

**“OBADIAH B. BROWN:
A NEGLECTED, FORGOTTEN BAPTIST HERO”**

By

Rev. John C. Hillhouse, Jr.

**ADDRESS PRESENTED
AT THE ANNUAL DIRECTORS MEETING
OF THE
FLORIDA BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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Philippians 1:3-6

In the youthful years of the American Republic, before an earth-scorching Civil War etched sectionalism in our history, there were a few men like the Reverend Obadiah B. Brown¹ of Washington, D.C. who sought to make the words “One nation, indivisible” a reality.

Call Brown an enabler. He provided unique opportunities for persons from all parts of the nation to work cooperatively. His contemporaries called him the preacher politician.

He was one of the most dynamic and influential men in American **political, religious, educational, and journalistic life**. And it was the team of Luther Rice and Obadiah B. Brown that accomplished many of the things currently attributed solely to Rice: organizing a nationwide denomination of Baptists (in contrast to the regional associations of Baptists existing before 1814), creating a Baptist denominational college in Washington (now the George Washington University), establishing a program of Indian missions, and creating a Baptist denominational interest in journalism.

Brown was well known by Presidents Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Quincy Adams, Jackson and Van Buren. He served as an officer in clubs which included men like Daniel Webster, Henry Clay and John Calhoun. “Kitchen Cabinet” members Amos Kendall and Richard M. Johnson lived in his home. Lesser-known politicians and important federal judges knew that some of Washington’s most stimulating conversations were held around his hearth. He was the top civil servant in the U.S. Post Office Department when that agency was considered the most powerful and complex federal bureaucracy—issuing mail routes to winning stagecoach companies, hauling newspapers from town to town when that was only the mass communication, and building highways to be used by stagecoaches. Brown’s thinking played an important role in the way the U.S. Post Office Department handled newspaper circulation. A resident of his boardinghouse revolutionized world communications as the business brains behind Samuel F.B. Morse’s telegraph company. Brown was a capital intellectual, noted for his brilliant mind and business ability. He was, in short, in the center of power.

Brown was the first man to have served as chaplain of both the U.S. House of Representatives (1807) and The Senate (1809). After the British burned Washington on August 24, 1814 following the humiliating Battle of Bladensburg, Brown was called back to chaplaincy to provide spiritual guidance for a humbled House of Representatives. Postmaster General Amos Kendall, called the brains of the Jackson and Van Buren administrations, and Vice President Richard M. Johnson said in their biographies that Brown should be credited with some of the brightest ideas ascribed to them. In the prize-winning biography of *The Age of Jackson*,² Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote that Brown was comparable to the Reverend John Leland, the Baptist preacher behind James Madison writing the first Amendment to the Constitution, as the nation’s foremost advocates of the separation of church and state.

Brown was one of the three men who founded both the American Baptist and Southern Baptist denominations. While pasturing his church in Washington, he was successively the denomination's foremost leader in Maryland, the District of Columbia and Virginia as the Washington church affiliated with the local association serving Baptist churches in Washington.³ Property of the first denomination-wide college was deeded in his name. His church was the first local congregation to be represented by a member of the church at a national Baptist convention. Brown was the first president of what became the American Baptist Publication Society. He was on the committee that created the forerunner of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board. He was the only man listed as the editor of the denomination's first newspaper.⁴

But today Brown is a neglected, forgotten Baptist. He should be remembered as second only to the Luther Rice in the creation of a nationwide denomination of Baptists with a global view of missions and service. Why was he forgotten?

Beginning this inquiry requires our remembering America when New Englander Luther Rice called Baptist mission societies and associations to support New England Baptist missionaries then in British-ruled India.

THE WAR OF 1812

During the War of 1812 (1811-1815) the New England states were openly talking of seceding from the Union to realign with Britain's colonies near the St. Lawrence River.

The Southern states were ringed by potentially hostile forces: the British Navy in the Atlantic, the Spaniards in Florida, the possibility of renewed French influence along the lower Mississippi Valley, and powerful Indian tribes in the interior of each state.

The Western territories, such as Kentucky and Illinois, were antagonistic to Eastern financial control, were concerned about British military intrigue from Detroit to Vincennes, and had their own problems with the Indians.

The Middle Atlantic States were unwilling hosts to the British expeditionary forces making attacks on Maryland and Virginia and seen as a threat by Pennsylvania.

Brown, like many of the frontier Baptists, was a Republican, the name then used for followers of Thomas Jefferson. Republicans like Brown were ardently in hope that the federal union would survive the year of 1814. So Baptists like Brown and Rice used that year to advance from local association to nationwide denomination cooperation.

Obadiah Bruen Brown was born in Newark, N.J., on July 20 1779, the son of Mary Bruen Brown and Eleazar Brown. Their marriage produced a great grandson for two men who had founded Newark back in 1667, John Browne (sic) and Obadiah Bruen.

Raised a Presbyterian, Brown started attending the Baptist church when it was organized in Newark. At age 24, he joined this church and soon the members of the congregation began encouraging him to enter the ministry. Within a few months, O.B. Brown had gone to Scotch Plains, N.J., to study theology with the Rev. William Van Horn, pastor of the most prominent Baptist church in the New Jersey-New York area.

Brown was invited to the federal city in 1807 to preach several sermons as a test of his ability. The Washington First Baptist Church voted, without a dissenting vote, to appoint him as the pastor.

Unfortunately for Brown's career, the church could not financially support a pastor. So Brown obtained a clerkship in the U.S. Post Office Department, the nation's largest and influential bureaucracy. He became the fiscal agent representing several Congressmen in Washington during the months they returned to their home states. He and his wife Elizabeth turned their home into a boardinghouse.

Before his first year as Washington pastor had ended, Brown had been elected the Moderator of the Baltimore Baptist Association, then the highest position of leadership among the churches in Northern Virginia, the District of Columbia, Maryland and parts of Delaware. And he was first elected by Congress to be the Chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives.

During 1808, his second year as Washington pastor, Brown's church hosted the annual meeting of the Baltimore association. The assembled churchmen communicated with President Thomas Jefferson about the separation of church and state. Brown delivered their September message to Jefferson and the President agreed to reply to those persons convened in Brown's meeting house.⁵

Two months later a visitor to the capital attended a House session and recorded in his diary that about eleven o'clock

the Speaker rapped on the table and Mr. Brown, a Baptist clergyman, the Chaplain of the House, went into the Clerk's place fronting the Speaker's chair and addressed the throne of grace in a modest, appropriate, republican prayer of about eight or ten minutes, about half the members being in observing great decorum and apparent seriousness.⁶

LUTHER RICE

Luther Rice had accompanied Adoniram and Ann Judson to India as American Congregational missionaries. Anticipating theological differences with the British Baptist missionary, William Carey, who was already in India, the three Americans began preparing for debates and soon found themselves in favor of Carey's views of baptism. In India the three Congregationalists became Baptists and decided Rice must return to America to organize mission support among America's Baptists.

Three areas of the nation were then regional centers of Baptist influence. Boston was the center of foreign mission interest. Philadelphia, the former national capital, was also the home of the first Baptist associational cooperation in the New World, dating from 1707. Charleston was the second oldest center and consequently the most influential in the South. Throughout the country there were 115 associations with a combined membership in 1813 of 175,000 Baptists.

Boston Baptists had supported the American Congregational and British Baptist mission efforts. They welcomed Rice on his return to Massachusetts. He was given their commission to tour as far south as Philadelphia seeking to organize the northern Baptist associations in support of the Judsons in India.

The Pennsylvania city was the southern circulation terminal for *The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*. The people in that city would already be aware of Rice's purpose. But the furloughed missionary continued beyond Philadelphia southward across the Mason-Dixon Line into the territory of the Baltimore association, where the most prominent leader was Washington's Obadiah B. Brown.

Brown was an enthusiastic and convincing advocate of the idea of a federal-like denomination of autonomous Baptists which had been suggested by a leader in the Charleston association. Rice wrote in his *Journal*, while traveling shortly after meeting Brown, that a national denomination of Baptists might

be a good idea. Brown had offered Washington and his church as the logical place to create a federal association of Baptists from all over the nation.

South of Washington Rice was welcomed as a friend of Chaplain Brown. New Englander Rice carried a letter of introduction from Brown. The rural Baptists knew little of Boston mission activity but they did have a hero in Brown, who had become the first member of their faith to be a chaplain of both houses of Congress. When a thief attempted to steal funds from the denomination in the 1820's, he sought to impersonate Rice by showing a fake letter of introduction from Brown.⁷

Thirty-six persons were designated to meet in May of 1814 in Philadelphia to form a federal-like denomination of Baptist societies. Rice had chosen the old federal city instead of the new one advocated by Brown. Another reason for holding the first denominational meeting in Philadelphia was that the British Navy was prowling Chesapeake Bay prior to 1814 attacks against Alexandria, Washington and Baltimore.

Brown and two other delegates, from areas threatened by British invasion, did not attend the Philadelphia meeting which created the American Baptist denomination. Nevertheless, he was so well known that in his absence he was elected an officer (member of the Board of Commissioners, later renamed Managers). The denominational structure was centered around representatives of associations or mission societies meeting once every three years in a federal convention. From its once every three years pattern, the denomination was nicknamed "the Triennial Baptist Convention." Looking ahead to the 1817 convention, the denominational leaders asked Thomas Baldwin, editor of the Boston based *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, to preach the featured sermon. If he couldn't preach that sermon, Obadiah Brown was the denomination's second choice for its foremost preacher in the nation.⁸

COLUMBIAN COLLEGE

President James Madison delivered a message to Congress a few days before Brown's second term as House Chaplain ended. The Chief Executive urged Congress to start a college in Washington, adding his name to the list of Presidents favoring a capital city college. President Washington had donated stock from his personal wealth to stimulate the funding of a college. But nothing had been done.⁹

Brown knew that denominational leaders were trying to start a central theological seminary somewhere south of New England. If a central seminary could be started, why not start a central college which would contain a seminary? From December 5, 1815, onward, the idea of a central college in the District of Columbia under the auspices of the Baptist denomination was the foremost subject of discussion around the Brown boardinghouse hearth.¹⁰

President James Monroe added his support to the establishment of a college in Washington in 1817. Heath conversation this year produced a "Literary Association," headed by Brown and consisting of Reverend Spencer Cone (who had moved to Washington to study theology under Brown's tutelage), Luther Rice, and Enoch Reynolds, deacon of Brown's church. This group created the Columbian College, which decades later became the George Washington University. The work of the hearth group in creating the college is examined in detail elsewhere.¹¹

The other major hearth topic of 1817 was the need for a new denominational journal. *The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, published since 1803, had assumed the role of denominational journal. But it was a subscription periodical, too expensive for frontiersmen to order. And the editors in Boston were a long way from Cincinnati or Charleston. Rice attacked the cost of the subscription journal in September. The following month the editors said they would not object to his

creating a new periodical in Philadelphia, with the assistance of Dr. William Staughton and House Chaplain Burgiss Allison. In 1818 Rice created *The Latter-Day Luminary*.

While at the 1819 Baltimore denominational Board of Managers meeting, Brown set the groundwork for centralizing the denomination's administrative, educational and journalistic activities in Washington. He was able to accomplish this centralization during the national convention the following year.¹²

Senator Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky, who boarded at the Brown home, introduced a bill on November 30, 1820, for Congress to incorporate the new college.¹³ Some Senators questioned the legality of the federal government incorporating a Baptist institution, and the uproar over the application of the federal government incorporating a Baptist institution, and the uproar over the application of the First Amendment's separation of church and state clause caused the bill to be tabled. When news of this debate reached Massachusetts, where Baptists were advocating the disestablishment of the State Church, leaders of the denomination's New England wing were severely embarrassed. The New England Baptists had been fighting church-state interaction since 1636. Now these newcomers to the denomination, former Presbyterian Brown and former Congregationalist Rice, were showing too much interest in cooperating with the government to be orthodox Baptists.

Observing the opposition caused by the denominational entry into the world of politics, Brown and his associates made an open appeal for inter-denominational support of the college in Washington's secular *National Intelligencer* newspaper. This support quickly began to develop. Johnson went back to the Senate and introduced a modified form of his original bill. The Senate made some amendments to it, and the bill cleared the Senate on January 9. President Monroe signed it into law on February 9, 1821. Two unique points in the modified charter bill made it clear that a person's creed would not deprive him of admission to the student body; and gave the U.S. Attorney General the right to inspect college affairs.¹⁴

The Easterners, especially those in New England, entered the 1820 triennial convention with the idea of withdrawing the denomination from its missionary activity in St. Louis. While their attention was focused on the West, Brown appeared and centralized the denominational headquarters in Washington. In three days he accomplished what Rice had been considering for seven years.¹⁵

On January 9, 1822, Columbian College was formally inaugurated. The college property was in Obadiah Brown's name on the deed. He was the president of the college trustees. He had been appointed by the denomination to invest the president and faculty of the college with their duties. Many local and federal government officials, having made financial contributions to Brown's favorite project, also attended the ceremony.

Finances plagued the infant school's progress.

Besides bringing a college to Washington by 1822, Obadiah Brown had obtained the centralization of all Baptist denominational activities in the federal city:

- Managers: He made the motion that the Board of Managers establish their headquarters in Washington. He was appointed the chairman of a committee of Washingtonians (Reynolds, Cone, Rice and Allison) to seek Congressional incorporation of the denomination, itself. Brown invited the convention to meet at a city other than Philadelphia for its third gathering. He hosted them in Washington for their 1823 meeting.
- Indian missions: The first project to benefit from Washington centralization of the denomination's leadership was the Indian mission program. Congress had

authorized \$10,000 a year for Indian education to be handled through the War Department. Secretary of War John C. Calhoun created the post of Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Thomas L McKenney was brought from Kentucky to Washington to fill this position. McKenney had been working with the Johnson family in Kentucky Indian programs.

When Rice began to show interest in the Indians (at the urging of the Johnsons and Brown), he contacted McKenney. McKenney sent a description of Rice's proposals to the governor of every state and territory, as well as the twenty federal Indian agents, showing he was encouraging the Baptist project.

Missionary Isaac McCoy of Indiana visited Washington in 1821 to see government officials about his Indian activities. Rice, Senator Johnson and Allison accompanied him on his visit to John Calhoun's office. Missionary John Mason Peck also sought government assistance for his work with Indians in Illinois and Missouri. Peck wrote letters about his activities to Brown and Calhoun.

McKenney became a frequent writer to Baptist periodicals.¹⁶

Denominational journalism: Journalistic activity also became centralized in Brown's town as the denominational journal, *Luminary*, was moved there from Philadelphia. Obadiah Brown first appeared in the journal in 1819 as the author of an obituary about a member of his church. (Eventually, he would become the only designated editor of the publication.) Brown was appointed to the *Luminary* publication committee in 1820.

Anderson & Meehan, the Philadelphia firm printing *Luminary*, moved to Washington with it in 1822. Luther Rice and John S. Meehan joined Brown's church at the same time, March 8, 1822.

Rice began publishing the Baptist newspaper *Columbian Star* in Washington in 1822, "assisted by Dr. Staughton and O. B. Brown." John S. Meehan served as its publisher. The paper soon became the "principle medium of intelligence for the Baptist Church in this country."

With denominational headquarters, Indian missions liaison, the new college and seminary campus and the two official denominational publications centralized in Washington by the middle of 1822, Obadiah Brown's influence grew enormously. While Rice was traveling around the nation collecting funds and establishing mission societies, Brown was in Washington directing the denominations.¹⁷

YEAR OF DARKNESS

The fateful year 1826, a year of darkness for Brown and Rice, came between the bitter presidential campaigns of 1824 and 1828. The political connection is described in detail elsewhere.¹⁸

Brown's hearth group was split between the rival political factions supporting J.Q. Adams and Jackson. As the showdown in the denomination came to head April 26-May 7, the political split significantly weakened the usual effectiveness of Brown's associates in Washington. Rice could not understand why Brown's hearth group had lost its effectiveness in standing up to the pressure coming from Francis Wayland's anti-centralization New Englanders. During 1825 and early 1826, Rice wrote numerous letters to Brown encouraging the preacher politician to line up support for Brown-Rice centralization projects before the Baptist convention met in New York City.¹⁹

At the second annual meeting of the Baptist General Tract Society January 4, 1826, Brown still seemed in control of the denominational machinery. He was re-elected president of the publishing society. Baron Stow, a brilliant Columbian College student from New England belonging to Brown's church, made a motion to praise Brown and his co-workers in the society.²⁰

On January 28, Stow's name appeared on the masthead of the *Columbian Star* as editor and publisher. A note said that the former editor and publisher, John S. Meehan, had left the paper to begin "a political journal in this city." (Former Baptist denominational publisher John S. Meehan, well known as a Jackson supporter, was designated the Librarian of Congress after Jackson won the election of 1828.) The *Luminary* would no longer be published, the note continued, as the *Star* would replace that magazine. Apparently Meehan inherited the *Luminary* facilities as Stow obtained the *Star* equipment. Brown and Rice had chosen a poor time to yield control of their journalistic projects to others.

The New Englanders were seeking targets to attack the college's financial situation. A tutor at the college sent a letter to a relative in Vermont describing where he felt the blame for the school's financial problems should be placed.

Wait named Rice and O. B. Brown ... as the chief culprits ... Rice and Brown's insistence on a new building, promised on a policy of "push on, and let matters turn out as they will" had brought Columbian to the brink of financial ruin. Controlling the Board of Trustees, Rice and Brown had no effective opposition.²¹

The 1826 triennial convention was held in New York. This gathering had originally been planned for Washington. But grumbling by Northerners over the many Southern delegates at the Washington convention of 1823 caused the site to be moved northward. The result was that the 1826 convention contained forty-four delegates from New York and New England and only nineteen delegates from points south of New York. Some of the few "Southerners" at the meeting were actually New Englanders attending Columbian College in Washington, the only one of the four Baptist schools located south of New York. This convention was to become infamous for its "animosities and collisions, chiefly of a personal character ..."²²

On May 5, 1826, the convention committee investigating Rice declared he was "a very loose accountant" but they could find no evidence of criminal action in his bookkeeping. But a cherished Brown-Rice project, the Indian education mission in several frontier territories and states, coordinated with the War Department through centralized denominational offices in Washington, was dismembered. Instead of the Baptist denomination having a centralized mission program for the Indians, the 1826 convention decreed that individual mission societies within each state could minister to the Indians if they desired. Regional Indian mission societies took over the various schools after the convention adjourned.

THE ECLIPSE

The May meeting of the Columbian College trustees, following the upheaval of the Triennial Baptist Convention of 1826, witnessed the anti-Brown forces exerting the greatest power they had ever held in the affairs of the school. Luther Rice was fired as treasurer and Enoch Reynolds was dismissed (to be replaced by Baron Stow) as the secretary of the trustee board. Only Obadiah B. Brown, "O.B.B." as friends and foes alike called him, retained his position, as president of the board. The one bright spot in college affairs during the month following the convention, in the opinion of Brown was that one New Englander elected to the trustees refused to accept the position and Brown was able to substitute the mayor of Washington in the vacancy.²³

Dueling was a popular sport among America's youth during this decade. Although he would have abhorred the use of pistol or sword, *Star* editor Baron Stow knew the power of the journalist's pen in a

duel. An example of Stow's editorial bias against Brown and Rice was the news item from the convention which was investigating Rice's honesty. Stow reported that Rice had given the Washington printing office (used by the *Luminary*, the *Star*, the tract society and "Mission Press") to the denomination, but that the convention investigation exposed a "flaw" in the deed. Later, after pressure had been brought by someone in Washington to get Stow to describe the "flaw", Stow said it was a deed clause that the convention should pay Rice for the printing office before the office was turned over to the denomination! It took several months before Stow reported that Rice had been cleared of any dishonesty.²⁴

Stow went to Vermont in September to be married. While he was out of Washington, Rice and General Duff Green, editor of the Jacksonian newspaper *U.S. Telegraph*, initiated "the logotype war" of 1826.

On September 26, Luther Rice and some brawny workmen from the newspaper *Telegraph* broke into the *Star* office and seized its logotype (its distinctive nameplate for the front page), type, and printing presses. The equipment was carried down the street to the *Telegraph* newspaper's office. There Rice published the September 30 issue of the *Star*.

Stow returned from his New England honeymoon to obtain an injunction in the District Court ordering Rice to cease publishing the newspaper he had originated four years earlier. Rice and Green held the logotype and printing equipment. Stow moved his office to another printing plant in the city and, with a new logotype, continued editing his paper.

The verbal battle raged for two months. The personal attacks became so bitter that Brown's church entered the arena, as both Rice and Stow were members of the church and the church felt the logotype war was unbecoming behavior for Christians. Both Stow and Rice appealed for Brown's support. As Stow stated in his paper, Brown was the ranking denominational officer in Washington.

The monthly church business meeting on November 10 appointed a committee, to be chaired by Deacon Enoch Reynolds, to investigate the incidents being "carried on in the public newspapers of this city." Reynolds arranged a meeting between Rice and Stow in the deacon's home. A compromise was reached. A public apology before the church by both Rice and Stow was arranged. Stow agreed to pay Rice for the logotype and other equipment. Rice returned the equipment to the *Star* office.²⁵

At the following meeting of the denominational executive board, it was decided to sell the press and move the *Star* away from Brown's Washington hearth group. The Boston publication *American Baptist Magazine* (formerly the *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*) was designated the denominational journal. Stow announced that the reasons he wanted to edit the *Star* had ceased to exist. He wanted to give up the *Star* editorship to accept a New England pastorate.²⁶ The denominational board agreed to seek a buyer for the *Star*. The buyer could print the paper in New York or Philadelphia, but not in Washington.²⁷

The final blow of 1826 came when the Baptist General Tract Society, up to this time headed by Brown, voted to move its facilities northward to Philadelphia. The reason given for the move from Washington was to improve "communication with the Southern and Western Depositories" of material printed by the society.²⁸

As 1827 started, it became evident that the new trustees elected by the denomination to reform the Brown-Rice school's finances were creating more problems than they were solving. In March, Postmaster General McLean led a mass exodus of the "reform" trustees in resigning from the board. The college faculty, with long-overdue salaries, resigned a short time later. At this point the president of the college, Staughton, resigned in despair, and the school closed for an indefinite recess.

With their opponents having resigned from the trustees, Brown and Rice went back to work for the good of their college. Brown worked with Robert Semple of Virginia, heading a five-member committee appointed by the 1826 convention to rescue the reputation of the college. As Rice wrote to Brown:

Semple must work with the Administration men and General Green with the Jackson men; and Dr. Sewall with both. Let Semple be introduced to Mr. Clay. He wishes it and you can introduce him any time.

Again, Brown's political connections would aid the college and Rice. Just as they had been friendly with both presidential candidates Crawford and Adams in 1824, Brown and Rice were able to work with the administration of President John Quincy Adams and his main political foe in the coming election battle of 1828, Andrew Jackson. Henry Clay was Secretary of State for Adams. General Duff Green was editor of the Jackson newspaper in Washington, the *Telegraph*. Clay and Green may have attended Brown's church.²⁹ One main concern Brown had was that President John Quincy Adams was the main creditor of the college. Of the school's outstanding debt of \$50,000 at this time, \$20,000 was owed entirely to President Adams.³⁰

Within a short time, Brown and Semple were able to re-open the college. Some of the original professors were re-hired. Congress brought financial aid to the school, largely through the efforts of the two Jackson supporters, Senators Richard M. Johnson and John H. Eaton.³¹ Brown, Richard Johnson and McLean, were re-elected trustees of the college in 1832.³²

The federal government waived the debts the college owed it in 1842. With improved bookkeeping, this enabled the college to come out of debt for the first time that year. But by that time Rice and Reynolds were dead and Cone was ministering elsewhere. Only Obadiah Brown of the college's founders was still active in the affairs of the school.

BROWN POWER

Three incidents illustrate the power and influence of the Rev. Obadiah B. Brown:

Shortly after the *Luminary* began publication in 1818, the American Colonization Society held a conference in Washington. Brown and attorney Francis Scott Key, who had penned the words to what became our National Anthem, were leaders of the local ACS. Two ACS officials described their recent visit to Sierra Leone, an African nation created as a new home for freed slaves. Someone (probably Brown) wrote about that conference for the *Luminary*. That article was read by two freedmen in Richmond, Virginia. Lott Carey and Colin Teague told their pastor they wanted to be the first black missionaries to Africa. Their pastor, from the same hometown as Obadiah Brown, introduced the two volunteers to Brown. At the Baptist board meeting of April 28, 1819, Brown told the Baptist leaders that if they would appoint the two freedmen as missionaries, the President of the United States had already authorized their transportation to Africa by means of U.S. Navy vessel.³³

Two British Baptists, Francis Augustus Cox and James Hoby, came to America to attend the triennial convention of 1835 to encourage it to renounce slavery. First they visited Brown, and mentioned they would like to meet the President of the United States. Brown's son-in-law escorted them to the White House where they met Andrew Jackson and Vice President Martin Van Buren. Later they visited former President Madison. Brown was always good at introducing visiting Baptists to people they should get to know.³⁴

Although Brown died in 1852, Washingtonians still thought of the sanctuary he had built for the second meetinghouse of the First Baptist Church as "Brown's church". When the congregation later moved to another structure and sold their second sanctuary, that old building was still identified as

“Brown’s church”. The purchaser ran an advertisement in the *Washington Evening Star* saying someday he hoped people would quit thinking of that building as Brown’s church and begin thinking of it as Ford’s Theatre. Local newspapers still were identifying the structure with Brown’s name when a fire destroyed the building in 1862, a decade after Brown’s death.³⁵ (The site was used for the New Ford’s Theatre in 1863.)

WHY WE FORGOT

Extensive writings since 1936 have sought to restore Luther Rice to a place of respect among Baptists in this nation. But the role of Obadiah B. Brown in these pioneer affairs remains in even greater obscurity. Recognizing the work this team accomplished, one wonders why Brown and Rice faded into historical darkness for more than a century. Three reasons for this obscurity present themselves:

First, the major historical recounting of the denomination’s founding was in 1864, the fiftieth anniversary celebration. This was by the Northern convention. Much of the work by Brown and Rice was in the Southern states (Brown had helped to organize the Virginia convention, for instance, and both men had worked with Keeling, the founder of the Virginia Baptist newspaper, *Religious Herald*, which had become the official publication of the Southern Baptist Convention). Since Robert E. Lee’s unsuccessful effort to visit the North via Gettysburg the year before the Baptists’ fiftieth anniversary celebration, Southerners had generally felt unwelcome in the North. All of the Northerners who had supported Brown and Rice apparently were deceased by 1864.

As part of that 50th anniversary, the historical account of the founding and of the important men in that founding of the Baptist denomination in America was compiled by Baron Stow, the most vocal opponent of Brown and Rice in 1826. Baron Stow wrote the official denominational history. Thus the man who did the most to belittle, defeat and degrade the efforts of the Washington centralizers was called upon to select the men who should be remembered by the denomination. His account minimized Rice’s public activities and almost overlooked Brown.³⁶

The American Baptist Historical Society *Catalogue of Books and Manuscripts*, issued in 1872, didn’t have a single document by Brown but it had many items by Stow. In 1925 the American Baptist Publication Society published a centennial study of the society and author Daniel Gurden Stevens was negative about Rice and didn’t mention Brown. *The Baptist Advance* of 1964, published to celebrate 150 years of North American Baptist denominational life, completely omitted Brown.

Second, from about 1840 onward it was not fashionable among Baptist churchmen in America to be associated with politics. Baptist biographers, such as Samson, seemed embarrassed by Brown’s interest in partisan politics. A professor of sociology’s 1965 preface to the re-issue of the 1864 memoir of Illinois missionary John Mason Peck commented on this political myopia by stating that the Civil War-era biographer “harbored prejudice against ‘secular’ events and affairs which played a significant part in Peck’s life” The same thing was true of Brown’s life, except that Brown was involved in politics in a greater extent than, perhaps, any other clergyman of his day.³⁷

The final reason for Brown’s obscurity is that he was willing to assume secondary status for the good of the Washington centralization effort. Rice went out and promoted activities in public while Brown remained in Washington and functioned to make those ideas and goals work.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Although some books briefly mention Brown, the only subject and title references to him at the Library of Congress (as of February, 1993) are due to the copyright of my 1970 master’s thesis. It is my goal to add to that bibliography through this paper and the hope of completing a book about Brown, tentatively called *Obadiah B. Brown: Enabler, Preacher, Politician*.

The 150th anniversary of the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention will be in 1995, causing some interest in Baptist history. Today Brown's church is dually aligned with the American and Southern conventions.

In the year 2002 the First Baptist Church of Washington, D.C. will celebrate its 200th anniversary and that will be the 150th anniversary of the death of Brown.

I hope that by the year 2002 we will have reclaimed Brown's memory from obscure history so many Baptists will be able to honor Brown for his contributions to America and Baptist life. We should give the Reverend Obadiah B. Brown the belated attention and respect his life and efforts deserve.

ENDNOTES

¹This paper is based on "Obadiah B. Brown: Pioneer Baptist Denominational Editor and U.S. Post Office Official", unpublished master's thesis, Bloomington: Indiana University, copyright 1970 by John C. Hillhouse, Jr. A summation is in *Journalism Abstracts* Vol. 9, 1971.

²Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1950), pp. 139, 355, lists O. B. Brown and John Leland as the two foremost clerical advocates of the separation of church and state in America prior to 1830. Leland had helped organize Brown's church when Washington was established. He had thrown his political support to James Madison in 1788 after Madison promised to seek an Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which would guarantee that the proposed federal government would not interfere with any church.

³The District of Columbia included at one time the areas now known as Arlington County and the City of Alexandria in Virginia.

⁴William Stickney, editor, *Autobiography of Amos Kendall* (New York: Peter Smith, 1949 micro-offset of 1872 publication), p. 288, hereafter AAK. *Minutes of the First Baptist Church of Washington, D.C.*, October 8, 1852, and March 10 and May 12, 1843, hereafter Minutes. *Columbian Star* denominational newspaper, October 14, 1826, p. 163; March 8, 1823, p. 40; March 15, 1823, p. 44; May 8, 1824, p. 75; June 3, 1826, p. 87; and December 23, 1826, p. 202; hereafter CS. Dorothy Clark Winchcole, "Brown, Obadiah Bruen," *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists, Vol. 1* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958), p. 202. Dr. W. Van Horn Brown, "Obadiah B. Brown," *Baptist Pulpit*, edited by William Sprague (New York: Robert Carter & Sons, 1865), pp. 538f. Leland Winfield Meyer, *The Life and Times of Colonel Richard M. Johnson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), pp. 400-406, hereafter RMJ. Francis Augustus Cox and James Hoby, *The Baptists in America* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1836), pp. 27-32.

⁵Schlesinger, op. cit.

⁶Brown was a champion of the Republican party (today known as the Democratic party), so it is difficult to know whether Edward Hooker's comment meant "that the prayer had a partisan flavor, modest but appropriate," according to Kenton Kilmer, "Prayers and Chaplains in Congress" (Washington: Legislative Reference Service, Government and General Research Division, the Library of Congress, December 30, 1964); and Omar Bursleson, *History of the United States House of Representatives* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), p.212.

⁷Elmer Louis Kayser, *Luther Rice* (Washington: George Washington University, 1966), pp25-29; Albert L. Vail, *The Mourning Hour of American Baptist Missions* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), pp. 455f.; Evelyn Wingo Thompson, *Luther Rice; Believer in Tomorrow* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1967), p. 86; hereafter BIT. L. Tucker Gibson, *Luther Rice's Contribution to Baptist History* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Philadelphia: Temple University School of Theology,

1944), p.149; Edward B. Pollard and Daniel Gurden Stevens, *Luther Rice; Pioneer in Missions and Education* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1928), pp. 124f.; Rufus O. Weaver, *The Place of Luther Rice* (Washington: Luther Rice Centennial Commission, 1936), p. 15; and William A. Carleton, *The Dreamer Cometh* (Atlanta: Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, 1960), p. viii.

8*Proceedings, 1814*, pp. 6-10, 30f., and *Second Annual Report*, (1816), p. 67.

9Cf. Elmer Louis Kayser, *Washington's Bequest to a National University* (Washington: The George Washington University, 1965).

10Gibson, op. cit., p. 83, and BIT, p. 118.

11The work of the hearth group in creating the university is examined in John C. Hillhouse, Jr., "Obadiah B. Brown and Columbian College", *Baptist History and Heritage*, April, 1971 (Nashville: Southern Baptist Historical Commission).

12*Luminary*, I:8, p. 382.

13RMJ, pp. 379f., *Luminary* II:13, pp. 147-149; II:13, pp. 148f.; IV:6, pp. 202-206.

14*Columbian University Charter and By-Laws 1821-1904* (Washington: Judd and Detweiler, 1904). Cf. Kayser, *Luther Rice*, p. 17.

15John T. Christian, *A History of the Baptists* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, 1926), p. 397; *Luminary* II:13: Stow, op. cit., pp. 104f.; and Gibson, op. cit., pp. 93-95.

16BIT, pp. 89 and 104. Cf. pp. 108, 163. RMJ, pp. 343-361, 368f. *Luminary* I:1, pp. 41f; I:3, pp. 132f.; I:8, pp. 376f., 381f., 409f.; III:6, pp. 172, 175; III:7, pp. 215f. *Fourth Annual Report* (1818), pp. 200f. McCoy, op. cit., pp. 63, 124. CS, February 12, 1825, p. 25.

17Rice's *Journal* microfilm. Southern Baptist Convention Historical Commission, Nashville, Publication No. 391, Reel 2.

18John C. Hillhouse, Jr., "Caucus Politics: Obadiah Brown's 'Hearth Group' at the Baptist Triennial Convention of 1826", *Foundations, A Baptist Journal of History and Theology*, January-March 1973 (Valley Forge: American Baptist Historical Society)

19BIT, pp. 176-181.

20CS January 14, 1826, p. 5. Cf. January 21, 1826, pp. 10f.

21Letter from Samuel Wait to Jonathan Merrian Jr., from College Hill, dated February 18, 1826, quoted in W. Ronald Wachs, "Conflict on College Hill," *The Quarterly Review*, Nashville, Vol. 29, Number 2, 1969, pp. 46ff. Copyright 1969, The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

22Ibid., pp. 174ff.: Carleton, op. cit., pp. 59ff.; and Babcock, op. cit., pp. 217-221.

23CS June 3, 1826, p. 87.

24CS August 19, 1826, p. 130.

25CS October 14, 1826, p. 120.

26Minutes of November 10 and 24, 1826. Cf. Pollard and Stevens, op.cit., pp. 97-102; and Kayser, *Luther Rice*, pp. 26-28.

27*Thirteenth Annual Report* (April, 1827), pp. 10f. Eventually the *Star* was sold to a Philadelphia man who published it in that city as the *Columbian Star and Christian Index*. In 1831, this paper was designated to be the denominational publication featuring news about the South, in possible competition with Henry Keeling's Virginia Baptist paper started by Brown and Rice's friend a few weeks after the 1826 convention. In 1833 the paper was moved from Pennsylvania to Georgia, where it exists today as the Georgia Baptist Convention weekly *Christian Index*. The Boston publication, after many name changes, in 1993 is the American Baptist Church's *In Mission*, of Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

28CS December 9, 1826, p. 194. Cf. BIT, p. 172. The tract society, long known as the American Baptist Publication Society, is known in 1993 as the *Board of Educational Ministries of the American Baptist Church*. Its organization includes the book publishing agency Judson Press.

29Letter dated October 23, 1827, in BIT, p. 189. Elmer Louis Kayser, *Bricks Without Straw: The Evolution of George Washington University* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), pp. 66f.

30Ibid., p. 183.

31RMJ, pp. 385f.; BIT, pp. 191-193.

32*Proceedings, 1832*, pp. 9f.; *Minutes*, April 29, 1832, and April 10, 1835.

33This is explained in a half page of footnoting in thesis footnote 32.

34Cox & Hoby, op. cit., pp. 27-32.

35*Washington Evening Star*, December 31, 1862; and WFBW, PP. 9-11. The current meeting house of Washington's First Baptist Church is described as an example of effective modern church architecture and art by Jack Hillhouse, "The Protestant Renaissance in the Space Age," *The Watchman-Examiner*, May 16, 1968, p.299.

36Stow, op. cit.

37Samson in Sprague, op. cit.; and Paul Harrison, "Introduction" in Rufus Babcock, editor, *Memoir of John Mason Peck*, 1864 (re-issued at Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), pp. xii-xiii, lxiii. Used by permission.