

Hancock, Samuel Cooley (1828–1874)

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Known as “the blind preacher,” Samuel C. Hancock was an early Adventist singer, composer and evangelist whose ministry was accompanied by controversial “Spirit operations.”

Early Life

Samuel Cooley Hancock was born in East Hartford, Connecticut on September 16, 1828. He became partially blind at four weeks old. By attending a school for the blind, Hancock became proficient in music and later became the organist at the Meriden, Connecticut, Methodist Episcopal Church. At the age of twenty-three, Hancock contracted smallpox, which led to complete loss of sight.¹ In 1853 he married Susan Sims and they had one daughter, who died in 1862.

Hancock was originally part of the Methodist denomination until he accepted the Sabbath in the late 1840s.² He became notorious in Advent circles for his “Spirit operations,” described by *Review and Herald* readers as “talking in tongues,” “swimming in the Spirit,” and “dancing in the Spirit.”³ It is likely that Hancock became involved in the “1854 Movement” in New England that set a date for Christ’s return. According to Ellen White, this movement was characterized by “a noisy, rough, careless, excitable spirit” being promoted by “wandering stars professing to be ministers” speaking “gibberish,” “unintelligible sounds” and displaying “strange manifestations.”⁴



Samuel Cooley Hancock

Photo courtesy of *Bristol, Connecticut* (Hartford, CT: City Publishing Company, 1907).

The “Hancock and Cranmer Party”

In early 1864, James White informed Review readers that he saw no hope for Hancock’s work in connection with Seventh-day Adventism.

There is a class in the East that nothing can be done with at present, only to let them alone. We refer to Hancock and company. . . . This man gets sympathy in his fanatical course on account of his being blind. It is right to sympathize with the afflicted, because of their afflictions; but it is madness to accept, as a leader to the kingdom of God, through sympathy alone, a man that is twice blind. The best way to dry up the influence of fanatics is to let them alone, but actively visit the scattered friends of the cause, and set things in order with them⁵

Later that year, Hancock had joined a Sabbatarian offshoot led by Gilbert Cranmer (1814–1903)⁶ Disputes over Ellen White’s prophetic gift and other matters in 1858 led to Cranmer’s separation from the Battle Creek Adventists. He joined forces with itinerant preacher Hancock in targeting Adventist communities in New England. They attracted “those that wished to rebel against the body” and “all the remnants and wrecks and odds” and “ministers of small talent, and not with the best of reputation,” Dudley M. Canright later reported in the *Review*.⁷ The group became known as the “Hancock and Cranmer party” and made a significant impact on Adventist congregations in New England. They rejected the authority of Ellen White’s testimonies, calling the Seventh-day Adventists the “White party” and “Babylon.”⁸

Cranmer developed a substantial following and formed several Sabbatarian congregations in Michigan while Hancock led out in New England. The Michigan congregations would eventually become part of the Church of God (Seventh Day).

However, the movement in the East had dissipated by early 1865. In the March 7, 1865 issue of the *Review*, M.E. Cornell reported that the meeting of the “Hancock and Cranmer party” in February in North Berwick, Maine, had not attracted a “single soul.” The following week, James White also reported that the Hancock and Cranmer party was crumbling in New England: “Our friends in the East who are coming into the ranks, heartsick of the administration of S. C. Hancock, deserve the sympathy of the body. They had been left as sheep without a shepherd.”⁹

Final Years

Following the demise of the “Hancock and Cranmer party” in New England, Hancock continued preaching independently and sold books to make a living. He wrote the melody of the hymns “Resurrection” and “Passed Away from Earth” used in the early Adventist hymnal *Hymns and Tunes* (#963, #964 respectively) and other hymnals.¹⁰

Samuel Cooley Hancock died in Springfield, Massachusetts, on Aug 23, 1874 at the age of 46. After his death, an anthology of his gospel songs was printed for the benefit of his widow.¹¹

“The Old Spirit of Blind Sammy Hancock” Returns

By 1899, a small group of Adventists in the farmlands of Indiana, influenced by A. T. Jones’ and A. F. Ballenger’s “receive ye the Holy Ghost” movement along with a taste of Salvation Army revivalism, picked up practices similar to Hancock’s eccentric “operations” to hasten the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Led by a handful of leaders concerned about the lukewarm spiritual condition of the churches in Indiana, some started preaching the “cleansing message” (later known as “holy flesh”), an attempt to display sanctification through emotionalism and physical manifestations. Describing the Indiana camp-meeting of Muncie, Indiana, in the summer of 1900 where singing with instrumental accompaniment was at times drowned out by shouting, Stephen Haskell compared it to “the old spirit of blind Sammy Hancock.”¹² After Ellen White’s pointed testimony in the General Conference of 1901 against it, the movement in Indiana rapidly disintegrated.¹³

But old spirits die hard. Although not directly connected to Hancock’s influence, speaking in tongues resurfaced in the Adventist ranks in 1908 in the experience of the Mackins, a couple from Ohio who sang and spoke in tongues at the sound of traditional piano music. Ellen White wrote that this experience was “along that line that I have met again and again.”¹⁴ Among more recent examples, speaking in tongues as the baptism of the Holy Spirit became the main thrust of the Adventist Church of Promise, a Sabbatarian, Pentecostal offshoot of mainstream Adventism founded in northern Brazil in 1932 by João Augusto da Silveira, which claims over 1,000 churches and 80,000 members worldwide.¹⁵

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NOTES

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