

Temple, Ruth Janetta (1892–1984)

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Ruth Janetta Temple, M.D., was the first Black graduate from what is today the Loma Linda University School of Medicine, the first Black female physician licensed to practice in the state of California, and a lifelong public health crusader.

Early Life

The second child of Richard and Amy Temple, Ruth Janetta, was born in Natchez, Mississippi, November 1, 1892. Both of her parents were well educated in an era of limited educational opportunity for African Americans. Her father, Richard Jachin Temple (1854-1902) was a graduate of Denison University in Ohio and the University of Chicago, where he earned a bachelor of divinity degree in 1887. Ruth's mother, Amy Rebecca Morton Temple (1860-1948), earned a teacher's degree from Shaw University in North Carolina. They met in New York City while both were working to pay for college expenses – Richard as a waiter at the Hotel Astoria and Amy as a governess for a wealthy southern family. When he proposed marriage, Richard informed Amy he felt called to return to his birthplace, Mississippi, to be a missionary for his people and that the woman he would marry would have six children. Amy, born in Macon, Georgia, disliked the racist South and at first refused him, insisting that she would never raise children in Mississippi. Richard eventually prevailed, promising that “we'll get a house by the side of the road where the people pass by . . . all kinds of people, of all races, all creeds, all colors, all educational backgrounds” so that the “children will learn love before they learn hate.”



Ruth Janetta Temple

From *Negro Trail Blazers of California*, 1919.

Richard Temple kept his promise. They bought a big house, which they called "Templedale," on a 13-acre plot by the side of Pine Ridge Road in Natchez, Mississippi. True to his word, Richard and Amy had six children: Walter Morton, Ruth Janetta, Vivian Verona, Richard Jachin Jr., Ethel Mae, and Lanier David.²

In addition to his pastorate in Natchez, Rev. Temple served as secretary of the National Baptist Convention of America, and traveled frequently for speaking engagements and meetings in that capacity.³ He maintained a large personal library, including books in Hebrew and Greek and he opened it to ministers of various denominations to conduct research. The Temples befriended people of all races, welcomed strangers in need, and provided for them. Ruth and her siblings learned to have no religious or racial prejudice. When she did finally learn that there were different races, she compared the different races to flowers of "all shades and colors."⁴

Ruth adored her father as a delightful, honest and honorable man who both instilled high ideals in his children and enjoyed exploring nearby forests and bayous with them. She was heartbroken when he died suddenly in 1902, when she was only 10 years old.

Education

In 1904, Amy Temple moved her family to Los Angeles, California. Although she had a teaching degree, she did not have a California teacher's license and so became a practical nurse. The Temple family discovered Adventism through medical missionary work conducted by Jennie L. Ireland, a young nursing graduate from Battle Creek Sanitarium. In 1906, during a prayer meeting held in the Los Angeles Central Adventist Church, Ireland expressed her burden to work among the black population concentrated in "Furlong Tract" that linked central Los Angeles with Watts. Shortly after this meeting Sarah Cain, a member of the Central church, asked her postman, Theodore W. Troy, who was African American, if he would be willing to have someone come to his home to give Bible studies. Troy's immediate response was that his wife, Estelle, would be glad to have them. After Ireland began giving Bible studies and health lectures in her home, Estelle Troy invited Amy Temple, who was interested in the health information. Mrs. Temple and her children went on to become charter members of the Furlong Tract Church, organized in 1907, the first black Adventist congregation established west of the Missouri River.⁵ Amy Temple became a Bible Instructor for the Southern California Conference, serving for 21 years. She and Jennie Ireland were instrumental in forming the Watts church in 1914, the second black Adventist Church in Los Angeles, later renamed the Compton Avenue church.⁶

Ruth had attended public schools in Los Angeles but after joining the Adventist church, she studied at San Fernando Academy, an Adventist boarding school, completing the premedical course in 1913.⁷ As a teenager, Ruth thought women became nurses and only men became physicians, but after hearing Jennie Ireland tell stories about two female doctors at Battle Creek, Dr. Kate Lindsay and Dr. Anna Stewart, Ruth made up her mind to be a "lady doctor."

When Theodore Troy heard about her aspirations, he invited Ruth to speak to the Los Angeles Forum, an organization of black leaders who met weekly. The Forum agreed to pay her tuition through the entire five years at the College of Medical Evangelists (CME), later known as Loma Linda University.⁸ She graduated in 1918, the first African American to do so, and then passed the California State Board Medical Examinations with the exceptionally high average of 91.7 percent.⁹

Career

For many years, while in private practice, Dr. Temple maintained connections with the Los Angeles City Health Department as a maternity service staff member and later as a consultant on pathological obstetrical cases. She delivered hundreds of babies and performed many difficult operations. She was one of the chief attending physicians in the children's clinic at CME for many years, and at frequent intervals she held positions on the faculty of CME and the teaching staff at White Memorial Hospital. "I think of Dr. Ruth J. Temple, one of Los Angeles' own daughters, who was so competent in her chosen field that she is on the teaching staff of the White Memorial Hospital," wrote T.R.M. Howard, who would soon also earn a medical degree from CME, in a 1933 column for the *California Eagle*, a major black newspaper. "I am quite sure that Dr. Ruth Temple is the only member of our race in this country who has the pleasure of teaching medicine to white student doctors," Howard added.¹⁰

Dr. Temple's interest in public health began when she studied *The Ministry of Healing* in a course taught by Dr. A. W. Truman at CME. Ellen White's book inspired her to know what a physician could do for a community.¹¹ When she started practicing in southeast Los Angeles, with a population over 250,000, she saw appalling health needs. One night a young mother called and reported that her baby was breathing with difficulty and pain. After examining him Dr. Temple immediately knew he had pneumonia. The mother would not let Dr. Temple take her baby to the hospital or even apply hydrotherapy treatments to her baby in the home. "So I had to just stand by, see the baby die without benefit of an available hospital bed or some treatment that might have saved his life," she recalled.¹²

The experience taught Ruth the necessity of motivating local citizens to use available resources. A few doors from the home in which the baby died, at the 12th Street YWCA, Dr. Temple started a Health Study Club, which became the first component of her comprehensive Total Health Program, which she promoted the rest of her life. She identified the three steps to health as the ABCs:

- A: Acquire essential basic health knowledge.
- B: Bring your essential health knowledge into practice.
- C: Communicate your knowledge to other persons who should be involved.

Her block-to-block plan of going to every house in a given area to assess their health needs and then tailoring programs to meet these needs went to thousands. Dr. Temple described her comprehensive Total Health Program as interesting, simple, and idealistic.¹³

Ruth married Otis Lawrence Banks (1891-1959), a real estate broker, on February 23, 1928, in Salinas, California. A few years after their marriage, the couple sold their home on the west side of town and moved to the east side to be close to where Dr. Temple saw such great needs. She opened her first clinic in their five room cottage but so many people came, and so much medical equipment filled the rooms that they were forced to move into a chicken coup in their backyard. After living in the crude chicken coup for two years she began her campaign to provide that area with a competent health center. She opened her first Temple Health Institute in a rough building which she kept upgrading as she raised funds from philanthropists and the city.¹⁴

The Los Angeles Health Department awarded Dr. Temple a scholarship to Yale University School of Public Health where she received a master's degree in public health in 1942. When she returned she moved her Temple Health Institute several times into better buildings. Finally, the city of Los Angeles built an attractive new facility, the Eastside Health Clinic, and appointed Dr. Temple as medical director. A 1947 article in the *Atlanta Daily World* stated:

Dr. Temple . . . holds perhaps a greater responsibility than any other woman physician in the United States regardless of racial origin. She is the director of the recently constructed \$300,000 interracial clinic operated by the City of Los Angeles in the southeast district. An interracial staff of over 50 employees are under her direction.¹⁵

In 1948, wanting to utilize her talent beyond the southeast section of the city, the Los Angeles Health Department called Dr. Temple to be the city's first woman health officer with the title of Director of Special Health Services and an office in the Civic Center.¹⁶

Community Health Week

In 1945 Dr. Temple founded Disease Prevention Week (later known as Community Health Week) in Los Angeles to focus attention on acquiring good health. The California legislature eventually designated Community Health Week to be observed throughout the state. The program emphasized prevention and eradication of sexually transmitted diseases and provision of TB testing, immunization, family planning, mammograms and health information.¹⁷

Dr. Temple retired from the Los Angeles Health Department in 1962. In 1963 the Southern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists employed her as Director for Health Services and in that capacity she promoted temperance and health while continuing to spearhead the Community Health Week.

Based on the effectiveness of Dr. Temple's Community Health Week, a Congressional joint resolution, S. J. Res. 244, was introduced on October 14, 1970 to authorize the President of the United States to issue annually a proclamation designating the calendar week during which the third Wednesday of March occurs as "Community United Operation Total Health Week." Seven years later, November 3, 1977, Representative Yvonne Brathwaite Burke of Californian again introduced a joint resolution. By then, many states and hospitals had already seen the effectiveness of Health Week in California and had adopted and promoted their own health programs at different times during the year.¹⁸

Recognition

In 1948 a portrait of Dr. Temple became the 35th in a special exhibit of "Leading American Negro Citizens" that premiered at the Smithsonian Institution on May 2, 1944. George Washington Carver, Mary McLeod Bethune, Paul Robeson, W. E. B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson were among those depicted in the original exhibit, funded by the Harmon Institute for the purpose of counteracting racial prejudice. Dr. Temple's life-size likeness, painted by Betsy Graves Reynaud, was unveiled at a ceremony in Los Angeles that both attended. Afterwards, the entire exhibit that now included the portrait of Dr. Temple traveled to other large cities in California and then to eastern cities.¹⁹

Over the years, Dr. Temple's work was recognized by Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and several mayors of Los Angeles and other cities. In a letter to Dr. Temple in 1968, Dr. Milford O. Rouse, president of the American Medical Association wrote: "I trust you will pardon my intense interest in the Community Health Association, but frankly, I think it is the most practical and outstanding example of utilization of all the resources of the community toward total health to be found anywhere in the world, and I'm anxious to see your program expand greatly."²⁰

At the General Conference session in Vienna, Austria, held in 1975 – designated as International Women's Year by the United Nations – Dr. Temple was one of 73 women who received recognition for outstanding service rendered to the church.²¹

The 39th Health Week, March 6-12, 1983, was her last. She had dreamed of a 40th annual Health Week, and the adoption of Community Health Week every year all over the United States and perhaps in many countries of the world. But that was not to be. Throughout her career, Dr. Temple advanced the medical gospel of prevention of illness through diet, exercise, rest, recreation, and spirituality. In 1983 the Loma Linda University School of Medicine Alumni Association named Dr. Temple Alumna of the Year. Also, in 1983 the City of Los Angeles renamed its "East Los Angeles Health Center" the "Dr. Ruth Temple Health Center." The center had served the community for more than 10 years, had grown from 5,000 square feet to 30,000, and was serving more than 15,000 patients a month.

Dr. Ruth Janetta Temple died in Los Angeles on February 8, 1984, at age 91. At her passing the Los Angeles city council and the county supervisors adjourned their meetings in honor of this great contributor to the field of public health.²²

SOURCES

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"Dr. Ruth Temple, Health Care Pioneer, Succumbs." *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 9, 1984.

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NOTES

1. Ruth Janetta Temple, interview by Tahi Mottl, "Black Women Oral History Project," Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, June 12, 1978, 1-2.

6. Richard Jachin Temple is listed as an 1887 recipient of the B.D. in the University of Chicago's *General Register of the Officers and Alumni, 1892-1902* (University of Chicago Press, 1903), 119.

2. Ruth J. Temple interview, 2, 6.

3. In the 1978 interview, Dr. Temple identified the church her father pastored as the First Baptist Church. This was likely the Rose Hill Missionary Baptist church, the oldest formally organized black church in Mississippi. Both this church and the white First Baptist Church evolved out of the Wall Street Baptist church in Natchez; Quin'nita F. Cobbins-Modica, "Rose Hill Missionary Baptist Church, Natchez, Mississippi (1854-);" April 23, 2014, accessed January 13, 2021, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/rose-hill-missionary-baptist-church-natchez-mississippi-1854/>. Dr. Temple also recalled that her father was "appointed as the secretary of the American Baptist Association, the Southern Baptist Association." Almost certainly, this was the National Baptist Convention of America, for Richard Jachin Temple is listed as delegate to that denomination's organizational meeting in St. Louis in 1886; "Colored Baptists: The First National Convention of the Church Opened To-day," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 25, 1886, 2.
4. Ruth J. Temple interview, 2.
5. Louis B. Reynolds, *We Have Tomorrow: The Story of Seventh-day Adventists With an African Heritage* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1984), 175-176.
6. Owen A. Troy, "Dedication of Compton Avenue Church," *Pacific Union Recorder* May 29, 1946, 11.
7. "Graduating Class, 1913," photo caption, *Pacific Union Recorder*, August 7, 1913, 1.
8. Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles: 1919), 139.
9. "Negro Woman Physician Makes High Mark," *California Eagle*, September 7, 1918, 8.
10. T. R. M. Howard, "Negro in the Light of History," *California Eagle*, September 29, 1933, 12.
11. Ruth J. Temple interview, 16, 20
12. Ruth J. Temple, "I Carry Them in My Heart," *Message*, February 1957, 24.
13. Ruth Temple interview, 24-26.
14. "History of Health Center is Told By Dr. Ruth Temple," *California Eagle*, March 27, 1941, 6A.
15. "Ground Breaking for New Health Center," *California Eagle*, June 28, 1945; "Forum Reveals Adventist Pattern," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 7, 1947, 1.
16. "Citywide Post Given to Dr. Ruth J. Temple," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 19, 1948, 16.
17. "Open War is Declared Against Disease by Health Officials," *California Eagle*, September 20, 1945.

18. *Congressional Record-Senate*, October 14, 1970, Proceedings and Debates of the 91st Congress, Second Session, Volume 116-Part 27, S. J. Res. 244; Ruth J. Temple interview, 52.
 19. H. L. Dungan, "33 Portraits on Exhibit," *Oakland Tribune*, January 2, 1949, 71; Roy Hilton, "National Exhibit on View in Recreation Park Lounge," *Long Beach Independent*, November 7, 1948, 10; Alan J. Heavens, "Smithsonian Exhibit at RCC to Hail Role of Black Women," *The Journal News* (White Plains, NY), September 4, 1977, 159.
 20. Ruth Temple interview, 30, 48-52.
 21. *Ibid.*, 51.
 22. Gery P. Friesen, *Loma Linda Alumni Journal*, September-October 1983, 22; Dennis E. Park, "Ruth Temple '18—She Was an Example," *Loma Linda Alumni Journal*, October-December 2000, 20; "Dr. Ruth Temple, Health Care Pioneer, Succumbs," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 9, 1984, A1; John Kendall, "Dr. Ruth Temple, Pioneer Crusader for Health, Dies," *The Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 1984, 41, 44.
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