

John Ogilvie Stevenson (1841-1912). John Ogilvie Stevenson, teacher of the freedmen in Port Lavaca and Galveston, Texas, was born on June 10, 1841, in Bannockburn, Scotland to Alex Stevenson and Mary Ogilvie Stevenson.

As a young man Stevenson labored in coal mines, worked in a woolen mill, and later learned the trade of tanner and currier, being employed at his uncle's firm of Ogilvie & Duchart. However, wages in Scotland were not enough to realize his dream of a higher education. In 1865, he traveled to Canada finding his way to Rice Lake, Minnesota, where he worked for a farmer. He also taught for a short while in a country school and took employment at a bank in St. Paul. Stevenson's forbearers were preachers and elders of the Presbyterian Church thus the Christian religion and serving others had been at the core of his boyhood. When he learned that the American Missionary Association, working with the Freedmen's Bureau, was recruiting men and women to teach the freed slaves in the southern states, he signed up.

In March 1867, Stevenson was sent by the AMA to [Port] Lavaca, Texas, where he held classes for seventy "scholars" in the upper story of an old warehouse. With the promise of money from the bureau, and the financial assistance of a few local businessmen, he began construction of a building to serve as a school and church. However, the bureau funds never materialized and Stevenson and his pupils were forced to hold classes in the unfinished building. The project was finally completed with the help of sponsoring churches in the north. During Stevenson's tenure in Lavaca he slept for months with a revolver under his pillow due to threats by the Ku Klux Klan. He became sick "almost unto death" with yellow fever, and nursed back to life again only by the tender love and care of his colored friends.

In the fall of 1869, Stevenson was asked to serve as principal of the Barnes Institute in Galveston, replacing Sarah Barnes who left to marry the captain of the brig Florence. Miss Barnes had campaigned for funds to build a two story, brick school house which was still being constructed when Stevenson took over. He and two other AMA teachers, Miss Skinner and Miss Williams, continued teaching in a colored Baptist church until January 3rd when classes commenced in the new building. During his tenure in Galveston, a number of teachers worked under Stevenson, including Anna Keen from Wisconsin.

By January of 1871, Stevenson had gained recognition for not only his well-run institute, but for his summer travels at the request of the bureau superintendent of schools resulting in additional schools for the freedmen. Confident that he was a good candidate for state superintendent of schools, Stevenson petitioned to Governor Davis for the position and garnered some impressive signatures including that of State Senator George Ruby and Congressman William Sinclair. He also received the endorsement of the Republican Association of Galveston. However, Governor Davis appointed Jacob Carlos DeGress who yielded a more "powerful political influence."

Stevenson continued as principal of the Barnes Institute until the end of the school year of 1872, when he left Texas to pursue his dream of a higher education. He entered Yale University that fall and in 1875, after earning a B.D. degree, he and Anna Keen were married.

Stevenson served as minister in Congregational churches in Ellsworth, Connecticut; and Shenandoah and Waterloo, Iowa. He later received a B. A. degree from Oberlin College and, in

1892, was honored with a D.D. degree from Tabor College. He and Anna had seven children, four of whom lived to adulthood. Anna Keen Stevenson died May 21st, 1888, eight months after the death of her infant son, Louis. She was 43. Stevenson later married Ella McDonald.

After years of preaching Stevenson lost his voice but continued communicating his thoughts through writing. For a number of years he edited the Woman's Standard, a newspaper published on behalf of women's suffrage. He wrote editorials for the Waterloo Courier expressing his views on a multitude of subjects from politics to religion. He died of asthma "complicated by heart disease" in Waterloo, Iowa, on December 19, 1912 at 71 years of age. Many heartfelt tributes were printed following his death. An editorial from the Waterloo Courier, December 21, 1912, summarized how he had lived his life:

Dr. Stevenson had a soul of justice, conviction, charity and democracy. His beliefs were notable above all things for their championship of the under dog. He loved the right. He loved the weak, the poor, the helpless and abused. Waterloo has lost a man whose counterpart is not known to us anywhere. And humanity has lost a friend, a friend who spent his last years in humble circumstances but who now takes his place in eternity among the elect of great minds and souls.

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Resources: Stevenson Family Bible, documents and letters handed down through the family.