

# Wright, Kenneth Albert (1903–1976)

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## DENNIS PETTIBONE

Dennis Pettibone, Ph.D. (University of California, Riverside), is professor emeritus of history at Southern Adventist University. He and his first wife, Carol Jean Nelson Pettibone (now deceased) have two grown daughters. He is now married to the former Rebecca Aufderhar. His published writings include *A Century of Challenge: the Story of Southern College* and the second half of *His Story in Our Time*.

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Kenneth Wright was a pastor, academy principal, conference administrator, and the president who transformed Southern Junior College into an accredited senior college called Southern Missionary College (now Southern Adventist University).

## Early Years

Kenneth Wright was born March 4, 1903, in Buffalo, New York. His parents were George F. and Ella Genting Wright.<sup>1</sup>

After his mother became a Seventh-day Adventist, Wright attended Fernwood Academy (forerunner of Union Springs Academy). He graduated from South Lancaster Junior College (forerunner of Atlantic Union College) in 1922 and received a bachelor's degree from Emmanuel Missionary College (forerunner of Andrews University) in 1923. He later received a Master's degree from Cornell University.<sup>2</sup>

He married Clara Jeannette Noseworthy (1904-1992) on August 12, 1924, in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>3</sup> They had four children: June L. Frame (born about 1925), Burton (1928-2022),<sup>4</sup> Walter F., and Kenneth Junior (1934-2011).<sup>5</sup>

## Academy Principal

In the late 1920s and early 1930s he was the principal and manager of Pine Tree Academy in Maine. In addition, he taught Bible and history classes there.<sup>6</sup> His next assignment was as principal and business manager of Union Springs Academy in New York. He was there from 1931 to 1936.<sup>7</sup> Once again he was a teaching principal. The subjects he taught most frequently were biology and Spirit of Prophecy. He also taught American history,



Kenneth Wright

Photo courtesy of Southern Adventist University archives.

botany, and “doctrines.”<sup>8</sup> During this time he was also listed in the Seventh-day Adventist ministerial directory as a licensed minister.<sup>9</sup> Then, in 1936, he was ordained to the gospel ministry.<sup>10</sup>

Moving to Florida, he became the principal and manager of Forest Lake Academy, a position he held during the 1937-1938 school year and then from 1939 to 1942.<sup>11</sup> Again he taught classes in Bible and history, including Bible Doctrines and Spirit of Prophecy.<sup>12</sup> During his administration the school bought additional acreage, more than doubling its size. A grapefruit orchard was planted on some of the added land.<sup>13</sup>

## Conference Work

Before becoming principal of Pine Tree Academy, Wright had been the educational superintendent of the Northern New England Conference for several years.<sup>14</sup> Then, during the year between his first and second years at Forest Lake, he worked in the Florida Conference office as the Education and Young People's Missionary Volunteer Secretary (director).<sup>15</sup> During the school year after he left Forest Lake, he held the same position at the Southern Union Conference office in Decatur Georgia.<sup>16</sup>

## Southern Missionary College

The pinnacle of Wright's career was his 12 years (1943-1955) as president of Southern Missionary College (now Southern Adventist University) in Collegedale, Tennessee. It was Southern Junior College when he arrived, but he presided over its transformation to a four-year senior college renamed Southern Missionary College (SMC). His next major achievement, assisted by a stellar faculty, was securing four-year accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Meanwhile the student body grew and, with the end of World War II, a flood of veterans came to the college, increasing the percentage of male students and married students from previous years. This growth and the demands of the accreditation process necessitated a major building program.<sup>17</sup>

Former students and faculty members described him as “a dedicated, forward-looking, and well-organized administrator with a keen perception which enabled him to surround himself with strong and gifted people” and as “compassionate and gentle, even when rebuking.” They said he “helped Collegedale develop a more collegiate atmosphere.”<sup>18</sup>

His chapel talks, they said, were practical and inspiring, “laced with illustrations that made them 'come alive with force and meaning.'” He encouraged students to “fall out of bed on your knees” and “to spend time every day in prayer, Bible study, and 'talking to someone about God and His love.'” They remembered his favorite Bible text as Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.”<sup>19</sup> This is the text found on his tombstone.<sup>20</sup>

Southern Missionary College during the Wright years has been described as “vibrant, dynamic, and spiritual,” but the Wright administration ended unexpectedly. Although Kenneth Wright had been reelected for another term, he needed to step down when he failed to recover from a serious diabetic attack.<sup>21</sup>

## Retirement

During retirement, Wright pastored churches in Murray, Kentucky, and Fort Lauderdale and Avon Park, Florida. During the last 15 years of his life, he was a field representative of the Florida Conference Association.<sup>22</sup>

The Andrews University Alumni Association honored him on April 28, 1973, for his contributions to Adventist education.<sup>23</sup> The General Conference Department of Education awarded him a “citation of excellence” on May 24, 1975.<sup>24</sup>

Elder and Mrs. Wright received a different type of honor during the weekend of August 10 and 11, 1974: a golden anniversary celebration planned by their four children: June, the wife of a mortgage company vice president; Walter, principal of the Riverside, California, church school; Kenneth Junior, assistant secretary-treasurer of the Arizona Conference, and Burton, a teacher at Solusi College in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. (Burton attended by telephone.) Present at the reception held in the Forest Lake Church fellowship hall were three members of the original wedding party, 11 grandchildren, several other relatives, and a total of about 300 people.<sup>25</sup>

Kenneth Wright passed away on March 21, 1976, in Forest City, Florida. He was 73 years old. His funeral was held in the Forest Lake Church. Among the participants in the service were Frank Knittel, at that time the president of Southern Missionary College, and Charles Fleming, who had been Wright's business manager at SMC. He was buried at Highland Memory Gardens in Apopka, Florida.<sup>26</sup>

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## NOTES

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22. At Rest."
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24. "Florida," *Southern Tidings*, August 1975, 19.
25. "Kenneth A. Wright Honored At Golden Anniversary," *Southern Tidings*, November 1974, 16.
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