

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

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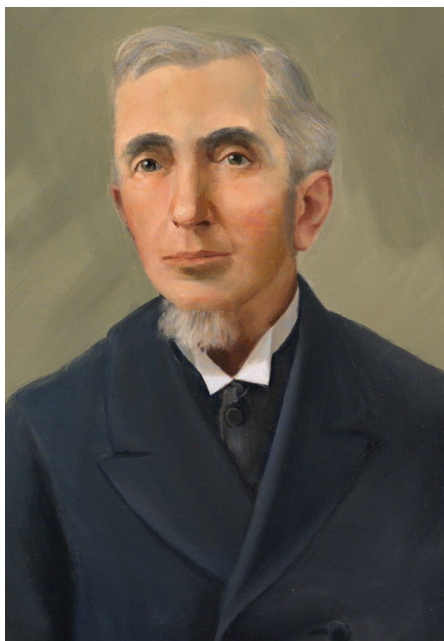
**No. 1**

*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.*

## **William Newell Chaudoin** **Florida Baptists' First Missions Leader**

"I had misgivings in going to Florida from the extreme North," William Newell Chaudoin (b. 1829; d. 1904) once observed. "After a residence of five years, I am glad to say I never saw brethren work more harmoniously and lovingly." Chaudoin's pilgrimage and early ministry in Florida taught him that Florida Baptists' "way of doing missions for Christ is more in harmony with New Testament teaching and Baptist principles."

Affectionately known as "Uncle Shad," **William Chaudoin was a common, unassuming man who became recognized for his devotion, faith, energy, tact, skill and constructiveness in leading Florida Baptists into the twentieth century.** Chaudoin brought hope and encouragement to a struggling state-oriented denomination that was still seeking to define itself and financially support its missions' dreams.



He accomplished this in his role as the first corresponding secretary for the State Board of Missions of the Florida Baptist State Convention from 1881 to 1901. Parallel to those years, he also held the elected post of State Convention President from December, 1880 through 1885; and after a brief two-year hiatus due to health issues, was re-elected in 1889 and served through January, 1903. **In those decades Chaudoin led Florida Baptists to embrace the diverse Florida mission field through church starting and missions giving.**

### **Chaudoin's Young Life**

Born August 20, 1829, on a farm in Robertson County, Tennessee, William Chaudoin was converted to the Christian faith before he was sixteen. Two years later on April 2, 1848, he preached his first sermon. Soon thereafter his home church licensed him "to exercise his gifts in public." In 1851, he was ordained to the ministry at the Marrowbone Baptist Church, which was located 15 miles from Nashville.

Chaudoin did not pursue a formal education beyond high school. Many years later, Chaudoin reported to the 1875 Florida Baptist State Convention that **he had "an opportunity of attending college, did not embrace it, and has had a life time to regret it. Education makes any man more efficient."**

To his credit, Chaudoin did have the tenacious commitment for reading and independently pursuing a variety of studies including the Bible and theology. And it could be assumed that Chaudoin's lack of a formal education in later life made him more sympathetic and sensitive to the needs for a trained clergy in Florida.

At age 21, he married Caroline Frensley (b. 1835; d. 1907) on May 6, 1850. Although the couple never had any children, "Uncle Shad" and "Aunt Carrie," as they were often called, enjoyed 54 years of marriage before his death at age 75. Surprisingly, Chaudoin's long life span far exceeded the expectations of his personal physician and close friends who knew Chaudoin had been diagnosed with tuberculosis and "was confirmed an invalid," Biographer John Manning noted. **While the illness did not stop him from faithfully pursuing God's leadership in ministry service, it did become a reason for his later re-location to Florida.**

### Initial Years of Ministry

Chaudoin's ministry pilgrimage included service as pastor of the Second Baptist Church in Nashville, followed by a short tenure as a traveling sales agent for the independent Southern Baptist Publication Society. Prompted by his physician's recommendation to move in a warmer climate, the Chaudoins re-located to Macon, Georgia in 1857. He was initially enlisted as the first Secretary and Agent of the Georgia Baptist Bible and Colporteur Society. Later, he served as principal of the Georgia Academy for the Blind, a post he held for a year.

Between 1858 and 1870, Chaudoin served as pastor of several churches in Southwestern Georgia, including the communities of Pine Bluff, Bethesda (near Albany) and Thomasville's First Baptist Church. During the Civil War years, Chaudoin frequently traveled to the Confederate army camps in Virginia to preach the gospel.

Pastors and laity came to know the quiet and unassuming W. N. Chaudoin as a man who was highly effective in the pulpit. **He was once described as an effective preacher despite having, "no great homiletical skill, with no special knowledge of rhetoric or logic, and not profound in theology." A later testimonial by John F. Forbes observed that "his greatest and most effective proclamation of Jesus was in his own daily life; from which the very Spirit of Christ exhaled as a perfume continually."**

By 1871, Chaudoin's missionary spirit and evangelistic zeal were recognized by some Baptist leaders. This resulted in The Domestic and Indian Mission and Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (in 1874 renamed the Home Mission Board) enlisting Chaudoin to serve as its district secretary for Georgia, Alabama and Florida. Chaudoin's assignment actively engaged him in preaching, church starting and Sunday school promotion.

Chaudoin's pulmonary infection required him to spend the winter months in Florida's milder climate. By 1880, he and Caroline had moved to LaGrange in Brevard County, to settle in a small orange grove.

### A Heart for Pastors and Their Struggles

Apart from his agency assignments, Chaudoin had a "pastor's heart" for the pastors he regularly visited. What burdened him greatly were the sense of loneliness and the economic struggles experienced by pastors and their wives. In several *Christian Index* (the Georgia Baptists newspaper) articles, Chaudoin called upon Baptists to "cheer the heart" of the "lonely" pastor's wife by sending her a gift. At other times he encouraged church members to place a thank you gift beneath the pastor's buggy seat during the next pastor's visit to their home.

### State Board of Missions Organized

During the 1880 State Convention held in Madison a report on missions was presented. It cited one-half dozen facts that made the case for the need of a greater missionary commitment by Florida Baptists. **"To oppose missions, whether as individuals or as churches," the committee noted, "produces blight and spiritual decay."** The committee requested the State Convention to appoint a Board of Missions "whose business it shall be to furnish the preached word to every destitute section in our territory." The convention delegates agreed to create the board and approved a motion to designate William N. Chaudoin as corresponding secretary of the yet to be named board. Earlier, on the opening day of the State Convention, Chaudoin was elected as convention president.

## Serving as Corresponding Secretary

Initially, as the only employee of the Board, Chaudoin did much of his work through correspondence – just as the job title of corresponding secretary implied. Often Chaudoin used a plain unadorned white piece of stationery that measured nearly six inches wide by nine inches deep. **In a penmanship that was near perfect, easy to read and filled with clear and well-constructed sentences, Chaudoin often made the case for missions, or sought cooperation or encouraged a fellow pastor.** The few surviving originals of these letters reflect well thought-out proposals and expressions of concern. From his home in LaGrange – the so-called “headquarters” of the State Board – Chaudoin conducted much of his work through the mail.

For all its value, there was a limit to what correspondence could do. Although physically frail, Chaudoin regularly traveled the state – primarily by train, steam-wheeler and horse drawn buggy – to encourage and motivate Florida Baptist pastors and churches.

## A Gospel Focused on Ethnic Diversity

During Chaudoin’s leadership, Anglo Florida Baptist churches doubled to number 468 with a combined membership of 23,136 by the beginning of the nineteenth century. This growth was the result of Chaudoin’s personal priority to lead Florida Baptists to start churches in areas where Florida’s population was burgeoning. Initially undertaken with two field missionaries, the church starting effort soon developed into a growing troop of nearly 40 State Board of Missions’ appointed missionaries and mission pastors.

Chaudoin’s concern for evangelizing the state was not limited to the Anglo population. Given the financial limitations of the State Board, Chaudoin regularly sought the continued assistance of the Home Mission Board to financially underwrite missionary efforts with the **Seminole Indians and the growing refugee Cuban populations** in Key West and Tampa.

Chaudoin also persuaded the State Board to fund a field worker who could provide **leadership training and development for African-American pastors.** In the early 1880s, as many as 103 African-American congregations, organized into four “colored” associations, cooperated with the State Convention. In 1886, the State Board employed G. P. Guild, who within a year was conducting as many as 35 institutes designed to teach the Bible and provide basic ministerial training to African-American pastors and lay leaders

## Starting Churches

Much of his travel was **motivated by a missions’ commitment to start new churches.** But Chaudoin immediately recognized the need for financial resources to help churches construct desperately needed church buildings. In July, 1883, Chaudoin led the State Board of Missions to establish a permanent loan fund and a “gift fund” to provide grants for church construction. In making his case for these funds, Chaudoin spoke almost prophetically by noting that, “This will be a very important part of our state mission work.”

**Such an undertaking was easier said than done as it proved to be an ongoing struggle for Chaudoin to raise money from banks, churches and individuals to underwrite the much-needed loan fund.** However, during the ensuing two decades of Chaudoin’s tenure, the loan fund – which had a six percent interest rate – was responsible in part for assisting over 200 churches constructing primary worship facilities.

## Promoting Giving to Missions

Despite his ordinary demeanor, Chaudoin was exceptional in his task of encouraging churches to financially contribute to the missionary needs in Florida. “It was one of his deepest desires to have every church in the Convention, no matter how weak, contribute regularly to missions,” the editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness* observed. Chaudoin proudly pointed out in his seventh annual report to the Convention that undesignated gifts from churches had increased to nearly \$7,000 compared to the \$104.11 contributed in 1880, the first year the State Board solicited financial support. The contributions came slowly as Chaudoin struggled to educate and promote the concept of state missions among Florida Baptists.

As the State Board was able to commission more missionaries – either as general area missionaries or as designated mission pastors serving a specific congregation – **Florida Baptists slowly began to realize the values of evangelization and church starting.** Not only were these missionaries evangelists and church starters, they were advocates for missions giving who promoted the need to support Florida’s missionary endeavors.

### Convention Service Concluded

During the 1901 State Convention annual meeting, due to failing health, Chaudoin announced his retirement as Corresponding Secretary for the State Board of Missions. Chaudoin was most proud of the missionary spirit of Florida Baptists. **He said Florida Baptists were “imbued with the spirit of the great missionary Savior in whom they trust, [and who] will be satisfied with nothing short of taking part in the work of going into all the world, of preaching the Gospel to every creature.”**

Florida Baptist historian, E. H. Rennolds, Sr., summarized the significance of the State Board’s action to employ W. N. Chaudoin as their corresponding secretary. **“The work of the Board grew under his [Chaudoin] wise management, in its [financial] collections, in its missionary operations, and in its hold upon the people, till it became a great power for good in the land.”**

On January 22, 1904, W. N. Chaudoin died at his Brevard County (Fla.) home in LaGrange. Chaudoin, who had served as the first pastor and subsequent part-time pastor (until 1904) of the LaGrange Church, is buried in the adjacent church cemetery.

**[RESOURCES:** Florida Baptist Convention *Annuals*, 1875, 1880, 1882, 1888, 1889, 1899 and 1901; E. H. Rennolds, Sr., “William Newell Chaudoin,” *Florida Baptist Witness*, January 27, and February 4, 1904; “W. N. Chaudoin,” *Biographical Compendium and History of Baptist Denomination in Georgia* (1881); John T. Manning, “Chaudoin Family History,” unpublished manuscript; Jack Dalton, “A History of Florida Baptists,” PhD dissertation (1954); *Christian Index*, January 16, March 20, April 17, and October 9, 1879; as well as, selected issues in 1880, 1883, 1893, and 1889; State Board of Missions, *Minutes*, January 3, 1883; Joel R. Breidenbaugh, “W.N. Chaudoin: Pioneer, Preacher and President of Florida Baptist Work,” *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, 2004; Donald S. Hepburn and E. Earl Joiner, *Favored Florida: A History of Florida Baptists, Vol. One, 1784 – 1939* (2013); and Joseph R. Moss, “Early Southern Baptist Work in Brevard County: The LaGrange Church,” (1991 monograph).]