



FLORIDA BAPTIST  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# LEGACY

*Our Mission: Researching, preserving and promoting the Legacy of Florida Baptists*

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LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people, churches and events in Florida Baptist history. During the next several months this newsletter will feature the story of the development and ministry of the state Baptist news journal, *The Florida Baptist Witness*. The *Witness* was officially adopted and served as an entity of the Florida Baptist State Convention from 1884 until 2017 when it was dissolved as a State Convention agency. During its 133-year history the *Witness* had 33 editors (plus a number of associate editors) and its ownership moved on several occasions between private owners to control by the Convention corporation.



## EARLY EFFORTS



James McDonald

One of the most important events among Florida Baptist life during the concluding decades of the nineteenth century was the founding of the state paper, the *Florida Baptist Witness*. Before 1880, some men had tried to establish a written means of communication and news among Florida Baptists. For example, in 1848 James McDonald began publication in Jacksonville of *The Baptist Telegraph and Florida Emigrant* but was forced to discontinue it after only a short time. During these early years, *The Christian Index*, the Georgia Baptist newspaper, founded in 1821, gave generous space to news about Florida Baptists, many of whom were subscribers. However, as they grew and developed their own State Convention and other organizations, many Florida Baptists increasingly desired to have their own newspaper.

W. N. Chaudoin traced the origin of the *Florida Baptist Witness* to the failed efforts in the 1860s of two unnamed young pastors, one at Thomasville, Georgia, and the other at Monticello, Florida. They chose a name, *The Peninsular Pioneer and Florida Baptist*, and assembled a subscription list, but the paper never materialized. In 1872, interest arose in the Santa Fe River Baptist Association and the Florida Baptist Association to establish a Baptist newspaper in Florida. The State Convention, meeting in November, 1872, approved the suggested venture, but at the time State Convention ownership of a paper apparently was not considered. Hugh B. McCallum was named editor, and T. E. Langley and J. H. Tomkies were named assistant editors. In 1873, Hugh B. McCallum, a pastor in Lake City and publisher of a secular newspaper, also began publication of *The Florida Baptist*.



W. N. Chaudoin



Hugh B. McCallum

He was unable to get sufficient financial support, however, and had to discontinue it in 1875. It was a generous effort by McCallum, made largely at his own expense. Efforts by the 1876 State Convention to revive and continue the newspaper failed. The editor apparently gave his subscription list to *The Christian Index*, for in 1880 an ad for the *Index* in the Florida Baptist State Convention *Annual* described the *Index* as the successor to *The Florida Baptist*, and listed W. N. Chaudoin as the Florida editor.

#### STATE CONVENTION ADOPTION

With the help and encouragement of F. B. Moodie in 1884, Columbia, Alabama entrepreneur A. P. Ashurst, began the publication of the newspaper which survived. The premier issue was dated Thursday, January 17, 1884. The name, *The Florida Baptist Witness*, was provided by W. N. Chaudoin. Moodie and Ashurst were editors, and W. N. Chaudoin and N. A. Bailey were associate editors. At the State Convention that year, the Committee on Periodicals commended *The Witness* as a necessity for Florida Baptists. **Among the stated rationale, was the belief that the state newspaper could publicize New Testament principles and stimulate the missionary spirit among Florida Baptists. Also it was contended that the Baptist publication would likely raise the moral tone of the people of Florida and rouse the people to the educational needs of their children.**

The early format and style of *The Witness* presented a striking contrast to the *Witness* of recent years. Published weekly, it abounded in patent medicine ads, no doubt an absolute economic necessity at that time for its very survival. It included several kinds of news, including religious, secular, scientific, local, national and international. In time, *The Witness* contributed a great deal to Florida Baptist life.

Editors A. P. Ashurst, W. N. Chaudoin, and C. C. Hill announced in March 1885, that the newspaper's editorial office would be moved to DeLand to be closer to south Florida (really central Florida), from which the bulk of their news came. Henry A. DeLand promised to buy \$1,000 worth of advertising. However, the newspaper continued to be printed at Lake City.

#### OWNERSHIP CHANGES

By June of that year, Ashurst, as sole owner of the paper, sold half interest to S. M. Provence, who then replaced C. C. Hill as one of the editors. Provence had recently moved to Florida after serving as a pastor in Columbus, Georgia. Before year's end, a number of associations had regular or infrequent columns in *The Witness* in which they publicized news events and discussed current issues in the churches. Usually these columns were edited by the respective associational missionary.

Ownership of *The Witness* again changed by January 1886, when J. H. Griffith became editor and W. H. S. Northrup assumed responsibilities as business manager. By June, however, Griffith was gone and N. A. Bailey and W. N. Chaudoin were listed as editors.

Northrup, the following year in 1887, sold *The Witness* to L. B. Plummer of DeLand. Plummer then became business manager, while Bailey and Chaudoin continued to be listed as associate editors. On September 1, P. C. Drew of Lake City was added as associate editor. During that year, "The Home Circle," written by J. C. Porter, became a regular column in *The Witness*. As one would expect, it dealt with various aspects of home life.

The name *The Florida Baptist Witness* was shortened to *The Florida Witness* on October 6, 1887. An editorial explained that for economic reasons the editors had to reduce the size of the paper and it cost less simply to leave out the word *Baptist*. Further, the editors argued, anyone reading the paper

would know it was Baptist. A later editor, W. D. Turnley, labeled Plummer's administration as short and weak and stated that the format Plummer had adopted was not popular. He added, in somewhat of a back-handed comment, that Plummer later became a Presbyterian. On November 1887, a new feature appeared, a column called "University Notes" that served to keep news about Stetson University before Florida Baptists.

*-- continued next month --*