

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 Sullivan – From Coal Miner’s Son To Baptist Leader/Statesman [Part 1 of 2-parts]

T. G. “John” Sullivan, who served as the Florida Baptist Convention’s executive director-treasurer from 1989 to 2015, holds the distinction of being the longest serving executive leading the State Board of Missions through a record 26 years. Such a service LEGACY requires a two-part installment narrative on the life and ministry of John Sullivan.

During his Convention tenure, **Sullivan called Florida Baptists to three core principles – evangelism without apology, planting New Testament churches, and developing healthy churches and church leaders.** These were principles he honed and practiced during his years as a local church pastor which began in Arizona, continued in Texas, and culminated in his last pastorate in Shreveport, Louisiana.

The Coal-miner’s Son

Sullivan’s notable lifelong accomplishments belie his humble childhood. He was born (1936) in the home of a coal miner who worked the coal fields of West Virginia in the midst of the Great Depression. He was named Travis Gene at birth. Yet while growing up in poverty, his mother Louise gave him another name – John – one that stuck with him the rest of his life.



Sullivan’s father, Frank, was eight or nine years old when he quit school in order to work with his father in the coal mines. One of his first jobs was to help trim the hoofs of the mules that were used to pull the coal out of the mines. When John Sullivan was asked about why his father did not get an education, he responded, “He knew how to write his name and that’s all he needed to sign his paycheck. He was a hard worker, a man of integrity, and would never think of not giving a full day’s work for a full day’s pay,” John Sullivan explained during an oral history interview. This work ethic would pay off for Frank and his family because during the Depression years, he was one of the few miners that kept a job. It would also be the type of work ethic instilled in and adopted by his son, John.

He also observed discipline in his mother that compelled her to keep her house spotless on the inside, waxing linoleum floors every week, even though the house belonged to the coal company. **John learned integrity and resourcefulness from his mother and industry and hard work from his father. These character traits developed as Sullivan matured and would eventually serve him well as an adult.**

As a child, Sullivan did not have much exposure to religion. His parents were not anti-religious, but they were not pro-religious either. They did not encourage involvement in the church. So, as a young man, Sullivan was not religious, but he was disciplined.

Graduating to the Federal Bureau of Investigation

Growing up in Ansted, West Virginia, Sullivan attended Ansted High School and was very competitive in sports, lettering in all of them. However, when he graduated in 1954, rather than pursuing a career in sports, Sullivan was given an opportunity to participate in a program for high school graduates sponsored by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Soon he moved to Washington, D.C., to work for the Bureau.

Getting settled in Washington, he rented a room in a boarding house and rode the bus to work every day. In addition to his regular week-day work schedule, Sullivan worked most weekends as well. He enjoyed his work as a fingerprint specialist for the FBI. He took pride in his work, always striving to do the best he could do, and moving up the pay scale at a faster rate than many of his peers.

An Encounter that Gave Him a Spiritual Life

On one of his bus rides to work, Sullivan met Nancy Hinson (b. 1936; d. 2020). She, like Sullivan, had moved to Washington, D.C., after graduating high school, to work for the FBI. Unlike Sullivan, her early childhood life was centered in the church. Nancy grew up going to church, singing in the age-graded choirs, and attending the traditional Baptist girls' mission group, Girls in Action. While dating, John and Nancy fell in love with each other. Within a year – June 24, 1955 – the eighteen-year-olds were married at the Philadelphia Baptist Church in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Sullivan often would say that, apart from the Lord Jesus, Nancy "has been and is still the greatest influence" in his life.

Nancy was a believer and on more than one occasion shared with Sullivan what it meant to have a relationship with Jesus Christ and specifically, what it meant for her to engage that relationship. She encouraged Sullivan to attend church with her. One Monday evening, he made a commitment to go with Nancy the next Sunday. He recalled, "The closer we got to Sunday, the more I wondered why I'd made that commitment."

In August 1955, Sullivan went to church with Nancy and listened to a furloughing missionary whose name he did not remember, preach a sermon that he did not remember, from a Bible text that he did not remember. **He did remember, however, the invitation that was given, and when the preacher advised the congregation that Jesus Christ could provide direction for their lives, Sullivan, to Nancy's absolute surprise, walked forward.** He had never owned a Bible. He had never struggled with spiritual questions before - had never really considered them. He could not explain to the pastor what was happening, but the pastor was able to take the time to explain to Sullivan the concepts of conviction and repentance and Sullivan, three months after marrying Nancy, gave his life to Christ.

Responding to God's Call to Ministry

Sullivan began reading the Bible and had not yet finished the Gospel of John when he began to sense God's calling in his life to ministry. In October of 1955, two months after his conversion experience, Sullivan heard his preacher, A. Lincoln Smith, pastor at Congress Heights Baptist Church, Washington, D.C., speak about vocational ministry and full-time service. **Once again, Sullivan**

responded publicly to what God was doing in his life and submitted himself to be eligible for whatever God was calling him to do. He was subsequently ordained to the gospel ministry on December 1, 1957, by the First Baptist Church, Cupertino, California.

After two years Sullivan left the F.B.I. to respond to the Lord's call into Christian ministry. The call to ministry involved years of preparation. During that time Sullivan received a baccalaureate degree (1961) from Grand Canyon College in Phoenix, Arizona. He subsequently attended and graduated with a bachelor of divinity (1965), master of divinity (1968) and doctor of ministry (1973) degrees from the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. John Sullivan never saw the time of preparation as separated from service. He ministered at various small churches throughout his educational career.

A Man of God called John

Years later, Florida Baptist pastor Tim Maynard observed, "I wonder if John Sullivan's mother from the coal fields of West Virginia might have known that her son was going to take his place in the ranks of great men of God named John who have preached the word faithfully through the centuries?"

"How many great men of God have been named John?" Maynard said. For like John the Baptist, Sullivan is "a man sent from God. He came to bear witness to the Light and he has done so faithfully," during his service to Florida Baptists. As was John the Baptist, Sullivan is a man of character, courage, conviction and calling, Maynard continued. "I have watched him under pressure. I have seen him under attack. He is the same man in every situation," observed Maynard in 2014, who at the time was serving as pastor of Fruit Cove Baptist Church in Jacksonville (1993 – 2024).

The John Sullivan story to be continued in the October issue of LEGACY.

[RESOURCES: Barbara Denman and Greg Warner, "John Sullivan Elected Unanimously," *Florida Baptist Witness*, January 26, 1989, 3-4; Barbara Denman, "John Sullivan, Statesman, Honored for Serving Florida Baptists 25 Years," *Florida Missions Today*, Summer, 2014, 8-11.; Donald S. Hepburn, oral history interview with John Sullivan, conducted in December, 2006; Michael A. Tatum, "T. G. "John" Sullivan – The Legacy of a Denominational Servant-Leader," *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, Vol. 21, 2019; Thomas Kinchen, "Executive Secretary -Treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention, 1989 to Present," *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, Vol. 6, 2004.]