



FLORIDA BAPTIST
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LEGACY

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

Vol. 13

March, 2021

No. 3

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.

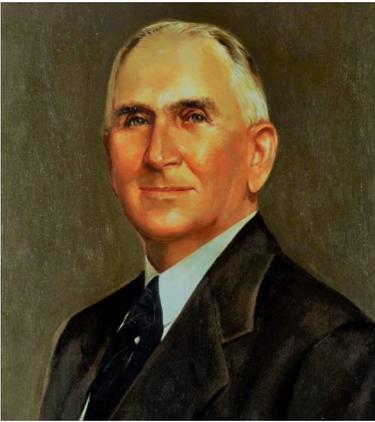


Frank C. Edwards (b. 1870; d. 1922), a native of Crystal River, Florida, who had been retained as managing editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness* since 1905 was joined in 1909 by John H. Tharp (b. 1880; d. 1938), pastor at First Baptist Church, Arcadia, as a co-editor. The newspaper was moved to Ocala to obtain lower printing prices. Initially, under Edwards' leadership in 1907, the *Witness* began a vigorous campaign to place the newspaper on a cash basis. At the end of the year, during the 1907 State Convention annual meeting, Edwards reported "considerable progress" in achieving a balanced bottom line. The following year Edwards moved the newspaper to Arcadia, and the name was changed back to the *Florida Baptist Witness*. Unfortunately, due to failing health, Edwards had to step away from the editor role and J. H. Tharp assumed the editor and business manager roles.

Despite having continued financial problems, Editor Tharp warned his readers against the false claims of the medical ads carried in the newspaper, explaining that he had to take the ads in order to cover expenses. And to his credit, Tharp eliminated all medical ads before he resigned in January 1909. Unfortunately, Tharp's action to eliminate medical ads exacerbated the worsening financial condition of the paper. Tharp reported to the State Convention's Publication Board that he had found the task "too burdensome and uncongenial," and during the 1909 State Convention meeting in January, Tharp tendered his resignation.

Frank Edwards Returned

The Publication Board of the State Convention in 1909 re-enlisted F.C. Edwards, whose health had improved, to return as editor. The Publication Board also secured Charles M. Brittain, a pastor at Lake City, to serve as the assistant editor. Miss S. D. Fannin was named field editor. Edwards, who had previously served churches in Williston, Oviedo, Crystal River, and while editor, was pastor of the Baptist Church at Starke, devoted much time to a hoped-for success of the *Witness*. Both Edwards and Brittain worked diligently to increase subscriptions to make the newspaper self-sustaining. Brittain's contributions to the newspaper were primarily editorials and lengthy articles encouraging and offering suggestions for effectiveness by Florida's pastoral leaders.



Brittain (b.1873; d.1943) [pictured] was a graduate of Mercer University and attended The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary one year. He later received an honorary doctorate for his service as business manager and bible teacher at the State Convention's short-lived Columbia College in Lake City. Although he served as a Y.M.C.A. chaplain during the Spanish-American War, he later lamented that the leader – Col Teddy Roosevelt – of American military forces called the Rough Riders refused to allow soldiers to gather for religious services. Brittain's pastoral leadership in Florida subsequently resulted in his appointment by the State Board of Missions as corresponding secretary-treasurer (December, 1926 to May, 1941) of the Convention corporation. While serving in that position, he assumed editorship of the *Witness* for a brief time, during the years 1930-31.

In March 1909, the newspaper moved again; this time to Jacksonville, keeping the same staff. Within a year, the editors announced another move in April 1910, this time to Lakeland. William J. Sullivan, a pastor in Greenville, Florida, was then enlisted as field editor. Both Edwards and Brittain worked diligently to increase subscriptions to make the newspaper self-sustaining. Yet by September 1910, the editors bewailed their economic woes and literally begged people to pay up their subscriptions.

E.Z.F. Golden Assumes Editorship

In 1911, the Publication Board announced plans to release Brittain and Edwards from their contracts as editors and to employ Erasmus Zerulus Franklin (E.Z.F.) Golden (b. 1853; d. 1927), of West Point, Georgia, as editor and business manager. Between prior pastorates in Georgia, Golden started a short-lived denominational newspaper called the *Baptist Mirror*, and also wrote a biography about a pioneer Georgia pastor.

Golden, who also served the Baptist church at Arcadia, labored for a year before having to report to the January, 1912, State Convention meeting, a debt of \$2,000. The continued economic difficulties caused many Baptist leaders to become dissatisfied with the existing arrangement since the State Convention, always beset with its own financial difficulties, was responsible for the state paper's deficit. During the 1912 annual meeting, the State Board of Missions recommended to abolish the Publication Board and assign to the State Board the publication of the *Witness* until another buyer could be found. State Convention messengers agreed to the Board's proposal and agreed to assume the *Witness* debt. Years later C.M. Brittain observed about Golden, "His character like his name was golden."

William D. Nowlin Bought the Newspaper

On March 13, 1912, the State Board sold for \$2000 the *Witness*, then printed in Arcadia, to William D. Nowlin (b. 1864; d.1950), [pictured] pastor at Lakeland First Baptist Church, and Nowlin became editor. Interestingly, during his service at Lakeland, Nowlin grew the largest Sunday School among Florida Baptist churches.



An experienced journalist, Nowlin had graduated from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. While serving as pastor of the large First Baptist Church of Owensboro, Ky., he wrote the book, *History of Kentucky Baptists*. He then served as editor of the *Western Recorder*, the Baptist state paper of Kentucky. He also contributed articles to other Baptist state newspapers, as well as writing a half dozen other books. In addition to his pastoral service at Lakeland (1911–1914), and then to a Knoxville, Tennessee church, Nowlin subsequently served Florida Baptist churches at Arcadia (1924-1934), and the Hopewell Church, Plant City (1934-1939). He served as interim pastor for churches in Miami, West Palm Beach and Fort Myers. His leadership was recognized by his election as president, Florida Baptist State Convention, 1930-31.

During his service as editor of the *Witness* Nowlin emphasized evangelism. One observer wrote of Nowlin, that his articles were “rare and permanent value.” Nowlin made a valent effort in doubling the number of subscriptions, by following his own motivational motto, “Plan your work and work your plan.” Unfortunately, Nowlin’s management of the *Florida Baptist Witness* did not result in profitability and after two years the paper was sold to a group of interested individuals from Arcadia.

-- continued next month --