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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.



E. D. Solomon

E. D. Solomon 1931 – 1949

Since its 1884 founding the *Florida Baptist Witness*, at various times, was either owned or operated by pastors, laymen and the State Board of Missions. But as the nation was coming out the throes of the Great Depression, a woman – Josephine Solomon – became the owner of record for the *Witness* in 1938. And although Josephine Solomon was the spouse of *Witness* Editor E. D. Solomon, she actively managed the financial operation of the printing facilities that was called Convention Press, the entity that published the state newspaper. More about that arrangement will be noted later.

As previously reported in this LEGACY newsletter, financial difficulties and deficits increased during the first three decades of the twentieth century for the state newspaper, the *Florida Baptist Witness*. Such a condition was only made worse by the coming of the Great Depression in the 1930s. What the State Board of Missions sought for the position of editor was someone who had reporting-editorial experience, as well as financial acumen. The Board had to look no further than to its western neighbor of Louisiana. There they found Edward Davis Solomon who had been serving as the corresponding secretary (executive director) of the Louisiana Baptist Convention from 1924 to 1930. In that capacity he also served

as the business manager for *The Baptist Message*, the state Baptist newspaper. “He was a committed Baptist, a well-known preacher, and well-connected denominational servant,” wrote Dr. Jerry Windsor, in a profile article about Solomon that was published in the 2005 issue of the *Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*.

Unique Employment Arrangement

Under the unusual terms of his employment, Solomon was not to be paid a salary directly. Rather he was to lease for one dollar a year the *Witness'* editorial operation and presses and attempt to generate a profit from subscriptions and advertising. After expenses, including his \$4,000 annual salary, any profits then realized were to be split evenly with the State Board of Missions. The lease arrangement included a \$6,000 annual subsidy paid to the *Witness* by the State Board. In exchange for that subsidy, Solomon agreed to give space in the newspaper for promotional news from the Convention's programs of work. The contract was reviewed and renewed at the end of each five-year period through much of Solomon's tenure that concluded in 1949.

By 1935, the State Board of Missions was no doubt glad to learn that the *Witness* finally was operating on a much sounder financial basis. Throughout much of 1936, ongoing negotiations between Solomon and the State Board revolved around the need and associated expenses for replacing and repairing presses used to publish the newspaper. Although the presses were owned by the State Board, the lease agreement was interpreted to require that Solomon, as the lease holder, be responsible for repair and upkeep of the presses. For nearly a year a series of proposals and counter-proposals were exchanged between the two parties. Finally, a State Board study committee proposed and the State Board agreed that the *Witness* printing presses – known as Convention Press – would be sold to the editor's wife, Mrs. Josephine Crawford Solomon, for \$1,000. Having resolved the equipment issues, the State Board renewed for another five years the one dollar per year lease as well as the subsidy agreement.



Mrs. Josephine
Crawford Solomon

The year-long negotiation process created a realization among some State Board members that the need existed for a *Witness* advisory committee. Such a group, it was proposed, would be responsible “to advise the editor of the *Witness* in matters pertaining to the publishing of the paper.” The initial advisory group was appointed by the State Board, but this group was to be the forerunner to a State Convention elected committee that provided oversight to the state newspaper.

Experience, Energy and Wit

The coming of Edward Davis Solomon (b. 1875; d. 1957) brought new life and new light to the work of the *Florida Baptist Witness* during his 18-years tenure, that ran from 1931 to 1949 – the longest service of any editor up until that time. The new editor from Louisiana entered his new work with experience, enthusiasm and energy.

Solomon brought to the *Witness'* pages a spice and wit not known before. His first editorials were short, pithy epigrams (terse, witty, or sage sayings) that caught attention. Examples published on July 2, 1931, included the following: “There is no competition in virtue;” “A.D. will soon stand for After the Depression;” and “If the ox falls in the ditch every Sabbath, either fill up the ditch or kill the ox.” Also, another observation stated: “Some are wanting to know if the editor is a Jew. He has some Jew blood in him, but not enough to hurt the Jews.”

Witness Observes 50 Years of Publishing

The *Florida Baptist Witness* observed its 50th anniversary of continuous operation in 1934. To mark the occasion Solomon set a goal to attain a circulation of 10,000 before the year was over. Although achieving the circulation goal took a little longer, by the end of Solomon's first decade as editor in 1941, circulation had doubled to 10,000 subscribers from 5,000.

Solomon was born in Coldwater, Mississippi, and graduated from Mississippi College in 1898. He attended The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1898 – 1900) and during his Florida years was awarded the Doctorate of Divinity degree by Stetson University.

Prior to his service as the leader of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, Solomon served as a pastor of churches in Mississippi and Louisiana, before coming to Florida.

A Cooperative Program Advocate

One of the noteworthy achievements of Solomon's career was participating in the birth of the Cooperative Program, an idea conceived and proposed by Louisiana Pastor M. E. Dodd. In 1923 Dodd and Solomon were on the Southern Baptist Convention-appointed committee that had to set the dollar amounts that each board and institution was to receive from the Seventy-Five Million Campaign (the predecessor to the Cooperative Program). Solomon later recalled that he and Dodd were the ones who introduced the idea of an annual fund solicitation effort to provide on-going financial support by percentage allocations to the agencies and institutions of the Southern Baptist Convention. That funding effort came to be called the Cooperative Program.

As a result of his involvement in the Seventy-Five Million Campaign, Solomon saw the need for sound financial footing and planning for state agencies, such as the *Witness*. Two years after serving as editor of the *Witness*, and during the 1932 Florida Baptist State Convention meeting in Daytona Beach, Pastor C. M. White announced that, "The *Florida Baptist Witness* does not owe one dollar." This depression era financial success came largely from the hand of Editor Solomon.

Increased Circulation a Priority

A year later, it was reported at the 1933 State Convention meeting held at the First Baptist Church, Pensacola, that Solomon was a "regular dynamo of cheer and optimism." Solomon saw the need to increase the circulation of the *Witness* and in his tenure saw the increase of subscribers reach 23,600 before his retirement in 1949.

Solomon believed in putting forth new ideas for promoting the paper but he felt that a real key to more subscriptions were the pastors and the true hope of Florida's state Baptist newspaper was Cooperative Program support. In 1933 there were 739 Southern Baptist churches in the state and a total of 915 preachers. Solomon bemoaned the fact that only 100 of the 739 churches budgeted the *Witness* and only 238 of the 915 preachers were subscribers.

The Solomon years saw the paper through the end of the depression and through the paper shortages and labor problems associated with World War II. Dr. Solomon knew that a stronger funding foundation was needed and at the 1949 State Convention held in Orlando, he proposed that the "Arizona Plan" be adopted. The plan used by the Baptist Convention of Arizona fully-funded the costs to place their state newspaper in the hands of every member of their churches. Such an undertaking ensured every Arizona Baptist got much needed information on the mission and ministries of Arizona Baptists and Southern Baptists. Solomon strongly believed that it was time for Florida Baptists to consider such a plan. In 1947 the population of Florida was 2,540,000. There were 224,884 Southern Baptist church members in Florida who had given \$6,524,111 through the Cooperative Program. Solomon argued before the State Convention that all Florida Baptists needed to be informed and inspired on a state-wide basis. Unfortunately, Florida Baptists did not commit funding to make the "Arizona Plan" a reality. However, it was a dream that did not die entirely. Nearly 30 years later *Florida Baptist Witness* Editor Edgar Cooper fought the same funding battle without success.

-- *continued next month* --