

# Fordham, Walter Wraggs (1911–1998)

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## ROBERT L. BOOKER

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Walter Wraggs Fordham was an Adventist minister, evangelist, administrator, and author.

## Early Life

Walter Wraggs Fordham was born on October 20, 1911, in Charleston, South Carolina. He was the fifth of six children born to Catherine Wraggs Fordham and Henry Joseph Fordham. Neither parent was a Seventh-day Adventist at the time. However, a few months after Walter Fordham's birth, the sudden and tragic death of his older sister, Frankie, from a rare cardiac disorder set the stage for the family's introduction to the Adventist message. At evangelistic meetings conducted in 1912 by Charles Manns, Fordham's parents gained Biblical assurance about the question tearing at the heart of their family, "Where are the Dead?" As a result of the meetings, the Fordhams became charter members of the first black Seventh-day Adventist church formed in Charleston.<sup>1</sup>

As they became indoctrinated in their new faith, Fordham's parents, especially Catherine—a "country schoolteacher" before marriage—became determined that their five remaining children receive an Adventist education, despite the fact that they "were poor and lived hundreds of miles from any Seventh-day Adventist school." Thanks to their parents' resolve and sacrifice, the Fordham children "were able to attend our church schools from the elementary to the college level."<sup>2</sup>

Due in no small part to their Christian education, the Fordham children made significant contributions to the Adventist church. Walter Fordham's oldest sister, Jesse, became a schoolteacher and married John H. Wagner, Sr. (1902-1962), the prominent evangelist and conference president. Two of Fordham's brothers, Wilmont and Henry, like him, became preachers. Another brother, Furman, became a well-known professor of music who supported evangelistic efforts conducted by his brothers and other ministers as a singing evangelist.<sup>3</sup>

## The Oakwood Years

In 1929, Fordham left home to enroll at Oakwood Junior College (now Oakwood University) in Huntsville, Alabama. The following summer he decided to take up colporteur Adventist literature to earn scholarship funds for continuing at Oakwood. He and a friend from Jamaica, Moses Beach, had a very promising start, canvassing in the vicinity of Marion, South Carolina. But as the Great Depression hit with full force, tobacco prices suddenly plummeted so drastically that their customers were unable to pay on their accounts. The two young colporteurs, their hopes for earning a scholarship dashed, were stranded 600 miles from school with nothing more than their bicycles. Fordham, on the verge of returning home and giving up hopes of returning to Oakwood, decided to pray first, promising that if God would open a way for him to attend school, he would give up his desire to become a lawyer, and if it was God's will, become a minister of the gospel instead.



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

He and Beach embarked on Huntsville on their 600-mile bicycle trek through the South, experiencing several adventures and providences that Fordham later narrated in his autobiography. News of their plight and their determination reached Anna Knight, associate educational secretary of the Southern Union Conference, who in turn appealed to friends for funds to support the young men.

“When we finally arrived on our bikes,” wrote Fordham, “the entire student body gave us an unforgettable welcome. Anna Knight gave us a check equivalent to a scholarship for one entire school year.<sup>4</sup> Fordham cites this experience of answered prayer as the event that turned him to the path of gospel ministry.

One of the most dramatic and pivotal events in the history of Oakwood—and of black Adventism—occurred in October 1931, thrusting Fordham into a leadership role: the Oakwood student strike for black advancement and leadership at the college. He, along with Alan Anderson, Samuel Rashford, Ernest Mosely, and H. R. Murphy, led the entire student body to demand the appointment of a black president, along with a significant increase in the number of black faculty, among other reforms. The five leaders of the strike were expelled from the school. However, Fordham returned later and graduated in 1934 with a diploma placed in his hand by J. L. Moran (1894-1972), who had become the first black president of Oakwood College on May 12, 1932, in large part due to the efforts of Fordham and his fellow student leaders.<sup>5</sup>

In 1934, Fordham, by this time affectionately referred to as “W.W.” in most circles, was also united in marriage to Maybelle Lois Winston. They would have four children: Lois F. (Lester), Audrey E. (Booker), Walter, Jr., and Kathryn (Adams).<sup>6</sup>

## A Righteous Rebel in Ministry

The young couple began their ministry in the New Jersey Conference, with responsibility for all of the black churches in the southern part of the state. Four years later, Fordham was called to pastor Ethnan Temple, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was while pastoring the influential Ethnan Temple that Fordham established himself as a dynamic and effective evangelist. After two major evangelistic efforts, 150 members were added to the Church.<sup>7</sup>

In 1942, Fordham was called to head the black work in the state of Florida. He baptized over 100 persons in his Jacksonville evangelistic campaign, and went on to lead the Southern Union in baptisms for the year. Increasingly, as he was exposed to the racial injustice and discrimination often exhibited by the church organization during this time, Fordham was propelled into the forefront of the struggle as a spokesman demanding equality. His determination toward those goals was fierce, as recorded in his own words, “We determined to continue the struggle, no matter how long it would take. We would not allow racism and segregation to drive us off the ‘ship of hope.’ Our motto was, ‘Stay with the ship!’”<sup>8</sup>

## Leadership: Regional Conferences and the Regional Department

Throughout most of his ministry, Fordham played a leading role in the conception, growth, and development of regional conferences—the black-administered conferences that began to be organized in 1944. In 1946, after accepting a call to serve as evangelist and secretary for the black work in the Southwestern Union, Fordham led out in the creation in 1947 of the Southwest Region Conference, headquartered in Dallas, Texas, and became its first president. After leading that conference for its first seven years, Fordham was called to take the helm of two other regional conferences. From 1954 to 1959 he served as president of the South Central Conference, headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee, and from 1959 to 1966, he was president of the Central States Conference, headquartered in Kansas City, Missouri.

At the 1966 General Conference Session, Fordham was elected to serve as the associate secretary of the Regional Department of the General Conference, and then elected to secretary in 1975. He served in that capacity until his retirement in 1979. In his leadership of this General Conference department, “Fordham played a major role in the development of the Adventist Church’s official position on human relations,” according to the *Adventist Review*.<sup>9</sup>

After more than sixty years of marriage, Maybelle Fordham went to her rest in 1995. W.W. Fordham spent his final days close to Pine Forge Academy in the rolling hills of Berks County, Pennsylvania. He died on October 27, 1998.<sup>10</sup>

### SOURCES

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“Furman Fletcher Fordham obituary.” *North American Regional Voice*, September 1987.

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“Walter Wraggs Fordham obituary.” *ARH*, January 28, 1999.

## NOTES

1. W.W. Fordham, *Righteous Rebel* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1990), 13.?
2. *Ibid.*, 16.?
3. *Ibid.*, 15; "Furman Fletcher Fordham obituary," *North American Regional Voice*, September 1987, 17-18.?
4. *Ibid.*, 18-20.?
5. *Ibid.*, 25-34; See also Holly Fisher, "Oakwood College Students' Quest for Social Justice before and during the Civil Rights Era," *The Journal of African American History* 88, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 110-125.?
6. Fordham, 51.?
7. *Ibid.*?
8. *Ibid.*, 73.?
9. "Retired GC Director Dies," *ARH*, January 28, 1999, 23.?
10. "Walter Wraggs Fordham, Sr. obituary," *ARH*, January 28, 1999, 28.?

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