Historical Introduction

James [Springer] White, 1821-1881, is one of the three recognized co-founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Noted as a preacher, organizer, and administrator, White has been called the “apostle” of Adventism, the “Moses” of the movement, and “the recognized leader among the founders.” Life Incidents relates his early life, the biblical basis of his beliefs, and the story of his career in Millerism and Sabbatarian Adventism to 1868. This reprint of his mid-life autobiography provides a new generation of readers with an open window into his remarkable life and contributions to American Christianity.

But, we need to ask, Who is this man? To date there have been two adult biographies and one for young people. Virgil E. Robinson’s James White (1976) is rich in anecdotes derived from both oral and written primary sources, and gives a rather comprehensive account of White’s lifework and relationships to his contemporaries. Though Robinson was James White’s great-grandson, he was wary of hagiography and sought to provide an accurate portrait of his subject. His work gently but frankly explores such sensitive areas as James White’s relationships to Ellen (usually positive), to his son Edson (often rocky), and to his colleagues in ministry and administration. Robinson points out that all of White’s personal relationships were exacerbated in his later years by intensifying bouts of stroke-induced depression.

Being released concurrently with this reprint of Life Incidents is a biography by Gerald Wheeler. James White: Innovator and Overcomer utilizes a chronological and “historical framework” for its treatment of White’s achievements and contributions, but is “more interested in how certain personality traits and events shaped him as a man and leader.” It would overstate the contrast between the two works to say that Robinson examines White’s personality as one aspect of his history, whereas Wheeler examines White’s history in order to illuminate his personality, but the two works do complement rather than duplicate each other. Wheeler’s is less detailed about the minutiae of the chronological history in order to be more detailed about James White’s personal relationships and the light they shed on his personality.
Margaret Rossiter Thiele’s *By Saddle and Sleigh* narrates for young people White’s first 25 years, through his marriage to Ellen Harmon in 1846.\(^{12}\) Not to be overlooked is Arthur White’s six-volume biography of Ellen White. The first three volumes of that work also include extensive information about her husband.\(^{13}\) Briefer accounts of White’s life are found in the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* and in all histories of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, for which some reference to James White and his foundational contributions is essential. In addition, such works as Kraid Ashbaugh’s thesis and Andrew Mustard’s dissertation, are illustrative of the wealth of material available on various aspects of James White’s career, achievements, and theology.\(^{14}\) To provide the reader a clearer picture of the man, James White, a brief outline of his life is here given, drawn from the existing biographies.

## James White’s Life

White was born in Palmyra Township, Maine, on August 4, 1821. In early childhood, impaired eyesight kept him from attending school. Instead, he worked full time on his father’s farm. Years of farm labor greatly strengthened his general health. At age 19, improving eyesight permitted him to enter elementary school with the first-graders, and by twelve weeks of studying night and day, White claims, he passed the grammar-school exams and received a certificate to teach “the common branches” of elementary education (reading, writing, and arithmetic).\(^ {15}\) For the next two years he combined teaching with a relentless pursuit of further education. He had college in view when Millerite Adventism interrupted his plans. As he encountered in a fresh way the claims of Jesus Christ, his passion for education was superseded by a greater passion to prepare himself and others for the Second Coming of Christ. He first shared his convictions with his students and their parents. Then he borrowed a horse and held public lectures in district school houses and churches around his hometown. Finally, he was invited to address churches of the Christian Connection denomination in Eastern Maine. In one six-week period, White tells us, he gave his lecture series in twelve different churches, leading to the conversion of 1000 people.\(^ {16}\)

Following the Great Disappointment of October 1844, White was one of those who maintained the conviction that God had led in the Millerite movement and began to search the Scriptures for a deeper understanding of the Millerite “Midnight Cry” and disappointment.\(^ {17}\) Two who shared this belief were Ellen G. Harmon, seventeen years of age and five years his junior, and Joseph Bates, 29 years his senior. By the end of 1846, Ellen had