Booker T. Washington, Ellen G. White, and Adventists Manual Training Schools

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Up until the 1890s the Adventist School System demonstrated little promise. Several dozen schools had been started, struggled to stay open, and often disappeared. In 1886 the system had 8 elementary schools, three closed the following year. In 1888 the system grew to 12 elementary schools then dropped to seven. Besides being few and unstable, many of the schools subsisted on the verge of bankruptcy.[[1]](#footnote-1) Battle Creek College, the first institution of higher learning that the system founded, in 1874, struggled with its identity for over twenty years, unsure of its curricular purpose.[[2]](#footnote-2) Its first graduating class in 1879 gave degrees to a mere 4 students.[[3]](#footnote-3) In 1882, overwhelmed by the infighting on campus, the College closed its doors for an entire year. In 1890 the entire system graduated only 56 students, which included primary, secondary schools, and colleges. [[4]](#footnote-4) Up until the mid-1890s the system appeared to be on a tiny roller coaster surging upward momentarily then diving.

Unexpectedly, in 1895, a few years before the end of the nineteenth century, a fresh breath of life engulfed the struggling educational enterprise. Winds of change blew over Adventist Education provoking a series of transformations which radically renovated the system. One of the first signs of a shift occurred in the Deep South, 1895, when an Adventist school appeared in Vicksburg, Mississippi enrolling over 200 students. Up until that date Adventist schools were small with a dozen or so students, mostly in the cradle of Adventism. Surprisingly, the school with 200 hundred students appeared were few Adventist lived. Something unusual was happening.

In 1895 the Adventist church operated 18 primary schools, employed 35 teachers and enrolled 895 students, 200 of them in Mississippi. Astonishingly five years later, the church s spiraled from 18 to 220 schools. The number of teachers exploded from 35 to 250. And the student enrollment leaped from 895 to 5,000 students. Moreover the monetary value of the Adventist Educational structure soared from 5,000 dollars to 50,000 dollars.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Only a few years after the founding of the school in Vicksburg, Mississippi Adventists manual or industrial training schools began to pop up all over the United States and Canada, for example; Bethel Industrial Academy in Wisconsin, 1899, Cedar Lake Industrial Academy in Michigan, 1899, Boggstown Manual Training School in Indiana, 1902, Stuart Industrial School in Iowa 1902, Hazel Industrial Intermediate School in Hazel Kentucky, 1901, Framington Industrial Academy in Nova Scotia, 1903, Lorne Park Industrial Academy in Ontario, Canada 1903, and Sheridan Industrial School in Illinois, 1904, to name a few . In time Adventist manual or industrial schools replicated outside of the United States and Canada; Lake Titicaca in Peru, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Trinidad, Fiji, Singapore, Kenya, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and the Kongo.[[6]](#footnote-6)

What happened? What led to the revitalization of Adventist education? What awakened the vitality that would incubate dozens of school, employ hundreds of teacher and enroll tens of thousands of students in all corners of the planet?

The popular answer has been that the counsels of Ellen G. White, on Education, provided the motor behind the amazing success of the Adventist Educational System. Many Adventist Educators have referred to a Blueprint given to Ellen White through divine inspiration to explain the world wide educational success. In the 1990s, George Akers, the then Director of the Education Department for the General Conference, articulated the idea in the following words;

The prophetic quality of Mrs. White's utterances on education is probably best seen in this I872 premier production "Proper Education." It was here that she introduced the special perspectives that for the remainder of her writing ministry occupied her thoughts about schooling. In this piece cluster the cardinal concepts that constitute her contribution to early American educational discourse-counsels to a young nation and church. Here seems to reside the foundational philosophy which she elaborated, reiterated, and applied to evolving Adventist education over the next four decade.[[7]](#footnote-7)

If a blueprint, or a foundational philosophy existed as Akers verbalized, why not put into use in the 1850s, 1860s. Why did it appear only in 1870s. Furthermore why did the Church leadership wait for so many years before instituting the blue print? Ellen White had been writing since the early 1850s, Why did the Church wait till she was in her mid-sixties to apply the “blue print”?

In this paper I suggest an alternative account to the radical Adventist Education make-over after 1895. In the first place I suggest that the changes started when the school in Mississippi appeared, with practically no Adventist in the classroom. Soon after its founding, several others schools blossomed in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. But more important above Bliss Landing, in the Delta, the first Adventist run manual training school appeared. In this paper I suggest that this incursion into manual training in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, modeled after the School founded by Booker T. Washington in Tuskegee, Alabama in 1881, along with empathy for the children of sharecroppers, provided the newfound energy and ideas that renovated the Adventist System School System.

In the early 1890s, a self-supporting group of Adventist decided to serve African-Americans of the Deep South, garnering overwhelming support from the laity of the Church, organized a plan of action and began construction on a river steam boat that would become their center of operations in the South. Construction of the steamer began in the basement of building in Battle Creek. The frames were transported to Kalamazoo, Michigan, there the work continued. In 1894 the Morning Star, the name given to the small steamer, sailed across Lake Michigan down canals and into the Mississippi River. To fund the mission Edson White, Ellen G. Whites son, wrote a book called the *Gospel Primer*. The book became a best seller selling into the tens of thousands at twenty five cents per copy; generating enough funds to pay for the boat and the living expenses of those who joined the expedition.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In Vicksburg, January 1895, the group, with the help of local African-Americans from the Baptist Church, innocently entered the world of education. Sister Holston one of the leaders of the Mt Zion Baptist Church, who was delighted with their arrival, helped the group navigate the new world they confronted.[[9]](#footnote-9) They started a night school on the steamer. Within a few days they had 150 students enrolled in literacy classes with a waiting list of many who wanted to join. In the midst of this enterprise they began to learn about schooling, curriculums, management of classroom, and other school related issues. By March of 1895 they were running twelve classes on the steamer.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the summer they built a one room school house[[11]](#footnote-11), enrolling 200 students.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Within a few years the Morning Star team planted or influenced the appearance of dozens of schools in the South. In the process they encountered many obstacles.[[13]](#footnote-13) The biggest hurdles came from the fact that their students were not content with just learning how to read and write. Education, like a potent drug, seemed to wet their appetite leaving an intoxicating desire for more. Meanwhile the planter elite in the Delta detested the idea that African-Americans were receiving an education. They needed cheap hands to pick cotton, not educated “Negros” to question the status quo. The planters prohibited, social integration, not allowing white teachers to teach both white and black students in the same school. Such social integration would threaten their status. It became clear that the only way to solve this problem was to get Black teachers to teach Black students.

The Need to produce teachers in time led the Morning Star Mission to the work of Booker T. Washington in Tuskegee, Alabama. The model provided by the Negro Normal School of Tuskegee became the perfect solution to the dilemma since the school in Alabama took unschooled children, who needed housing, food, work, and a craft or profession to make them self-sufficient. In the words of Edson White, who ran the mission in Mississippi, writing to his mother in Australia in June of 1895, the need for an industrial school so that scholars can earn their way is an “absolute necessity”. [[14]](#footnote-14)

The Morning Star Mission thought their problem was solved the spring of 1896 when the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist, pressured by articles written by Ellen White, from Australia, announce it was starting a school for African Americans in Huntsville, Alabama. The articles written by Ellen White, ten in all, appeared in the *Review and Herald*, insisting that the Church needed to do more in the South. They, more than likely, led to the purchased of 300 acres of land in Huntsville, Alabama for an Industrial School for African-Americans.[[15]](#footnote-15) Energized by the news the Morning Star Mission in Vicksburg began to encourage their more advanced students to prepare to travel to Huntsville. In the fall of 1896, of the 16 students that enrolled in the Oakwood Industrial School, six were from Vicksburg, Mississippi. But their hopes sunk when they discovered that although the Church bought the land they had no money to run a school. This convinced the Morning Star group that they needed to do something in Mississippi.

In December of 1896 they found a track of land of about 240 acres, a few miles above Bliss Landing on the Yazoo River, believing the land would be an ideal location for a manual trainings school. The land would also solve financial problems by providing an abundant supply of lumber that could be sold. The land was bought for 4 dollars an acre,[[16]](#footnote-16)  on easy terms, in January of 1897. Almost immediately lumber and tools were transported from Vicksburg.[[17]](#footnote-17) The team moved to the land preparing for the new school. A barn was built at the location and a horse and carriage transported from Vicksburg. A vegetable garden was laid out, two hundred strawberry plants were purchased; raspberries, and several fruit trees were planted.[[18]](#footnote-18) The men chopped cord wood which they hoped to ship to Vicksburg. A shingle mill was established and cypress blocks were cut. Students began arriving and working to establish the first Seventh-day Adventist Manual Training School. [[19]](#footnote-19)

The news of the evolving schools in the Delta filtered northward To Battle Creek. Letters from member of the crew were read and repeated to friends and relatives. News appeared in the pages of the *Review and Herald*. Edson and Emma White, who were unable to survive the summer months in Mississippi, because of health reasons, traveled to Battle Creek delivering details of the project. Edson White lectured in the College classrooms, to the faculty and staff of the College, and to the workers of the Sanitarium. He also preached in the Churches of the region.[[20]](#footnote-20) Besides news filtering from the South many of the Adventist in the North sent aid, traveled, and volunteered.

For example in the summer of 1895 the President of the General Conference, O. A. Olsen spent several days on the Morning Star observing the work of the Mission.[[21]](#footnote-21) In 1896 when he and the treasure of the General Conference traveled to purchase the land in Huntsville, Alabama they took time to visit Booker T. Washington’s School in Tuskegee. In 1898, the newly elected president of Battle Creek College, Edward Alexander Sutherland and his second in command P. T. Magan, traveled to the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta to observe the Mississippi schools with the intent of establishing an affiliation with Battle Creek College. While in Calmar, Mississippi they planned to purchase land to establish an Industrial school for the training of young men and women. However the resistance from the Planter elite squashed the plan.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In time the ideas from the Delta began to impact the College in Battle Creek that was going through its own internal struggles. During the years that the United States struggled over the nature of Colleges and Universities as they experiencing explosive growth, Battle Creek College was founded. In 1870 there were 563 institutions of higher education in the Nation. By 1910 they numbered almost 1000 with an enrollment of about one third of a million.[[23]](#footnote-23) During this time span Battle Creek College struggled with the same problem faced by American Colleges. On one side, the eastern institutions believed that the heart and soul of higher education lay in the Classics, with special emphasis on the mastery of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew; Adventists leaders embraced this curriculum. The classics were seen as the motor energizing Western Civilization by the established colleges and universities of the Nation. At the other extreme, specially the land-grant colleges of the Western States, which today we call the Midwest, educators believed that education must be practical; students should learn bee keeping, animal husbandry, planting fruit trees, etc. Although some in the Adventist community believed in manual training as an important element of higher education, In Battle Creek up until 1897 the classic dominated the curriculum.

However there were reformers in Battle Creek who wanted a more practical education that prepared the students quickly. They looked to the writings Ellen White, who was living in Australia, who seemed to support their cause. In the early 1890s, the college, unable to sponsor manual training, as many insisted it should, because they had no land on their campus; turned to competitive sports as an alternative for the physical development of the body. Competitive sports became a great hit with the students and the community, but displease Ellen White, who wrote from Australia condemning the decision. In 1897, the reformers took control of the Educational Board and elected their president for the College. One of the first things Sutherland, the new president did, when he took office, was to plow the baseball field and create a vegetable gardens. Also he began calling the College The Training School for Christian workers.[[24]](#footnote-24) With the changes came a series of other reforms that included moving the college to a farm in Berrien Springs, Michigan in 1901, edging the new school, which was renamed Emmanuel Missionary College, to become more and more like the school in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Although Ellen White was living in Australia when these changes began to appear she played an intimate role in the dramatic reforms after 1895. The Writings of Ellen White on Education moved through several phases in her life time. Before the Civil War she wrote extensively on education in relationship to the children of the “Scattered Flock”. In the 1850s she was not concerned with founding or running schools. After the Civil War her focus, possibly because she lost two children and her husband was paralyzed, broadened to cover Education and Health. In her first Testimony on Education “Proper Education” of 1873 she refers mostly to the education of children in the home and elementary school. The early years of education were her primary concern. In the Testimony she states; "Parents should be the only teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age.[[25]](#footnote-25) She clearly disliked what most American Schools were doing with children, especially the fact that children were housed in closed quarters with little ventilation and sunlight. She believed that children should be allowed to play and work in the open air. She condemned Americans schools for their imbalance, She wrote;

Provision should have been made in past generations for education upon a larger scale. In connection with the schools should have been agricultural and manufacturing establishments. There should also have been teachers of household labor. And a portion of the time each day should have been devoted to labor, that the physical and mental powers might be equally exercised. If schools had been established upon the plan we have mentioned, there would not now be so many unbalanced minds.[[26]](#footnote-26)

At this juncture in her life Ellen White did not have higher education in her scope of interest feeling the "end time" was near. Towards the end of the 1873 Testimony she wrote; “Because time is short, we should work with diligence and double energy. Our Children may never enter college,…” Not only was she not concerned with higher education she was not impressed with the product of contemporary colleges, she wrote; “Very many youth who have gone through a college course have not obtained that true education that they can put to practical use.” Furthermore she felt a college education did not guarantee wisdom, she wrote; “They may have the name of having a collegiate education, but in reality they are only educated dunces.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Two years after this essay her focus on education began to modify. In September of 1875, White, 48 year of age, after attending a camp meeting in Rome, New York chatted with a young man who had been appearing in her dreams for 26 years. In the course of the dream the young man stated;

There should be men trained for this branch of the work that will be missionaries, and will circulate publications. They should be men of good address, who will not repulse others or be repulsed. This is a work to which men would be warranted to give their whole time and energies as the occasion demands.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The young man, in the dream, made reference to the education young men, minister that is, a college education. After this dream she may have begun to think with more intensity about schools and higher education. However it is not until her husband passes away in 1881 that she comes out from behind his shadow. Losing her shyness she begins to comment with increasing frequency on the weaknesses of Battle Creek, College. However much of that decade, 1880s, she spends traveling and writing, the *Great Controversy*, which she considered her most important book. By the time she finished it she had reached her 6th decade of life.

Several changes in her life, in the 1890s, triggered a set of circumstances the allowed her to pay more attention to the founding of schools along with the nature of education. First, against her will, she was pressured to travel to Australia. The pretext used by those wanting her to go was that her influence would inspire the Australian Adventists to establish a school so that young Australian would not have to travel to the United States to get a college education. This placed the question of the founding of a college at the center of her agenda. The insistence of her son Willie, a loyal Adventist Administrators, pressed her to the point that she eventually boarded a ship in San Francisco in 1891 sailing across the Pacific.

A second element that impacted her focus on education was the great economic crisis of the 1890s. A short time after her arrival, Australia fell into the worst depression it had experienced in its short history leaving many Adventist families without jobs or homes.[[29]](#footnote-29) The Adventist organization in Australia did not have the funds to establish a schools or a college. Adventist members were unemployed with many of them kicked out of their homes because they could not make monthly payments. She frequently found herself taking out loans to help some of the more severe cases of abandonment. A College, for her, in Australia, became the solution to many of the problems faced by the Adventist Church in Australia. With a College, she believed a series of social, educational and economic problems would be solved.

Under these conditions Ellen White's thinking about education goes into turbo charge. Three years after her arrival, In 1894 , she publishes her first book on education, a two hundred and fifty page work with the title*, Christian Education,* that contained many of her previously publish articles on the subject. The following year, 1895, dozens of letters from her son and daughter-in-law helped her to link her thinking on education to the schools and work in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Between April of 1895 and February of 1896 she writes ten articles, for the *Review and Herald,* scolding the church for not doing enough in the African-American Community of the South. The following year 1897, she pens another 240 page document with the title *Special Testimonies On Education*. And in 1903, after returning to the United States, she writes, *Education*, her most accomplished book on the topic.

Her writings, as soon as they came off the presses, were eagerly consumed and quoted by educators, administrators, students, and parents in the United States and eventually all over the world. The reformers of Adventist Education in Battle Creek, in the 1890s, used her words to push their agenda. Many of the changes that were instituted in Battle Creek College were backed by a quote or a statement from the flood of articles, letters, testimonies, and books on education authored by Ellen White.

In the process of transforming Adventist Education, The Reformers discovered a close affinity between the writings of Ellen G. White, and the speeches and work of Booker T. Washington. News of Washington’s activities in Tuskegee, and reprints of his speeches appeared periodically in the *Review and Herald* and other Adventist Journals. By 1898 Adventist laymen and educators had embraced the writing and work of Booker T. Washington, and were using his school as a model for the founding of Adventist Schools. As the editor of the Review and Herald wrote in an editorial comment in 1898;

And we hesitate not a moment to say that all this is just as good for white people as it is for colored people. It is all just as good for all Seventh-day Adventist schools, and for all Seventh-day Adventists everywhere — grown people and youth — as it is for the Tuskegee school and for the colored people of the South. And compared with our study in the book of Daniel this week, who can say that it is not entirely Scriptural ?[[30]](#footnote-30)

It had become clear to Adventists that Washington and White shared many similarities. Both assumed they live in an evil world, full of injustice and oppression. Unlike the Educators of the larger society that saw the Nation as a, City on a Hill, a good and just society chosen by God to be a light unto the world, Booker T. Washington and Ellen White saw the Nation as an bankrupt social structure, which fostered an evil caste system that thrived on the backs of the downtrodden. For the American Educational System schooling was about refining good students; polishing the rough edges making them fit nicely into the status quo. Booker T. Washington and Ellen White believed that students needed more than polishing they needed transformation, they needed to learn to be self-sufficient rather than dependent. White and Washington believed that at the core of the education enterprise sat the transformation of the character, the makeover of the whole person.

In conclusion, Adventist Education appeared to be going nowhere before 1895. Then something changed. I suggest that it was not the arrival of a blueprint that came into usage but rather a set of new ideas interconnected to education which blossomed at the core of Adventist educational reforms. These ideas flowered when a few Adventists went to Mississippi and sided with the lowest in the American caste system. The ideas did not appear out of thin air or originate in a blueprint; they flourished as Adventists learned to serve the children of sharecroppers. The ideas were then transported to Battle Creek where they became part of Adventist Culture. They were nurtured in Australia as Ellen White and Australians worked to establish a College in the midst of a devastating economic crisis; as she worked to decipher problems Adventists in Australia faced; problems of homelessness, unemployment, and education. In time the ideas traveled to all corners of the planet, especially to the places on earth were unschooled children live snarled in a web of oppression and inequality.

1. An Online Document found in the General Conference Archives. General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist. 1853-1987 Education Statistics Report Section 01 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Battle Creek College”. *Advent Review and Herald of the Sabbath*. Volume 45 No 7. February 1874 56. See also Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greeenleaf, *Light Bearers to the Remnant: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herals Publishing Association, 1995), 126,127. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Battle Creek College Commencement Exercises.” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*. Volume 54 No. 2 July 3, 1897 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. An Online Document found in the General Conference Archives. General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist. 1853-1987 Education Statistics Report Section 01 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Statistical Report of the Seventh-day Adventist Conferences, Missions and Institutions for the years ending December 1910. Most of the statistical Reports of the Church before 1910 did not report on Educational Institutions. This is the first report that includes historical data from the 1800s. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Adventist Years Books for the establishment of schools on a yearly baises. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. George Akers. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a complete and detailed account of the work in Vicksburge see Ronald Graybill, *Mission to Black America.* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Edson White. Letter to his Mother February 4, 1895 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Edson White. Letter to his Mother. March 11, 1895 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This was a wooden building that measured 40 by 60 feet. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. O. A. Olsen, “Visit to Bighmingham and Vicksburg,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (August 27, 1895): 553. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See A. W. Spalding, “Lights and Shades in the Black Belt: Containing the Story of The Southern Missionary Society, the Oakwood School, and the Hillcrest School,” 1910. A copy of this document can be found in digital from in the Adventist Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Edson White. Letter to his Mother June 11, 1895 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mervin Warren, *Oakwood! A Vision Splendid 1896-1996* (Huntsville, Alabama: Oakwood College, 1996), 12–19. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Spalding, “Lights and Shades in the Black Belt: Containing the Story of the Southern Missionary society, the Oakwood School, and the Hillcrest School,” 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Spalding, “Lights and Shades in the Balck Belt: Containing the Story of Hte Southern Missionary Society, the Oakwood School, and the Hillcrest School,”. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Edson White. Letter to his Mother, Ellen G. White. January 18, 1897. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 221-223. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Edson White. Letter to his Mother Ellen G. White August 3, 1897 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. O. A. Olsen, “Visit to Birmingham and Vicksburg,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (August 27, 1895): 553. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Spalding, “Lights and Shades in the Balck Belt: Containing the Story of Hte Southern Missionary Society, the Oakwood School, and the Hillcrest School,”. 252 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Daniel J. Boorstin. *The Americans: The Democratic Experience*. London; Phoenix Press 1973 481 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See the first issue of the new journal of the School published by the school. *The Training School Advocate* Battle Creek, Michigan. December 1898 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ellen White. “Proper Education” *Testimonies for The Church* Volume # 3, Chapter 13. Battle Creek, Michigan. Review and Herald Publishing Association. 1875 137 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 153 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ellen White. “Proper Education” *Testimonies for The Church* # 20, Battle Creek, Michigan. Review and Herald Publishing Association. 1875 159 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ellen White. Financial Straits Near Cooranbong in 1896 Manuscript Release # 1582 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Editorial comments “Education of the Negro” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* February 8, 1898 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)