

Gardiner, Leon H.

(1881–1969)

GLENN O. PHILLIPS

Glenn O. Phillips, Ph.D. (Howard University, Washington, D.C.), although retired, is actively writing, researching, lecturing, and publishing. He was a professor at Morgan State University, Howard University, and the University of the Southern Caribbean. He has authored and published numerous articles, book reviews, and books, including "The African Diaspora Experience," "Singing in a Strange Land: The History of the Hanson Place Church," "African American Leaders of Maryland," and "The Caribbean Basin Initiative."

Leon Henry Gardiner was an early American missionary who served in the eastern and southern Caribbean for more than 20 years as educator, evangelist, pastor, and administrator in the Caribbean and Dutch Unions from the late 1920s to the late 1940s. He and his wife pioneered Seventh-day Adventism in the very difficult early times across the Inter-American Division.

He was born November 6, 1881, to James J. and Carrie Gardiner in Lorraine, Jefferson County, New York. His parents were Adventists, and at the age of 17 he was baptized by Pastor W. A. Westworth at the 1898 camp meeting held at Phelps, New York. Three years later he married Lotta Emma Brown also from Lorraine, New York. They were married in Manville, New York, in November 1901. Two years later their union gave them a daughter who they named Thelma.¹

Leon received his early education in public school in Jefferson County, New York, where his family lived. Lotta Gardiner attended Lyons High School in Manville, as well as Belleville Academy. Leon desired to become an Adventist minister, so he attended South Lancaster Junior College (later Atlantic Union College) in South Lancaster, Massachusetts, where he studied in the theology department. He continued his education at Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University) in Berrien Springs, Michigan, graduating in the class of 1925.²



Leon H. Gardiner

From Daniel A. Duffis, *Legacy of Faith: The History of Seventh-day Adventists in Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao* (Nirgua, Venezuela: Litografia Instivoc, 2003).

Prior to serving in the Caribbean, Leon and Lotta Gardiner taught and held a number of education-based positions in the United States. After Leon completed his training at South Lancaster Junior College, the Gardiners taught and held administrative positions at various schools. He served as principal of Eastern New York Academy and taught Bible, as well as farming and carpentry. Mrs. Gardiner served as matron of East New York Academy and taught at Union Springs Academy and Fox River Academy where Leon also taught and held administrative positions.³

In October 1928 the Gardiners received a call from the Inter-American Division to come immediately to serve at the recently established East Caribbean Training School in Maracas Valley, Trinidad. He was appointed the second principal of the school as Professor C. J. Boyd, the founder of the school, had become too ill to continue his work. The Gardiners served for two years, until the end of 1930, and skillfully guided the new boarding school through one of its most critical times—creating a campus out of a former Cacao plantation and launching its first full time classes for the pioneering students from around the eastern Caribbean. Immediately afterwards, Leon was elected as the first president of the Leeward Islands Mission, with offices in Bridgetown, Barbados.⁴ This mission covered the Adventist Church's operations in numerous scattered congregations from the U.S. Virgin Islands in the north to Barbados in the south, except for the French West Indies territories. While serving as the leading administrator, Leon was also pastor of the King Street SDA Church which was the largest congregation in the mission. While there, he held a number of very successful and memorial evangelistic crusades in Bridgetown and he baptized 49 converts in his first crusade in 1931. He remained president of this mission from 1931 to 1937. The *1936 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* shows that under his leadership the mission grew to 30 churches and 2,201 baptized members.⁵

Elder Gardiner was elected and served as president of the Guyana Conference between 1937 and 1940. Both he and his wife continued to work diligently to move the Church's work forward in this vast and challenging field. He encouraged and fostered church growth and the training of many Guyanese youth at the training college in Trinidad, who later returned and helped further evangelize British and Dutch Guiana.

In 1940 Elder Gardiner was elected president of the Curacao Mission that included the Dutch-speaking islands in the southern Caribbean of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao. At the time there were just two churches with a combined membership of 110 members in the mission. He was the only ordained minister in the mission and Mrs. Gardiner served as the mission secretary and treasurer, as well as director of the Book and Bible Store.⁶ Elder and Mrs. Gardiner continued to lead in this region that was administered by the Columbia-Venezuela Union Mission. They achieved outstanding results in evangelism, planting new congregations, building a representative church on each island, encouraging many young people to attend Caribbean Union College, and setting a record for having the most successful annual Harvest Ingathering campaign in their territory. They also printed Adventist literature in Papiamento, the language of a significant percentage of the people residing in these islands, as well as starting the first Adventist elementary schools on both Aruba and Curacao. At the end of World War II, the Dutch government officially bestowed its approval on the church and welfare work of the

Seventh-day Adventist Church in these three islands, under the leadership of the Gardiners, despite the many hardships that they had faced.⁷ Elder Gardiner served on the board of trustees of the Columbia-Venezuela Union Training School located in Medellin, Columbia, where his decades of interest and experiences in promoting Adventist Christian education contributed to the progress of this school.

Elder and Mrs. Gardiner retired in 1948, after spending more than 20 years of missionary service across the Inter-American Division, and returned to the US on account of health challenges, residing in St. Petersburg, Florida,⁸ where they continued to be involved with local church work. They later moved to the New England area to be near their daughter.

Elder Gardiner passed away on December 21, 1969, in Beverly, Massachusetts, and was buried in the Pine Grove Cemetery in Essex County, Massachusetts,⁹ leaving his wife, daughter, other family members, and other Christian believers.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Appointee files-RG21, "Leon H. and Lotta E. Gardiner," G.C. Secretariat, Record No. 114913, Box 7299, Department of Archives and Statistics, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland; *United States Census Report, 1920* (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration Microfilm Publication), 11 September 2019.
2. *Alumni Today Directory Andrews University* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 2013), c38.
3. Appointee Files.
4. Eric John Murray, *The History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Trinidad and Tobago, 1891-1981*, (Maracas Valley, Trinidad: College Press, 1981), 179; Glenn O. Phillips, *The Making of A Christian College: Caribbean Union College, 1927-1977* (Maracas Valley, Trinidad: College Press, 1977), 27, 77.
5. Glenn O. Phillips, *Over a Century of Adventism: Seventh-day Adventists in Barbados, 1884-1991* (Bridgetown, Barbados, Caribbean Graphics & Letchworth Ltd., 1991), 127.
6. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C., Takoma Park, The Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1935), 135; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1936), 145.
7. Daniel A. Duffis, *Legacy of Faith: The History of Seventh-day Adventists in Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao* (Nirgua, Venezuela: Litografia Instivoc, 2003), 63-65.
8. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1948), 229; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1950), 410.
9. "Gardiner, Leon H.," *ARH*, January 22, 1970, 24.

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