



Carl Elkanah Bates
Served as 36th SBC President:
1971 and 1972

Florida Pastorate:
First Baptist Church, Leesburg, 1943 – 1947

Introductory Overview

As a recent high school graduate, Carl E. Bates travelled from Liberty, Mississippi, to New Orleans, Louisiana, to seek his fortune. Unfortunately, it was the height of the Depression and Bates was hard pressed to even find work. “Hungry and depressed, he went to the back entrance of the old DeSoto Hotel on Baronne Street, asking for any kind of work that was available.”¹ He was offered a job as bus boy and washing dishes in exchange for a room and board in the hotel.

Bates, years later in retelling this story to a newspaper writer, said he found himself, “in deep spiritual need – even in the point of considering suicide as the only way out.” The youthful Bates recalled he, “began reading a Gideon Bible one night in his hotel room. He fell on his knees in prayer and committed his life to God. A little later, he went back home to Liberty, made his full commitment to Christ and responded to God’s call to enter the preaching ministry.”²

That call to the pastoral ministry led Carl Bates from Mississippi to Kentucky to Florida to Texas and finally to be called as pastor of one of the largest Baptist churches in North Carolina, during which time Bates was elected to two consecutive years as the 36th president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

His Early Life

Carl Elkanah Bates (b. 1914; d. 1999) was born and reared as the son of a sharecropper near Liberty, Mississippi. Although raised in a Christian home, Bates “was not converted and baptized until he was in college, at age 19, in the First Baptist Church of Summit, Mississippi.”³ As previously noted that conversion occurred in New Orleans.

Decades later, in a sermon to messengers at the 1963 annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, Bates told how he found clarity in his Christian conversion before the end of his college years.

During my college days a favorite verse among the BSU'ers was Luke 9:23. I was a new Christian, coming out of a background of skepticism. I suppose I listened to them in a critical, unsympathetic way. But when they stood and told what they had given up to become Christians, I thought deep within me, 'They are as proud as hell itself.' For you see, as far as I am concerned they had missed the total meaning of Chrisitan discipleship. Jesus said, 'If any man would come after me, let him deny his right to himself and take up day by day their cross that is involved in this kind of commitment and follow me.'⁴

Responding and Preparing for Ministry Service

After completing two years study at the Southwest Mississippi Junior College, Bates responded to the call of God to pursue the gospel ministry. He then enrolled in Mississippi College located in Clinton. After receiving a B.A. degree (1937), Bates enrolled in The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where he earned the Bachelor of Divinity degree (1941), which was later re-issued as a master's in theology. During his seminary years, he served as a parttime pastor of rural Baptist churches in Kentucky.

While enrolled in seminary, Bates married Myra Mae Gray (b.1917; d. 2006) of Tupelo, Mississippi, September 15, 1939. In the ensuing years the couple had a daughter Judith (b. 1942).

Years later, Bates was honored at various times for his ministry and denominational service with four honorary doctorates from Mississippi College, Wake Forest University, Judson College of Illinois, and a Doctor of Divinity from Baylor University (1951).

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His first fulltime pastorate was at the Central Baptist Church, Winchester, Kentucky, (1941-1943). Although it was a short-lived ministry, Bates made a significant impact on the congregation. Following his resignation to accept a Florida pastorate, a church-authorized published resolution noted, “the church has lost a conscientious and inspiring leader who was unfailing in his efforts to promote harmony and unity among his people, and at all times exerted a spiritual influence over them.”⁵

Florida Ministry Years 1943 – 1947

On the first Sunday of February 1943, Carl Bates began service as pastor of the First Baptist Church, Leesburg, Florida, (org. 1872). At the time the church was engaged in a slow-moving special drive to pay off its bond indebtedness. With the country being in the throes of World War II, raising funds for non-war purposes was challenging. However, the arrival of a new pastor brought a new dynamic as the church members responded affirmatively by raising funds beyond the actual debt. The additional funds made it possible for the church to redecorate the entire sanctuary and made other long delayed repairs to the church facilities.⁶

Under Rev. Bates' leadership the church constructed a Mission Sunday School facility on the outskirts of Leesburg, as other mission starts were planned. The church also began a fund for a proposed educational building. In the first year of his leadership at Leesburg, the church received 61 new members, 30 coming for baptism.⁷

During the four years Bates served the Leesburg church, the membership grew over 20 percent to 1,186. During Bates' ministry the average annual baptisms were 43, reaching a single year high of 72 during Bates' final year of service. Rev. Bates also led the church to increase its commitment to the Cooperative Program, Southern Baptists' unified missions' giving program, from \$1,320 (1942) to over \$8,552 in 1947.⁸

Although only being in the state less than a year, Bates' gained statewide prominence by his election to the Florida Baptist State Convention's State Board of Missions (1944 – 1947). When the state convention approved in 1946 the creation of an Education Commission, to monitor the development of its three educational institutions, Carl Bates was one of the 15 pastors and lay persons appointed to the body.⁹

Texas' Ministry Years 1947 – 1959

Subsequently, Bates accepted the pastoral call from the First Baptist Church of Texarkana to lead that church, which lasted from 1947 to 1950. That ministry service was summarized by Caner and Caner's in their book on former SBC presidents, which noted, "Bates' renown grew as his heartfelt preaching attracted the attention of Texas Baptists."¹⁰

Bates' effectiveness in Texarkana also drew the attention of the pastor search committee of the First Baptist Church, Amarillo, which in 1950 called

Carl Bates as pastor. “In his first year as pastor,” according to Caner and Caner, “Bates and the church saw a remarkable move of God. During his first year of ministry – from the summer of 1950 to the summer of 1951 – a net 962 people joined the church.” One third of those – 379 – came forward for baptism.¹¹ By the time Rev. Bates concluded his ministry service in the middle of 1959 the church’s membership had reached 6,600 members and had an annual average of 200 baptisms.

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During those years Bates was elected as one of the designed representatives of Texas Baptists on the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1950 to 1956. He also served as chairman of the Executive Board of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Continuing Caner and Caner noted, “At the completion of his eight-years term of service at Amarillo, Bates was elected as president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.”¹²

**First Baptist Church, Charlotte, N.C.
1959 – 1980**

However, in June 1959, Bates received and accepted a pastoral call to lead the First Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina. Preaching effectiveness, particularly as an evangelist, no doubt affected the growth of the two Texas congregations. And it was no different in Charlotte, where Bates’ preaching drew national attention. “At First Baptist Charlotte Bates would become a national voice for evangelicals. Almost immediately, Bates also was in demand as a leader in the SBC.”¹³ In a short time, Bates was a highly sought after evangelistic preacher for pastors’ conferences, state conventions and evangelism

conferences. By the end of Rev. Bates' 21-year ministry (retired Dec. 31, 1980) the church had grown to over 3,300 members.¹⁴

The historic and prominent First Baptist was organized in 1832 in the heart of downtown Charlotte. Its main sanctuary – with Byzantine domes and arched stained-glass windows – had served the congregation since 1909. Then on Easter Sunday, 1971, church leaders broke ground on a \$2 million nine-acre campus located on an urban renewal site in downtown Charlotte. Rev. Bates characterized the planned re-location as “the major challenge of the future for First Baptist.”¹⁵ A year later, the new campus referred to as Spirit Square, with a contemporary sanctuary and educational facilities, was completed.

As he approached his tenth anniversary serving the Charlotte church, Bates told a reporter that this church had “a higher incidence of committed Christians . . . than in any other church I’ve served.”¹⁶ That commitment also was reflected in its financial contributions of nearly \$100,000 annually through the Cooperative Program.¹⁷

The Bates Made Footnotes in Baptist History
Carl Bates and his spouse Myra Gray Bates achieved three unusual footnotes in Southern Baptist history. The first event occurred in 1963 during the annual meeting of Southern Baptists that had convened in Kansas City, Missouri. Rev. Bates, nominated by J. Norris Palmer of Louisiana, was one of an unprecedented 14 persons initially nominated for the office of convention president. Before the ballots were cast, five nominees withdrew their names for consideration and one nominee – Billy Graham – was declared to be ineligible because he was not a registered messenger. The first ballot of over 8,200

votes cast resulted in two persons receiving a combined 60 percent of the votes – Carl Bates received 3,829 and K. O. White of Texas received 1,131 votes. Immediately upon the ballot results announcement, Rev. Bates requested that his name be withdrawn. Initially the presiding officer ruled that Bates’ name could not be withdrawn. As the official proceedings recorded: “Dr. Bates stated respectfully and with appreciation that if elected he could not serve.” After several procedural votes by messengers, it was agreed to remove Bates’ name from the ballot and proceed with voting on the remaining eligible candidates.¹⁸

The sudden interest in and large support of Bates’ nomination may have been due to the positive impression Bates’ made upon messengers in his preaching of the Convention Sermon on the preceding Tuesday night’s opening session. Bates had been selected a year earlier to bring the annual sermon. His message from Acts 17:5-9, was titled, “Troublemakers in a Troubled World,” in which he stressed, “our most desperate need is to lay hold of the power, God has promised to those who set themselves in the earth to do His work.”¹⁹

Secondly, between 1962 and 1963, Carl Bates was one of the 23 state Baptist convention presidents who were assigned to serve alongside a convention-appointed study and review committee of the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* statement. The proposal was in response to a growing perception of “widespread concern that Southern Baptists were becoming more liberal doctrinally,” explained former SBC President Herschel Hobbs (b. 1907; d. 1995). At the time, the SBC Executive Committee agreed that an updated doctrinal statement would “serve as information to the churches, and which may serve as guidelines to the various agencies of the Southern

Baptist Convention. . .”²⁰ The culmination of the study committee’s work was the revised 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* statement presented to and adopted by messengers during the 1963 SBC annual meeting held in Kansas City, Missouri. Herschel Hobbs later wrote that the 1963 convention action “for the time being largely put to rest the doctrinal controversy. . .”²¹

The other historic event occurred during the 1976 annual meeting held in Norfolk, Virginia. Myra Bates was nominated by James Graves of St. Petersburg, Florida, to be elected as second vice president of the

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convention. Three others also were nominated.²² Upon her election, Mrs. Bates became one of only three women to ever serve as an officer of the Southern Baptist Convention. By that time, Carl Bates had

already served two terms as convention president (1971 and 1972), and with Mrs. Bates’ election, they reportedly became the only husband and wife couple ever to hold elective office in the convention.²³

Elected SBC President for 1971

When messengers convened in Denver for the 1970 Southern Baptist Convention it marked the 125th anniversary of the convention established in 1845. One of the several significant business items considered during the annual meeting was the election of a new president to replace term-limited W. A. Criswell of Texas, who had served the two previous years. Texas pastor Landrum P. Leavell II, of Wichita Falls, nominated Carl Bates, who as among five pastors recommended to serve as president from mid-

1970 to mid-1971. Bates received two-thirds majority of votes cast on the first ballot. There was no need for a run-off, which typically occurred with multiple candidates.²⁴ Bates became the 36th individual of the 125-year-old Southern Baptist Convention to serve as its president.

Following his election, Bates, who considered himself a moderate, told a news conference with secular reporters, that he believed a “diversity of views is characteristic of the Baptist tradition: ‘We’re not trying to get everybody under one creedal statement.’” His approach contrasted with that of the outgoing president, the W. A. Criswell of Dallas, Tex., “who had emphasized conformity with stated doctrine,” the Associated Press reported.²⁵

Responding to questions about Criswell’s view on the infallibility of the Scriptures, the North Carolina Baptist newspaper, the *Biblical Recorder*, reported, “Bates said he believed the Scriptures were inspired, but did not say how; asking a reporter what he meant by the words ‘verbal inspiration.’”²⁶

The *Biblical Recorder* in its own convention coverage, reported that Bates “cast himself in the role of healer and reconciler,” following his election as president. “It is my personal hope that Southern Baptists will tone down the attention given to extreme positions within the denomination,” Bates told reporters. “The Charlotte pastor added that he felt that most Southern Baptists are still where they have always been – in the broad middle ground between extreme conservative or liberal positions.”²⁷

Marse Grant, editor of the *Biblical Recorder*, told a Charlotte newspaper, that Bates’ election was because the pastor “is known as a ‘reconciler and unifier.’” He

likely will be tested severely on both counts as the denomination is pulled between fundamentalist beliefs and liberal scholarship, between social activists and stand-patters.”²⁸

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Serving as SBC President in 1971

Carl Bates presided over the 1971 annual meeting held in St. Louis, Missouri. Again, one of the primary business items was the election of convention president, for the year 1972. Florida pastor James L. Pleitz of Pensacola nominated Carl E. Bates. No other nominations were made, and a motion was made and approved to elect Bates by acclamation.²⁹

Among the several significant actions taken by messengers in 1971, was the final approval of a plan to withdraw from the hospital ministry that affected Southern Baptist-operated hospitals in Jacksonville, Florida and New Orleans, Louisiana.³⁰ In another approved recommendation was an evangelistic plan called “Share the Word Now,” to be promoted in 1973-74, focused upon witnessing, involving people in Bible study and the starting of new missions and churches.³¹

In his president’s address to the messengers attending the 114th annual meeting (in its earliest years the convention did not meet annually), Bates decried the fact that, “for the first time in the history of our nation there is no Christian consensus. Christian influence is at an all-time low.” Bates shared with the messengers his desire, “to find a way to consider our mission in the spirit of Christ rather than in the spirit of the times.” He concluded his message by challenging those in attendance: “We can recognize the Lord’s ownership of the harvest; His option in sending

reapers; His orders for His disciples; or we can spend our time and energy in endless discussion on ‘how to get the show on the road again.’”³²

Serving as SBC President during 1972

The SBC 1972 annual meeting, held in Philadelphia, during which Bates presided, was not without heated debate on several issues. A motion – presented for the third year in a row – called for the re-writing of the 12-volume *Broadman Bible Commentary* was defeated. A separate recommendation from the convention’s Executive Committee proposed the dissolution of the Stewardship Commission. After extensive debate messengers voted down the Stewardship Commission proposal.³³

The *Broadman Commentary* issue, which originally had been considered during the 1970 Convention after the Baptist Sunday School Board’s Broadman book publishers released its first volume in a new series of Bible commentaries. The commentary on *Genesis-Exodus* presented a non-literal interpretation of the events recorded in *Genesis*. During the 1970 annual meeting messengers approved a motion directing the Sunday School Board to not only discontinue distribution of the current version of the commentary but “. . . that it be rewritten with due consideration of the conservative viewpoint.”³⁴

The following year (1971), when the Convention met in St. Louis, messengers considered a motion that noted the Convention’s 1970 vote on the *Broadman Bible Commentary* had been ignored by the Baptist Sunday School Board. The 1971 motion, subsequently approved by messengers, directed the Board to follow the Convention’s 1970 directive and find another writer with a “conservative viewpoint.”³⁵

Now, during the current 1972 annual meeting, a motion was presented by Gwin Turner of California, that called for the replacement of the commentary in its present form contending that “a large segment” of the *Broadman Bible Commentary* “is out of harmony with the spirit and letter of the *Baptist Faith and Message*.” It was requested that the Sunday School Board “withdraw from further sale the entire set, seek a new editor, and rewrite the commentary from the point of view that the Bible is truth without any mixture of error.”³⁶ During consideration of the

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motion, Herschel Hobbs, who had chaired the committee that developed the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*, rebutted that the confessional statement had specified a specific interpretation

of scripture.³⁷ Messengers agreed with Hobbs’ assessment and voted down the motion to replace the commentary.³⁸

In his president’s message, Bates decried the growing turmoil within the churches due to a growing theological divide. “Lest I be accused of laying the groundwork for compromising our convictions, let me remind every messenger of this convention, that if any member of this convention and its affiliated churches is determined to have theological sameness, let him know at the outset that he has one of two choices. He must either join another denomination or deny the basic democratic principles for which our people have been known across the years.”³⁹

Southern Baptist historian Jesse Fletcher commenting on the *Broadman Bible Commentary* controversy wrote, “The Convention defeated a motion to rewrite

the whole commentary, but as the years ahead would show, many Baptists were committed to the theological ‘sameness’ that Bates felt was incongruous with Baptist principles.”⁴⁰

Messengers attending the 1972 annual meeting approved a resolution of appreciation for Carl Bates’ service as convention president. Among other things, the resolution cited Bates’ “ceaseless efforts to unite us in one great missionary thrust at home and abroad . . . He has expressed earnestly our confidence in and commitment to the Word of God as the vital, relevant counsel of God for our day.”⁴¹

As his role on the denominational stage came to an end, “Bates returned to his pastorate in Charlotte and continued to speak to Baptists throughout the nation,”⁴² including speaking at national conferences, state evangelism events and local church revivals. He also was enlisted to deliver a series of sermons on the nationally syndicated radio program *The Baptist Hour*.

Retirement Ministry

Following a 21-year ministry in Charlotte in 1981, Bates and his spouse Myra moved to Hendersonville, North Carolina, to live out their retirement years. Almost immediately, Bates was invited to join the faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as a senior professor of preaching. During the ensuing five years Bates mentored young ministers. In 1982 the Carl E. Bates Chair of Preaching was established there in his honor.⁴³

A non-smoker for 50 years, Bates was diagnosis with lung cancer two weeks before his December 21, 1999, death. He was 85.⁴⁴ Following his death, his spouse Myra, told reporters that Bates’ most fulfilling aspect of his life, “was working to give people the peace he

believed was in God's word. 'He was a teacher of the Scriptures and an instructor to people in their living,'" recalled Myra Bates.⁴⁵ Seven years later, then residing in a hospice facility, Myra Gray Bates died June 7, 2006, at age 89.⁴⁶

ENDNOTES:

Editor's Note: This profile of Carl E. Bates was written by Donald S. Hepburn, managing director, Florida Baptist Historical Society, using the following resources:

¹ Rita Simpson, "U.S. Baptist Leader Finds Key to Success," *The Charlotte (N.C.) News*, January 7, 1971, 2, [news stories on Carl Bates held in the files of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Graceville, Florida, and are hereinafter referred to as story held in Bates' bio file].

² *Ibid.*

³ Emir and Ergun Caner, *The Sacred Trust*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 141.

⁴ Proceedings, item 17, sermon by Carl E. Bates, Southern Baptist Convention *Annual*, 1963, 51 [hereinafter referred to as *SBC Annual*].

⁵ "Resolutions," *The Winchester (KY) Sun*, February 12, 1943, 2, [story held in Bates' bio file].

⁶ J. L. Shelfer, "First Church, Leesburg, Makes Progress," *Florida Baptist Witness*, April 6, 1944, 6, [story held in Bates' bio file].

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Lake County Baptist Association, "Statistical Reports" *Florida Baptist Annual*, 1944, 1945, 1946, and 1947.

⁹ Proceedings, item 12 (2); 21 and 120, *Florida Baptist Annual*, 1946.

¹⁰ Emir and Ergun Caner, 142.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹² *Ibid.*, 140.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Kathleen Galligher, "Charlotte's First Baptist Church Fills Pulpit After 1-Year Search," *Charlotte (N.C.) Observer*, January 25, 1982, [story held in Bates' bio file].

¹⁵ Rita Simpson, "Key to Building: Committed Flock," *Charlotte (N.C.) Observer*, July 28, 1969, [story held in Bates' bio file].

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

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- ¹⁷ Rita Simpson, "Bates Steering a Careful Course," *The Charlotte (N.C.) News*, June 10, 1970, 12B, [story held in Bates' bio file].
- ¹⁸ Proceedings, items 53 – 69; 88 – 91; *SBC Annual*, 1963, 58 – 60. The original 14 fourteen nominees included: Carl Bates (NC); R. Paul Caudill (TN); Walter Pope Binns (VA); Monroe F. Swilley (GA); W. Ross Edwards (MO); D. L. Druien (KY); K. O. White (TX); H. Leo Eddleman (LA); W. O. Vaught, Jr. (AR); W. A. Criswell (TX); Kendell Berry (NC); Billy Graham (NC); Theodore F. Adams (VA); and E. Hermond Westmoreland (TX). Before ballots were cast, five men withdrew their names: W. A. Criswell; H. Leo Eddleman; Kendell Berry; Theodore F. Adams; and W. Ross Edwards.
- ¹⁹ Proceedings, item 17, *SBC Annual*, 1963, 51.
- ²⁰ Herschel H. Hobbs, "Southern Baptists and Confessionalism: A Comparison of the Origins and Contents of the 1925 and 1963 Confessions," *Review and Expositor*, Winter, 1979, 57-58.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ²² Proceedings, item 97 and 110, *SBC Annual*, 1976, 51, 52. The other three nominees were: Truett B. Thompson (AZ); Paul Jackson (GA); and Lawrence Bradley (GA).
- ²³ "Myra G. Bates, 89," *Hendersonville (N.C.) Times-News*, June 9, 2006, [story held in Bates' bio file].
- ²⁴ Proceedings, items 32-38; 74, *SBC Annual*, 1970, 58, 64. The other nominees were: Gerald Martin (TN); Lee Porter (TX), Charles A. Trentham (N) and Harold C. Abbott (LA).
- ²⁵ George W. Cornell, religion writer, *Associated Press*, "Charlotte Man Heads Baptist Group," *Asheville (N.C.) Times*, June 3, 1970, [story held in Bates' bio file].
- ²⁶ "Bates Assumes Role of Healer, Reconciler as SBC President," *Biblical Recorder*, June 13, 1970, 6, [story held in Bates' bio file].
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ "Carl Bates, A Unifying Choice," *Charlotte (N.C.) Observer*, June 5, 1970, np, [story held in Bates' bio file].
- ²⁹ Proceedings, item 39, *SBC Annual*, 1971, 61.
- ³⁰ Proceedings, item 20, recommendation 4, *SBC Annual*, 1971, 55; also see Proceedings, item 86, Recommendation 13, *SBC Annual*, 1970, 65-66.
- ³¹ Proceedings, item 27, recommendation 10, *SBC Annual*, 1971, 56-57.
- ³² Proceedings, item 172, *SBC Annual*, 1971, 74; transcript of message, "Consider Our Mission," *Texas Baptist Standard*, June 9, 1971, 12-13.
- ³³ "SBC Votes to Keep Commentary, Retain Stewardship Commission, Establish a New Bylaw and Elects Layman as President," *Florida Baptist Witness*, June 15, 1972, 1 and 7,

[story held in Bates' bio file]. Also see Proceedings, item 66, *SBC Annual*, 1972, 59.

³⁴ Proceedings, item 64, *SBC Annual*, 1970, 63.

³⁵ Proceedings, items 153, 156, and 188, *SBC Annual*, 1971, 71 and 76.

³⁶ Proceedings, item 36, *SBC Annual*, 1972, 55.

³⁷ Proceedings, items 99 and 100, *SBC Annual*, 1972, 71

³⁸ Proceedings, items 99 and 11; *SBC Annual*, 1972, 71.

³⁹ Proceedings, item 13, presidential address, *SBC Annual*, 1972, 93.

⁴⁰ Jesse C. Fletcher, *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 239.

⁴¹ Proceedings, item 125, *SBC Annual*, 1972, 73.

⁴² Emir and Egun Caner, 143.

⁴³ "Dr. Carl E. Bates," *Asheville (N.C.) Citizen-Times*, December 23, 1999, 12, [story held in Bates' bio file].

⁴⁴ "Former Baptist Convention Leader Carl E. Bates dies at 85," *Hendersonville (N.C.) Times-News*, December 22, 1999, [story held in Bates' bio file].

⁴⁵ Ken Garfield, religion editor, "Rev. Carl Bates, 85, dies; led Baptist Convention," *Charlotte (N.C.) Observer*, December 12, 1999, 1B; 3B, [story held in Bates' bio file].

⁴⁶ "Myra G. Bates, 89," *Hendersonville (N.C.) Times-News*, June 9, 2006, [story held in Bates' bio file].

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