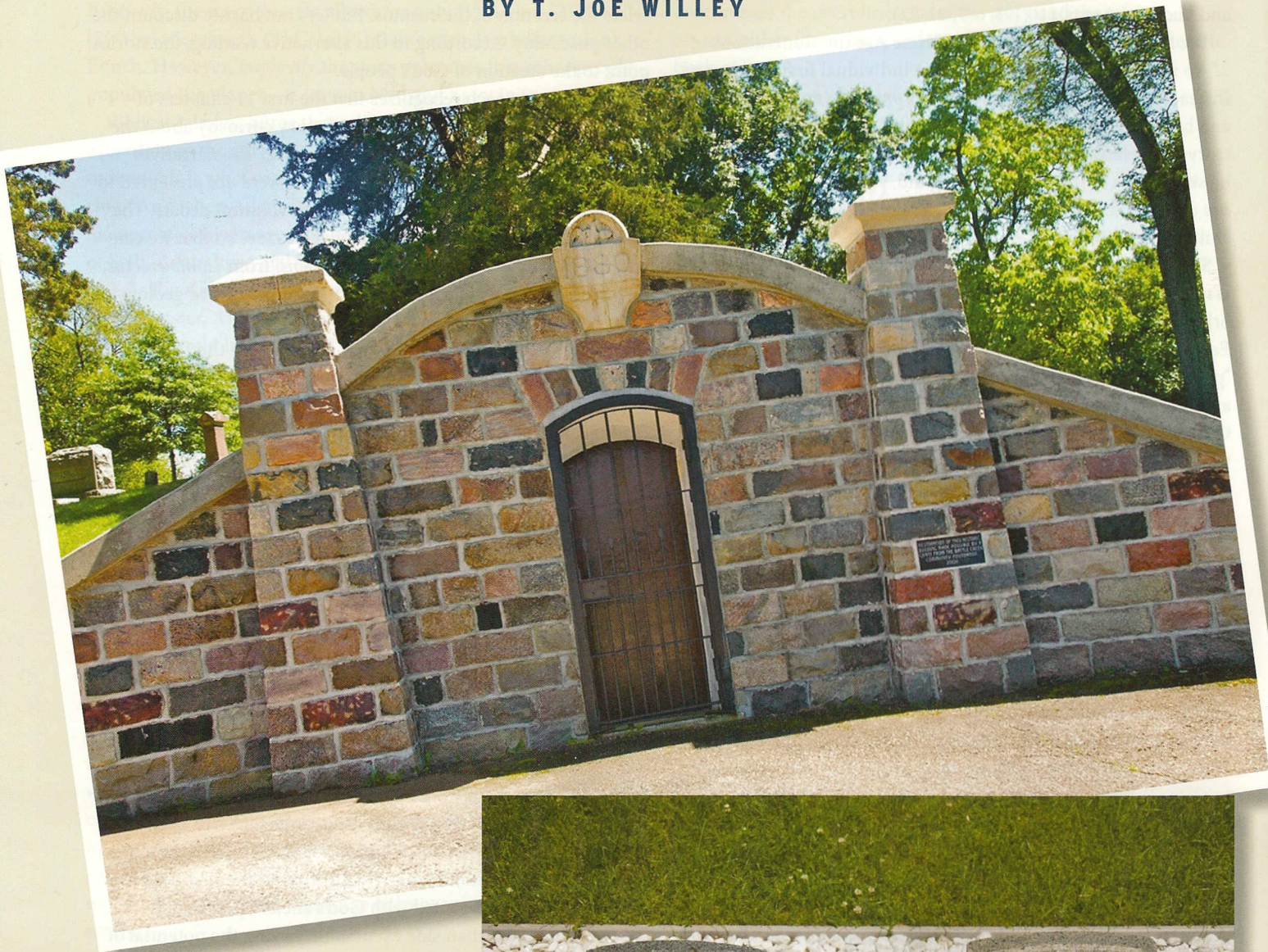


# An Adventist H

BY T. JOE WILLEY



The coffins of Adventist pioneers James and Ellen White were held in this vault at Oak Hill Cemetery in Battle Creek, Michigan, before being secretly opened and then resealed for final burial nearby.





# Historical Puzzle

## THE DELAYED BURIALS OF JAMES AND ELLEN WHITE

“It is the distinction of our days that the Church in America has enjoyed the teachings of two later prophetesses. Mrs. Eddy, founder of the Christian Science Church, and Mrs. Ellen G. White, leader and teacher of the Seventh-day Adventists, both lived and died in comfort and honor, surrounded by their admiring followers. Many of Mrs. Eddy’s disciples believed she would never die, and Mrs. White hoped to be one of those who would be taken up alive to meet the Lord in the air.”

—*New York Independent*, Aug. 23, 1915, as quoted by Arthur L. White. Also published in *The Later Elmshaven Years*, Vol. 6, Review & Herald Publishing Association, p. 443, and in *The Advent Review & Sabbath Herald*, Sept. 2, 1915.

Following the sorrowful funeral and graveside services of Elder James White, and unbeknownst to the departed mourners who had melted away after the graveside burial Aug. 13, 1881, his coffin was removed and transported down the hill to the receiving vault near the entrance of the Battle Creek Oak Hill Cemetery. There it was stored. Then again at night, 10 days later, White’s eldest surviving son, James Edson White, along with William H. Hall, chief steward of Sanitarium Improvement Company, returned to the vault and opened the casket. They then resealed it and transported it back up the hill to the family gravesite. At last, Elder James White was buried.

Thirty-four years later on July 24, 1915, following the funeral of Ellen White—which was the largest in Battle Creek history—“The remains of our dear sister were tenderly and silently lowered into the grave to rest beside the body of her husband, Elder James White.”<sup>1</sup> But this was not exactly true. After the mourners departed, her coffin was removed from the gravesite and transported down the hill to the same cemetery vault. There her remains were stored above ground for more than 30 days, well into August. On Aug. 26, Edson White returned to the cemetery along with a witness and unsealed the coffin. After observing the condition of his mother, he closed the coffin, took her remains up the hill to the family plot, and at long last Ellen White was “lowered into the grave.”

### Mystery of the Clandestine Interments

These raw facts regarding the interruptions of the burials of both James and Ellen White remained a secret until 1973. In that year, Mrs. Alta Robinson, the wife of Virgil Robinson, a great-grandson

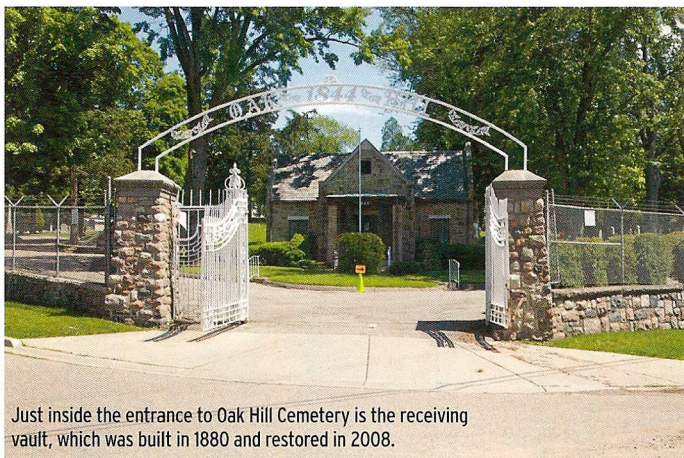
of Ellen White who was then employed by the Ellen G. White Estate, came across a revealing letter written Oct. 15, 1915, by Edson to his brother William C. White.

The first paragraph of Edson’s letter read: “You asked in regard to mother’s burial. I think I explained this to you fully stating that we went to the grounds about three weeks after the funeral and we saw her placed in the grave that had been prepared for her. Of course her face had changed considerably, and yet she was preserved as well as I could expect. When we went to the cemetery Sister Isreal (sic) took me over in her auto...Everything went off smoothly, and occupied but little time.”<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Robinson, like most everyone else, believed that Mrs. White was buried in full view of all of the mourners on July 24, 1915, as described in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* and in the Battle Creek newspapers. Three weeks later would put the actual burial into the month of August. To pursue the matter further, Mrs. Robinson sent a letter to the Battle Creek Cemetery sexton and asked him if he knew anything about this interruption in the burial of Ellen White. Since the sexton had no personal knowledge of the matter, but thinking who might know, he passed the Robinson letter to Mark Bovee, a grandson of Uriah Smith. Bovee was living in Battle Creek and served as press secretary for the Tabernacle Church.

Bovee was also actively collecting Adventist history associated with his venerable grandfather. At the time of Ellen White’s funeral, he was 15 years old but could not recall any of the details of her burial. However, as a frequent contributor to the Battle Creek newspapers on church and community affairs, Bovee had





Just inside the entrance to Oak Hill Cemetery is the receiving vault, which was built in 1880 and restored in 2008.

interviewed several elderly people who were present at the burial. Following up, he wrote to Mrs. Robinson about eyewitnesses who possibly could fill in more details.

Mrs. Edith Childs (age 32 at the time of the funeral) said that she “saw the casket being lowered and dirt was thrown on it, as is sometimes the custom.” Another eyewitness, Mr. L.C. Coulston (age 36 in 1915), also “distinctly remembered that Sister White was buried on the spot, immediately following the graveside service.”<sup>3</sup> These two eyewitnesses convinced Bovee (for a short time) that Edson had confused his participation in extracting his father’s coffin and reburying it back in 1881. Still, the October 1915 date on the letterhead remained troubling, since it only described his mother’s delayed burial. Was she also secretly removed from her grave?

At first Bovee wrote to Robinson that the solution to the dilemma found in Edson’s letter could be solved by reaching back to the delayed burial of James White described in the 1881 diary of William H. Hall, which had just come into his possession.<sup>4</sup> To make his point, Bovee quoted from the Hall diary in answering Robinson’s question. The entry was taken from Aug. 23, 1881: “Tonight I went to J.E. White and we went to Oak Hill and we moved the remains of Eld. White from the vault to the grave. We opened the casket and took a last look until the morn of resurrection. Rest in peace, war worn soldier, sleep on.”

This was 10 days after the burial account in the *Review*. Bovee went on to explain that he thought the interruption of the burial was because James White had died suddenly and perhaps his burial plot had not been purchased yet. The problem with that explanation is that James White and John Loughborough together purchased the White family plot back in 1861, 20 years earlier. Had Bovee known this fact, his speculation could not account for the 10-day “reburial” of James White.

## Arthur White Reaction

Arthur White, grandson of James and Ellen, devoted his life to the White Estate and, when shown the Edson letter, he admitted that he was surprised by the implications of this interruption. It could focus an embarrassing spotlight on the circumstances between the very public burials and some kind of clandestine interruption. He took the unusual step of writing an internal memorandum dated Nov. 4, 1974.<sup>5</sup> In that memorandum, he noted how he had dealt with “rumors that Ellen G. White was not buried in the Oak Hill Cemetery on the day of her funeral.” Each time he had “categorically denied that her burial was any different than what might have been anticipated ... she was buried in the Oak Hill Cemetery on the day of her funeral.” He stated that the White Estate had been “unable to track down any other information that would support the J.E. White statement. At no time was the matter of how Ellen was buried discussed by W.C. White [Arthur’s father] in his conversations with me. I have never heard it mentioned in the family.” He reasoned that that if the facts were true, his own guess was that the “body was kept under lock and key to prevent possible exhuming by the curious, particularly Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, for an examination of her brain.” Kellogg did not attend the funeral and was on his way to the Pan American Exhibition in San Francisco and a Race Betterment Conference at the time.

Within a few months after Arthur White’s memorandum, Bovee went to the Oak Hill Cemetery, where the official burial records were kept. The cemetery records go back to the origin of the cemetery in 1844. After pulling up the leather-bound volume for 1915, Bovee discovered that Edson was correct. According to the cemetery records, Mrs. White’s casket was transferred to the vault on July 24 and remained there until August 26. Thus the actual date for burying Mrs. White was not July 24, as reported by the *Review* and the newspapers, but rather in August, 34 days later. Mrs. White’s casket was the only one in storage in the vault throughout 1915. Bovee made copies of these records and sent them to Ronald Graybill and Arthur White at the White Estate.<sup>6</sup>

At this time, Arthur White was focused on refuting charges of plagiarism and overuse of literary assistance in the writings of Ellen White. After receiving the copies of the burial records, he wrote to Bovee thanking him for his efforts: “You write of the fact that Ellen White was not placed in the grave until about three weeks after her funeral. I appreciate the data you have sent to us on this. The whole thing was rather incredible to me, but I think there is ample evidence to support what seem to be the facts. Thank you for going to the trouble to investigate the matter thoroughly there.”<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, we will never know what Arthur White meant



by “what seem to be the facts.” Was he referring to “facts” in the *Review* and his long-held view or Bovee’s recent vault storage information? This group of documents describing the circumstances of the deferred burials remained in the White Estate, with only a few people being aware of them. In the course of writing his six-volume biography of Ellen White, Arthur White included no mention concerning the events associated with the delayed burials of either James or Ellen White, not even a footnote.<sup>8</sup> Nor did Virgil Robinson note this information in his biography of James White published in 1976.<sup>9</sup>

What could have been the motivation for secretly removing the bodies of James and Ellen White from their graves after the assembled leaders and devotees in the thousands had come to Battle Creek to witness and appreciate the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

### **The Religious Worldview of Early Adventism**

To address this interesting question, we begin by distinguishing the pioneers and people in the past as essentially different from our own time. Descriptions of everyday miracles, specific

Would I have him suffer all this over again? No, no. I would in no case call him from his restful sleep to a life of toil and pain. He will rest until the morning of the resurrection,”<sup>11</sup> which she, of course, believed was not far off.

There are a number of common or physical explanations that come to mind that might explain the interruptions of these two burials. We’ll cover a few. Coffins were stored in the vault during the winter waiting for the ground to thaw. That explanation obviously does not apply here. On rare occasions when family members had to come from a great distance, a coffin might be held in the vault to allow them a final viewing before burial. This was not an issue for either James or Ellen White. Both funerals were held a week after death attended by family. There was no legal request to conduct an autopsy. Safety of the coffins or mutilation of the remains was never an issue. There was no legal reason or questions about the ownership of the plots to delay the burial. The coffins were not held in the vault because of fear of premature burials, since both James and Ellen White were embalmed and their public burials took place a week later. Finally, if you think about other physical reasons,

## **In that memorandum, he noted how he had dealt with “rumors that Ellen G. White was not buried in the Oak Hill Cemetery on the day of her funeral.”**

manifestations of God’s presence, and even heavenly journeys and purported resurrections were more common in 19<sup>th</sup>-century and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Adventism than today.<sup>10</sup> For instance, Mrs. White in reference to early fanaticism in the followers to Millerism described circumstances where a “dead child was left unburied; for a ‘sign’ had been given that it would be raised from the dead.”<sup>9</sup> Mrs. White herself certainly must have thought resurrection or translation was possible for her late husband, soon after he passed away in 1881.

Before his funeral, one of the leading brethren, who thought a great deal of the leadership of Elder White and could not see how the church would function without him, came to Mrs. White and urged her to appeal to God to raise her husband from the dead. “Do not let them bury him,” he implored, “but pray to the Lord, that He may bring him to life again.” After reflecting on the request, Mrs. White said no. “He had done his work ...

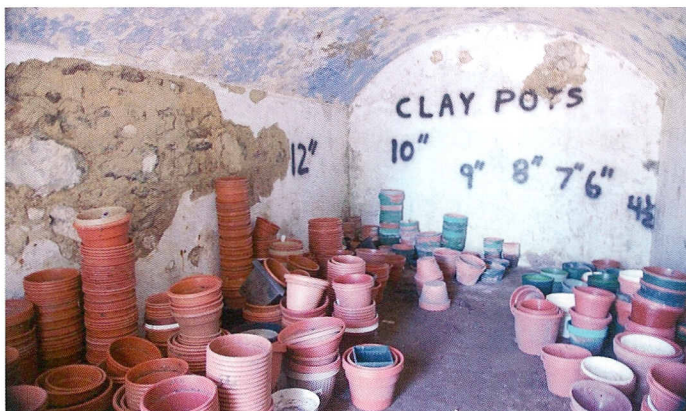
none of them require secrecy. There are not an infinite number of generalizations that are consistent with the limited set of observations.

### **Historical Facts Prompt a Theory**

We may never know why the James and Ellen White caskets were removed after the public melted away and then quietly, without telling anyone—including members of the family and church leaders—stored above ground, then opened after a delay, and returned to the final resting place. It sounds bizarre to say the least. But based on the fact patterns, we can construct a reasonable theory that underlies the scenarios.

In offering an explanation as to what motivated both acts, first recall the similarities in the burial interruptions of both parents. We know the coffins were removed to the receiving vault in secret. And in both it was most likely son Edson White who





Today the vault at Battle Creek's Oak Hill Cemetery is used to store pots.

directed the removals. Before reburial he is joined by a witness or confidant and superintends the reburials outside of public view. What is the most likely explanation for his behavior?


Edson thought of himself as an honorable man, son of the co-founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. But Edson's early years were troubled and his youth unpredictable. He "was happy-go-lucky in character, living for the moment." As he became older, to his anguish he was never accepted by church leaders or respected like his younger brother William. Growing up he abandoned the Church, then at mid-life he returned to the Church.<sup>12</sup> Edson probably revealed his true inner life in these burial interruptions. Living with his parents, he had been deeply exposed to the Bible. Might he have come to expect a full resurrection of his parents, just as in ancient times? The basic ideas that govern our thoughts in everyday life can show themselves, as it did here in this instance.

I propose that Edson believed his worthy father and mother could be translated by God. But to make this determination would be more difficult after the caskets were buried. So he decided to hold the coffins in the vault for a time to see if early rapture had occurred. But removing each coffin to the vault and lifting the casket lid to observe whether or not the remains were still there would require a witness, someone he could trust. Edson needed to demonstrate that he did not remove the body himself and then fabricate a resurrection story.

An interesting aspect of this theory is that it provides an insight into the personality of Edson White. When peeled away, it can be argued that he had great respect for his parents. After his father did not turn up missing over the course of 10 days, he may have thought his mother had a greater possibility and hence he waited three times longer before reburying her. Finding both physical remains, it was simply better for both brothers to not talk about it with others, including family.

Perhaps even more interesting is that this theory might open a new window into the ethos of those who were active participants in the world of Adventism as practiced during the times of James

and Ellen White. Certainly some 19<sup>th</sup>-century religious ideas are less visible in our own times.

Could this theory be wrong? Of course; direct evidence is missing. But the theory has the convenience of argument, because what happened was clandestine and the negative outcomes could not be revealed; it also exposes the unconstrained inner world of Edson, in his hopes of moving into the inner circle of respect among church leaders like his brother. Generally speaking, the White Estate does not suffer from a lack of details about the lives of both James and Ellen White. But here was an important gap in the history of the family. If the White Estate had a more convincing explanation, we would no doubt have heard it by now. 

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<sup>1</sup>The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, Aug. 5, 1915, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup>In W.C. White letter file on microfilm at Loma Linda University Heritage Center, Loma Linda California.

<sup>3</sup>Mark L. Bovee to Mrs. V.E. Robinson, April 29, 1973, Mark Bovee (Collection 146), Center for Adventist Research in the James White Library at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

<sup>4</sup>Wm H. Hall Diary is from Box 11, folder 9, Mark Bovee (Collection 146), Center for Adventist Research in the James White Library at Andrews University. Wm. H. Hall first appeared in the Review in the 1870s as a member of the Minnesota Conference Committee. Next time he showed up as nominated to the Board of Trustees of the Educational Society in Battle Creek in 1880 along with other prominent leaders, including Elders Uriah Smith, George Butler, and James White along with Prof. Brownsberger, G.W. Gage, H.W. Kellogg, and O.B. Jones. In 1884 he was placed as a board member and secretary of the Health Reform Institute and in 1886 as treasurer of the Sanitarium Improvement Company. His diary entries do not appear to be a forgery. The sentences were written in the same handwriting, they were short entries, some words were abbreviated, and there was no evidence that the entries were interpolated at a later date. The diary appeared to be written at the moment (end of each day), and historical data included in the diary checks against events taking place at Battle Creek, in the State of Michigan, and nationally. There does not appear to be any reason to distrust the reburial entry on August 23, 1881. He used the same description "worn-out soldier" a term that was in vogue for James White at the time of his death. The vault referred to by Hall was constructed in 1880, so it had been in use about a year.

<sup>5</sup>Arthur L. White, memorandum titled "Ellen G. White—Question of Deferred Burial," Nov. 4, 1974, Loma Linda University Heritage Center, Loma Linda, California.

<sup>6</sup>Letter from Mark Bovee to Ron Graybill, March 14, 1975, Center for Adventist Research in the James White Library at Andrews University.

<sup>7</sup>Arthur White to Mark Bovee, April 1, 1976, Center for Adventist Research in the James White Library at Andrews University.

<sup>8</sup>Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Lonely Years*, Vol. 3, 1984, also published in *The Later Elmhaven Years*, Vol. 6., 1982, p. 353.

<sup>9</sup>Virgil Robinson, *James White*, Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1976.

<sup>10</sup>Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances & Visions*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

<sup>11</sup>*Manuscript Release*, Vol. 7, p. 419, The White Estates Archives. Also published as Ellen White letter 396-06 written to "Sister Belden" on Dec. 25, 1906, and in Ellen G. White, *The Retirement Years*, Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1990, p. 164.

<sup>12</sup>Jerry Allen Moon, *W.C. White and Ellen G. White*, Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993, p. 43.