

Harlem Academy

(1920–1932)

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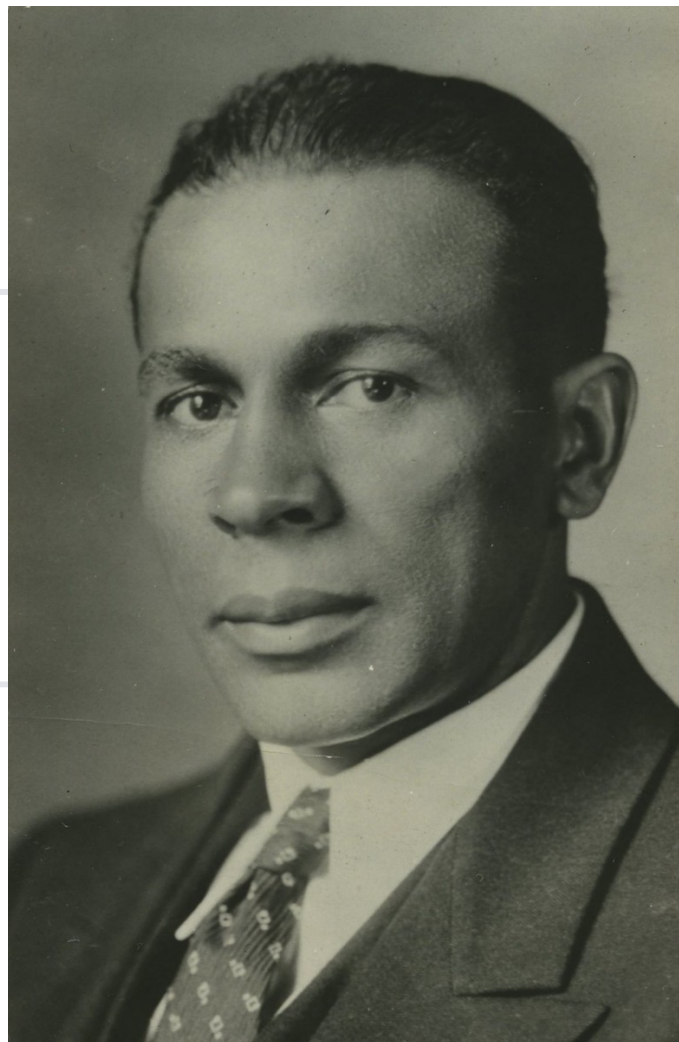
Throughout its 12-year history, Harlem Academy was the only Seventh-day Adventist high school operated on behalf of African Americans.¹

Founding

The school was founded in 1920 by James K. Humphrey, pastor of the Harlem Church, in cooperation with J. E. Jayne, president of the Greater New York Conference.² Under Humphrey's leadership Adventism flourished during an era in which newcomers from the American South and the

West Indies greatly expanded New York City's Black population, particularly in the Harlem section of Manhattan that became a nationwide center of cultural influence. The membership of Humphrey's Harlem congregation neared 450 in 1920 and surpassed 600 in 1923, making the need for a school increasingly acute. No institution outside of Oakwood Junior College, located in Huntsville, Alabama—the Deep South, was prepared to accommodate the unprecedented numbers of Black youth seeking an Adventist education.³

Humphrey and Jayne turned to 26-year-old James L. Moran (1894-1972), a 1918 graduate of the normal course (teacher training) at Lancaster Junior College (later Atlantic Union College) in Massachusetts, to organize the new school and serve as its principal.⁴ Harlem Academy opened in September 1920 with 135 students, making it the largest school in the Atlantic Union Conference. It had four salaried teachers, including Moran, with a fifth added



James L. Moran, principal (1920-1928, 1930-1932).

Photo courtesy of General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

in 1921.⁵

Facilities and Students

For its first two years the school met in the basement and balconies of the Harlem Church at 144 West 131st Street. Thirty-five applicants were turned away due to overcrowded conditions. No space for playgrounds or exercise was available—a source of considerable stress for both students and teachers.⁶ In 1922 the school leased more satisfactory quarters at 149 West 139th Street. The building previously housed the “Lybia”—a rather notorious nightclub for “devotees of jazz and followers of Bacchus.” It was thoroughly renovated in preparation for classes and the surrounding property developed into recreational facilities both for the students and neighborhood children.⁷

Two years later the school moved again to Carlton Hall, 106-108 West 127th Street, where it stayed for its remaining eight years. This building was acquired with support from the Greater New York, Atlantic Union, and General Conferences to house both the academy at the Second Harlem Church, organized in 1924 to relieve overcrowding at First Harlem. M. C. Strachan, Second Harlem pastor, became chair of the school board and the academy’s Bible teacher.⁸

Harlem Academy offered nine grades during its first two years, but then added grades 10 through 12 over the next three years. By the 1924-1925 school year it offered a full high school, college preparatory education recognized by the city of New York and awarded diplomas to its first two 12th-grade graduates in June 1925.⁹ Total enrollment reached a peak of 240 in 1922, with 220 students in the first eight grades and the other 20 in grades 9-11. Subsequently, enrollment in the high school grades increased, reaching a highpoint of 86 in 1926, with 120 in the first eight grades. In 1922 and most of the subsequent years, the school had seven faculty members.

Though it had no boarding facilities and was intended to serve primarily students in the New York City area, Harlem Academy attracted students from various locales in the United States and the West Indies. Church members improvised housing arrangements. By 1929, 40 students had graduated from the high school, 29 of whom went on to college or professional training. Another 31 would graduate over the following three years.¹⁰

Leadership

J. L. Moran continued as principal until 1928, followed by Arna W. Bontemps (1902-1973), who served two years, 1928-1930. Moran then returned to lead the school through its final two years, 1930-1932. Bontemps, a 1923 graduate of Pacific Union College in Angwin, California, began teaching at Harlem Academy in 1924, primarily in the areas of English literature, history, and modern languages. During his seven years at the academy, Bontemps simultaneously became an award-winning author and prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance,

an era of Black intellectual, artistic, and literary achievement that reached its height during the 1920s and early 1930s.¹¹ In the process of attaining renown as an interpreter of African American history and culture, Bontemps did not short-change his students at the academy. Quite the opposite. He was remembered as a “teacher par excellence” who “led in the development of a distinct cultural and literary program within the school, which expressed itself most fully in the student publication *The Sentinel*.”¹² He also initiated an Inter-State Oratorical Contest, conducted under the auspices of Harlem Academy, which took as its theme in 1927-1928, for example, “The Negro’s Contribution to America.”¹³

Another notable and long-serving teacher was Geneva Bryan, who taught the primary grades from 1923 to 1929. She later earned a degree in nursing and in 1942 became assistant director for health education in the General Conference Colored Department under the leadership of George E. Peters.¹⁴

Legacy

The Great Depression dealt a heavy blow to Harlem Academy. Conflicts over racial injustice in the church that led the large First Harlem Church to separate from the denomination likely also contributed to a major decline in enrollment. Given bleak financial circumstances, it seemed impossible to sustain the academy and it was closed in the summer of 1932. The Ephesus Church, as Second Harlem was renamed in 1930, continued to operate a church school that, in 1939, became a junior academy, offering the first two years of high school (up to grade 10).¹⁵ Northeastern Academy opened in New York City in 1947 as a four-year secondary school and has continued in operation ever since under the auspices of the Northeastern Conference.

In a sense, then, Harlem Academy has had an institutional legacy that, despite disruptions, continues more than a century after its founding. In another sense, though, 1932 marked the end of a story that stands on its own. The story of Harlem Academy is one of creative endeavor under forbidding circumstances to develop of vibrant center of Adventist influence that engaged the racial and cultural ferment of the Harlem Renaissance era.

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NOTES

1. At that time the only other Adventist institution dedicated to making college preparatory education available to African Americans was Oakwood Junior College in Huntsville, Alabama.
2. "7 Day Adventists Have School in Heart of Harlem," *Chicago Defender*, December 30, 1922, 9; Samuel London, "Moran, James Lewis (1894-1972)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed October 25, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=8FVZ>; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1921, 157.
3. "Attitude of the Church," First Harlem Seventh-day Adventist Church, 1930, 15-16, General Conference Archives; G.E. Peters, "The Negro Department," *ARH*, June 9, 1930, 11.
4. Samuel London, "Moran, James Lewis (1894-1972)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed October 25, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=8FVZ>; Jas. L. Moran, "The Alpha Institute," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, January 7, 1921, 8.
5. J.L. Moran, "Harlem Academy—Appeal to Greater New York," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, August 3, 1921, 3; "Statistics, 1853-1987," Department of Education, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1990, 1010, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Online Archives, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/Education/SES1990-03.pdf>.
6. Moran, "Harlem Academy—Appeal to Greater New York," 3.
7. "Noted Pleasure Resort Now to Be Church School Home," *New York Age*, September 2, 1922, 1.
8. Wesley Curtright, "History of Harlem Academy—Northeastern Academy," *North American Informant*, September 1968, 4; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1923, 190; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 1924, 198; "Harlem Academy Graduating Exercises," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 19, 1925, 7.
9. "Statistics, 1853-1987," 1010; "7 Day Adventists Have School in Heart of Harlem."

10. Curtright, "History of Harlem Academy—Northeastern Academy," 4-5; Peters, "The Negro Department," 11; Statistics, 1853-1987," 1010.
11. Derek C. Bowe, "Bontemps, Arna (Wendell) (1902-1973)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed October 25, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=BHY9>.
12. Curtright, "History of Harlem Academy—Northeastern Academy," 5.
13. "Baltimore Teacher Is Prize Orator," *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 11, 1928, 20.
14. DeWitt S. Williams, "Bryan, Geneva (1894-1981)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed October 25, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=9CE9>.
15. "Statistics, 1853-1987," 1010.

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