

Vol. 13

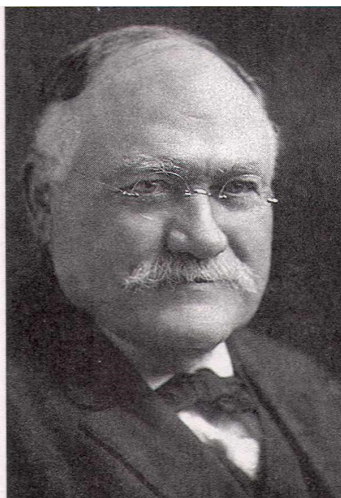
April, 2021

No. 4

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.



Adoniran Judson Holt



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As noted in last month's LEGACY, on March 13, 1912, the State Board of Missions sold the *Witness*, which at the time was printed in Arcadia, to W. D. Nowlin, pastor at Lakeland. Although Nowlin could well-manage the editorial responsibilities, he was not able to make the paper profitable. After only two years, in 1914, Nowlin sold the *Witness* to Dave Scott, J. L. Livingston and James E. Trice, of Arcadia. [At the time, Trice was serving as superintendent of the State Convention's orphanage. Trice's interest in ensuring the continued publication of the state Baptist newspaper was its value in promoting the work and ministry of the orphanage to its resident children.] The new owners employed A. J. Holt (b. 1847; d. 1933) to serve as editor.

The new editor brought a background filled with a wealth of ministry experience as a pastor, itinerant preacher, and as a missionary among the Indian tribes in Oklahoma, which he detailed in his autobiography, *Pioneering in the Southwest*. He also served as the statewide superintendents of missions in Texas and Tennessee. At

various times Holt either founded, published or edited a religious news-journal: including the *Texas Baptist and Herald*; an East Texas newspaper called, *A Voice in the Wilderness*; and the Tennessee Baptist newspaper, *The Baptist and Reflector*.

“A teeming population is predestined to fill Florida. The world is but just now discovering Florida,” Editor Holt reminded messengers to the December, 1913, State Convention meeting. “Sick people are coming to get well; poor people to get rich; rich people to get richer; cold people to get warm; warm people to get cool; tired people to get rested and thousands of people are coming just for fun. They are all coming. It behooves us to meet them with an open Bible.” Such a flair for the spoken word was also reflected in Holt’s writing in the *Witness*, which ranged from news reports to sermons with antidotal illustrations.

Although others – W. A. Hobson, C.W. Duke and C.E.W. Dobbs – assisted in the writing and had the responsibility of editing one *Witness* issue each month, Holt continued as editor until February 1918, while also serving as pastor at Boca Grande (1916 – 1918). His other Florida Baptist pastoral service included churches at Lake City (1909 – 1911); Kissimmee (1911 – 1916); Arcadia (1918 – 1924); and Punta Gorda (1924 – 1927).

The newspaper continued to operate at a financial loss. As a result, in 1918, the State Board decided to re-purchase the newspaper and began a period of publishing the newspaper and hiring the editor. The service of Holt and the other part-time editors was terminated.

J. W. Mitchell’s 10-year Tenure

J. W. Mitchell (b. 1856; d. 1933) of Parkersburg, West Virginia, was employed by the State Board beginning in 1918. During the ensuing decade (1918 – 1928) and despite economic problems, his tenure and record were impressive. Circulation of the *Witness* grew to 7,500 subscribers from approximately 2,500. Mitchell’s lengthy tenure brought stability to the management and operation of the Florida Baptist newspaper. Although he trained for the ministry and served many years as a pastor in Virginia, he worked in state Baptist newspapers the 16 years prior to accepting the Florida editor’s position. That previous newspaper service included five years (1902 – 1907) as the co-editor of the *Religious Herald* (Va.) and 11 years’ service (1907 – 1918) as editor and manager of the *Baptist Banner*, the newspaper of the Baptist General Association of West Virginia.



J. W. Mitchell

Editor Mitchell provided readers with a weekly diversity of Baptist news, church news, and information supporting the State Convention’s growing program of church development resources. Reports provided in the form of letters from church and association leaders were a regular staple for highlighting the events, activities and undertaking of churches, both large and small, across the state. Throughout the entire decade of his tenure, Mitchell’s wife, wrote a weekly column titled “Home and Fireside.”

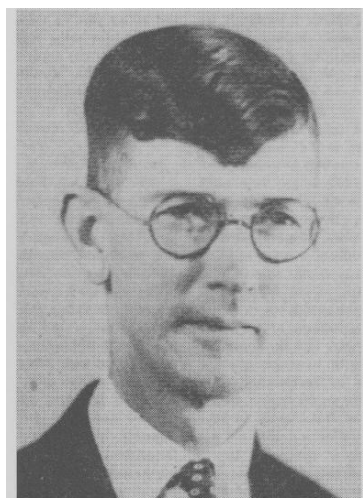
Mitchell often published articles on theological and moral issues, as well as sermons provided by pastors. The *Witness* regularly published news from the Southern Baptist Convention and its agencies. Often the Florida newspaper carried reprinted articles of interest that had previously appeared in other state Baptist newspapers. Unlike his predecessors, following each Southern Baptist Convention and State Convention annual meeting, Mitchell provided extensive reports on the actions taken and messages delivered. It was during this era, in part due to the newspaper’s on-going financial difficulties, that the State Board directed the Convention program departments – administration, Sunday school and B.Y.P.U., and Woman’s Missionary Union – to pay monthly

subsidies to the *Witness*. Variations of the funding practice – which purchased several pages in each issue that were devoted to reports from the program directors – continued throughout the remainder of the century.

After ten years of effective service, Mitchell, citing health issues and his age of 72, retired in February, 1928.

Baptist Layman P. L. Johnson

Pinkney Leslie Johnston (b. 1884; d. 1957) was a Mercer University graduate with many years' experience in newspaper work – including recent service as the editor of religious news for a Miami newspaper – became the *Witness* editor on March 1, 1928. The State Board's editor search committee noted that Johnston, a layman, had previously served as an educational director for several large churches and "was thoroughly familiar with our church denominational life." In his first editorial, Johnson committed to provide "news and personal items, progress of all the churches in the state, and world-wide Baptist accomplishments and achievements."



Pinkney Leslie Johnston

Two initiatives were recommended for implementation with the new editor by a *Witness*' Executive Committee appointed by the State Board of Missions. One was the discontinuance of all medicine advertisements that had filled the *Witness*' pages, although they provided a steady income. The additional plan was to enlist churches to use the *Witness* to publish special church editions. Those tailored editions featured church-specific news and promotions, as well as the general Florida Baptist and denominational news carried in the statewide edition of the *Witness*. This was a moderately successful idea that came to be adopted and re-promoted by subsequent editors.

As hard as Johnston tried to increase circulation beyond the 7000 subscribers he inherited, the souring economy leading up to the Depression took its toll. Johnston reported in December, 1930, that church budgets' reductions resulted in a loss of 2000 subscriptions due to "the backwash of the boom, the fruit fly, bank failures and general business depression."

Coupled with these set-backs, a debilitating illness restricted Johnston's travel and severely affected his efforts to secure the *Witness*' financial lifelines of advertising and subscriptions. In an effort to permit Johnston to devote full attention to the newspaper's financial operations, the State Board employed several Florida pastors – G. J. Rousseau of Pensacola, W. D. Nowlin of Arcadia, and Lee M. White of Jacksonville – as temporary regional editors who secured and reported the news. The State Board also managed to find funds within its own financial resources to pay down the growing *Witness* deficit each year. At the end of 1930, Johnston resigned. He accepted a position as the Southern manager of The Religious Press Association, and subsequently joined the advertising staff of the Georgia Baptists' *Christian Index*.

C.M. Brittain's Brief Return

A former *Witness* assistant editor who served briefly from 1909-11, and now employed as the State Executive Secretary since 1927, Charles M. Brittain assumed the responsibility of editing and publishing the *Witness* which was still owned and operated by the State Board of Missions. Brittain's transitional service continued until the paper was leased on June 1, 1931, to Edward D. Solomon.

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