



Joseph H., Romaine, and Mabel Aldrich Watson.

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Watson, Joseph H. (1869–1903) and Mabel Edith (Aldrich) (later Bailey) (1876–1964)

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Joseph and Mabel Watson were pioneer missionaries to Africa. Joseph Watson was born in Banbridge, Down, Ireland, on May 2, 1869.¹ In the early 1890s Watson heard the Adventist message through the ministry of William Hutchinson and became one of the first few in Ireland to accept it. Desiring preparation for “more efficient service in the cause of God,” Watson emigrated to the denomination’s headquarters town, Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1895.² Soon he made the acquaintance of Mabel Edith Aldrich and the two wedded on May 5, 1896.³ Mabel was the daughter of Marietta (1851-1946) and Homer M. Aldrich (1851-1932), longtime residents of Battle Creek where Homer was a press room foreman for the Review and Herald Publishing Company.

Watson found employment in the Good Health Publishing Company headed by Dr. J. H. Kellogg, superintendent of Battle Creek Sanitarium. In September 1897 Watson was sent to Toronto to head the Review branch office.⁴ The Watson’s son, Romaine Eldon Watson (1897-1982), was born while they were in Canada.

After four years in Canada, Watson returned to Battle Creek and employment in the Review and Herald publishing office. He and Mabel were placed in charge of a boarding house for printing apprentices. With fewer employees needed at the Review and Herald following the disastrous fire of December 30, 1902, Joseph and Mabel volunteered for overseas mission service. The denomination’s Foreign Mission Board appointed them to work in Africa. On Sabbath, February 28, 1903, at a dedication service in the Battle Creek Tabernacle, prayers were offered for the young family, and Joseph was ordained to gospel ministry.⁵

The Watsons sailed from New York on March 4, stopping in Ireland where Joseph participated in the first annual meeting of the Irish Mission (held March 25-29, 1902).⁶ They spent three weeks (May 6-23) in Cape Town, South Africa, between boats, preparing for their new missionary assignment.⁷ During this stopover Joseph taught Bible classes at Claremont Union College (later Helderberg College).⁸

Their destination was the Plainfield Mission station, acquired from the Seventh Day Baptists in 1902, renamed Malamulo Mission (“Mission of the Commandments”) in 1907. It was a 2,000-acre property in the Cholo foothills, in what became the nation of Malawi.⁹ It was situated at about 3,000 feet above sea level, making it less malarial than the Zambesi River lowlands. The Watsons, with Dutch Reformed and Baptist missionaries as fellow passengers, traveled the first 150 miles upriver until reaching a point where the water became too shallow for their steamer to navigate. The passengers were then transferred to houseboats or barges, each propelled by twenty men using long poles, for two more days of travel. When they arrived at Chiromo, 40 miles from the mission, just as the sun was setting on Sabbath, June 20, they were whisked away by *machilla* (a suspended hammock carried by locals). Each individual was carried separately, including little Romaine, and the family members lost sight of one another until their arrival at Cholo.¹⁰

Joseph and Mabel joined Henrietta (1858-1913) and Thomas H. Branch (1856-1924) and their adult daughter, also named Mabel (1878-1945), in the work of the mission, helping to farm and teach classes. Joseph and Thomas Branch traveled 300 miles to purchase some of the first cattle for the property. Soon, they had 40 students in their school.¹¹

In a letter of November 26, 1903, later published in the *Review*, Watson described a demanding daily schedule of farm work, teaching, and many administrative responsibilities. He noted experiencing “a little rise of temperature” and some other mild symptoms of “the African fever” (malaria) the previous week, but was confident he had fought it off.¹² Soon afterwards, when a neighbor seven miles away became ill with “the fever,” Watson went to his aid, staying up two nights giving him treatment until the fever subsided. Upon his return, Watson complained of severe chills. Despite treatment, he died on December 11, 1903.¹³ His grave marks the first Adventist foreign missionary to die in central Africa.¹⁴

In a letter written shortly before his death, Watson stated: “I am satisfied that this great continent of Africa is not to be warned of the coming of the Lord without much hard work and some real sacrifice. But so many seem to think that the Lord will perform wonderful miracles while we stand by and look on and see the results.”¹⁵ His death, eulogized W. A. Spicer, General Conference secretary, was a reminder that the missionary work was indeed “a genuine battle.”¹⁶ Several photographs of J. H. Watson’s grave were published in early Adventist publications, serving both as a reminder of the cost of mission service and an appeal for self-sacrifice for its worldwide advance.

After Joseph’s death, Mabel and Romaine went to South Africa where she worked at the Claremont Sanitarium.¹⁷ The two remained at their mission post until 1908 when they returned to Battle Creek to live with her parents. Here Mabel worked as a dressmaker. She remarried Dr. George Wesley Bailey (1868-1955) in 1911 and had four children with him.¹⁸

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