

Green, William Hawkins (1871–1928)

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.

William Hawkins Green headed the North American Negro Department of the General Conference from 1918 to 1928 and was the first African American to hold that position.

Education and Legal Career

William Hawkins Green was born near Lewisburg, North Carolina, December 20, 1871. His mother died while he was a small child so he spent most of his childhood and adolescent years with his grandparents. He studied theology and law at Shaw University, a Baptist school in Raleigh, North Carolina.

After graduating, Green practiced law in Elizabeth City and Charlotte, North Carolina and brought a case before the North Carolina Supreme Court in 1897.¹ He moved to Washington, D.C., where his practice continued to flourish. In October 1903 Green was admitted to the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia and won a case in the presence of President Theodore Roosevelt.² He also argued a case before the Supreme Court of the United States in 1903. Green, along with his partner, J. E. Collins, represented Rufus Bingon, who had been convicted of murder in the Indian Territory (Oklahoma). They gained a “writ of error” for their client from Supreme Court Justice David Brewer, directing that the case be reexamined in the Court of Appeals of the Indian Territory.³

Adventist Ministry

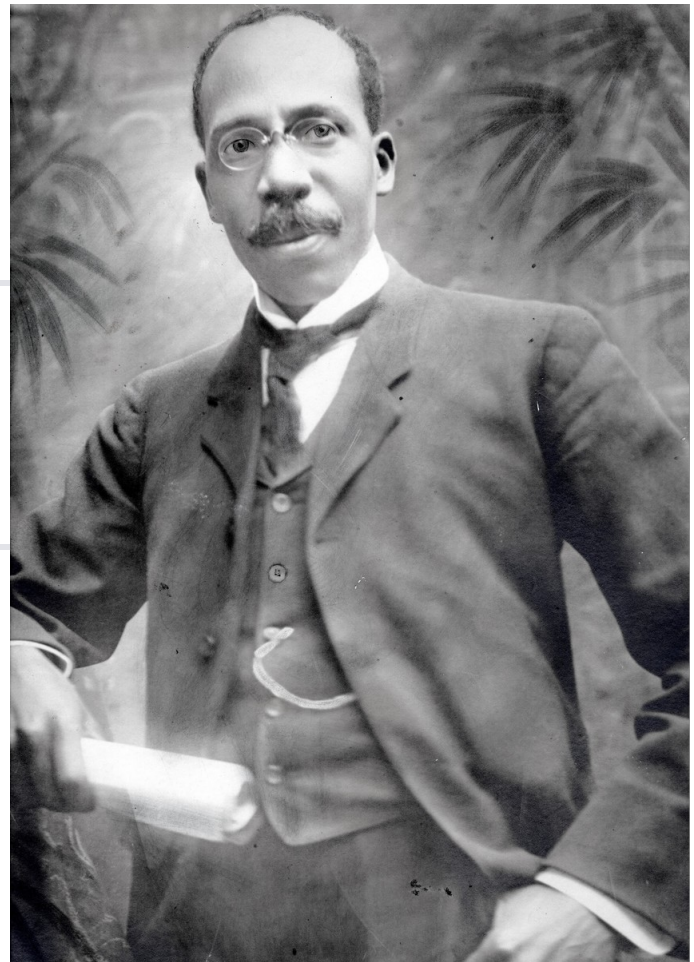
Green became an Adventist in 1902 or 1903 through the evangelistic labors of Lewis C. Sheafe in Washington D.C. After further study and preparation, he gave up the practice of law in 1905 and became an Adventist minister.⁴

On October 20, 1909, at Newark, Ohio, Green was united in marriage to Jessie C. Dorsey, a teacher and one of the founders of the Voorhees Industrial School at Denmark, South Carolina. They had two daughters, Mildred and Inez.⁵

Green pastored several churches during the years from 1905 to 1918. His first charge was in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, from 1905 to 1909. Then he connected with the work in Atlanta, Georgia, but after only a few months was called to Washington, D.C., where he pastored the Fifth Seventh-day Adventist Church. This church later merged with the congregation that adopted the name of Ephesus (DuPont Park today). In 1912 Green went to Detroit, built up the membership and built a new church, the Hartford Avenue Seventh-day Adventist Church, dedicated in 1920.⁶

“Cross-country Green”

After the North American Negro Department was organized at the General Conference session in 1909, the first three to head up this new department, J.W. Christian, A.J. Haysmer, and C.B. Stephenson, were all white men. At the 1918 General Conference session in San Francisco, denominational leaders acceded to the request made by the representatives of the black work for the appointment of a black minister to head the Negro Department. Green was



William Hawkins Green
Photo courtesy of Oakwood University Archives.

chosen to take the responsibility.⁷

W. H. Green was nicknamed "Cross-country Green" by some and "Traveling Green" by others because he traveled constantly from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico and from coast to coast, bearing messages of encouragement and admonition to the conferences, churches, and homes that he visited. Some said that he had memorized the railroad timetable for every major city. He was humble and rarely referred to his accomplishments and actually buried his academic degrees in the bottom of an old trunk.⁸

Green's itinerary during the final month of his life in October 1928 illustrates the rigorous travel schedule that he maintained for ten years as director of the Negro Department. After attending the Fall Council at Springfield, Massachusetts, Green visited his home church, Hartford Avenue in Detroit, on October 6 where he preached "a very touching sermon" and assisted in the communion service. He remained home for a few days, attending to official affairs and visiting his daughters, then students at Adelphian Academy in Holly, Michigan. He left Detroit on the night of October 12 to serve the church in Omaha, Nebraska, the next Sabbath. After leaving Omaha, he visited Kansas City, Missouri; Wichita, Kansas; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Fort Worth, San Antonio, and Houston, Texas, and then journeyed on to the Florida camp meeting, stopping a few hours in New Orleans, Louisiana. The night of October 27 he departed from Orlando, Florida, for Detroit, intending to leave early enough to meet an appointment in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on November 3.

He took a roundabout route to Detroit, using his railroad passes to save expenses for the cause of God. Unfortunately, he missed his connection in Atlanta, which required him to spend most of Monday in that city. He finally arrived in Detroit about 10 p.m. Tuesday night. Suffering with a severe cold and weary because he had not been in bed for four nights, he quickly retired and seemed to be sleeping quite naturally. However, his wife was awoken about 2:00 a.m. by a peculiar noise he was making. Thinking he was troubled with dreams, she tried to arouse him, but to no avail. W.H. Green passed away in his sleep early in the morning of October 31, 1928.

Funeral services were held in the Hartford Avenue church on Sabbath, November 3. W. A. Spicer, the General Conference president, delivered the sermon. Many of his leading colleagues in ministry were also present⁹

As a memorial to his outstanding contribution to the African American work, W.H. Green Hall was built at Oakwood College in 1952 under the administration of President F.L. Peterson. Initially it housed the college library but in 1973 it was renovated into offices and classrooms for the Behavioral Sciences and History Departments.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. "Licensed Attorneys With Cases before the NC Supreme Court in 1897," accessed August 17, 2020, <https://www.ncgenweb.us/franklin/court/court-off.htm>.?
 2. Jessie C. Green, "Elder W.H. Green," n.d., W.H. Green Collection, Oakwood University Archives.?
 3. "City Paragraphs," *The Colored American*, January 2, 1904, 4.?
 4. Lewis C. Sheafe, "People's Seventh-day Adventist Church of Washington, D. C.," *ARH*, August 24, 1905, 15.?
 5. G.E. Peters, J.K. Humphrey, and A.E. Webb, "Elder W.H. Green," *ARH*, December 27, 1928, 22.?
 6. J. Green, "Elder W.H. Green."?
 7. Jacob Justiss, *Angels in Ebony* (Holland, OH: independently published, 1975), 32.?
 8. Peters, Humphrey, and Webb, "Elder W.H. Green"; "A Voice in the Assembly," *North American Informant*, March-April 1977, 9.?
 9. Peters, Humphrey, and Webb, "Elder W.H. Green."?
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