

# Seeney, Frederick Harold (1865–1925)

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Fred H. Seeney, pastor-evangelist, raised up the earliest Black Adventist congregations in Delaware and Maryland, and was prominent in the early development of the church's work in Washington, D.C.

## Heritage and Conversion

The Seeney family was part of a people of mixed European, Native American, and, possibly, African descent in central Delaware identified as "Moors."<sup>1</sup> Fred Seeney was born March 15, 1865, in Kenton, a few miles north of Dover, Delaware. He was the 10th of 11 children in the family of James Seeney (1821-1904) and Sarah Greenage Seeney (b. 1827).<sup>2</sup> Though they were relatively fair-skinned, the reputed element of African descent generally caused them to be placed on the "Black" side of America's racial divide. Yet even this was by no means always clear, as demonstrated by United States Census records. Fred was identified as "mulatto" in the 1870 census, "black" in 1900, and finally as "white" in 1920.<sup>3</sup>

Seeney farmed for a living and, in 1886, married Hester Dean (1868-1948) of Brenford, Delaware. They, too, had 11 children.<sup>4</sup>



Fred H. Seeney

From *Columbia Union Visitor*, January 15, 1997.

Fred's parents were members of the Methodist church in Cheswold, about five miles east of Kenton, but he never joined a church, even after he "became a Christian" as a young man in 1890. After hearing evangelist E. E. Franke preach at evangelistic meetings in Kenton in 1893, Seeney accepted the Adventist message and began observing the seventh-day Sabbath even though he only made it to two of Franke's meetings. His wife, Hester, also embraced the message, and through their witness, others eventually joined them. A church with 11 members and 32 Sabbath school members was organized in Cheswold in 1896 and became part of the Atlantic Conference.<sup>5</sup>

## Pioneering Ministry in Delaware and Maryland

Seeney led the Cheswold congregation and at the Atlantic Conference session in December 1896, he, along with five other budding preachers, was "encouraged to improve the gift of ministry."<sup>6</sup> In 1899 the Cheswold Church, later called the Forest Grove Church, became part of the new Chesapeake Conference and in 1900 Seeney was issued a ministerial license.<sup>7</sup> His assignment now broadened to include evangelizing African Americans throughout the conference territory, which then included Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland, the two cities with the largest populations of African Americans in the nation.

During the spring and summer months of 1902 Seeney assisted Lewis C. Sheafe with his remarkably successful evangelistic campaign in Washington, D.C.<sup>8</sup> Later in his career, Seeney would return to pastor both of the two churches that originated or expanded as a result of the work Sheafe led in Washington, but for the next dozen years he concentrated on Maryland and Delaware.

After returning from Washington, D.C., Seeney resumed evangelistic work in Cheswold that added 14 new members to the church, bringing its membership to nearly 60. On May 18, 1903, at the fourth annual session of the Chesapeake Conference held in Baltimore, Maryland, he was ordained for gospel ministry, with Orville O. Farnsworth and Hampton W. Cottrell officiating.<sup>9</sup>

Two circumstances set back Seeney's evangelistic work for much of 1904 and 1905. First, a fire completely destroyed the Adventist house of worship at Cheswold on December 30, 1903.<sup>10</sup> While he was leading efforts to rebuild from that disaster, Chesapeake Conference operating funds were going deeply into the red, and in May 1904 the conference committee placed Seeney and another minister, Volney H. Lucas, on unpaid leave. Seeney returned to "manual labor" and continued to lead the church in Cheswold.<sup>11</sup> But his public evangelistic labors ceased until appropriations from the Atlantic Union Conference voted in early November 1905 helped Chesapeake with its debt and provided funds for Seeney to begin the first campaign by Seventh-day Adventists to reach the Black citizens of Baltimore, who numbered more than 80,000.<sup>12</sup>

Seeney began his meetings in a rented hall in December 1905 before switching to a tent during the warmer months. The work went slowly but Seeney persisted and on August 8, 1906, organized a company of 12 believers that became the Baltimore Third Church.<sup>13</sup> In 1910 he returned to the city, this time assisted by a

fellow Moor, Gustavus P. Rodgers, Seeney's sole convert from an effort in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1908. The Seeney-Rodgers meetings generated a few additions to the church, and interest was growing in the city when the meetings were cut short because the evangelistic tent was needed for the Chesapeake Conference camp meeting.<sup>14</sup> Rodgers, who became a powerful evangelist, took the lead in 1911 and built up Baltimore Third into a congregation of some 300 members, with assistance from Seeney during major evangelistic campaigns held in 1914 and 1915.<sup>15</sup> In the late 1930s, during the pastorate of John H. Wagner, Sr., Baltimore Third was re-named Berea Temple.<sup>16</sup>

Outside of Cheswold, Seeney's major achievements in Delaware came in the state's capital city, Dover, and its largest city, Wilmington. His work in Dover, begun in the summer of 1907, led to establishment of a church of 17 members on October 17, 1908.<sup>17</sup> He began targeting Wilmington in the summer of 1911 and by February 1912 had planted a church there, also with 17 members. Outside of assisting Rodgers in Baltimore, Seeney made Wilmington the center of his work through 1915.<sup>18</sup>

## Washington, D.C. Pastorates

In January 1916 Seeney was called back to Washington, D.C. to pastor the People's Church, established by Lewis C. Sheafe in December 1903. The church grew to around 150 members but withdrew from the Seventh-day Adventist denominational structure in early 1907, protesting racial injustice in the church's educational and medical work. A reconciliation was achieved in 1913, but by the time of Seeney's arrival, winds of controversy were swirling once again and would soon turn into a maelstrom.<sup>19</sup>

The core issue remained the same—Black Adventists were excluded from the denomination's new school and sanitarium established in nearby Takoma Park, Maryland, and had no alternative institutions open to them, and yet were expected to give financial support to the denomination as fully as those who did enjoy full access. When the District of Columbia Conference committee proved unresponsive to Seeney's proposal for an initial step toward resolving the dispute, his relationship with the denomination neared a breaking point. At a church business meeting on July 11, 1916, he gave voice to his frustration. Though he had witnessed a pattern of difficult experiences in the denomination generally, Seeney reportedly declared "that he had never been forced to observe the unfair treatment of the colored people by the officials as he had since being in Washington, D.C." In view of the fact that church leaders had put colored believers "out of their councils, out of their schools, out of their sanitariums and out of their business offices," he supported a church board resolution to suspend remittance of tithe and offerings to the conference.<sup>20</sup>

Seeney emphasized that the measure's purpose was not to break with the denomination but "to awaken the conference officials to a sense of justice."<sup>21</sup> However, with the conference remaining unresponsive to their grievances, the majority of the People's Church favored once again withdrawing from conference affiliation and becoming an independent Adventist congregation, and for a time, Seeney appeared to support such a move.

Finally, though, he changed course, concluding that maintaining loyal connection with Seventh-day Adventist organization would be the wiser course in the long run. Failing to persuade the People's Church majority of this, he resigned as pastor in October 1916.<sup>22</sup>

A substantial minority of the People's Church who likewise opposed the independence move met for Sabbath worship in the Seenev home for a few weeks before shifting to the home of one of the members. In November 1916 this group was organized as a church of 37 members in the District of Columbia Conference, taking the name "Ephesus."<sup>23</sup> Renamed Dupont Park in 1958, it became, along with the First Church, one of two congregations that anchored Black Adventism in the nation's capital for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and grew to more than 1,600 members as of 1999.<sup>24</sup>

Seenev transferred across town to First Church in 1917 and would play an important role in the early development of that congregation as well. It too had been buffeted by the recurring storms of racial conflict since 1902. Seenev's six-and-a-half year pastorate brought both stability and progress. The membership grew from 91 to 135 under his evangelistic efforts. In 1921, for example, he expanded the church's outreach to the Southwest sector of the city with a tent effort that resulted in the baptism of 28 new believers.<sup>25</sup> The church's physical structure was upgraded with capital renovations costing \$3400, completed and paid for in 1919.<sup>26</sup>

In 1923, when Rodgers left Washington, D.C. for Los Angeles, Seenev was called back to Ephesus Church. After a little over a year there, he was debilitated by cancer, putting an end to his ministry in September 1924.<sup>27</sup> He died at his home in Cheswold on March 15, 1925, three days after his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>28</sup> Hester Seenev, noted for laboring faithfully with her husband in ministry while raising 11 children, died in Cheswold on October 31, 1948. She rests with Fred in the Forest Grove Church cemetery.<sup>29</sup>

## Legacy

Fred H. Seenev's evangelistic ministry bore fruit in the founding of at least four congregations in Delaware and Maryland. His work was of no small importance in getting Black Adventism off the ground in the two cities—Baltimore and Washington, D.C.—where the African American population was most heavily concentrated, and in setting the course for future progress by shepherding the faithful through treacherous terrain.

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