

Atlantic Conference (1889–1901)

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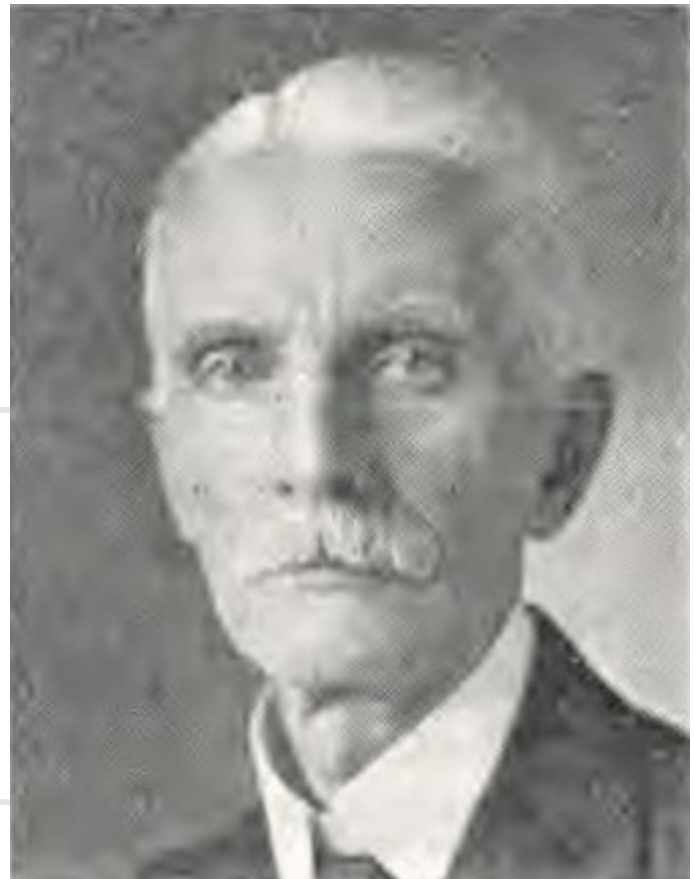
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The Atlantic Conference, though short-lived (1889-1901), fostered the early development of Seventh-day Adventist work in the large cities on the mid-Atlantic coast of the United States. It was parent to the Chesapeake, Greater New York, and New Jersey Conferences.

Origins

Two decades after the founding of the denomination in 1863, the Seventh-day Adventist church had barely touched the large cities of the United States and had no organized presence in the urban centers along the eastern seaboard such as New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. Although the second advent movement of the 1840s led by William Miller and Joshua V. Himes had generated a considerable response in these cities, the Seventh-day Adventists had made only occasional forays into them, with no lasting congregations established until a nationwide effort to organize city missions began in 1883. Missions were launched in twenty-five cities by 1886, including Brooklyn, New York; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Washington, D.C.¹

Initially these city missions typically involved a small group of workers who canvassed and distributed literature door-to-door and on the street, seeking to win interest in Bible readings (or studies) and public lectures.



Hiram Edson Robinson, Atlantic Conference president (1890-1895)

From *Adventist Review*, September 24, 1924.

Generally, it was not until the 1890s that Adventist city work would begin to take a more wholistic character with medical missionary and humanitarian endeavors.²

The work developed slowly but by 1889 viable congregations had been planted in Washington, D.C. and Brooklyn. The General Conference Committee, meeting March 4, 1889, went on record in favor of organizing these churches, along with a handful of small congregations in New Jersey and Maryland, into a new conference. The conference's territory would comprise "S.E. New York, N. Jersey, Maryland, Delaware, and the Dist. of Col."³ – all of which until then had been "mission" territory, outside the boundaries of existing conferences. The work in Philadelphia became part of the Pennsylvania Conference.

Organizational History

The Atlantic Conference was organized at meetings held in Washington, D.C., September 25-30, 1889, chaired by General Conference president O.A. Olsen. The deliberations began with a total of nine credentialed lay delegates, increased to 12 when three late arrivers from Brooklyn were seated the second day. The delegates came from a total of five congregations. In addition to Washington, D.C. and Brooklyn, two New Jersey congregations were represented: Camden and Vineland. The fifth was the Baltimore, Maryland, church, organized with 16 members in October 1888. Two earlier groups formed in the late 1870s, one in the Calverton area of Baltimore and one on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, had dissipated when members moved away.⁴

The conference's territory was delineated as the counties of Westchester and Rockland, N. Y., New York City, Brooklyn, Long Island, Staten Island, the states of New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland, and the District of Columbia. An estimate of 175 members was given at the organizational session. However, when the new conference was admitted into the General Conference three weeks later, a membership of 151 was recorded.⁵

The ministerial brothers Joel E. Robinson (1854-1890) and Hiram Edson Robinson (1856-1935), second generation Seventh-day Adventists from upstate New York, were elected to lead the Atlantic Conference as president and secretary, respectively. The Robinsons along with two other ordained ministers and one lay member, Andrew Kalstrom of the Washington, D.C., church comprised the executive committee.⁶

Parallel Agencies. The Atlantic Conference's organizational history offers a glimpse at how agencies established to advance various aspects of Adventism's mission during the church's early decades functioned as formally independent of conference administration yet closely parallel with it. At the same September 1889 meetings in which the conference was organized, the Atlantic Tract and Missionary Society was formed with the three officers of the conference holding near equivalent offices in the "T. and M. society": J.E. Robinson, president; H.E. Robinson, vice-president; and T.A. Kilgore, secretary-treasurer.⁷ Also, a Sabbath School Association was formed with H.E. Robinson, president; another minister, D.C. Babcock, vice-president; and Mattie Robinson, H.E.'s wife, serving as secretary-treasurer. D.E. Lindsey, also one of the conference's initial five ministers, headed the Health and Temperance Association, assisted by his wife in the role of secretary-treasurer.⁸

The Atlantic Conference's organization in 1889 coincided with establishment of the National Religious Liberty Association that same year (re-organized as the International Religious Liberty Association in 1893) to counter the drive for national Sunday legislation and related federal measures to establish the United States as a "Christian nation."⁹ Ministers sent by the NRLA/IRLA to work for religious liberty also provided pastoral and evangelistic leadership for the Washington, D.C. church (without their salaries drawing on the meager funds of the Atlantic Conference). The church in turn provided a base of support for the religious liberty work.¹⁰ In rural communities of Maryland's Eastern Shore, Adventists, in 1892, began facing prosecution for violating Sunday laws. The Maryland state supreme court upheld the constitutionality of such laws in 1894 and several Adventists served prison sentences that year, including two who were incarcerated while the Atlantic Conference was meeting for its fifth annual session in November.¹¹ The conference organized believers in becoming members of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) and supporting its work to counter measures enforcing religious conformity.¹²

The conference's annual sessions regularly featured presentations on Adventist education and, more specifically, the importance of supporting South Lancaster Academy in Massachusetts. A resolution to "seek out and encourage suitable young persons to attend South Lancaster Academy, and thus secure the benefits of that institution in fitting themselves for usefulness in the Master's service" was adopted at the first session in 1890 and similar pledges would be affirmed at subsequent sessions.¹³

At its 1896 session, the conference endorsed "Christian Help work," an initiative introduced in 1894 by the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association under Dr. John Harvey Kellogg.¹⁴ Christian Help work was a precedent for humanitarian agencies the developed denomination in the twentieth century such as the Dorcas society and, later, Adventist Community Services and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA). Yet, more than a department, Christian Help work was a model or framework for organizing an entire congregation as a Christian Help band and thus become "recognized as an uplifting force in its community, as an association of Christians who are competent to deal with every form of human need, physical, mental, and moral."¹⁵

According to a report at the 1898 session, the Atlantic Conference's churches had "manifested commendable interest in missionary and Christian Help work" with Christian Help bands organized and active in the Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Wilmington, and Jersey City churches, among others. At the Washington church "ten branches of the Christian help band doing work for the poor and needy" were active, according to a report in 1899.¹⁶

At its 1894 session, the Atlantic Conference amended its constitution to allow for the work of the Atlantic Tract and Missionary Society to be "conducted by the Conference under the head of tract and missionary department work."¹⁷ This action suggests growing support for a new plan of organization in which the auxiliary societies and associations (T. and M., Sabbath School, Health and Temperance, IRLA) would become departments directly administered by the conference rather than parallel, semi-independent organizations. The support was not by

any means universal – in 1898 the conference re-established the tract society as a separate organization.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the change from auxiliary organizations to conference departments would soon prevail and became part of the denominational reorganization agreed upon at the General Conference of 1901.¹⁹

Evangelism. The Atlantic Conference faced the daunting challenge of reaching a largely urban population of some 6 million marked by far greater racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity than the church had typically engaged in the past. Its territory stretched along what become known as the I-95 corridor a century later, from the nation's dominant center of commerce and culture, New York City, to its capital city, Washington, D.C.

By outward measures the conference's first year of operation was not particularly promising. Within three months the conference president, J.E. Robinson, was out of commission, having contracted tuberculosis. He went to Colorado for a climate more conducive to recovery but his affliction turned out to be "galloping consumption" and he passed away on July 13, 1890.²⁰ In addition to this loss of a promising leader only 35 years old, another minister, D.C. Babcock, accepted a call to West Virginia soon after the conference was organized. Thus, after starting out at five, the Atlantic Conference's ministerial force had diminished to three by February 1890.²¹

Some progress was also in evidence. New congregations were organized in Paulsborough, New Jersey and in Hollandsville, Delaware, where a small (24 x 35 ft.) house of worship was constructed – the first church building or property of any kind owned within the conference.²² But H.E. Robinson who, as conference secretary, stepped in for his fallen brother, recognized the need for the fledgling conference to re-group and formulate plans for meeting its missional challenge. He called for a longer-than-usual 10-day gathering for the conference's first annual session, November 13-23, 1890, in Brooklyn, New York. It would be a time of "great spiritual benefit," Robinson believed, with Ellen White, who was on a national speaking tour promoting the Christ-centered revival stemming from the 1888 General Conference, to be present, along with her son, W.C White and General Conference president O.A. Olsen. H.E. Robinson was elected president of the conference at the 1890 session, which endorsed his proposal for development of "a short course of practical instruction in Bible study, missionary work, public speaking, and other points of education necessary" to mobilize and train Bible workers.²³

After a somewhat slow start, evangelistic progress began to accelerate, as seen in an overview of developments in four sectors of the conference during the 1890s.

First, the Washington, D.C. church, organized with 26 members in 1889, grew to 150 members by 1899. Remarkable for its thoroughly biracial composition, it included a substantial professional class of civil servants, teachers, and physicians. They took seriously both the potential influence and high responsibility of the church's witness in the nation's capital and several of them gave vigorous and idealistic, if sometimes contentious leadership.²⁴ For the first four years of the Atlantic Conference's operations, a member of the Washington, D.C. church served a one-year term as the sole lay person on the conference executive committee. One of these, Dr.

James H. Howard, who served 1891-1892, was in all likelihood the first African American elected to the executive committee of a Seventh-day Adventist conference.²⁵

Delaware, along with northern and eastern portions of Maryland, constituted a second sector. Subsequent to Baltimore (1888) and Hollandsville (1890), churches were added in Rock Hall, Maryland (1892); Wilmington, Delaware (1892); Ford's Store, Maryland (1893); Winchester, Maryland (1893); Church Hill, Maryland (1894); and Cheswold, Delaware (1896). Several ministers led out in these evangelistic endeavors, including R.D. Hottel, H.E. Robinson, S.B. Horton, and E.E. Franke. Ordained in 1892, Elmer E. Franke²⁶ quickly became the dominant figure in Atlantic Conference evangelism.

The Cheswold church comprised members of a Delaware-based ethnic group called the "Moors" who were classified as "black" in American society's racial order though they were relatively light-skinned, and their heritage shrouded in ambiguity. A member of this group, Fred H. Seeney, entered ministry and would make a signal contribution to black evangelism in the Chesapeake Conference (to which Delaware and most of Maryland were assigned in 1899) and in the Washington, D.C. area.²⁷

Regarding developments in a third sector of Atlantic Conference territory, New Jersey, see the New Jersey Conference, Inc. article. Here we simply note that E.E. Franke moved on to even more impressive evangelistic feats in this state. The campaign that Franke began in Jersey City in September 1893 within five months led to organization of a 60-member church and to construction of "a fine meeting-house worth \$3000, besides purchasing a lot for about \$1500."²⁸ At the conference's fifth annual session in November 1894, H.E. Robinson reported that church membership in the conference had doubled during the two preceding years, reaching 854 in 16 churches. Eight additional houses of worship had been built or acquired in the four years since the first one at Hollandsville in 1890.²⁹

The Brooklyn church anchored the fourth sector, the New York City area on the northern end of the conference territory. It was home base for H.E. Robinson during his years as conference president, and thus for the conference itself. Though the 1894 session passed a resolution "authorizing the executive committee to establish Conference headquarters at some suitable point in the Conference,"³⁰ a headquarters office building never materialized for the Atlantic Conference. As conference president, Robinson was also pastor of the Brooklyn church, apparently the largest congregation in the conference with a membership estimated at 200.³¹ Greater New York's large immigrant communities cried out for work in languages other than English, and primarily through the persistent work of John F. Hansen, a Scandinavian church was established in Brooklyn by 1894. Work in other languages would develop after the Atlantic Conference era.³²

Decades later, H.E. Robinson's obituary credited him with delivering the "first sermon ever preached by a Seventh-day Adventist minister in New York City," though no date was given. It seems ironic, then, that the Atlantic Conference devoted greater attention to evangelizing greater New York City soon after Robinson left Brooklyn and the conference presidency in 1895 to take the leadership of the Adventist work in Great Britain.

Robinson had shepherded the Atlantic Conference through its first five years (save for the initial few months) during which it had grown impressively from 151 members to nearly 1,000.³³

In fact, it was just prior to Robinson's departure that the Atlantic Conference undertook a new initiative for New York City, and sent a resolution requesting help from the General Conference in meeting the enormity of the task. The General Conference agreed to support a minister to work with E.E. Franke for two years in New York City evangelism – first O.O. Farnsworth and then, after Farnsworth took ill, Volney H. Lucas.³⁴ Franke's tent meetings on West 94th Street in 1896 led to formation of the first Seventh-day Adventist congregation in the borough of Manhattan.³⁵

Though Franke would eventually become a divisive figure in the church, in part for methods that at times bordered on sensationalism – a “theatrical style of preaching” in the words of Ellen White³⁶ – his meetings at Chickering Hall in early 1899 drew unprecedented attention to the Adventist message in New York City. Methods of large city evangelism that would become standard during the twentieth century – renting a large public auditorium, advertising, and printing large quantities of circulars, invitation cards, and so forth – were new to Adventism at that time, and quite costly. Though the Atlantic Conference had nowhere near the resources needed to fund such an effort, it did play a significant role, along with donors Franke personally cultivated, in make sure that the bills were paid.³⁷

Leadership and Organizational Changes. The Atlantic Conference not only established a vigorous pattern of growth in membership and financial support but also of action to strengthen the conference's capacity to foster mission. Early on, the conference incurred substantial expense to purchase a “splice” to make its large camp-meeting tent usable. This made it possible to conduct annual camp-meetings at varying locales, usually in the late summer, beginning in 1891 at Mt. Holly, New Jersey. Conference sessions were sometimes held in conjunction with camp meeting. Believers were encouraged to give regular support to a “tent and camp-meeting fund” to cover expenses for upkeep of the tents and related expenses necessary to conduct evangelism and conference meetings.³⁸ A monthly periodical for conference news along with instructional and inspirational material entitled the *Union Record* began publication in 1893. The 1896 annual session recommended changing the name to the *Atlantic Record* and the publication frequency increased to weekly.³⁹ And, by 1896, the Atlantic Conference Association had been set up as a holding corporation for conference property.⁴⁰

Five years of leadership continuity in the presidency of H.E. Robinson likely helped the Atlantic Conference both establish a solid foundation and forward momentum that continued through the more frequent turnovers in administration that followed. Julius E. Jayne was called from the presidency of the Maine Conference to succeed Robinson as Atlantic Conference president in 1895. When Jayne was tapped to head the denomination's Foreign Mission Board in 1897, Sven F. Svensson, who had recently come to New York City to build up the Scandinavian work, stepped in as conference president. At the 1898 annual session, Albert E. Place, previously president of the New York Conference, was elected president of the Atlantic Conference.⁴¹

Less than a year later, though, at a meeting held April 27-30, 1899 in Baltimore, acting in accordance with a General Conference recommendation, the Atlantic Conference divided. Delaware, the District of Columbia, and Maryland (except for three western counties that had been ceded to the West Virginia Conference in 1894) became the territory of the new Chesapeake Conference, with K.C. Russell chosen as president.⁴² As of September 1898, the Atlantic Conference had 22 churches and 1,331 members. The membership figure likely surpassed, 1,400 by time the conference was divided, representing a nearly ten-fold increase in the decade since it was organized.⁴³

The division left the Atlantic Conference with 14 churches and 779 members as of December 31, 1899.⁴⁴ Vigorous evangelistic efforts continued in New Jersey and New York City under the auspices of the down-sized Atlantic Conference for the remaining two years of its history. Campaigns led by E.E. Franke continued to loom large, the most notable coming in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1901.⁴⁵ In 1900, A.E. Place transferred to New England and J.E. Jayne returned to once again serve as Atlantic Conference president. Membership had increased to 909 in twenty churches and two companies when the conference was divided once again on December 18, 1901. This time, however, the division brought an end to the Atlantic Conference and created two new conferences: Greater New York and New Jersey.⁴⁶

Legacy

The history of the Atlantic Conference provides an informative window on an era of rapid change in the Seventh-day Adventist organizational system. Before it was organized, the Seventh-day Adventist presence in the cities of the mid-Atlantic coast had been limited to scattered individuals and small ephemeral groups. By the time it was divided to create new entities, Adventism had a lasting, organized foothold from New York City to Jersey City, Trenton, Wilmington, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., as well as surrounding communities. Its legacy can be traced to several conferences that have thrived into the twenty-first century: Allegheny East and Northeastern, along with Chesapeake, Greater New York, and New Jersey.

After visiting the Atlantic Conference camp meeting held in Wilmington, Delaware in 1897, General Conference president G.A. Irwin noted in the *Review and Herald* that the GC had provided support to the conference for its mission to the large cities in its territory. "However," he added, "it is but due to the conference to say that its members have shown commendable zeal and perseverance in pressing the work, and its growth is largely the result of this effort."⁴⁷ The legacy left by the believers associated with the Atlantic Conference, then, is not simply a matter of organization and administration, but also a spirit of enduring consecration to a great and, on human terms, impossible mission.

Presidents

J.E. Robinson (1889-1890); H.E. Robinson (1890-1895); J.E. Jayne (1895-1897); S.F. Svensson (1897-1898); A.E. Place (1898-1900); J.E. Jayne (1900-1901).

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NOTES

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3. General Conference Committee, March 4, 1889, General Conference Archives, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1889.pdf>.
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11. H. E. Robinson, "Atlantic Conference," *ARH*, March 20, 1894, 188; H.E. Robinson, "Atlantic Conference," *ARH*, December 11, 1894, 781.
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14. J. H. Kellogg, "Christian Help Work; Its Aims and Methods," *Home Missionary*, March 1894, 60-62.
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16. "Atlantic Conference Proceedings," *ARH*, October 11, 1898, 656; S. F. Svensson, "Washington, D.C.," *ARH*, February 28, 1899, 16.
17. H. E. Robinson, "Atlantic Conference," December 11, 1894.
18. "Atlantic Conference Proceedings," *ARH*, October 11, 1898, 656.
19. A. T. Robinson, who had given oversight to the Atlantic Conference in its earliest years (1889-1891) in his role as supervisor of General Conference District 1 (covering the northeastern and mid-Atlantic states and eastern Canada), pioneered the department plan in South Africa in 1892; Milton Hook, "Robinson, Asa Theron (1850-1949)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*. November 30, 2020, accessed December 16, 2020. <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=7A27>. For an overview of the denominational reorganization centering on the 1901 General Conference, see Schwarz and Greenleaf, *Light Bearers*, 248-257; 269-270.
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21. Lindsey, "Atlantic Conference," 108.
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24. O. A. Olsen stated, "I don't know as there is any church in the country at present that has a greater interest or is more devoted to the work," in a letter to J.S. Washburn, June 17, 1890, General Conference Archives. On the origins and early years of the first Seventh-day Adventist church in Washington, D.C. see Douglas Morgan, *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2010), 179-183.
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27. C. A. Weslager, *Delaware's Forgotten Folks: The Story of the Moors and Nanticokes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 25-39, 128-155; T.B. Westbrook, "Fred Harold Seeney obituary," *ARH*, April 16, 1925, 22.
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29. "Atlantic Conference Proceedings," *ARH*, December 11, 1894, 781.
30. "Atlantic Conference Proceedings," *ARH*, November 7, 1893, 797.
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32. John F. Hansen, "Atlantic Conference," *ARH*, October 9, 1894, 637-638.
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37. "General Conference Proceedings," *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, March 5, 1899, 148-149; W. E. Cornell, "The Work in New York City," *ARH*, May 16, 1899, 315-316.
38. "Atlantic Conference Proceedings," December 22, 1891.
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42. "Formation of a New Conference," *ARH*, May 30, 1899, 348.
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46. *Annual Statistical Report for 1901*, 1, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR1901.pdf>; H. W. Cottrell, "Biennial Report of the Atlantic Union Conference," *General Conference Bulletin*, April 1, 1903, 34.

47. I[rwin], "Eastern Camp-Meetings."

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