

Harbor Springs Convention

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Harbor Springs Convention (July 15 – August 17, 1891) is noted by Adventist historians as a decisive “turning point” in the development of Adventist education because during that meeting the Church embarked on creating a distinctive philosophy of Adventist education. This “educational convention” held in Harbor Springs, Michigan was the first meeting of its kind held by the Church.¹ At this meeting the concept of “Christian education” became a common term among Adventist educators.

Plans and Location

At the 1891 General Conference session it was recommended that “an institute for the special benefit of Bible teachers and those who may be called upon to fill positions as Bible teachers in our schools or local institutes, be held this coming summer, at some convenient place.”² The planning committee, consisting of A. T. Jones, E. J. Waggoner, E. B. Miller (professor at Battle Creek College) and G. W. Caviness (from South Lancaster Academy), and chaired by W. W. Prescott, settled on a small resort area known as “Harbor Springs,” just four miles from Petoskey, Michigan. A vibrant Seventh-day Adventist congregation had been established there earlier that year thanks to the labors of G. B. Starr and others. This “strong church” was raised up with a newly remodeled “mission home.” While there, Starr reported holding a number of Bible studies with “leading merchants” and “professional men” in both Petoskey and Harbor Springs in the months leading up to the meeting.³

The meetings were held in what was styled “Harbor Heights” on the bluffs overlooking Harbor Springs, adjacent to Little Traverse Bay.⁴ One reason this site was chosen was the beautiful location and the easy access to clean water (which turned out to be more important than they realized when a nearby forest fire came to the edge of camp so that those who came early were preoccupied with putting out the flames). Participants stayed in 41 rented tents. Sarah E. Peck, at the time a junior at Battle Creek College, remembered that it felt like an Adventist camp meeting.⁵ Some of the featured speakers and luminaries that W. W. Prescott invited to participate included A. T. Jones, E. J. Waggoner, W. C. White, Uriah Smith, G. I. Butler, O. A. Olsen, J. H. Kellogg, S. N. Haskell, J. O. Corliss, J. S. Washburn, and G. B. Starr. After some persistent urging Ellen G. White also agreed to participate.⁶

Commencing on Wednesday, July 15, 1891, the event, which lasted just over a month, was identified variously as the “Summer School,”⁷ “Normal Institute,” or “Summer Bible Institute.”⁶ It was attended by approximately ninety⁹ to one hundred¹⁰ persons. The invitation to attend was broad and included the denomination’s leading ministers, licentiates, Sabbath-school workers, Bible workers, and church elders, as well as other church workers. It was felt all could benefit from the instruction.¹¹ The number of participants may have fluctuated above one hundred as some people living in the vicinity or who were on vacation in nearby Petoskey seem also to have participated.¹² It appears that some people went early or stayed afterward, although the official meetings concluded by August 17, 1891.¹³

Meetings and Pedagogical Significance

The purpose of the Harbor Springs Convention was to train and inspire Adventist educators. W. W. Prescott, as education secretary of the General Conference, described how just before the meeting, the theme came to him “as distinctly as though spoken with the audible voice the words, ‘They shall be all taught of God.’ This motto was adopted as the theme for the institute at the first morning session.”⁴ After the meeting was over, Prescott noted that the motto was placed prominently in the chapel back at Battle Creek College, and, later, also in Union College. “It was the guide,” added Prescott, “in the work during those six weeks. We expected to receive, and did receive light from God, not only in the study of the Scriptures, but in our plans for educational work.”⁵

Up until this point, the curriculum at the Adventist schools had focused on classical studies, with the usual emphasis on ancient languages and memorization; a course in Bible doctrines was offered as an extracurricular class. What made the 1891 Harbor Springs educational convention significant is that it introduced the idea of centering the curriculum around the study of the Bible as an integrative and cohesive philosophy for Adventist education. The convention meetings adopted an approach to Bible study that went beyond doctrinal formulation and focused on personal spiritual growth.¹⁶ This strong spiritual emphasis meant that the meetings were remembered as a significant turning point for many individuals and for the community. One participant, Percy Magan, recalled that it was on this occasion that the term “Christian education” first entered the Adventist vocabulary and became widely used among Adventist educators. Adventist schools came to be understood as essentially different from their secular counterparts rather than just teaching the same information but in a private, religious setting. Instead, Adventist education began to grasp a wholistic outlook, grounding its entire learning program within a strong spiritual and scriptural framework that encompassed all aspects of the curriculum and the educational experience.

W. W. Prescott, as the lead organizer for this event, communicated this concept when he reported to the 1893 General Conference session on what had been accomplished:

Our minds were impressed there as never before with the idea that the purpose of educational work was to teach us of God in his revealed word and his works, and in his dealings with men, that all education should be

planned upon such a basis and carried out in such a way that the result would be a more intimate knowledge of God, not merely as a theory but as an experience. While the general purpose up to that time has been to have a religious element in our schools, yet since that institute, as never before, our work has been *practically* upon that basis, showing itself in course of study and plans of work as it had not previously.¹⁷

Several influential voices helped shape the themes that emerged at the convention. These provide important context. Two of the speakers were A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner. Both had captured the attention of the denomination with their emphasis on the centrality of the theme of “Righteousness by Faith” at the 1888 General Conference session in Minneapolis. In the wake of the 1888 conference they had continued the emphasis in extensive preaching tours in partnership with Ellen White.

Ellen White, the prophetic founding voice of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, was also a major influence at the convention. Previously, she had called for more intentional efforts to incorporate Christian principles into both the curriculum and Adventist pedagogy. Subsequently, in 1891, the church’s educators began to reframe educational goals in light of the new understanding that the previous focus on the study of the “heathen” classics was perceived to be inadequate—a failure. Some teachers, such as Edward A. Sutherland and Percy T. Magan, advocated for the complete “elimination of pagan and infidel authors from our schools, the dropping of long courses in the Latin and Greek classics, and the substitution of the teaching of the Bible and the teaching of history from the standpoint of the prophecies.”¹⁸ These Adventist educational reformers saw the dual focus of the spiritual with the classical curriculum as inherently conflicted and ultimately detrimental to the success of Adventist education. Both Magan and Sutherland, among other educators, would struggle over the next decade to implement these reforms at Battle Creek College (and later at Emmanuel Missionary College).

Prescott sought to standardize the Adventist educational curriculum following the 1891 Harbor Springs Convention but discovered that changes needed to be introduced incrementally. He noted that the adoption of the new system had been voted “as far as practicable in all of our schools.” There was significant resistance. “The Institute,” he noted in his 1893 report, “discussed and adopted a Bible course which should be used as far as practicable in all the schools represented there. The basis of this course was determined upon [*sic*] as consisting of four years of Bible study, four years history, an advanced course in the English Language, while New Testament Greek was made optional, and Hebrew was suggested as optional. But the basis was these three lines of study.”¹⁹ Students in Adventist schools could expect a decreased emphasis on ancient classics replaced by a new course focused on the Bible along with another course in history from a Christian standpoint. There would also be studies in healthful living, a course promoted by Dr. J. H. Kellogg.²⁰ English language study was also deemed essential. In the new curriculum, classes would be required in English grammar and composition, although not usually in literature. Classes in mathematics and logic rounded out the curriculum. Overall, the emphasis in the curriculum shifted, with biblical study coming to be viewed as its integrative core. The study of biblical languages was retained (in contrast to studying ancient classics), particularly for aspiring ministers (although, while encouraged, this was not made a mandatory requirement for all aspiring pastors). A short

program of study was an important objective because of the strong sense of imminence.

Another significant aspect of the 1891 Harbor Springs Convention is the new curricular emphasis upon the Bible and history, thus emphasizing within Adventist education a decidedly Christian philosophy and in a new Christ-centered approach to Adventist theology. This new approach, as Prescott put it, would study “the Bible as a whole” “as the gospel of Christ from first to last.” Adventist teaching was “simply the gospel of Christ rightly understood.”²¹ This spiritual revival intended to frame Adventist education as distinctly Adventist with the goal of providing each student with an opportunity to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Ellen G. White saw the Harbor Springs meeting as an opportunity to put into practice emerging Adventist educational ideals that she had been reflecting upon since the 1870s, ideas that she would continue to actively refine and attempt to put into practice later in the 1890s in Australia through the establishment of the Avondale school. Adventist historian George R. Knight observes that Ellen G. White’s strong support of this meeting, coupled with a series of six “powerful, unambiguous articles” afterward, contributed to “new standards” in Adventist education.²²

Impact

Adventist education grew significantly during the 1890s as elementary schools, secondary schools, and colleges blossomed across the United States and around the world. The 1891 Harbor Springs educational convention was a major catalyst that brought new energy to Adventist educators’ attempts to focus on the purpose of Adventist education and to inspire aspiring teachers. The meeting crystalized the distinctive reason for existence. For the first time in Adventist history, a deliberate attempt was made to develop “a college curriculum specifically designed for ministerial training.”²³ While such ideals had been aspired to before this point, this event helped Adventist educators put such ideas into practice.

During the 1891 Harbor Springs Convention the General Conference Committee and the Foreign Mission Board each met several times to utilize the opportunity of having so many influential church leaders together in one place to make strategic decisions. Several significant mission appointments took place during this meeting, including sending G. B. Starr to travel with Ellen G. White to help in the establishment of the developing missionary work in Australia. In fact, Starr left the meeting early to visit family and “to make necessary preparations for the journey.”²⁴ Thus, in a very significant way, as Adventist education became more distinctively Adventist in practice, the role and purpose of Adventist education within the denomination was seen as integrally intertwined with its mission. Missionaries learned that one of the most effective ways of advancing the Adventist mission was through the establishment of new schools, which in turn required mission-minded Adventist educators. Thus, the convention of 1891 not only led to sweeping curriculum reform, but it also helped provide a distinctive spiritual focus that closely linked Adventist education with mission in a renewed overall purpose.

The Harbor Springs Convention was remembered by veteran Adventist educator, C. W. Irwin, as “our first great step in educational reform.” Although Adventist educators “had been slow to comprehend God’s plan of education,” this meeting showed them how “to put these principles into practice.”²⁵

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. George R. Knight, “Harbor Springs, Michigan,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, eds. Denis Fortin & Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 856.
2. “The Summer Normal Institute,” *ARH*, June 16, 1891, 384.
3. G. B. Starr, “Notes of Experience,” *ARH*, October 13, 1891, 635.
4. [G. B. Starr], “The Summer Bible Institute,” *The Home Missionary*, August 1891, 171.
5. Sarah E. Peck, “Personal Reminiscences of Ellen G. White,” *ARH*, March 19, 1964, 1, 7-9.
6. Gilbert M. Valentine, *W. W. Prescott: Forgotten Giant of Adventism’s Second Generation* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2005), 100.
7. See note on the back page of *ARH*, September 15, 1891, 576.
8. G. B. Starr, “Notes of Experience,” *ARH*, October 13, 1891, 635; J. S. Washburn, “Labors,” *ARH*, October 6, 1891, 618.

9. See note on *ARH*, August 4, 1891, 496, where the editors published information from W. W. Prescott that about half way through the meeting there were "about 90" in attendance. This is the closest documented source from the actual meeting.
10. W. W. Prescott, "Report of the Educational Secretary," *Review and Herald Extra, Daily Bulletin of the General Conference*, February 23, 1893, 349. In this subsequent report Prescott estimates one-hundred people were present after the meeting was over.
11. "The Summer Normal Institute," *ARH*, June 16, 1891, 384.
12. Ibid.
13. W. W. Prescott to W. A. Colcord, Aug. 13, 1891, General Conference Archives, Secretariat Incoming Letters, 1891-K to 1891 Waggoner, #21, Box 3. This letter confirms that the meeting concluded on Monday, August 17, 1891. This is confirmed by the note on the back page of *Review and Herald*, August 18, 1891, pg. 528, that notes the return of General Conference Committee members by this date. This would make the educational convention approximately five weeks in length although Prescott described the meeting as lasting six weeks. This dichotomy can be explained in that Prescott went to prepare for the meeting approximately one week before hence in his memory he recalled the event as lasting six weeks, even though the factual evidence points to an event that was just over a month in length. It is also possible some participants stayed longer although I have found no evidence to support such a claim.
14. Prescott, "Report of the Educational Secretary," 349.
15. Ibid., 349-350.
16. [G. B. Starr], "The Summer Bible Institute," *The Home Missionary*, Aug. 1891, 171.
17. Prescott, "Report of the Educational Secretary," 350.
18. P. T. Magan, "The Educational Conference and Educational Reform," *ARH*, August 6, 1901, 508.
19. Ibid.
20. George R. Knight, "Harbor Springs, Michigan," in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, eds. Denis Fortin & Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 856.
21. *General Conference Bulletin*, February 23, 1893, 350.
22. George R. Knight, "Education, Ellen G. White's Role in Adventist," in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, eds. Denis Fortin & Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013).
23. Valentine, 67.

24. G. B. Starr, "Notes of Experience," *ARH*, October 13, 1891, 635.

25. C. W. Irwin, "The Divine Remedy for Our Educational Ills," *ARH*, July 12, 1923, 10.

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