



The Branches and the Booths.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

Branch, Thomas H. (1856–1924) and Henrietta Paterson (1858–1913)

DEWITT S. WILLIAMS

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.

Thomas H. Branch and Henrietta Paterson Branch were some of the first African Americans to be sent as missionaries to Africa by the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, and were pioneers of the church's work among African Americans in Colorado and in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.¹

Early Life

Thomas Branch was born in Jefferson County, Missouri, December 24, 1856. Henrietta Paterson was born March 12, 1858, at Roanoke, Missouri, the youngest in a large family. They married December 7, 1876, in Kansas City, Kansas.²

Thomas is believed to have attended the small school opened in Ray Country, Missouri, in 1877 by Mrs. H. M. Van Slyke, who reported that her pupils ranged in age "from six to twenty-four years."³ This school was one the earliest endeavors by Seventh-day Adventists to provide education for the freedpeople.

Ministry Beginnings in Colorado

Though Thomas and Henrietta may have had their first exposure to Adventist doctrines at the Van Slyke school, it was several years later, in 1892, that they joined the church in Colorado,⁴ where they had moved soon after the birth of their daughter, Mabel, in 1878. By that time two sons had been added to the family: Thomas in June 1887; Paul in March 1891. A third, Robert, was born in 1896.

In Colorado, Henrietta received training as a nurse. Mabel graduated from Denver West High School in 1897 and the following year became the first African American hired as a public school teacher in the state of Colorado.⁵ Thomas worked for twenty years as a porter, cook, steward, and brakeman on the Rio Grande Railroad, and was granted Sabbath privileges by the company when he joined the Adventist Church.

Thomas became known as an able speaker, a diligent Bible student, and an enthusiastic lay worker. In August 1901 he was hired by the Colorado Conference and began conducting evangelistic ministry in Pueblo.⁶ Early in 1902 he reported that "the interest has increased very much and to the extent that I am not able to fill all the calls. I am still holding meetings in Bessemer at the hotel, and am trying to find a place on the north side to hold meetings."⁷ His efforts led to formation of the first Black Adventist company of believers in the city.

Joseph Booth, the Plainfield Mission, and the Call to Africa

The Branches' call to mission service in Africa came under the unusual circumstances of Joseph Booth's brief connection with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Joseph Booth (1851–1932) was an independently minded Englishman who in 1891 embarked on a missionary career in Africa. A spiritual maverick who eventually journeyed through at least seven different denominational affiliations, Booth was a radical idealist who espoused complete racial equality. He saw industrial missions as a means by which Africans could attain the

education and financial independence needed to gain control of their continent from the European colonialists who were extracting its wealth for their own interests.⁸

In *Africa for the African* (1897) Booth published his program for abolishing British colonialism. Not surprisingly, the British colonial authorities looked upon Booth's work with suspicion, associating it with "Ethiopianism," a movement for indigenous African churches independent from the European-based denominations that was believed to hold dangerous potential for inciting political rebellion.

Soon after his arrival in Africa, Booth, then a Baptist, encountered such Seventh-day Adventists as A. T. Robinson, Hetty Hurd, and the self-supporting missionary George James. Although not won over to their beliefs, he was drawn by the Sabbath message, and in 1897 became a Seventh Day Baptist. Under that church's sponsorship, he developed a large Sabbathkeeping mission station in Nyasaland, British East Central Africa (later the independent nation of Malawi). It was called Plainfield Mission (after Plainfield, New Jersey, the locale of Seventh Day Baptist headquarters).⁹

Deciding to explore affiliation with the Seventh-day Adventists during a trip to the United States in 1901, Booth located Stephen N. Haskell and Hetty Hurd Haskell in New York—the latter a familiar face from his initial contact with Adventists in South Africa ten years before. Haskell interviewed Booth and sent his report to the Mission Board which invited Booth to meet with them in Battle Creek. Booth gave electrifying speeches in Battle Creek and at the Lake Union Conference meeting in Chicago on March 29, 1902. W. A. Spicer, secretary of the Mission Board, reported that "all who heard the recital of his experiences and his invitation to this people to accept the burden of the work in that far-off field were deeply impressed with the opening providence of God in bringing to us such an opportunity."¹⁰ The Seventh Day Baptists were willing to sell the mission, financially distressed because of crop failure, for \$4,000, and the Mission Board quickly raised more than enough to make the acquisition debt-free.¹¹

Booth also had a broader agenda for his trip to the United States that he did not announce to the Adventists but that would have an impact on the Branches as missionaries and the overall future of the mission. The most innovative and controversial part of Booth's plan to redress the centuries of injustice produced by colonialism was to encourage African American families to emigrate and settle on small plots of land on the Plainfield estate. He organized the African Protection and Repatriation Society with the goal of sending 20,000 African Americans to their native continent to help Africans reclaim Africa from their colonial masters. Just before visiting the Adventists, Booth had traveled to Atlanta and several Eastern cities with large African American populations, seeking (unsuccessfully, it turned out) financial support. He visited Henry M. Turner and W.E.B. Du Bois, wrote other prominent African American leaders such as Booker T. Washington, and ran advertisements in newspapers throughout the nation promoting his plan.¹²

This agenda no doubt influenced Booth's insistence that an African American be selected as the first Adventist worker to accompany him back to Africa, though he gave the Adventists another reason that Spicer relayed to

Review readers: "The situation in Central Africa is such that colored workers may render special service, where the white face could not get access. The natives of the interior have besought Brother Booth, if he loved them, to bring out to Africa one of their own brethren, of whom they have vaguely heard. It was therefore decided that we might appropriately send out one of our colored brethren as our first contribution to Brother Booth's party."¹³

In reporting the Mission Board's selection of the "colored worker" to join Booth, Spicer noted that "Colorado recommended Thomas H. Branch as one in whom all had confidence as a consecrated man and a teacher of the truth" and had agreed to cover the expenses of the Branches' travel to Africa. Spicer also pointed out the contributions to the mission work that could be anticipated from the fact that Branch's "wife is a nurse, his daughter a schoolteacher, and the two little boys, of seven and eleven, will learn the languages most readily of all."¹⁴ (The eldest son, Thomas, did not accompany the family.)

Adventist leaders subsequently gained some awareness of Booth's radical schemes. Edwin R. Palmer wrote to General Conference president A. G. Daniells on June 13, 1902, of Booth's plan "to secure hundreds and thousands of coloured people from the South and locate them on self-supporting stations," a plan that Booth saw as both "the salvation of Africa and the relief of the oppressed coloured man in the South." Palmer raised caution about the extent to which it would be proper for "us as a denomination [to] enter into such a religio-political undertaking." Yet he had "seen enough of Brother Booth and have heard enough of Central Africa to convince me that it would be nothing short of a criminal caution for us not to enter into this opening of Providence, and do all that we can for that field." What concerned Palmer at that point as a potential source of "unpleasant developments in the future" was "the fact that Brother Booth knows only the ABC of our message, and is not at all acquainted with our methods of working."¹⁵

The Nyasaland Mission

The Branches were older than most first-time missionaries sent out by the church. Thomas was 46 and Henrietta 44. Their unmarried daughter, Mabel, had just turned 24. No other Black person from the Adventist Church had been sent to Africa. They had no role models to copy. But with courage and faith in the providence of God, they gladly accepted the "Macedonian call" to service overseas.

Once Branch had accepted the call, the Colorado Conference ordained him to the gospel ministry on May 22.¹⁶ After a stop in Chicago, where Spicer met them and provided instructions, the family continued to New York, where they set sail for London, England, on June 4 aboard the *St. Paul*.¹⁷ After two weeks with fellow Adventists in England, they departed Southampton on June 28 with Booth, his wife, and daughter for a 16-day voyage on the R.M.S. *Saxon* to Cape Town, South Africa.¹⁸

In an account for the *Review and Herald*, Henrietta Branch reported that she and her family had varied experiences, only some being "very pleasant." As for those that were not pleasant (by implication), "we

endeavored to make them stepping-stones to the kingdom, remembering that it is written, 'In your patience possess ye your souls,' " she wrote.¹⁹ One such experience may have had to do with the difficulty finding lodging for the Branches with a White South African Adventist host in Durban, which caused Booth to deplete his limited funds on hotel accommodations for them.²⁰

The Branches' lengthy journey to the mission site was placed on hold at Chinde, East Africa, where, Henrietta reported, the British consul detained them because they were "educated Afro-American missionaries."²¹ That alone, they discovered, brought them under suspicion of the political implications of Ethiopianism. Many colonial officials equated Ethiopianism with educated African Americans, whose teachings, they believed, induced a spirit of independence and insubordination among Africans.

Booth tried for three days to convince the authorities to release the Branches from detention, but, with no success, proceeded to their destination at Cholo. The Branches insisted that they had nothing to do with Ethiopianism, but were held for six more days. Finally a letter from Booth convinced the authorities to allow the Branch family to continue on their journey up the Zambezi River, with a warning that they would be expelled if they got involved in native political matters.²²

Problems quickly developed between Branch and Booth at Plainfield Mission. The Branches were interested in teaching and preaching the gospel and were not interested in the projects that preoccupied Booth and caused the mission to be short of funds to pay its bills and the Branches their salary. After just six months Booth was recalled by the Mission Board and asked to become a colporteur in England.

This turn of events broke the ties between Booth and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Despite this, and all the controversy he generated by advocating several unusual political, social, and religious causes, it was Booth's vision that opened the Adventist Church in Malawi.

With Booth gone, Branch labored alone as the director of Plainfield Mission until the Mission Board sent a White missionary, Joseph H. Watson, with his wife and son. In less than a year the climate had ravaged Watson. He passed away at age 33, and his wife and son returned to their home. Young Watson was buried on the grounds of the mission station.²³ Branch continued as director, and on July 14, 1906, organized the first Adventist church in what would later become the independent nation of Malawi.²⁴

In 1907 another White missionary, Joel C. Rogers, arrived to take charge of the mission. Rogers renamed the mission Malamulo (which means "the commandments").²⁵ The Branches went to South Africa in 1907 for a better climate and to put their boys in school. It was a great disappointment to them when they found out that their sons could not attend the Adventist school—Claremont Union College—and thus had to go to a government-aided school operated by another denomination.²⁶

Ministry in Denver and Philadelphia

In 1908 the Branches returned to the United States because of the fevers that debilitated Henrietta.²⁷ Their assignment took them back home to Colorado, where Branch was placed in charge of the African American work in Denver. He also traveled to many churches, telling of his experiences in Africa, and served on many denominational committees.

In 1910 he was called east to Philadelphia, a city with one of the largest Black populations in America, but one that had very little Black Adventist presence. According to a report in the *Columbia Union Visitor*, the “colored members of the North Philadelphia church . . . heartily affiliated” with Branch’s work, leading to organization of “the First African S. D. A. church of Philadelphia” on February 11, 1911 “with sixteen charter members.”²⁸ A year later 13 new members had been added to the church, and a report by the conference treasurer, S. D. Hartwell, “showed a tithe paying church, and that the ten cents a week for missions was by the church paid in full to date.”²⁹

Henrietta Branch died in Philadelphia April 4, 1913. Her death delivered a devastating blow to Thomas. His own health suffered from having had malaria so many times in Africa. He married a much younger woman, Lucy Baylor, who had a 5-year-old daughter. But Lucy became a follower of A. T. Jones, who had become a critic of church organization and had broken with the denomination. When Thomas would not compromise his beliefs to adopt hers, Lucy’s parents urged her to leave Branch and return to their home. His two younger sons, who had lacked opportunity to get a good education, both joined the Army.³⁰

Alone and without any family in Philadelphia, he moved to California in 1918. The church he left behind in Philadelphia was later renamed Ebenezer and became the mother of nearly a dozen African American churches in the city.

Final Years and Legacy

Branch served in Watts, Los Angeles, for a short time, but then took sustentation. He lived with and spent the last few years of his life with his daughter, Mabel Webb, and her family in Los Angeles. He passed away November 6, 1924. P. Gustavus Rogers gave the eulogy.³¹

The Branches were forerunners, pioneers—in Colorado, in Malawi, and in Philadelphia. They steered clear of politics, overlooked prejudice, and became an inspiration to other Black missionaries to venture overseas.

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1. Ed. note: James Patterson (1892) and Anna Knight (1901) preceded them (1902).
2. H.M.J. Richards, "Henrietta P. Branch obituary," *ARH*, May 22, 1913, 22.
3. Charles Dudley, Sr., *Thou Who Hast Brought Us Thus Far on Our Way*, book 3 (Dudley Publications, 2000), 172; Mrs. H. M. Van Slyke, "Among the Freedmen," *ARH*, February 22, 1877, 59.
4. Richards, "Henrietta P. Branch obituary."
5. "First Colored Teacher in Colorado," *Rocky Mountain News*, June 30, 1898, 4.
6. P. Gustavus Rodgers, "Thomas H. Branch obituary," *ARH*, December 4, 1924, 22.
7. Thos. H. Branch, "Pueblo," *Echoes From the Field*, February 5, 1902, 3. Bessemer was one of four adjacent towns that had merged to form the city of Pueblo.
8. Harry W. Langworthy, *Africa for the African: The Life of Joseph Booth* (Zomba, Malawi: Christian Literature Association in Malawi, 1996).
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12. Langworthy, 107, 108; Harry W. Langworthy, "Joseph Booth: Prophet of Radical Change in Central and South Africa, 1891-1915," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 16 (February 1986): 33.
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19. *Ibid.*

20. Langworthy, *Africa for the African*, 166.
21. Ibid.
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29. Henrietta Branch, "Philadelphia," *Columbia Union Visitor*, February 28, 1912, 5; see also T. H. Branch, "Philadelphia, Pa.," *Gospel Herald*, June 1913, 3.
30. D. A. Parsons to J. J. Ireland, March 30, 1917, Thomas H. Branch, Sustentation File, RG 33, General Conference Archives; Ervin T. Glenn, Sr., interview by DeWitt S. Williams, 2016.
31. Rodgers, "Thomas H. Branch obituary."

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