

Byard, Lucille

(1877–1943)

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Lucille Spence, whose refusal for treatment at an Adventist hospital was a catalyst for the organization of regional conferences, was born to Harriett and Jesse Spence on September 22, 1877, in Petersburg, Virginia.¹ Lucy's parents were both born into slavery in southern Virginia in the 1850s and emancipated with the millions of other African Americans during and at the close of the Civil War. The Spences had eight children in all: five daughters, including Lucy, and three sons. Harriett Spence raised the children, while Jesse Spence made a living as a fireman for a railroad company.²

Lucy grew up in Petersburg, and completed her second year of high school, but apparently did not receive any further formal education. Just less than half a year before the new century, on August 10, 1899, she was married to Charles W. Lewis by a Reverend F. J. Walker in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Also born in Virginia, but four years after Lucy, Lewis was a railway porter living in Allegheny. The newlyweds relocated to New York City shortly after their nuptials.³

In New York, Lucy discovered the Seventh-day Adventist Church, becoming a member at age 25 in 1902. Upon her baptism she became one of the few black Adventists in the city. Friend and fellow Adventist Greta Martin described Lucy as “an earnest, sincere believer and a faithful worker in the cause of the Lord. She always trusted the Lord, never complained, and supported the work of the Master. She was loved by all who knew her.”⁴ Lucy's granddaughter Naomi R. Allen would later write without exaggeration that Lucy “was a strong, energetic church worker. She was one of five Black women who pioneered the work in New York City. All her life she worked untiringly to build up the church.”⁵

Apparently unable to have children, Lucy supplemented her lay church work with teaching piano, while her husband Charles was a chauffeur for a wealthy family. In 1910 the couple lived on 98th Street; by 1920 they were renting a house on West 141st Street in Harlem. Tragically, Charles Lewis died shortly after turning 40 on January 26, 1922, leaving Lucy a widow in the big city.⁶

Five and a half years later Lucy met James Henry Byard, a 58-year old twice-widower with five children. He was also from Virginia and made a living as a cellar worker in Queens. Both were avid musicians, Lucy playing the piano and organ, and James, the harmonica. The couple were married on September 23, 1928, at the First Harlem Seventh-day Adventist Church by James K. Humphrey, an Adventist minister prominent in the establishment of the church in New York City.⁷

Lucy was a vital part of church life, playing the organ, teaching piano lessons, and directing the choir at the First Jamaica Seventh-day Adventist Church in Jamaica, Long Island. She was also reputed to be a superb cook—known for her “freshly baked rolls, breads, pies, cakes, nut loaves and gluten”—and her ready, gracious hospitality. She entertained hundreds of guests, including builders of the Adventist Church such as J. K. Humphrey, F. L. Peterson, L. B. Reynolds, and W. W. Fordham, throughout the decades in her homes in Queens and Long Island. Of her it was said, “She had a special gift for hospitality. Her home and her heart were open to everyone.”⁸

In the summer of 1943, Lucy, by then in her mid-sixties, developed liver cancer, apparently with a chronic case of cachexia, or the wasting syndrome. According to her husband James, she “needed careful watch and attendance” during that fateful summer. When it was clear that she needed professional medical attention, Lucy and James carefully considered to which hospital she should be taken. James stated that he “was suddenly deeply impressed to send her to Washington Sanitarium, of which place, I was not referred to by anyone.”⁹ James asked Jeter E. Cox, an African American pastor of the Bethel Seventh-day Adventist Church in nearby Brooklyn, to write a letter of introduction for him to the Washington Sanitarium, arranging for Lucy to be admitted there. Cox was ideal for this favor, not only because he was a respected Adventist minister, but because he had pastored in several states in the



Lucy Byard
Photo from the *North American Regional Voice*, August 1987,
posted at blacksdahistory.org

Columbia Union, the union where Washington Sanitarium was located.

The practice of the Washington Sanitarium in admitting and treating black people is complicated. Prior to 1943 blacks had been treated at the Sanitarium, but on a limited, selective, and subpar basis—meaning that only a certain kind of black person would be admitted, only in emergency cases, and s/he could only be treated “in an inconspicuous way” in the basement of the Sanitarium by off-duty hospital staff. By 1943 the policy had changed: no blacks were to be admitted to the Washington Sanitarium.¹⁰ When Cox agreed to inquire the Sanitarium on behalf of Lucy, he did not know about the reversal of policy at the Sanitarium, as when he had worked in the Columbia Union blacks could still be admitted to the Sanitarium on a limited basis.

True to his word, Jeter Cox wrote a letter to the Washington Sanitarium dated September 5, 1943, requesting a reservation be made on behalf of James and Lucy Byard and inquiring about financial assistance with the hospital fees. His letter was answered by one Miss Brooke from the Sanitarium’s credit office on September 9, with an enclosed form for “part-pay, part-charity care.” Cox responded to Brooke on September 14, advising her that the Bethel Church would cover Lucy Byard’s medical expenses, paying \$60 up front for the first week, and after that the hospital bills could be sent to the church. Brooke replied on September 17 that the arrangement was acceptable and that the Sanitarium would be ready to admit Lucy Byard on Tuesday, September 21. Whether socioeconomic status would be a factor later is anyone’s guess; but suffice it to say, the Byards were not as wealthy as a good deal of the clientele of the Sanitarium.¹¹

After Jeter Cox had made the requisite arrangements with Washington Sanitarium and received confirmation of the reservation, the Byards prepared to travel to Washington. Due to the gasoline shortage brought on by World War II, the couple opted to take the train.

James and Lucy Byard arrived at the train station in Washington, D.C., at 7:05 a.m., Wednesday, September 22, 1943. James Byard described what transpired next in a letter to G. E. Peters, Secretary of the North American Colored Department, written six days later:

We, after much effort, arrived in Washington by rail and went directly to the [Washington Adventist] Sanitarium. I went to the office and informed them that I was Mr. James Byard, of Jamaica, Long Island, and that Elder Cox had made reservations for my sick wife. The attendant acknowledged my reservation, went out and spoke to my wife and proceeded upstairs. He returned shortly and called me into the office, and told me that he regretted to say this, but it was against the law of the State of Maryland to admit colored people into the Sanitarium.

I, of course, was stunned, for my wife had been looking forward with much anticipation to going to this particular Sanitarium, because she felt that she would be among her own people. There would be an understanding among them that she could not expect in an outside hospital. In fact her hopes were so high that her health was much better than it had been for days, and she even suffered the tiresome and painful train ride because of the expected destination. I warned the attendant of my wife’s condition, and reminded him that she needed immediate attention; also that I was not acquainted with any hospital in Washington, D.C., hoping that he might examine her and find out her critical state, but to no avail. I was utterly confused and tried to get in touch with you, but was unsuccessful. The attendant recommended me to Freedman’s Hospital, and assured me that she would be accepted there. He called a taxi, told the driver the hospital to take us to, and my wife and I were driven away.¹²

James Byard stated in closing:

My wife is now in Freedman’s Hospital under competent and watchful care. I have now [no] remorse [sic], but I thought I might bring to your attention the sudden and unpredictable manner in which she got there. I would greatly appreciate it if you would, at your convenience, find time to visit her.¹³

At Freedman’s Hospital, today’s Howard University Hospital, about six miles from what was then the Washington Sanitarium, Lucy’s condition began to worsen. Although the effect the traumatic event at Washington Sanitarium had on Lucy’s health is not known, it could not have been positive. If what James said was true—that Lucy’s “hopes were so high that her health was much better than it had been for days”—then her spirits undoubtedly sagged after she was turned away by “her own people.”

Thirty eight days after being denied equal treatment at the Sanitarium, Lucille Byard died at Freedman’s Hospital on October 30, 1943. The immediate cause of death was cachexia (literally, wasting away) and her death due to carcinoma of the liver (liver cancer). Her body was transported to New York City, where her funeral was held at the Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is said that hundreds attended, and thirteen ministers officiated. She is buried at the Siloam section of Evergreen Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York.¹⁴

SOURCES

Allen, Naomi R. “Memories of My Grandmother, Lucille Byrd (sic).” *North American Informant*, August 1987.

Byard, James H., to G.E. Peters, September 28, 1943. General Conference Archives, Box: 10991, Folder: “Colored Situation.”

“Colored Situation” (folder). Box: 10991. General Conference Archives, General Conference Archives, Silver Spring,

Maryland.

Lucy Byard, Certificate of Death, Vital Records Division, Department of Health, District of Columbia.

Martin, Greta. "Lucy Lewis Byard obituary." *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, December 17, 1943.

NOTES

1. Lucille Byard will be referred to as "Lucy" throughout this article to prevent confusion.?
2. United States Census, 1880, Petersburg, Dinwiddie County, Virginia, District: ED 91.?
3. Pennsylvania, County Marriages, 1885-1950, Charles W. Lewis and Lucy Spence, 1899.?
4. Greta Martin, "Lucy Lewis Byard obituary," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, December 17, 1943, 6.?
5. Naomi R. Allen, "Memories of My Grandmother, Lucille Byrd (sic)," *North American Informant*, August 1987, 5.?
6. 1910 US Federal Census, Manhattan Ward 12, New York, New York; 1920 US Federal Census, Manhattan Assembly District 21, New York, New York.?
7. New York Marriage Certificate, No: 22482, September 23, 1928,?
8. Allen, 5.?
9. James H. Byard to G.E. Peters, September 28, 1943, General Conference Archives, Box: 10991, Folder: "Colored Situation."?
10. See Minutes of the Washington Sanitarium Board Meeting, "Colored Out-Patient Business," August 29, 1935, General Conference Archives, Box: "Washington Sanitarium Board Minutes 1913 to 1956," Book: "Washington Sanitarium January 1, 1932 to Jan 1949;" "Explain Why Negro Patients Not Admitted," January 6, 1937, General Conference Archives, Box: "Washington Sanitarium Board Minutes 1913 to 1956," Book: "Washington Sanitarium January 1, 1932 to Jan 1949."?
11. See Robert A. Hare to J.L. McElheny (sic) and W.E. Nelson, November 15, 1943, General Conference Archives, General Conference Archives, Box: 10991, Folder: "Colored Situation."?
12. Byard to Peters, September 28, 1943.?
13. Ibid.?
14. Lucy Byard, Certificate of Death, Vital Records Division, Department of Health, District of Columbia.?

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