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### Biographical Sketch of Dr. Ezekiel Edward Nelson

Monroe Fordham

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Dr. Ezekiel Edward Nelson

A Biographical Sketch

Dr. Nelson was born in Louisiana in 1884. His mother died when he was ten years old and he was sent to live with an aunt in Texas. After several years of moving around as share-croppers, his aunt's family settled in Texarkana, Arkansas. During those years there were very few opportunities for a young black share-cropper to improve his status. Caught in the web of the "peonage" system of the post-Reconstruction south, the avenues of upward mobility were very limited. Restrictions notwithstanding, the ambitious young Nelson was determined to break the cycle. He decided that his best hope for self-improvement lay in the acquisition of an education.

At the age of <sup>16</sup>nineteen he began his formal schooling in Texarkana, Arkansas. In four years he went through all the grades in the local school for blacks. After graduating from the local school he left home and took a job with a white family in Texarkana. In addition to a small wage he received room and board. Young Nelson was a great admirer of the work of the widely acclaimed Tuskegee educator--Booker T. Washington. Being aware of Nelson's interest in education, the white family for whom he worked offered to provide financial support if he would enter the trade school at Tuskegee. Nelson, however, forfeited their offer of financial support by choosing to attend Wilberforce University instead. In order to accumulate enough money to get to Wilberforce, which was in Ohio, Nelson supplemented his small wage by taking on part time jobs in his spare time.

In 1904, optimistic and determined, Nelson made his way by train from Texarkana to St. Louis and on to Xenia, Ohio where he hoped to

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enroll at Wilberforce. He arrived at Wilberforce with only nine dollars in his possession. Shortly after his arrival a school official found him a job cutting firewood. He enrolled in the Wilberforce academy (high school) where he studied for two years. Following his graduation from the academy he enrolled in the college program. His education at that point was moving him in the direction of the ministry, however, Nelson was still unsure about the specific occupational field he wanted to enter. Before his graduation from Wilberforce he decided that he wanted to become a medical doctor. That was indeed a bold decision, because the opportunities for medical school training was very limited for blacks at that time. While at Wilberforce, Nelson met and courted an attractive young student from Jacksonville, Illinois--Miss Alberta F. O'Leary. Miss O'Leary was enrolled in the teacher training program. Although they went in different directions following graduation, they continued to communicate and were eventually married in 1920.

After graduating from Wilberforce in 1911, Nelson went to Detroit, Michigan in search of summer employment. During that summer he decided to apply for admission to the University of Michigan to study medicine. He completed three years at the University of Michigan before leaving in 1914. During the next two years he worked in Detroit and saved his money in hopes that he would eventually be able to complete his medical training.

By 1916 he was ready to continue his education, but not at the University of Michigan. He decided to complete his work at Boston University. In 1916 Nelson left Detroit by boat and headed for Boston via Buffalo. During a brief stopover in Buffalo he found that that city had much to offer to a struggling black student. "In those days Buffalo



was quite a railroad center. The trains to New York, Washington, D.C., Canada and other points in the eastern United States needed porters, waiters, and railroad service personnel. Many black college students came to Buffalo in search of such economic opportunities which would enable them to continue their education."

In the summer of 1917, after successfully completing a year at Boston University, the young medical student returned to Buffalo in search of summer employment. He found work with the railroad as a dining car waiter. In the fall of 1917 he returned to Boston University for his final year. After completing his studies at Boston, in 1918, Nelson returned to Buffalo. Not having the funds and contacts needed to open a medical practice, he went back to work as a dining car waiter. He viewed that job as a temporary means of accumulating the capital needed to launch his own practice. In 1920 he went to Chicago where he married Miss O'Leary. The couple returned to Buffalo shortly after the wedding. Still unable to set up his own practice, Nelson went back to his job as a dining car waiter. He remained there until 1922 when he accepted a job in the railroad shop. Because of his medical school training he was assigned to the first-aid section.

In 1924 the young graduate took the state board exams and received his license to practice medicine in the state of New York. In an effort to upgrade his economic status and hasten the day when he would be able to set up his own medical practice, Nelson took the Civil Service exam and went to work for the Post Office the same year. Three years later he opened his office as a medical doctor. For the next forty-five years he practiced medicine in Buffalo. He retired in 1972.

Throughout his tenure in Buffalo, Dr. Nelson not only ministered to the physical and health needs of the community, he was also deeply concerned with the social and economic problems faced by the blacks of Buffalo. One area of his involvement was the Buffalo Cooperative Economic Society, Inc. The records, papers, and other documents pertaining to that organization have been preserved for posterity on this microfilm reel. Dr. Nelson was the founder and the president of that organization. In addition to operating a grocery cooperative, the organization established a credit union. A more detailed history of the Buffalo Cooperative Economic Society, Inc. is presently in progress.

Dr. Nelson and his wife Mrs. Alberta F. O'Leary Nelson are responsible for preserving the documents and records that have been preserved on this microfilm.

Monroe Fordham

1973

*Monroe Fordham*



Mrs. Alberta F. O'Leary Nelson:

A Biographical Sketch

Mrs. Nelson was born in Jacksonville, Illinois on August 7, 1891. She lived in Jacksonville until 1909 when she graduated from high school. During those years Jacksonville was a small town with very few blacks. Miss O'Leary's parents were farmers; they were also devout members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She (in later years) recalled that there was always plenty of religious literature in the family home. Included in this literature were books, pamphlets, articles and pictures relating to the A.M.E. Church. Since the history of the A.M.E. Church stands as a major part of the historic struggle of black Americans to promote racial liberation and uplift, Miss O'Leary was exposed to the rich Black American heritage at an early age. Throughout her life she maintained a strong interest and an active involvement in the affairs and programs of the A.M.E. Church. The same enthusiasm and dedication was reflected in her concern regarding the struggle of her people to overcome the disadvantages and inequities that they experienced in the United States.

During her early life in Jacksonville, Miss O'Leary lived with her grandmother who worked for and lived-in with a local wealthy white family. Her grandmother was a major

influence and a source of encouragement during the early years of Miss O'Leary's life. While she was still in grade school her grandmother used to tell her that she would one day attend Wilberforce University and become a teacher. All through her grade school and high school years in Jacksonville, the goal of attending Wilberforce was constantly kept before her. Following her graduation from high school Miss O'Leary enrolled at Wilberforce University in the teacher training program.

Her education at Wilberforce was financed by her grandmother (until her grandmother's death during the first year of college). After her grandmother died Miss O'Leary was supported financially by her father and the white people for whom her grandmother had once worked. Not having to worry about financial support, the young scholar was able to devote all of her energies to her studies without being concerned with working to earn money. Consequently, she was able to complete the teacher education program in two years. Even before her graduation Miss O'Leary had received an appointment to teach in East St. Louis, Illinois. Following her graduation in 1911, she taught for nine years in East St. Louis.



Shortly after her arrival at Wilberforce Miss O'Leary met the young E.E. Nelson. The bond of friendship between the two grew stronger over the next two years. Following their graduation in 1911, they both went their separate ways for the next nine years. However, they continued to correspond during that period. In 1920, two years after Nelson's graduation from Boston University, they were married in Chicago. The couple settled in Buffalo, New York. Shortly after moving to Buffalo the couple purchased the home at 445 Cornwall Avenue in which they presently reside. The new bride (Mrs. Nelson) taught for three years in the Buffalo Public Schools before retiring for health reasons.

Almost immediately upon arriving in Buffalo Mrs. Nelson became actively involved in the program and activities of Bethel A.M.E. Church. For many years she served as the organist. She is presently the Sunday school pianist-- a position she has held for many years. In 1950 Mrs. Nelson founded the Bethel Credit Union and served as its president from 1950-1960.

In addition to her church work, Mrs. Nelson has been active in numerous civic organizations and activities. Organizations to which she has belonged include Zeta Phi Beta Sorority and the Wilberforce Club. She was also the secretary and treasurer of the Buffalo Cooperative Economic Society, Inc. When that society founded its credit union



Mrs. Nelson was elected treasurer of the union. Because of her involvement in the BCES and Bethel credit unions, she was elected to the Council of the Buffalo Federation of Federal Credit Unions.

Mrs. Nelson is a very well read and learned woman. During her more active years she was frequently featured as a speaker at meetings of various local organizations and church groups. Some of her reflections and other writings are collected on another microfilm reel.

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1973

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