



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.



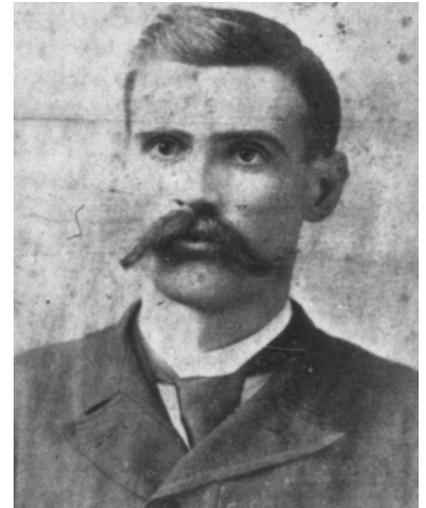
MOVE TO OCALA – 1888

A plan to move publication of the *Florida Baptist Witness* to Ocala was announced March 29, 1888, because L.B. Plummer had sold the paper to W. D. Turnley, an Ocala attorney, who became managing editor. Turnley named his Marion County pastor Charles H. Nash (pictured) as editor-in-chief, “to avoid questions regarding the orthodoxy of the editorial positions,” wrote former Historical Society Director Dr. Mark Rathel. J. C. Porter, state evangelist for the State Board of Missions, was named field editor. Napoleon A. Bailey, W.N. Chaudoin and P. C. Drew were retained as associate editors. The word Baptist was put back in the newspaper's masthead and the newspaper was restored to its earlier size. By then it had 1,500 subscribers. Toward the end of Turnley's ownership of the newspaper, publication was suspended for several months because the 1888 yellow fever epidemic cut off the paper supply due to quarantine regulations which forbade shipping to Ocala where the paper was published.

Within seven months (November 7, 1888), attorney Turnley sold *The Witness* to M. F. Hood, another attorney. Apparently, the previous editors and associates were retained. By then *The Witness* regularly had a "Woman's Department," a "Temperance Column," a "Sunday School Lesson," and a children's column by the State Convention's evangelist to children, George Washington Hall, which was called "Uncle Hall's Corner." In 1890, L. D. Weir and N. A. Bailey of Orlando were listed as correspondents. Interestingly, the "Woman's Department" at this time was not being edited by the State W.M.U. Corresponding Secretary, Miss Jennie Spalding, but by Mrs. M. F. Hood.

THE J.C. PORTER YEARS

By December 1890, J. C. Porter (pictured) purchased the paper and twice served as editor from 1890—1893 and 1895 until his death in 1904. Other co-owners at various times during those years included as E. C. Hood, M. F. Hood, and S. H. Blicht. Associate editors were L. D. Geiger and C. H. Nash.

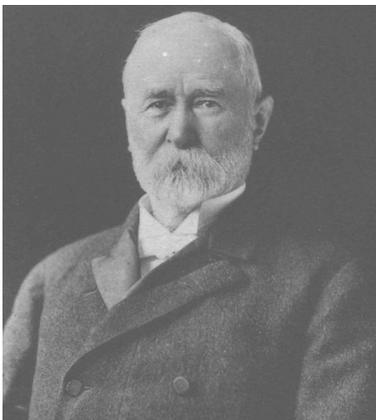


A few years later, by January 1893, C. S. Farris, was editor. Issues from May 24, 1893, to January 2, 1895, are lost to history but the January 9, 1895, issue reflects that *The Witness* was still located in Ocala. Additionally, the publication had a new building (see photo) which had been dedicated with many speeches and a grand celebration. John F. Forbes, president of DeLand University, later named Stetson University, spoke at the ceremonies and W. N. Chaudoin reviewed the history of *The Witness*. By then Miss Jennie Spalding, W.M.U. Corresponding Secretary, was in charge of the "Woman's Work Department," and the "Home Circle Department" was edited by Lula (Mrs. J. C.) Porter. The former column, called "Uncle Hall's Corner," had disappeared. *The Witness* gave excellent coverage of all kinds of news and discussions of interest to Florida Baptists. Despite financial problems, the newspaper continued under J. C. Porter's direction.



THE WITNESS TOOK A STAND IN THE FORBES CONTROVERSY

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the *Florida Baptist Witness* was still being published in Ocala by J. C. Porter. In 1902, W. N. Chaudoin was listed as associate editor. In 1903 Stetson University President John Forbes became embroiled in a controversy based upon unfounded rumors that claimed Forbes was involved in an illicit affair with a female faculty member whom Forbes fired for embezzlement of University funds.



Three separate inquiries were made by the Stetson trustees, as well as investigations conducted by the State Board of Missions and a State Convention-appointed committee. All three entities found no credible basis for the accusation and each completely exonerated Forbes. Through editorials Porter supported Forbes by claiming that close associates or employees of John Stetson, Sr. (pictured), conspired to have the trustees remove Forbes from University leadership. Porter claimed that John Stetson, a major benefactor of the university, "manifested an unchristian spirit and showed very clearly his intention to withdraw all his support from the institution." He went on to conclude that Stetson's action was, "the saddest thing we have ever known."

COMPETING NEWSPAPERS

John B. Stetson and some of his friends apparently were not pleased with the determinations by the State Convention entities in exonerating Forbes and the editorial position taken by *The Witness*. To publicize their version of the controversy, financial assistance was provided to J. B. Holley, pastor of the First Baptist Church, Gainesville, who began another newspaper, *The Southern Baptist*, first published April 1903. In response to the organization of a competing newspaper, *Witness* Editor Porter, in an editorial, questioned the motivation behind John Stetson's financial commitment to Holley. Porter wrote, "It is evidently the purpose of Mr. Stetson is to kill the *Baptist Witness*,

reconstruct The Baptist State Convention, force the resignation of President Forbes and get control of the university . . . If he [referring to John Stetson] is activated by a pure and unselfish desire to unify and build up the Baptist cause by this newspaper movement, why has he not been helping the *Baptist Witness* all these years previous to the University trouble?" Porter went on to decry John Stetson's withdrawal of financial assistance to causes promoted by the State Convention's State Board of Missions and the DeLand Baptist Church which had stood in support of Forbes.

A PEACEFUL RESOLUTION TO MERGE THE NEWSPAPERS

Before he died in 1904 J. C. Porter sold *The Florida Baptist Witness* to a company represented by W. L. C. Mahon. Then W. A. Hobson, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, and one of his church members, D. H. McMillan, bought the *Witness* from Mahon and prepared to publish it in Jacksonville. Hobson, convinced that the competing newspapers could cause only greater disharmony, persuaded John Stetson to discontinue *The Southern Baptist* and to throw his weight behind *The Florida Baptist Witness*. Responding positively to the proposal, John Stetson even provided funds to briefly sustain the combined publication now merged under the name, *The Florida Baptist Witness*. Hobson served as editor and Holley as business manager and field representative. The policy of the consolidated newspaper included a management commitment to work for all denominational interests, particularly by the positive promotion of Stetson University and the State Convention's orphanage. In essence the management hoped to unify the Baptist people in the then denominational endeavors.

STATE CONVENTION OWNERSHIP

Disagreements among the owners of the newspaper made harmony impossible, and to solve the problem John Stetson agreed to buy out the other parties and convey ownership of the paper to the Florida Baptist State Convention. John Stetson required that the newspaper be moved to Orlando, where a better price for printing had been found. F. C. Edwards became managing editor with C. S. Farris and C. H. Nash as editors. Finally, *The Florida Baptist Witness* was to be published exclusively by the State Convention. The State Convention assigned management oversight to a Publication Board consisting of A. A. Murphree, B. B. Tatum, and E. O. Painter. By March 1905, the name had been changed to *The Southern Witness* and with the new name came a new format and location. It was a smaller newspaper with larger type and was printed in DeLand. Still beset with economic difficulties, the newspaper only was able to continue publishing with financial assistance provided by John B. Stetson, Sr.

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