

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,

Florida Baptists have claimed some very interesting and influential people among their number. One that would have to be mentioned in any "Roll of Recognition" would be Claude Denson Pepper (1900-1989) of social and political fame. Pepper helped change the social scene (Social Security, Medicare) of America more than any other person. He had a heart for the poor and a mind for accomplishment.

Pepper was born September 8, 1900, in Chambers County, Alabama. He was raised picking cotton, plowing fields, milking cows and making syrup. He joined the County Line Baptist Church as a boy and attended Sunday School classes taught by his relatives. Pepper said in his autobiography that he was poor but never unhappy. He was offered a scholarship to Howard College, a Baptist college in Birmingham, but after serious reflection turned it down and went to the University of Alabama.



First Baptist Church,
Dothan, Alabama

He taught school at Dothan, Alabama and a men's Bible class at First Baptist Church. He worked at a steel mill in Ensley, Alabama. He graduated from the University of Alabama in 1921 and graduated from Harvard Law School in 1924. He taught law at the University of Arkansas in 1924 and 1925. He set up law practice in Perry, Florida and became a member of the Florida House in 1929. In 1936, Pepper was elected United States Senator from Florida and served fourteen years. He was elected to the House of Representatives from District 18 in Miami in 1962, and never lost an election after then. He served in the United States House from 1962-1989 and was one of the most respected congressmen in Washington. Pepper married Irene Mildred Webster Pepper of St. Petersburg, and she died in 1979. They are both buried at Oaklawn Cemetery in Tallahassee, Florida.

Pepper was a champion of the downtrodden and a friend of the poor. He fought injustice and helped those who were powerless and oppressed. He was a Baptist by conviction and claimed Central Baptist Church in Miami and First Baptist Church in Tallahassee as his Florida home churches. On March 30, 1944, the "Claude Pepper Club" of Duval County bought a full page ad in the *Florida Baptist Witness*, and showed a picture of Pepper and permitted him to share his basic political beliefs. Pepper stated, "The Scriptures tell us: We are our brother's keeper. If the nations and peoples of the world had followed the teaching of Christianity, we would not have world war. We would not have a large part of the world suffering. America was founded on Christian principles by Christian people. We believe that America has a dominant place in the divine plan for a better world...as Baptists we must try to build rightly for the right."



Claude Pepper,
University of
Alabama



Mildred Pepper

5400 College Drive ~ Graceville, Florida 32440

Telephone: 850-263-3261, Ext. 480 ~ E-mail: fbhspt1@baptistcollege.edu ~ web: floridabaptisthistory.org



Claude and Mildred Pepper at the polls, 1950.

Claude Pepper was described as 5'7", red nosed, homely, deaf (two hearing aids), arthritic, pacemaker and painfully widowed. Yet he made an impact against injustice and poverty.

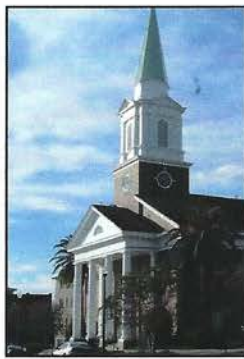
The death of Claude Pepper came at Walter Reed Army Medical Center on May 30, 1989. Days earlier President George W. Bush and wife Barbara visited him and presented him with the "Presidential Medal of Freedom" (formerly the Medal of Freedom). It is the highest civilian honor bestowed on any citizen of the United States. There were four memorial services for Claude Pepper upon his death.

The first was at the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, D. C. Only 27 Americans have ever been so honored. The body of Pepper lay in state June 1-2, 1989. He was only the sixth member of Congress so honored. The last was Pennsylvania Congressman Thaddeus Stevens in 1868. The coffin of Pepper rested on the same funeral bier that bore the coffin of Abraham Lincoln in 1865.



Memorial service at Capitol Rotunda

The second service was at Central Baptist Church in Miami, Florida on Sunday, June 4, 1989. A military plane bore the casket of Pepper to Miami on Friday, June 2. His body lay in state for viewing from 2-8pm, on Saturday and then the Central funeral service was on Sunday. Three military planes of Congressman and their staff were flown from Andrews Air Force Base for the Miami service. The Congressmen left Washington at 10:15am on Sunday morning and returned to the House of Representative steps at 7pm on Sunday night. The third service was the body lying in state at the Rotunda of the Old Capital building in Tallahassee on Sunday evening, June 4, 1989. Hundreds of people from all over Florida went to Tallahassee to honor Pepper and his legacy.



First Baptist Church, Tallahassee

The fourth service was at First Baptist Church, Tallahassee on Monday, June 5, 1989, at 1:30pm. Governor Reubin Askew referred to Pepper as a man of "great integrity, a keen intellect, boldness, vision and courage."

A total of 4,000 programs were printed for the church services honoring Pepper. Central and First Baptist Church, Tallahassee grieved as a friend was laid to rest.

On May 25, 1989, a short time before his death Pepper wrote: "I have prayed many, many long hours on my knees for the Lord to bestow on me the ability to improve the lives of my fellow Americans and to make it possible for me, a poor boy from Alabama, to move in the direction of a longer, happier, healthier life for all." Pepper wrote his own epitaph: "He loved God and the people and sought to serve both."

Honoring those who honor Christ,

Jerry M. Windsor
Secretary-Treasurer
Matthew 6:33



Claude and Mildred Pepper