

## History of the Baptists in the Jackson Purchase: A Panel Discussion

J. H. Spencer Historical Society and the Jackson Purchase Historical Society  
West Kentucky Baptist Association  
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For those of you who do not know me ~ I am Bill Mulligan, president of the Jackson Purchase Historical Society. I want to thank the West Kentucky Baptist Association and the J. H. Spencer Historical Society for working with us to put this program together, specifically Glen Stewart and Ben Stratton. The idea for a joint meeting of the Jackson Purchase Historical Society and J. H. Spencer Historical Society started some years ago. I also want to acknowledge at this time Charles Blair who has been the bridge connecting the two groups. Charles, a.k.a. Brother Blair, is someone who has both written about the history of Baptists in western Kentucky and helped make that history through his long and distinguished career of service to the Baptist church and the Jackson Purchase community.

Religion has been a powerful force throughout history in shaping the values and views of men and women, their communities, and ultimately their nations. As we see in the news today, it remains such. We are here today to look at one particular place and one particular religious group. We are not here today to discuss theology, but more to look at the social and community roles of churches, individual congregations as well as denominations, very broadly defined, as an institution. The men and women who built churches in their communities, their trials and triumphs are our subject today. People moved and inspired by their beliefs to serve others and worship God in a particular place. Specifically, today, how have Baptists and their churches shaped life in the Jackson Purchase? I am aware that all Baptist groups are not the same. There are theological and other differences. I am not going to get into that and am keeping it simple, because I am a simple person. I am also avoiding the church, denomination, sect discussion, of which I am aware.

As someone who came to the Jackson Purchase as an adult, I have had a chance to get out and about in the Purchase due to my initial work at the University, which involved a lot of outreach and more recently as president of the Society ~ quite a lot. One cannot miss the large number of church buildings that dot the landscape. It seems that wherever two or more gathered they built a church building. Many denominations and variations of those denominations exist and thrive in communities large and small across the Purchase. I am not sure there is a community ~ including the inelegantly named Census Designated Places ~ that

does not have a church or two or even three. In many ways the churches define the community and are its center. Schools have been consolidated, especially the high schools; country general stores gave way to larger stores in the larger places when the automobile replaced the mule. Of course, this was before Dollar General metastasized across the landscape. But the local church remains; a focal point of community and extended family. It often defines the place. Those who have moved away often return to bury a parent or themselves be buried with their ancestors. This is shared widely across all denominations, certainly, and religions, but my sense is that it is stronger here in West Kentucky than other places I have lived, and this is my fifth state.

In talking with Ben Stratton at one point during the planning I offered the opinion that it seemed to me that the Baptists, by the sheer number of churches and their ubiquity, had had the greatest impact on the culture of this region. Methodists and the Church of Christ have also been widespread and might try to make a case – we can give them a chance in the future ~ but not as much as the Baptists as my unscientific survey suggests. That seems to me to raise an interesting historical question. Is there something about this area that is especially compatible with the Baptist Church and its structure? Or, is there something about the Baptist Church that fit with the challenges and concerns people here had better than other options? I do not know the answer; I do suspect searching for the answer will tell us a lot about the Jackson Purchase and its people.

Maybe we will get some clues from the other panelists, who are actual historians of the Baptist church. We will hear from our panelists and then open things up for questions and comments.

Charles Blair

As we all know, when in 1792 the western lands of Virginia became the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the 15<sup>th</sup> state of the young union, it began as an incomplete entity. While Virginia, like several of the seaboard colonies, had claimed “all the lands to its west,” for all practical purposes the Mississippi River became a natural boundary. But Kentucky wasn’t even granted that much land; through federal treaties with the Cherokee and Chickasaw nations, the region bounded by the Tennessee, Ohio, Mississippi, and Tallahatchie rivers was off limits to white settlers. And when an area cannot be legally entered, those who enter are outlaws!

In colonial Virginia, there were at least two groups who especially chafed under the Anglican state church and resultant bureaucracy. In its desire for a pure church, Virginia’s House of Burgesses enacted strong restrictions on dissent of whatever type. The tithe tax, taken by government collectors, was imposed on all, then used to pay the state-approved clergy. “Unlicensed preaching” was forbidden, and to obtain a license required agreement with the

establishment. Baptists and other dissenters refused both requirements, some more vigorously than others.

One man in particular, Lewis Craig, so offended public decency as to preach on the streets views which were anathema to the godly magistrates, telling all who would listen that baptism was only the brief immersion in water of a responsible believer in the salvation offered in Christ and that church and state should be separate though friendly one to another. For his continued refusal to pay the fine for unlicensed preaching, he was placed in a cell under the Spotsylvania County courthouse. His one means of contact with the outside world was a barred opening high enough above his head that he could only see the sky or objects right at the “window.” Through this opening he would often call, “anybody out there?” If anyone answered, he would preach, holding his hands out from the bars to be lashed by the jailers. Finally, the exasperated magistrates called in the offender and asked, “if we set you free, will you go west “beyond the mountains,” over the Cumberland Gap, “to the Kentucky?” Craig and his “traveling church” thus opened the path for several others who held similar views. Such hardy, independent souls could scarcely be bound by a state decree that they could not cross the Tennessee River! So at least some Baptists likely came to this area before it was lawful to do so.

One other group that chafed at the Virginia establishment were the bootleggers whose illegal stills dotted the western backwoods of several colonies—remember the whiskey wars, and Shays’ rebellion? So it came to pass that the region stolen from my wife’s ancestors by Andy Jackson and Kentucky governor Isaac Shelby in 1818 was early on home to at least some Baptists and some bootleggers, and likely some Baptist bootleggers, given that one of Lewis Craig’s brothers invented bourbon in Kentucky.

This background may help us understand more readily the natural independence and self-reliance of the descendants of those hardy first settlers. But one other thing stands out as the area opened to legal settlement. Many of those who came were not the “rednecks and roughnecks” that might be expected. From as soon as the early 1830s, formal education was a major factor of life in the Purchase. Well-to-do families with more spacious new homes boarded young ladies who had in mind learning not only reading, writing, and ciphering, but also the social graces of polite society. By the 1840s, this practice had called into existence in Clinton an academy, first intended as a school for young ladies but soon opening its doors to young men of good character. While little is known of this institution, one of our local historians, Virginia Jewell, has written that Alben Barkley attended there briefly before transferring to the more advanced Methodist Marvin College, also in Clinton, which was known at that time as “the Athens of the South.” In the days following, after what some still call simply “the War,” Baptists also opened Clinton College, a co-educational school worthy a separate presentation.

To further help explain the ethos which has produced the pronounced independence which struck Dr. Mulligan, coming to the area—as Alma and I did in 1958—from a different background, a few thoughts including but not limited to Baptists may help.

While rivers were highways in early days, they were also roadblocks. Until Kentucky Dam was built, in the World War II era, to enter the Purchase from other areas of Kentucky meant crossing both the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers on ferries, after a bouncing trip along one of three winding highways. A trip to the state capital took in most cases three days. This re-enforced the natural independence of the area.

Baptists opened at least five schools of higher education over more than a century in the purchase. Several similar Baptist schools were built across the commonwealth; most of them worked together, at least to report their statistics and exchange ideas. Of the five Purchase schools, none actively participated in this wider contact; one never did, the others seldom.

Politically, the region was long known as “the Gibraltar of the Democracy.” When I, as a young pastor in Graves County, had the audacity to register as a Republican, one of our deacons told me: “before the bridges were built, we didn’t have any deer, no rattlesnakes, and no Republicans!” The votes of the region were taken for granted—on both sides of the Tennessee—so that little real contact was necessary.

Further examples to illustrate the unique character of the “Purchase” could be multiplied. One of the most common sayings among Purchase folk, at least the older natives, is simply “ain’t none of their business!” And it makes little difference who is meant by “their.” With another census on the horizon, it is a safe prediction that some will refuse to be counted. When the school that became Mid-Continent University before its unfortunate closing was in the planning stages in 1948, I was told by men who were directly involved that opposition to a Bible institute was not against education, but against making it a requirement to be imposed by some sort of authority.

While the desire to manage one’s own affairs is found in many places, a blend of geography and early culture has heightened the tendency in this region. And Baptist church governance, which downplays wider groupings in favor of local church self-government, has certainly played a part. Early Baptists in America feared the idea of a convention, preferring to use the term “association” as implying no authority in any wider fellowship.

It may be argued that the “Jackson Purchase Culture” cannot be understood apart from Baptist influence, interwoven with the unique historical geographic influences. Each has helped shape the other.

*Charles Blair has been involved in Baptist life in the Jackson Purchase for more than sixty years in numerous roles. He is also active in both the J. H. Spencer Historical Society and the Jackson Purchase Historical Society and is a past president of both organizations.*

## Glen Stewart

This building is the Ministry Center of the West Kentucky Baptist Association. The property is owned by 35 Baptist churches which make up the Association. These 35 Baptist churches are from the River Counties of western Kentucky: Fulton County which includes Fulton City to Hickman, Hickman County which includes Clinton to Columbus, and Carlisle County which includes Milburn to Cunningham.

The Missionary Baptist Churches of this area were members of the West Union Association in McCracken County and later joined the Mt. Olivet Association. Mt. Olivet was started in 1848 when four churches, Mt. Olivet, Liberty, Little Obion, and Salem Baptist Churches, withdrew from West Union Association.

In 1892, Elder W.T. Lowe offered a resolution to the Mt. Olivet Baptist Association, the churches of the two associations entered a year of discussion which led to a major realignment. Mt. Olivet disbanded in 1893 and the two associations so divided to make three. A joint meeting at Bardwell Baptist Church reflected the changes as following: The churches of Ballard and McCracken counties would remain West Union Baptist Association. The churches of Graves County would be the Graves County Baptist Association, and the churches of Fulton, Hickman, and Carlisle counties would form the West Kentucky Baptist Association. The streamer at the end of the hallway you saw upon entering building reflects the date as October 12, 1893. Of the 26 original churches forming the West Kentucky Baptist Association nineteen remain. Some are no longer a church or have gone to an Independent Baptist Church status. Those who are no longer in the Association are Emmaus, Mayfield Creek, Pleasant Ridge, Pleasant Valley, Poplar Grove, South Ballard, and Zoar. Others have joined since including Beulah, David's Chapel, Green Valley, Kirbyton, Moscow, Oakton, Sassafras Ridge, Antioch, Cayce, Crutchfield, East Hickman, New Harmony, Oak Grove, Riceville, Clinton Second, and West Hickman.

Today the West Kentucky Baptist Association consists of eleven Churches from Carlisle County, thirteen Churches from Hickman County, and eleven Churches from Fulton County. Today I am reporting on Milburn Baptist Church. Milburn Baptist Church was constituted on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord's Day in July 1866, actual date July 7, 1866. Milburn Baptist Church was sponsored by Emmaus Baptist Church which was organized in 1832 on what was known as Page Hill in then Hickman County and was about four miles East of Milburn. The Church services at that time were ¼ times service, once every 4 weeks or once a month. In 1922 they went to ½ times services. Two men, who took turns preaching at Emmaus, Elder Henry Trent and Elder C.L. Cates, were the men responsible for the work and eventual starting or organizing of Milburn Baptist Church as they shared the responsibility for the preaching. Emmaus Baptist Church was started by Mayfield Creek Baptist Church. Many of the early preachers and pastors at Milburn served at Emmaus as well. One man in particular was Brother T.P. McGary,

licensed to preach by Emmaus Baptist Church in 1935 and later he moved to Milburn and united with the Milburn Baptist Church and was later ordained into the ministry by the Milburn Baptist Church and pastored Milburn from 1938-1939 along with Bethlehem Baptist Church with ½ time services at each.

Milburn Baptist Church is the third oldest Missionary Baptist Church in Carlisle County, as a member of the West Kentucky Baptist Association, and eleventh oldest Church in the West Kentucky Baptist Association. The first Moderator of the Association was Elder J.N. Hall, who later pastored Milburn Baptist Church. Many great men have played a role in the work of Milburn Baptist Church, including the earlier Pastor, Elder J.H. Milburn. Elder Milburn preached a revival at the Farmington Baptist Church which Brother Ben Stratton currently pastors, and as a result of the revival twelve people became believers in Jesus Christ. During the early 1900s Milburn had a membership of over 102. The church had, and still has, a strong influence in the area with men like J.H. Milburn, Brother Lowe, Talmadge McGary, J.N. Hall, and the two men instrumental in starting Milburn Baptist who later became Pastor, Brothers Henry Trent and C. L. Cates. In the early years of Milburn's beginning there arose occasions when non-Baptist groups would try to infiltrate the area with beliefs contrary to the Bible beliefs of Baptist. The resulting conflict would result in debates being held and among the great debaters were men like J. N. Hall and J. H. Milburn who would eventually have their opposing debaters leaving the area and the Milburn Baptist Church would flourish. Milburn has been influential in the area in the Lord's work since its early years. In early years men like Brother Harold Cathy, a Kentucky and Southern Baptist leader, held revivals and folks would come, some in wagons, for the services. In 2006, Milburn had a revival service with former Southern Baptist Convention President, Brother Bailey Smith, leading the services. The meeting had an average attendance of 150 nightly, the church only had forty-five active members at the time. The result of the Word of God being preached by Brother Bailey Smith under the leadership of the Holy Spirit resulted in ten souls being saved (coming to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior).

Milburn is the one of the oldest communities in Carlisle County. Carlisle County became the last of eight counties to be formed from the Jackson Purchase and was authorized on May 3, 1886 and was named for John G. Carlisle who was the Lieutenant Governor of the Commonwealth. He and T.T. Gardner proposed the Gardner & Moreman's Bill to make Carlisle County the 119<sup>th</sup> County of the Commonwealth. There was stern resistance to the bill and on its first reading in February 1886 it was defeated. Mr. Thorne and Mr. Gardner began working getting the bill up again for another vote. They sought, as politics would play out, to find friends in high places to come in. They involved J.W. Turk, who had relatives in Henry County, and Dr. Graves who had relatives in Gallatin County to get a block of votes. On May 3, 1886 the bill passed overwhelmingly making Carlisle County the 119<sup>th</sup> County of Kentucky.

Milburn played a role in the first County Court meeting with Thomas B. Hayes as Judge. The meeting was in the Masonic Hall in Milburn. Bardwell was chosen in that meeting as the County seat for Carlisle. The railroad played a major role for Bardwell being named the County Seat.

Thanks to each of you for attending today and I count it an honor to serve the Milburn Baptist Church as Pastor and this Association as Director. God Bless each of you.

*Glen Stewart is pastor of the Milburn Baptist Church and Mission Director of the West Kentucky Baptist Association. He is the author of Milburn Baptist Church, 1866-2006. He also provided the donuts, juice, and coffee. Meeting and working with Glen has been one of the highlights of developing this program.*

## The Ten Most Influential Baptist Leaders in West Kentucky History

Ben Stratton

Andrew Jackson purchased the land now known as West Kentucky from the Chickasaw Indians in 1818 and it was not very long until Baptists arrived. Their first congregation, the Clark's River Baptist Church was started on May 13, 1820. Within ten years eleven additional Baptist churches had been planted in the region. The Baptists multiplied quickly. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were over 100 Baptist congregations scattered throughout West Kentucky.

Today there are well over 200 Baptist churches in Kentucky's Jackson Purchase. This includes Southern Baptists, Primitive Baptists, Independent Baptists, National Baptists, General Baptists, and Free Will Baptists. Over the 200-year history of Baptists in West Kentucky, who have been the most influential leaders? Ten short biographies have been compiled about these individuals and their most significant achievements.

The list is given in chronological order, not order of rank. Six or seven of these men would be on everyone's list, while three or four might be open to discussion. Also, everyone on this list is deceased. There are a few Baptists currently in West Kentucky you could make an argument for being on the list. To keep from hurting feelings, the list was limited to those who had already passed away.

In addition, there are several individuals who lived in West Kentucky briefly, but went on to become very influential elsewhere. For example, M.E. Dodd, J.D. Grey, William Dehoney, and Franklin Pashcall all served consecutive terms as President of the Southern Baptist Convention, yet each only lived or pastored for a brief time in West Kentucky. The same can be said for others such as the famous Baptist historian D.B. Ray, the prolific Baptist

theologian J.B. Moody, or Mr. Kentucky Baptist Wendell H. Rone. Because of their brevity in the Jackson Purchase, they were left off the list.

Of the ten leaders listed, two quickly rose to the top: H. Boyce Taylor and George Washington Dupee. In many ways, they mirror each other. Both had long tenures as pastor, served as newspaper editors, exercised tremendous leadership capabilities, and were very gifted preachers. Long after their passing, the influence of Taylor upon Southern Baptists and of Dupee upon African American Baptists in West Kentucky could still be felt.

#### 1. James Phillips Edwards (1790-1855) – Father of Organized Baptist Work in the Jackson Purchase.

J.P. Edwards (June 22, 1790-November 2, 1855) was an early pioneer of Baptist work in West Kentucky. Though born in Virginia, his family moved to Kentucky shortly after his birth. His father, Isaac Spencer Edwards, was a Baptist preacher and organized the first Baptist Church across the Ohio River in Indiana.

Following in his father's footsteps, Edwards went west as a Baptist missionary. He organized Baptist churches in Missouri, Illinois, and Arkansas. In 1818 the United States obtained the Jackson Purchase area of Kentucky from the Chickasaw Indians. Settlers soon began moving to the region and it wasn't long before Baptist churches were being started. While Edwards was still living in Illinois, he began to make preaching tours through West Kentucky. During these tours he helped organized several new Baptist churches, including Mayfield Creek, New Bethel, and Little Obion. As more churches were established, it was realized that a Missionary Baptist Association was needed in West Kentucky. The West Union Baptist Association was started in 1833, and J.P. Edwards was elected its first moderator.

Finally, in 1834, Edwards moved permanently to Kentucky. As towns were started and communities increased in population, Edwards preached and sought to gather new congregations. He organized new Baptist churches in Paducah, Lovelaceville, Mayfield, Clinton, and Columbus.

The Lovelaceville Baptist Church had been started in 1841 and Edwards remained the pastor of this congregation for 14 years. One weekend a month he would preach for the church and the rest of the time he would be out on preaching tours, seeking to start new works. On Monday, October 29, 1855, he came in from a tour very ill. He died the following Friday. Starting at least 20 new churches in the Jackson Purchase, Edwards laid the foundation for



much of the Baptist work that was to follow. His tombstone in the Lovelaceville Cemetery fittingly reads, “A Baptist Missionary and Western Pioneer.”<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Willis White (1805 – 1891) – Early Proponent of Baptist Education in West Kentucky

Willis White was another pioneer Baptist leader in West Kentucky who often worked together with his mentor, J.P. Edwards. Born in North Carolina, his parents moved to Caldwell County, Kentucky in 1809 and then to Hickman County, Kentucky in 1824. White was converted in 1833 and was baptized into the fellowship of the Mayfield Creek Baptist Church by J.P. Edwards. He was ordained in 1836 by the Ohio Baptist Church in McCracken County.

The missionary zeal of J.P. Edwards was passed on to Willis White. He traveled throughout West Kentucky, preaching to the destitute and organizing churches. With the help of Edwards and H.H. Richardson, White was able to organize the Lovelaceville, Mississippi, Spring Bayou, Paducah, Mayfield, and Humphreys Creek Baptist churches. White would also pastor many of the new churches in West Kentucky and see them grow from struggling fellowships to strong congregations. In West Kentucky he served the Clinton, Columbus, Hickman, Liberty, Mayfield Creek, Ohio, Poplar Grove, Spring Bayou, and Spring Hill Baptist churches.

One of White’s most significant contributions to West Kentucky was his promotion of religious education. In 1849 he helped to establish Clinton Female College, which trained young women for several years, but was disrupted by the Civil War. In 1870 White led in the establishment of Clinton College, first as a female school, but within a few years as a co-educational institute. By 1883 the school reported 200 students, including a dozen in the ministerial department. Clinton College would eventually close in 1914. During White’s years it had a significant influence on West Kentucky Baptists and would pave the way for latter schools such as Hall-Moody Bible Institute, the West Kentucky Bible School, and Mid-Continent Baptist Bible College.

With his long white beard and kindly face, in the latter years of his life, White was affectionately nicknamed, “Father White.” During his 55 years of ministry, he served as a pastor, church planter, associational moderator, sheriff, magistrate, judge, county commissioner, and school superintendent. Due to the work of faithful men and women like

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<sup>1</sup> J.H. Spencer, *History of Kentucky Baptists*, Volume 2 (Cincinnati, OH: J.R. Baumes, 1885), 480-481; Jim Bryant, Edith Wallace, and Zula Craig, *West Union Baptist Association, A History of 175 Years* (LaCenter, KY: Unlimited Graphics, Inc., 2007), 18-29.

Willis White, West Kentucky Baptists moved from a handful of struggling churches to multiple associations of thriving congregations.<sup>2</sup> White is buried in the Clinton City Cemetery.

3. George Washington Dupee (1826-1897) – Influential African American Pastor in West Kentucky

G.W. Dupee (July 24, 1827 – September 5, 1897) was one of the most significant African American Baptist leaders in Kentucky. Born a slave in Gallatin County, Kentucky, in 1841 he was hired out to work on the courthouse in Versailles. There he encountered an older Baptist preacher named David Woods and was convicted of his sin. Dupee soon placed his faith in Christ and was later baptized into the fellowship of the Buck Run Baptist Church of Frankfort. Wood was a mentor of Dupee, even performing the marriage ceremony of the young man and Miss Matilda Green in 1848.

Early on Dupee felt the call to preach and was licensed by Buck Run Baptist Church in 1846. In 1851 he was ordained to the gospel ministry and became pastor of the African American Baptist Church in Georgetown. Full of energy, Dupee soon organized new congregations in Paris and Old Big Springs, Kentucky. He was called to pastor the Pleasant Green Baptist Church in Lexington while continuing to serve his congregation in Georgetown. When it was announced in 1856 that he was going to be sold to the highest bidder, Pleasant Green Baptist Church, with the help of members of the First Baptist Church of Lexington, purchased his freedom.

In 1858 Dupee was called to be the pastor of the Washington Street Baptist Church and would serve this congregation until his death. With his freedom he was also able to serve churches in Lexington, Versailles, Covington, and Owensboro. In 1864 he permanently moved to Paducah. Washington Street rapidly grew and was soon one of the largest congregations in the state. Shortly after becoming pastor, Dupee baptized 81 people into the fellowship of the church in only fourteen minutes. Indeed by 1887 it was reported that he had baptized 8,000 converts and by the time of his death ten years later, it was claimed the number was over 10,000! This would mean George Washington Dupee baptized more individuals than any other person in Kentucky Baptist history.<sup>3</sup>

With so many new African American Baptist churches being started, Dupee realized there was a need for organization. In 1861 he organized the first ever African American ministers and deacons meeting in Kentucky. Dupee encouraged the founding of a General Association in 1865 and served as moderator of the group from 1871-1882. He also organized

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<sup>2</sup> *Minutes of the West Union Baptist Association*, (Fulton, KY: Baptist Gleaner Job Rooms, 1891), 3-4; J.H. Spencer, *History of Kentucky Baptists*, Volume 2 (Cincinnati, OH: J.R. Baumes, 1885), 484.

<sup>3</sup> A.W. Pegues, *Our Bhenryapist Ministers and Schools* (Springfield, MA: Willey and Company, 1892), 175-183.

First District Baptist Association in West Kentucky in 1866 and served as moderator of what was for many years the largest district association in the state until 1895.

W.J. Simmons called Dupee “an uncompromising Baptist, believing in one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”<sup>4</sup> He baptized and ordained numerous pastors coming from Methodist and Presbyterian denominations. In order to teach young preachers and church members sound doctrine, he started “The Baptist Herald” newspaper in Paducah in 1873. He edited the paper until 1878 when it was purchased by the General Association and became the “American Baptist.” Simmons concluded, “Certainly no man lives in Kentucky who had done more to develop her spiritual interest.”<sup>5</sup> Dupee died in 1897, after preaching a sermon on John 3:5 – “Ye must be born again” in Kansas City, Missouri. He is buried in the Oak Grove Cemetery in Paducah.

#### 4. William Francis Lowe (1838-1907) – Founder of Graves County Baptist Association

William Francis Lowe (August 7, 1838 – December 14, 1907) was the founder of the Graves County Baptist Association and one of the most influential early preachers in West Kentucky. He was one of eight sons born to Levi and Morning Ann Lowe. Levi and his brother John M. Lowe had moved to West Kentucky from Virginia in 1837. The area of northwestern Graves County they settled in was named Lowes after the two brothers. As a boy W.F. only occasionally attended church. However, in 1854, the nearby Mount Carmel Presbyterian Church held a protracted meeting. Revival broke out and over eighty people were converted, including one of W.F.’s brothers. Sixteen-year-old W.F. was urged to attend the meeting and was soon saved himself.

Although he had been saved at a Presbyterian Church, W.F. had read enough of the New Testament as a child to understand the Bible taught believer’s immersion. At his first opportunity he joined the Mount Olivet Baptist Church in Lowes and was baptized by Pastor M.S. Wiman. In October 1858, he was ordained to the gospel ministry by the Mount Olivet Baptist Church. In Graves County he pastored the Bethany, Cuba, Dublin, Hopewell, Liberty, Little Obion, Melber, Mount Olivet, New Concord, Oak Grove, Pilot Oak, Pleasant Grove, Pleasant Ridge, Sharon, Trace Creek, and Wingo Baptist Churches. He also pastored the Emmaus, Milburn and Zoar Baptist Churches (Carlisle County) as well as the Lovelaceville Baptist Church (McCracken County). While these were quarter-time churches, several of his pastorates were long tenures, including 24 years at Mount Olivet.

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<sup>4</sup> William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (Cleveland, OH: George M. Rewell and Company, 1887), 840.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 858.

While W.F. Lowe was noted for his preaching ability and numerous pastorates, his greatest influence was in associational leadership. The Mount Olivet Baptist Association had been formed in 1848, after several pastors disagreed with the way an open communion controversy had been handled in the West Union Baptist Association. W.F. Lowe quickly became a leader in this body, serving as clerk seven years, moderator 19 years, and preaching the annual sermon seven times. Yet In 1893, Lowe had led the seventeen-member Mount Olivet Association to vote to unanimously disband, and the Graves County and West Kentucky Baptist Associations to be formed in its place. The West Union Baptist Association Churches outside of McCracken and Ballard Counties joined these new associations. W.F. Lowe was elected moderator of the Graves County Association and served fifteen straight years until his death in 1907.<sup>6</sup>

W.F. Lowe was known as a man of strong doctrine. His obituary in the *Western Recorder* called him a “Landmark anti-Whitsitt Baptist.”<sup>7</sup> The convictions of W.F. Lowe can still be found throughout West Kentucky. Lowe is buried in the Mount Olivet Cemetery in Graves County.

#### 5. John Newton Hall (1849-1905) – Founder of West Kentucky Baptist Association

J.N. Hall (February 5, 1849-December 4, 1905) was the leading Baptist preacher in West Kentucky at the end of the nineteenth century. Although he was born in Henry County, Kentucky, his family moved to what later became Carlisle County when he was seven years old. In 1863 Hall was converted and joined the old Cane Run Church in Arlington. In 1871, he was ordained by the nearby Hopewell Baptist Church. His pastorates included the First Baptist Churches of Arlington, Fulton, and Milburn in Kentucky. He also pastored the First Baptist churches of Bolivar, Dyersburg, Martin, Newburn, and Trezevant in Tennessee as well as numerous rural congregations in both states.

Widely recognized as the most outstanding pulpiteer in the region, Hall was in constant demand to preach revival meetings, Bible Institutes, and associational annual sermons. He estimated he had preached an average of over 600 times a year (11+ a week). In 1890 he preached the annual sermon for the West Union Baptist Association. He read 1 Corinthians 11:22 (“Despise ye the church of God”) and dealt with the doctrines and origin of the Baptists. After the sermon, the associational clerk noted in the minutes, “For two hours and ten minutes the congregation gave most careful attention, but this is not surprising when J.N. Hall is the speaker.”<sup>8</sup> His excellent public speaking ability also enabled him to excel at religious debates.

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<sup>6</sup> W.F. Lowe, *Valid Baptism, What Is It?* (Fulton, KY: National Baptist Publishing House, 1904), 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> “R.W. Mahan “Lowe,” *Western Recorder*, Louisville, KY, January 2, 1908.

<sup>8</sup> *Minutes of the West Union Baptist Association* (St. Louis, MO: American Baptist Print, 1890), 6-7.

He held over 100 debates during his lifetime with men from nearly every religious denomination.

Early in his ministry, Hall realized the importance of the Baptist periodical. For many years he had worked with J.B. Moody in editing the “Baptist Gleaner” newspaper at Fulton. When overwork forced him to sell out to the “Western Recorder,” he edited the “Gleaner Department” in this paper for two years. In 1898 he purchased the “American Baptist Flag” newspaper from D.B. Ray. He moved the paper to Fulton and shortened its name to the “Baptist Flag.” By 1900 the “Baptist Flag” had a circulation of 14,000 and had a great influence throughout the South. During the Whitsitt controversy, the “Baptist Flag” was considered the leading anti-Whitsitt newspaper and did much to help West Kentucky side against the new views of Baptist history.

Another great need that Hall helped to meet in Baptist life was ministerial education. He was convinced that a theological school needed to be established for the young preachers in West Kentucky and Tennessee. In 1901 the Beulah and Weakley County Baptist Associations voted to start a school in Martin, Tennessee and named it the Hall-Moody Bible Institute in honor of J.B. Moody and J.N. Hall. Moody became the theology professor and Hall himself gave the first \$500 to go toward his salary. The preacher boy fellowship on campus named themselves the “J.N. Hall Society of Religious Inquiry.” The Hall-Moody Bible Institute trained multitudes of preachers (including several men who became early professors at Mid-Continent Baptist Bible College in Mayfield). It finally closed in 1927 and the property was purchased by the University of Tennessee. To this day, a portrait of J.N. Hall hangs in the administration building of the University of Tennessee-Martin.

As Baptists grew rapidly in West Kentucky after the Civil War, Hall realized that new district associations were needed. In 1893 he led in the establishment of the West Kentucky Baptist Association, which was made up of Missionary Baptist churches in Carlisle, Hickman, and Fulton Counties. Hall was elected the first moderator of this new association and served continually in that capacity until his death in 1905, (save 1899, during which he was unavailable).<sup>9</sup>

J.N. Hall died on December 4, 1905 at the young age of fifty-six. He is buried in the Fulton City Cemetery. His flat gravestone reads “Elder J.N. Hall” and contains the words to one of his life verses – Jude 1:3 “*earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.*”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Wendell H. Rone, *Commemorating the First Century of the First Baptist Church of Arlington, Kentucky* (Mayfield, KY: Mayfield Printing Co., 1976), 13-14.

<sup>10</sup> Ben M. Bogard, *Pillars of Orthodoxy* (Louisville, KY: Baptist Book Concern, 1900), 441-447.

## 6. H. Boyce Taylor (1870-1932) – Defender of the Faith and Champion of Mission Work

H.B. Taylor is one of the most influential Baptist leaders, not just in the Jackson Purchase, but in the entire state of Kentucky. He was a fourth-generation Baptist pastor who was able to use the pulpit, the printed page, and the classroom to further the cause of missions and sound doctrine throughout the South. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century his name is still recognizable, and his impact can be felt in the region

Born in Ohio County, Taylor was educated at Bethel College and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He was called to pastor the First Baptist Church of Murray in 1897 and would serve this congregation until 1931. During his last few years there, he had the record for the longest continuing pastorate in the Southern Baptist Convention. The church grew tremendously under Taylor's leadership. New sanctuaries were built in both 1899 and 1924, and it was a flagship congregation in Kentucky.

Missions were always Taylor's main passion. Many years the Murray congregation was one of the leading churches in the Southern Baptist Convention in per capita giving. Under Taylor's guidance, numerous men and women were sent out as foreign missionaries, including the first southern Baptist preachers in Chile and Peru. Instead of utilizing special offerings, Taylor led the Murray church to adopt the "Budget Plan" of giving. In 1915 he led Kentucky to adopt this plan and in 1925 Taylor's friends M.E. Dodd and O.E. Bryan took the idea and lead the SBC to adopt the Cooperative Program. It is no wonder that noted Baptist leader B.H. Carroll said the Murray church was the greatest missionary church since the book of Acts!<sup>11</sup>

Sound doctrine was Taylor's other primary concern. He wanted Baptist church members to know what they believed and why they believed it. To accomplish this, each year Taylor held a Bible Institute with five days of continual preaching and teaching. Huge crowds listened to such recognized speakers as P.E. Burroughs, Louis Entzminger, Arthur Flake, J.B. Moody, and A.W. Pink. He also started a weekly newspaper called "News and Truths" which ran from 1904-1932, and he held over 50 public religious debates.

One of Taylor's greatest accomplishments was the founding of the West Kentucky Bible School in 1921. With Clinton College folding in 1915 and Hall-Moody Bible Institute being consolidated in 1926, the school filled a void in providing religious education in the Jackson Purchase during the depression era. The school operated until 1937 and many of its graduates went on to teach at Baptist Bible colleges, universities and seminaries.

Taylor died in 1932 at the age of only 62 years old, worn out after years of hard work. He was buried in the Murray City Cemetery. Yet his legacy remains in West Kentucky. His picture hangs in both the Kentucky Baptist Convention administration building and in the First Baptist church of Murray. The Memorial Baptist Church in Calloway County is named in

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<sup>11</sup> Roy Beaman, *The Life of H. Boyce Taylor* (Ashland, KY: n.p., 1933), 1.

his honor. His writings are still printed by several publishers and continue to be read. The influence of Harvey Boyce Taylor is one of the key reasons West Kentucky remains the most conservative Baptist region in Kentucky.<sup>12</sup>

7. L.R. Riley (1878-1975) - Outstanding Evangelist and the Last of the West Kentucky Baptist Debaters.

L.R. Riley (February 8, 1878 - August 11, 1975) was widely recognized in West Kentucky for his evangelistic preaching and skillful debating. Feeling the Lord was calling him to preach in 1910, Riley soon sold his farm in Calloway County and enrolled at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. He married Cora Kendall and they had two children: Boyce Truett Riley (who died in infancy) and Mable Riley. L.R.'s younger brother, A.C. Riley (1880-1948) also became a Baptist preacher and pastored throughout the area.

In the twentieth century, Baptist churches would have at least one annual revival. In a business meeting, the pastor and church members would discuss who to call for their upcoming meeting. In West Kentucky, L.R. Riley's name was always recommended. His powerful preaching of the Bible often produced outstanding results. For example, beginning in 1935, he preached three revivals in a row at the Liberty Baptist Church in Graves County. Each year the revival grew in intensity, with 28 additions to the church in 1935, 42 additions in 1936, and 65 additions in 1937. His greatest revival was at Dublin in Graves County in 1924. 109 people were received into the fellowship of the Dublin Baptist Church, with 96 coming by baptism. Of these, only four were under the age of 16.<sup>13</sup>

Riley was not just an evangelist, but he was also a pastor. In West Kentucky he served the Arlington, Briensburg, Calvert City, Hardin, Hopewell, Kirbyton, Liberty, Lone Oak, Pleasant Hope, Pryorsburg Olive, Owens Chapel, Union Ridge, and West Fork Baptist churches as well as numerous congregations in west Tennessee. His son-in-law, Joe T. Odle, later states, "He was a church builder. Every church he ever pastored grew in its spirituality, its program, its stewardship, its prayer life, its missionary support, and its evangelism."

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, religious debates were very common in West Kentucky. Each denomination had its own champion to defend their peculiar doctrinal views. These debates would often last several days and draw huge crowds. However, by the 1940's, with the widespread use of the automobile and the radio, religious public discussions had nearly died out. L.R. Riley was the last holdout. In the 1950's he held several debates with Church of Christ preachers at the Mayfield fairgrounds. Thousands of observers gathered for these debates and they were, for the most part, well-mannered events.

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Blair, "One Man in a Thousand," *The Kentucky Baptist Heritage* 11, no. 1 (July, 1984), 1-6.

<sup>13</sup> L.R. Riley, *Baptists and Their Doctrines* (Mayfield, KY: n.p., n.d.), 5-10, 75-80.

In his retirement, Riley taught part-time at Mid-Continent Baptist Bible College in Mayfield and regularly filled the pulpit of area Baptist churches. In 1966 he authored a book entitled, "Baptists and Their Doctrines" which was widely circulated. He died at the age of 97 and was buried in the Highland Park Cemetery in Mayfield. While this was 45 years ago, many senior adults in Baptist churches throughout West Kentucky still fondly remember the name of L.R. Riley.<sup>14</sup>

8. Oscar Clyde Markham (1900-1976) – Longtime President of Mid-Continent Baptist Bible College.

O.C. Markham (October 27, 1900-October 22, 1976) was a noted Baptist educator in West Kentucky. Born in Pulaski, Tennessee, Markham graduated from Union University in 1938. After serving various churches in Tennessee, he was called to the First Baptist Church of Hickman, Kentucky in 1940. He immediately took an active role in the West Kentucky Baptist Association.

In the years after World War II there was no Baptist school for preachers in the Jackson Purchase. The Hall-Moody Bible Institute in nearby Martin, Tennessee had closed in 1926 and the West Kentucky Bible School in Murray and later Paducah had followed suit in 1937. Many young men who had returned from military service had surrendered to preach and desired to further their education. In September 1948, the West Kentucky Baptist Association made a motion to establish a Preacher's Bible School in Clinton, Kentucky. After a few months of planning, the first class was held January 10, 1949 with fifty people in attendance.

From the beginning O.C. Markham was very involved. In September 1948 he began publishing the "West Kentucky Baptist" newspaper. While this four-page monthly paper covered the news of churches in the West Kentucky Baptist Association, each issue also promoted the new "Preacher's Bible School." In July 1949 Markham resigned the pastorate of the First Baptist Church of Hickman and was elected the first full time employee of the school. He served as executive secretary, treasurer and taught Homiletics, English, and Religious Education.

In 1957 it was decided to move the West Kentucky Baptist Bible Institute to North 15<sup>th</sup> Street in Mayfield, Kentucky where it was eventually renamed it "Mid-Continent Baptist Bible College." W.A. Sloan, who served as president of the school from 1953 to 1957 had retired due to failing health. The school trustees naturally elected Markham to fill his role. Under his leadership the school increased enrollment, added a bookstore, built dormitories, and included a graduate program. In the early 1970s Markham led Mid-Continent to begin the process of moving the campus to northern Graves County beside Highway 45. Property was donated by

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<sup>14</sup> C.R. Daley, "Former Kentucky Pastor Dies," *Western Recorder*, Louisville, KY, August 23, 1975.



Mr. Earl Harris, and a groundbreaking ceremony was held in July 1975. It was fitting that the first building erected was the administration building, named Markham Hall. The school officially moved locations in July 1977.

Unfortunately, O.C. Markham never got to see the final fruits of his labor. On October 22, 1976, while on his way to visit a Baptist associational meeting and promote the school, he was killed in an automobile accident in Stewart County, Tennessee. He was buried in the Clinton City Cemetery. For twenty-eight years he had a tremendous impact on religious education in West Kentucky. While Mid-Continent closed its doors in 2016, the school had an unprecedented influence upon the Baptists of West Kentucky. This was largely due to the labors of O.C. Markham.<sup>15</sup>

9. Joe T. Odle (1908-1980) - Author of the Influential “Church Member’s Handbook.”

Joe T. Odle (August 19, 1908-March 24, 1980) was a pastor who authored one of the most widely read Baptist books in the twentieth century. Born in West Frankfort, Illinois, Odle surrendered to preach in high school. Realizing the need to continue his education, Odle moved to Tennessee and graduated from Union University in 1930. Upon graduation he married Mable Riley, the daughter of West Kentucky pastor L.R. Riley.

While Odle pastored churches in Illinois, Tennessee and Mississippi, his longest pastorate was the East Baptist Church in Paducah where he served from 1932-1943. While there the congregation often led the West Union Baptist Association in total baptisms (recording 92 in 1941) and was one of the largest churches in Paducah. Odle was elected moderator of the West Union Baptist Association in 1934-1935. During his years in Paducah, Odle and L.R. Riley also worked together to publish the “West Kentucky Baptist” newspaper.

With a rapidly growing congregation, Odle realized there was a great need to teach his church members the doctrines of the faith. In 1941 he authored a small booklet entitled “The Church Members Handbook.” While first written for the members of East Baptist, other area pastors quickly realized how valuable this booklet was and asked Odle to print additional copies. In 1955 Broadman Press began publishing the book. It has never been out of print since, with millions of copies being distributed. Perhaps more than any other book, “The Church Member’s Handbook” has been responsible for preserving historic Baptist ecclesiology among Southern Baptist churches.<sup>16</sup>

In 1943 Odle moved to Mississippi to pastor. He continued to author books and in 1959 he became the editor of “The Baptist Record” newspaper in Mississippi. When he retired

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Blair, “President Markham’s Coronation Day,” *Baptist Herald* 27, No. 45 (October 29, 1976), 1-3; Charles Cloyd, *History of Mid-Continent College* (n.p., n.d.), 1-18.

<sup>16</sup> C. Douglas Weaver, *In Search of the New Testament Church* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 159-160.

from this position in 1976, he was recognized as the last of the old school conservative Southern Baptist editors. In his retirement, he often came back to West Kentucky to preach and guest lecture at Mid-Continent Baptist Bible College. Joe T. Odle died of pancreatic cancer in 1980 and is buried in Jackson, Mississippi.<sup>17</sup>

10. Orman Stegall (1913-2001) - Long Time Director of Missions in West Kentucky.

Orman C. Stegall (January 17, 1913-January 17, 2001) was a long-term associational missionary/director of missions in West Kentucky. Raised in Livingston County, Stegall served as both a schoolteacher and circuit clerk. However, he soon felt the Lord calling him to preach and was called to pastor the Mexico and Old Salem Baptist Churches where he served from 1945-1948. He was then called to the Springhill Baptist Church in Hickman County.

In 1948 Stegall became the associational missionary for the West Kentucky Baptist Association, where he served alongside his fellow missionary, Sammy Price. Yet when Sherman Holt went back into the pastorate in 1949, the Graves County Baptist Association called Stegall to be their full time sole associational missionary/director of missions. He would serve in this capacity from 1950 until his retirement in 1977. These 27 years give him the longest continual tenure of any associational missionary/director of missions in the history of West Kentucky.

As a director of missions, Stegall had a variety of responsibilities. He conducted religious surveys of communities which often led to new Baptist congregations being planted, such as the East Hickman Baptist church in Fulton County. He also organized Vacation Bible Schools at area churches and was able to shape the religious education of multitudes of young people.

Stegall's greatest influence was in expanding the viewpoint of the churches he directed. In the 1950s most Baptist churches in West Kentucky had an isolation spirit and couldn't see beyond their local association. Stegall encouraged churches to receive the "Western Recorder," the state Baptist newspaper and for his pastors to attend state convention meetings. With his influence, West Kentucky Baptists became much more involved in cooperative Baptist ministry.

After retiring, Orman Stegall remained in Mayfield and joined the High Point Baptist Church. While he occasionally still preached, he devoted his last years to his family and his local church. Orman Stegall passed away in 2001 and is buried in the Leeper Cemetery in Livingston County.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Joe T. Odle, *Church Member's Handbook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Paducah, KY: n.p., 1942), 2; W.C. Fields, "Former Mississippi Editor Odle Dies." *Baptist Press*. Nashville, TN, March 25, 1980.

<sup>18</sup> "Rev Orman Stegall." Find a Grave. Accessed March 3, 2020.

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/119164397/orman-stegall>; Cloys Bruce, *A Season of Faithfulness, A Concise History of Graves County Baptist Association* (Mayfield, KY; n.p., 2006), 23-24.

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## Don Houston

Joe T. Odle was born in West Frankfort, Illinois, the son of Harry Odle and Winona (Dillon) Odle on August 18, 1908. He received his B.A. from Union University in 1930 and continued his studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

While at Union University, he met Mabel Riley, the daughter of Brother and Mrs. L.R. Riley. Brother Riley, like Joe T. Odle, was an advocate of Landmark Theology. Brother Odle and Mabel Riley were married in Lone Oak, Kentucky on July 17, 1930. They had two children, Joe Thomas and Sara. Joe Thomas was called to preach the gospel as a very young man, but after being diagnosed with cancer, passed away in January 1955 at the age of 20.

Brother Odle pastored churches in Illinois and Tennessee while still in high school and college followed by pastoring churches in Kentucky and Mississippi after graduation. His longest pastorate was at East Baptist Church, Paducah, Kentucky from 1932 to 1943. At the celebration of its Golden Jubilee in 1941, East Baptist had 700 members and was the largest church in Paducah. In 1942, he led the West Union Baptist Association in Baptisms, Odle baptizing 92 people into East Baptist Church. Also, during his pastorate, Brother Odle wrote *Church Member's Handbook* (1962) for the use of new members in that church. Later it was enlarged and published by Broadman Press and has now sold millions of copies and been translated into several foreign languages. Also, while at East Baptist, Brother Odle was Moderator of West Union Baptist Association in 1934 and 1935. Many think that Joe T. Odle's *Church Member's Handbook* was as influential on Kentucky Baptists as J.M. Carroll's *The Trail of Blood* (1931). These two publications were extremely important in promoting Baptist distinctiveness in the United States and many other countries.

Brother Odle's commitment to Baptist ecclesiology (i.e. the study of New Testament churches) was widely known. He took note that the church Jesus founded multiplied itself as recorded in Acts of the Apostles, and that all New Testament churches were local, visible, and autonomous for over three hundred years. With the founding of the Catholic Church after 300 A.D. a second view of the church appeared and was accepted by many. This view was that the true church is earthly and universal. Those that promoted the Protestant Reformation in the early 1500s, however, rejected much of the Baptist view of ecclesiology and even some of the Catholic view of ecclesiology. This new view presented the true New Testament church as universal and invisible. The choice of which view of ecclesiology one accepts, in fact, has

profound implications. Brother Odle's ministry was committed to presenting the Baptist position on this central issue.

While in Paducah, he and his father-in-law edited *The West Kentucky Baptist*, a regional Baptist Newspaper. Some of his writings were *It's a Great Life: Don't Miss It* (1967), *Is Christ Coming Soon?* (1971), *Why I Am a Baptist* (1972), *The Coming King* (1974), *The World's Greatest Coming Event* (1970), and *Church Member's Handbook*.

Joe T. Odle is quoted as saying, "I was young, inexperienced, idealistic and perhaps a bit brash. I wanted things to move fast and probably felt that I knew the way that they should move. God did give many glorious victories and the church did move forward."<sup>19</sup> Brother Odle's zeal for the Lord and the local nature of the true New Testament church never waned. He passed on March 24, 1980 at the age of 71. His impact on the Baptists in Kentucky and Baptists in general is still being felt today. The *Church Member's Handbook*, for example, is still in print.

*Don Houston is pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Paducah and immediate past president of the J. H. Spencer Historical Society.*

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<sup>19</sup> *The Mississippi Baptist* (August 1974).