

Return → Dorothy Sanghvi

George W. Gray

by Rev. G.
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The year from August 1891 to the summer of 1892 was both a great disappointment and a great personal triumph for George Gray. At the beginning of that period he had been a member of the Arkansas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church for about ten years. He had been received by that conference at its 10th Session in February of 1882 when it met in Waldron, Arkansas.

He began his work there in Arkansas with the Freedman's Aid Society and was associated with the Little Rock University, both of them based in Little Rock, Arkansas. The FAS had been organized as a group to raise funds for the educational advancement of the "colored people" (as they were called then) of the South. A notation in the Minutes of that first meeting for Gray said, "We most cordially welcome Rev. G.W. Gray to our conference, and pledge a hearty cooperation with him in securing students to fill its halls..." Later in the meeting Gray made a plea for ministerial support of the school & said that they endorsed the purchase of a site for the University. The report was signed with Gray as Secretary. On the back cover of the Conference Minutes was a full page ad for the school with Gray's name at the bottom as the President.

Gray's life & career were characterized by a number of unusual features. In the Conference of 1882 the Minutes record that he went from Secretary to Chairman, and then to President in just one day. During his ten year ministry in Arkansas his job description changed frequently. He worked for both the Freedman's Aid Society and the Little Rock University, though it wasn't clear just what being the president involved. In some descriptions it seemed as if the school was for black students at a college level, but in his obituary it said that it was a school for white students. In November 1891 he wrote to a friend in Davenport, Iowa about coming to Missouri because there "are nearly 200,000 colored people in Missouri & there is not a Christian school in the state where they can attend..."

Each year he was listed in the appointment lists of the Conference Minutes, and he was variously mentioned as President of LRU, western agent for FAS, agent for the Society & member of the Ebenezer Quarterly Conference, Assist. Corresponding Secretary for the FA & Southern Education, and member of the Main Street Quarterly Conference, and President of the FAS.

Copies of his letters beginning August 1891 are still available which give us an insight into his personal concerns and anxieties. These letters were made as carbon copies because of "a difficulty in my right hand which makes it almost impossible to write" said Gray in a letter of January 1892. The booklet of letters ends with the following spring. The letters revolve around two important events which were significant to George Gray within the next two years. The first was the quadrennial meeting of the General Conference of the Methodist Church scheduled to meet in Omaha, Nebraska in May of 1892. The second was the Columbian Exposition (originally scheduled for 1892) which actually opened, by President Grover Cleveland, on Monday, May 1, 1893 in Chicago, Illinois.

By November 1891 the letters of Gray show his anxiety about the coming meeting of the General Conference scheduled for the following May in Omaha. Each regional conference (Gray was in the Arkansas Annual Conference) sent representatives who were elected by the "home folks", and it was a great honor to be selected. A November letter contained Gray's feeling that the efforts to elect a man named Curl were lead by a "Brother Cunningham" who opposed Gray.

At the end of January 1892 (27-Feb 1) the 20th Session of the Arkansas Conference met at Little Rock. Gray was listed in attendance, though his address was recorded as Cincinnati, Ohio. He addressed the meeting and spoke on the work of