

Scott, Alma J.

(1874–1957)

DOUGLAS MORGAN

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Alma J. Scott, a prominent Washington, D.C., social reformer, served as vice-chair of the Committee for the Advancement of the Worldwide Work Among Colored Seventh-day Adventists that helped bring about landmark change in church race relations during the mid-1940s.

Born in Brenham, Texas, in 1874, at a young age Alma Scott felt the desire that became her life purpose: to help others, particularly those of her own race, whose opportunities were constricted by unjust societal conditions. She became a school teacher and, in 1895, married fellow teacher Edward L. Scott (1872-1943). Their only child, James, was born in 1896.¹

The Scotts moved to Washington, D.C., in 1897 where Edward Scott became an attorney and real estate broker. Alma Scott became involved in one of Washington, D.C.'s earliest organized efforts to combat juvenile delinquency, helping to found the Lindsey Center, a recreational center in the notorious area known as Blagden's Alley. She also studied at Howard University, graduating from the Teachers College in 1908. She furthered her studies at Howard later in life, earning a bachelor's degree in 1939.²

In 1911, Scott became president of the Washington, D.C., chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).³ Her activism in the cause intersected with her early involvement with the Seventh-day Adventist



MRS. ALMA J. SCOTT.

Alma J. Scott

Photo from the *Washington Evening Star*, June 26, 1938.

Church, in which public advocacy for temperance and prohibition was then quite strong.⁴ Extant sources do not reveal how, why, or exactly when Scott became interested in the Adventist faith, but according to a newspaper obituary she joined the historic First church of Washington, D.C., (organized 1889) in 1916. She lost little time in becoming an activist and influencer in the Church, just as she was in the societal arena. In that same year of 1916, at the District of Columbia Conference annual session held in June, she successfully appealed for the conference to undertake, in harmony with a plan recommended early that year in the *Review and Herald*, “a general effort to raise sufficient money from the general public to place a copy of the Temperance Instructor Annual in every home in the District.”⁵

Scott’s leadership in the WCTU would also undergird her most noteworthy achievement in the work of social reform: The Southwest Community House. This new phase in her career originated in 1921 when her investigation into the living circumstances of a 17-year-old girl sentenced to death for murdering a man led her to conclude that the brutal social environment of Southwest Washington bore much responsibility for the tragedy.⁶

Determined that more be done about the ruinous conditions, Scott obtained a matching grant at the national WCTU convention in San Francisco that led to the founding of a neighborhood settlement house in 1921, eventually known as the Southwest Community House. The settlement house provided for neighborhood residents, especially youth, a wide range of social, recreational, and educational opportunities: study clubs, athletic teams, and classes in cooking, sewing, carpentry, art, drama, and speech. It also operated a “nursery school” for children from 2 to 5 years old. The children, many of whom would not have otherwise received adequate nourishment, were given three meals per day.⁷

Under Alma Scott’s direction for more than two decades, the Southwest Community House became known to many as the “lighthouse of the Southwest.”⁸ According to a feature article in the *Washington Afro-American* in 1940, it “had developed into one of the greatest agencies for good in the community.”⁹ During the 1940s and 1950s, the latter years of her career, Scott led in the founding and development of another major social service institution in Washington, the Ionia Whipper Home for unwed mothers.¹⁰

Throughout her career, Alma Scott was also prominent in the local activities of organizations dedicated to racial justice and equality. Her roles with the Washington, D.C., chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) included executive committee member and district captain for promoting membership.¹¹ She also spoke out and provided logistical support for the New Negro Alliance, a movement for boycotting and picketing businesses that did not treat black people fairly.¹²

A leader in her congregation as well as in the community, Scott served, among other capacities, as Sabbath School superintendent for eight years and as a member of the board of Washington Union Academy, jointly operated by the First and Ephesus churches.¹³ It was from these same two thriving black congregations that the Committee for the Advancement of the Worldwide Work Among Colored Seventh-day Adventists sprang in 1943.

The catalyst was the refusal of Washington Sanitarium in Takoma Park to admit a terminally-ill black Adventist from New York City, Lucy Byard, on account of race. Byard passed away five weeks later at Freedmen's Hospital in Washington, D.C..¹⁴

In the meantime, the Washington committee had already formed, presented to the General Conference administration their call for an end to the entrenched patterns of racial injustice in the church exemplified by the Byard case, and had begun mobilizing black Adventists throughout the nation in support of the imperative for change. Other members of the committee included Joseph T. Dodson, Ephesus church elder, who served as chair; Willie Anna Dodson; Valarie Justiss; Eva B. Dykes; and James Montgomery. Scott contributed the wisdom of her experience based on decades as a social activist and her leadership in rapidly mobilizing the Howard University alumni in support of their first black president, Mordecai Johnson, when his administration came under fire during the mid-1930s.¹⁵

The 1943 committee called for complete racial integration in the Adventist Church and equal opportunity for African Americans in its institutions and equal representation in administrative leadership. While it did not then achieve these goals, the committee's campaign did result in a major break with the status quo—the formation of black or regional conferences in 1944-1945 that enabled black church leaders greater control over the work in their communities, creating the framework for a new era of rapid growth and advancement in black Adventism.¹⁶

Alma J. Scott remained active in benevolent causes, both in the church and the community, until a cerebral thrombosis took her life on February 5, 1957, in Washington, D.C., at age 82.¹⁷ She was survived by her son, James E. Scott, who, as a real estate broker also prominent in civic organizations, followed the footsteps of both his parents.¹⁸

The *Washington Afro-American* characterized Alma Scott as “a pioneer in many civic and social movements” over a period of six decades.¹⁹ For four of those decades, she did this work as a dedicated Seventh-day Adventist. She devoted similar energy to the mission of her church and to prodding it toward a fuller realization of justice and love in race relations.

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3. Alma J. Scott, "A Backward and a Forward Glance at the W.C.T.U.," *Message*, September 1952, 11.
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6. "'Lighthouse of Southwest' To Be Dimmed If Chest Fails," *Washington Evening Star*, October 28, 1938, 9; Paula C. Austin, *Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC: Navigating the Politics of Everyday Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), unpaginated excerpt from an online preview of

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9. Joseph Shephard, "'Proud of Southwest,' Native Sons Tell Afro," *Washington Afro American*, July 6, 1940, 3.
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16. Rock, 46-57.
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