



Here & Now

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

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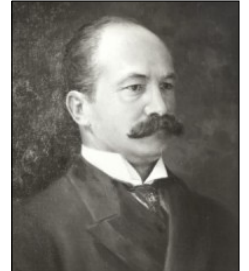


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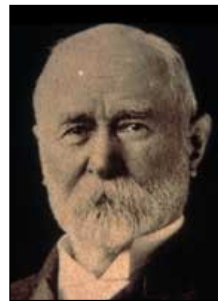
Dear Board Members and Friends of the Florida Baptist Historical Society,

Maturity, patience and forgiveness can make a big difference. The Stetson story and Florida Baptists took some interesting turns in 1904-1906. The events came out of the "Forbes Controversy" that arose over ugly rumors spread about President Forbes. Forbes and John B. Stetson entered into a bitter struggle and Forbes was exonerated by the board, but resigned in 1903.

John F. Forbes was a graduate of the University of Rochester where he received three degrees (A. B., 1878; A. M., 1881; Ph. D., 1885). He became the first president of Deland College, a school begun as Deland Academy. This school was provided by Henry A. Deland. It was Deland who founded the town of Deland and helped fund the first public school there. Forbes was 32 years of age when he took office and his starting salary was \$2,000 a year plus room and board for him and his family.



John F. Forbes



John B. Stetson

Forbes was the son of a Baptist preacher and was serving as a professor at the State Normal School in Brockport, New York, when he chose to move to Florida. His chosen fields of study were Greek and psychology. Forbes was president from 1885-1903 and the school was renamed the John B. Stetson University in 1889. In 1903, Forbes sued Mr. Stetson for libel and slander asking for damages to the amount of \$250,000.00. The struggle, the suit and the personal conflict was resolved when Forbes withdrew the suit and resigned as Stetson President. He returned to New York where he purchased an office equipment factory, and founded a business school where he taught until his death.

The 1903-1904, Forbes-Stetson feud was one of those Baptist fights that should have never been. Both men were intelligent and highly esteemed, but both listened to third parties that had an ax to grind. By January 1, 1904, there was much bitterness and discouragement in the ranks but cooler heads made a tremendous difference. Politics gave way to problem solving and personalities pitched in to make a difference. A case could be made that five events evolved that made a reconciling difference at Stetson and Deland.

First of all was the Forbes resignation. Forbes did not have to resign. The Stetson trustee meetings of September 18-19, 1902, concluded that "there are no facts to support such charges or suspicions" that had been raised about Forbes (*Garwood, Stetson University and Florida Baptists*; p. 83). A vote of 15 to 7 on a procedural matter proved that Forbes and friends could have defeated Stetson and his colleagues. However Forbes weighed the issues and he resigned August 3, 1903, "for the sake of the University." It was February 25, 1904, that the *Florida Baptist Witness* reported that Forbes felt that the university was not the "place or cause" of his battle with Stetson.



Lincoln Hulley

Secondly, was the work of Lincoln Hulley. After the resignation of Forbes, Hulley was chosen as president of Stetson and he served from 1904-1934. He was a graduate of Bucknell and went to Harvard for his postgraduate work. He became an ordained minister and was on the faculty at Bucknell when he accepted the presidency at Stetson. Hulley was a playwright, acknowledged orator, author and served two terms in the Florida State Senate. During his 30 year presidency the student body grew to 500 and Hulley reached out to the convention in friendship and scholarship. Hulley's son, Benjamin, class of

1917, was Florida's first Rhodes Scholar. Hulley died of a heart attack in January, 1934, at the age of 69. The Hulley integrity, compassion and friendship made a difference after his July 2, 1904, selection as president.

A third factor was a Stetson revival. Many felt the school had fallen on hard times primarily because of a lack of spiritual commitments made and kept. This feeling was addressed in a spirit led revival that changed lives, attitudes and directions of many on the Stetson campus. A lady wrote President Hulley that her prayer for Stetson was that the school would be brought out "clear as the sun, fair as the moon, and as terrible as an army with banners." (*The Southern Witness*, March 30, 1905, p. 2). This prayer rang in the ears and heart of Dr. Hulley and others at the school. The campus was revived. Every professor was a Christian and "the religious spirit" became the best thing about the school.

A fourth factor in the easing of tension was the willingness of Mr. Stetson to let bygones be bygones. An article entitled "Florida Baptist Education," in the March 16, 1905, issue of *The Southern Witness*, states "all who read this paper will be glad to know that the clouds have rolled away from Stetson University. It has been through the fire. It is brighter, better and stronger on account of this..." (p. 1).

A February 5, 1903, meeting of the Stetson Trustees led to the Forbes faction winning a vote 15 to 7. This vote resulted in Forbes being retained. Mr. Stetson was denied the trustee chairmanship for the first time since 1889, when he was first elected. This action alienated Mr. Stetson and he did not attend any more board meetings until February, 1906, shortly before his death.

An event on March 17, 1905, changed the general atmosphere and attitude of the campus. Newly elected President Hulley reached out to the John Stetson family. They had been hurt and grieved but Hulley wanted them and needed them in the Stetson fold. An informal dinner was planned and faculty, students and the Stetson family were invited. "The occasion was greatly enlivened by the singing of songs during the progress of the dinner. No speeches were made, and everyone felt free to eat as much as he pleased, sing as much as he pleased and laugh as much as he pleased." (*The Southern Witness*, March 23, 1905, p. 6). The gathering was a roaring success and "Mr. and Mrs. John B. Stetson were specially invited guests."

A fifth factor in the Stetson University reconciliation was the cooling off of words written and spoken about Dr. Forbes, Mr. Stetson, and the school. Rhetoric had gotten out of hand early on in the controversy and money, power and influence were used to create press releases and unfair statements. In January, February and March, 1905, there were actually three different Florida Baptist newspaper titles that hit the press. Due to leadership confusion and conflict there was the *Southern Baptist Witness* (January 11, 18, 25, 1905), *Florida Baptist Witness* (February 1, 8, 15, 22, 1905), and *The Southern Witness* (March 2, 1905). Dr. Hulley also had the *Gospel Herald* started up in 1907, and for eighteen months it was a journal that supported the Stetson cause.

The confusion in paper titles continued until 1908, when *The Florida Baptist Witness* gained the title it uses today. It appears it was a compromise in 1904, that set the stage for proper Florida Baptist newspaper service. On June 1, 1904, *The Florida Baptist Witness* and the *Southern Baptist* paper consolidated their interests. According to W. A. Hobson and J. B. Holley the intention of the combined papers would be to stand for denominational interests, work for the evangelization of Florida, upbuild Stetson University and unify our Baptist people (*Southern Baptist Witness*, June 2, 1904, p. 1).

The clouds gathered and the clouds parted after the Stetson and convention conflicts of the 1904-1906 era. It seems a lesson learned is that wise people find spiritual means to settle legitimate disputes. Humility, patience and vision proved to sustain the Florida Baptist Convention in the Forbes controversy. It takes spiritual means to make the best spiritual decisions.

Honoring those who honor Christ,



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Matthew 6:33
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