

# French, Benjamin George Othniel (1918–1994)

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## GLENN O. PHILLIPS

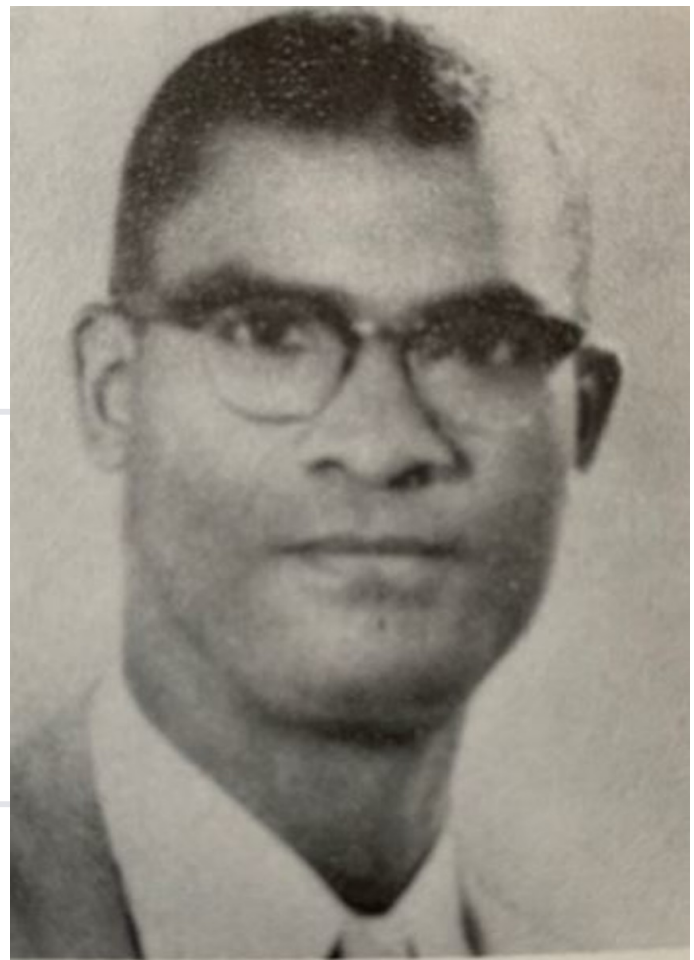
Glenn O. Phillips, Ph.D. (Howard University, Washington, D.C.), although retired, is actively writing, researching, lecturing, and publishing. He was a professor at Morgan State University, Howard University, and the University of the Southern Caribbean. He has authored and published numerous articles, book reviews, and books, including "The African Diaspora Experience," "Singing in a Strange Land: The History of the Hanson Place Church," "African American Leaders of Maryland," and "The Caribbean Basin Initiative."

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Benjamin George Othniel French, a Saint Lucian pioneering Adventist educator and administrator, was the tenth president of Caribbean Union College (now the University of the Southern Caribbean) between 1962 and 1965.<sup>1</sup> Before becoming the first principal of the Barbados Seventh-day Adventist Secondary School located near Bridgetown (established September 1953), he was a leading Saint

Lucian educator and government administrator.<sup>2</sup> He was fluent in both English and French. After serving for six years in Barbados, he accepted a teaching position at Caribbean Union College in Trinidad and was elected in 1962 the college's president, the second Caribbean educator to hold the position. Later, he served as the director of education for the Caribbean Union Conference before assisting the Saint Lucian government to strengthen its newly founded grammar school.<sup>3</sup>

During his 30-year period of service for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, French influenced hundreds of his Caribbean students to seek further educational opportunities at the tertiary level, thus enabling them to more effectively aid their church and the wider community. He also studied for his doctoral degree at New York University in New York City, obtaining his ABD. Also he made outstanding contributions to the work of local congregations in St. Lucia in his youth and in his later years at the Hanson Place SDA Church in Brooklyn, New York, filling many positions.<sup>4</sup>



Benjamin G. O. French

From Glenn O. Phillips, *The Making of A Christian College: Caribbean Union College, 1927- 1977*.

French was born January 13, 1918, one of seven children to Benjamin and Amborisine French, devout Methodists who lived at La Croix near Maingot in rural St. Lucia. "BGO," as he was called, excelled in his early primary education and successfully completed his secondary education in the colony's elite school, St. Mary's College.<sup>5</sup> At the age of 19, French entered the teaching profession and quickly became one of the colony's leading educators. He received his teaching certificate from the University of the West Indies in Trinidad and, passing the external examinations offered by London University, acquired a Bachelor of Arts in Education degree. His country appointed him one of its education officers.<sup>6</sup>

Baptized in the early 1940s, he joined the Castries SDA Church where he became an elder. In June 1946 he married Mona Mondesir, the third daughter of Henry and Amy Mondesir of Diamond Estate near Soufriere, St. Lucia. She was a registered nurse and graduate of the Victoria School of Nursing at Castries, St. Lucia.<sup>7</sup> Together they helped to train hundreds of Caribbean youth as he became the first principal of the Barbados Seventh-day Adventist Secondary School in 1953, guiding the institution for its first six years (1953-1959).

Beginning in the fall of 1959, French headed the teacher training department at Caribbean Union College that prepared students to serve in primary and secondary schools across the Caribbean Union of SDA. Responsible for the high rate of students passing the annual examination administered by the government of Trinidad and Tobago, he served as president of Caribbean Union College from the fall of 1962 to 1965.<sup>8</sup>

Desiring to continue his own studies, he enrolled at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, where he completed his master's degree in educational leadership. In 1974, after the death of his wife Mona, he returned to St. Lucia. The government of Saint Lucia asked him to pioneer the country's new Comprehensive School, but he also served as pastor of a group of churches on the island. In the early 1980s the Caribbean Union appointed him its director of education.<sup>9</sup>

Fourteen years after his first wife died, French married a Trinidadian and graduate of Caribbean Union College (now the University of the Southern Caribbean), Lera Ramkissoon, in New York City in June 1987.<sup>10</sup> During those later years in New York he became active in the Hanson Place SDA Church in Brooklyn, serving in numerous positions ranging from the board of elders to the church's education secretary and chairperson of its school board.<sup>11</sup>

Benjamin French died October 1, 1994, in New York City after a brief illness. His funeral was held October 5, 1994, at the Hanson SDA Church, Brooklyn and he was buried at the Rosedale Hill Cemetery in Linden, New Jersey. A second memorial service took place at The Castries SDA Church in St. Lucia October 16, 1994, in which his family, government officials, and church leaders recounted his contributions to Caribbean education for more than 50 years.<sup>12</sup>

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## SOURCES

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## NOTES

1. Glenn O. Phillips, *Singing in a Strange Land: the Hanson Place SDA Church, Brooklyn, New York, 1958-2008*, (Littleton, Massachusetts: Tapestry Press, 2008), 176.
2. The obituary in "The Memorial Service for the late Benjamin George Othniel French," October 16, 1994, The Castries SDA Church, High Street, Castries, Saint Lucia.
3. Glenn O. Phillips, *The Making of a Christian College, Caribbean Union College, 1927-1977* (Maracas Valley, Trinidad: College Press, 1977), 56.
4. Phillips, *Singing in a Strange Land*, 176.
5. The obituary in "The Memorial Service for the late Benjamin George Othniel French."
6. Glenn O. Phillips, *Seventh-day Adventists in Barbados: Over A Century of Adventism, 1884-1991* (Bridgetown Barbados; Caribbean Graphic and Letchworth Ltd, 1991), 68, 140.
7. Aleita King-Dummett, phone interview by the author, March 4, 2020; Phillips, *The Making of a Christian College*, 56-59, 72.
8. Eric John Murray, *A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Trinidad and Tobago, 1891-1981* (Maracas Valley, Trinidad, College Press, 1981), 135.
9. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 211.
10. New York City, New York Marriage License Index, 1987, Number 13398.
11. Glenn O. Phillips, *Singing in a Strange Land*.

12. The obituary in "The Memorial Service for the late Benjamin George Othniel French." U.S. Social Security Death Index, 1935-2014, 1997-2020, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.ancestry.com/>.

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