

Hilliard, Aaron Henderson (1820–1875)

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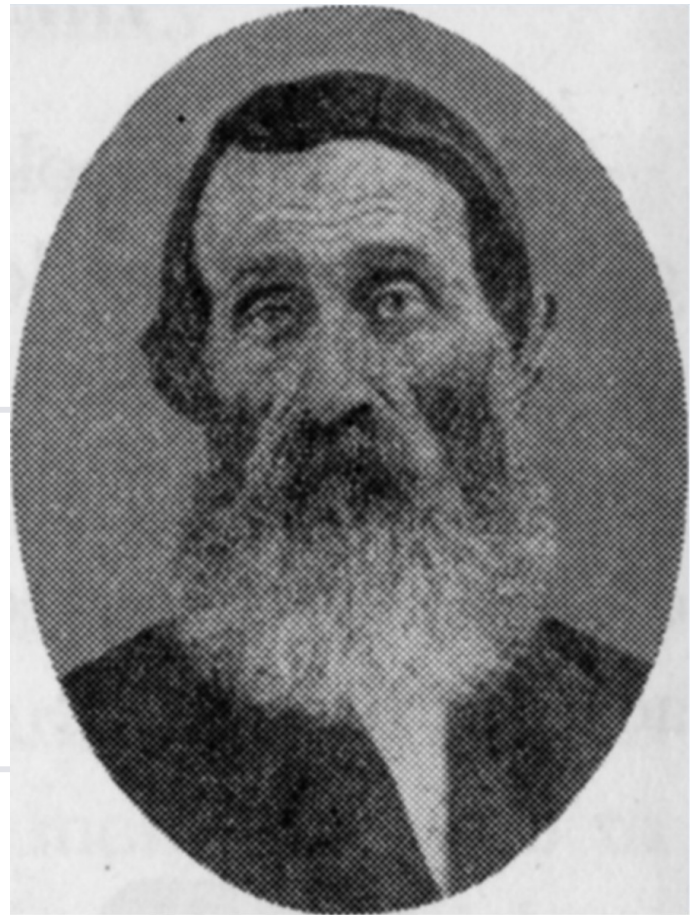
Brian E. Strayer, Ph.D. (University of Iowa). Strayer taught history at Jackson (MI) Junior Academy, the University of Iowa, Southern Adventist University, and Andrews University for 41 years. He has written 10 books, 120 scholarly and professional articles, 40 reviews and critiques in French and Adventist history and directed three Adventist heritage tours of New England. He writes a weekly column ("The Past Is Always Present") in the *Journal Era* and shares Adventist history at camp meetings, schools, and churches.

Aaron Henderson Hilliard was an active layman and church elder. Hilliard's contributions to the Seventh-day Adventist Church include his providing the venue for the first Sabbath-keeping Adventist home school in Madrid, New York, and the warm hospitality that he and his wife, Lydia, provided to numerous traveling Adventist preachers who stayed at their home during the 1860s and 1870s.

Early Life

Aaron Henderson Hilliard (or Hellard) was born on June 6, 1820, in Vermont to Clark (b. 1786) and Lucy (Byington) Hilliard (b. 1790). Sometime during the 1830s the Hilliards moved to St. Lawrence County, New York. During the 1840s Aaron became a class leader in the Methodist Episcopal Church in Morley, New York. Also, like many American citizens in the antebellum (pre-Civil War) era, he opposed secret societies and was active in the Anti-Masonic movement.

Around 1846, Aaron married Lydia Ann Hilliard (1818-1883), a Methodist Episcopalian. The couple bought a farm near Madrid, New York. Over the next ten years, they had eight children: Cynthia (b. 1847), Sidney (b. 1848), Seymour (b. 1850), Edwin (b. 1851), Jebesie L. (b. 1853), Orilla (b. 1856), Amajon (b. 1858), and Phebe O. (b. 1859). After reading the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Aaron became a Sabbath-keeping Adventist early in 1852;



Aaron Henderson Hilliard

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

Lydia followed about a year later.¹

It was largely through Aaron's efforts that John (1798-1887) and Catharine Byington (1803-1885) of nearby Bucks Bridge became Sabbath keepers in the summer of 1852. Aaron had suggested to John that his use of tea and tobacco constituted a "tax" on his "holiness." The two families—Aaron Hilliards and John Byingtons—remained close not only because of their new found truth, but also because John's sister, Lucy Byington (1788-1854) had married Aaron's brother, Henry Hilliard (1816-1892).

The closeness went even farther. In the fall of 1853, John's daughter, Martha Byington [Amadon] (1834-1937), taught the first Sabbath-keeping Adventist home school in Aaron and Lydia Hilliard's parlor. Among her seventeen pupils were four of their children: Cynthia (b. 1847), Sidney (b. 1848), Seymour (b. 1850), and Edwin (b. 1851). Thus began the story of Adventist education.

Lay Leader in Michigan

In 1859 Aaron Hilliard and his brother Henry moved their families to Michigan. Aaron, Lydia, and their children stayed in the home of James (1821-1881) and Ellen White (1827-1915) in Battle Creek for a few days before traveling to Pine Creek, near Otsego, about thirty miles northwest of Battle Creek. Here Aaron purchased several acres of land, built a house, and began farming.

In 1861 the Hilliards were instrumental in establishing the first Seventh-day Adventist Church in Otsego, and until his death, Aaron served as an elder there. Church members praised him as a consistent and earnest Christian. He was also highly respected by non-Adventists in the area for his conscientiousness and integrity.

During the 1860s and 1870s, the Whites, Byingtons, and other traveling Adventist pioneers appreciated the warm-hearted hospitality of the Hilliards, who frequently provided them with bed and board during their preaching tours. It was in the parlor of Aaron and Lydia's home during family worship on the evening of June 5-6, 1863, that Ellen White had a 45-minute vision that helped her understand the physical and spiritual importance of adopting the health reform message, including vegetarianism, exercise, and hygiene.

Although the Hilliards (in Otsego) and the Byingtons (in Newton Township) lived more than forty miles apart, the two families remained as emotionally close in Michigan as they had been in upstate New York. During the 1870s Aaron's son Henry occasionally took the train to Newton to assist the aging John Byington in planting, cultivating, and harvesting his crops.

Many of the Hilliards, including Aaron, suffered from a disease of the lungs called "asthmatic consumption" (tuberculosis). However, it was not TB, but "congestion of the liver" (probably liver cancer) that took Aaron's life on August 20, 1875, at age 55. Two days later, former General Conference president George I. Butler (1834-1918) presided at his funeral. Aaron was buried in the Mountain Home Cemetery in Otsego, Allegan County, Michigan.

Contribution

Aaron Henderson Hilliard's primary contributions to the Seventh-day Adventist Church include his providing the venue for the first Sabbath-keeping Adventist home school in Madrid, New York, in 1853; his fifteen years (1861-1875) as an elder at the Otsego Seventh-day Adventist Church which he founded; and the warm hospitality that he and Lydia provided to numerous traveling Adventist preachers who stayed at their home during the 1860s and 1870s. Like all of the Hilliard men, Aaron was much loved for his sense of humor, his hard-work ethic, his hospitality, his love of poetry and music, and his devotion to the Church.

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Note

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