

Southampton Wilson Kinfolk

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 (daughter of Granville + Lillian
 Wilson)

In 1983 the Wilson kinfolk, the author's patrilineal family, were the largest single family of Adventists in Bermuda, with more than 300 SDAs.

Adventism began to surround them in a very interesting way. My great-great-grandmother, known to all as Ma Fanny, was an elderly ex-slave. Ma Fanny (Frances Bassett) and her only child, William Thomas Bassett lived at Sinky Bay, Southampton East. British Emancipation occurred in 1834, American Emancipation in 1865.

Following Emancipation in America, many Black Bermudians emigrated to the United States, some never to be heard from again. Among these, some kinfolk say, was William. Others merely say that "he went to sea." He left behind a female child, Benonie, whom Ma Fanny adopted. This child became more of a daughter to William's mother than a granddaughter. Benonie had two sons, Thomas and Granville and a daughter Ellen. She later married Archibald Jones, to whom she bore three other daughters, Kathleen, Anita, and Alexandria.

Thomas, the older of Benonie's sons, left home so that he could live his life without parental intervention. Down in the city, while enjoying the "good life," he heard about a strange group of people who were holding some meetings. They called themselves Seventh-day Adventists and went to church on "Seddy" (Saturday) instead of "Sundy" (Sunday).

This was the news that Thomas carried home to his mother. Out of curiosity she decided to go and see for herself what her son was talking about.¹

At the time, Benonie lived at Cobb's Hill within easy walking distance of the city of Hamilton. She went to the meetings and later carried the news to Ma Fanny at Sinky Bay. All of this must have occurred around 1901 for my father Granville was often heard to remark that his family learned of the Adventist message when he was a boy of fourteen. He was born in 1887.

Granville

Frances Bassett Rowling - Ma Fanny

Frances Bassett (who married Rowling) was born in 1820 to Joanna Bassett, descendant of a slave master named Robert Bassett (Bob Bassett) and a relative of Jack Wilson.* She made her home in a tiny stone cottage near the cliffside between Sinky Bay and Cross Bay. This portion of Bassett property was included in a large estate that lay on the southern border of the Gibb's Hill Lighthouse property, and included Bob Lake near St. Anne's Anglican Church; Christian's Bay below the Reefs and Boat Bay, Sinky Bay, and Cross Bay.

The South Shore Road which divided the property runs parallel to the beaches. A tribe road also runs through the property ending at Cross Bay and is supposed to remain forever a path to that beach. This vast estate was left to the slave descendants of Bob Bassett, whose many male descendants, slave and free, also became known as Bob Bassett. The descendants, however, apparently had misplaced the title deeds; at least no one knew what happened to them. One story is that the proper heir to the property emigrated to America and did not return to claim his land.

Ma Fanny, whom some folk say took over the land from her mother (or grandfather), for several decades paid the taxes on the Sinky Bay/Cross Bay portion of the property. Granville lived with her from his early teen years, and when she became too old to work he assumed the responsibility of paying the taxes and also for her care. Though a loyal Sabbath observer, Ma Fanny died on April 2, 1905 without the benefit of baptism; yet by 1983 this Sinky Bay matriarch had produced six generations of Adventists. Seven generations of Adventists, which included Ma Fanny, had all grown up in the area of Southampton East. (Her son's generation has not been included in the seven.)

As far as it is known, Thomas, who brought Adventism to his family, never did embrace the Gospel. Ellen received the baptismal rite on July 4, 1908, Benonie, Granville, and Ellen's husband Josiah A. Wilson united with the church in 1913.³ These Southampton Wilson kinfolk became the backbone of the Southampton Company officially organized between 1914 and 1915.

Benonie Todd Rowling Jones

The tall, heavy-set, ruddy-complexioned woman was a Sabbath observer before she united with the church. We suspect, however, that it was she who invited Evangelist J.A. Morrow to hold tent meetings at Port Royal around 1905/06. When Benonie Jones did join the church in 1913, the Hamilton church clerk recorded that she had been observing the Sabbath for many years.⁴ She had also been a faithful tithe-payer, although her tithe was at times not more than six pennies for the month.⁵

Company which later became the Southampton church. The Adventist community, with very strong analogous relationships, became an important vanguard for Christ in the Lighthouse area.

Alexandria Jones Williams

Alexandria Jones Williams was Benonie's youngest daughter. Her marriage to John Williams produced a large family of singers and for me a host of cousins. Both parents, as well as a number of children, learned to play at least one instrument. During the children's growing years, the Williams family was often called upon to perform at church and public functions. Following my aunt's death in 1948, the family no longer sang as a group.

A son, Warren, founded the well-known singing group The Warrenaires. A daughter, Lois Williams Scott, a nurse, has perhaps been the most well-known church worker in the Williams family. She has worked extensively both with the Southampton church and with Mission programs. Besides nursing, her expertise has been particularly seen in the Pathfinders and in the organization of family camps.

Granville Wilson

Many Wilsons contributed to the development of the Seventh-day Adventist church of Bermuda, and Granville Wilson made an outstanding contribution. Better known during his early years as "Trimere," Granville Trimmingham Wilson was born in 1887. Though an intelligent youth, Granville had not learned to read very well in elementary school. There is a noteworthy story in connection with this which needs to be told here.

Granville's teachers failed to explain to his satisfaction how vowels had different functions and how, in carrying out those various functions, they sometimes produced different sounds. While many others learned by rote, young Granville demanded explanations. This was sometimes taken to mean that he did not have the ability to understand. The opposite was true, and because he did not understand, he refused to accept that "blouse" did not rhyme with "house," and he became totally confused when dealing with the tenses and such words as "read" which had the identical spelling but a different sound when using the past versus the present tense. So he chose not to read, and no amount of whipping would make him change his mind.

Following his baptism, however, he decided to teach himself to read. His Bible became his textbook. He bought a dictionary, and whenever he came across a word which he did not understand, he would look it up. With the same stubbornness with which he had once refused to learn to read, he now tackled the job of studying and reading the Bible. He also purchased and read publications by various religious writers, and memorized vast portions

of Scripture. Reading and memorizing poetry also became a favorite pastime.

Within a very short time he had become so fluent with the Scriptures that he assumed the leadership role in the newly formed Southampton company. He was ordained as a local elder and at one period was the head elder of the Southampton Church. For more than sixty-five years he actively served his Lord as a lay preacher. A portion of this time was spent travelling over hills on the Island of Jamaica, West Indies, proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. Incidentally, when the family went to Jamaica in 1950, they carried many barrels of clothing to give to those in need of it. The news soon spread and people came from miles away to get the free garments.

Lillian Ainsworth Wentworth Wilson

Lillian Wentworth was baptized in October 1918. She was married to Granville in November of the same year. They interested the aging Rebecca Wentworth in the Adventist doctrines, and her home became a vehicle for the promulgation of the Gospel at Somerset Bridge, Southampton West, and the surrounding countryside.

Lillian Wentworth Wilson had an insatiable desire for Christian education, and her primary occupation became the salvation and the education of her children.

In 1926 Mr. and Mrs. Wilson had four children. Six others came later. The Adventist church did not believe in the christening of babies (or in the practice of having godparents for guardians – perhaps because of a non-scriptural concept that godparents stand in the place of God to accept the sins of the child until the child comes to the age of accountability when he or she becomes spiritually responsible for himself or herself.

Mrs. Wilson believed that it was the parents' duty to dedicate their children to the Lord, and that they should not wait until the children were grown. Therefore, according to a clerk's report, the mother requested that her children be blessed.⁸

Living as the family did several miles from the city of Hamilton, they had little opportunity to attend the services after the birth of their fourth child. But what was so unusual about the blessing of this child that the clerk should make special mention of it in her report?

Baby Blessing

It would appear that the blessing of babies in Adventist churches was not generally practiced prior to 1926. Here was something new. But that did not stop Lillian Wilson. What did it matter to this woman, my mother, who was guided by what she believed to be right?