

“They lived near the bridge where we went over”: *Ellen White and Blacks* | BY BENJAMIN BAKER

Ellen White and race was the subject of Benjamin Baker’s 2011 Howard University dissertation. In this article he begins an occasional series on the topic for *Spectrum*.

Ellen Gould Harmon was born sometime around November 26, 1827, in Gorham, Maine, to Robert and Eunice Harmon. The Harmones were married on July 11, 1810, and had a total of six daughters and two sons, the last being the fraternal twins Elizabeth and Ellen. Robert (1786–1866) was an entrepreneur who dabbled in the usual pursuits of the day: agriculture, real estate, and apparel. Eunice (née Gould, 1787–1863) was a teacher and homemaker with a penchant for flower gardening.¹

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had black ancestry, in large part due to her facial features, developed in the last decades of the twentieth century. This is not solely a posthumous observation, for *The Minneapolis Journal* stated in 1888 that Ellen White had “a peculiar dark, swarthy face, a low brow and thick lips.”² Speculation has also been fueled by the absence of an image of her mother, and a sole extant photograph of her father. White’s activism for black causes in her senior citizen years clinches the certainty in some minds that White was black.

There have been three genealogical studies of Ellen White’s ancestry. The first, done in 1920 by White’s relative Artemas C. Harmon, traced Robert Harmon’s ancestry. The second, by Alice Soule, a professional genealogist,

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“Portland, Maine, U.S.A.” by W.A. Hatton (1854)



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The earliest extant image of Ellen White, here with husband James (1857)

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charted Eunice Harmon's line and was completed in 1983. The third was commissioned in 2000 by the Ellen G. White Estate in response to growing claims of White having black ancestry. Roger Joslyn, then president of the American Society of Genealogists and highly esteemed in the field with expertise in northeastern United States genealogy, conducted the research. All three of these studies concluded that Ellen White was of Anglo-Saxon origin, her ancestors arriving from England to New England in the early seventeenth century. White was not black.³

No research has been done on the influence Robert and Eunice Harmon had on the racial views of their daughter Ellen. In fact, not much research at all has been done on White's parents, primarily due to the paucity of references to them in her corpus. It is not even known where they are buried. However, aside from the safe assumption that, being Mainers, Methodists, and later Millerites, the Harmons were also anti-slav-

ery, it is known that on several occasions Robert Harmon took his daughter to hear a black Millerite minister speak on his visions, and that Harmon apparently had no problem with Ellen socializing with the man and his wife.⁴ This despite the probability that the local newspaper was referring to the black minister when it derisively editorialized that "the Millerites of the city have recently imported a great bull nigger, who has been rolling up the white of his eyes, showing his ivory, and astonishing the good people by his dreams and prognostications."⁵

The Harmons moved to Portland, Maine's capital and largest city, around 1832. While the vast majority of African Americans were enslaved at the time, young Ellen here encountered free blacks. An international commercial seaport and land transportation depot, Portland began commerce with the Caribbean when Britain lifted its trade restrictions in 1830. The industry that made Portland prosperous was largely dependent on black dockworkers, either

descendants of slaves or recent Caribbean immigrants. The Harmon family lived on Portland's Clark Street for years, within walking distance of the cosmopolitan wharves.

It was while walking home from school one day in the fall of 1837 that Ellen was severely injured when an irate girl hurled a stone that connected with her nose. Scores of pages have been written on this incident, so it will not be dwelt on here except for two points. First, this is the most formative event of White's youth, the starting point in the autobiographical sections in her writings and one that receives the most print space. Second, it was from the traumatic aftermath that Ellen began her Christian conversion process; developed an unusual sensitivity to the plight of the suffering and marginalized by experiencing it firsthand; and gained a great appreciation for the education that she was now incapable of receiving. These developments would undergird her relationship to black people throughout her life.

Religion

Methodism From this injury at age nine to the end of her life, religion would be Ellen White's magnificent obsession. Born to Methodist parents, she inherited a faith tradition with strong ties to blacks. The denomination's founders, John and Charles Wesley, were ardent abolitionists, outspoken against their native England's lead role in the African slave trade. John Wesley experienced American chattel slavery firsthand in his brief but pivotal stint in Georgia from 1736–1737, and would strike a moral blow against the institution in his influential tract *Thoughts on Slavery*. Ellen lauded Wesley frequently in her writings as an ideal Christian pioneer, and he particularly influenced the way she viewed American slavery and the manner she went about condemning it.

One person integral in establishing a Methodist presence in Ellen's home city was a black minister named Samuel Snowden (c. 1765–1850). A former slave in the South, Snowden was once a member of Ellen's Chest-

nut Street Methodist Church and pastored in the Portland area before her birth. He was a significant abolitionist and activist, adroitly using his stature as a minister to assist escaped blacks and establish the Underground Railroad throughout New England, most notably Portland and Boston. "Father Snowden," as he was known by both whites and blacks, was pastor of the May Street Church in Boston when William Foy had his second vision there.

Conversion The biggest religious influence of Ellen's youth was Millerism. First hearing William Miller in March 1840 in Portland, White marks Miller's preaching as the impetus of an intense period of spiritual struggle that resulted in a thorough conversion. She writes about this time at length, and besides being an invaluable look into her early life and a moving religious coming-of-age account, it articulates clearly White's view of herself and God.

Ellen grappled with the notion of a God who burns sinners eternally in hell. This idea caused her no end of torment, and she shrunk away from a Heavenly Father who was such a tyrant. Her personality is a relief to her conception of God; instead of wishing to inflict suffering she conveys a keen sensitivity to all things living. In writing about this period she presents herself as an early teen that identified with the suffering and the outcast and with a unique ability to trace the effects of oppression, whether it was oppression of ideas, religions, institutions, governments, or individuals.⁶ The most significant breakthrough of her life up to that point occurred when she discovered that God was a "kind and tender parent, rather than a stern tyrant."⁷

White now had a Heavenly Father of love and grace who placed an inestimable value on human souls, wishing to save instead of destroy. She referred to her fellow humans as "souls." This was no anthropological fancy; White valued people because she believed that the Godhead invested their most valuable resources to save them from a doomed plight. Each person's soul belonged to God and God alone; his, White

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would often state, “both by creation and by redemption”—and should be valued and appreciated accordingly. White’s anthropological system brooked no hierarchies, castes or divisions; each human was equal in the eyes of God.

The Millerite Movement The Harmons were expelled from their church family, the Chestnut Street Methodist Church, on September 2, 1843, for their refusal to relinquish Millerite beliefs. At that point the Millerite Movement effectively became Ellen and her family’s religious home.

Millerites were decidedly antislavery and abolitionist, but with a unique twist.⁸ The issue of slavery was not central among Millerites—although it was indeed important for many Millerite ministers, Joshua Himes chief among them—because the Millerite worldview was unapologetically otherworldly. It held that investing energy and resources on resolving earthly problems was pointless, and worse, faithless, for Christ’s second coming was the “fountainhead” of all reforms, the ultimate culmination of abolitionism. As William Miller himself remarked at an American Anti-Slavery Society meeting he attended in 1840, “The poor slave has but little chance to be liberated by these two parties...God can & will release the captive. And to him alone we must look for redress.”⁹

The fact that the Millerite Movement was primarily a northeastern United States phenomenon is crucial to this mindset. Slavery was an abstraction to most Millerites: they did not personally encounter slavery, or the challenges other denominations faced from the often-vicious reaction of white masters when their slaves were converted. Although the Millerite movement was signally ordained of God, it failed in its collective oversight that Jesus could come without giving the millions of captive blacks below the Mason-Dixon line a chance to hear that message and prepare themselves. Unfortunately, the mindset that Jesus would terminate black slavery at his second coming and that therefore the Gospel did not need to be preached to blacks would prove stubborn

and pervasive among Miller’s heirs, the Seventh-day Adventists. It directed the church’s thinking until the emancipation of the slaves in 1865 and then engendered an informal hands-off policy toward evangelizing blacks that lasted into the twentieth century.

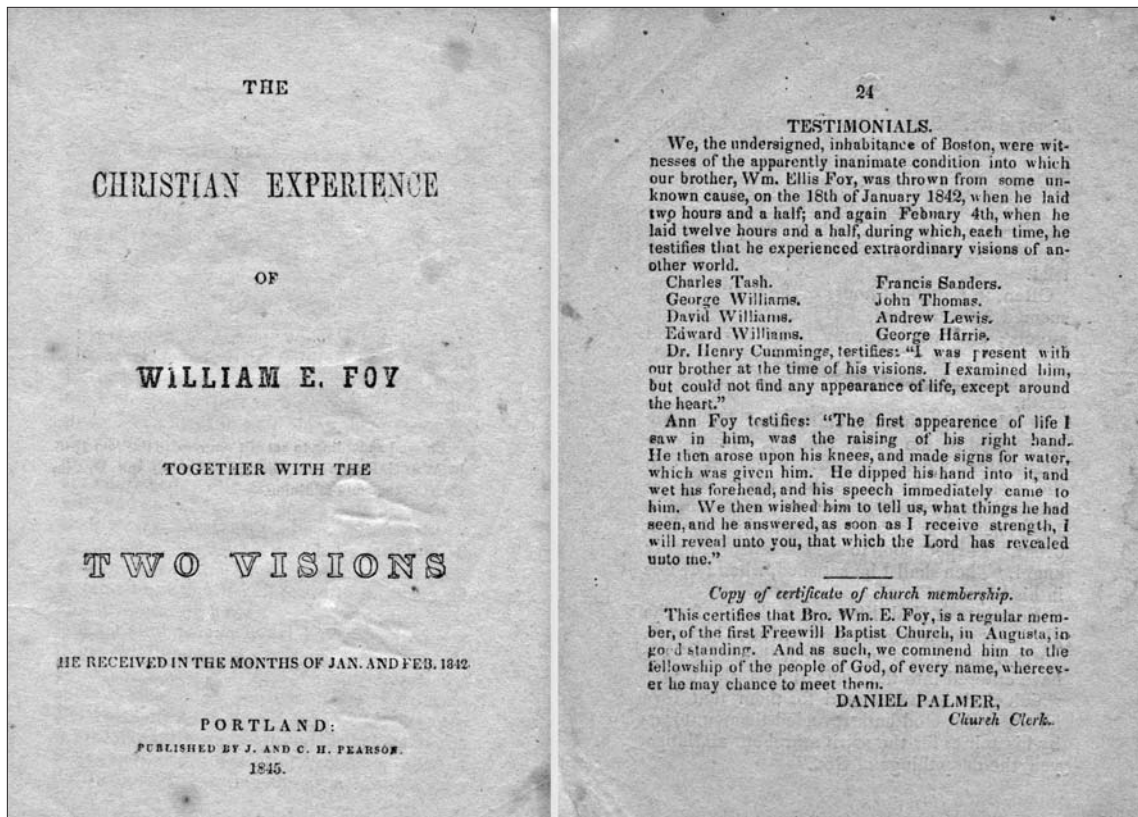
Nevertheless, the Millerite movement was welcoming to blacks and attractive to them. Not only were outspoken black leaders like John W. Lewis and Sojourner Truth active in the movement, but William Still and Frederick Douglass gave William Miller a sympathetic hearing. The most prominent and educated black ministers in the big cities on the East Coast took up Millerism, and although the slaves could not be reached, the top leadership fully supported proclaiming the message to free blacks that could be reached.¹⁰

William Foy

It was in the apocalyptic atmosphere of Millerism that Ellen White met William Ellis Foy.¹¹ Born just north of Augusta, Maine, to free African American parents in 1818, William Foy was baptized at seventeen and shortly after was married to a woman named Ann. The Foy’s had their first child, Amelia, in 1837, and moved to Boston in 1840 so William could study to obtain Episcopalian clergy credentials and enter the ministry. It was in Boston that he embraced the teachings of William Miller, although he was initially averse to an imminent *parousia*.

On January 18, 1842, during a prayer meeting at the Twelfth Street Baptist Church in the heart of Boston, the twenty-three year-old Foy was “immediately seized as in the agonies of death,” lost his breath, and felt his spirit separate from his body. For two and a half hours an angelic guide gave William a tour of heaven and hell, which he later described in arresting language at once majestic and awful. While he was in vision, ten eyewitnesses, including a physician, testified that they could “not find any appearance of life [in Foy], except around the heart.”¹²

Weeks later on February 4 at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Beacon Hill



Above: The cover and back of William Foy's pamphlet (1845)

neighborhood of Boston, William Foy again went into vision, this time for twelve and a half hours. The young black man beholds a scene from the final judgment, and is subsequently escorted to paradise. At the close of the vision Foy's angelic guide tells him that he will help him declare to the world what he was shown. "I will go," is Foy's response.¹³

This was easier said than done. "The message was so different—and the manner in which the command was given, so different from any I had ever heard of, and knowing the prejudice against those of my color, it became very crossing," Foy later wrote. "These questions were continually arising. Why should these things be given to me, to bear to the world, and not to the learned, or to one of a different condition from myself? But no peace could I obtain in disobedience. 'Woe is me if I declare not these things,' rested heavily upon my soul."¹⁴

Despite his color, youth, and the fact that he had learned to read just several years before,

William Foy did honor his promise to the angel. John Loughborough, in the first history of Seventh-day Adventism, describes Foy as an "eloquent speaker" whose "visions bore clear evidence of being genuine manifestations of the Spirit of God." He writes of Foy:

Having a good command of language, with fine descriptive powers, he created a sensation wherever he went. By invitation he went from city to city to tell of the wonderful things he had seen; and in order to accommodate the vast crowds who assembled to hear him, large halls were secured, where he related to thousands what had been shown. . . . When dwelling on the tender, compassionate love of Christ for poor sinners, he exhorted the unconverted to seek God, and scores responded to his entreaties.¹⁵

But all of this did not come without hardship. As he anticipated, Foy was persecuted, and aggressively, if the aforementioned editorial about the "great bull nigger" is any indication. In touching language Foy shares what got him through: "They [the visions] have been a great consolation to me, in seasons of temptation and trial. Often, in the silent hours of the night, I have seemed to hear again, the sweet song of the

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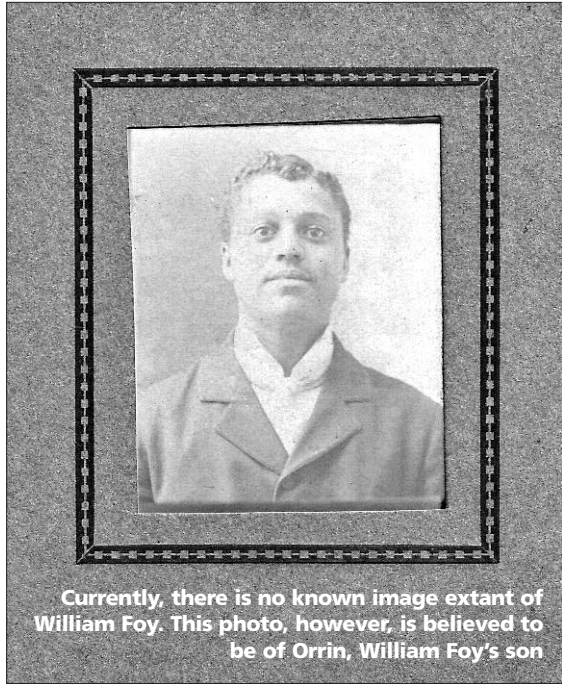
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In mid-1842 William Foy and his family moved to Ellen Harmon's hometown of Portland. Sixty-five years later in an interview with her personal assistant, Dores E. Robinson, White, just shy of eighty, recalled rather specific details about the Foy's, like that "they lived near the bridge where we went over to Cape Elizabeth," which would have been very close to the Harmon home. She reminisced that her father would take her to Cape Elizabeth on a sleigh to hear Foy lecture in Beethoven Hall. When Ellen heard Foy there she sat near the stand because of respiratory difficulties that were aggravated in closer proximity to others. Sitting by Ann Foy, she witnessed the dynamics between husband and wife while he spoke, and after she was privy to their conversation. "He was a very tall man, slightly colored," White said of Foy. "But it was remarkable testimonies that he bore."¹⁷

In the summer of the year that Jesus did not come, William Foy had two more visions. In one he was shown three "steps of fire" leading to a pathway that entered into the city of God. Multitudes stood on the steps, some advancing upward, others disappearing from view; those

who remained on the third step entered the city. The contents of Foy's fourth and final vision are lost to us.¹⁸

Shortly after the Great Disappointment, William Foy collaborated with two fellow Millerite brothers, John and Charles Pearson—as friends of James and Ellen White, their father John, Sr., would introduce James and Ellen to each other—and published a pamphlet titled *The Christian Experience of William E. Foy together with the two visions he received in the months of Jan. and Feb. 1842*. Ellen Harmon possessed a copy of the pamphlet.¹⁹

"The power of God" first came upon Ellen Harmon at the home of one Elizabeth Haines in Portland in late December 1844. Now known as the "Vision of the Narrow Way," its contents are similar to William Foy's third vision. In fact, when she shared it in a public meeting near Cape Elizabeth, Foy was in the audience, listening intently. Ellen White remembers:

I had an interview with him. He wanted to see me, and I talked with him a little. They had appointed for me to speak that night, and I did not know that he was there. I did not know at first that he was there. While I was talking I heard a shout, and he is a great, tall man, and the roof was rather low, and he jumped right up and down, and oh, he praised the Lord, praised the Lord. It was just what he had seen, just what he had seen. But they extolled him so I think it hurt him, and I do not know what became of him."²⁰

Among other things, Ellen Harmon learned from William Foy how to be faithful to the divine mandate to prophethood in an antagonistic and even hostile society. Foy braved deep misgivings about his race, age, and education, while White was too young, too sickly, insecure, and of an oppressed gender. Harmon literally had a front row seat to witness Foy in living color witness *despite* his color. Through the persecution he obeyed God in the lonely role of seer, in stark juxtaposition to the example of Ellen's ill-fated brother-in-law, Hazen Foss, who also received visions but declined the prophetic commission after calculating the

scorn he would face if he shared them.

In Ellen White's advocacy for black causes in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century, William Foy's example was summoned. Like Foy crossing the prophetic Rubicon by opting for courage instead of cowardice, Ellen White declared in a speech to General Conference leaders in 1891 titled "Our Duty to the Colored People:"

After my severe illness one year ago, many things which the Lord had presented to me seemed lost to my mind, but they have since been repeated. I know that which I now speak will bring me into conflict. This I do not covet, for the conflict has seemed to be continuous of late years; but I do not mean to live a coward or die a coward, leaving my work undone.²¹ ■

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2. "Casually Observed," *The Minneapolis Journal*, October 20 (1888), 4.
3. Each genealogy, as well as a statement of the White Estate's conclusions, can be found here: <http://www.whiteestate.org/issues/genealogy.html>.
4. See "Interview with Mrs. E.G. White, re Early Experiences," August 13, 1906, Manuscript 131 (1906), 3.
5. "When will Wonders Cease?" *Portland Tribune*, February 10 (1844), 351.
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