

# **Marion and the Founding of *The Alabama Baptist***

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Marion, Alabama, holds so many memories for me. Along with my experiences as a student at Judson College, I returned to Marion after graduate school. I worked here, then taught Marion Junior High School, met Michael, married in Siloam and had our reception in Jewett parlors.

I began my journey with *The Alabama Baptist* in 1970 at Auburn University and an Old South grad class, which turned in to a master's thesis. Then my tenure at Samford University allowed me to work with and in the pages of the paper for more than 40 years. I worked with research and researchers finding answers to Baptist beliefs, denominational work and Alabama/world history. And then came the opportunity to write the *The Alabama Baptist's* story — a 175-year-old paper! To write such a narrative requires that you read the paper. Yes — from the 4-page to 8-page editions and the 16-page, and sometimes more, editions.

As I read the 175 years I learned many interesting things — some monumental some trivial, which is good for my factoid-type brain. This paper covered news about Baptists of the state (organization of churches and associations, men ordained, helps for preachers) and national (missionary reports), happenings in Alabama (prices for crops, steamboat and railroad fares, schools organized, election news) and the country (what's happening in Washington, problems in Texas, gold strike in California) — all this for readers who might never travel far from their own area or state, let alone across the nation or to China or Africa. Is that yesterday or could this be today?

The paper changed editors and size through the years. It informed about thorny issues — both secular and denominational — reported the results of conflicts, stood firm for moral and ethical causes, and brought the gospel to the thousands of readers through these years. Each editor had a distinctive style. Having read each of them and written about the 175 years, I might be able to tell you who is speaking for each new editor brought new ideas, new conclusions into an ever-changing audience.

Focusing on Marion, it is the county seat of Perry County and a small town in the heart of Alabama. Why here and why was so much happening in this place? Matthew tells us that people questioned why Nazareth was Jesus' hometown because it was such a small town but what significance it had.

In Marion in the 1800s, you found some of Alabama's educational and denominational leadership. Leadership doesn't always come from the big places or best known but the people make and made the difference.

The first owners of *The Alabama Baptist* in 1843 were known as the Association of Brethren, all from Marion and members of Siloam Baptist Church. Siloam, organized in 1822, was considered the largest church west of the Chattahoochee River. It consisted of one planter (Edwin King), one pastor, (James H.

DeVotie), one school president (Milo P. Jewett of Judson) and one benefactress (Julia Tarrant Barron) dedicated to education and ministry. They all were involved with Judson College (1838), Howard College (1841), now known as Samford University, and *TAB* (1843). This was Marion, the center of Alabama Baptist, and eventually national Baptist, denominational work.

Place yourself back in time when the 4-page *Alabama Baptist* may have been the only newspaper you received. The privately owned and published paper's primary mission was to inform and inspire readers in such a format to increase the subscription list.

Private ownership of denominational papers was common in 1843. Georgia's *Christian Index* and Virginia's *Religious Herald* also were privately owned and not owned by the state convention. The Alabama Baptist State Convention praised the work but said, "No financial obligations." These owners took a great leap of faith to launch or continue a paper in the midst of financial depressions and/or wars. They were called to this ministry, not money. They were called, not compensated.

From Pastor DeVotie's records, the printing press and all the parts — paper, etc. — cost about \$1,500, not a small sum at the time. The press was manufactured in the North and purchased in Mobile. It was put on a boat in Mobile and brought up the Alabama River to Selma to the Cahaba River then to Marion. The small, white building that now sits on the edge of campus was its home.

During their the Association of Brethren's tenure, the paper was filled with news of churches, associations, advice for pastors, home and literary information with the ever-present last page for advertisements — corsets, coffins and cures. Baptists and other denominations struggled with many questions, especially that of slavery. The paper carried all the news of the formation in 1845 of the Southern Baptist Convention and with the Domestic and Indian Mission Board (Home Mission Board, now North American Mission Board) formed at Siloam Baptist Church, around the table that is still at the church.

The Association of Brethren survived several years. Even when one editor would take over and quit, these folks picked up the paper and began again. The money came out of their pockets and subscriptions — verbally supported but no money from the state convention.

By 1849, the editorship of the paper was akin to a revolving door. Finally, Alexander W. Chambliss bought the paper. Chambliss was a minister, had worked for a printer, published pamphlets and had written books, so he decided to try his hand at editing the paper. Taking over the paper, he changed its name to the *Alabama Baptist Advocate* — separating himself from any former editorial financial problems. Two nearby papers failed — the Mississippi and New Orleans papers — so he bought the subscription lists, invested in a new press straight from Boston and improved the 4-page paper. With the joining of the publications, he ensured, "more stability and to provide the best face." His paper became the only Baptist paper from the Chattahoochee River to Texas. He renamed the paper, *The South Western Baptist*. Although the paper reflected the Southern positions, the first goal was always to preserve the church, spread the gospel and act as a spokesman for Baptists in Alabama and throughout the Southwest. Although many ministers had discounts, he demanded payment before delivery. Some thought his was not good business but he replied, "Type is cash, paper is cash, ink is cash, and workmen is cash — no money, no paper!"

There was a bit of sectional trouble at the time and it only got worse, although a Baptist paper, this was a newspaper. It reported the good, bad and ugly, and readers shared their opinions. However, the paper ministered to small and large churches, sharing missions news of the Alabama Baptist State Convention and the ministries of the SBC.

Chambliss resigned in 1852 selling the paper to a stock company, three members of First Baptist Church, Tuskegee. They encouraged their pastor, Samuel Henderson, to accept the editorship. Henderson was well known in the convention and the state as pastor, publisher, orator and writer. Upon his acceptance, he and Albert Williams, former Mercer University professor, had the paper printed in Montgomery over McBride's New Drug Store, but after one year, they took the operation to Tuskegee in an office over Morton's and Steven's store. Yes, the paper left its home for a season.

While Chambliss shared information from sympathetic papers to express his opinions, occasionally he was direct in his opinion about the conservative South. However, the new editors advised their readers that should comments offend or insult them, they could simply discontinue taking the paper. They promised true reporting of all topics but did not promise to please the audience all the time. In addition to all the political news, the paper reported Alabama Baptist news and inspiration to readers as its primary duty and task.

From 1852 to 1855/56, there were three assistant editors but each left because of failing health but also because of loss of investment in the venture.

Henderson and his brother-in-law, Harden Taliaferro, and Willis Jones bought the paper for \$3,000. Henderson and Taliaferro edited the paper through the thorny times prior to 1859. Henderson resigned but in 1862 was back as editor seeing the paper through the war. Henderson was very outspoken and kept his readers informed about all aspects of the war. So much so that the Union closed the paper by force in April 1865.

May believed that Alabama Baptists would no longer have a newspaper for their voice, but Henderson made a deal with James J. Toon, owner of the *Christian Index* to partner with the paper for Alabama to have some voice, though small.

After few years, it was determined the Alabama voice was too small. And on Dec. 23, 1873, a specimen issue of *The Alabama Baptist* appeared — published in the state again. Edwin Winkler, pastor of Siloam, was listed as editor along with Eldred Burder Teague and Jefferson D. Renfro. They bought the paper, designed the first issue which was overwhelmingly accepted and encouraged. Though a risky business venture with the state of the economy, these men decided to try. A reborn *Alabama Baptist* appeared on March 17, 1874, back in Marion.

John West, minister and printer in Selma bought the paper in 1877. He kept the paper in Marion and also wanted to gain from the experience and wisdom of the former owners. On Dec. 1, 1877, a fire broke out in the building where the paper was printed. West wrote, "Monday morning after its destruction on Saturday, I took charge of its ashes without money, without a subscription list, without a type or lead or a column rule — we took charge of it, determined if possible to save it for the denomination "and moved the operation to Selma.

The song sung for decades by Judson women speaks volumes of the courage of the leaders — daring to risk it all to begin and sustain work for the Lord, as Julia Barron regretted she had no more to give. *TAB* was one of the major accomplishments of these leaders — all still stand today.

“Marion, of all the cities in the USA, we’re here to say, you’re on the map to stay.”