

Bryan, Geneva (1894?1981)

DEWITT S. WILLIAMS

DeWitt S. Williams, Ed.D. (Indiana University) lives in Maryland after 46 years of denominational service. He pastored in Oklahoma, served as a missionary in the Congo (Departmental and Field President), and Burundi/Rwanda (President, Central African Union). He served 12 years in the General Conference as Associate Director in both the Communications and Health and Temperance Departments. His last service was Director of NAD Health Ministries (1990-2010). He authored nine books and numerous articles.

Geneva Bryan, a teacher and nurse, was the first black woman to serve as a General Conference departmental officer. She was born February 23, 1894, in Washington, D.C.¹ Her parents, Ada Taylor and Louis Bryan tried to provide a good education for all seven of their children.² Geneva attended the distinguished M Street High School in the District.³ She was a member of the People's Seventh-day Adventist Church in Washington, founded by L. C. Sheafe in 1903, probably joining through one of his tent efforts.

Geneva was active in the Young People's Literary Society at the People's church and in 1916 served as one of the church's delegates to the Eighth Annual Session of the District of Columbia Conference.⁴ During 1914-1916 she successfully canvassed in Washington, D.C., and in 1920 she spent a short time in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) as a self-supporting missionary.⁵ In 1923 she was called to New York City where she taught at Harlem Academy until 1929.⁶

Bryan added nursing to her education and connected with the Tuberculosis Association in Washington, D.C. as a public health nurse. Later she was superintendent of nurses at Meharry Medical College in Nashville for two years and then took a position with the Board of Health in the city of New Orleans.⁷

In 1942, while Bryan was in New Orleans, Elder G. E. Peters, the newly-elected Secretary of the North American Colored Department, insisted that a nurse be hired as his assistant in order "to promote medical-education interests among the colored churches." Geneva Bryan was selected for the task and appointed the department's assistant secretary for Health Education.

In his report to the General Conference in 1946, Peters described Bryan's work:

Her work has embraced the visitation and inspection of all the colored schools in each union conference. The inspection is done annually by the nurse, and remedial defects as observed are reported to the parents through the regular conference letter, which is filled in by the nurse. The present status of health of each child as it is observed, is explained to the parent; and when deemed necessary personal visits are made to the homes of the children and their parents given needed advice.

Health talks are given to the school children, also to church groups, of our various churches. As a result, many defects have been corrected, such as defective teeth, poor eyesight, large and embedded tonsils, defective hearing, poor posture, malnutrition, athlete's foot, heart trouble; and proper immunizations against the various communicable diseases have been produced. Both children and parents seem to become more health conscious through constant contact with the nurse during her annual visit. Many health departments of various cities have been visited by Miss Bryan and the services of public health nurses made available to many of our schools, periodically, just as the public schools are served. Thus our immunization program...has been promoted greatly.

Miss Bryan, a national Red Cross nurse, having had much experience in the field of public health, has found no difficulty in securing the services and co-operation of Red Cross instructors and nurses, which has proved very helpful to our people in some instances...She also teaches the Red Cross home nursing course and the General Conference home nursing course when time permits. Within the past year she has taught three such classes, visited regional and camp meetings, and given talks on health and Christian education, stressing in her talks the influence of



Geneva Bryan, 1920.
Photo courtesy of DeWitt S. Williams.

the home life from all angles on the lives of our children.⁸

Bryan also served as a consulting editor of *Message Magazine*. Because, at that time, young black Adventists were denied admission to Adventist sanitarium or hospital nursing programs, she also served on several committees to help prepare black professionals for the medical fields. Her schedule was very busy with traveling and presentations and four years into her job, acting on the advice of her physician, Bryan requested a leave of absence of one year. After that year she felt that her health still would not allow her to be involved in the strenuous travel and she retired from the position.⁹

Although no longer a denominational employee, Bryan remained an active church member in Washington, D.C. She participated, for example, in a large city-wide cooking class conducted at the First church in Washington in 1962 for the public as well as church members.¹⁰

Geneva Bryan died in September, 1981, in Washington, D.C. at age 87.¹¹

SOURCES

"Introductions." *Keynote 5*, no. 10 (1942): 5.

Peters, G.E. "Associate Secretary Leaves Department." *North American Informant*, October-November, 1947.

Peters, G.E. "The North American Colored Department." *Adventist Review*, June 14, 1946.

NOTES

1. U. S. Social Security Death Index, 1935-1914.?
2. United States Census, 1880, 1900,1910?
3. "High School Promotions," *Washington Evening Star*, June 26, 1912, 5.?
4. "Young People Entertain, Literary and Musical Program at Seventh Day Adventist Church," *Washington Evening Star*, March 15, 1909, 12; "Minutes of the Eighth Annual Session of the District of Columbia Conference," *Columbia Union Visitor*, April 27, 1916, 3.?
5. "Canvassers' Reports," *Columbia Union Visitor*, December 23, 1914, 6; January 7, 1915, 6; and February 4, 1915, 2; United States Passport Applications, 1920, certificate #44736.?
6. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks*, 1923-1929; "Baptismal Classes," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, January 12, 1927, 6.?
7. "Introductions," *Keynote 5*, no. 10 (1942): 5.?
8. G.E. Peters, "The North American Colored Department," *Adventist Review*, June 14, 1946, 194-195, 207?
9. G.E. Peters, "Associate Secretary Leaves Department," *North American Informant*, October-November, 1947, 12.?
10. "Cooking Class Conducted at Washington First Church," *Columbia Union Visitor*, September 13, 1962, 3.?
11. U. S. Social Security Death Index, 1935-1914.?

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