

“To Be Depended Upon”: *Ellen White and Blacks, Part III*

| BY BENJAMIN BAKER

Ellen White and race was the subject of Benjamin Baker's 2011 Howard University dissertation. This is the third article in an occasional series on the topic for Spectrum.

During the Sabbatarian Adventist era (c. 1845–1860), Ellen White did not visit and speak at black schools and churches as she did in the first years of the twentieth century, because such black Adventist institutions did not exist at the time. But she and her husband James did have meaningful relationships with individual African Americans in this foundational decade and a half, intriguing connections forged before the onset of the Civil War—a war which, quite simply, changed everything. These relationships are a type of synecdoche of the rapport that Sabbatarian Adventists, all Northerners, had with blacks before Adventism collided with the South.

After the Disappointment

The seventeen-year-old Ellen Harmon received her first vision sometime in December 1844, her second following a week later. The dashed Millerite believers in Portland, Maine, regularly met for religious meetings in December 1844 and early 1845 in the Harmon's house on Spruce Street. Ellen shared her visions at this venue, and there is a possibility that William Foy visited one of these gatherings at the Harmon home, and there “had an interview” with her (as she recalled in 1906), later interrupting her in a talk she was giving about her visions, jumping up and down and shouting praises to the Lord for revealing the same thing to him.¹ Adventism's first historian, John Loughborough, records that “after the close of the prophetic period, in the year 1845, he [Foy] heard another [Ellen Harmon] relate the same vision...”² Arthur White, Ellen White's grandson and most prolific biographer, contends that the Harmon house was too small to

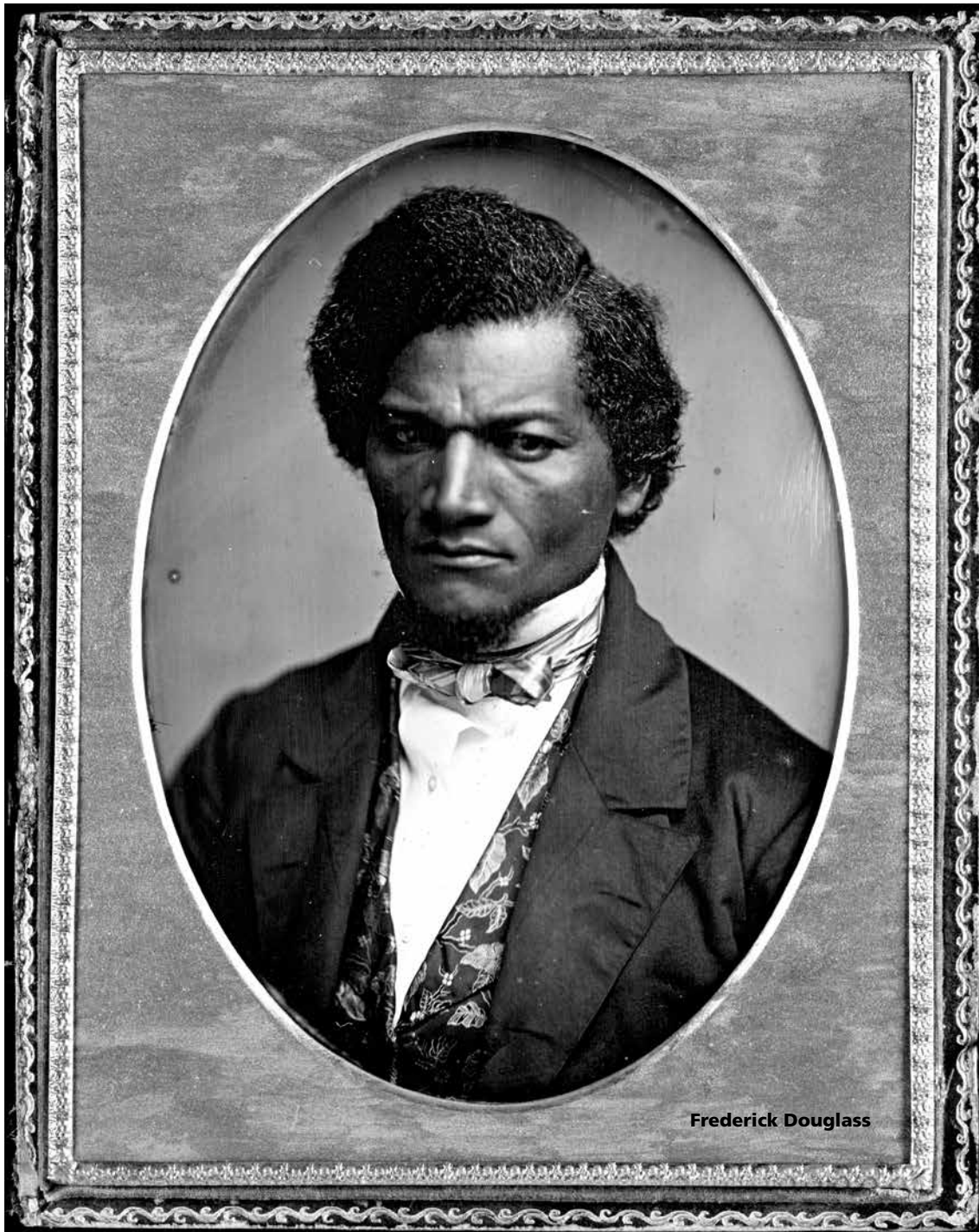
accommodate the crowd that was present during Foy's outburst.³ Whatever the case, it should be underscored that, as with Millerite crowds, African Americans were also present and integral in post-Disappointment gatherings, and, as we shall see, among Sabbatarian Adventists; and Ellen White had substantive encounters with blacks in this religious milieu.

There is a further connection between White and Foy. Aged believer John H. Pearson, Sr., had a positive impact on the teenaged visionary's spiritual walk, and was an early supporter of her prophetic gift. James White went on a year-long preaching tour with Pearson's son, John Pearson, Jr., from the summer of 1843 to the summer of 1844.⁴ It was during this time that John and his brother Charles met Foy, resulting in the Pearson brothers publishing *The Christian Experience of William E. Foy* in early 1845. James most likely met fellow Millerite minister Foy via these mutual contacts in these small circles. It is commonly held that John, Sr., introduced James and Ellen, who married on August 30, 1846.

The Douglass Family

Rochester, New York, a bustling port city of roughly 40,000 residents in the early 1850s, was one of the centers of Sabbatarian Adventism. In order to expand the fledgling publishing enterprise, on March 12, 1852, Sabbatarian Adventist leaders unanimously voted that a press and type be purchased post-haste and established in Rochester.⁵ James and Ellen White moved there the next month, and the Advent Review office began operating from their house at 124 Mt. Hope Avenue. The press staff, a who's who of early Adventism, produced the bimonthly *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, as well as a string of pamphlets, tracts, and books. The operations were later transferred to a house at 109 Monroe Street.

Rochester was renowned as an abolitionist stronghold

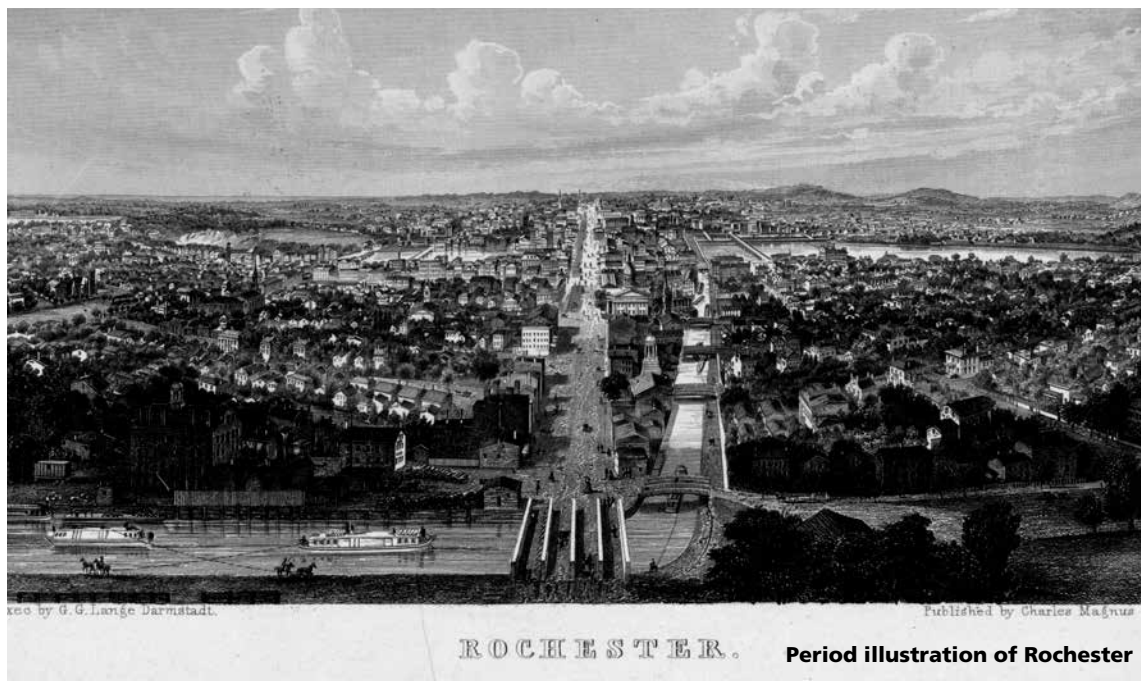


Adventist publications have tirelessly quoted Douglass' faith-filled reaction to the Leonid meteor shower of November 12, 1833, and news of his exploits were frequently related in the *Review and Herald* until his death in 1895.

and a depot vital to the Underground Railroad. During the Whites' time in Rochester, Frederick Douglass, famed orator and abolitionist, resided in the city on South Avenue, where he published the *North Star/Frederick Douglass' Paper*. In fact, just a couple of months after the Whites moved there, Douglass delivered what is considered to be among the greatest speeches in American History on Independence Day, 1852:

"What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Adventist publications have tirelessly quoted Douglass' faith-filled reaction to the Leonid meteor shower of November 12, 1833,⁶ and news of his exploits were frequently related in the *Review and Herald* until his death in 1895. Merritt Kellogg eulogized Douglass in 540 words in the *Review* of March 5, 1895, concluding: "He will ever stand out in bold relief as a great and

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unique specimen of American manhood and greatness, and besides being honored by fitting monuments in marble and bronze, a grateful people will hold him in loving remembrance.”⁷ Douglass is buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery, just blocks away from the Whites’ one-time home.

It is not known if the Whites ever met Frederick Douglass during their time in Rochester. We do know, however, that Rosetta (born June 24, 1839), Douglass’ eldest child, was a teenager attending seminary and assisting her father with editing in the Rochester office during the three and a half years the Whites lived on Mt. Hope Avenue. Marrying a former slave named Nathan Sprague the year of the Emancipation Proclamation, Rosetta again worked as an assistant to her father when he was appointed US Marshal of the District of Columbia in 1877. In the nation’s capital, Rosetta met the prominent black Adventist physician James H. Howard (1861–1936) and his wife Isabel (née Cook), who introduced her to the Adventist message around 1889. Sometime after—the precise year is unsure—she became a member of the First Seventh-day Adventist Church in Washington. As Douglas Morgan, an authority on twentieth-century black Adventism in Washington, DC, has explored in recent monographs, the

sophisticated African American membership of First Church posed earnest and compelling objections to denominational leaders’ attempts to segregate congregations on the basis of race in the nation’s capital.⁸ Specifically, Rosetta Sprague—outspoken on issues of race as her father had been—is reported as loudly denouncing Ellen White’s firm dissuasion to an interracial couple endeavoring upon marriage, characterizing White’s stance as “a wicked catering to race prejudice.”⁹ Rosetta Douglass-Sprague died a respected Adventist and civil rights activist in Washington, DC, on November 25, 1906.

Eri L. Barr

“We humbly trust that the day is not far distant when the mountains and valleys of Vt. [Vermont] shall echo with the loud cry of the Third Angel’s Message, the last servant of our God be sealed, and his saints go forever free.”¹⁰ So wrote Eri L. Barr in the *Review and Herald* in late 1857. Now believed to be the earliest African American Adventist minister, Barr was an important and beloved itinerant leader-minister in 1850s Sabbatarian Adventism.

Born in Reading, Vermont, on May 23, 1814, Eri was the son of one William Barr, who is listed in census records as “free colored.”¹¹ Scant

is known of Barr's early life, other than that he studied English at Wesleyan Academy in Massachusetts in 1836, and, from a letter of his published in a Millerite paper, that he embraced the soon coming of Christ, steadfast years after the Great Disappointment.¹² Barr married Lori Z. Harvey, on December 7, 1842, in Reading, Vermont, and the couple had one child, Emma, the year of the Disappointment. Barr put bread on the table for his family as a mechanic, until he accepted the seventh-day Sabbath in the first years of the 1850s, and, shortly after, began itinerating as a Sabbatarian Adventist minister in New England.

Early Sabbatarian ministers most often traveled and worked in pairs. Barr is recorded as partnering with at least three other men: Frederick Wheeler in 1853; John Nevins Andrews in 1855; and Joseph Bates in 1855–1856. Barr and Bates worked particularly well together, as numerous reports cosigned by them in the *Review* attest, conducting at least a dozen meetings in tandem in 1856 alone.¹³ Bates is considered a cofounder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church along with James and Ellen White, and it is especially significant that in pre-Civil War America a man of color partnered with him in his founding efforts. An Adventist black minister would not speak so freely and frequently to white people again until Lewis C. Sheafe did so in Washington, DC, in the first decade of the twentieth century.¹⁴

In the tiny world of Sabbatarian Adventists, Eri Barr and James and Ellen White would meet on several occasions. The Whites first met Barr in “the mountains of Vermont,” Barr’s home region, on September 3, 1852, in Wolcott, at a meeting in a 400-seat tent that adjoined the house of Seth Hubbell Peck. James White writes that here he and Ellen “met Brn. Barr and [Alfred S.] Hutchins for the first time, and heard them speak of their present faith, hopes and joys. May the Lord give them success in winning souls to Christ, and the present truth.”¹⁵ James would mention the meeting again in a retrospective titled “A Sketch of the

Rise and Progress of Present Truth,” remarking that he and Ellen first met “our much beloved Brn. Byington, Hutchins, and Barr, who continue firm friends of the cause and devoted laborers,” while at meetings “generally attended with great success.”¹⁶ Later that month, on the morning of September 30, Ellen White had a vision in Dorchester, Massachusetts, the contents of which James White adumbrated to Leonard Hastings in a letter. One of the takeaways of the vision was “that brethren Baker, Ingraham, Barr and Wheeler were men to be depended upon.”¹⁷ In June of the next year, Barr reports meeting Robert and Eunice Harmon, Ellen’s parents, in Topsham, Maine, during an evangelistic tour of the state.¹⁸ In May 1857, the Whites attended a tent meeting that Barr was holding in Lancaster, Massachusetts. Although there is no extant correspondence of Ellen White to Barr, she did single him out in two letters addressed to others, to be remarked upon shortly.

In almost a decade as a Sabbatarian minister in the lean years between the Great Disappointment and the official selection of the name “Seventh-day Adventist” in 1860, Barr mainly labored in the New England states of Vermont, Maine, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, as well as New York. Barr was a versatile worker, visiting scattered believers in far-flung locales; correcting errors in doctrine; holding prayer sessions; conducting evangelistic meetings in town halls, tents, and believers’ homes; giving Bible studies; passing out tracts; delivering sermons on Sabbaths and other days of the week; and raising up churches. Barr’s effectiveness as a minister is evinced by his reports of conversions,¹⁹ requests from believers for him to labor in their areas, the featuring of his progress reports in the *Review*, and his leadership role in “general Conferences”—calling for and chairing—and other Sabbatarian Adventist decision-making bodies.²⁰ Staggeringly, it would not be until more than a century later that blacks took a leadership role in general Adventist conferences (i.e., mixed race) tasked with directing the movement at large.

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As it did with several other Sabbatarian leaders, Barr's frenetic pace had a deleterious effect on his domestic life. On December 10, 1858, Lori Barr obtained a divorce from Eri for the cause of "willing absence." The marriage had lasted for just over sixteen years.²¹ In this same period, Barr lent his voice with others in encouraging a Sabbatarian group in Connecticut to burn daguerreotypes and cases, with the rationale that the considerable monies spent on the pictures should have been used to fund the spread of the gospel. Both James and Ellen White chastised Barr especially for this, given his stature in the movement. James wrote that "We have been surprised and grieved to learn how some have run from place to place on the cars, encouraging a fanatical spirit in burning daguerreotypes, &c., worse than wasting their Lord's money, and leaving the brethren in distraction."²² Ellen White, meanwhile, altered her earlier commendation of Barr, upbraiding him for the daguerreotype furor, as well as for what she deemed to be his extreme application of the message to Laodicea in Revelation.

I saw that Brother Barr has not been standing in the counsel of God. He has had a wrong spirit, has followed impressions and feeling. It has led him astray. I saw that he was more to be blamed in Connecticut than the church there. He, a servant of Jesus Christ, should be ready to correct these wrong influences in the church, but he gave support to them instead of correcting them, and I saw that he had better have been working with his hands than exerting this wrong influence in the church.²³

Barr apologized for his actions on the ground level, and then issued a lengthy mea culpa in the *Review and Herald* in the summer of 1862.²⁴ Indicating that he had no ill-will toward the Whites, Barr was one of the vouchers for the integrity of James White in a pamphlet titled *Vindication of the Business Career of Elder James White*.²⁵

In the spring of 1861, Barr reported from Niles, New York, to *Review* readers that he was in "feeble health," to the point that it was difficult for him to write. For the next three years Barr would battle with tuberculosis under the care of Daniel Oviatt (with whom he had established a church in Niles), until he died a week before his fiftieth birthday on May 16, 1864, in Oviatt's home in Alma, New York. Nathan Fuller, a delegate to the first General Conference and a leading voice in the formation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, stated that at Barr's last moment "his mind was calm, and he felt that death would be a sweet rest."²⁶

Ellen White's few interactions with Eri Barr are intriguing in light of statements she would make half a century later. The young prophet's several affirmations of Barr's ministry show that she supported a black man ministering to whites, and indeed, didn't even view this dynamic through a racial lens at all. When the conditions changed, however—and the changed conditions are key here—Ellen White would repeatedly write lines like this from 1901: "Colored men are inclined to think that they are fitted to labor for white people, when they should devote themselves to doing missionary work among the colored people. There is plenty of room for intelligent colored men to labor for their own people..."²⁷ In a strange way, even White's suggestion that Barr quit the ministry and return to his mechanic trade shows that she viewed him as any other of the one-to-two-dozen Sabbatarian ministers, some to whom she made similar cease and desist advisement. And so, early in her ministry, a leitmotif in Ellen White's life emerges: her object in life would be the spread of the Adventist gospel through her movement—race, with its maddening attendant complications, would only be a deterrent to that object that had to be surmounted somehow.

The Hardys

Ellen White recorded in her diary on January 25, 1859:

It looks like a storm....We [Ellen, John and Anna Loughborough] rode fourteen miles to Brother Hardy's. Brother Cramer did not give us the right directions, and we went four miles out of our way. Did not arrive at Brother Hardy's until dinner time. It was snowing fast. We were heartily welcomed by the family. A good dinner was soon in readiness for us of which we thankfully partook. This is a colored family but although the house is poor and old, everything is arranged with neatness and exact order. The children are well behaved, intelligent, and interesting. May I yet have a better acquaintance with this dear family.²⁸

This African American family may have been inauspicious at the time, but they would exceed even the normal forerunner status of many Sabbatharians by accomplishing firsts statewide, as opposed to just in the movement. The patriarch of the clan, William J. Hardy, was born in Seneca County, New York—a critical zone in Whitney Cross' *Burned-over District*—on January 9, 1823.²⁹ Although New York was a slave state at the time of his birth, it is unknown whether Hardy was ever enslaved; a clue, however, may be found in the fact that the year New York outlawed slavery his parents moved to Washtenaw County, Michigan. Hardy married Eliza Watts in 1844, purchased a sizable farm in Gaines Township, Michigan, and the couple had their first of six children a year later. In the summer of 1857, Eliza Hardy accepted the Sabbatarian Adventist message upon hearing Joseph B. Frisbie preach in Caledonia, a town six miles from Gaines Township; her husband joined her shortly after.

Ellen White and the Loughboroughs probably first heard of the Hardy family from John Byington, later the inaugural General Conference president, who overnighted with the Hardys in early October 1857, scrawling in his diary, "a Mulatto family, but very good and kind."³⁰ Byington's lodging with the Hardys, as well as

White and Loughborough's visit in 1859, and speaking appointments at the Hardys' Caledonia church by notables such as Joseph Bates and John Andrews, show the Hardys' value to early Adventist pioneers. While he was leader of the Caledonia church, Hardy and his congregation put up \$1,050 (around \$21,300 in 2018) to have conscientious Adventists' drafts commuted during the Civil War, and, in the 1870s, contributed funds for the Adventist work in California and other frontiers.

During the 1860s and '70s, William Hardy's influence expanded simultaneously in the wider community. In 1872, he was elected the county supervisor for Gaines Township and served as a delegate to Republican county conventions, distinguished as Michigan's first African American to occupy public office, and the first Adventist elected politician. Eugene, William and Eliza's son, is purported to be the first African American high school graduate in the state of Michigan. Eugene went on to study law, while one of his other brothers, William, attended Battle Creek College.³¹

There is evidence that Ellen White's journaled desire—"May I yet have a better acquaintance with this dear family"—was satisfied. In an extremely vulnerable time for the sickly James White, and almost eight years after Ellen's previous visit to the Hardy home, the bitterly freezing morning of December 19, 1866, found the Whites plowing through inclement weather on the Michigan peninsula. James relates that the couple and their son Willie lodged in a "noisy rum tavern" the night previously, and after driving fifteen miles against a "keen" north wind at five in the morning to reach the Hardy residence, they "thank[ed] God for an Advent home, and simple, healthful fare."³²

William J. Hardy died on June 8, 1888, a local paper eulogizing him in words consistent with Ellen White's decades earlier: "He was a man of honor, honesty and integrity, and was appreciated by the community in which he lived."³³ Eliza Hardy followed her husband on December 3, 1890. Both are buried in Blaine Cemetery in

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Gaines Township, Michigan.

The Hardys, with their impeccable (Sabbatarian and Seventh-day) Adventist heritage, held a capacity in early Adventism the precise opposite of African Americans after the Civil War: as succorers of white Adventists, not needy, white-terrorized and impoverished former black captives in, say, *fin de siècle* Mississippi, whom Ellen White's son Edson encountered. The Hardys' succor went beyond just providing lodging and leadership; by the late 1860s the family was wealthy and were most likely the main source behind the draft deferment money and the financing of frontier missions. Like Eri Barr, they were among those who helped found—yes, who made—the Seventh-day Adventist Church. ■

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Footnotes:

1. See "Interview with Mrs. E. G. White, re Early Experiences," August 13, 1906, Manuscript 131, 1906, 3, White Estate.
2. J. N. Loughborough, "The Prophetic Gift," *Review and Herald* (July 18, 1899): 2.
3. Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years*, Volume 1, 1827–1862 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association), 63, asterisk note.
4. James White, *Life Incidents* (Battle Creek: Steam Press, 1868), 108–112.
5. "The Conference," *Adventist Review* (March 23, 1852): 4.
6. See for instance "I Left Baltimore..." *Review and Herald* (January 5, 1860): 51; "Seen as Sign of Second Advent," *Review and Herald* (November 20, 1919): 13.
7. M. E. Kellogg, "Frederick Douglass," *Review and Herald* (March 5, 1895): 151.
8. See Douglas Morgan's recent work, *Miracles of Courage, Color, and Christ* (Washington, D.C.: Helping Hands Press, 2014).
9. J. S. Washburn to W. C. White, February 18, 1903, 3, White Estate.
10. E. L. Barr, "Conference at Eden, Vt.," *Review and Herald* (November 26, 1857): 24.
11. E. L. Barr, Vermont, vital records, 1720–1908, ancestry.com. These insights into E. L. Barr are indebted to the late Stanley D. Hickerson's groundbreaking piece, "Was Eri L. Barr the First Black Adventist Minister?" *Adventist Review* (online), April 26, 2015; William Barr as "Free Colored:" 1840 US Federal Census: Reading, Windsor, Vermont, roll 548, page 279, Image 569, film 0027442.
12. E. L. Barr, "Letters, Bro. E. L. Barr," *The Voice of Truth, and Glad Tidings of the Kingdom at Hand* (March 11, 1846): 88.
13. Joseph Bates, "Tent Meetings," *Review and Herald* (October 2, 1855): 24.
14. See Douglas Morgan, *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2010), 177–289.
15. James White, "Eastern Tour," *Review and Herald* (September 16, 1852): 80.
16. James White, "A Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Present Truth," *Review and Herald* (January 14, 1858): 77.
17. James White to Leonard Hastings, September 30, 1852, White Estate.
18. E. L. Barr, "Dear Bro. White," *Review and Herald* (July 7, 1853): 31.
19. See for instance Barr's report of twelve converted in a month: E. L. Barr, "Dear Bro. White," *Review and Herald* (March 20, 1855): 199. Some of Barr's evangelistic meetings had hundreds in attendance. Joseph Bates and E. L. Barr, "Tent Meetings," *Review and Herald* (August 7, 1855): 21.
20. Barr chaired or reported in conferences for Sabbatarian Adventists in Maine, *Review and Herald* (June 19, 1856): 64; New England States, *Review and Herald* (December 25, 1856): 64; New Hampshire, *Review and Herald* (January 1, 1857): 72; Connecticut, *Review and Herald* (June 11, 1857): 48; and New York, *Review and Herald* (June 30, 1859): 48.
21. Record of Divorce, Eri L. Barr and Lori Z. Barr, December 7, 1842, New Hampshire Bureau of Vital Records, Ancestry.com.
22. James White, "New Fields," *Review and Herald* (October 6, 1859): 156.
23. E. G. White to William Bruce, and Andrew Graham, September 24, 1859, Letter 7, 1859.
24. Eri L. Barr, "From Bro. Barr," *Review and Herald* (June 24, 1862): 80.
25. *Vindication of the Business Career of Elder James White* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1863), 38.
26. Nathan Fuller, E. L. Barr obituary, *Review and Herald* (June 14, 1864): 23.
27. E. G. White to "Brethren in Denver," July 16, 1901, Letter 84, 1901, White Estate.
28. Ellen G. White, "Diary," January 25, 1859, Manuscript 5, 1859, White Estate.
29. "Obituary," *Review and Herald* (June 19, 1888): 398. The best source on the Hardy family is Lawrence W. Onsager and James R. Nix, "Adventism's First Black Family," *Adventist Review* (online), February 24, 2011. This section largely draws from their work.
30. John Byington, Diary, October 5, 1852, Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University.
31. Franklin Everett, "Memorials of the Grand River Valley" (Chicago: The Chicago Legal News Company, 1878), 29 (590).
32. James White, "Report from Bro. White," *Review and Herald* (January 15, 1867): 66.
33. *Grand Rapids Eagle*, June 9, 1888, 4.