

Ashby, Nathaniel Edward (1907–1962)



Nathaniel Edward Ashby

Photo courtesy of Oakwood University Archives.

C. GARLAND DULAN

C. Garland Dulan, Ph.D., born in Berkeley, California, attended Pacific Union College, Oakwood College, and Union College from which he holds a bachelor's degree. He also holds M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in sociology from the University of California, Riverside. He is now retired from 40 years of Seventh-day Adventist denominational service, spanning teaching and/or administration at Southern Adventist University, Oakwood University, La Sierra University, and at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

For more than twenty years Nathaniel Edward Ashby served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a dedicated schoolteacher, college professor, registrar, residential dean, and principal.

Nathaniel, son of Wilbert W. Ashby and Blanche Lacy, was born in Washington, D.C., on March 15, 1907! He received his elementary education at the West Point Children's School, in West Point, New York, and graduated from Schenley High School, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.² Ashby attended Howard University, where he received his bachelor's degree in 1932 and later a master's degree. In college Nathaniel majored in history and minored in French and Spanish.³ His postgraduate work was done at the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary in Washington, D.C.; the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City; and New York University and Hunter College in New York City.⁴ On September 3, 1935, Ashby married Lillian Rebecca Burgess (1903–1996) in Washington, D.C.⁵

In the academic year 1935–1936, Ashby taught history and foreign languages (Spanish and French) at Oakwood Junior College in Huntsville, Alabama.⁶ The following academic year, he served as the principal of the Orange School in Orange County, Virginia.⁷ In the fall of 1937 Ashby returned to Oakwood, where he undertook the responsibilities of professor and school registrar.⁸ He served in that capacity until 1945.⁹ For the academic year 1946–1947 Ashby was the principal of Washington Union Academy in Washington, D.C. From 1951 to 1960 he worked as teacher and principal of Northeastern Academy in New York City. In 1960 he returned to Oakwood—serving as a professor, residential dean, and fire chief.¹⁰

In addition to these facts are the fond memories that warm the hearts of those whose lives he touched. Isaac Palmer writes, "I knew Dean Ashby as the dean of men for the academy boys in Peterson Hall during our junior and senior years in Oakwood Academy. In the early 1960s Dean Ashby lived in a dormitory apartment. In today's politically correct terminology he would be called 'height challenged,' as he was the shortest person in the dorm that included ninth- through twelfth-grade boys. When addressing a young man taller than himself—which was everyone—he would not look up to make eye contact, but would look straight ahead and talk to whatever part of your body that was level with his eyesight. His whole demeanor epitomized confidence and control. He spoke with authority and never lost his composure. He assured us that any attempt to break the rules would be found out because, as he said repeatedly, 'You can't win for the fix you're in, and I can't lose for the stuff I use.' This phrase was both a challenge and a promise that was never unfulfilled. His discipline was always quick, certain, and verbal. He would turn on his gruff voice to dress you down and immediately walk away. And that was the end of it. As a disciplinarian I would have to use the term *compassionate*. I do not recall him acting in anger or being excessive in handing out punishment. We could easily see through his displays of sternness and gruffness to see a man that loved and cared for us as young men. He knew all the train schedules on the East Coast. If you came to Huntsville by train, he would ask the city and time of your departure. He would then tell you the name of the train and its route and where you had layovers and changed trains. He knew the trains by their name. He told me that coming from Cleveland, Ohio, I took the Blue Liner into Chattanooga and after a three-hour layover in Chattanooga, I changed trains and took the Silver Star line, arriving in Decatur, Alabama, at 9:23 p.m. (I really can't remember the actual names—but he knew them.) As you stood there in dumbfounded amazement, he would walk away with a twinkle in his eye. It's the twinkle in his eye that I remember the most. As I look back I identify him more as a grandfather figure than anything else. I have nothing but the fondest of memories as I think back on the days in Peterson Hall under the care and protection of Dean Ashby."¹¹

Another student remembers: "Mr. Ashby was an interesting conversationalist, traveled quite extensively, and was known as being quite up-to-date with news of the world. He was well liked by students as well as by members of the faculty."¹²

Ashby had a great "ability to balance learning with fun," writes Douglas Simons.

"One day during our senior year the 'prof' was late for our Spanish class, which he taught. There was a folding partition between our room and the vacant adjacent classroom. A few of the guys decided to play a joke on him by locking him out. There was much muffled giggling as we heard him attempting to open the door. When he tried the partition with no success, laughter erupted! When a young lady finally opened the door, he charged in, immediately concluding that the guys were guilty of the prank, and demanded us to leave! He then closed the door and led the girls in the laughter of sweet revenge! He eventually let us back in. After thus getting our attention, he successfully taught memorable lessons in Spanish, making us accountable for them on the next test! Because of his upbringing at West Point, where his father was an officer, Ashby was exposed to the discipline and regimen of military life. As a result, inside and outside the dorm he would often strut his walk in a

measured cadence to the glee of all observing—‘your left . . . sound off, one, two, three, four.’ Whether in a worship setting or walking the halls, the guys recognized his fun side and his serious side, both respecting and learning valuable nuggets for living purposeful lives.”³

Ashby remained at Oakwood until he passed away, quietly as he slept, on July 14, 1962. He was 55 years old. Nathaniel E. Ashby will be remembered as a dedicated teacher, principal, and residential dean, who devoted many years of faithful service to Adventist education.¹⁴ In gratitude for his service, the gymnasium on the campus of Oakwood University is named in his honor.

SOURCES

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Professor Ashby. Faculty Member Information Form. Oakwood University Archives.

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NOTES

1. H. D. Singleton, “Journey’s End.” *North American Informant* 16, no. 85 (November-December 1962): 5.

2. “Oakwood University Archives: Biography—Nathaniel E. Ashby,” Oakwood University Archives.

3. Professor Ashby, Faculty Member Information Form, Oakwood University Archives.

4. Ibid. See also Singleton, 5.; “Oakwood University Archives: Biography—Nathaniel E. Ashby.”

5. District of Columbia, Marriage Record film no. 002293334 (1935), Nathaniel Edward Ashby and Lillian Rebecca Burgess, Clerk of the Superior Court, Records Office, Washington, D.C.

6. "Oakwood Junior College," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1935), 242. See also "Oakwood Junior College," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1936), 262.
7. Esther E. Mallory, "Allegheny: Gordonsville (Va.) Church Dedicated," *Columbia Union Visitor* 69, no. 53 (December 31, 1964): 3.
8. "Oakwood Junior College," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1938), 261.
9. Singleton, 5. See also "Oakwood University Archives: Biography—Nathaniel E. Ashby."
10. Ibid. See also See also Nathaniel Edward Ashby file, Oakwood University Archives.
11. Isaac Palmer, Sr., personal knowledge of Nathaniel Edward Ashby's student.
12. Gloria Saddler, in *Spreading Oak* 13, no. 4 (April 1945).
13. Douglas Simons, personal knowledge of Nathaniel Edward Ashby's student.
14. Singleton, 5. See also "Oakwood University Archives: Biography—Nathaniel E. Ashby."

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