



Here & Now

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

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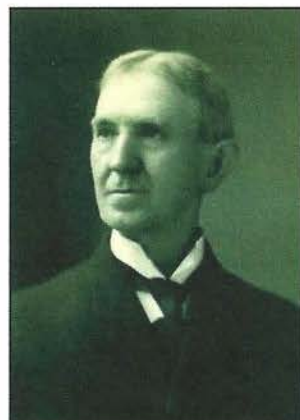
Dear Board Members and Friends of the Florida Baptist Historical Society,

Earl Joiner in his book *A History of Florida Baptists* (pp. 92-94), points out that there were three defining theological issues that set the table for Baptists for one hundred years. Those issues were Landmarkism, liberalism and footwashing. Joiner presented the importance of these movements by observing that these three issues made Florida Baptists "what they have been ever since" (p. 92). I have sympathy with that assessment with two additional thoughts. You have to also include the anti-mission controversies of the early years of the convention and you have to include the Whitsitt controversy in the Landmark column. I think Dr. Joiner would have been comfortable with those two suggestions so with that in mind let us look at the Whitsitt controversy outcomes in light of our 2012 theological culture in the Florida Baptist Convention.



Earl E. Joiner

The Whitsitt controversy came at the close of the influence of James Robinson Graves (1820-1893), and the Landmark pressure to lead the Southern Baptist Convention in a way it refused to go. Graves and his followers insisted on four primary tenets. One, the church was local. Two, valid baptism required a Baptist preacher. Three, other denominations were seen as bogus and four, they held that there was a succession of Baptist churches all the way back to the New Testament. Graves was controversial, confrontational and a great orator. His influence in the Southern Baptist and Florida Baptist Convention from 1858-1877, was personally powerful and disruptive.



William Heth Whitsitt

Then came William Heth Whitsitt (1841-1911). He was serving as pastor at Albany, Georgia, when invited to join the faculty at Southern seminary in 1872. He was a gentleman and a scholar. In 1886, he wrote an article for *Johnson's Universal Cyclopedia*, and contended that through research he believed "believer's baptism" by immersion was "restored" by English Baptists in 1641. If this were true that meant no "immersion" Baptist churches could be traced to the New Testament. The Lankmarkers went in orbit and Whitsitt had to resign from Southern Seminary in 1899.

There will be no attempt here to re-visit the Landmark-Whitsitt controversy. However, I do want to visit the outcomes.

Whitsitt got a job as professor of philosophy at Richmond College and taught there until he died in 1911. Graves died in 1893, but some interesting conclusions can be drawn for Florida Baptists. Note these observations.

The *Florida Baptist Witness* stood by Whitsitt and the seminary (March 12, 1885, p. 2). The *Witness* demanded that proof and not rumor was needed if an attempt was made to tear down a man or a school.



James Robinson Graves

Whitsitt always dealt with the issues and not personalities. He did not back down from perceived truth but he never engaged in personal criticism or print innuendo. In 1896, he published *A Question in Baptist History* (164 pages), a well documented defense of his theological position. But not one page is given to any derogatory comments of those who disagreed. In the theological controversy Whitsitt always brought light and not heat.

Another outcome was the change in J. R. Graves. In 1862, the Union Army captured Nashville and cost Graves thousands of dollars in economic loss. His mother and wife died of yellow fever within weeks of one another in 1867. He had a stroke in 1884, and fell in his yard in 1889, that caused him to be an invalid for the last four years of his life. The harshness of life affected the thunderous personality of Graves in a positive way. His writings, manners, attitude and demeanor were tempered by tragedy. The issues of theological controversy were swallowed up in the issues of life. Sermons became personally helpful and his "chair talks" as an invalid in his last few years showed concern and compassion for others.

Long after the "Graves-Whitsitt" arguments are forgotten may there be a Christian spirit, valid research, and a solid compassion behind every theological stance.

Honoring those who honor Christ,

Jerry M. Windsor
Secretary-Treasurer
Matthew 6:33



Southern Baptist Theological Seminary