

Webb, Florence Mabel (Branch) (1878–1945)

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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.

Mabel Branch was the first African American public school teacher in the state of Colorado and she, along with her parents, Thomas and Henrietta Branch, became the first black missionaries sent to Africa by the Seventh-day Adventist church.

Early Life

Florence Mabel Branch was born in Wyandotte, Kansas, on April 1, 1878 to Thomas H. Branch (1856-1924) and Henrietta Paterson Branch (1858-1913). Soon after Mabel's birth, the Branches moved to Denver, Colorado where her three younger brothers, Thomas (1887), Paul (1891), and Robert (1896) were born.¹

In Colorado, Henrietta Branch took nurses training and Thomas Branch worked for twenty years as a porter, cook, steward and brakeman on the Rio Grande railroad. The couple joined the Seventh-day Adventist church in 1892, and Mabel, by then a teenager, also joined the church, probably around the time that her parents did. She became a "prominent worker" in Sabbath School. Thomas Branch became a dedicated lay worker in the church, known as a good speaker and diligent student of the Bible. The Colorado Conference called him to full-time ministry in 1901?²

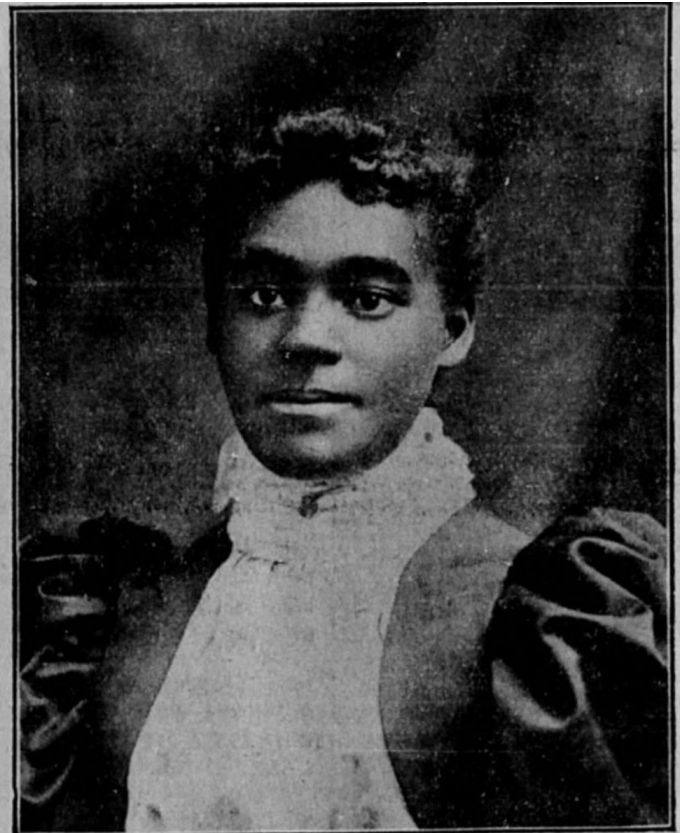
“First Colored Teacher in Colorado”

Mabel attended Denver public schools and graduated with honors from West Denver High School in June of 1897. At graduation Mabel received an offer to teach in a Presbyterian school at Knoxville, Tennessee, but her parents opposed her leaving home and she declined the offer. Instead, she accepted an appointment to teach at Pine Ridge school, just outside of Denver, and thus became the first black public school teacher in the state's history, according to the *Rocky Mountain News*. The paper reported that her appointment was seen "as marking the beginning of a new era for the colored race in the state."³

Pioneer Missionary to Central Africa

In the summer of 1902, Mabel Branch left her teaching position and joined her parents in accepting the call to become the first African American missionaries sent by the denomination to Africa. Mabel's two youngest brothers, Paul and Robert, went with them. The Branches were assigned to join Joseph Booth, a British missionary who had launched the Plainfield (Nyassaland) Mission at Cholo, British Central Africa, under the auspices of the Seventh Day Baptists in 1897 but had arranged its sale to the Adventists. However, Booth, who was a rather mercurial idealist, severed his connection with the Seventh-day Adventists about six months after the Branches arrived, leaving them in charge of the mission.⁴

In letters and reports published both in Colorado newspapers and denominational periodicals, Mabel Branch gave vivid and detailed descriptions of her work and of mission life. The *Denver Post* published a letter from Mabel Branch to her friend Leona Troutman in a March 1903 article subtitled "Bright Young Afro-American's Experience in Far-Off Africa, Where the Sun Shines Hottest at Christmas Time." She began by acknowledging, "It is very lonely here for



Florence Mabel Branch
From *Colorado Statesman*, November 10, 1906.

me," but then moved quickly to a description of her work:

I have 112 scholars, divided into three separate schools on this station. Some of the more advanced pupils teach those in the lower grades, and I teach the highest classes in English....Besides this I often make little dresses for the children and women's waists to sell.

All of my pupils are young men and married ones with children. Mamma teaches the women every afternoon. I have charge of all the teaching work, besides cutting up soap once a week and distributing to each pupil to do his washing with....

As for the weather and diseases:

Oh, it is so extremely hot! We dare not go out in the sun without a cork hat and a white umbrella, even when the sun is hidden behind a cloud. In a few minutes, without a hat in this country, you will suffer with a severe pain in your head. Malarial fever is the common disease, and I am now having a second attack. I am still trying to perform my duties, but, oh, it is so hard. Mamma is just getting over an attack of fever.⁵

In a report published in the *Review* the following November, Branch gave a detailed description of the mission buildings and facilities. Regarding the school:

Our two school buildings are made of grass and bamboo poles, with grass roofs. The larger one will accommodate about one hundred persons, sitting close together....

Occasionally snakes come out of the grass roof to view the classes in the schoolroom. Whenever one appears, the school boys drop books and slates, and lessons are suspended until it is killed....⁶

In 1905, she wrote that progress for the gospel was in many ways slow and difficult, particularly among the Manganja tribe that lived closest to the mission, but she also included a hopeful note:

Many of the village children attend our school and also Sabbath services, and listen attentively to all that is said. In these children lies our hope of getting this message taught to others. The older people do not like to change their customs, but many of the young ones do not like the village life, so come to the mission to be taught. In school we are teaching the boys to sing, which all enjoy very much; and they are eager to learn our Sabbath-school songs in English.⁷

Branch had some accomplishments to report in a letter published in November 1906 in the *Colorado Statesman*, a black newspaper:

In our school we have over seventy in daily attendance, and they are all learning nicely. We have several boys, who, when they came to us two years ago, could not read their own language, now they can read the English Bible, third reader, their own language, and understand and speak some English very nicely. I feel very proud of these boys.

We had baptizing three weeks ago, thirteen were baptized, five of them being women. That same day the Ordinances were celebrated for the first time, and as the like (foot-washing) had never been heard of in this part, you may be sure the natives looked on in amazement. Over two hundred people gathered to witness the baptizing and ordinances. We now have organized a church of twenty one members.⁸

This church, organized July 14, 1906, was the first Seventh-day Adventist church formed in what would become decades later the independent nation of Malawi.⁹ However, the measure of progress was not without opposition:

We do not find the work easy, for the Government and Missions are against us, and the Bible teachings, and many of the boys who would like to come here, are hindered by the white Missionaries, and now they are teaching their boys, that we are false prophets, and not to come near us or they will be deceived. Of course the more they try to crush the Truth, the more it spreads . . . and when the boys ask them (Missionaries) questions about Sabbath and Sunday , they cannot answer or prove their position from the Bible. It is not a pleasant thing [to] them to be floored by an ignorant, heathen boy.¹⁰

After four years, weariness was setting in and with it, questioning whether the Branches had been treated equitably as missionaries for the church:

When one considers that on account of the malarial conditions here and no facilities for helping one's self, when it is an established fact that foreigners should leave every three years on a furlough to cleanse the system, and that those staying over that time run a risk, it seems as if we too, need a change.

Is it true that when the black brother enters a mission field, he must never think of leaving under any circumstances? Is health no consideration? Does God require more of the black man for his salvation than of the white man, or is it

only our narrow mindedness? God is just but his servants often get in a rut.¹¹

It would be another year before the overdue change came. Joel C. Rogers, a white missionary, took charge of the Nyassaland Mission in 1907 and would rename it Malamulo (“the commandments”).¹² The Branches served for a year in the better climate of Cape Town, South Africa. Mabel taught in a government-supported school operated by another denomination because no positions were open to her in the Adventist work that had its headquarters in that city. Worse still, her two brothers had to attend a similar school because, their father reported, “our College [Claremont Union] was closed against them” – in other words, they were excluded because of their race.¹³ Despite the healthier climate, Henrietta Branch’s debilitated condition made it necessary for the family to return to America in 1908.

Later Life and Legacy

Very little evidence has surfaced regarding Mabel’s activities for about a decade after her return from Africa. Her mother, Henrietta, died in Philadelphia in 1913 where her father served as pastor of the first black Adventist congregation in that city, later known as the Ebenezer church. By 1918, Mabel was living in the Los Angeles, California area, for that is when her father came to live with her after his retirement.¹⁴

On November 1, 1922, Mabel Branch, at age 43, married 49-year-old widower Seymour Webb in Watts, California. Webb, a contractor, and his first wife, Anna, who died in 1918, had been charter members of the Furlong church in Los Angeles when, in 1908, it became the first Seventh-day Adventist church to organize west of Ohio. Seymour and Anna had eight children, two of whom – Adolphus and William – became prominent Adventist ministers.¹⁵

Mabel continued to care for her father until he died in 1924. Likely some of her younger stepchildren were part of the household as well for a few years. Mabel and Seymour Webb continued living in Los Angeles until her death on October 12, 1945. Her husband died in 1949.¹⁶

Mabel Branch Webb left a legacy of pioneering excellence and courageous, sacrificial service for Christ, helping to establish a foundation for Adventism in Central Africa.

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