

Ashton, Ned Sullivan (1881–1966)

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.

Ned Sullivan Ashton's 48-year long service began as a pastor and ended as a pastor of both small and large churches in North American Division. In between he was an academy Bible teacher, conference and union president, leading the church through difficult years of growth with organizational and social challenges.

Early Years

Ned Ashton, third of six children of John Ashton and Mary Sullivan, was born on August 27, 1881 in a small town near Pittsburg, Pa. The Ashton family was introduced to the Adventist truth by a visiting colporteur. Later, after attending evangelistic meetings conducted by C. L. Longacre, pastor of Pittsburgh and Allegheny city churches, the entire Ashton family joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹

In preparation for ministry, Ned Ashton attended Mount Vernon College, financing his education by working as a student colporteur, with sales mostly consisting of Ellen White's *The Desire of Ages*.² In 1904 Ashton married Clare Shepherd, who later taught at Union College, Mount Vernon College, and Mount Vernon Academy.



Ned Sullivan Ashton

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

Ashton began his work as a minister in Pittsburgh and was ordained to the gospel ministry in the West Pennsylvania Conference in 1907.³ Later he served as a Bible teacher at Mount Vernon College, principal of Mount Vernon Academy, president of the New Jersey and Ohio Conferences, president of the Southern Union Conference, and as hospital administrator and pastor until he retired from active service in 1955.

Changes at Oakwood

While Ashton was president of the Southern Union Conference (1928-1932), a significant event affecting the shape of Adventist history in North America took place. It was the time when Oakwood Junior College functioned largely on a segregated basis, with black students feeling that they were being treated as second-class citizens in the institution where they were in majority. J. L. Tucker, the college president, was white; the majority of teachers were Southern whites. There was no social contact between the whites and the blacks on the campus. During chapel and Sabbath services all the white teachers tended to sit on one side of the auditorium and the blacks on the other side. It was not uncommon to see that even during communion service, foot washing was practiced according to color.

In short, the campus was split by color, and black students felt accurately the pain of discrimination, non-acceptance, and injustice. After the failure of many student attempts for a fair hearing of their grievances and a resolution for equality and justice in the treatment and acceptance of black students, students took the extreme step of a strike against the college. It was 1931. In a very organized way, students waited on the campus without attending any classes, until the board scheduled to meet that year on the campus can give them a hearing.

The students had sent letters to all of the large black churches and to the General Conference detailing their situation. The concerned leaders arrived on the campus just about the time of the board meeting. Ashton, president of the Southern Union and chairman of the college board, met with the striking students to hear their concerns. After an earnest prayer session, the students placed their expectations before Ashton. Among other things, students expected the appointment of a black president, recruitment of better-qualified black teachers from the North, and a well constructed curriculum. Ashton listened to the student concerns, and then met with the General Conference officers and spoke pointedly against the idea of a black president for Oakwood. "No attention should be paid to demands for Colored leadership," he said, "because Colored people are not capable of self-government." In spite of his appraisal, the board recognized the need for change and appointed J. L. Moran, then principal of Harlem Academy in New York, to head up the institution. Moran became the first black president of the Oakwood College on May 12, 1932.⁴

Later Years

Ashton left the leadership position of Southern Union in 1932, and served the church in many distinguished positions as chaplain of the Florida Sanitarium and Hospital, pastor in Atlanta, Ga., Charleston, W. Va.,

Columbus, Ohio, and Sligo Church in Takoma Park, MD. Although Ashton retired in 1955 after 48 years of service, he continued to serve as pastor of some of the smaller churches in the Washington, D. C., and area. The last nine years of his life were spent in Worthington, Ohio. He and his wife had a son, Wilton, and a daughter, Shirley Randall. He died at the Mount Vernon Rest Home in Mount Vernon, Ohio, September 23, 1966⁵

SOURCES

Longacre, C. S. "Mary Sullivan Ashton obituary." *Columbia Union Visitor*, January 15, 1931.

McVagh, C. F. "West Pennsylvania, First Call to Camp-meeting." *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, February 6, 1907.

"Ned Sullivan Ashton obituary." *Columbia Union Visitor*, November 3, 1966.

Painter, F. E. "Pennsylvania Canvassers' Items." *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, September 10, 1902.

NOTES

1. C. S. Longacre, "Mary Sullivan Ashton obituary," *Columbia Union Visitor*, January 15, 1931, 6.
2. F. E. Painter, "Pennsylvania Canvassers' Items," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, September 10, 1902, 6.
3. C. F. McVagh, "West Pennsylvania, First Call to Camp-meeting," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, February 6, 1907, 12.
4. W. W. Fordham, *Righteous Rebel* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1990), 25-34.
5. "Ned Sullivan Ashton obituary," *Columbia Union Visitor*, November 3, 1966, 19.

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