



Here & Now

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An update for Florida Baptist Historical Society Board of Directors and Friends

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Penny Baumgardner
Administrative Assistant

Dear Board Members and Friends of the Florida Baptist Historical Society,

In the course of research one comes across many interesting personalities and fascinating stories. Florida Baptist history is no exception. Each year at the Florida Baptist Convention our Florida Baptist messengers vote for a respected Baptist leader to serve as president “to preside over the body, keep order, take the vote on all questions properly brought up, and to perform all other duties usually performed by such officers.”

In the past 160 years Florida Baptists have elected 91 different men and one woman to hold this position. The Florida Baptist Constitution states: “Either the President or one of the Vice-Presidents shall be a layperson other than a person ordained to the gospel ministry or a member of the professional staff of a church. Additionally, either the President or one of the Vice-Presidents shall be a person ordained to the gospel ministry or a member of the professional staff of a church.” I would like to introduce you to Albert A. Murphree a layperson who served as president from 1922-23. Murphree was married to Jennie Henderson and they had four children.



Albert A. Murphree

Albert A. Murphree (1870-1927) was born near Chepultepec, Alabama. His parents Jesse and Emily raised him and a family of ten children in Walnut Grove, Alabama where he attended community schools and a local two-year college. Murphree graduated from the University of Nashville (BA, 1894), and taught mathematics at several high schools and small colleges in Alabama, Tennessee and Texas. In 1895, Murphree moved to Florida to become a mathematics instructor at the West Florida Seminary (now Florida State University) in Tallahassee.

Two years later in 1897, the West Florida Seminary board of trustees appointed Murphree as the seminary’s third president at the age of 27. While serving as president he started and completed the academic work for a Master of Arts degree at the seminary, renamed Florida State College in 1901. In 1905, the Florida Legislature passed the Buckman Act, a law which segregated Florida’s schools of higher learning by race and gender. After the passage of this law Florida State College became the all-female Florida Female College, where Murphree remained as president until 1909. In 1909, Murphree convinced the legislature to change the name of the college to the Florida State College for Woman.

In the summer of 1909, the Board of Control of the University of the State of Florida in Gainesville, voted unanimously to elect Murphree as president where he would serve until his death in 1927. Being a deeply religious man Murphree’s beliefs carried over into his leadership at the University of Florida. He insisted that the University of Florida students attend chapel on campus twice a week and that Scripture reading and prayer be included in each service. Murphree also said that the University would “not engage, or retain a professor who is known to be irreligious.” A condition of membership on the faculty during Murphree’s administration was that the person be “a member of some evangelical church.”

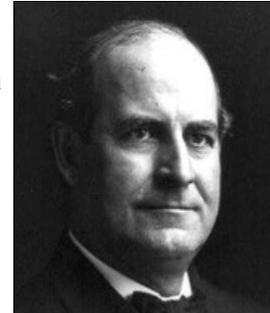


West Florida Seminary, Tallahassee

While president of the University of Florida, Murphree became friends with William Jennings Bryan, the former U.S. Representative from Nebraska and the Democratic Party nominee for President in 1896, 1900, and 1908. Bryan being of like mind concerning religious matters was impressed with Murphree's "simplicity and fervor of his religious faith and the humility and tenderness of his soul." It is perhaps these qualities that led Bryan to announce to the press on January 13, 1924, that he was planning to nominate Murphree as a candidate for President of the United States during the 1924 Democratic National Convention.

Murphree who was perhaps more astonished than anyone else by Bryan's announcement stated, "Nobody expects a Southern man to be nominated President, much less a Florida man." Murphree himself called the nomination "a fiction" and even his friends refused to treat the matter seriously, as many when writing him, humorously requested cabinet posts and other political offices.

On February 24, 1924, Murphree publicly announced that he was not a candidate and would not permit his name to appear on the state ballot. After the 1924 Democratic Convention which was held June 24-July 9, Murphree sent the following message to Bryan: "I appreciate your faithfulness and your friendship. The advertising that came to the University through your generous proposal concerning me has shown results in greatly increased correspondence with prospective Florida settlers from all sections of the United States." From the University of Florida's point of view Bryan's efforts at the convention had brought about positive results.



William Jennings Bryan

Murphree did not need a candidacy for United States President to help him carry out a successful administration in college matters. History tells us that during Murphree's eighteen years as the University of Florida president, the school saw tremendous expansion and improvement in its academic and building programs. But the fact still remains that history and life can surprise us at anytime with unexpected events.

Murphree can be credited for his role in nurturing two of Florida's earliest Universities in their infancy. In just over one hundred years, with the influence of Murphree, these two national research universities have grown to take their place among the largest single-campus universities in the United States. The University of Florida is among the ten largest with an enrollment of over 50,000 students annually.

Florida Baptists can and do make a difference in the lives of students yesterday and today.

Honoring those who honor Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Penny Baumgardner".

Penny Baumgardner
Administrative Assistant
Florida Baptist Historical Society



The University Auditorium was the largest construction project completed on the University of Florida's Gainesville campus during the presidency of Albert Murphree. The auditorium was built between 1922 and 1925.