he averted a potential financial crisis by stopping Oakwood's cotton cultivation and immediately transitioning to food production only. In an effort to make the institution more self-sufficient, Beardsley expanded Oakwood's storage capacity for foodstuffs. He also improved the campus water supply by ordering the construction of 12 concrete cisterns with pipes and a pump house to distribute water to the various buildings and cottages. Beardsley believed in Oakwood's motto, "Enter to Learn, Depart to Serve." He demanded that all students take courses in agriculture to equip them with the skills to go out into the community and implement their learning in a society driven largely by agriculture. Students received plots of land where they were required to demonstrate what they learned in the classroom. They also learned to construct wagons and other farming implements. On Sundays students, organized in pairs, engaged in missionary work by going out into the community educating residents on modern agricultural practices.⁵ Moreover, at the start of his administration in 1917, Beardsley integrated Oakwood's faculty with the hiring of Frank Loris Peterson (1893–1969), the institution's first black academic instructor.⁶ Beardsley also issued a regular newsletter that kept the students, staff, and faculty informed of various initiatives, policies, and school developments.⁷ His financial acumen and leadership resulted in the doubling of Oakwood's net worth from \$52,122.35 in 1917 at the start of Beardsley's administration to \$104,187.62 at his departure in 1923.⁸

In the fall of 1923 Beardsley became the principal of Shelton Academy in Shelton, Nebraska, serving in that capacity until 1927. He returned to Canada and served as the president of Canadian Junior College in Lacombe, Alberta, and Educational and Young People's Missionary Volunteer secretary for the Western Canadian Union Conference in 1927 and 1928. Afterward, he enrolled for a year at Emmanuel Missionary College (EMC) in Berrien Springs, Michigan. From 1929 to 1934 he taught Bible and history classes at EMC Academy. In 1934 Beardsley secured a position teaching the same subjects at Adelpian Academy in Holly, Michigan. For the next seven years he taught there, until his tragic death in an automobile accident on April 8, 1942. He was 62 years old.⁹

Beardsley will forever be remembered as Oakwood's first president. He was also a kind and well-spoken gentleman who firmly believed in the benefits derived from a quality Christian education. Beardsley's commitment to learning and service is succinctly stated in his own words: "Pray God to fill you so full of His spirit of work, that you will talk Christian education to everyone you meet. Let us get every youth in this denomination into our schools, and prepare him for a place of service in the Lord's work."¹⁰

SOURCES

Beardsley J. I. J. I. Beardsley to Oakwood Community, August 9, 1922. Oakwood University Archives.

Beardsley File Document. Oakwood University Archives.

Dixon, Minneola. "Letters From President Beardsley," *Oakwood Heritage Moments Radio Program*, Disk 1, Series 9 Track 2. Oral Transcript, April—September 2004. Oakwood University Archives.

"James I. Beardsley, 1917–1923," Oakwood University Archives.

"Oakwood's First College President: James I. Beardsley, 1917–1923." Oakwood University Archives.

O'Brien, Iowa. Marriage Record. Iowa Department of Public Health, Des Moines, Iowa.

"Sustentation Fund Application—Aural Jordan Beardsley." April 12, 1942. Oakwood University Archives.

NOTES

1. "James I. Beardsley, 1917–1923," Oakwood University Archives.
2. O'Brien, Iowa, Marriage Record (1909), James Irving Beardsley and Aural Brown Jordan, Iowa Department of Public Health, Des Moines, Iowa.
3. "James I. Beardsley, 1917–1923." See also "Sustentation Fund Application—Aural Jordan Beardsley," April 12, 1942, Oakwood University Archives.
4. Ibid.
5. Beardsley File Document, Oakwood University Archives.
6. "Oakwood's First College President: James I. Beardsley, 1917–1923," Oakwood University Archives.
7. Minneola Dixon, "Letters From President Beardsley," *Oakwood Heritage Moments* radio program, Disk 1, Series 9, Track 2, Oral Transcript, April–September 2004, Oakwood University Archives. See also J. I. Beardsley to Oakwood Community, August 9, 1922, Oakwood University Archives.
8. Beardsley File Document, Oakwood University Archives.
9. "James I. Beardsley, 1917–1923," Oakwood University Archives. See also "Sustentation Fund Application—Aural Jordan Beardsley," April 12, 1942, Oakwood University Archives.
10. J. I. Beardsley to Oakwood Community, August 9, 1922, Oakwood University Archives.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000