

Wightman, Lulu

Irene (1872–1940)

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Lulu Wightman was an evangelist and a passionate advocate for religious liberty.¹ She was an effective and popular public speaker. During the first decade of the 20th century, she was considered one of the most effective evangelists in the denomination. Early on in her ministry, a fellow minister, S. M. Cobb, stated that she “has accomplished more in the last two years than any minister in this state [New York].”²



Lulu Irene Wightman

Shared by Michael W. Campbell.

Background

Lulu Irene Russell was born in Randolph, Cattaraugus County, New York, on September 27, 1872. She grew up in a large family where her mother, Lucinda (1832-1907), converted to Seventh-day Adventism.³ Her father, Truman Russell (1824-1906), while friendly to Adventism, never actually became an Adventist Church member.⁴ They had eight children, two sons and a daughter and son-in-law all became ministers.

On April 20, 1896, she married John S. Wightman (1865-1918) from Pennsylvania.⁵ While it is unclear how the two met, it appears likely that evangelism brought the two of them together. Just a few weeks after their marriage, they were working together assisting Adventist minister J. B. Stow with “valuable aid” during evangelistic meetings that included singing.⁶ By September 15 of that same year, they were conducting their own series of meetings in Gas Springs, a small farming community near Canaseraga, New York.⁷ The next year, a

note published in the New York Conference publication, *The Indicator*, listed three individuals for ministerial licenses including Mrs. Lulu Wightman, which was how her name was generally listed in Adventist Church periodicals.⁸

“An Abundant Harvest of Souls”

Between 1896 and 1905, she raised 12 churches in New York. The very first church she organized was in Wallace, New York, where, in 1896, 14 people were baptized and organized into a church. In 1901, she returned to conduct the “quarterly meeting services” (which inevitably included Communion), where she spoke in the morning, afternoon, and again in the evening. “The Lord came near in these services. Four persons were received as members of the church.” She noted with care one particularly talented young person whom she hoped would “enter the work in some capacity.” She also noted that, while she was there, she held a debate with the local Methodist Episcopal minister who “poured forth a tirade of epithets and abuse against our people, with the mistaken idea that this was warrantable proof for the sacredness of the Sunday Sabbath. Souls lingering in the valley of decision listened attentively.”⁹ Thus, from early on, Lulu Wightman began engaging with ministers of other faiths—some of whom were at times hostile—demonstrating courage in responding to criticism and graciously sharing her religious convictions.

Another early congregation she established was in the town of Avoca, where she began a series of evangelistic meetings on November 11, 1897. The meeting hall was filled to capacity, with an additional 50 to 100 people standing outside due to “lack of standing room.”¹⁰ Earlier that same year, as a result of her efforts, nine individuals were baptized, and a Sabbath School with sixteen members was organized in Woodhull, New York!¹¹ While there, she reported on the fiftieth anniversary of a Spiritualism Conference, whose keynote speaker was Moses Hull, a former early Adventist minister who had defected to Spiritualism. She noted that his very words served as evidence of the fulfillment of Ellen G. White’s prophetic prediction that Spiritualism and apostate Protestantism would unite.

Lulu Wightman was not only an evangelist but also demonstrated the compassion and care of a pastor. Although she and her husband worked effectively as a ministry team, numerous accounts indicate that she personally conducted many funerals, with reports consistently noting her role as the officiant. Later obituaries frequently credited her ministry as the decisive influence that led individuals to join the Adventist Church. In addition to being an eloquent speaker, she appears to have been a diligent and organized evangelist who engaged closely in personal labor for souls. In 1898, from Sheridan, New York, she noted leading four more people in that village to baptism. She was now preparing to begin meetings at Silver Creek, on Lake Erie, “where I hope to find other honest hearts. May God bless the work.”¹² In this latter town, she would again raise up another church after conducting evangelistic work. One observer, B. T. Walker, noted her effective ministry in New York: “Sister Lulu Wightman is doing a grand work for God and man. She and her helpers have built up

several churches and societies. Christ works with and through them for His glory."¹³ It was also while she was in Silver Creek that she became concerned for a "Brother Erb" who was employed in a large machine shop. Although he made excellent wages, "it was predicted that he would be discharged; but he put himself in the hands of the Lord, and instead of losing his position, the company made a new contract with him for the year 1899, not asking him to work on the Sabbath."¹⁴ Perhaps it was while in the midst of conducting evangelism, with her concern for new converts, that Lulu Wightman first developed her later passion for religious liberty. It is no wonder that, during her frequent evangelistic reports, she invited others to pray for these early converts: "Pray that this field may continue to yield an abundant harvest of souls," she pleaded to fellow church members.¹⁵

Wider Evangelistic Travels

Beginning in 1901, John and Lulu Wightman began to travel around the South during the cold winter months of New England. While it does not say why, the fact that her husband died of tuberculosis in 1918 suggests that, perhaps even by this early date, they may have sought refuge in a warmer climate, a common belief at this time, during the cold winter months for the sake of their health. In 1901, she requested support for publications from Thomasville, Georgia.¹⁶ In 1903, she and her family spent the winter in St. Augustine, Florida. When they arrived, she wrote: "Down among the scrub palmettos and the alligator swamps, we have found a company who have been keeping the Sabbath for years, brought to their knowledge by a single tract which drifted their way." She began to actively work to organize them into a church noting that two more recently had also converted.¹⁷

Her frequent travels did not stop her from returning to her native upstate New York to continue to raise up churches. Frequent reports in Adventist Church periodicals during 1906 recorded how she held evangelistic meetings in Bath, New York, which resulted in organizing a church. At that time, evangelists held meetings for months at a time until a church was raised up. One such report by her stated:

We are now in the seventh week of our meetings here, and every seat of the hall is filled with persons eager to hear the truth for these times. It is an audience of fine, intelligent people, and the interest is excellent indeed. Several have decided to obey the truth, and a large number attend the Sabbath meetings. We look for others to come into line with the message."¹⁸ About a month later, she reported that the meetings had brought "a good return. On an average twenty-two persons have been attending the Sabbath meetings for some weeks past, and I can safely say that at least half this number are observing the day in a spiritual sense; I mean that they are obeying in both the letter and the spirit."¹⁹

Apparently one effective source for reaching people included distributing literature at a local home for soldiers and sailors. Another early convert, at the conclusion of evangelistic meetings in Watertown, New York, in early 1907, remarked that the "whole world ought to know about what you are preaching." The record states that 17 people made a public decision to come "into the ark of safety."²⁰

The California Tract Society listed that John and Lulu Wightman had moved west in April 1907 and were serving in Nevada and eastern California.²¹ Once again, it is plausible to consider that they sought a warmer and drier climate, particularly if John had begun to exhibit early symptoms of tuberculosis. One of the most fascinating reports during this time is how Lulu Wightman went up to the mining town of Wonder, Nevada, to seek new converts. Only 61 miles from the nearest railroad or “the sound of a village church-bell,” this small mining camp didn’t have a minister from any denomination. “A year ago, rich gold-bearing quarts was found upon the very top of one of the many peaks of the Silver Mountains, and Wonder arose as by magic.” She had heard of a report in which a small infant had died, and no one in town had a copy of the Bible to read at the child’s funeral. The community sent a request, that Lulu verified, for a minister. In response, she traveled up to this remote mountain community, visiting people among the 176 tent dwellings, not counting the many more frame buildings among this “inviting field.” In the midst of this mining town, after “considerable difficulty,” she secured a small hall where they could hold evangelistic meetings. The discovery of other prospects for gold, in the midst of a financial panic, had a “blighting effect,” leading to mine closures. Tragically, the town soon became a ghost town, cutting short her evangelistic endeavor.²² While this effort was not as successful as in other locations, it does show her pluck and courage to literally go to the ends of the earth in search of souls.

Religious Liberty Advocate

While leading others to Christ was her passion, it appears that, while holding evangelistic meetings in upstate New York, that she observed how the proposed “Blue Laws” or “Sunday legislation” threatened their religious liberty and awakened an interest by both of them in the topic of religious liberty. During meetings of the State Sabbath Association (an auxiliary to the American Sabbath Union), held October 28-31, 1906, John and Lulu Wightman held their own meetings to promote religious liberty. At this point the *Signs of the Times* described Mrs. Wightman as “a well-known evangelist.” As she held meetings, local newspapers reported her talks about religious liberty.²³

By 1909, Lulu Wightman was becoming increasingly in demand as a leading advocate within the denomination for religious liberty. In early 1909, she conducted a two-week religious liberty campaign in Lincoln, Nebraska.²⁴ It was reported that they had a disappointing attendance of only 1,500 due to bad weather. Her religious liberty meetings were meant to both inspire the faithful as well as to serve as an entering wedge to attract people to evangelistic meetings.

On April 13, 1909, she became the first Seventh-day Adventist to address the state legislature in the state of Missouri about religious liberty. At the time, Adventists described this unprecedented opportunity as clearly providential. “By resolution in the House of Representatives, Mrs. Wightman was invited to use the chambers for an evening address on “The Rise of Religious Liberty in the United States.” As later recorded, she reviewed in detail the history of religious liberty in America with special emphasis upon the contributions of Roger Williams

in Providence, Rhode Island. She argued: "Ours is a civil and not a religious government. It is the world's greatest government since time began. Let there be no innovation upon our splendid system where in all men are free." It went on to note how "this lecture was well attended by the legislators and their families." She was later invited to address the legislature while they were in session, as widely reported in the press. Her speech, titled "The Altar Fires of Liberty," later became a *Religious Liberty* special number for colporteurs to sell.²⁵

Drifting Away

In early 1910, Lulu Wightman was continuing to hold evangelistic meetings in Kansas City, Missouri. Once again, the "attendance was large from the beginning," with people being turned away because there wasn't even standing room available.²⁶ The exact circumstances during this period remain unclear; however, her brother, B. T. Russell, then president of the Central Union Conference, was sufficiently concerned to publish a sixteen-page pamphlet warning against his sister and brother-in-law, alleging that they had come to oppose the Adventist denomination. Shortly thereafter, both Wightmans were dismissed from church employment. Soon, they relocated to Los Angeles, California, where John succumbed to tuberculosis in 1918.²⁷ After his death, Lulu went to live with her daughter, Ruth (1895-1939), who married novelist Gouverneur Morris. Ruth was notable in her own right as she was credited with being only the second woman in American history to be granted an airplane license.²⁸

Lulu Wightman died on July 23, 1940, in Monterey, California.²⁹ She is an example of an incredible woman who passionately shared her faith with others.

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NOTES

1. This article is adapted with permission from this article's author, Michael W. Campbell, *We Stand on Their Shoulders: A Historical Legacy of Adventist Pastors* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2023), 75-85.
2. The full quote is accessible at: <https://h0bbes.wordpress.com/2006/10/01/more-forgotten-heralds-early-adventist-women-ministers/> [accessed 12/31/21].
3. See Obituary for Lucinda J. Russell, *The New York Indicator*, May 8, 1907, 4.
4. See Obituary for Truman Russell, *ARH*, November 1, 1906, 31.
5. <https://www.ancestry.com/invite-ui/accept?token=FaRCMZYNsfNdCL6tg2FfCHstYg0Fpi7irw3cWGqsPRc=>.
6. See *The Indicator*, May 27, 1896, 3.
7. See John S. and Lulu Wightman, "New York," *ARH*, November 24, 1896, 752.
8. *The Indicator*, October 13, 1897, 2.
9. See note under "Wallace," *ARH*, July 30, 1901, 9.
10. Mrs. Lulu Wightman, "Avoca," *The Indicator*, December 1, 1897, 3-4.
11. See note in *Signs of the Times*, May 27, 1897, 12.
12. See Lulu Wightman, "New York," *ARH*, November 8, 1898, 14.
13. B. T. Walker, "Poplar Bluff (MO.) Camp-Meeting," *ARH*, November 19, 1901, 12.
14. Lulu Wightman, "New York," *ARH*, January 24, 1899, 60.

15. Cf. note under "Canandaigua," *ARH*, September 3, 1901, 578.
16. See *ARH*, Sept. 10, 1901, 806.
17. See note, *ARH*, Feb. 17, 1903, 20.
18. See note, *ARH*, March 1, 1906, 19.
19. See note, *ARH*, April 5, 1906, 19.
20. John S. & Lulu Wightman, "Watertown," *The New York Indicator*, April 3, 1907, 3.
21. *Pacific Union Recorder*, February 27, 1908, 3.
22. John S. and Mrs. Lulu Wightman, "Wonder, Nevada," *Pacific Union Recorder*, November 14, 1907, 5.
23. "'Sabbath' Agitation in New York," *Signs of the Times*, September 21, 1906, 15.
24. See *ARH*, March 11, 1909, that features information about these special meetings.
25. See report in *ARH*, April 22, 1909, 24.
26. James Cochran, "Revival Meetings in Kansas City, Mo.," *ARH*, April 7, 1910, 16.
27. K. C. Russell, "Returning from General Conference," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, April 24, 1918, 3.
28. "Noted Writer's Wife Succumbs," *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, Arizona), April 20, 1939, 54.
29. "Rev Lulu Russell Wightman," *Findagrave.com*, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/268518959/lulu-wightman>.

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