



Here & Now

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An update for Florida Baptist Historical Society Board of Directors and Friends

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Dear Board Members and Friends of the Florida Baptist Historical Society,

In 162 years the Florida Baptist Convention has had only four special sessions. These sessions were in 1907, 1957, 1967, and 1989. Three of the special sessions dealt with education issues, one of them dealt with abortion, and all four were embroiled in politics.

It has been said that Southern Baptists respond to two things: sentiment and raw power. That has certainly been the case in the Florida Baptist special sessions. I want us to look especially at the 1907 "extra session" in this issue.

The Florida Baptist State Convention constitution has only 13 articles and 15 bylaws. Article 11 deals with special sessions. The President of the FBSC may request the State Board of Missions to call a special session, or the State Board of Missions may call a special session. A two-thirds affirmative vote of the SBOM is required for a special session under either initiative; and the 2014 FBSC constitution requires that the vote shall be secured in writing. All of these safe guards have proven to be needed down through the years.

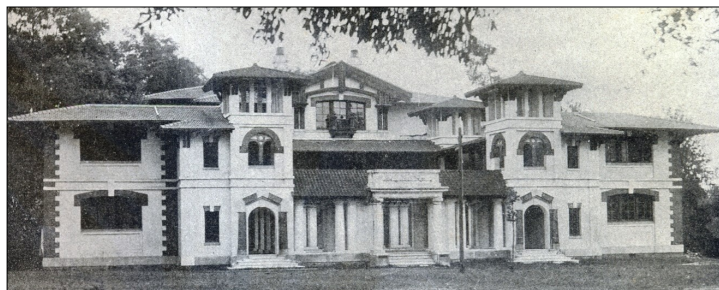
The first special session of Florida Baptists was called for July 24, 1907, at 8 pm, at Lake City. The 1907 special session had as much to do with Stetson and emotions as it did with Lake City, Columbia College and education.

Baptists want to control what they pay for and in 1907, Florida Baptists did not feel they controlled Stetson University. Stetson President Hulley often reminded them of that. When the Lake City, Florida, City Council, offered Florida Baptists the former property of Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College, ego and emotion ruled the day. The college had moved to Gainesville and the state legislature gave the 300 acres, \$200,000 worth of buildings and \$15,000.00 in endowment to Lake City. Florida Baptists jumped at the chance to start a school they could own out right and the eight buildings, beautiful grounds and five school plants were too much to ignore.



Lincoln Hulley

A special session of the Florida Baptist State Convention was called to consider the proposal of a new school. Emotions ran high and logic was hard to find. Stetson president Hulley established *The Gospel Herald*, a paper used to attack the proposed project. (see Hepburn-Joiner, *Favored Florida* for a great overview of the issues, pp. 287-303). However, leaders in the Florida Baptist Convention were drawn to the project in spite of warning signs and unrealistic expectations.



Columbia College Science Hall



Columbia College
Chapel Hall

Albert Carlton of Wauchula was one of the few who openly opposed the project. Carlton said the convention had supported Stetson and Stetson had not changed. Carlton called for deliberation and said there were religious, educational and financial reasons not to start a new school. (*The Southern Witness*, July 18, 1907, p. 5). This wise word of advice was a lone voice in a cascade of enthusiasm and celebration.

George T. Leitner, president of the State Board of Missions, wrote, "Many of you have said to me that the greatest need of our Florida Baptist people was a Baptist school, under control of our convention...." (*The Southern Witness*, July 18, 1907, p. 8). Leitner raised the ante when he later wrote, "Surely the Lord is in this movement. Christian education by Florida Baptists, for Florida Baptist....controlled and directed by Florida Baptists..." (*The Southern Witness*, August 8, 1907, p. 6).

B. H. White sounded a simplistic note when he wrote, "Provide a choice faculty and cheap education, and you will get the choice youth." (*The Southern Witness*, August 8, 1907, p.10). In the same issue of *The Southern Witness*, C. C. Carroll, sent a chilling and prophetic word of realism to the convention when he declared, "Endowment is its eternal safeguard..." and without it the school will die.

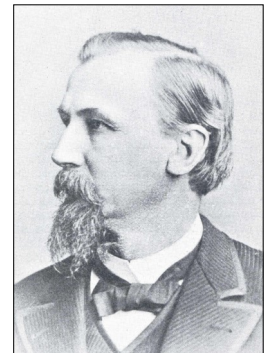
Different motivations brought different perspectives. A. J. P. Julian in the Lake City Index noted the local enthusiasm for the college and stated, "Vox populi Vox Dei," therefore the people of Columbia County were duty bound to support Columbia College.

W. C. Foster was making plans to support the start up of Columbia College but only if it would be an all woman's school. Foster announced twenty days in advance of the July 24, 1907, called session that "I would not favor the enterprise as a co-educational school..." (*The Southern Witness*, July 4, 1907, p. 5).

The handwriting was on the wall. Editorial support, letters to the editor, special train ticket rates and the thought of their own school brought 1,500 messengers to Lake City in 1907. The convention took in hand (formerly University of Florida property) the Lake City gift with joy and celebration.

G. A. Nunnally was chosen as president and October 2, 1907, was set as the first session of the co-educational Columbia College. The school opened with 133 students enrolled. There were twenty trustees elected by the convention and expectations were high.

But reality prevailed. A disastrous drought in Florida in 1908, a lack of financial pledges fulfilled, increasing debt and the onslaught of World War I caused the school to close in August, 1918. In 1920 the convention deeded the property of Columbia College to Lake City and discharged the board of trustees (Earl Joiner, *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, Vol. 1, p.300).



G. A. Nunnally

As Florida Baptists we learn from our past. Special sessions are possible and sometimes needed. However, the motivation for the session, the leadership calling for the session, and the potential outcomes of the session need to be documented, publicized and debated. It takes more than enthusiasm, passion and desire to promote a project and fulfill a dream. It takes prayerful vision, leaders, money and hard work.

Honoring those who honor Christ,

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Matthew 6:33
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Columbia College Gymnasium