

# Detwiler, Howard Johnson

## (1889–1951)

---

### HANNAH KO LUTTRELL

Hannah Ko Luttrell spent her childhood in both the United Kingdom and Singapore before attending Andrews University, where she obtained a bachelor's in journalism and religion. She later acquired a master's in communications management, and served in various communication roles at the Review and Herald Publishing Association, Loma Linda Broadcasting Network, Loma Linda University Medical Center, and Hope Channel. She has been published in *Guide* magazine, *Columbia Union Visitor*, and *Adventist Review*.

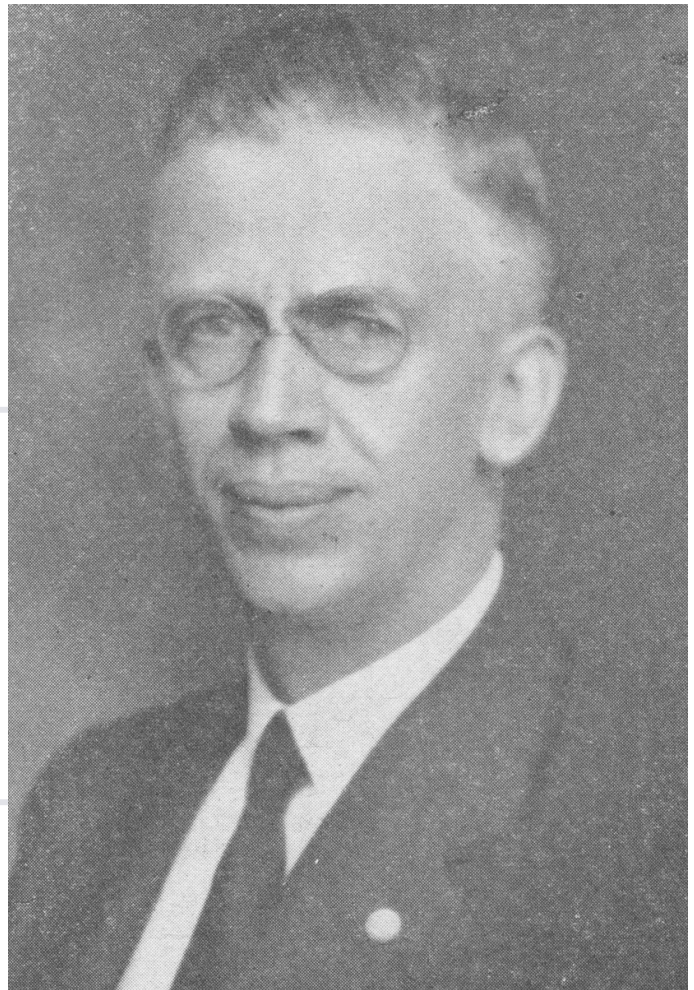
---

Howard Johnson Detwiler was an evangelist, pastor, educator, and church administrator who served as president of the West Virginia, New Jersey, and Potomac conferences, as well as the Columbia Union Conference.

He was born in eastern Pennsylvania in Bucks County on June 17, 1889,<sup>1</sup> to Reuben George and Mary Ann Johnson Detwiler (1858–1943; 1861–1956).

<sup>2</sup> The Detwilers were the first, and for some years the only, Seventh-day Adventists in the county.<sup>3</sup> The couple already had four children: Della (Fisher) (1881–1976), Harry (1882–1975), Oscar (1884–1967), and Cora (Anglemoyer) (1886–1972). After Howard was born, his mother gave birth to six more children—Lydia (Bailey), born approximately 1891, Frank (1893–c. 1991), Sadie (1895–1946), Edith (Arnold) (1897–1987), Roberta (1900–1913), who contracted diphtheria and passed away in her adolescence,<sup>4</sup> and Blanche (Wood) (1903–1987).<sup>5</sup>

Howard spent his childhood on his father's farm, working hard despite being physically handicapped from polio and rheumatic fever. He gave his heart to Christ at an early age, and continued from there on with a deep love for God and a desire to serve Him. With no nearby church or school, he would often travel to and stay in Philadelphia for several days at his own expense in order to hear leading Adventist preachers who spoke there from time to time, including Ellen G. White.<sup>6</sup>



Howard Johnson Detwiler.

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

As a young man he worked as a colporteur, earning a substantial amount of money that he intended to use to attend Mount Vernon College in Ohio. However, as his father's farm had not done well that year, he ended up turning over all his earnings to his father except for \$35. He continued to work his way through school each year, doing janitorial work and digging cellars, and graduated with \$35 to his name, the same amount he started with.<sup>7</sup> He also earned a scholarship for one of his sisters and influenced his older siblings to attend school!<sup>8</sup>

Howard's success as a colporteur was evident not only through his sales but also the converts he won as a result. The first was the woman whose home was the first in which he found lodging for the night he began the work. She was so impressed with the knowledge, enthusiasm, and sincerity of his canvass for Uriah Smith's *Daniel and the Revelation* that she kept him up most of the night studying the Bible with her. She was later baptized and remained a faithful member of the Adventist Church. Detwiler would remain a strong supporter of colporteur ministry, later called literature evangelism, throughout his career as a church leader.<sup>9</sup>

In 1911 Howard married Mary Sprecher (1884–1970), also a Pennsylvania native,<sup>10</sup> in Philadelphia in a ceremony performed by W. H. Heckman,<sup>11</sup> then president of the East Pennsylvania Conference. The couple later welcomed three children into their family: Newton H. (1913–1967), Howard F. (1915–1999), and Mary Louise Goodwin.<sup>12</sup>

Upon graduating from Mount Vernon College in 1915,<sup>13</sup> Detwiler commenced evangelistic work in the East Pennsylvania Conference, associating with H.M.S. Richards, D. E. Rebok, Fred Harter, and J. W. Hirlinger. He also later conducted evangelistic work in New Jersey, where he pastored the church in Paterson.<sup>14</sup>

Detwiler was called to Mount Vernon Academy as a Bible teacher in 1920, and soon after became principal of the school. From 1924 to 1928 he served as president of the West Virginia Conference. In 1928 he was called to the presidency of the New Jersey Conference, where he also served a four-year term. The love and appreciation that his conference workers had for him was made evident through a surprise gift that they gave him at the close of the 1931 New Jersey Conference workers' meeting. M. H. St. John, the longest-serving minister in the conference, made the presentation of "a beautiful briefcase of exquisite workmanship" on behalf of his colleagues, saying that the confidence that Detwiler had shown in his conference workers inspired them to strive all the harder.<sup>15</sup>

In 1932 Detwiler became president of the Columbia Union Conference, a position he filled for the next decade.<sup>16</sup> Conference incomes were greatly curtailed through the Depression years, but with Detwiler's efficient planning and careful execution, no salaried position in the union was cut from the workforce. Under his guidance each of the five academies in the union grew with needed buildings, augmented staff, and increased attendance. The Columbia Union Educational Building Fund, initiated under his leadership, helped in the building of Takoma Academy as well as several new buildings on the campus of Washington Missionary College. This plan became widespread throughout the North American Division, and was turned into the General Conference Ingathering Reversion Fund.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, winning souls was his foremost commitment, and toward that end he promoted some of the largest city evangelistic campaigns yet undertaken as well as smaller-scale efforts, and

encouraged new ways of outreach through Bible correspondence schools, radio, and television.<sup>18</sup>

Detwiler was called to the presidency of the Potomac Conference in 1942, a position he held until his death. Begun while he was president of the Columbia Union, the construction of Sligo church in Takoma Park was completed in 1944 under his administration in Potomac. The 2,300-seat house of worship was, at the time, the largest in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.<sup>19</sup>

As Potomac Conference president, Detwiler's commitment to evangelize the counties in Virginia that had little or no Adventist presence led to the erection or purchase of 38 new church buildings, in addition to the baptism of hundreds of new members and the organization of new churches. He was also a firm believer in medical ministry as a complement to the gospel ministry. He encouraged many doctors to establish practices in various parts of Virginia, and was an influence in the establishment of the Wytheville Hospital and Sanitarium.<sup>20</sup>

On July 8, 1951, Detwiler suffered a heart attack and passed away at the Washington Sanitarium, Takoma Park, Maryland.<sup>21</sup> His funeral service, held in Sligo church, was conducted by W. H. Branson, president of the General Conference, while the graveside service was conducted by Detwiler's friend and associate, H.M.S. Richards, speaker and director of the Voice of Prophecy radio ministry.<sup>22</sup>

Detwiler's decades of leadership had been marked by a firm commitment to the truths found in the Bible and writings of Ellen White, and an unwavering passion for evangelism. His legacy can be seen not only in the people he won and in the churches he helped establish—both spiritually and physically—but also in the hundreds of workers whom he led and inspired, and the people that they in turn reached. The Howard J. Detwiler School, a four-room, 10-grade intermediate school named after him in Suitland, Maryland, near Washington, D.C, was dedicated in 1954.<sup>23</sup>

---

## SOURCES

Ashton, N. S. " 'A Prince in Israel Is Fallen.' " *Columbia Union Visitor*, August 2, 1951.

Conger, M. G. "Life Sketch." Unpublished manuscript emailed to author from Virginia Goodwin-Gray, March 29, 2019.

"Death of H. J. Detwiler." *ARH*, July 19, 1951.

"Della Johnson Detwiler." Ancestry.com. Accessed March 31, 2019. [https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/7313932/person/-1119616061/facts?\\_phsrc=b1C15&\\_phstart=successSource](https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/7313932/person/-1119616061/facts?_phsrc=b1C15&_phstart=successSource)

Neil, J. Lee. "Sons of Strangers Shall Build Up Thy Walls (Part III)." *Ministry*, July 1, 1955.

"Roberta Detwiler." Find a Grave. Accessed October 14, 2018. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/91017158/roberta-detwiler>.

"The Sligo Story." Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church. Accessed March 24, 2019.

<http://www.sligochurch.org/contentpages.aspx?p=d8d80cb3-cc13-47ac-9c4e-e8dd04305784>

---

## NOTES

1. N. S. Ashton, "A Prince in Israel Is Fallen," *Columbia Union Visitor*, August 2, 1951, 3.
2. "Della Johnson Detwiler," Ancestry.com, accessed March 31, 2019, [https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/7313932/person/-1119616061/facts?\\_phsrc=b1C15&\\_phstart=successSource](https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/7313932/person/-1119616061/facts?_phsrc=b1C15&_phstart=successSource).
3. M. G. Conger, "Life Sketch," unpublished manuscript emailed to author from Virginia Goodwin-Gray, March 29, 2019, 1.
4. "Roberta Detwiler," Find a Grave, accessed October 14, 2018, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/91017158/roberta-detwiler>.
5. "Della Johnson Detwiler," Ancestry.com.
6. Conger, 1.
7. Ashton, "A Prince in Israel Is Fallen."
8. Conger, 1.
9. Ashton, "A Prince in Israel Is Fallen."
10. Conger, 1.
11. Ashton, "A Prince in Israel Is Fallen."
12. Gilbert Goodwin, email to author, March 27, 2019.
13. Conger, 1.
14. Ashton, "A Prince in Israel Is Fallen."
15. C. H. Keslake, "A Pleasing Incident," *Columbia Union Visitor*, May 21, 1931, 2.
16. Ashton, "A Prince in Israel Is Fallen."
17. Conger, 1.
18. *Ibid.*, 4, 5.

19. Ashton, "A Prince in Israel Is Fallen;" "The Sligo Story," Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church, accessed March 24, 2019, <http://www.sligochurch.org/contentpages.aspx?p=d8d80cb3-cc13-47ac-9c4e-e8dd04305784>.
20. Ashton, "A Prince in Israel Is Fallen."
21. "Death of H. J. Detwiler," *ARH*, July 19, 1951, 24; Ashton, "A Prince in Israel Is Fallen."
22. Conger, 5, 6.
23. J. Lee Neil, "Sons of Strangers Shall Build Up Thy Walls (Part III)," *Ministry*, July 1, 1955, 12.

---

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