

James Edson White: A “NO LIMIT” MAN

BY R. STEVEN NORMAN III

1849 — James Edson White is born July 28 to James and Ellen.

1870 — Marries Emma MacDearmon on July 28.

1873 — Moves to California to help his father with the Signs of the Times.

1878 — Publishes Song Anchor, the first Sabbath School song book of the denomination.

1893 — Has religious awakening after reading letter from his mother.

1893 — Reads “Our Duty to the Colored People.” Decides to work in Mississippi.

1895 — Morning Star arrives at Centennial Lake in Vicksburg on January 10, and opens Vicksburg School.

1898 — Forms Southern Missionary Society.

1900 — Moves to Nashville and opens Nashville Colored Sanitarium and Herald Publishing Company.

One of the pioneers who had a great impact in the development of the Southern Union territory was James Edson White. In eight short but challenging years, 1895-1903, he made a footprint on the work that is evident 125 years later.

James Edson White, born July 28, 1849, in Rocky Hill, Connecticut, was the second son of James and Ellen White. He married Emma MacDearmon of Wright, Michigan, on his 21st birthday, July 28, 1870. During his early professional life, he was a writer, printer, and publisher of numerous song books, and worked with the General Sabbath School Association for seven years, 1880-1887.

The Making of a “No Limit” Man

Edson was a man “subject to like passions as we are,” but God gave Edson extraordinary success despite his human frailties, the racial conditions of the South, and the organizational challenges he faced.

It all began with a religious awakening. On May 18, 1893, Edson White wrote to his mother, “I have no religious inclinations now in the least ...” Later in the same paragraph, he wrote, “I am not a Christian yet.” When his mother received his letter in Wellington, New Zealand, she was deeply troubled. She responded with a 10-page letter. In her letter, she recounted how she saw Edson drowning in an undertow. “When I was observing your peril, I cannot express the feelings I passed through. It seemed that my soul would dissolve. I have not recovered from the impressions made on my mind as I cried to you, ‘The undertow! The undertow!’” 8LtMs, Lt

123, 1893, par. 19. She understood the undertow to represent Satan’s efforts to destroy him, and appealed to him to accept Christ as his Saviour. She sealed the letter and mailed it with a prayer.

A few weeks after receiving his mother’s letter, Edson responded, “I have surrendered fully and completely, and never enjoyed life before as I am enjoying it now. I have for years been under a strain, with so much to accomplish, and it stood right in my way. Now I have left it all with my Savior, and the burden does not bear me down any longer. I have no desire for the amusements and pleasures that made up the sum of my enjoyments before, but have an enjoyment in the meetings with the people of God such as I never had before,” LT, August 10, 1893.

Soon after Edson’s religious awakening, he met Dr. J. E. Caldwell, of Knoxville, Tennessee, who told Edson about an appeal entitled, “Our Duty to the Colored People,” that his mother made to the General Conference leaders on March 21, 1891. Interested to know more, Edson found a copy and read it. Convinced, he decided to go work among the African-American people in Mississippi.

God had uniquely qualified Edson to accomplish the great work that lay before him in the South. He learned the printing trade as a youth. He was a prolific writer and publisher, loved boats, and possessed a vast vision and deep commitment to evangelize Blacks in the South.

God led him to a few supportive partners. He had a wonderful wife in Emma. He also had a committed friend in William O. Palmer. He shared his plans with them and, together with a few oth-

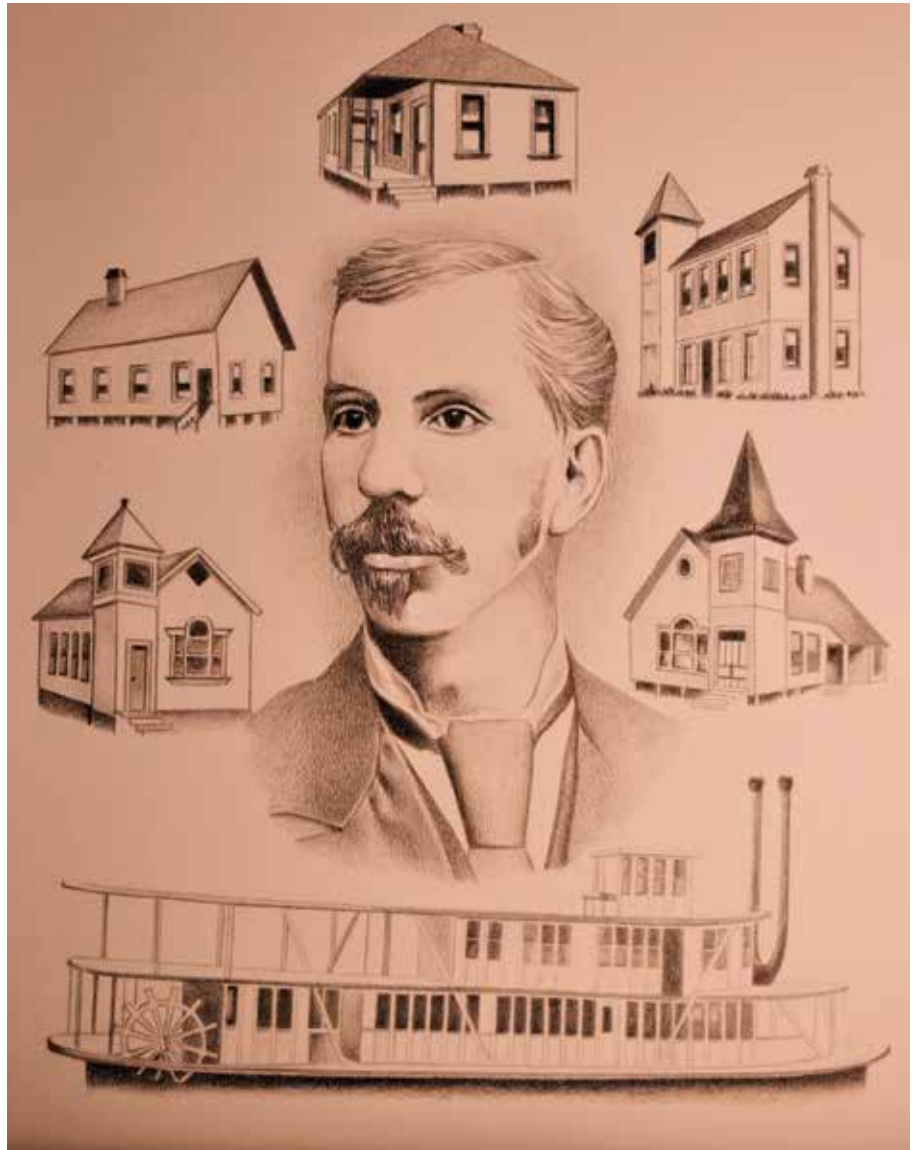
1912 — Moves to Marshall, Michigan.

1916 — Emma dies. Moves to Battle Creek.

1928 — James Edson White dies on May 30, in Otsego, Michigan. He was 76.

“There is no limit to the usefulness of one who, by putting self aside, makes room for the working of the Holy Spirit upon his heart, and lives a life wholly consecrated to God.”

The Desire of Ages, p. 250



ART BY: ADRIA WARE

ers, they began to make preparations to go south to Mississippi.

He hired Captain A. T. Orton to build the hull of a steamboat he called *The Morning Star*. When the boat was completed in July 1894, Edson, Emma, Will Palmer, and company made the 1,500-mile journey from Michigan to Vicksburg, Mississippi.

In Vicksburg

On January 10, 1895, they steamed onto Centennial Lake in Vicksburg. He leased a lot near the river on the corner of Walnut Street and First East, and built a school at a cost of \$150. By winter

more than 150 students were crowded in attendance at night school.

Because that location was prone to flooding, a new church and school building, designed by W. K. Loughborough, was built at 209 Fayette Street to provide a more favorable location for the growing school. Next to the new church, a mission house and a janitor's home were built. On March 16-17, 1901, Ellen White preached for the dedication services for the Vicksburg Church.

Some of the teachers who taught at the Vicksburg School were Edson and Emma White, Fred Halladay, Anna Agee, and Anna Jensen. Some of the Black work-

ers were N. B. King, pastor, and Thomas Murphy, pastor, and his wife, who joined the Church hoping to find a better lifestyle; and J. D. Grimes, a colporteur.

Yazoo City

Edson purchased two lots in Yazoo City and another one in Lintonia, a suburb of Yazoo City at the time. A Sunday-school was opened in a private home in Lintonia. The school quickly outgrew this home, and in 1898, a “movable chapel” was built on the lot in Lintonia. Fred Rogers and his wife came from the West Coast to teach at the school in Lintonia. They began the day school in Decem-

ber 1898 with 15 students, and within months had 200 students in attendance. An addition was added to the back of the school and three teachers were hired. In 1900, Franklin G. Warnick moved to Yazoo City to become the first Black principal of the school which already had two black and one white teacher who had served under Fred Rogers' supervision. This was necessary because it had become dangerous for Rogers and other whites to work among Blacks after the Supreme Court affirmed "Separate but Equal" in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896.



Emma MacDearmon White



Warnick Nash Rodgers

The Southern Missionary Society

The work of Edson and his cadre of workers needed to be legally organized, so he formed the Southern Missionary Society (SMS) to serve as an umbrella for his varied and far-flung ministries. The mission of the SMS was "to carry the principles of Christian education to the people of the South," *Gospel Herald*, December 1899, p. 105.

Yazoo City was the headquarters of the Southern Missionary Society until Edson moved to Nashville, Tennessee. Some of the projects and organizations owned by the SMS were the Dixie Health Food Company, the Herald Publishing Company, and the Nashville Colored Sanitarium (1901-1903), which was later replaced by the Rock City Sanitarium in 1906. The SMS became a branch of the Southern Union in 1901. The October 1908 *Gospel Herald* reported that

the Society also controlled 28 mission schools with an enrollment of nearly 1,000 pupils.

The 1903 General Conference Session

At the 1903 General Conference Session in Oakland, California, three reports were presented concerning the work done by Edson and his team.

George I. Butler, president of the Southern Union, reported that in Mississippi "there are nearly as many colored believers as white. The treasurer's report at the last camp-meeting showed that the colored people, poor day laborers, had paid about half of all tithes that came into the treasury," GCB 1903, p.131. He went on to say, "I believe that the Southern Missionary Society has done a great deal of good. I will say it fearlessly before this whole Conference that there never

has been made an effort in this cause for the colored people that accomplished as much as that work has done for them."

Edson's report provided other details. He reported five schools "located at Vicksburg, Yazoo City, Columbus, and Jackson." Regarding churches and companies, he reported, "A few months ago the president of the Mississippi Conference united with Brother Rogers in organizing a colored church at Vicksburg, and one at Yazoo City. There are also companies at Calmar, Columbus, and Jackson. Our laborers have also carried forward efforts in Nashville, Memphis, and Edgefield Junction in Tennessee, and in Louisville and Bowling Green in Kentucky." The congregations in Nashville, Edgefield Junction, Louisville, and Bowling Green were organized and or pastored by Charles M. Kinney and Alonzo Barry. Edson continued, "Five ordained ministers have been



Students and teachers stand in front of the Vicksburg School and Chapel built in 1901 at 209 Fayette Street.

developed in the work of the Southern Missionary Society. All these ministers are now doing efficient ministerial work in the South.” Other workers included two public speakers, 13 school teachers, Bible workers, and medical missionary workers. “The superintendent and matron [Fred and Fannie Young] of the Nashville Colored Sanitarium were brought from private home life in the North. Two nurses are in training, and others are soon expected to begin a course of study in this department. One young man is being educated by the society as a physician, at the Meharry Medical College of Nashville, and another is being assisted in his course at the same school. Both are intelligent, well-educated young men. One will graduate in 18 months, and the other one year later,” GCB 1903, p. 200.

His mother, Ellen White, gave the final report. She commented, “By the work of the steamer ‘Morning Star’ much has been accomplished that otherwise could not have been done. Thus, the workers have been enabled to reach places that otherwise they could not have reached. The boat served as a home for them, and as a place to which to invite those interested in the truth,” GCB 1903, p. 202.

Edson’s Final Years

Edson and Emma continued to work in the South until 1912 when they were in their 60s and Emma’s health began to fail. They moved to Marshall, Michigan, and remained there until Emma passed July 29, 1917. Edson moved to Battle Creek. He later married Rebecca Burrill, and spent his final years operating a stereopticon business with his wife in Otsego, Michigan. He died May 30, 1928, and was buried in Battle Creek in the Oakhill Cemetery. 📍

Visit SouthernTidings.com for additional multimedia content related to Edson White’s ministry.

R. Steven Norman III is the communication director and Southern Tidings editor at the Southern Union Conference.

EDSON’S LEGACY CONTINUES

One hundred and twenty-five years have passed since Edson White steamed into Vicksburg. The work that he accomplished and the descendants of people he won continue to hold aloft the light of the Morning Star that illumined the South.

One school, the **E. E. Rogers School**, which started out as the Jackson School with Joseph H. Laurence as its first teacher, is still operating. Churches that were started by Edson’s work in Mississippi include the Morning Star Church in Vicksburg, Lintonia Chapel in Yazoo City, Brookhaven, and Columbus.

There were students at the school whose progeny continue to serve the church.

Etta Little-John, from Vicksburg, was one of the first 16 students at Oakwood. She was the mother of Charles E. Bradford, retired president of the North American Division. Her granddaughter, Sharon Lewis, is a retired Adventist educator.

Cynthia Gertrude Johnson, a student at the Yazoo City School, was the mother of the late Garland Millet, former president of Oakwood College. Her granddaughters are Carol Byars and Debbe Millet of Huntsville.

The writer had the privilege of knowing and interviewing several students and converts of Edson’s ministry. In 1992 Madeline Edwards, widow of a Vicksburg physician and former student from the Morning Star School, fondly remembered Edson playfully teasing her. She said, “He was a nice

man. He made me feel so special.”

John Champion Salfore Nipmach, a faithful deacon in the Temple Gate Church in Selma, recalled that Edson encouraged him to attend the Oakwood School.

Lula Johnson attended the school in Natchez, but remembered Edson White calling her a “diamond in the rough.” She was a faithful member of the Natchez Triumphant Church.

Retha Weathington Davis’ grandson, James Humphreys, was a pastor and later chaplain at Oakwood University before his death. Her great-grandson, Austin Humphreys (James’ son), is a South Atlantic Conference pastor. Her granddaughter, Elaine Humphreys Norman, was a teacher and employee of the South Central Conference.

The key to making an indelible imprint on time and eternity is to commit one’s life to building the Kingdom of God by saving souls. Edson’s ministry touched lives that became a multigenerational blessing that lasts even to today.



Adria Ware has been commissioned to create the art used for each history feature during 2021. A talented freelance artist and photographer, she received her fine arts education at Oakwood College (now Oakwood University) and Mississippi State University. Adria has two daughters, Crystal and Annah Ware, and is passionate about her relationship with Christ. We failed to give her a credit line for Elbert and Ellen Lane’s portrait in the January issue.