

# Walking *With the* Pioneers

*The Captivating Story of West Coast Adventism*

Jim Wibberding



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*Let your imagination hear the  
rhythm of their footsteps, of women  
and men who walked with purpose.  
Picture their brown eyes and blue  
eyes and green eyes darting between  
fear and hope.*

# How to Use This Book

Life never happened in black and white. The photos of Adventist pioneers are black and white, and we can catch ourselves talking of them in those terms, but theirs was a vibrant world. They bled in color. They dreamed in stark hues. Some cried themselves to sleep on brightly patterned pillows.

This book aspires to bring our Adventist pioneers to life in living color. It is a guide to the lives, mission, and places of those who kindled the Seventh-day Adventist flame in California. I hope that, as you read their stories and stand on the ground where they stood, you pause to gaze at the hills they saw each day, inhale the scents they once breathed, hear the songs hatched from the genes of birds whose notes filled their mornings, and feel the textures of the world that was theirs.

Let your imagination hear the rhythm of their footsteps, of women and men who walked with purpose. Picture their brown eyes and blue eyes and green eyes darting between fear and hope. Listen to the passion tremble in their voices. Taste the dust on the wind that tugs at their beards and bonnets. Feel the shivers of discovery and breakthrough climb your own spine and bloom into smiles on your face.

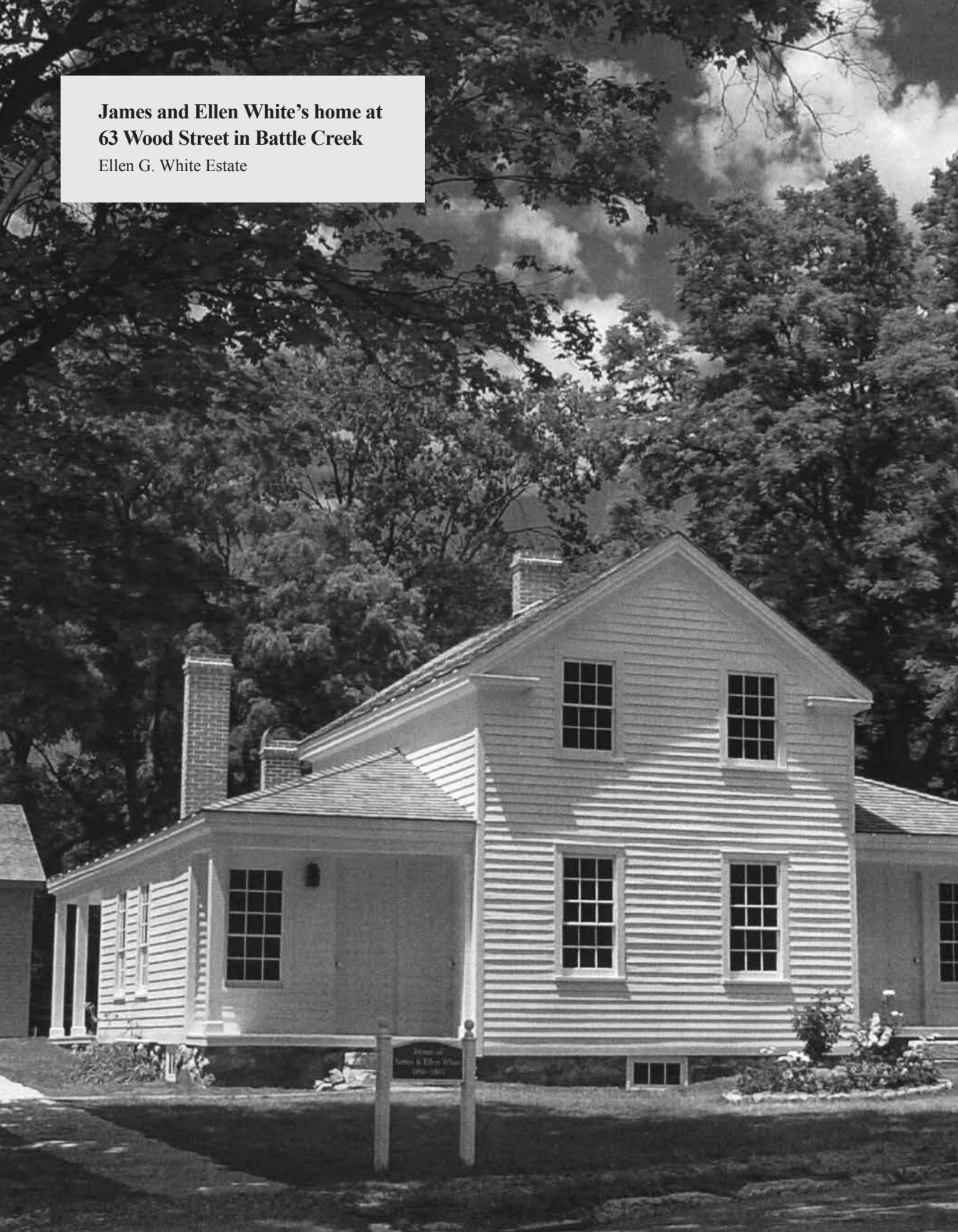
This book will guide your personalized adventure in Adventist history. First, an introduction to the Advent Movement gives the backstory to Adventism in California. Next, chapters 2-8 tell the story of California Adventism's first half century on location, tracing progress from San Francisco to Healdsburg to Loma Linda, and the many places in between. The final chapter ponders what the story of West Coast Adventism means today.

I invite you on a journey. Read the story through, then choose a few places that intrigue you most, gather some friends, and journey with the pioneers who helped make Adventism on the West Coast what it is today. You might even post pictures online with the hashtag #adventistPLACES, so the rest of us can see them.

Whether you just read the story or chart your own journey, I pray that the early West Coast pioneers come to life for you, and their passion for the cause of God stirs your own passion for the same.

**James and Ellen White's home at  
63 Wood Street in Battle Creek**

Ellen G. White Estate



## *Chapter 1*

# Introduction to the Advent Movement

His tall, muscled frame strode down the familiar street. A hint of defiance spurred his gait. His strong, tenor voice sent a new song ringing between the houses. James White was on a mission of mischief, and the neighbors all heard it. His song trolled Ellen's rag rugs. He couldn't stand them, and James was not as stingy with his opinions as his wife, Ellen, was in upcycling old rags. The notes trilled through the crisp morning:

“In expectation sweet, we will watch, and wait and pray,  
Until Christ's triumphant car we meet and see an endless day,  
There'll be no rag carpets there, There'll be no rag carpets there.”<sup>1</sup>

It is fun to imagine who heard his song that day, and whether they laughed or cringed, ran off to tell Ellen, or just went on with their day. The men and women crafting the Advent Movement into Seventh-day Adventism had migrated from New England to a small town in the Midwest. Meet the enclave of Battle Creek, Michigan.

Nearby is the home of Joseph Bates, a retired sea captain, who once caused his own stir by tossing the Sabbath doctrine into his Adventist circle. A boyish Uriah Smith now leads the Review and Herald office on the corner. Snappy dressing John Loughborough paces his porch, coaxing clear-eyed idealism into slick turns of phrase for his next sermonic masterpiece. What he lacks in stature he makes up for with



**James and Ellen White (c. 1864)**

Ellen G. White Estate



a larger than life stage presence. The future doctor, Kate Lindsay, walks the halls of Western Health Reform Institute, pitching ideas to John Harvey Kellogg to improve medical care, especially for women. Maud Sisley strolls the sidewalk, conjuring missionary visions with her friends.

She will travel the world for this cause someday, and she already knows it in her heart.

James himself had drawn many of these men and women together and made them neighbors. His mechanism was publishing. His cause was a world to save.

By Ellen's prompting, he birthed the publishing work at his home in Rocky Hill, Connecticut, back in 1849. At first it was a one-man show, and he had to pay a printer in Middletown to ink each issue of *The Present Truth*. By 1853, James gathered a small team and rented a house in Rochester, New York, where they lived and worked together—writing, editing, typesetting, inking, folding, and mailing copies of their new journal, the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*. The Review and Herald team became family.

Naturally, when James and Ellen moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, two years later, much of their “family” moved too. Soon, their New England Adventism was a Midwest Adventism.<sup>2</sup> With Michigan still claiming its place as a land of pioneers, they traded the tradition and reserve of colonial towns for the rugged flexibility of America's frontier. It stirred a pioneering wind in their midst that would whisk them to such distant lands as California, and beyond.





**Joseph Bates (1860s)**

Center for Adventist Research



**John Harvey Kellogg (1872)**

Center for Adventist Research



**Kate Lindsay (c. 1870)**

Center for Adventist Research

**Maud Sisley (c. 1870)**

Center for Adventist Research



Seventh-day Adventism was yet to reach into the American South or out to the Southwest and West Coast, but when it did, it would change in fresh ways that drove its missional potency. With each new missional artery, the heart of Adventism would beat stronger. That heart was a set of beliefs and the resolve to share them. Traditions and tactics changed, but those beliefs deepened with each embodiment of Adventism in a new place, driven by the hope that Christ would soon appear.

In Battle Creek, the Seventh-day Adventist faith organized into a loosely bound denomination, with loyalty to “the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ” at the center, and with as little control as possible. After the Great Disappointment of 1844, it took these fine people sixteen years to choose the name Seventh-day Adventist, seventeen to organize their first state conference, and eighteen to create the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

The molasses pace of institutional development was by design, and they had hoped never to do it. Why? They had a few reasons. First, most Advent believers still felt the pain of expulsion from their childhood churches, for the crime of believing William Miller’s Second Advent preaching. Organized religion was the source of religious trauma, and they took to calling it Babylon. Second, they did not want to be part of any structure that might try to control believers. Third, they especially abhorred creedal authority, arguing that a church should never violate the conscience of its members by telling them what to believe.

Practical issues softened their stance on organization,<sup>3</sup> but not their fear of creeds or control. Those twin concerns shaped the strikingly parse organization that emerged. That sparsity of control gave Adventism an agility that let it sprint across the United States and around the globe.

The needs to credential ministers, own property, and lobby for exemptions to the Civil War drove James White and company to build a conference, but they built one without a president and almost no staff.<sup>4</sup> That loose structure would leave room for Adventists to chart their own course on the West Coast.

After voting to take a name in 1860, and choosing the name Seventh-day Adventist,

they met the next year to debate organizing. A simple resolution came to the floor: “We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together, as a church, taking the name, Seventh-day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

The essential promise to “keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus Christ” seems sparse, almost juvenile, against the backdrop of the present-day “28 Fundamental Beliefs,” but the pioneers feared it was too much. Thanks to swift-fingered stenographers, we have the debate in writing.<sup>6</sup>

The resolution passed quickly, but some didn’t vote, and James would have none of that. He called for a new vote, urging, “I hope that matters of so much importance will not be passed by without discussion, if any are disposed to question them. Nothing hurt my feelings more than the non-committal position of some at last fall conference. I hope therefore that these subjects will have the benefit of a full and free discussion,



**Western Health Reform Institute (1868)**

Ellen G. White Estate

and that the sisters will take part in the vote, and that the action may be unanimous. I would be in favor of trying this vote again.”<sup>7</sup>

John Loughborough seconded the motion to revote and it carried. One by one, Adventist leaders rose to support the plan, but with caution.

Moses Hull argued, “We pledge ourselves only to do one thing, to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. There can be nothing more in Christianity. We pledge ourselves to help each other along in the Christian journey. No one can call this a creed or articles of faith.”<sup>8</sup>

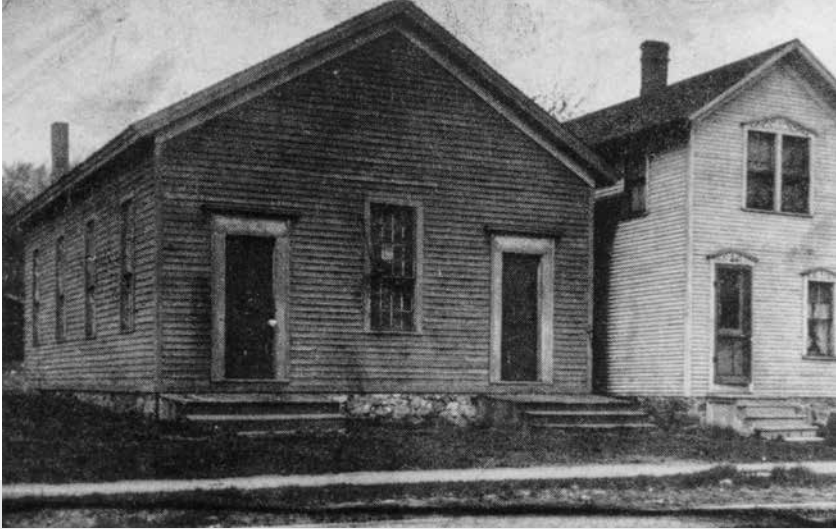
John Byington next voiced support.

James, eyes darting through the room, jabbed again at the lack of fight in the crowd. They had fought this for almost two decades. He hoped to organize but had to be sure they did it right. He also did not want to carry the weight of this decision any more than he wanted to carry the deed to the press any longer. James goaded, “If there is no one to raise any objections to this step, I have almost a mind to raise some myself, so that the subject may be discussed.”<sup>9</sup>

John Loughborough took the challenge, striking a dramatic pose and flinging the perils of church authority into the crowd before endorsing it. “We call the churches Babylon,” he began, “not because they covenant together to obey God. I am still of the opinion I advanced sometime since through the *Review*: The first step of apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is, to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And, fifth, to commence persecution against such. I plead that we are not patterning after the churches in any unwarrantable sense, in the step proposed.”<sup>10</sup>

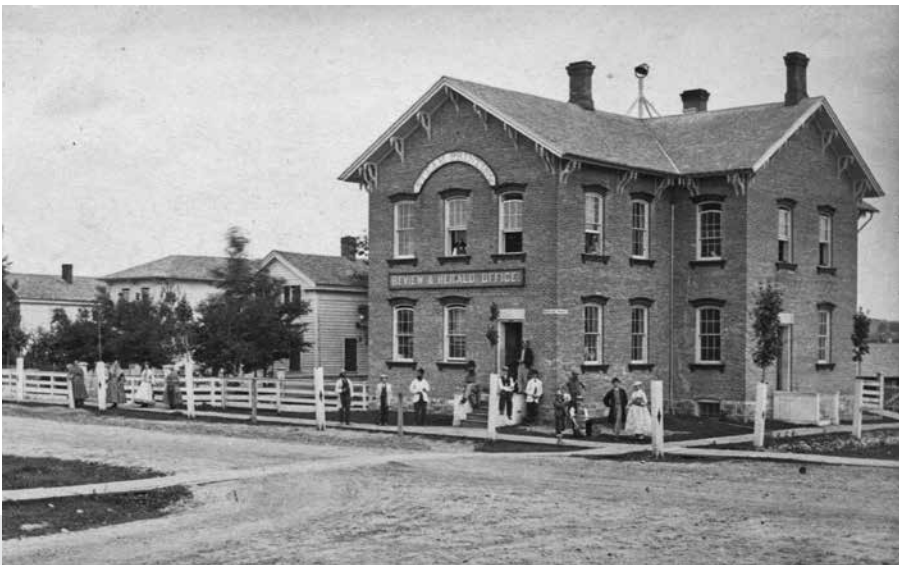
After John’s backhanded support, Merritt Cornell lodged his endorsement. That stirred James to further caution toward the very motion he hoped would pass, affirming his support to organize but opposing a creed.

“Let us suppose a case,” James began. “We get up a creed, stating just what we shall believe on this point and the other, and just what we shall do in reference to this thing



**Second Battle Creek Meeting House, where the  
denomination formed in 1860, 1861, and 1863**

Ellen G. White Estate



**Review and Herald (c. 1868)**

Ellen G. White Estate

and that, and say that we will believe the gifts too. But suppose the Lord, through the gifts, should give us some new light that did not harmonize with our creed; then, if we remain true to the gifts, it knocks our creed all over at once. Making a creed is setting the stakes, and barring up the way to all future advancement.”<sup>11</sup> He spoke with certainty, knowing the crowd was with him.

James continued, “God put the gifts into the church for a good and great object; but men who have got up their churches, have shut up the way or have marked out a course for the Almighty. They say virtually that the Lord must not do anything further than what has been marked out in the creed. A creed and the gifts thus stand in direct opposition to each other. Now what is our position as a people? The Bible is our creed. We reject everything in the form of a human creed. We take the Bible and the gifts of the Spirit; embracing the faith that thus the Lord will teach us from time to time. And in this we take a position against the formation of a creed. We are not taking one step, in what we are doing, toward becoming Babylon.”<sup>12</sup>

As one can tell, early Adventists were idealists and dreamers. They believed in the core of their faith fiercely and almost as fiercely in personal liberty. That combination made Adventism one of the most fertile missional movements of the time. It just needed a new frontier, with fresh soil and plenty of sun, to take fullest bloom. California was waiting.

At the same time that Michigan Adventists chose a name, pondered organizing, and formed a General Conference, West Coast Adventism would fasten its first tendrils to the shores of the San Francisco Bay. It would trade the molasses pace of Michigan for the reckless waves of a California Gold Rush.

The Seventh-day Adventist mission poised to burrow its roots deep in that California soil, nurtured by something Ellen dubbed “California liberality” and an openness one later critic called “western informality.” It all started in 1859 with a lumbering oxcart, a carpenter’s belt, and a small stack of papers.

1. Norma J. Collins, *Heartwarming Stories of the Pioneers*, book 1 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 2005), 114.
2. M. Ellsworth Olsen, *Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists*, 3rd ed. (Takoma Park, MD: Review and Herald®, 1932), 199–222.
3. Matilda Erickson Andross, *Story of the Advent Message* (Takoma Park, DC: Review and Herald®, 1926), 103–111.
4. Joseph Bates and Uriah Smith, “Michigan General Conference,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 18, no. 19, (October 8, 1861): 148, 149.
5. Joseph Bates and Uriah Smith, “Business Proceedings of B. C. Conference,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 16, no. 23 (October 23, 1860): 179.
6. Bates and Smith, “Michigan General Conference,” 148, 149.
7. Bates and Smith, 148.
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