The Mystery of A. Oluwole Snelson

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The grave of A. Oluwole Snelson is a lonely grave. It is far back in the historic African-American Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery in Athens, Georgia. I saw it for the first time about six years ago as I was identifying graves in this 9-acre cemetery founded in 1882 by the Gospel Pilgrim Society. I tallied its location and wondered whether the brief inscription was in error. What person could possibly have a name like that?

The Snelson grave seems set apart. I can see that A. Oluwole was a child, born in 1897 and dying in 1900. The epitaph, barely readable, says, "A Flower Too Soon Faded." No Snelson family members are buried near the grave or elsewhere in the cemetery at Fourth and Bray streets.

A tangle of brush, vines and trees makes it hard to identify graves in this cemetery placed on the National Register of Historic Places. As many as 3,500 African Americans may be buried in Gospel Pilgrim, preliminary research indicates. Only about a fifth have readable markers. Most burial sites are mere sunken places in the cemetery. About one-fifth of the identified graves are graves of ex-slaves.

Some underbrush is cleared sporadically, but at least 25 per cent of Gospel Pilgrim has not been cleaned up in decades. Little money from Athens-Clarke County is available for Gospel Pilgrim, which is officially an abandoned cemetery, with a small amount of care given by the city-county. Despite Gospel Pilgrim's being on the National Register of Historic Places and having a Georgia State Historical Marker, now it is mostly neglected. Volunteers make forays to remove sticks and brush in small areas, but little overall care is being given.

Athens-Clarke County voters in 2004 did approve a $306,000 Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax project, for improvement of pathways and sidewalks at the cemetery, but this money could not be used for maintenance and upkeep. Since then most of the pathways have suffered erosion and are overgrown with weeds.
Close inspection is necessary to see which graves still have readable tombstones. All of the Gospel Pilgrim records were lost when the last officer of the Society, Alfred Richardson Hill, died in 1977. The Gospel Pilgrim Society was a burial society and sold lots in the cemetery, designed to give African Americans a respectable and beautiful place for burial. In the last few years, only a handful of burials have taken place if descendants could present a lot certificate, but it is not really an active burial ground.

In June, 2013, I looked at an Internet Web site, Cenantua.wordpress.com, which deals with the Civil War period. It contains blogs by Robert Moore. I share an interest in Civil War and Reconstruction history. My own Web site alhester.author.com, is mainly about similar local Athens, Georgia, Civil War and Reconstruction topics. Many ex-slaves are buried at Gospel Pilgrim and sometimes I tell their stories on my Web site.

One of Mr. Moore's blogs was about the Emancipation Day celebration in 1869 at Andersonville, Georgia, site of the infamous Confederate prison. The presiding leader at that Jan. 1, 1869, event was Floyd Grant Snelson, born in 1847, the ex-slave child of a white father and black mother.

The surname Snelson seemed slightly familiar to me. Could it be that Floyd Grant Snelson, an ex-slave Georgia preacher, Republican political leader and educator named for Gen. U. S. Grant, was connected to Gospel Pilgrim's "A. Olewole Snelson"? Snelson, a Swedish name, is not very common in Georgia, but finally I did recall it was on the mysterious tombstone in Athens.

As I checked on the Internet and with various public records concerning the Floyd Grant Snelson family—I did find Athens connections. Rev. Floyd Grant Snelson, Jr., the son of the Emancipation speaker, turned out to be one of the most prominent church leaders and missionaries in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. His middle name of Grant was his preferred name, in honor of the Northern general. About seven years of his life were spent in Athens as a minister, principal and teacher.

Rev. Floyd Grant Snelson, Jr., was born Dec. 19, 1865. Both the father and son were ministers and important missionaries to West Africa. The elder went to Africa
in the 1870s for the Congregational Church, taking with him his family including young Floyd Grant, Jr. His son became a member of the A.M.E. faith in 1874 and obtained his bachelor's degree from Atlanta U., as had his father. Rev. Snelson, Jr. was licensed to preach in 1889 and had churches in Atlanta, Warrenton, North Carolina, Cartersville, Georgia, and later in Athens. Later in his career, he would be a leader in the mission field and as a pastor of major A. M. E. churches in Cleveland, St. Louis, Pittsburgh and San Francisco.

He would follow his father's missionary lead, becoming head of A. M. E. Church mission work as superintendent and presiding elder in West Africa. A. M. E. Bishop Henry McNeal Turner had watched Rev. Snelson's development as a young preacher and educator and liked what he saw, choosing him to lead major efforts in several West African countries.

In 1895, Rev. Snelson Jr. was appointed principal and teacher at the East Athens Colored School in Athens. He had been the principal of the Mitchell Street black school in Atlanta before coming to Athens. In Athens, he also became editor of *The Negro Educational Journal*, the publication of a statewide organization for black teachers.

His wife, Waterloo Bullock Snelson, also an Atlanta U. grad, took a job as first-grade teacher in the East Athens School. We have no information about why she was named "Waterloo." Her parents were Green and Sarah Bullock. Rev. Snelson Jr. would add a master's degree and two doctorates, becoming one of the most highly educated African Americans in the United States. He was principal of East Athens Colored School between 1894 and 1896, after being a principal in Atlanta. He was also made a church deacon in Athens in 1894 and preached in Athens. After his African mission work, 1894-1900, he returned to Athens as pastor of the Bethel A.M.E. Church in Athens for 1901-02, according to official publications of the A.M.E. Church.

Bethel at first was a very small church at Billups and West Broad streets, which would later become the larger Greater Bethel A. M. E. Church on Rose Street, just off West Broad.
Late in 1896, Rev. Snelson became head of A. M. E. mission work for four years in West Africa, headquartered in the country of Sierra Leone. In its January, 28, 1897, issue, The Christian Recorder, official newspaper of the A. M. E. Church, carried a long story about his abilities and characteristics:

"He is a young man of medium height but well proportioned and full of nervous energy," the article said. "He wears side whiskers which conceal his square jaw, but his strong, yet nervous chin is exposed. His eyes are deep-set but expressive. His voice is full and resonant, but has been somewhat injured by the unrestrained energy with which he has evidently become accustomed to speak. His postures are full of manifestations of decision of character, mingled somewhat with obstinacy."

As the minister and educator resigned his jobs in Athens in 1896 to go to Africa, Mrs. Snelson was making a name for herself in her own right. She was an excellent educator, outstanding speaker and organizer of various social services. She organized the first colored women's club in Georgia, according to The Crisis, magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"In fact, Mrs. Snelson was in many ways the ideal wife for the itinerant Methodist preacher, the article said. "She lectured, sang and worked. She even occupied her husband's pulpit, and she brought up a family of four children; with all this work and her own restless nervous energy she was personally charming, full of humor, and one of the most beautiful women in America," the article in the August, 1914, issue said.

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But nowhere in any record could I find a child named A. Oluwole Snelson. I did learn that Oluwole is a fairly common name for boys in West Africa. One translation from Yoruba is "The king has entered the house."

There were three other black Snelsons enumerated in the 1900 federal census in Clarke County, but none seemed related to the Floyd Grant Snelsons. No child named Oluwole turned up in the federal censuses.
In 2013, I couldn’t locate any person in Athens who knew the Floyd Grant Snelson family. John Davis, a longtime member of Greater Bethel A.M.E. Church, said the Rev. Snelson is not listed in a Greater Bethel church history as an early pastor.

"A 97-year-old woman member of Bethel might have known about the Snelsons, but she died about a month ago," he said in August, 2013.

There are, however, ample mentions in national A. M. E. records of Floyd Grant Snelson and his wife living in Athens and his being pastor at Bethel Church on the west side of Athens. Fifteen years after Rev. Snelson left, Bethel officially became Greater Bethel AME Church of Athens, when a cornerstone for a new building was laid at the corner of West Broad and Billups, according to the Greater Bethel, Athens, GA, history on its Web site.

The 1900 federal census for Clarke County indicated the Snelsons lived in East Athens at 614 Third St., which was about a block from the East Athens School. In February, 1900, Mrs. Snelson bought the 4-room house on the half-acre lot in her name, paying $400. She sold the property in Athens for $520 in 1907, when the Snelson family was living in Massachusetts.

Rev. Snelson was in the enumeration on June 6, 1900, with his other family members after he came back from his missionary service. The Clarke County federal census enumerator mistakenly listed the family surname as "Nelson."

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The Snelsons married on Christmas Day, 1890, in Atlanta. Their first son, Floyd Grant Snelson, Jr., was born in September, 1891. A daughter, La Ursa, was born in May, 1893. A second daughter, Blydena, was born in November, 1895. Their youngest son, Strathana or Strathcona, would be born in 1903. The youngest daughter, Arnetta, was born in 1907.

A. Oluwole Snelson was born on July 29, 1897, according to his tombstone. The year of death is also clear on the marker, 1900, and the date of the month appears to be March 1.

We do know in the 1900 federal census for Clarke County, Waterloo Snelson is listed as having three living children—Floyd Grant, La Ursa and Blydena. But she
is enumerated as having had a total of four births, indicating one child who was not living by June 6, 1900. It seems likely that this child was A. Oluwole.

On Jan. 12, 1897, Rev. Snelson, boarded the ship Majestic to go to Sierra Leone, according to a long account in *The Christian Recorder*. "Upon the pier as the stately ship... glided away, stood a band of more than fifty, among whom were Bishop Turner, Bishop Derrick, Secretary Parks and the heroic wife of the departing missionary," the article in the Jan. 28, 1897, issue said.

Before the Majestic's embarkation, a large congregation at Bethel A. M. E. in New York City said goodbye to Rev. Snelson, giving him their support and approval.

"Bishop Turner introduced Mrs. Snelson, who made a brief but remarkable speech," the article said. "Everyone realized the burden of the sacrifice laid upon the wife who was giving up her husband to the cause of God and the Church. Next to his God, every true man holds in reverence a pure and noble woman. Between true hearts the vast ocean may sweep without abating love or dimming the unalloyed lustre of loyalty. At the altar, side by side, husband and wife, so soon to be separated, knelt together while forth from hundreds of hearts went up a prayer... Then with bowed heads the people sang in tones soft and low, 'God be with you till we meet again.'"

*The Christian Recorder* account ended by saying: "Secretary Parks placed in the hands of the departing missionary a through ticket and about five hundred dollars and assured him that a loyal church would care for him and would soon send to him his wife and three little ones."

Mrs. Snelson, however, never went to West Africa to be with her husband. We have information from the *Athens Banner* newspaper indicating in several stories that she was teaching in 1898 and 1899. We also know that before his return from Africa, she was going to Atlanta on business. She also had her children to look after.

And Waterloo Snelson would also have been pregnant with A. Oluwole Snelson, who, as pointed out, was born July 29, 1897. By that time, Rev. Snelson was running the extensive West African mission program of his church. His supervision included traveling thousands of miles to many mission outposts under very
primitive conditions in several countries. A recognition, which he obviously relished, came when he was made a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (F. R. G. S.) of London during his time of mission work and exploration in Africa, according to many newspaper accounts. He became a specialist in cultures and languages of West Africa. He always included "F. R. G. S." along with his degree credentials in letters and information given to the press.

We have no private letters written between Rev. Snelson and his wife. He doesn't mention his family in his official correspondence, reports, or in newspaper accounts of his missionary work. We know for certain that Mrs. Snelson had to care for Floyd, La Ursa and Blydena—and A. Oluwole if he were the fourth living child.

We do know that her "little boy" had been in a serious fire, but supposedly was recovering in 1900, according to the story in the Feb. 4, 1900, Atlanta Constitution. It seems likely that the "little boy" hurt in the fire would not be Floyd, who would be about nine years old. A. Oluwole, less than three years old, would be more likely. We also know that Waterloo's mother was listed as a member of the household of the Snelsons in the 1900 Clarke County federal census. Sarah Bullock was probably able to help considerably in caring for the children. But A. Oluwole was dead by March 1, 1900, according to his marker inscription in the cemetery.

Rev. Snelson returned from Africa to Athens on April 18, 1900, according to the Athens Banner. "He built three churches in Freetown [Sierra Leone] and five in the interior, and received 500 members into the African M. E. Church," the article said, announcing his lecture in Athens at Pierce Chapel A. M. E. Church upon his return. "He traveled 400 miles into the interior and 5,000 miles along the coast of Africa studying the languages and customs of the people."

It seems quite possible that Rev. Snelson himself named A. Oluwole Snelson, while he carried out his mission duties in Africa. He was quite familiar with African names. Looking at the names of their children, we can see that Rev. Snelson and his wife had no hesitation in choosing unusual names. Surely Rev. Snelson's grief would have been acute, so soon after his return from Africa. It is possible he may not have received word about the death until he arrived in the United States.
Soon, the Snelsons were also shocked by the tragic case of the Rev. Floyd Snelson, Sr. In 1902, he was placed in the Milledgeville, Georgia, Insane Asylum. After being dismissed from the asylum, he was run over by a train near Blackshear, Pierce County, Georgia, in 1904. He was "... killed by a freight train near Blackshear," a brief article in the Feb. 14, 1904, *Atlanta Constitution* said. "Snelson only recently returned from the Milledgeville asylum and for several days past has been crazy in his actions," the article said.

Strathana or Strathcona [both names are used] McKinley Snelson, the youngest son, died Aug. 30, 1911, in an accident involving rail cars. His death "... occurred last Wednesday evening while he with some other boys were playing on the street while the cars were switching, ran in front of one, running directly into another going in opposite direction," the *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper reported. "The pallbearers were six playmates of the deceased." Rev. Snelson was pastor at St. Paul's A.M. E. Church in Pittsburgh at the time.

Floyd, the eldest son of the Snelsons, became a well known newspaper writer, columnist and editor for black newspapers. He also would die in a major accident. He was killed in a stove explosion and fire while staying in a friend's apartment in France in 1956.

Rev. Snelson would be appointed pastor of Bethel A. M. E. Church in Athens, Georgia, from 1901 to 1902, according to A. M. E. official reports. But he left Athens when appointed minister at Bethel A. M. E. Church, a large church in San Francisco. Throughout the rest of his life, Rev. Snelson, who died in 1932, had numerous important preaching appointments. He had a reputation for overcoming church mortgage difficulties, and helped pay off the debts of several A. M. E. churches.

On May 3, 1914, Waterloo Snelson died unexpectedly after surgery of an undisclosed nature at the age of 44, in Columbus, Ohio, where Rev. Snelson was pastor of Mt. Vernon A. M. E. Church.

"Only a week ago Mrs. Snelson was requested to take charge of the women's suffrage movement among the colored women in Ohio, and at the same time was appointed by Governor Cox to represent the state at the national education congress
which will convene in Oklahoma next July," the Ohio State Journal said in her obituary.

In October, 1914, he married Blanche Ward, a widow, who also took major leadership positions in the church. She died in 1923. After that, he married his last wife, Trenna O. Banks Snelson, who also had been a strong church leader.

In 1924, he campaigned at the general conference of the A. M. E. Church to make him a special "Bishop of Africa" to further mission work there. The Topeka (Kansas) Plaindealer newspaper, reprinted his long announcement and request for votes. In the May 2, 1924, issue, the paper endorsed him. In his campaign for bishop, his seventh point for election was: "... My age is ripe; my health is perfect, my habits with religious scrutiny, and I do not SMOKE, CHEW, DRINK, nor CAROUSE, my personal character stands untarnished, the joy of my family, friends and fellow citizens." Although he was endorsed by several A. M. E. leaders, he was never made a bishop. He had sought the bishop's office as early as 1900, but was not successful.

Failing health, due in part to his service abroad, caught up with him, but he did have a last pastoral assignment from 1927 to 1931 as a minister in Barbados. He returned to the United States to try to regain his health, but died on Feb. 28, 1932, at the home of his sister in Washington, D. C. "Prominent churchmen from all parts of the country" were present at his funeral, The Chicago Defender newspaper reported in its March 6, 1932, issue.

There are no signs of visits to the grave of A. Oluwole Snelson, 113 years after his death. The grave appears starkly unadorned in Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery. Surely his family and church friends did mourn for him. But the Snelson family soon moved away from Athens for prominent activities all over the country in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

No flowers are set in pots by the grave. At the plot, no lilies bloom in the spring, as by other graves. There are no conch shells or quartz crystals placed there as remembrances, as is common at many Gospel Pilgrim burial sites. Truly, A. Oluwole Snelson, was "A Flower Too Soon Faded."

The End