

Michaux as Prophet

Elder Lightfoot Solomon Michaux (1884–1968) has been variously labeled prophet, cultist, showman, businessman, charlatan, and politician because of his blend of religious, social, and economic interests and activism. Upon hearing his name many people, who did not live through the Thirties and early Forties, or who have had only fleeting introduction to this black man of the cloth, are quick to identify him as the “man with the long red, white, and blue fingernails,” or “the preacher who calls himself God and gives away food,” or “Michaux, the Father Divine of Washington.” Michaux was closely identified with Bishop Grace and Father Divine by some of their contemporaries as well.

But Michaux disdained religious movements in which leaders often were proclaimed to be divine and was anxious to disassociate himself from black nationalist groups, such as the Black Jewish Church of God and Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. These groups had much appeal during the Twenties — a decade of black racial chauvinism. In that era, some black people utilized religion creatively by glorifying their blackness which had been so much maligned in white America. Although the “association” with such groups was painful for Michaux, he had helped create it by proclaiming himself to be a prophet from God.

When Michaux was born in the township of Newport News, Virginia, on November 7, 1884, his doting mother reasoned that this (her second) child was destined for a unique mission. She thought this because he was born with a veil. Folklore augured an exceptional future for infants with sloughable facial covering. This mother successfully communicated her prognosis to young Lightfoot as he grew up, and he was so affected that he considered himself special. Therefore, later in life, he claimed that as a child he was visited frequently by little angels with whom he frolicked while playing alone in his crib and before the family fireplace; the spectral playmates vanished when others entered into the room.¹

Young Michaux, who attended Twenty-second Street School in his hometown, was continuously anxious about his future and anticipated “mission” in every opportunity. During his impressionable youth, he was influenced by post-Reconstruction entrepreneurialism. He thought his

¹From discussions with Michaux's sister, Mrs. Jennie B. McRae, member of the Church of God, and *Washington Post* (D.C.), Oct. 13, 1956.

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mission, like that of his father and uncle, lay in the world of business, and the youth was so cosmically motivated that he turned a fish cart into a successful seafood enterprise — replete with lucrative government contracts during World War I. This business was operated from Hopewell (a wartime boom town and location of the DuPont guncotton plant and nearby Fort Lee Army base) and from Newport News (the well-known seaport town).²

He had married Mary Eliza Pauline, who was from Virginia's Eastern Shore, almost a decade before the war — in 1906. During the Conflict, Mrs. Michaux — a religious zealot — prayed, badgered and in other ways coerced her husband into reading the Bible, praying, and attending church. What may have been initially an attempt to please his wife eventually led to Michaux's own conversion and "Call" to the ministry.³ After he was "Called" to preach in 1917, Lightfoot embarked upon that venture also with a spurt of zeal. He became affiliated with the Church of Christ (Holiness) U.S.A. Convention which was convened by the Bishop C. P. Jones. When Michaux seceded from that body in 1921 because of a doctrinal dispute, he continued to espouse holiness dogmas and practices.⁴ Over the next two decades, he forged an autonomous church — the Church of God — in Newport News, where he had been preaching since 1919. He developed a ministry based on traditional theological doctrines and practices within the Christian Church but he capped them with "New Thought" ideas.⁵ By 1933 Michaux had become one of America's foremost radio evangelists.⁶

His preachments about happiness in God and the need for social reformation through economic, political, and religious revival were popular with the Great Depression poor. Michaux did not rely on words alone, though, as a panacea for destitution and poverty. He raised thousands of dollars during the early Thirties and convinced affluent white Washingtonians to donate money and real estate for philanthropic and social welfare programs. With these donations, the Church of God housed many and fed thousands during the depression as well as provided food and various services to the Bonus Army of 1933.⁷ Previously — early in the

²*Daily Press* (Newport News), February 14, 1919, *Sunday Star* (D.C.), July 10, 1938, *Minutes of Deacons and Elders Quarterly Meetings*, July 4, 1957, and from discussions with members.

³*Washington Post*, October 14, 1956, and discussions with members, and based on author's observations in the Church of God.

⁴From discussions with the former Field Representative of the Church of God, elderly members, and members of St. Timothy's Holiness Church — an affiliate with the Church of Christ (Holiness), U.S.A. Convention — on 18th Street and Madison Avenue in Newport News.

⁵*Seven Churches* (a Church of God publication), February 1950, 3; *Sunday Star*, July 10, 1938.

⁶*Amsterdam News* (New York), September 29, 1934; *Washington Post*, October 28, 1934; *Journal and Guide* (Norfolk), April 28, 1934 and December 19, 1934; *Evening Star*, July 11, 1938; *Pictorial Review* (a Church of God publication), August 1941, passim; *Daily Press*, October 21, 1968.

⁷Constance Green, *The Secret City* (Princeton, 1967), Chapter X; Chancellor Williams, "The Sociological Significance of the Storefront Church Movement in the United States

1920s — he also tried to lessen his own members' sufferings from economic recession by devising and implementing a plan for communal living among them. Those who lived together in church-owned housing worked and pooled their wages and skills to keep each other housed and fed and to help keep the church solvent.⁸

Michaux's movement grew during the Great Depression, and he was heralded at home and abroad as the "Happy Am I" preacher after his theme song by that name. Partly because of his popularity and fame, he was able to establish seven churches and over twenty-five branches along the East Coast. Headquarters of the predominantly black church was in Washington, D.C.⁹ The rapidity of his ascendancy was euphoric, but not unexpected, and Michaux philosophized about it. Reasoning that he had been intuitively guided into national prominence by God and remembering his mother's early prognosis, he had a conviction that he was "Called" to be a prophet and publicly proclaimed himself to be one in 1933. This was a period of national social reordering, of the New Deal's experimentation in reform. Traditionalism was being challenged and many people were tolerant of, if not amenable to, prophets and prophecies.¹⁰ Michaux's first public prophecy — based on a dream — was of a socio-political nature.

In the summer of 1933, he dreamed about three eagles and offered interpretation: The first eagle was white and represented the National Revival Administration; its program was war on the devil, and the Elder thought he was to lead on the battle-front of that war. The second eagle was blue, representing the National Recovery Administration, and it waged war on the depression by establishing hundreds of codes to regulate competition and production in industry and labor. These two eagles were to join forces, Michaux explained, to fight the third eagle (a red one) which he called the National Revolution Administration — a foe of peace and order in society. Michaux interpreted the dream to mean that he and President Franklin Roosevelt were to help each other rid the country of political and social and economic discontent so that revolution and communism would not overtake the country. He prophesied, "If we reject the New Deal offered us by God . . . there is nothing left for us but chaos."¹¹

Michaux's radio popularity was at its peak at the time. He had two million listeners daily and twenty-five million on Saturday evenings.¹² He was not preaching to an audience of intellectuals but to common people

Since 1920" (unpublished dissertation, American University, 1949), 72; *Courier Magazine* Section (Pittsburgh), February 28, 1953; Roger Daniels, *The Bonus March* (Westport, 1971), 322; Pelham Glassford, when Chief of the D.C. Police Force, to Michaux, June 14, 1932, Glassford Papers, UCLA Library; *Evening Star*, July 13, 1938; *Pictorial Review*, 58.

⁸*Minutes*, January 1, 1956; *Daily News* (D.C.), February 9, 1933; and from discussions with members who participated in the "Common Plan."

⁹Williams, "Storefront Church," 51, and *Minutes*, January 1, 1954.

¹⁰See, for example, J. Milton Yinger, *Religion, Sociology, and the Individual* (New York, 1957), for an opinion on this subject.

¹¹*Pictorial Review*, 10-11; *Evening Star*, July 13, 1938.

¹²*Amsterdam News*, September 29, 1934, and *Happy News* (a Church of God monthly publication), November 1933.

clenched in throes of the Great Depression; these folk were hopeful that God still lived and would rectify the social order peacefully. The prophecy, therefore, found favor among Michaux's members and other radio fans. Many in his radio audience saw in communism the greatest antagonist of their hope. Needing his brand of religious inspiration, they regularly tuned in to Michaux's broadcast. At least one New Dealer, the Director of NRA, thought the prophecy was a boon. It came when that New Deal agency was under intense fire from dissident factions of business and labor and so delighted Hugh Johnson (the director) that he arranged a White House appointment to introduce Michaux to Roosevelt.¹³

The prophet (Michaux) did not find favor everywhere. Some black ministers, as for example those in the Interdenominational Ministers' Union in Washington, D.C., resented him. That body proposed that formal action be taken to "stop Michaux" from disgracing the traditional black church.¹⁴ Even the limited acceptance, however, ensuing labor, agrarian, and political unrest, and the memory of his mother's prediction combined to validate Michaux's belief that the self-proclamation was authorized by God, and he retained and cultivated his image as a prophet. If the 1933 prophecy had not been an early fluke, he would have discarded it just as he did the posture of faith healer when a sixty-year-old paraplegic was not healed after he had immersed her in the Potomac River seven times.¹⁵ Discounting that disappointment, in 1934 the church's monthly paper heralded Michaux as "Spiritual Ambassador to the World."¹⁶ Four years later the Elder spoke convincingly of his gift and his mission to America. During the course of an interview, he said:

I don't say I am the only prophet but if any other comes along in this age and doesn't speak in accord with what I speak, he is a false prophet. . . . The Lord said to me, 'I have made you a watchman unto my people. I want you to listen to what I say and give my people warning from me.'¹⁷

To Michaux all who would heed the Word were God's people, and he flew across the Bering Strait, tossing a Bible into communist territory so that someone there could have the "opportunity to hear about God."¹⁸ He believed his more immediate mission was to counsel the American people and to make counsel for Black Americans. Michaux reasoned that there is an affinity between religion and government, especially between Christianity and democracy, making prophets and presidents natural allies. He thought presidents were divinely anointed since God authorized their election through the people. As a result presidents were obligated to minister to the people's needs, and when confused, presidents were to

¹³*Evening Star*, July 13, 1938.

¹⁴*Washington Tribune* (D.C.), July 6, 1936.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, September 7, 1933.

¹⁶*Happy News*, February 1934.

¹⁷*Evening Star*, July 12, 1938.

¹⁸*Washington Post*, October 13, 1956, and author's observations during a service when Michaux returned from that trip and gave an account of it.

receive counsel from God's prophet. Their refusal to receive such advice could cause them to fall from God's grace, to become corrupt and abusive, and to use their authority to benefit a favored few. An unfortunate president, rejected by God, would be condemned by God's prophet.¹⁹

Although he may have exaggerated his role within this triumvirate, Michaux's desire to influence national political affairs, and especially presidential decisions, was not unprecedented within the Black Church. Traditionally it had been the most important avenue toward political activism among black people. The tradition had grown out of anti-slavery and anti-racist expressions and activities of black ministers among whom Nat Turner, Samuel R. Ward, Bishop Henry M. Turner, and more recently Dr. Martin Luther King numbered. Their political activism was necessary because masses of black people were under-represented in conventional political decision-making bodies. With a congregational base, experience through intra-denominational struggles, and knowledge of conditions among Afroamericans, black ministers were the most likely candidates for trying to influence local as well as national political developments.

Michaux publicly announced his concern about political matters during Herbert Hoover's administration when the Great Depression stunned the nation. Formerly an admirer of that president, Michaux had advised him through radio sermons on how to best resolve the depression.²⁰ It annoyed the Elder that his proposals were received with mere presidential courtesy.²¹ However, until Hoover drove the Bonus Army out of Washington and allowed a big gospel tent to be burned to the ground, Michaux had considered the president one of God's anointed. "That day," the Elder exclaimed, "I knew God had rejected Mr. Hoover."²² Michaux followed suit.

In 1932 he advised his black members and followers to break their traditional Republican ties and to vote for the Democratic candidate — Franklin Roosevelt. For this reason, some political journalists have credited Michaux "with leading the first swing of Negro voters to the Democratic party."²³ After the election, Michaux enthusiastically supported Roosevelt, and he dramatized his favor by staging a massive program to welcome the president to Washington in 1933. During that affair seven thousand looked on as the Elder prayed that Roosevelt be given dictatorial powers and the guidance of God to use them to the nation's best advantage.²⁴ Later that spring he opened his Belasco Theater revival with special prayer for the president.²⁵

¹⁹*Happy News*, January 1, 1953.

²⁰Williams, *Storefront Church*, 74.

²¹*Ibid.*, 72.

²²*Pictorial Review*, 46, and *Evening Star*, July 13, 1938.

²³*New York Tribune*, March 11, 1951.

²⁴*Washington Post*, March 6, 1933.

²⁵*Washington Herald*, May 1, 1933.

From the perspective of some observers, Michaux's most exciting political prophecy was centered in the 1948 presidential election. On January 22, 1948, he was granted an audience with Roosevelt's successor, President Truman, ostensibly so that a delegation from the Philadelphia based National Freedom Day Association could present a photograph of the late Major Richard R. Wright, Sr. to Truman. Among those making the presentation were Emmanuel C. Wright (the major's son) and Emmett Jay Scott.²⁶ On the following day, Michaux announced to the Washington press his decision to back Truman for president. By making this announcement, the Elder believed he was signaling to the American people that Truman was God's choice whether the president had determined that himself or not.²⁷

Michaux tested Truman's concern for the black cause. Five months after the initial audience, the Elder telephoned the White House to request that a delegation from the National Freedom Day Association be present on June 30 when the president signed a Joint Resolution of Congress. The Resolution provided for "Emancipation Day" to be celebrated throughout the United States on February 1 of each year rather than at different times, like Juneteenth Day in Texas. Michaux thought "it would be awfully good publicity [for the president's campaign] to . . . have them photographed when the president sign[ed] the Bill . . . since all the Negro papers would carry" the photograph and story.²⁸ Truman not only complied but also requested the "Three Emancipators" cartoon which Michaux had used as a backdrop in the 1936 Madison Square Garden Democratic rally for Franklin Roosevelt.²⁹

Michaux was so convinced of God's approval of Truman that he forwarded a letter to General Eisenhower (who was much sought after as a candidate), explaining why Truman would be elected. "Mr. Truman is God's anointed for the position he now holds; the Elder explained, "for he was not placed there by any political party, but by Divine providence . . . brought about by the death of Mr. Roosevelt. . . . President Truman has done a wonderful job up to this time." Michaux made it clear that he thought Truman was continuing the Roosevelt policies and was elevated to that position by God who "directed" Roosevelt to select Truman as vice-president. Michaux said Roosevelt had chosen Truman carefully "in case of his death, which God made him to know; [sic] for he told me personally of his fears." Because Truman "was elevated by God," he would continue in that position for seven years — a period that Michaux called God's "perfect number." Truman would be responsible to God and not to a political party; therefore, he would be required to heed the commandments of God through His prophet (Michaux) as had Roosevelt. Alluding

²⁶White House memo, January 20, 1948, Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.

²⁷*Washington Post*, January 23, 1948.

²⁸White House memo, June 23, 1948, Truman Papers.

²⁹Michaux to Matthew Connelly, Secretary to Truman, July 1948, Truman Papers. "Emancipators" were illustrated as Christ, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. Truman had the autographed cartoon placed in his personal collection.

Michaux as Prophet

to his own NRA prophecy, Michaux wrote, "I was the late Mr. Roosevelt's prophet. We never failed God. Through us, God broke all precedence to carry out His purpose to lift up the common people and show His love to them"³⁰ Because Michaux believed he foresaw that Eisenhower could not win the 1948 election, he advised the general not to allow himself to be drafted as a presidential candidate at either political convention.³¹

It is significant that this letter was written to Eisenhower with such certitude in June of 1948. Spring public opinion polls showed that hardly more than a third of the voters favored the Truman candidacy, and he was losing the "solid South's" support of the Democratic Party because he had raised the issue of civil rights to a national level. When creating a committee on civil rights early that year, Truman had said, "I want our Bill of Rights implemented in fact. We have been trying to do this for 150 years. We are making progress but we are not making progress fast enough."³² Then he proposed that Congress pass legislation to abolish segregation and discrimination in transportation and insisted that a strong civil rights plank be included in the 1948 Democratic platform.³³

Impressed by Truman's actions at the convention and convinced that he would win, Michaux campaigned vigorously for the president. He broadcasted a pro-Truman election rally. Chimes were sounded and an announcer bellowed, "Prophet and prophetic words!" And Michaux defined the nomenclatures Dewey and Truman: Dewey would "vanish" under heat. "If Dewey is elected," he warned, "our government will vanish under pressure from Russia" because communists will infiltrate labor unions, causing strikes and depression which will lead to revolution. Truman is a substitute to the people for Roosevelt. Then Michaux called for laborers, Negroes, and Jews to go to the polls to vote for Truman.³⁴

The hunch was right. Black voters played a significant part in Truman's election. Henry Lee Moon, then the NAACP's public relations director, had speculated early in 1948 that the black vote in certain pivotal states could swing close national elections.³⁵ Approximately seventy-five per cent of the three million Afroamericans who voted cast ballots for Truman.³⁶ Possibly a fifteen per cent switch in black votes in California, Illinois, and Ohio would have thrown the election to Dewey.³⁷ Michaux was so elated over the Truman victory that he paraded through the streets of Washington on a bandwagon, singing a ditty about Truman and proclaiming, "God did it and we thank Him."³⁸ This victory was counted as the unfolding of another of Michaux's prophecies, and his appeal was

³⁰Michaux to Eisenhower, June 20, 1948. Copy to Truman, Truman Papers.

³¹Ibid.

³²Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs: Years of Trial and Hope*, II (Garden City, 1956), 181.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Draft of the program script found among remnants of Michaux's personal papers and based on discussions with members.

³⁵Moon, *The Balance of Power* (Garden City, 1949).

³⁶Jules Abels, *Out of the Jaws of Victory* (New York, 1959), 293-295.

³⁷Moon, *Balance of Power*.

³⁸Song, "Tru-Man," 1949, sheet music in author's possession, and from Michaux's *Obsequies*.

heightened among his members. Some reportedly leaped with joy when election returns were reported.³⁹

Michaux never had claimed one-party-allegiance although many people thought he was a registered Democrat because of his loyalty to Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. When circumstances warranted, he shifted political support to a Republican president — Eisenhower. This move was reasonable since Michaux was more interested in what presidents were about than he was in their party affiliation. The general was unpopular among the black electorate mainly because he endorsed the Army's Jim Crow policies during World War II. Nevertheless, Michaux promoted Eisenhower's candidacy during both of his presidential campaigns. He did this with impunity, as he assured his members that he always acted at God's bidding.⁴⁰ Moreover, he reminded them that he was a long-time "friend" of the Eisenhower family.

Michaux had known Mrs. Eisenhower first, through a maid who was a member of the church. As a result of this acquaintance, he began to send prayer messages to the general during the war.⁴¹ Late in 1945, the Elder wrote to inform Eisenhower that the Radio Church of God (Michaux's invisible radio audience) had named him an honorary deacon, and he sent the general a Bible to seal the fellowship.⁴² Acknowledging the honor, Eisenhower forwarded Michaux an autographed picture of himself, and he expressed his appreciation for the Elder's assistance in the United States' war effort amidst much black opposition and indifference.⁴³

Michaux felt good about Eisenhower and decided that he should become president. He claimed to have been the first person to mention the idea to the general; this was when they were in private session shortly after the war.⁴⁴ Again in 1948 Michaux urged Eisenhower to consider the presidency. He reminded the general that God wanted him to seek the position, not then but in 1952, to "save His people. . . . Your humble and unselfish spirit declares this to be true."⁴⁵

After Eisenhower became president, Michaux stayed in touch, sending him telegrams and letters. The interest was not reciprocated. Michaux read this as a bad omen and began to consider the administration to be at odds with his spiritual vibrations. In 1954, he advised Mrs. Mamie Eisenhower that her husband should not seek a second term although he

³⁹From discussions with members who had observed this reaction in other members on their jobs and in church.

⁴⁰From a taped interview with the former Field Representative of the Church of God who believed Michaux never generated much enthusiasm for Eisenhower among his members.

⁴¹General Eisenhower to Michaux, January 6, 1945. Eisenhower Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

⁴²Eisenhower to Michaux, September 11, 1945, Eisenhower Papers.

⁴³Richard M. Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," *Journal of American History*, LV (June 1968), 90-106, *passim*.

⁴⁴Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate for Change, 1953-1956* (Garden City, 1963), 4-5.

In his memoirs, Eisenhower credited Virgil Pinkley, a newspaper correspondent in the North African Theatre of World War II in 1943, with making the initial suggestion. Pinkley had reminded the general that was heroes often were elected to the presidency.

⁴⁵Michaux to Eisenhower, June 30, 1948, Eisenhower Papers.

Michaux as Prophet

had done a "wonderful job in a very short time."⁴⁶ He thought Eisenhower had already fulfilled his mandate from God by "stopping the Korean War" and trying to desegregate Washington.⁴⁷

Still hopeful of creating a cooperative relationship with Eisenhower, Michaux continued to forward prayer telegrams and sermons to the White House. He held a special prayer meeting for the ailing president in 1956, and Eisenhower responded favorably by sending Michaux an invitation to visit the White House. A memo in the presidential daily calendar noted that Eisenhower wanted to thank Michaux for the all-night prayer meetings during his illnesses.⁴⁸ After this invitation and Michaux's subsequent visit (along with his wife and the little Eskimo girl that they were keeping), he changed his mind and decided that Eisenhower should run for a second term. The Elder campaigned for the incumbent's re-election during the annual baptizing service in the old Griffith Stadium and during his radio broadcasts.

Michaux went to Michigan, too, to campaign for Eisenhower and to interest "the rest of these colored Democrats . . . [in returning] to their first love—The Republican Party." Ignoring earlier complimentary epithets that he had extended to Roosevelt and Truman, the Elder called Eisenhower the "second emancipator . . . [one who had] done more for the Negro in the last four years than . . . the presidents who have been in office in the past twenty years." He took this campaign message to Detroit, Flint, Saginaw, Bay City, Pontiac, and Lansing.⁴⁹ Michaux did not campaign in any official capacity for the Republican candidate; he had a black minister-friend in Pontiac who invited him to that state to help get Eisenhower re-elected.⁵⁰

Before he left for Michigan, Michaux had broadcasted a prophetic sermon asking, "Who will be elected — Mr. Eisenhower or Mr. Stevenson?" He not only answered the question with a responding "No!" for Stevenson but also carefully pointed out that he was no political adviser to Eisenhower, but was his prophet. Michaux explained,

Since my visit to the White House many people have asked me, 'Do you think that Eisenhower will be elected?' Because of my constant visits to presidents, they think I'm a politician. I'm not a politician; I'm a prophet. . . . I am here to tell you that Mr. Stevenson cannot be president. . . . It is because he has been rejected of God. Whenever a man runs for the presidency once, there's no need for his running again. . . . Every man seeking the office . . . who has once been rejected has never been elected. . . . William Jennings Bryan . . . Mr. Dewey.⁵¹

Then Michaux re-emphasized that he was no political adviser to Eisenhower, yet he subtly reminded the radio audience that he had contact

⁴⁶Michaux to Mrs. Eisenhower, October 26, 1954, Eisenhower Papers.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Michaux to Shanley, Counsel to the President, September 6, 1956; Eisenhower to Michaux, September 6, 1956, and White House Memo, Eisenhower Papers.

⁴⁹Michaux to Shanley, November 3, 1956, Eisenhower Papers.

⁵⁰From a discussion with the former Field Representative of the church.

⁵¹Sermon, October 28, 1956, Eisenhower Papers.

with the president. "When I went to the White House," he boasted, "I didn't talk politics, I talked about heaven."⁵²

The Elder's impact upon national political affairs and presidential decisions cannot be accurately measured. It can be realistically assumed that his influence dwindled after the thirties, however, as did his radio broadcasts and popularity. Throughout most of his ministerial career only a small nucleus of poor and socially insignificant people openly accepted Michaux as their prophet. Those who did were mostly members of the Church of God; they had tested the validity of his prophecies over a period of time. He was venerated by such followers, sometimes to demagogic proportions.⁵³

But Michaux discouraged charismatic reactions toward him. This was aptly illustrated in his remarks about an incident which occurred in Baltimore:

One day while preaching . . . , a young lady, fairly decent in her appearance, came up as we were about to dismiss and . . . asked me . . . to pray for her baby. And when I bowed over her to pray for the child [,] I noticed that although she was not drunk, she had the smell of whiskey on her breath. So I asked her just what was wrong with her baby. And while she was talking I noticed her make a little quick move. . . . Nevertheless, I laid my hand on her. . . . And as I began to pray she dropped the baby and fell sprawling on the floor, shivering and kicking. . . . She was carrying on so that I told the brothers to put her on the bench. I began to preach about how the devil had thrown her down and made her drop her child. . . . I was telling the Saints how the devil was in a man's son and how the devil had thrown this man down on the ground and even in fire but that the disciples could not heal this man or even make the devil come out of the man.

Michaux continued on to explain that only Jesus had power to cast the devil out of the man and that the woman wanted to make him think he also had such power.

. . . When she came back up and stood before me, . . . she said . . . 'When you laid your hand upon me to pray, something struck me on the crown of my head and went all through me. You are wonderful.' But I knew . . . that was the devil trying to praise me and at the same time deceive me by making me think . . . I knocked her out with my power . . . Anybody you see being knocked out when somebody is praying for them, the devil is using that person [who is knocked out].⁵⁴

When he and Mrs. Michaux entered one of the several churches, the congregation rose quickly to honor them. The Elder realized that he could be idolized and implicitly cautioned members to temper their esteem by saying to them, "When you rise to honor me, I kneel to honor God."⁵⁵ Members often referred to Michaux in testimonies as "a prophet in the last days," "the Man of God," "The last prophet."⁵⁶

As their prophet and leader, Michaux cultivated a deferential relationship between himself and his members. Referring to infrequent dissension within his church, he told his deacons and elders on one occasion,

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Based on author's observations and from discussions with members.

⁵⁴*Minutes*, April 1956.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Based on author's observations in Church of God services before and after Michaux's death.

Michaux as Prophet

Any intelligent person knows that you must respect your leader. . . . Nothing but a lot of ignoramus disrespect leadership. When intelligent people come together with a mind to accomplish something, the first thing they do is to elect a leader. And whatever the leader says is to be done they do it. And if they don't like the leader they get rid of him. But you can't get rid of a leader as long as he follows the standard of the organization.⁵⁷

Additionally, Michaux reminded his members that he could not be fired because he was unsalaried. Nor, he contended, did his power originate with them; it was derived from God, and under divine authority, he had called the members out. They did not send for him.⁵⁸ Those who were opposed to his directives withdrew their membership or remained quiet.

Whenever he deemed it expedient, Michaux discarded the mantle of deference for a more egalitarian one. He endeared himself to his members by proclaiming his high regard for them as Saints. He would say, for example, "Now precious ones . . . I am always honored when I find myself in the midst of holy brethren, that is a class that has out-classed the world."⁵⁹ The Elder nearly always referred to his converts as "my precious ones" and explained that no condescension was intended.

When moving to the pulpit, Michaux often shaded his eyes and looked over the audience, asking about missing members who were usually in faithful attendance or about elderly ones who were absent. He extended special greetings to those whom he had missed on previous trips to that church or who had recently recovered from a serious illness or problem. After services ended, he moved among the congregation speaking to and shaking hands with first one and then another member. He paused to listen as they burdened him with their individual financial problems, illnesses, family crises.⁶⁰

As he circulated among them, members were impressed that Michaux seemed unassuming and humble but also like an inscrutable prophet. Although most members probably thought he was of partisan stature because of his avowed influence with persons of national or local importance, they delighted in hearing him deny it. He did at the end of one annual Easter fish fry in Newport News.

I was . . . glad to be . . . giving those folks that fish and bread even though they attacked me, [were] up on top of me, grabbing me and kicking me . . . I didn't get mad because they acted as they did. I was their servant. I am not interested in being a big shot like [Bishop] Grace. If he were down there, his followers would have to take him up on their shoulders and carry him around.⁶¹

Members enjoyed a psychological satisfaction in believing that they had surrendered themselves unto the charge of such an unobtrusive yet prominent figure.⁶²

⁵⁷*Minutes*, January 1, 1954.

⁵⁸*Evening Star*, July 12, 1938; *Minutes*, November 1953; and from discussions with members.

Several members left the church when Michaux purchased the Lincoln Theater in Newport News for a house of worship. They thought that purchase was unholy.

⁵⁹*Minutes*, November 1955.

⁶⁰Author's observations.

⁶¹*Minutes*, April 1956.

⁶²From discussions with members and based on the author's observations.

Despite his rhetoric that he did not expect the members to exalt him, Michaux exacted exaltation from them by demanding total followship. His was a Holiness church and just as he demanded strict adherence to biblical commandments, he tolerated nothing short of complete obedience to his own directives. Michaux formulated church rules and cautioned members of the consequences of violating them. Disobedience to Michaux would be equivalent to disobeying God since the Elder was God's prophet. Michaux taught his members through the example of Adam and Eve. He told them, "the price for disobedience is . . . annihilation, extermination . . . extinction. . . . Adam, the first disobedient man brought the sentence of death upon all men." The reward for obedience is eternal life. "There must be obedience to the letter. Obey the prophet! When the word goes out, no matter what the cost may seem to be to you, be ready to do it or die. . . . Forsaking wife, land, property, children . . . leaving everything to obey the command of the prophet."⁶³ Blind obedience, Michaux counseled, would make the church more than a "sect, another little gang in a storefront, another little shouting, noisy, fuss-making group of folks."⁶⁴

The Elder tried to acquire material wealth to show that his was more than a storefront church. Even in business transactions, he saw God's guiding hand, and so he attached religious significance to each deal that he made. Michaux sometimes acted in seeming duplicity to obtain property. Illustrative of this is the manner by which he acquired the land upon which Mayfair Mansions, a black middle-class housing project, was built. The old Benning Race Track previously had been located on that site when horse racing was legal in the District. In March of 1940 a bill, which would make horsing racing legal in the Capital again, was pending before Congress. The Senate District Commission already had held hearings on the proposal. Repeal of the prohibition seemed certain since the bill had widespread backing.

One important supporter of the bill was George Allen (then a commissioner of the District of Columbia). He was an honorary deacon in the Radio Church of God. Allen owned a race horse and was scheduled to testify before the Senate Committee in favor of the bill's passage. Michaux, who was in opposition, took steps to prevent Allen's testimony. He dispatched the following telegram to the commissioner.

It has been brought to the attention of the membership of the Church of God at Washington of which you are an honorary deacon that you own a race horse and that you are to appear today for the Senate Committee hearings of the passage of the bill introduced by Senator Reynolds which, if passed, will permit racing and betting on races in the District of Columbia. Though some may not consider betting on horses a vice, it is considered so by all religious bodies and orthodox churches. Therefore, knowing your respect for all such bodies, you are requested to register your objections to the passage of this bill and also to offer your race horses (sic) for sale at this hearing to Senator Reynolds or William C. Murphy or any of the supporters of this bill at 50% of what the horses cost you.⁶⁵

⁶³Minutes, April 1955 and January 1959.

⁶⁴Minutes, November 1960.

⁶⁵Williams, "Storefront Church," 83.

Michaux as Prophet

Exactly what the relationship between Michaux and Allen was at that time is unknown, and so on the face of it, the telegram seems audacious. Interestingly enough Allen reversed his position, making headlines in newspapers. He also offered his horse for sale to Senator Reynolds.⁶⁶ Needless to say the bill was defeated without the commission's support. Whether by coincidence or not the Church of God subsequently purchased the race track for its housing project. Allen had one/fifth of the shares in the Mayfair Mansions project.⁶⁷

This was not the first time Michaux had drawn a "political favor." When the black Washington Industrial Savings Bank was reopened in 1933 after the bank holiday, many people considered that a favor extended to Michaux in return for his support of the Roosevelt Administration. What is significant about this re-opening is that it was permitted under a provision that depositors be paid only thirty-five per cent of their frozen deposits. Under regulation of the Emergency Bank Act, the Treasury Department rarely permitted banks to re-open before they could make at least a fifty per cent pay-off to depositors. Because Michaux was a major client with the I.S.B., black Washingtonians credited his influence in high places for that coup.⁶⁸ People who needed influence often sought Michaux's assistance. The bringing of Mayfair Mansions into reality is an example.

Albert Cassell, professor of Architecture at Howard University in Washington, D.C., had designed plans for a luxurious black, middle-class housing project; this was desperately needed in Washington in the Thirties for the large number of newly hired black civil servants. Housing was generally substandard and scarce for the Capital's black residents.⁶⁹ Neither Cassell nor several prominent black Washingtonians had succeeded in acquiring funds to build the artist's projected paradise. In desperation Cassell appealed to Michaux, "a man of influence," for help in getting the project funded.

The Elder accepted the challenge and became the first black man in the United States to receive a federally insured loan in excess of three million dollars. Construction on the 594 family units was begun on the old Benning Race Track site in southwest Washington in the winter of 1942. The National Housing Administration labeled the project an administration job and promised Michaux that all funds necessary for its completion would be forthcoming. When costs escalated, however, during World War II and additional loans were requested, the commissioner of the Federal Housing Administration, Abner W. Ferguson, rejected the application, saying the construction was mismanaged and too costly in wartime. He also persuaded the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to reject

⁶⁶ *Washington Post*, March 2, 1940, and Green, *The Secret City*, 239.

⁶⁷ A 1946 Allen release to the press, Vertical File, Moorland-Spingarn Collection, Howard University Library, and *New York Tribune*, March 11, 1951.

⁶⁸ *Evening Star*, July 13, 1938.

⁶⁹ Robert C. Weaver, *The Negro Ghetto* (New York), 66-70, and 1961 *U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Report*, Housing Book 4, 10-18.

the Mayfair Mansions group's application. Michaux countered with charges of racism in FHA and RFC. He used his influence with Eleanor Roosevelt and other members of the Roosevelt administration to elicit necessary additional loans from RFC.⁷⁰

Michaux was anxious about the project. He reasoned that racial benefits, other than supplementary housing, would accrue from their completing the complex. Writing about the hassle, he explained that this was the "first and only opportunity Negroes had in any administration to establish and prove their ability to build, occupy and pay for a project costing more than three million dollars and insured by the Federal government." He guided that project to completion and eventually purchased all of the shares in it for the church. After that accomplishment, Michaux borrowed six million dollars from the FHA's Urban Renewal funds in 1966 to build 617 low-income family housing units. The latter is called Paradise Manor which stands adjacent to Mayfair Mansions.⁷¹

Unfortunately neither Michaux's accomplishments nor the precedents which he established have remained as memorable for the public as his alleged "offences" in business. When the Church of God was delinquent in paying federal taxes and principal on loans, these defaults made headlines in major East Coast newspapers.⁷² Fortunately such coverage did not preclude the Elder's successful expansion of Mayfair Mansions into a shopping center and eventual incorporation.

Of his several major real estate purchases, Michaux was proudest of the acreage in Jamestown, Virginia. His failure to implement plans for developing that parcel was probably his greatest sorrow. He billed that strip along the James River between Colonial Williamsburg and the Jamestown Festival Park as being ethnically invaluable. If it does not include that spot on which the first bound Africans landed in 1619, the church's land is in close proximity to that site. In recognition of the black heritage, Michaux had architectural designs drawn for a twenty million dollar Memorial to the Progress of the Colored Race of America. He launched a disastrous fund-raising campaign for the memorial.⁷³ After highly publicized charges that he had misappropriated funds from the campaign and the ordeal of subsequent suits, Michaux abandoned the project. He raised only some two thousand dollars in cash and had to appeal to Major Richard R. Wright, the Philadelphia banker, for a ten thousand dollar loan which saved the "historical" land from impending

⁷⁰Michaux to Mrs. Bethune, January 27, 1944, Roosevelt Papers; Philip M. Klutznick, Asst. Admin. of the NHA, to Mrs. Roosevelt, February 2, 1944; Will W. Alexander (a co-director for Race Relations at the Julius Rosenwald Fund) to Mrs. Roosevelt, February 4, 1944, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Hyde Park, New York.

⁷¹Recorder of Deeds Files, Washington, D.C.; *Daily News*, September 8, 1960; and author's observations.

⁷²William D. Hassett (Secretary to President Truman) to James L. Dougherty (General Counsel to the RFC) October 11, 1950; Dougherty to Hassett, October 13, 1950, Truman Papers; *New York Tribune*, March 11, 1959; *Washington Post*, March 12, 1951; Laurence Robbins (Asst. Sec. of the Treasury) to David Kendall (an Eisenhower staff member), February 4, 1960, Eisenhower Papers; and *Evening Star*, October 4, 1960.

⁷³*Journal and Guide*, November 13, 1937.

foreclosure in 1937.⁷⁴ Michaux's dream for a national memorial was all but dead, however. He eventually came to regard the Jamestown site as a congregational possession rather than as the ethnic memorial lands which it has potential to become.⁷⁵

These larger real estate purchases and developments, like many of the smaller ones, were secured on loans made possible by Michaux's influence. The Elder's main supporters — a small but faithful predominantly black membership — were only, at best, 15,000 strong.⁷⁶ For the most part they had limited formal education, menial and low-paying jobs although they aspired to upward mobility. They tithed, gave offerings and participated in financial drives. These are conventional methods of fund-raising in black churches and in most denominations.⁷⁷ While offerings were inadequate for such grandiose designs, the membership served Michaux well as "collateral"; the church qualified to borrow large sums from local and federal lending institutions.

After looking back over Michaux's record, one writer was prompted to exclaim, Michaux should "not be passed off as just another gospel spreader . . . but should be regarded as a shrewd businessman."⁷⁸ When he started in Newport News, he was preaching in a patched-up tent; at the time of his death in October 1968, the Church of God's estate was valued at more than twenty million dollars.⁷⁹

Ironically after building the Church of God upon a black presence and a Christian gospel, the feeble and aged Michaux appointed a white allegedly Reformed Jewish Rabbi to succeed him. In a vaguely worded 1968 will, the Elder bequeathed all of his worldly possessions to the congregation of the Church of God and appointed the "Rabbi" as the estate's executor.⁸⁰ Michaux's action, some three months before his death, seemed bizarre and erratic for one who had struggled over several decades to show the world how God could bless a black, disinherited people under leadership of a black prophet. He had consistently and tenaciously guarded against and fought off attempted white dominance. This action was consistent, however, with his self-image as a prophet, for Michaux believed and told his members that Jewish people will turn to Christianity before the apocalypse. He undoubtedly was optimistic that God had sent the

⁷⁴Discussions with Emmanuel C. Wright, son of Major Wright, November 1971; *Minutes, passim*.

Emmanuel Wright said Michaux pleaded with his father for hours until the elderly banker released the money to him.

⁷⁵*Minutes*, January 1960.

⁷⁶Based on statements by the former editor of *Happy News*, Edwin F. Lark. Mr. Lark said these were published on the basis of church membership and some 15,000 were issued monthly.

⁷⁷*Minutes*, November 1951; *Minutes, passim*; *Minutes*, January 1, 1958; *Minutes*, April 1956.

⁷⁸"Elder Michaux," *Our World*, V (January 1950), 44.

⁷⁹Bernard Garnett, "Unbelievable Black Businessman," *Jet*, April 1969, 20-21; and *Afro-American* (Richmond), April 3, 1970.

⁸⁰This 1968 will, preceded by ones in 1958 and 1966, was not filed in New York until January 23, 1970 — one year after the others were filed and almost thirteen months after Michaux's well-publicized death.

The Journal of the I.T.C.

“Rabbi” as leader of that “movement to Christ.” Michaux — the prophet — could, therefore, in good faith, turn over the helm of the church he founded to such an “annointed” one.

After Michaux’s death, that will came to light and church leaders contested it. The will was denied probate in the United States District Court in Washington, D.C. Michaux’s personal assets, approximately \$250,000, were awarded to his surviving sisters and brothers. The multi-million dollar estate was awarded to the church (though the family is contesting that decision) whose seven member Board of Directors became its executor and continues to direct the affairs of the Church of God.⁸¹

⁸¹*Washington Afro-American*, February 17, 1973, and based on conversations with members of the Board.