

Peterson-Rock, Clara Elizabeth (1931–2018)

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Clara “Nomsa” Peterson-Rock was a benevolent and dignified pastor’s wife, Oakwood College’s first lady, a pioneering archivist, a gifted musician, and a loving companion to her husband, Calvin B. Rock, from 1953 to 2018.

Clara Elizabeth Peterson was born on March 28, 1931, in Washington, D.C., to Frank and Bessie Peterson.¹ Her parents were avid missionaries in the Adventist faith, serving Oakwood College as president and first lady, with Peterson retiring as the first African American vice president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. They avidly lived their faith and lifestyle both inside and outside their family, paving the way for Clara to flourish.

Clara attended Washington Union Academy, completing grades 1 to 4 there and finishing grades 5 through 9 on the West Coast before her father's selection as the second African American president of Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama. The youngest of five children, Clara intriguingly observed her mother, Bessie, fill the role of a pastor's wife and first lady of Oakwood College. Additionally, during her childhood, she acquired an interest in history, which allowed her to fulfill the will God intended her to serve in the Seventh-day Adventist community.²



Clara Elizabeth Peterson Rock

Photo courtesy of Oakwood University Archives.

Clara earned her Bachelor of Arts in English in 1952 from Oakwood College, then completed a Master of Science in Library Media (MSLM) at Alabama A&M University in Normal, Alabama. On January 29, 1953, Clara married Calvin Rock from New York City, overriding her earlier stance that she would never marry a preacher. To their union were born three daughters: Cheryl, Celia (named after Celia Cleveland), and Connie. Together the family traveled extensively, serving and participating in numerous church congregations and denominational work.³

Enjoying her role as a pastor's wife, Mrs. Clara Rock moved with her husband to serve the SDA community in Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, and Michigan from 1953 to 1967. From 1967 to 1970, Mrs. Rock served alongside him in Decatur, Georgia, where he held a position in the Ministerial Association of the Southern Union Conference. Clara Rock was a tremendous helpmate to her husband during his evangelistic ministries, supporting him as a musician. Accordingly, she graced many worship services with her talents at the piano. With enthusiasm, she dedicated all of herself to every church they pastored, but she always left each one with a heavy heart because of the warm connections she had formed with them. However, Mrs. Rock followed her husband to New York City, where he pastored the Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church from 1970 to 1971.⁴

Without breaking her stride, Mrs. Rock next transitioned from having been the first daughter of Oakwood College to becoming its first lady when her husband became president of the school. Clara's earlier observation of her mother in her position as the first lady of Oakwood from 1945 to 1954 helped her to provide a foundation and source of strength and inspiration for her own husband during his administration. From 1971 to 1972, she was employed as an educator in Huntsville. After receiving training through the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) in Atlanta, Georgia, she became the first archivist at Oakwood, housing all research and artifacts in the Eva B. Dykes Library. Mrs. Rock's primary responsibility was collecting, categorizing, and preserving historical documents of value to the school. In addition, she coordinated with Adventist institutions, including Loma Linda University, in retrieving valuable artifacts for the college. She astutely assisted the administration, faculty, staff, students, alumni, church leaders, and interested individuals when they requested information from the archives.⁵ She served Oakwood College for 12 years before leaving with her husband to join the General Conference, where Calvin Rock served as vice president (1985-2002).⁶

In this venture Mrs. Rock followed in the footsteps of her parents, filling the role as the first African American daughter and wife of the vice president of the General Conference. As she supported her husband, she graced her position with wisdom, traveling with him to various parts of the world, including European and African countries. She blessed the Adventist community through her gifts as a pianist and her gracious fellowship. In South Africa she was referred to as Nomsa, which, in Xhosa, means "mother of compassion" or "mother of kindness" and in Zulu, means "kindness is found."⁷ This is hardly surprising, for her demeanor and stature resembled kindness and love to the congregations and communities in which she served. During their 16 years of ministry with the General Conference, Mrs. Rock received words of commendation from Loma Linda University for her participation in events during her husband's term.⁸

In 2002 the Rocks moved to Las Vegas, Nevada, where Calvin Rock continued to pastor.⁹ Now, after 30 years, Clara Rock fulfilled her first love, serving as a pastor's wife. For nine years they served at the Abundant Life church in Las Vegas. While serving in Las Vegas, Clara Rock worked with Delbert Baker, the president of Oakwood University, to design and create the Clara Peterson-Rock Museum.¹⁰ It opened on the campus of Oakwood University in the Eva B. Dykes Library on October 6, 2010.¹¹ This outstanding museum meets the needs of faculty, students, and visitors from around the world, commemorating her hard work as the first and premier archivist at Oakwood College. The museum exhibits the history of Oakwood University and black Seventh-day Adventism.¹² On June 14, 2018, God allowed Mrs. Clara Peterson-Rock to rest from her lifetime of ministry, leaving in its wake an example of love and compassion.¹³

Mrs. Rock's given name, "Clara," comes from the Latin word *clarus*, which means clear and bright.¹⁴ Invaluable to her family and community, Clara Peterson-Rock similarly bestowed a bright and shining model of Christian living and motherhood. Her transparency and love for ministry left behind them the intellectual fellowship she displayed while serving, first as a president's daughter and then as the first lady of Oakwood College, now Oakwood University. Her spirit significantly impacted administrators, faculty, staff, students, and many individuals across the world in her role as the first archivist at Oakwood College. Her legacy will continue to be an inspiration to all who remember her favorite song, "When the Saints Go Marching In."

SOURCES

"Clara Peterson Rock obituary." Oakwood University church, July 1, 2018. Oakwood University Archives.

"Clara Peterson-Rock." Program for the grand opening of the Clara Peterson-Rock Museum at Oakwood University, October 6, 2010. Oakwood University Archives.

Mafela, Grace. "Welcome to Clara Nomsa Rock." Oakwood University Archives.

NOTES

1. "Clara Peterson Rock obituary," Oakwood University church, July 1, 2018, Oakwood University Archives.
2. Ibid. See also "Clara Peterson-Rock," program for the grand opening of the Clara Peterson-Rock Museum at Oakwood University, October 6, 2010, Oakwood University Archives.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

5. Ibid. See also Clara Peterson Rock, Oakwood College Service Record, Oakwood University Archives.

6. "Clara Peterson Rock obituary." See also "Clara Peterson-Rock."

7. Grace Mafela, "Welcome to Clara Nomsa Rock," Oakwood University Archives.

8. "Clara Peterson Rock obituary."

9. Ibid. See also "Clara Peterson-Rock"

10. "Clara Peterson Rock obituary."

11. "Clara Peterson-Rock."

12. Ibid.

13. "Clara Peterson Rock obituary."

14. Ibid.

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