

Southampton Wilson Kinfolk

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.

Frances Bassett (who married a descendant of a slave master, a relative of Jack Wilson.² She lived on a cliffside between Sinky Bay and the Hill Lighthouse property, Christian's Bay beach, Sinky Bay.

The South Shore Road runs along the beaches. A tribe road also runs along the coast and is supposed to remain open to the slave descendants, both slave and free, also because of the, however, apparently had no idea what happened to them. She emigrated to America and

Ma Fanny, whom some call her grandfather), for several decades a portion of the property. She died and when she became too old to pay the taxes and also for Ma Fanny died on April 2, 1901. Sinky Bay matriarch had several generations of Adventists in the area of Southampton East in the seven.)

As far as it is known, Thomas did embrace the Gospel. Benonie, Granville, and Ellen were church in 1913.³ These were the of the Southampton Community

The tall, heavy-set, ruddy before she united with the invited Evangelist J.A. M. in 1905/06. When Benonie's church clerk recorded the years.⁴ She had also been times not more than six

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.² 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

In spite of her meager earnings, grandmother would sometimes take her last pennies and buy literature to give away. When friends or relatives would ask, "Benonie, what will you do for food?" or, "How will you eat?" She would reply with her usual drawl, "O, God will provide, God will provide."

Then she would lift her booted feet – barely visible below her long full skirt – and trek off down the dusty road toward little white stone cottages tucked snugly away among oleander hedges and clusters of cedar trees, to distribute her pamphlets. Shortly after her death in September 1928, the Hamilton church clerk wrote into the record Book: "Sr. Jones has been a faithful member, we believe it can be said of her as it was said of one of old, she hath done what she could."⁶

The Sinky Bay Sabbath School

By 1903 sixteen-year-old Granville had taken over responsibilities of the Sinky Bay household. His mother, Benonie, had married, and periodically the family (which included three younger sisters) made their home at Sinky Bay. With Ma Fanny's death the atmosphere of the homestead changed, an atmosphere in which the elderly woman had often told her slave stories about the "old days" and of her Turks' Island ancestors.

It was into this atmosphere that Elder James Morrow had come and very likely encouraged the women to open a Sabbath School. This was most likely the result of a series of meetings from a Morrow Crusade.

Had oral history only been used as the beginning date for the Sinky Bay Sabbath school, we might have claimed a period prior to the matriarch's death for the commencement of the school, and that she was also partly responsible for its origin. That is probably what did occur. We have chosen, however, to use the year 1906 as the time of inception. On January 5, 1907 Sabbath School offerings from Southampton were recorded in the Treasurer's books of the Hamilton Church. A second sum was also listed as Sabbath School offerings and as having come from Ellen Wilson's Home Department.⁷

Ellen Elizabeth Wilson

The fact that Ellen Wilson's name has been recorded in the church journal lets us know that she was primarily responsible for the funds from this school; thus, not having any other documented confirmation, we claim that she was the primary founder. Esther Wilson Smith, Ellen's second daughter and Benonie's granddaughter, claims that Benonie was the one mainly responsible. Whichever of the women was responsible, we may conclude that the school was started with prompting from Elder Morrow.

By 1906, Ellen was a young working woman, and it is possible that offerings listed as coming from her Home Department were her own

personal offerings for the year. Throughout the early period individual families saved their offerings at home and turned them in whenever they got an opportunity to attend the "big" Sabbath school in Hamilton. More than a year might have gone by before they had such an opportunity. Also, it was customary for the minister to pick up funds while visiting members in their homes. Even then, his only primary mode of transportation was a pedal cycle, and it would take many months to get around to all of the members which included unbaptized "Sabbath-keepers."

Ellen and Josiah Wilson, a cousin, were married on July 27, 1941. It would appear that following her marriage, the Sabbath School was moved to his home, located "high in the bush" overlooking the calm waters of Black Bay.

Located just off the more recently named St. Anne's Road with sweeping views of the North, West and South Shores, this place became church to Adventists in the area. When weather permitted, classes were held under the cedars. As elsewhere, a service usually followed the Sabbath School session with Ellen often preaching the Word. Following the church service, which had no particular time schedule, folk who lived nearby would return home for lunch. Others would enjoy the superb hospitality which was always to be found at the Wilson residence. Josiah Wilson, who was generally the cook, was a well-loved host. On his table could be found freshly-baked homemade bread, fresh dairy cream, and a bowl of salad greens taken from his garden.

On some Sabbaths, particularly when there was a church rally at Hamilton, the Wilson family would get into their horse-drawn vehicles and transport those who wanted to go into the city.

During the week my Aunt Ellen would go out into the countryside and attend to her Bible work. Except for the one day a week that Uncle Josiah reserved to carry out his deacon's responsibilities, he and his sons would attend to the farm. Those were the days when the farmers gathered 'seaweed' from the beaches to be used as manure. They sometimes alternated the 'seaweed' with fish. They would dig a hole in the ground, drop in a fish and the seed, then cover the hole. In due time their well-manured gardens produced quantities of quality vegetables and fruit. A few 'farmers' in the 1980s continue to use the old fashioned fish manure.

Deacon Josiah Wilson and other deacons of the church cared for sick, invalid, and shut-in males. They did the regular chores of haircutting, bathing, and general nursing care. Their duties might also have included repairs around the home of the person being visited. Periodically Deacon Wilson accompanied his wife on her rounds. This couple produced nine sons and daughters. All were members of the church. From this branch of the Southampton Wilson kinfolk have come the largest number of Adventists. Pastor David Randolph Wilson is a grandson.

The Sabbath School started by Ellen Wilson evolved into the Southampton

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?