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Lest We Forget

“We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history.” LS196

W. W. Prescott

Messenger of God’s Invitation,
 “Come, for all things are now ready...”

(Ellen G. White 1888 Materials, p. 1455; September 25, 1895)

Family Background

William Warren Prescott was born September, 1855 in Alton, New Hampshire. His ancestry in the USA went back some 200 years, when a James Prescott from Derby in England settled in central New Hampshire.

William’s grandfather, Amos, was a farmer and member of the Free-will Baptist church. William’s father, James, had observed the falling of the stars at age 5 in 1833, and was baptized at age 10. Four years later, Amos and James heard Joshua V. Himes preach the advent message in Concord, New Hampshire. The family joined the Advent Movement.

James and his mother, Lydia, later heard S. S. Snow present his Bible study on Matthew 25 at the Exeter, New Hampshire campmeeting, which was the beginning of the “Midnight Cry” and the “Seventh Month Movement.” The Prescotts, along with the other advent believers, now looked for the coming of Christ on October 22, 1844. That fall they left their grain and potatoes unharvested. The family weathered the shaking that “the passing of the time” brought.

In 1847 James married Harriet Tripp, and worked as a cobbler and self-supporting preacher with the believers that later formed the Advent Christian Church. In 1858, three years after William was born, the family became Sabbath-keeping Adventists. William was thus raised in a family open to truth and firm in conviction.



W. W. Prescott
 Courtesy EGW Estate

With this issue we begin a series on the life and contributions of W. W. Prescott. While not one of the first generation Adventists from the 1850’s (though his father was), he was acknowledged by Ellen White to be a “messenger” during the significant events of the 1890’s. Issues 1 and 2 will cover his life, and 3 and 4 will focus on the Armadale Campmeeting in 1895 in Australia. The biographical material is drawn largely from Gilbert M. Valentine’s book on Prescott, *The Shaping of Adventism*.

Education Years, 1868-1877

For his first three years of high school, William attended South Berwick Academy. Located in Maine, it was one of the state's oldest and most prestigious private schools. The summer after his junior year he was baptized at the age of 17 by J. N. Andrews at the Massachusetts campmeeting. William completed his last year at Penacook Academy in New Hampshire in 1873. Both academies had a strongly moral and religious environment while offering an education in the classics.

It was during his senior year that he met Sarah Sanders (also known as Sadie), who was a Sabbath keeper and at the time 16 years old. He would later marry her. Her older brother Charles was taking engineering at Dartmouth, and it was there William applied for college, enrolling the autumn of 1873.

As the only Seventh-day Adventist at Dartmouth, William's commitment to stand alone was developed. He personally appealed to the president to be excused from classes on Sabbath. After an interview, this privilege was granted to him for the four years he attended.

He majored in "classical studies," taking courses in Greek, Latin, French, mathematics, mechanics, astronomy, logic, physics, rhetoric, psychology, geology, English literature, morals, Christian evidences, and political economy. He was in the top six of his class throughout his four years.

While standing for principle and excelling in academics, he was well accepted on campus. His many school activities included singing in the Handel Society, engaging in the debating societies, winning several first prizes in athletic competitions, and serving as vice-president and then president of his class in his final two years. He was also an editor of the weekly, student-published magazine.

During his four years he accumulated a full year of teaching experience in nearby schools. He graduated at age 21 in June of 1877 with a bachelor of arts. His academic standing entitled him to give a graduation oration. He spoke for six minutes on "The Office of the Thinker."

As was the practice at that time, he would qualify for a master's degree after three years working in his profession based on his academic accomplishments. He delayed requesting this degree until 1885 when he assumed the presidency of Battle Creek College.

As a background for later issues he would face in SDA educational settings, Prescott had been introduced at South Berwick Academy to "school homes." During his time at Dartmouth, agricultural training had just begun. Manual labor was also being tested in educational settings during the last decades of the 1800's.

Early Work, 1877-1885

For two years after graduating from Dartmouth, Prescott served as school principal in Northfield, Vermont. In 1879 he became principal at the most prominent school in Montpelier, Washington County Grammar and Montpelier Union School. The following summer, on July 8, he married Sarah Sanders. He was twenty-four and she, twenty-two.

That summer he moved to Maine, where he and his younger brother, Charles, had purchased the newspaper in Biddeford. They renamed it *The Biddeford Weekly Journal*. Its four pages focused on Republican politics, and included advertisements, moral stories, news, and temperance issues. Two years later Charles, no longer a Seventh-day Adventist, bought out William's interest in the newspaper. Charles went on to become well known in the state's business and political circles.

William and Sarah purchased Vermont's leading and oldest Republican newspaper, the *Vermont Watchman and State Journal*, and moved back to Montpelier in April of 1882. His publishing business prospered, even though he was closed on Saturday as well as Sunday. His willingness to agitate for reform, educational or political, involved him in controversy and criticism.

In June of 1885, the trustees of Battle Creek College (founded 1874), unsuccessful in their calls to two other SDA educators, met with Prescott about heading up the college. He was just shy of 30 years old. Having heard Ellen White and G. I. Butler preach at the 1883 campmeeting in Montpelier, and having discussed his burden with Uriah Smith at the 1884 campmeeting in Burlington, he had become convicted that God wanted him in church work. He sold the paper in Montpelier, and moved that summer to Battle Creek, beginning fifty-two years of work for the church.

Battle Creek College President, 1885-1894

For the next nine years Prescott worked hard to mold the college to train workers for the church with stricter discipline and higher academic standards. He traveled

extensively recruiting students, almost doubling the number of students to over 700 by 1894. He also oversaw a building program, paying for more than 10 percent of the costs himself. In addition, Prescott gave of his personal funds to students in need.

Woven through these years were the practical challenges of educational reform as called for by Ellen White's testimonies, being the application of the principles of the gospel to education. Prescott's willingness to receive the gospel message and learn how to implement these changes was challenged by his own background, and the resistance of students, parents, trustees, and the larger SDA community.

In 1888, just prior to the Minneapolis Conference, the Prescotts received the first of some 52 letters Ellen White addressed to him during her remaining ministry. She addressed the Prescotts as "my respected Brother and Sister," and "My dear Brother and Sister whom I highly esteem in the Lord." These appellations are unique based on a search of her published correspondence, and reflects the regard in which she held this couple. (10MR345, Letter 4, 1888). The Prescott's son Lewis was born in October of 1891.

—Working for a Higher Standard

The Prescotts lived with the students in West Hall. Strict etiquette was followed in the dining hall, with the students learning by the Prescotts' precept and example. Order was required indoors and out, in dress and in the school grounds. Brother Prescott led out in the daily chapel service whenever he was in Battle Creek and actively pursued the spiritual interests of these workers in training.

Policies such as the ban on courtship and restrictions on entertainment met with opposition from students and parents. His public and spirited approach led him in 1888 to preach two sermons at the Tabernacle, appealing for and winning support of these practices.

The manual labor program, clearly a balancing activity to the mental work, struggled with lack of finances and support by parents and students. The trustees stopped the program in 1889. In its place, influenced by his Dartmouth experience, Prescott set up a sports and gymnastics program. It quickly developed into competitive events, drawing many spectators on Sundays. This led Prescott to stop the games, but by 1893 football games again were in full swing. They were even

reported in local newspapers, one of which came to Ellen White's attention in Australia. Her counsel to him led him to stop them again.

From 1891 to 1894 the issue of the diet for college students was agitated. Some college faculty, E. A. Sutherland and P. T. Magan, and board members, particularly J. H. Kellogg, M. D., pushed for a meatless diet, or at

least more meatless options. Prescott found himself on the middle ground initially, but gradually moved toward the vegetarian option.

—In the Light of Minneapolis

The influence of the Minneapolis Conference in 1888 reached the college. Ellen White worked diligently that the message the Lord had given at Minneapolis would be heard at Battle Creek. Some six weeks after the conference session, the Week of Prayer planned for the church in Battle Creek, December 15-22, ended up lasting one month. Ellen White described that in these "revival services... the principle topic dwelt upon was

Timeline: Birth-1897

1855	Birth, Alton NH
1872	Baptized by J. N. Andrews
1877	Graduated Dartmouth; school principal, Vermont
1880	Married Sarah Sanders, bought newspaper in Maine with brother Charles
1882	Bought newspaper in Vermont
1885	Became Battle Creek College President (to 1894)
1887	GC Education Secretary (to 1897)
1888	First of 52 letters from Ellen White; Minneapolis Conference
1889	Organized first 5-month Ministerial Institute
1891	Joined GC Committee; GC Session Presentations; Harbor Springs Educational Convention; Union College Opens; son Lewis born
1892	Endorsed Anna Phillips; Walla Walla College Opens
1893	GC Session Presentations; compiled <i>Christian Education</i>
1895	GC Session Presentations; trip to Australia
1897	Compiled <i>Special Testimonies on Education</i> ; Head of work in England (to 1901)

justification by faith.” (RH2/12/1889, in 3Bio420).

On Thursday, December 20, Ellen White wrote in her diary, “I spoke to the college students. The Lord gave me the word which seemed to reach hearts. Professor Prescott arose and attempted to speak, but his heart was too full.

There he stood five minutes in complete silence, weeping. When he did speak he said, ‘I am

Professor Prescott stood five minutes in complete silence, weeping.

glad I am a Christian.’ He made very pointed remarks. His heart seemed to be broken by the Spirit of the Lord...” (Ms25, 1888, in 3Bio421)

Speaking further of the Scriptural light the Lord had given through brothers Jones and Waggoner, Ellen White wrote on March 10, 1890, “I am much pleased to learn that Professor Prescott is giving the same lessons in his class to the students that Brother Waggoner has been giving. He is presenting the covenants.” (Letter 30, 1890, in *1888 Materials*, p. 623).

Later that year, Ellen White described the “wonderful” December 27 Sabbath meeting. “Nearly the whole congregation presented themselves for prayers, and among them, Brethren Prescott and Smith. The *Extra* in the *Review and Herald* [Dec. 23, 1890] was read, and the testimony of all was that the power of God attended the reading of the article. They said that this made a deep impression.... Professor Prescott made a confession dating back to Minneapolis, and this made a deep impression. He wept much. Elder Smith said that testimony meant him; said that he felt that it was addressed to him, but he stopped there and went no further. But both placed themselves as there repentant, seeking the Lord. Well, they said they had never had such a meeting in Battle Creek, and yet the work must be carried on, for it was just begun....” (Lt 32, 1891, in *1888 Materials*, pp. 850, 851)

The message continued to do its work against stiff opposition. Both A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner were finally allowed to lecture at Battle Creek College. Prescott, gradually seeing more and more light in the Christ-centered message, worked hard as a peace-maker and consensus builder between the opposing parties. After Ellen White was exiled to Australia in 1891, her writings on the message kept the Spirit’s appeal before the church. In the November 22, 1892 *Review and Her-*

ald, she wrote, “The time of test is just upon us, for the loud cry of the third angel has already begun in the revelation of the righteousness of Christ, the sin-pardoning Redeemer. This is the beginning of the light of the angel whose glory shall fill the whole earth. For it is the work of every one to whom the message of warning has come, to lift up Jesus, to present him to the world as revealed in types, as shadowed in symbols, as manifested in the revelations of the prophets, as unveiled in the lessons given to his disciples and in the wonderful miracles wrought for the sons of men.” (*1888 Material*, p. 1073).

The effect of this article on the college, along with other timely testimonies from Ellen White, led to a vigorous revival. The rest of the school term was disrupted by long chapels, seasons of prayer and confession, and times of testimonies. Prescott, in reading a letter from Ellen White to the students, was moved to tears, and confessed again his previous resistance to the message. Sadly, Uriah Smith viewed the events as “excitement”. Thus the spiritual consensus the church greatly needed was never experienced.

—Added Responsibilities

At the 1887 General Conference, Prescott had been chosen as the General Conference education secretary. In this position he was absent from the college a significant amount of the time, as he oversaw the developing educational work of the church. In 1888 he was appointed to the church’s book committee. By 1889 he found it necessary to delegate college administrative duties to a principal and committee. In 1891 he was put on the General Conference Committee, leading to much added responsibilities. His conscientiousness and leadership abilities made it very easy for him to overwork, about which Ellen White repeatedly warned him. GC president Olsen also recommended he get one or two men to assist him, but Prescott never did this. By 1894 the needs of the church’s schools had grown to the point that Prescott was asked to oversee their work and development full time. He then relinquished the presidency of Battle Creek College.

General Conference Education Director, 1887-1897

During the time Prescott served as Battle Creek College President and the General Conference secretary

for education, he began the development of an educational policy for the church. He helped to coordinate the relationship of other schools to one another, including the exchange of faculty, thus avoiding duplication of courses, improving poor academic standards, and making it easier for students to transfer between schools.

—Ministerial Institutes

Against a background of minimal training for our ministers, and the controversy that boiled over at Minneapolis, Prescott designed a five-month ministerial institute for ministers. The first began in October of 1889, with 157 attendees. Prescott, Uriah Smith, and E. J. Waggoner were instructors.

In spite of Ellen White's strong endorsement, Waggoner's views were actively opposed by Smith, and led to her personally joining some of the early morning dialogues. Her letters, manuscripts, and diary entries written during the institute provide essential insights into what God was attempting to accomplish in these settings to prepare a people for Christ's coming. [The reader is encouraged to read the chronological collection of her writings on these issues in *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*.]

These institutes continued until 1896, by which time the colleges had developed more complete ministerial training courses. However, Ellen White lamented to the GC President in November of 1892 that ministers were not being benefited as they ought to have been by these gatherings. She said they either haggled over the truth, or having assented to it, kept it in "the outer court," not letting it permeate their lives in the "little things," particularly in the home setting (PH002:25,26).

She again spoke to the delegates at the GC Session in 1901 of the assent to this truth with no change in life or ministry. This counterfeit "faith" actually masked a deep-seated rebellion, which later that year she said might cause

God's people to remain in this world "many more years." (*1888 Materials*, p. 1743; SpM202).

—Union College Established

At the 1889 Kansas campmeeting Prescott was instrumental in persuading the constituency to support a mid-western school. Ellen White was present along with A. T. Jones, working against the spirit of opposition seen at Minneapolis the previous fall. She supported the plan for a school, and by January of the next year property was purchased in Lincoln, Nebraska. Prescott chose the name "Union College" to encourage all of the conferences in the area to rally behind the school. When the school opened in September of 1891, Prescott, while still president at Battle Creek College and GC Education Director, served as its first president. It was a position he actively filled for two years, although J. H. Loughhead was the on-site principal.

—Educational Conventions

Prescott developed a master list of Adventist teachers (church employed or not) and began a program of teachers' training institutes. Two significant conventions were held, one in 1891 at Harbor Springs, Michigan, and one in 1894 at another location. Both focused on making SDA education more Bible centered. At the 1891 gathering a four-year curriculum was first developed

for ministerial training. At the 1894 meeting, Prescott and A. T. Jones produced a four-year syllabus of Bible teaching for non-ministerial students. Plans were even laid for a graduate program (which was not realized for another sixty years) and an education journal (which took three years to begin).

—Walla Walla College Established

Prescott was instrumental, against significant opposition, in getting two Adventist conference schools in the Northwest to consolidate at Walla Walla, Washington. When the school

GC Session Presentations

1891 GC Session

The Calling and Work of the Ministry

1893 GC Session

The Promise of the Holy Spirit, No. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

The sermon on February 11 on the Sabbath

1895 GC Session

The Divine-Human Family, No. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Education

The Word of God, No. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Christ and the Holy Spirit

(These are all on the CD-ROM *Words of the Pioneers, Second Edition*. Contact the Adventist Pioneer Library.)

opened in December of 1892, Prescott had his third concurrent college presidency, holding this one for two years. E. A. Sutherland, who had worked at Battle Creek College and understood the educational plan envisioned, was principal and carried most of the duties.

—Preaching

Prescott was felt by many to be our best speaker. He preached often on the righteousness of Christ at the Tabernacle, which was always crowded when he spoke. He presented series of talks at the 1891, 1893, 1895 GC sessions (see “GC Session Presentations” on page 5), and conducted as well an evangelistic series for several months in Battle Creek in late 1892.

—Learning from Life’s Mistakes

In 1892 and 1893 Prescott along with Jones and others endorsed Anna Phillips as a new messenger of God. When Ellen White rebuked them as being misled, they were humbled and readily accepted the correction. Their enemies however seized the opportunity to discredit them. Though Sister White said she had more confidence in them after the episode than before, for years their foes continued to recall this mistake. Her most telling rebukes were to those who continued to oppose the light of righteousness by faith, looking for the messengers to stumble as an excuse to reject their message. (*1888 Materials*, pp. 1240, 1241)

Ellen White wrote Prescott on April 16, 1894 these

words of warning regarding Anna Phillips: “The Word of God is your counselor; the Word of God is your authority. Be very careful how you bring anything weaker

to take its place.... Satan would like nothing better than to call minds away from the Word, to look for and expect something outside of the Word to make them feel. They should not have their attention called to dreams and visions.” (Letter 68, 1894, in 14MR 184-188)

—Toward Educational Reform

Prescott’s views on education, while influenced by his own training and the current trends in the country, were most significantly molded by his interaction with Ellen White. Both through reading her writings and dialoguing with her over the years on the practical issues of applying gospel principles to education, he came under deep convictions regarding the need to make changes to accomplish our schools’ purpose.

He compiled and edited Ellen White’s writings on education, publishing in 1893 the book *Christian Education* and in 1897 *Special Testimonies on Education*. The central position of the Bible in education became a main theme of his. The need for a balanced education that symmetrically developed body, mind, and soul, was another deep burden. The constant challenge was how to apply these valid principles in practical settings. He was willing to

experiment to achieve the goal, but often students, parents, constituency, and his own teachers were not as willing.

Report on the Bible in Education at Battle Creek College

At the January 1893 GC Session Prescott reported that the Harbor Springs meeting “marked a remarkable change in the history of our educational work. Our minds were impressed there as never before with the idea that the purpose of educational work was to teach us of God in his revealed word and his works, and in his dealings with men, that all education should be planned upon such a basis and carried out in such a way that the result would be a more intimate knowledge of God, not merely as a theory but as an experience.”

He further observed, “...The Bible should be studied as the gospel of Christ from first to last; and in which it should be made to appear that all the doctrines held by Seventh-day Adventists were simply the gospel of Christ rightly understood, and that the basis was the proper understanding of the whole Scriptures, and not merely a limited study of a few portions of the Scriptures.... It has not been the purpose to put in the back-ground those doctrines which distinguish us, but to make it appear that these are simply the doctrines of the Bible as a whole; that the third angel’s message is simply the gospel, and that the message properly understood is an understanding of all the Scriptures, and that all of our doctrines have their basis in a proper knowledge of the gospel, and grown out of a belief in Jesus Christ as a living personal Saviour.” (*GC Bulletin*, 1893, p. 350).

During the 1893 academic year, he received letters from Ellen White regarding the schools of the prophets. He was led to study the Old Testament and became convinced of need to pursue the reforms that the Harbor Springs Convention decisions had envisioned (see "Report" on page 6), and which the testimonies had repeatedly called for. He enlisted his trustees, and along with them, met with the faculty, and then the students. His plan was to replace the classics in the curriculum with Bible classes, E. J. Waggoner heading the Bible department. The only thing he succeeded in doing was adding Bible subjects. At the 1894 convention, with Jones' playing a prominent role, he worked to convince the attending principals and Bible teachers of the needed reforms. Stiff resistance continued. He used his presentations at the 1895 GC session (February 12 and onward) to promote the changes. He succeeded in having resolutions passed in support, but they did not translate into changes in the schools. Even with his being gone to Australia in the following years, the needed changes were promoted by the board, with the faculty resisting.

—Trip to Australia and South Africa

He went to Australia in 1895 to assist in setting up the Avondale school. He served as chairman of the board, planning curriculum and buildings. He and Ellen White had long talks about the practical application of the principles outlined in her testimonies. These discussions helped both to clarify their understandings.

He also preached in evangelistic outreaches in each of the five eastern colonies. The Armadale Campmeeting soon after his arrival is perhaps the prime example of his effective preaching of Christ. (See inset.)

He helped in writing and editing of tracts and pamphlets used in evangelism, and even gave Ellen White assistance with her work on *The Desire of Ages*. On his voyage to Australia he studied the gospel of John in

depth, preparing Sabbath School lessons for the church. After arriving, he bought in a Sydney book store Neander's *Lectures on the History of Christian Dogmas*, and carefully read the parts dealing with the church's struggles over the nature of Christ. These studies proved a helpful background for his preaching of the full, eternal divinity of Christ and his assistance with Ellen White in her passages in *The Desire of Ages* regarding the place of Christ in the Godhead.

Prescott then traveled west to South Africa, where S. N. Haskell was working. Like in Australia, he did evangelism and planned with educators. He conducted an evangelistic series in Capetown in conjunction with a Bible Institute which lasted three months. By Christmas of 1896 he had returned to Michigan.

Battle Creek College was still in conflict over the educational reforms. The board of the college still supported it, and requested Prescott to plan a strategy to implement further changes. They liked his plans and wished he would become president again, an idea he did

not enjoy. The 1897 GC session at Union College, which elected G. A. Irwin as GC president, voted to send Prescott to Great Britain to head the work there. The Battle Creek College stockholders meeting, after the GC session, brought E. A. Sutherland from Walla Walla as the new president of Battle Creek College. He was to implement the educational reform principles in Battle Creek successfully followed in Washington state.

Work in England, 1897-1901

In England, Prescott worked hard in evangelism and publishing, but found church growth to be slow. He conducted a general church meeting the summer of 1898 during which the British Conference was organized. He worked with the Drs. Kress to develop a health ministry, which included plans for a sanitarium, food factory, and health magazine. Fire destroyed the facility planned for the first two. The Kresses' return to America, due to health problems, doomed the third. He attempted

Ellen White at the Armadale Campmeeting

"God has given brother Prescott a special message for the people. The truth comes forth from human lips in the demonstration of the Spirit and power. I know that since coming to this place he has had the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, his lips have been touched with a coal from off the altar." (October 19, 1895; Letter w-82, 1895 to Son Edson, unreleased).

See *Lest We Forget*, Vol. 10, Nos. 3 & 4 for more information on and extracts from the Armadale talks.

to start a training school, but was unable to do more than have the constituency vote in his last conference meeting to begin the project, which did not happen until after his return to the USA.

Prescott was also made board chairman of the International Tract Society Limited, the church's publishing ministry in Great Britain. However, its affairs were in such disorder, and the factors involved so difficult to resolve, that he eventually resigned. The conflict which was related to the business quagmire involved W. C. White who was managing the Echo Publishing Company in Australia, straining their relationship. The problems enabled Prescott to understand how the current structure of the church prevented local fields from han-

dling efficiently their own matters. He voiced these concern at the 1899 GC Session, but effective change would have to await the 1901 Session.

While in England Prescott lived next to E. J. Waggoner. They worked together and shared ideas on the gospel, health, and prophecy, including "the daily" of Daniel. During their four years together, they apparently developed what Ellen White identified at the 1901 GC Session as "overdrawn expressions" and "false theories" in regards to sanctification. (See Letter 269, 1903, pp. 1, 2. Dec. 14, 1903, in 10MR356, 357).

Next Issue: Prescott, 1901-1944

Lest We Forget

Volume 10

Number 1

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