

## Why Battle Creek?

James R. Nix

**F**or many years the name “Battle Creek” brought to mind for Adventists mental pictures of large institutional buildings such as the world-famous Battle Creek Sanitarium, the Review and Herald Publishing Company (reported to have once been the largest publishing business in the State of Michigan),<sup>1</sup> as well as the “Dime” Tabernacle (so named because Adventists were asked to contribute a dime a month to pay for its construction).<sup>2</sup> Memories of the photograph of Ellen White speaking in the “Dime” Tabernacle, and the fires that destroyed the sanitarium and the Review and Herald Publishing Company in 1902, also filled people’s minds. In short, the mention of “Battle Creek” to long-ago Adventists resulted in reactions as varied as were the pioneer men and women who lived, worked, and worshiped in this city.

But what were things really like here in the West End of Battle Creek a century or more ago? The following description is excerpted from an article originally published in the *Detroit News*, and subsequently reprinted in the June 8, 1891, issue of *The Signs of the Times*. Originally entitled “An Odd Community,” the article was retitled “What Others Say” in *Signs*.

For two days in the week—Saturday and Sunday—Battle Creek, Mich. is the funniest town on earth. Let a man wander about in . . . town, and then

saunter out to the west end, and he will wonder what is the matter. From the . . . rush of busy salesmen, which always marks the close of a week . . . , to the quiet that reigns . . . farther west, is indeed a contrast, for the west end is the possession of the Seventh-day Adventists, and Saturday is his Sabbath. On that day he rests from all his labors, and hallows every hour with calm communion and a sort of irritated wonder why all other men do not think as he does about a matter so plain. . . . He has the Scriptures at his fingers’ end, and at his tongue’s end, too, for that matter. . . . [He] will stop in the middle of a good meal and let his dinner get cold while he gives you proof, strong as Holy writ, that he is right and all dissenters are wrong.

But there is . . . [this] about him. He is a peaceable fellow, and . . . [he] is . . . industrious and orderly. . . . [He] has no . . . use for the frivolities of the world. . . . While he may feel . . . some . . . responsib[ility] for the spiritual welfare of his brother, yet he seems also to feel that he will preach a more eloquent sermon by a daily walk of rectitude than by the most flowery and persistent of harangues. He is as industrious as a Dunkard, as sober as a Quaker, as thrifty as a Jew, and mixes

his fervency of spirit with his diligence in business in a way that would have satisfied even the Apostle Paul. His religion is so intense, his faith is so close to him, so much a part of the breath he draws, and the food he eats, that he cannot be severed from it. He knows that . . . he must lead a pure life . . . and keep the body ready for the coming of the Lord, for He surely will come soon. He must abstain from all forms of alcohol, tobacco, opium, tea, coffee, and things of that sort. . . .

Think of a printing office employing 200 hands, where not one of them uses tobacco, where all . . . belong to the church, and spend . . . [thirty] minutes every . . . [Sunday] morning at prayer in the chapel just back of the composing room. . . . Think of the different preparations of grain [made by the sanitarium], all without sugar and salt. . . . Think of the intense devotion to church which pervades . . . the[ir] lives. . . .

These people are honest. A pair of new shoes was hanging against a mail box last Friday. Somebody had lost them, and the finder, not knowing anything better to do . . . , hung them up there. . . . They were there Saturday night, and they were there Monday morning. . . .

Yes, as the author of that long-ago article in the *Detroit Press* observed, “Take it altogether, Battle Creek is a curious place.”<sup>3</sup>

### Why Battle Creek?

How did we happen to come here—to this place—rather than to somewhere else? In short, why was the General Conference organized 150 years ago on May 21, 1863, in the original of this replicated building in which we are currently meeting?

For much of today, as well as tomorrow afternoon, we will look back at some of our church’s history. We will review the good and the not so good, including some of the really unfortunate things that happened here, as our various seminar speakers help us explore “Lessons From Battle Creek.” As we do so, the hope is that some of what we discover about our past will inform us as we move forward into the future.

But before delving into the lessons from our past, some background about this place called Battle Creek, as well as a few vignettes about things that happened here, might be helpful. Our story begins nearly thirty years before any seventh-day Sabbath keepers arrived here. In fact, it all started on March 14, 1825. On that day a skirmish occurred between two United States government contract surveyors and two Potawatomi Indians. That’s right, the origin of this city’s name is from a fight between just four men! The “battle”—if one dares to describe it as such—occurred along the small creek that the two surveyors, and their colleagues under the leadership of Col. John Mullett, later named “Battle” creek in honor of the so-called battle.<sup>4</sup>

Several years later, in 1831, Jonathan J. Guernsey (also referred to as John Guernsey), the first European-descent settler, cleared land and built a cabin near where the infamous “Battle” creek empties into the

Kalamazoo River, at a location within what today is the city of Battle Creek.<sup>5</sup> For a short time, what is now named Battle Creek was called Milton Township, and the post office was known as Garnsey, named for the first person who bought property in the new township.<sup>6</sup>

Erastus Hussey, an early settler who came here in 1838,<sup>7</sup> wanted to name the small but developing village Waupakisco. It was the name that an old Indian had told him was what the native people originally called the stream. But when the city incorporated in 1859, the majority of the voters preferred Battle Creek to Waupakisco, so Battle Creek is the name that in time became known worldwide.<sup>8</sup>

Another early settler was Sands McCamly, for whom the park across the street from the current Battle Creek Tabernacle is named. McCamly hoped that where the park is located would become the center of Battle Creek.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, that didn't happen. Among other things, McCamly dug a mill-race,<sup>10</sup> built a sawmill,<sup>11</sup> and started a bank.

### **The Bank of Battle Creek**

McCamly's Bank of Battle Creek was founded in 1838. Today it is remembered for being what is called a "wildcat" bank—meaning that the bank's financial obligations eventually outnumbered its assets (a situation caused by, among other things, issuing more bank notes than the bank had assets with which to cover their value. Some wildcat banks were established with no other intention than to defraud the unsuspecting public. Crooked "bankers" would print paper money with absolutely no legitimate assets to back it, and then circulate their valueless

bank notes to unsuspecting merchants and others).<sup>12</sup>

The story is reported that when a customer came into the Bank of Battle Creek to redeem bank notes issued by it, Tollman Hall, the cashier, would make a hasty exit out the bank's back door. In the meantime, the janitor was well trained to start briskly sweeping the floor, while at the same time whistling or singing loudly. Questions asked of the janitor by the unsuspecting customer were all answered in gibberish until finally the by-then totally disgusted person left without redeeming any of the bank's worthless paper money.

Another trick of the Bank of Battle Creek—as also happened with other banks at that time—was to borrow gold or silver coins from some nearby bank to show to the bank inspector when he came through making his rounds. For instance, as soon as the inspector had checked the financial assets of the bank in Marshall (located a few miles east of here), the same gold and silver coins would then be rushed to Battle Creek to be shown to the unsuspecting bank inspector when he arrived here. Again, once the inspector had checked this bank, the same gold and silver coins would next be rushed to the bank in Kalamazoo (a few miles to the west) so that everything would appear in order when the inspector got there. Little wonder that by 1839 the Bank of Battle Creek was out of business!<sup>13</sup> Despite many citizens in the fledgling community being seriously hurt financially when the bank went under, Sands McCamly continued on to become a state senator and his name remains well known today as one of the cofounders of Battle Creek.<sup>14</sup>

### Other challenges in early Michigan

Banking wasn't the only challenge in the early days. Travel was difficult. Dirt roads and the absence of accurate directional signs were problematic enough. But the situation was compounded each spring when the ground thawed out. Muddy roads became virtually impassable. Log or plank toll roads helped some,<sup>15</sup> but the wood used to construct the log roads soon rotted. And thanks to Michigan's many swamps, in addition to the rotting log roads, the wet bogs also bred mosquitoes, thus causing malaria to be rampant. Nearly everyone had it, though nobody then knew what caused it. Malaria was so common that people referred to it as the "Michigan shakes."<sup>16</sup> In fact, many years later, in 1881, James White died in the Battle Creek Sanitarium of "pernicious malarial fever,"<sup>17</sup> and Ellen White also almost died at that same time.<sup>18</sup>

### Joseph Bates's first visits to Michigan

Even so, despite its humble beginnings, Battle Creek would become world famous due much in part, one can argue, to the arrival of Sabbath-keeping Adventists.

The specific background for why we are meeting here in Battle Creek rather than somewhere else for this anniversary observance has its origins in an 1852 visit to this place by Joseph Bates. The population at the time was estimated at something between 1,000<sup>19</sup> and 2,000 people.

In 1849, Elder Bates first visited the State of Michigan. On that trip he traveled as far west as Jackson (about 48 miles, or 77 kilometers, east of Battle Creek). While in Jackson, Elder Bates convinced Dan Palmer, a blacksmith,<sup>20</sup> and his wife, Abigail,<sup>21</sup> regarding the

seventh-day Sabbath. During Bates's visit to Jackson, he also converted Cyrenius Smith.<sup>22</sup>

Three years later Bates again traveled to Michigan, where he visited Jackson and stayed with the Palmers in their home. While in Jackson, Bates also met young Merritt Cornell, who with Bates then converted John Preston Kellogg (the father of John Harvey and Will Keith Kellogg) and Henry Lyon, as well as their wives.<sup>23</sup> According to Bates, three of the men were teachers; Lyon was not. Bates also reported that all four "feel the burden of the third angel's message."<sup>24</sup>

From Jackson, Bates made his first trip further west to Battle Creek. He described to the Palmers a dream about sailing to a place called Battle Creek. Being a retired sea captain, it is little wonder that Bates's dream included sailing to a destination. Palmer informed Bates that in fact a place called Battle Creek did exist some forty miles to the west of Jackson. That decided it for Bates; he resolved to take the early morning train to Battle Creek.<sup>25</sup>

### David Hewitt—the most honest man in town

While traveling here from Jackson, Bates was praying and wondering about how best to introduce himself once he arrived in Battle Creek. Somewhere along the way he felt impressed to ask the postmaster to direct him to the most honest man in town. Bates thought that if a man is honest and hears truth, he would accept it.

The postmaster was a man named Leonard Stewart.<sup>26</sup> Upon locating him, Bates asked, "Who's the most honest man in your town?" Without hesitation Stewart replied, "David Hewitt!" Hewitt was a Presbyterian in his religious convictions and a peddler by trade.

He had a cart that he took around town selling pots, pans, dishes, matches, needles and thread, and other things of a similar nature that the housewives in the village needed.

During the course of conducting his business, Hewitt earned the nickname “Penny Hewitt.” At night, when back home going over the accounts from his sales that day, if he discovered that he had overcharged someone by as little as one cent, he would promptly return the extra amount to the customer.

After thanking the postmaster, Bates walked to the home of David and Olive Hewitt, located on Van Buren Street. Knocking on their door, Bates told the man who answered, “I have been told that you are the most honest man in town; if true, I have important information to share with you.” The Hewitts were just sitting down for breakfast. As people did in those days, they invited Bates to join them for breakfast, telling him that afterward they would listen to whatever he wanted to share with them.

The meal completed, and having discovered that what Bates wanted to share was religious in nature, the Hewitts invited him to conduct morning worship. Hanging his prophetic chart on the wall, Bates began. Worship lasted all day! By five o’clock that afternoon, both David and Olive Hewitt had accepted the Sabbath as well as the other teachings of the fledgling Sabbath-keeping Adventist movement.<sup>27</sup> Later, in August 1852, Elder Joseph Bates had the privilege of baptizing the Hewitts in Jackson, Michigan, where Dan and Abigail Palmer lived.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, back here in Battle Creek the Hewitt’s home soon became the meeting place for the first Sabbath keepers in this village.<sup>29</sup> By

1855 there were ten families consisting of twenty-four members who met in David and Olive’s home.<sup>30</sup>

### **James and Ellen White visit Battle Creek**

In 1853, James and Ellen White made their first trip to Battle Creek. They were traveling with twenty-one-year-old Elder John Loughborough. Ten local Sabbath keepers met in the Hewitt home on June 6, 1853, the Sabbath when Loughborough and the Whites were present. Seven other Sabbath keepers also attended, so they had a larger than normal congregation that day. James White is reported to have said, “Brethren, I am persuaded that if the few in Battle Creek are faithful, there will yet be quite a company of Sabbath-keepers here.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Joseph Frisbie arrives in Battle Creek**

Later, in the fall of 1853, Elder Joseph B. Frisbie and his family came to town. He had a similar experience to that of Joseph Bates, except this time the new postmaster, Alonzo Noble,<sup>32</sup> was asked by Frisbie if there was anyone in Battle Creek who was a Sabbath keeper. The postmaster responded, David Hewitt. And so the Frisbies headed off to find the Hewitts, who warmly welcomed them.<sup>33</sup> Elder Frisbie was known as the “marrying preacher” because he had been ordained by another denomination before becoming a Sabbath keeper. Consequently, he could legally perform marriages.<sup>34</sup>

### **First evangelistic tent**

An important first in our church’s history happened in Battle Creek in 1854. The decision was made to acquire a tent for doing evangelism. Millerite Adventists had used

evangelistic tents a decade or more earlier, but up to that time Sabbath-keeping Adventists had not. After making some inquiries, it was discovered that a tent would cost about \$200. The first person who was asked if he would give any money toward acquiring a tent in which to do evangelism was Charles Glover; he immediately handed James White \$35. Others such as Cyrenius Smith, J. P. Kellogg, and Dan Palmer also contributed. In fact, Kellogg offered to loan the entire amount so the tent could be purchased right then. Very shortly sufficient funds had been collected to buy the first tent.

Immediately after the funds had been raised, Merritt Cornell went to Rochester, New York, to see E. C. Williams, an Adventist tentmaker. Williams also made sails for ships, and similar things. It was Williams who had made the large Millerite tent. Although Williams was a Sunday-keeping Adventist, he was a very sincere person and was thrilled to think that he could sell a tent to someone who would use it to preach the soon return of Jesus. The 60-foot (18.3-meter) diameter tent he offered had been used for ten days at a state fair, so he offered to sell it to Kellogg for \$160. Included was a banner with the motto, "What Is Truth?" The tent was brought to Battle Creek and pitched on the corner of Tompkins and Van Buren. In later years, the name of Tompkins Street changed, so today where the first Sabbath-keeping Adventist tent was initially pitched is the southeast corner of United Way and Van Buren.

The meeting opened on June 10, 1854, just two days after the tent's arrival in Battle Creek from Rochester. As it was being pitched, Alonzo Noble, the new postmaster, came to see what was happening. He then

urged everyone to attend the meetings. The first two evangelists were John Loughborough and Merritt Cornell. Years later Elder Loughborough recalled that they had a large audience because the postmaster urged everyone to come listen to them preach.<sup>35</sup>

### **A place to meet—the first meetinghouse**

The first Adventist meetinghouse erected in Battle Creek was built on property owned by Elder J. B. Frisbie at the northwest corner of Van Buren and Cass Streets.<sup>36</sup> There were twenty-four Sabbath keepers in Battle Creek by the time it was built in early 1855. The building was small, approximately 18 by 24 feet (or approximately 6 by 8 meters), and cost \$300 to build. They called it the "House of Prayer."<sup>37</sup> That is how things were in late 1855 when James White arrived from Rochester, New York, bringing thirteen others with him.<sup>38</sup> With fourteen newcomers, it wasn't long before they needed a larger meetinghouse.

### **Our first publishing house**

James White's decision to move to Battle Creek in late 1855 resulted from his realization that something had to be done regarding the printing press. At the time, Elder White was its sole proprietor. What concerned him was his health. He was tired, or more accurately, he was exhausted. In short, he was run down from overwork. And with his health not good, he knew that if he died the press would go to his heirs and not to those who had contributed funds for its purchase and operation.

Such concerns caused him to begin to investigate where best to relocate the church's fledgling printing operation. He

first investigated Vermont. In early 1855 the members from there sent Elder White \$492. That act of tangible support looked very promising to him. Not to be outdone, the members in Michigan made a counter-proposal. Their offer intrigued Elder White. Before deciding which one to accept, he traveled to Vermont to allow the Sabbath keepers there to present their case. They were so convincing that he announced that unless a better offer was received, the printing press would be moving to Vermont. In his announcement in the *Review*, Elder White repeated his earlier statement that he must escape the heavy load that was destroying his health. Besides, as he reminded his readers, responsibility for the publishing work was not his alone but was that of all Sabbath-keeping Adventists.

By the end of August Elder White was questioning whether Vermont actually was the best place for the printing press to be relocated. Shortly thereafter he wrote to Abram Dodge, a friend in Michigan, telling Dodge that he had chosen Michigan as the place where the press should be located. What had changed Elder White's mind?

After visiting Vermont, Elder White visited the members in Michigan. There he learned that if the press was moved to that state, four members would contribute \$300 each in order to erect a small two-story, wood-frame building in which to house the press and publishing office. In addition, it was agreed that the local members would take responsibility for the operation of the press, including establishing a committee to oversee the work. Also, a new editor would be elected, and a finance committee would be established. And finally, it was agreed that

James White would keep ownership of the current inventory of books to repay him for all the money that he personally had been putting into operating the press.

Despite these assurances, James White assumed that nothing much would happen before the spring of 1856. How mistaken he was!<sup>39</sup> Very quickly the 25 by 35-foot (approximately 8 by 12-meter) publishing house was erected. The Washington hand-press was placed in a large wood crate and shipped from Rochester to Battle Creek. The first issue of the *Review and Herald* printed in Battle Creek was dated December 4, 1855. And 23-year-old Uriah Smith was installed as editor of the paper.

This all happened due to the visionary support of four laymen: Henry Lyon, the person who originally conceived the idea of moving the press to Battle Creek; John Preston Kellogg, Cyrenius Smith, and Dan Palmer. The first three men all moved to Battle Creek; Palmer continued to live in Jackson, Michigan, where he was a blacksmith. Each had invested \$300 to build the \$1200 press building.<sup>40</sup> And, yes, *invested* is the correct word to describe at least Dan Palmer's mindset when he volunteered to help support the new press building. Palmer never spoke of giving. Whenever a need arose, to him it was always an "investment." He would eagerly say, "I must have an investment in that,"<sup>41</sup> and his money would be forthcoming to support the project. Whatever the precise terminology, Palmer's attitude typified the generosity of each of the four men who were instrumental in causing the printing press to be located in Battle Creek.