

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 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.

John Henry Maguire's Love for Missions Was Realized in His 'Favored Florida'

"Brethren, this is no day for little things," wrote John Maguire in a 1946 article in the *Florida Baptist Witness*. **"And remember this – we will never bankrupt the Florida Baptist Convention by sending the gospel to a dying world."** Those sentiments served as a motivation for John Henry Maguire who served as the sixth – and second-longest tenured – executive secretary-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention from 1945 to 1967.

Born and Reared in Indian Territory

John Henry Maguire was the eighth child of a Primitive Baptist and a shouting Methodist. He was born February 25, 1900 in the Indian Territory (later becoming in 1907 the state of Oklahoma). His father, Thomas Oscar Maguire, was a blacksmith, and along with his wife Sarilda Munday Maguire had twelve children – seven sons and five daughters.

In 1912, John Maguire was among a group of young boys who were on a cookout at the invitation of Miss Jaily Pays, a 72-year-old retired Methodist missionary. Following the outdoor event, Miss Pays asked 12-year-old John Maguire to come help her light an oil lamp in her home in St. Jo, Texas. She offered him popcorn and asked him a question. "Are you a Christian?"



When the boy answered "no," she took out a 10-cent pocket new Testament and "showed me what I needed to do to become a Christian and prayed with me," Maguire later told Miami Herald reporter Adon Taft. It was just a few months later, while lying on a cotton sack in the field where he had been picking, Maguire asked the Lord to save him" and had an experience that he said was as vivid years later as it was that morning. He later was baptized at the church of his "shoutin Methodist" mother.

Over the next five years, Maguire whose early dream was to go into missions, seemed remote. He had dropped out of school and worked as a grocery delivery boy and as an ice delivery man. Little did he know the part that manual labor would play in shaping his heart for missions.

Maguire felt called to the ministry when he was 17. When he went forward in church to publicly surrender to the call of God, he thought he was to be a missionary such as Miss Pays. But his pastor and an elderly deacon told him he needed an education and arranged an interview at the San Marcos (Texas) Baptist Academy, near Austin, where many children of missionaries were students.

Working His Way Through School

Having quit school in the fourth grade placed Maguire at a great disadvantage to find and enroll in a school that would give him a second chance. That school was the San Marcos Baptist Academy in San Marcos, Tex. His intention was to work his way through school. The president asked to see his hands. When Maguire produced callused hands, the president felt confident young John would work and told him, “You’ll start in the morning digging ditches.”

Maguire worked his way through high school at San Marcos and then entered Rusk College in Texas (1921 – 1922). The school closed and he transferred to Howard Payne College in Brownwood, Texas (1924-1926). His college years demonstrated not only his scholarship, but he had a high-profile personality that got him elected as president of the Sophomore class, president of B.S.U. Council, and president of the Student Association for three consecutive years. He also was an athlete who received letters from both the football team (three years) and track team (two years). He graduated in 1926 with an A.B degree in history. He did graduate work at George Washington University for a year. Later in 1934 – 1935 he attended The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for one semester.

God’s Double Blessings at Mentone

A year after graduating from college, Maguire became a Sunday school specialist with the Alabama Baptist Convention, a position he held for nine years. That assignment led him to the state Sunday school training events held in Alabama’s Mentone Baptist Assembly each summer. **Two Providential events occurred for John Maguire at Mentone. The first was where he met his future wife in 17-year-old Clyde Merrill from Heflin, Ala, (b.1910; d.1995).** In the ensuing years Maguire continued to court Clyde while she attended and graduated from Alabama College (now Montevallo University) in 1929. The couple married September 3, 1931, and subsequently had three children – John, Jr. (b. 1932), Merrill (b. 1937), and Martha (b.1939). [For a fuller story on Clyde Maguire’s professional career see the *LEGACY*, February, 2024.]

The couple lived in Birmingham while Maguire served as a Sunday school specialist from 1927 to 1936 annually returning to Mentone. **It was there in 1935 that Maguire received his second Providential encounter by an undeniable call of God to go into the pastorate.** This calling was unlike any of the others he had received earlier in his life. So convinced by the Providential calling, he told Clyde that he would accept the first church that calls him to serve as their pastor. Within seven days, three churches had contacted him. That church was First Baptist Church, Florala, Ala. where he served 1936 – 1939. In 1939, Maguire was invited to serve as pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church, Birmingham, a post he held until 1945.

The Call to Serve in Florida

By 1944, Charles Bolton announced to the Florida State Board of Missions his intention to resign as executive secretary to return to the pastorate. As had been the prior 60-year practice for replacing five other former executive secretaries, the Board immediately opened the floor for nominations to elect a new leader. The nominations were voted upon by secret ballot. **Subsequently, unable to secure a candidate to fill the executive secretary position, the Board voted to establish a seven-member search committee, the first such committee in the Board’s history.**

The committee initially received a group of candidates as a result of nominating speeches made at the September, 1944 Board meeting. John Maguire’s name was not among that initial group. **However, in God’s Providence, a Florida pastor recommended Birmingham pastor John Maguire be considered.** Arrangements were made for a face-to-face meeting between the Board committee

and Maguire concurrent with an Alabama State Convention meeting. The Florida committee was unanimous in their choice. During their December, 1944 meeting the State Board of Missions were unanimous in their vote to call John H. Maguire as the sixth executive secretary-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention.

The Immediate Challenges

By January, 1945, John Maguire hit the ground running, according to a written account by Dr. Jerry Windsor. Maguire immediately began to reach out to pastors, church leaders and other state conventions to pinpoint the issues pastors and churches were facing. **There were six things that concerned Maguire following his assessment of the churches and the convention:** (1) there was debt by the churches and the convention; (2) twenty-five percent of the churches were not giving anything to missions; (3) the convention needed to be better organized; (4) twenty-five percent of the churches did not have a pastor; (5) many of the churches were substandard in their total giving; and (6) the convention lacked a unified sense of purpose.

Maguire's 'Favored Florida'

Years later, Dr Maguire received a letter from an Acteen who wanted to know about the mission challenge in Florida. **In his response, Dr. Maguire first coined the phrase "Favored Florida" in describing the mission opportunities God had provided Florida Baptists in the Sunshine state.** That phrase became Maguire's watchword for the remainder of his life.

During his 22-year tenure leading Florida Baptists, the number of Southern Baptist churches cooperating with the state convention grew to 1,462 from 826. The number of church members increased to over 600,000 from the 184,140 that were identified in 1944. Annual church baptisms grew to over 24,400 in 1966 from 8,833 recorded in 1944. Equally important, church incomes increased to thirty-seven million dollars from three million. And world missions giving increased to \$3,537,000 from \$346,000. **One of Maguire's most significant singular achievements was to lead every Florida Baptist church to support missions through the Cooperative Program.** This resulted in gifts allocated to the Southern Baptist Convention growing from 25 percent to an average of 42 percent. In one year, 1950, shared giving with the SBC hit a high of 51 percent.

Maguire is credited with leading the state convention to assume ownership and expansion of the Baptist Bible Institute (now known as the Baptist University of Florida); established the Florida Baptist Retirement Center in Vero Beach; and the expansion of the Lakeland-based Florida Baptist Children's Homes facilities (now called One More Child). He also established the Florida Baptist Witness Commission making it a stand-alone convention-agency; the Florida Baptist Foundation; and developed the Lake Yale Baptist Assembly and the West Florida Assembly. Maguire guided the Woman's Missionary Union from an auxiliary status to a convention program ministry department.

Active in Ministry Post-Retirement

Following his retirement at the end of 1967, Maguire served as an interim pastor for 15 separate churches and between 1977 – 1987, he served as volunteer chaplain in Jacksonville's Baptist Medical Center. In recognition of Clyde and John Maguire's love, commitment and active support for the Florida mission field, the State Board of Missions in 1985 named the annual state mission offering in honor of the couple. In a post-retirement interview, Maguire said Florida is the greatest mission field in the United States. **"And unless Florida Baptists rise to the occasion of reaching these people [for Jesus Christ], we are going backwards, instead of forward."**

John Maguire – organizer, fund raiser, minister and servant of the gospel – who had suffered with cancer during the past year, died in his sleep December 18, 1987.

[**RESOURCES:** Jerry M. Windsor, "John Maguire and Favored Florida," *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, Volume 6, 2004; Adon Taft, "Maguire leaves Legacy of Love for Missions," *Florida Baptist Witness*, January 16, 1986; Florida Baptist Historical Society files on John and Clyde Maguire.]