

Washburn, Judson Sylvanus (1863–1955)

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Judson S. Washburn was an evangelist, musician, and pastor who was deeply connected by pedigree with the church's leading pioneers.

Early Life and Ministry

Washburn was the second of six children born to Calvin Augustus Washburn (1834–1905) and Mary Amelia Butler (1842–1933), sister of General Conference president George Ide Butler. Calvin and Mary Washburn embraced the Seventh-day Adventist message in 1851 when Samuel Rhodes and John Nevins Andrews visited their home in Paris, Maine. Judson's aunt would marry into the Andrews family. The Washburns, like the Butlers and Andrewses, moved to Waukon, Iowa, in 1856. There, on April 24, 1863, Judson S. Washburn was born.¹ Young Judson was later baptized by Andrews.

O. A. Olsen, while serving as General Conference president, observed in 1889 that Judson S. Washburn was among the precious few young ministers who had "grown up in the truth."² Washburn's long ministerial career, spanning more than 50 years, would take him to England (1891–1902), Washington, D.C. (1890, 1902–1906), Tennessee (1906–1913), Pennsylvania (1914–1920), Ohio (1921–1923), and finally back to the Washington, D.C. area (1924–1955), where he semi-retired in 1934.

1888: A Crisis of Faith



Judson S. Washburn, c. 1900.

Photo courtesy of British Union Historical Archive.

Young Judson initially set out to be a teacher before he and his father began pastoral ministry together in Iowa in early 1884. The next year, Judson married Orra Ellen Riddle (1866–1932), a school teacher whom Calvin Washburn had baptized. With Orra, Judson had four children: Calvin Forrest, Mary, and Grace (a fourth child died in infancy).³

At 25, Judson attended the 1888 General Conference session with his father, a delegate. Judson later called the meeting “epoch-making” and admitted to being “on the wrong side at Minneapolis.” He came “prejudiced” in favor of his uncle, George I. Butler, and confessed that “Uriah Smith was sort of an idol to me.” As a result of Ellen White’s opposition to Butler and Smith, Washburn had a brief crisis of faith and prayed, “If there be a God, let me believe!”⁴ Yet Washburn, like many who opposed White, Jones, and Waggoner in 1888, soon came to embrace their message of righteousness by faith. Writing to White in 1890, he confessed: “I can see now that I was once blind.”⁵

With his eyes opened, Judson was finally ordained and given his first official assignment as an evangelist in Washington, D.C. He was immediately effective, and his meetings increased church membership by a third within his first few months.⁶

Missionary to England

The next year found Washburn as a missionary to England. There he abandoned “the old way” of evangelism and “made Christ in fact the central and one important thing in every sermon.”⁷ Ellen White approved. Despite being cautioned not to expect much success in England, Washburn’s meetings in Bath grew from thirty visitors to nearly five hundred on some nights.⁸ He found even greater success in Southampton, increasing the church from 20 to 120 members. The under-resourcing of the British Mission meant that those few Adventist churches were something of a leaky bucket: as soon as Washburn’s team left a city, some of the new believers there would grow discouraged. This does not change the fact that Washburn was an incredibly successful missionary who has been properly credited as “the unsung hero of Adventism in Britain.”⁹

Washington, D.C. and Conflict

On May 8, 1902,¹⁰ the Washburns returned to Washington, D.C. to work in conjunction with the gifted black evangelist Lewis C. Sheafe. General Conference president Arthur G. Daniells insisted that Washburn and Sheafe divide pastoral and evangelistic work along racial lines. Thus, Washburn was to raise a white congregation, with the white members of the existing Washington church forming the nucleus. Sheafe, similarly, was to build up a separate black congregation. However, a majority of the members of the racially mixed Washington church, with Sheafe’s support, urged continuation of a “colorblind” policy of full inclusion. Washburn wrote bitterly of the disagreement, often interpreting Sheafe and his allies in the worst possible light. When the division of the church was effected in late September 1902, approximately forty white members from the Washington church

joined Washburn to found the Second church. It was soon renamed the Memorial church after Washburn arranged purchase of a Methodist church building.¹¹

Judson Washburn accomplished two major projects during his D.C. years. The first was a nationwide campaign to pay off the debt of his new church, and the second was to persuade church leaders to move their headquarters to the Washington, D.C. area. Washburn's 12-page letter to Ellen White laid out the case he desired her to make to the 1903 General Conference session on his behalf. Calling Washington "the capital of the last great nation in the world," Washburn's central case was that Adventists should be present to influence the most influential people in the world.¹² His tireless letter-writing was rewarded in July 1903, when both the Review and Herald publishing operation and the General Conference moved to Takoma Park, Maryland. He refused credit and instead portrayed Ellen White as the visionary prophet who led God's people out of Egypt (Battle Creek) to the promised land (Washington, D.C.). After the move, he took a leading role in the campaign to raise funds for the buildings needed at the new denominational center.¹³

Washburn's relationship with church leaders, especially A. G. Daniells and W. W. Prescott, soured after 1910 in the controversy that raged over the meaning of the "daily" in Daniel 8:13. Washburn saw the leaders' "new theology" as a break from what he believed to be traditional Adventist teachings. This break widened after the 1919 Bible Conference, where attendees had freely discussed the nature of Ellen White's inspiration. Daniells and Prescott had advocated a "dynamic inspiration" view at a time when many Adventist lay members believed Ellen White to be verbally inspired. In the context of the larger cultural battle over inspiration raging between fundamentalists and liberals, Washburn adopted fundamentalist terminology for his battle within Adventism.¹⁴ He asserted that White's writings were "the inspired, authoritative word of God" and painted Daniells and Prescott as liberals who were subversively introducing the "startling Omega" of heresies of which Ellen White had warned. Washburn called the 1919 Bible Conference "the most terrible thing that had ever happened in the history of this denomination."¹⁵ Daniells labeled Washburn's claims as "the worst tirade ever put in print by a Seventh-day Adventist minister."¹⁶

As a result, Washburn and his allies campaigned hard against Daniells's reelection for General Conference president in 1922. Washburn first demanded a hearing before the leaders of the General Conference, wishing to defend himself and Ellen White's writings from "slander." He charged some with "secretly destroying" God's kingdom by teaching the "subtle science of evil." He even issued an ultimatum that if he was refused a hearing then he would print his private correspondence with Daniells for the delegates to read. "I will never be railroaded out of the work" by an Inquisition, Washburn proclaimed. Thus he lodged his "eternal protest" in the style of Luther at Worms. Daniells's candidacy was defeated that year, in part influenced by Washburn's protest.¹⁷

Semi-retirement and Death

In 1934, Washburn celebrated his fiftieth year of “continuous ministry.” Though he professed to be in excellent health, his itinerary shows he was slowing down.¹⁸ He was praised for being able to recite from memory every book of the New Testament.¹⁹

One final protest marked Washburn’s semi-retirement. His feud with W. W. Prescott reignited in 1939. In a sermon delivered at the Takoma Park church, Prescott had explored the mystery of the trinity—then a highly controversial term in Adventism.²⁰ Washburn clapped back, claiming that the sermon was more evidence that Prescott “so continually and so often criticized the teaching of Seventh-day Adventists.” Thus, Washburn felt “compelled to warn our people against your teaching.” Washburn believed the trinity “a cruel heathen monstrosity,” which influenced such men as Franco, Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler. “The fruit of the Trinity is only evil, only cruel” and “despotic,” he argued. Washburn’s twenty-page essay, which was spread by allies, reads as a historical catalogue of his grievances with Prescott; grievances that go far beyond the trinity and which led Washburn to ask: “Is he a true Seventh-day Adventist?” Washburn insisted that his differences weren’t personal. He simply opposed the progressive, intellectual version of Adventism that he believed Prescott represented.²¹

In his final decade, Washburn devoted himself more to music. Washburn had blessed many with his voice and compositions throughout his ministry, and his daughter Grace held those same gifts in abundance. Washburn dutifully attended Grace’s performances in the D.C. area throughout the 1940s.²²

Judson Washburn’s final years came with personal tragedies as well. His sister, Flora, died in 1931, followed by his wife, Orra, in 1932, and his mother, Mary, in 1933. Washburn eventually married the widow Clara Brown, a union that lasted until she passed away in 1953. His son Forrest followed in early 1954. Elder Washburn’s health began failing around the time of Forrest’s death, and his life slipped away at age 92 on July 21, 1955.²³

Washburn’s most lasting achievement was his campaign to establish the General Conference headquarters near Washington, D.C. His combative role in the conflicts with Sheafe, Daniells, and Prescott display the fiery confidence he had in his convictions.

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