

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

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Volume 17

February, 2025

No. 2

LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people and events in Florida Baptist history. During 2025, the LEGACY monthly issues will feature brief personal profiles of those men who have been elected by the State Board of Missions to lead the Florida Baptist Convention. Whether designated as the Corresponding Secretary or the Executive Director-Treasurer, each of these men have left a legacy upon the corporate mission enterprise of Florida Baptists.

Lorenzo D. Geiger A Bold New Leader for Florida Baptists

Despite having suffered health problems throughout his 21-years tenure as Florida Baptists' first Corresponding Secretary, W. N. Chaudoin finally retired from his leadership post in 1901. He was succeeded by Lorenzo Dow Geiger (b. 1854; d. 1909). He was described as "physically of large mold and robust physique, tall and corpulent," according to Florida Baptist Historian John Rosser. A contemporary of Geiger, Pastor G. W. S. Ware observed that "Geiger was endowed with a sonorous voice and oratorical gifts." **The man who was tapped by the State Board of Missions in 1901 as Corresponding Secretary was recognized not only for his commitment and zeal for Jesus Christ, he was known to be powerful in intellect and profound in consecration.**

A Florida Native Responds to God's Call

L. D. Geiger was a native Floridian, born in Old Town, then located in Marion County, on October 18, 1854. The Civil War, which claimed the life of his father, interrupted Geiger's early education by requiring him to assume greater family responsibilities. A few years after the war, he went to live and work with Jesse Willis of Williston, Levy County. And although his formal education was limited, Geiger's motivation and self-discipline caused him to pursue studies from whatever resources were available.



While circumstances of Geiger's Christian conversion is known, his call to the Christian ministry are somewhat obscure. However, James Semple's research revealed that Geiger, at age 17, was converted to Jesus Christ and baptized by the Buttonwood Baptist Church, Marion County. Two years later he was licensed and ordained to preach by the same church. **For the next several years Geiger was a bi-vocational pastor serving small rural churches and during the week he was a farmer.** On November 17, 1875, Geiger married his cousin Martha "Mattie" Anderson (b. 1855; d. 1922). They eventually had six children, four sons and two daughters.

Joined the Campbellite Movement

Despite being “born and bred” as a Baptist, within a few years of his ordination, Geiger became a "Campbellite." The Campbellite movement – which evolved into the Disciples of Christ and the Church of Christ denominations – believed that baptism was a necessary part of salvation in the remission of sin. Geiger’s decision to join the Campbellites was not so much motivated by a theological understanding as it was affected by a Campbellite preacher’s plea for Christian unity.

Begun as a “reform” movement to “return to the simplicity and authority of Scriptures,” the Campbellites rejected “man-made creeds” and sought to unite Christians in a strict adherence to the teachings of the Bible. Geiger, yearning for peace and harmony, particularly having witnessed the aftermath of the Civil War, was drawn to the Campbellite mantra. Geiger soon discovered that the church that had set itself about the task of uniting all Christians into one church was itself divided over the issues of missionary societies and the use of instrumental music in the church.

Finally, Geiger realized that the Campbellite doctrine on baptism, that had looked so plausible at first, would not bear a scriptural test. Florida Baptist Historian Earl Joiner explained that **after serving a decade as a Campbellite minister, Geiger “came back to the Baptist Church with the testimony that the ten years spent in the Campbellite Church had been utterly thrown away.”**

Returning to the Baptist Fold

Returning to the Baptist ministry, Geiger served as pastor of churches at various places including Micanopy, Leesburg, Ocala, Apopka, Brooksville, and Lakeland. Concurrently, Geiger recognized that he needed more formal theological education than he possessed. In 1883 Geiger made a request to the fledgling State Board of Missions, Florida Baptist State Convention, for ministerial scholarship funds. **He was the only person – up until that time – to whom the State Board provided funds to pursue ministerial training done at Mercer University.** Two years later, Geiger again requested and was granted ministerial financial assistance by the State Board. Although there is no available record, the likelihood is that Geiger traveled by horseback the 200-plus miles from north central Florida to Macon, Georgia, to reach Mercer. He probably attended classes one or two days a week and then returned to his church field to lead weekend worship services.

Service on State Board of Missions

In 1890 Geiger was elected to what became a decade of voluntary service as a member of the State Board of Missions. During his tenure on the board, Geiger served several years as its recording secretary and as president for five consecutive years, 1893 to 1898. **Towards the end of the nineteenth century Geiger was employed by Corresponding Secretary W. N. Chaudoin to work as his assistant.** As a result of his statewide visibility, Geiger was elected to serve as vice-president of the State Convention in 1896 and 1897. **By that time, his leadership and influence among Florida Baptist pastors had become widely recognized.** Geiger’s quest for continuing education prompted his recognition of the needs for a better trained clergy. These concerns likely were significant factors in his organization and leadership of the Florida Baptist Pastors’ Conference. In the early twentieth century, the pastors’ conference featured papers – written and read by pastors – on various aspects of the ministry, the Scriptures and theological topics.

Growth of Florida Baptists

Upon the 1901 retirement of Chaudoin, the State Board readily turned to Chaudoin’s assistant, L. D. Geiger. At that time Florida Baptists consisted of 484 churches which reported a combined 23,139 members and 277 ministers. By the time of Geiger’s final year of service in 1909, the number of churches had increased to 599 with a combined membership of 37,027. And although the number of

Baptist pastors serving in the state had grown to 430, there were well over 150 Florida Baptist churches at any given time without pastoral leadership. The issues of training and enlisting pastoral leadership, building houses of worship and appointing and supporting pastor missionaries, were the major emphases throughout Geiger's tenure.

Securing Money to Enlist and Train Pastors

Geiger in his new administrative leadership role inherited a \$10,000 (\$371,300 in 2025 dollars) pledge owed to Stetson University, which he determined had to be paid off. But as he realistically noted in 1902, people generally gave "with greater reluctance for the paying off of this note than for almost anything else." **Among the most significant challenges Geiger and the State Board faced often during the first two decades of the twentieth century were the lack of money and the shortage of ministers.** Both of these problems often impinged on each other. The State Board found it impossible to employ and to pay much needed general and pastor missionaries. Some churches found it impossible to hold worship services without someone to fill the pulpit preaching responsibilities.

The State Board reported to the messengers attending the 1901 State Convention that several county seat towns – Milton, DeFuniak Springs, Bronson and Inverness – were without pastors and unable to hold regular preaching services. Not only were ministers in short supply in Florida, but the prospects of producing Baptist leadership for the future looked slim. In 1904, only two ministerial students were enrolled at Stetson. The lack of requests for financial assistance from ministerial students did not dampen the State Board's continued directives to its field missionaries to collect offerings for ministerial financial aid.

The Evangelistic Needs of Florida's Growing Cities

During his brief eight-year tenure, Geiger managed to re-focus the mission work upon Florida's evolving urban areas. Not only were these growing cities the beneficiaries of the state's population growth, but they represented centers of evangelistic opportunity. As early as 1904, Geiger observed that it was highly unlikely that all the spiritual destitution in Florida could be addressed effectively. As a result, Geiger proposed that, "special [evangelistic] attention should be given to the centers of population and influence."

Additionally due in part to the tireless missions-promotion efforts of Geiger and his field missionaries, financial gifts to state mission causes in 1909 increased to \$75,000 (\$2,601,140 in 2025 dollars). That total represented a new benchmark in missions giving by Florida Baptists. In the eight years of Geiger's service Florida Baptists' missions giving increased nearly six-fold.

Unfortunately, despite the increased income and growing mission expenditures, a souring economy by 1909 again placed the State Board in debt. Geiger reported to the January, 1909 State Convention meeting that the prior year had been one of economic turmoil. "Already the evils of the Wall Street serpent had begun to close around the business interests of the country in anticipation of the November elections . . . besides this, Florida was in the turmoil of the most disastrous drought it had experienced for years . . ."

An Untimely Death

Unfortunately, three months later, on April 20, 1909, Lorenzo D. Geiger experienced an untimely death. It occurred upon his return to his Apopka home from a Sunday evening church service. Geiger complained to his wife that he was feeling ill. **Upon walking into the couple's bedroom, Geiger reportedly sat down and said, "Mother, I am dying."** The 54-year-old Baptist leader passed away before help could be summoned.

[RESOURCES: John E. Shaffett, “Executive Secretary of the Florida Baptist Convention, 1902–1909,” *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, Fall, 2004; John L. Rosser, *A History of Florida Baptists*, (1949); Donald S. Hepburn and E. Earl Joiner, *Favored Florida: A History of Florida Baptists, Vol. One, 1784 – 1939*, (2013); James H. Semple, “A History of the Florida Baptist Convention from 1865 to 1918,” a 1962 thesis; Edward Earl Joiner, *A History of Florida Baptists*, (1972); Florida Baptist State Convention *Annals*, 1901 through 1909.]