

Green, Jessie Catherine Dorsey (1874–1971)

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DeWitt S. Williams, Ed.D. (Indiana University) lives in Maryland after 46 years of denominational service. He pastored in Oklahoma, served as a missionary in the Congo (Departmental and Field President), and Burundi/Rwanda (President, Central African Union). He served 12 years in the General Conference as Associate Director in both the Communications and Health and Temperance Departments. His last service was Director of NAD Health Ministries (1990-2010). He authored nine books and numerous articles.

Jessie Dorsey Green was an Adventist educator who, with Elizabeth Evelyn Wright, cofounded the Voorhees Industrial Training School, today Voorhees College, a historically black liberal arts college in Denmark, South Carolina.¹

Early Life and Education

Jessie Catherine Dorsey, daughter of Clement and Martha Lucas Dorsey, was born in Coshocton, Ohio, on March 31, 1874. Clement Dorsey (b. 1839) worked on steamboats as a young man and his life was miraculously preserved when, in 1867, the *C. E. Hillman* collided with the *Nannie Byers* in Indiana and forty-five lives were lost. With just forty-eight dollars in his pocket he opened a barber shop in the small town of Coshocton in 1868. Dorsey prospered and became a much respected citizen in Coshocton. He was the first black person in the history of Coshocton County to serve as a juror and also the first to be nominated for county office.²

Soon after moving to Coshocton, Dorsey married the recently widowed Martha Johnson Lucas on October 14, 1869. Martha had one daughter, Dora, from her first marriage. She and Clement had four children who survived to adulthood: Effie, Isaac, Jessie, and Gertrude.³

Martha Dorsey united with the Adventist church in Columbus, Ohio, approximately 75 miles west of Coshocton, under the efforts of E. J. Van Horn and was baptized by E. H. Gates in 1886. At that time no Adventist church existed in Coshocton. Martha Dorsey, her daughters, and one other woman were the only Seventh-day Adventists in the entire county. In a letter sent to the *Youth's Instructor* in 1889, 15-year-old Jessie wrote: "We have a Sabbath-school of four members. Mamma is superintendent, I am secretary. Gertie is treasurer, and Effie pianist, as we have no organ. We are the only Adventists in this county."⁴ After many appeals from Martha Dorsey, two ministers, O. F. Guilford and C. P. Haskell held a tent effort in Coshocton, arousing an interest there around 1893. After similar efforts by others and a camp-meeting held there strengthened the interest, a church organized in Coshocton.⁵

When Jessie finished high school in 1893 she attended Battle Creek Sanitarium in Michigan for training in medical missionary work under the supervision of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg. She graduated from nurse's training in 1896⁶

A "Tuskegee" for South Carolina

While she was studying at Battle Creek Sanitarium, Jessie met Almira S. Steele of Boston, Massachusetts, a humanitarian who was trying to open schools for destitute black children in the South. At Mrs. Steele's invitation, Jesse went South in June 1896 to work with Elizabeth E. Wright in establishing a school for black students in South Carolina following the model of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where Wright had studied. Wright had great vision but was frail and sickly. They faced a great deal of prejudice against teaching black children to read and several of their places were burned down by angry men.

The two women traveled throughout South Carolina seeking the right place for the school, praying and encouraging



Jessie Dorsey, Voorhees Industrial Training School.
Photo courtesy of DeWitt Williams.

each other. Two of their efforts failed due to arson and another because the owner of the land attempted to cut down the timber on it before the sale had been completed. Finally, the town of Denmark was chosen as the school's locale. On April 14, 1897 the Denmark Industrial School for Colored Youth opened in a three-room house on 20 acres of land.⁷

Many obstacles and difficulties confronted them. These included opposition from an influential African American preacher who was prejudiced against Seventh-day Adventists, even though the school had no official ties to the denomination.⁸

Jessie did write several letters to Adventists members eliciting their help and made trips North where she spoke at camp meetings about her project, generating donations of money, clothing, books and other things necessary for the school. "The donation appropriated at the camp meeting was used to purchase lumber and nails for desks and black boards, and other expenses," she reported to believers in her home conference of Ohio in early 1897⁹

A decade after the school's beginning, Jessie told her story in an article written for her hometown newspaper to inspire contributions from Coshocton citizens:

. . . In the crowded months of January and February over 300 children attended daily. The benches were full and the overflow of little ones sat on the floor while the larger students stood in the aisles. Old window shades were tacked sidewise along the walls, blackened with lamp-black and used for blackboards, while rags answered admirably for erasers. Miss Wright made several trips to New England in the middle states in behalf of the school and many benevolent persons became interested in what she was doing and gave of their means to carry on the work. In the meantime the teaching force had enlarged and we began to feel that we were indeed growing into a school. It was upon one of these business trips to New Jersey that Miss Wright succeeded in interesting Mr. Ralph Voorhees, who through her efforts, appropriated the money for the purchase of the 280 acre tract and for whom the school was afterward named.

A marked progress has favored the school during the time since 1902 five years ago. Six large buildings some frame, others of brick, several smaller ones for teachers, cottages and a large barn are to be seen on our campus. The farm is well-stocked with mules, horses, cows, pigs and poultry. We have a fine Artesian well in which we hope in course of time to supply the place with water. 94 acres of adjoining land were added last year. These things are all free of debt.¹⁰

Voorhees College became "a living monument to the love and self-sacrifice of these two women."¹¹ Elizabeth Wright died in 1906 at Battle Creek Sanitarium. Her body was shipped back to her beloved Voorhees to be buried there. Dorsey remained at Voorhees as principal until a newly-appointed principal, Gabriel B. Miller, arrived in the summer of 1907. Subsequently, after devoting close to eleven years to the school, Jessie Dorsey left South Carolina to engage in missionary work in Washington, D.C. and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1949 a small infirmary at Voorhees was built in Dorsey's honor and named and dedicated as the Jessie C. Dorsey-Green infirmary.¹²

Activism in the Adventist Cause

In 1909, Jessie Dorsey married William Hawkins Green, a much respected lawyer and recently ordained minister of the Seventh-day Adventist church. After ministerial labor in Washington, D.C. for about three years, the Greens moved to Detroit in 1912, building up what became known as the Hartford Avenue church. In 1918, W. H. Green became the first African American elected to head the North American Negro Department. Though her husband traveled extensively in overseeing the black Adventist work throughout the nation, Detroit remained the Greens' home base. Jessie Green continued to do missionary work while caring for her daughters, Mildred and Inez.

After Elder Green died suddenly in October 1928, Jessie Dorsey Green took her family to Huntsville, Alabama, where she became a member of the teaching staff of Oakwood Junior college, now Oakwood University. In 1932 she and her daughters moved to Newark, Ohio, and again later that year to Wilberforce, Ohio. Jessie Green joined the WCTU (Women's Christian Temperance Union) at Wilberforce and served the organization as president for a number of years. She continued to do door-to-door canvassing with religious literature, making visits in connection with the annual Ingathering campaign, calling on the sick and shut-ins, and providing services to the church whenever needed.¹³

In November 1960, she was honored by the Wilberforce chapter of the Links, Inc., by being selected Woman of the Year. At her ninetieth birthday party in April 1964, Mrs. Green attributed her good health to a vegetarian diet, "the quiet life," her "kind friends and neighbors," and the blessings of God. She passed away at age 97 on October 13, 1971.¹⁴

Shortly after Jessie Dorsey went to the South in 1896 on the venture that ultimately led to the establishment of the Voorhees school, she penned this poem, published in the *Review and Herald*:

Something We Can Do

O children of our Heavenly King,

While working here below,

Think not your mite too small to bring,
Or seed to scant to sow.
If we are called from loving friend,
From home and comforts too,
Christ says he's with us to the end
If we his work will do.
Grieve not because your mite is small,
Or seeds are very few;
Just let us heed our Saviour's call;
There's something we can do.
Yea, work we will till setting sun,
From dawn till closing day;
And when our reaping here is done,
We'll bear our sheaves away.¹⁵

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NOTES

1. South Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities, accessed November 5, 2020, <https://www.scicu.org/colleges/voorhees-college/>?
2. N. N. Hill, Jr., *History of Coshocton County, Ohio, Its Past and Present, 1740-1881* (Newark, OH: A. A. Graham & Co., 1881), 671.?
3. Ibid.; Jessie Green, "Martha Lucas-Dorsey obituary," *ARH*, September 30, 1926, 22.?
4. "Letter Budget," *Youth's Instructor*, December 4, 1889, 195.?
5. "Martha Lucas-Dorsey obituary"; B.L. House, Letter to the Visitor Readers, *Welcome Visitor*, December 31, 1902, 1-2.?
6. "Mrs. W. H. Green Passes," *North American Informant*, January-February 1972, 7.?
7. J. F. B. Coleman, *Tuskegee to Voorhees* (Columbia, SC: The R. L. Bryan Company, 1922), 28-34; 41-45; 52-61.?
8. Ibid., 61-80. Initially nondenominational, the school came under the financial sponsorship of the American Church Institutes for Negroes, an agency of the Episcopal Church; see "History," Voorhees College, accessed November 5, 2020, <https://www.voorhees.edu/our-college/history/>?
- 9.

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10. Jessie C. Dorsey, "Former Coshocton Girl Tells of Education in South Carolina," *Coshocton Age*, August 29, 1907, 6.?
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