

**Southern Baptists in West Virginia:
Our Mountain Heritage –
A Treasure That Matters**

State Missions Study 2004

“Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them to thy sons, and thy sons' sons” (Deuteronomy 4:9 KJV).

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The Early History of Baptists in West Virginia

As thousands of European immigrants pressed westward into the new country, they soon entered the Appalachian Mountains. The mountain range proved to be a formidable barrier to all but the most determined travelers, with no highways, just Indian trails and rivers, making travel challenging.

Fleeing the persecution, tyranny and intolerance they faced in Europe these early immigrants came to the Colony of Virginia. Soon they discovered that

As early as 1695 the Baptist faith was found in what is now called West Virginia.

the people in the Colony had set up their own intolerance and tyranny laws, taxing and meting out punishment for nonconformist. Looking for a place to freely worship God, it was only natural that the early founders of the Baptist faith in America would press westward, deeper into the mountains. History records as early as 1695, the “new lights” came to what is today called West Virginia.

These early Baptists kept few written records, being more interested in proclaiming the gospel than in writing history. However, some early church minutes and personal records of the early settlers do exist. Unfortunately these records disagree as to when and from where the early settlers entered the western part of the Virginia colony.

Some of the records show that the first Baptists arrived from Maryland in 1743, while others say they came from New England, led by Shubal Sterns. Still others note that about fifteen families came from New Jersey in 1742, settling in Middletown, Virginia, just across from what is now the eastern panhandle of West Virginia.

The Middletown group built a meeting place near Mill Creek and in 1742 constituted the church. In 1755 they called Reverend John Gerrard as pastor. He pastored the church until 1787. Due to internal strife over missions and paying the preacher, the church disbanded in 1868.

Since the state was blessed with numerous waterways, it was only natural that towns and Baptist churches would spring up along the rivers. In his book, West Virginia Baptist History: The Early Years: 1770-1865, Dr. Truett Rogers writes, “If one takes note of the Monongahela and New Rivers and their tributaries, it could easily be determined that the strength of Baptist work, past and present, is situated along these waters (1990, p.2).” Five years before the outbreak of the American Revolution, approximately 20,000 people lived within the area now known as West Virginia and the work of Baptists began to flourish, but not without difficulty.

By the early 1800’s, Baptists in northwestern Virginia were divided between the “Old School” and the “New School.” The “Old School” believers held that churches were not to pay preachers, engage in missions or have Sunday Schools. The “New School” believers held that churches were supposed to pay preachers, engage in and support missions, and have Sunday School.

While churches were started, struggled and grew, associations were also formed and grew. By 1844, the Western Virginia Association was formed and by 1850 this association had grown and formed an additional association called North Western Virginia Association. Its purpose was to “aid the General Association of Virginia in preaching the gospel to the feeble and destitute settlements in North Western Virginia” (Andes, p.2). Prior to the formation of these new associations, the region was surrounded on three sides by the Philadelphia and Ketockton associations.

Other than fleeing the intolerance of southern

Early Baptists were divided between the “Old School and the New School.”

Virginia, what motivated these early Baptists to settle in the area west of the Alleghenies? Rogers suggests four motivations that brought Baptists to our state (Rogers, 1990, p.3).

First, there was the evangelistic and missionary motivation on the part of individuals. Men like David Jones, a self-appointed evangelist-missionary from the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania traveled into the present Pittsburgh-Wheeling area and then moved down the Ohio River. Joining with George Rogers

Clark he conducted two preaching tours: May-September 1772 and October 1772-April 1773. He would soon be joined by others who sought to reach the Indians and whites.

In 1773-1774, itinerant preacher, Reverend John Taylor from Fauquier County, Virginia visited the Tigers (Tygarts) Valley in what is today Pocahontas County and found one-hundred families and only one Baptist woman among them. A year later he returned to the Tygart Valley and preached twice a day until “the people broke” (Rogers, 1990, p.4).

Early Baptists were motivated by:

- **Evangelism and missionary zeal**
- **Military service**
- **Organized associations**
- **Desire for land**

A second motivating reason bringing Baptists into the region was military service. For example, when the Forks of Cheat Church was formed with twelve members, four of the six male members were soldiers connected to the nearby fort.

A third motivating factor was the evangelistic and missionary motivation of organized Baptist associations. The Philadelphia and Ketchikan associations often granted letters of dismissal to churches in outlying areas in order to allow them to form new associations for convenience of travel and fellowship. The forming of new associations placed the work closer to the less inhabited frontier areas and added to the motivation to evangelize and organize Baptist work.

The final motivation was the desire for land. This applied not only to Baptists, but to all people of all walks of life. Beginning in 1763, with the defeat of the Indians during the “Pontiac’s Uprising,” people moved across the Appalachians declaring their “Tomahawk Rights”: the right of any and all land they could occupy and hold.

The free land in the Appalachians also served to bring about a spiritual decline. Robert Semple, writing in 1809, attempted to explain this when he wrote, “The opening of free trade by peace served as a powerful bait to entrap professors (Christians) who were in any great degree inclined to the pursuit of

wealth. ...Speculators seldom make warm Christians. Kentucky and the Western country took off many of the preachers who had once been exceedingly successful in the ministry.” Virginia also gave to every settler who built a log cabin and raised a crop of corn a title to 400 acres of land, making the motivation of land ownership even more powerful (Rogers 1990, p.6). His analysis is germane to the subject of the desire for land.

Consequently, Baptists, like many others, came to occupy land that was inexpensive, free or captured from the Native Americans. They were also motivated out of a sense of God’s calling, a ministry to the Indians, and a care for the souls of their own people. They performed that ministry by forming cooperative churches and associations with their eastern Baptist kin.

The Early Years of Southern Baptists in West Virginia

The birth of the Southern Baptist Convention

In 1740, a great revival swept through the American colonies and shortly thereafter Baptists began a period of rapid growth. The principal Baptist leaders in this revival were Shubal Stearns and Daniel Marshall, who were called Separate Baptists. In 1755, these two Baptist preachers from Connecticut and a few of their followers organized a church at Sandy Creek, North Carolina. During the next few years they preached zealously in all the southern colonies, stormed the new western frontier, and provided patterns of church life that Southern Baptists still follow.

After the close of the Revolutionary War, Baptists in the southern states continued to steadily grow during the remainder of the 1700s. A second great revival broke out among several denominations west of the Allegheny Mountains just at the turn of the century. Baptist churches in the South gained many new members as a result of this revival.

As Baptist churches in America grew, they, like their English Baptist forefathers, desired the larger fellowship and united strength for Christian tasks that could come only through joining hands. These desires led to the rapid growth of associations. The principle function of the associations was to provide

a larger fellowship and to allow counsel concerning common problems facing the churches. By common understanding, associations had no authority over the churches which affiliated with them.

Baptists at heart are a mission minded people and several events related to missions led to the birth of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. In 1755, the Philadelphia Association began a home missions program. This caused the Baptist churches to consider other ways to do mission work which would safeguard the authority of the churches.

One of these new methods came into being in 1792 when William Carey led in the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in England. Called the society method, the system made it possible for individuals to work together in missions or any other Christian task without surrendering any church authority. It also removed the churches from the supervision of the associations in missionary activity.

“Under this new plan, any Baptists interested in foreign missions could organize an independent society for foreign missions whose membership would consist of those who made a financial gift for foreign missions. Similarly, those Baptists interested in home missions could organize another independent society for that purpose, or another society could be organized in this way for any kind of Christian work. Massachusetts Baptists adopted such a plan in 1802. Within a decade, most of the associations had turned their missionary programs over to independent missionary societies.

“A larger challenge soon faced Baptists in America. In 1812, Adoniram and Ann Judson and Luther Rice sailed to India as missionaries for another denomination. En route, they studied the Bible and other books carefully, concluding that Baptist beliefs were closer to the New Testament teachings than their former views. All three were baptized in India. They desired to become missionaries for Baptists of the United States, but at this time there was no Baptist foreign mission society in the nation. Local societies were formed in the North and the South to meet the immediate needs of these new Baptist foreign missionaries.

“Then, on May 18, 1814, thirty-three messengers representing Baptists in America met at Philadelphia and formed a national foreign mission society called

the General Missionary Convention. Meeting only once every three years, this body was sometimes called the Triennial Convention. The Convention was organized on the society pattern (that is, organizing a separate society for each Christian ministry), although southern leaders sought for several years to change it into the associational type (that is, one denominational body fostering several different Christian ministries). Baptists in America formed a second society in 1824 for tract publication and distribution. In 1832, they organized a home mission society. Seemingly, these Baptists had permanently united on the society model for Christian work.

“When Baptists in this country formed the first of their three national societies in 1814, many of their leaders recognized that there were numerous social, cultural, economic, and political differences between the businessmen of the North, the farmers of the West, and the planters of the South. These differences had already brought much rivalry

between the several sections of the new nation. Each section continued to revive old colonial disagreements and wrestled with questions about how the new constitution should be interpreted, what constituted the final legal power, and similar problems.

“Perhaps most critical of all was the slavery issue. This practice

had been forced upon the colonies by England early in the seventeenth century against the protests of Northerners and Southerners. Northern merchants, however, soon sought the profit involved in importing slaves from Africa. Southern planters, the only ones able to use large numbers of unskilled laborers on large plantations in a relatively warm climate, helped to prolong this evil. At the height of this system, however, two-thirds of the white families of the South owned no slaves at all, and Baptists (who were generally of the lower economic status) were probably even less involved.

“The same moral blindness that caused a minority of northern businessmen to purchase and import slaves from Africa and finance their sale to southern planters was displayed in the South in continuing this evil institution. The same arguments concerning the right of secession from the federal union that were debated by the South in 1860 had been vigorously used by the northeastern states a generation earlier in the Hartford Convention. The same political frenzy that finally brought all of these

In 1792 William Carey launched the modern mission movement with the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society.

issues into civil conflict in 1861 dominated equally the New England merchant, the western farmer, and the southern planter.

“These tensions were already building at the very time when Baptists united in the three national societies for Christian work. Naturally, Baptist unity was affected by such tensions. Furthermore, the meetings of these societies between 1814 and 1845 revealed some basic differences in the thinking of northern and southern Baptists.

The Southern Baptist Convention was formed in Augusta, Georgia on May 10, 1845 at a gathering of 293 Baptist leaders representing 365,000 Baptists.

“Southern leaders, for one thing, desired a stronger denominational unity than the society plan afforded, but were unable to achieve it. In addition, just three years after the organization of the national home mission body in 1832, many Baptist leaders of the South openly urged the formation of a separate southern body for home missions. They believed that southern mission needs were not being met by the northern-based society. A separate southern home mission body was actually organized in 1839, but it died after three years. In his history of the Southern Baptist Convention, W. W. Barnes expressed the view that these differences between northern and southern Baptists would have brought separation eventually, even if there had been no slavery-abolition issue. However, when the "slave states" voted as a bloc in Congress (and particularly in the Senate), threatening to upset the political balance, the slavery issue became a political football as well as a moral issue.

“The meetings of the three Baptist national societies in the 1840s brought angry debates between Northerners and Southerners. These debates concerned the interpretation of the constitutions of the societies on slavery, the right of Southerners to receive missionary appointments, the authority of a denominational society to discipline church members, and the neglect of the South in the appointment of missionaries. The stage was set for separation.

“In 1844, Georgia Baptists asked the Home Mission Society to appoint a slaveholder to be a

missionary in Georgia. After much discussion, the appointment was declined. A few months later, the Alabama Baptist Convention asked the Foreign Mission Society if they would appoint a slaveholder as a missionary. When the society said no, Virginia Baptists called for Baptists of the South to meet at Augusta, Georgia, in early May, 1845, for the purpose of consulting "on the best means of promoting the Foreign Mission cause, and other interests of the Baptist denomination in the South."

“Thus, on May 8, 1845, about 293 Baptist leaders of the South gathered at the First Baptist Church, Augusta, Georgia, representing over 365,000 Baptists. They concluded, with expressions of regret from their own leaders and from distinguished northern Baptist leaders, that more could be accomplished in Christian work by the organization in the South of a separate Baptist body for missionary work. The Methodists in the South had already separated over the issue of slavery, and southern Presbyterians did so later.

“Southern Baptist leaders noted that Paul and Barnabas had disagreed over the use of John Mark in mission service, and "two lines of service were opened for the benefit of the churches." These leaders hoped that "with no sharpness of contention, with no bitterness of spirit . . . we may part asunder and open two lines of service to the heathen and the destitute."

“On May 10, 1845, the Southern Baptist Convention was provisionally organized under a new constitution, which was ratified the following year in Richmond, Virginia. In their address to the public, Convention president William B. Johnson and other Southern Baptist leaders pointed out that Baptists North and South were still brethren; that separation involved only the home and foreign mission societies and did not include the third national society for tract publication; and that this new organization would permit them to have a body that would be willing to appoint Southerners to home and foreign mission fields.

“At the 1845 meeting, Southern Baptists were faced not only with the question of whether to organize a separate body but also with the problem of what kind. Baptists like other denominations which give final authority to the local churches, have had difficulty in trying to form an effective general body without threatening the local authority. This was the reason that the association-type plan had been viewed with suspicion by some churches, resulting in the

adoption of the society plan for missionary and other Christian work.

The first recorded Southern Baptist work in this region was in 1857 when funds were allotted for mission work in Wheeling "to minister to the growing throngs of people involved in the Ohio River Traffic.

"In safeguarding the authority of the churches, however, the society plan made it difficult to secure unity and effectiveness in denominational work. Southern Baptists, at their meeting in 1845, deliberately rejected the method of having a separate society for each kind of Christian service. They chose instead to follow the more centralized pattern of the older associational plan to form only one general convention closely related to the churches for all Christian ministries. They felt they could provide safeguards in Convention operation that would protect the authority of the local churches. Rather than form independent societies for Christian ministries, Southern Baptists elected a board of managers to supervise foreign missions and another to supervise home missions, both under the authority of the Convention. Other boards for additional Christian ministries would be formed later by the Convention" (Baker).

Southern Baptists in West Virginia

Most of the Baptists churches in Virginia were part of the Baptist General Association of Virginia and became united with the new Southern Baptist Convention when it was formed in 1845. Then came the Civil War years and issues of church policy and slavery began to divide brothers, congregations, and the new convention. The nation was torn apart, emotions, and loyalties were divided, and the people of forty counties in northwestern Virginia decided to secede from the rest of Virginia and remain with the Union. West Virginia became a state on June 20, 1863.

In 1868, 249 Baptist churches in the new state of West Virginia withdrew from the Baptist General

Association of Virginia and formed their own association, Baptist General Association of West Virginia. Rogers notes that "a Southern Baptist representative was present at the formation" of the new state convention and "spoke kind words about the relationship between the two groups" (1994, p.9).

Rogers continues, "In the 1868 minutes is a reminder that the suggestion of both Northern and Southern Baptists in 1865 was that West Virginia should seek neither group but invite them both to help in any way they could. As a result, 'delegations have been received with pleasure from each of them. Some churches prefer to cooperate with one, other with another...' In 1871 the Executive Board reported that the Southern Baptist Convention had requested \$100.00 from the Baptist General Association of West Virginia. Given the small amount of the request, the feeling is that the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board simply wanted West Virginia to feel a part of their efforts, regardless of the amount given. No further explanation of the request is given" (Rogers 1994, p.9).

The first Southern Baptists mission work in West Virginia

In 1857 the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board (then known as the Board of Domestic Missions and later as the Home Mission Board) allocated funds for mission work in Wheeling to minister to the growing throngs of people involved in the Ohio River traffic.

As the new Convention began to develop, and the issues surrounding the Civil War evolved, many southern areas of West Virginia continued to feel more "southern" than "northern." Soon it was obvious that some West Virginia Churches wished to unite completely with the Southern Baptist Convention. Yet, in 1884 the "Foreign Mission Report of the General Association indicated that 'West Virginia's cooperation has mainly been with the American Baptist Missionary Union and not the Southern Baptist Convention.' The following year a resolution was passed asking for a committee to be appointed to try and organize one national Baptist body (in West Virginia), including the Northern and Southern Baptists" (Rogers 1994, p.9). However, no further note of any action or effort in this direction was made and thus nothing ever materialized.

The speech that changed Baptist history in West Virginia

In 1880 the Baptist General Association of West Virginia met in Huntington. The aged and honored Matthew Ellison wished to swing West Virginia Baptists to the Southern Baptist Convention. Rogers writes, quoting Rev. G. W. Lasher, "Our brethren in the Old Dominion (Baptist General Association of Virginia) were peculiarly anxious to bring about a change of relations; and so, on that occasion, Rev. Dr. H. A. Tupper, Secretary of the Foreign Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, came over to look in upon the brethren, and do what he might for the furtherance of the relationship. When the opportunity was offered, he delivered such an address as only a man such as Dr. Tupper could deliver. He was one of the most cultured of men. He was suave and eloquent. His language was chaste and beautiful, and he had many good things to say of the work being done by the Southern Baptist Board, especially in Mexico. I thought I had rarely or never heard so beautifully constructed and delivered address. After he sat down, 'Father' Ellison got up and made a few remarks, bearing upon the question of the relations of the body to the Southern Board.

West Virginia as a state has never been without a Southern Baptist Church.

"Then it came the turn of Rev. Thomas Allen, representative of the A. B. Missionary Union, headquarters in Boston. No two men could be much more unlike in their manner and mode of address, though they had been fellow-students at Colgate University. Brother Allen was straightforward, brusque, and forceful, with no oratorical ornaments or smooth sentences. But he carried his hearers. He told of the work being done by the society which he represented, and when he had finished, the address of Dr. Tupper had been forgotten. No further reference whatever was made to it."

Rogers concludes, "Thus, the references to Southern Baptists in the official records of the Baptist General Association of West Virginia fade slowly, eventually disappearing altogether. The wonder is, not that there was an effort to maintain ties with Southern Baptists, but that the exertion was no more than it proved to be" (Rogers 1994, p.10).

The Formative Years of Southern Baptists in West Virginia

West Virginia has always had a Southern Baptist church

In 1907 the Northern Baptist Convention, now known as the American Baptist Convention, was formed and most of the Baptist churches in West Virginia placed their affiliation with this new convention. A few of the churches along the borders remained Southern Baptists and affiliated with the nearest state Southern Baptist Convention.

Records indicate that churches in Charles Town, Martinsburg, and Princeton, West Virginia continued their affiliation with the Baptist General Association of Virginia and the Southern Baptist Convention. Thus, as a state, West Virginia has never been without churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

These churches started others so that by 1958 the Baptist General Association of Virginia reported twenty-four churches in West Virginia that were affiliated with them. During this period, nine more churches were organized in West Virginia through the efforts of Southern Baptist churches in Kentucky and Ohio. This brought the total of Southern Baptist churches in the state to thirty-three¹, all of whom were cooperating with associations in Ohio, Kentucky, and Virginia by early 1958.

The first modern era missionary arrives

The Baptist General Association of West Virginia, affiliated with the American Baptist Convention continued to grow and by 1960 had 739 churches and approximately 130,000 members in West Virginia, making it the strongest state for the American Baptist Convention. Due to this strength and the strong presence of other Baptist groups in West Virginia, the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention Home Mission Board (now called the North American Mission Board), felt it unwise to do any active promotion of mission work in West Virginia. But with the expansion of Southern Baptists in states surrounding West Virginia and with this expansion now reaching into the state, the Home Mission Board felt it was time to place a missionary

¹ Some records reflect thirty-two churches

in the state, one who could give direction to this expansion.

In 1958, the Home Mission Board employed John I. Snedden as area superintendent of missions in West Virginia. The Ohio, Kentucky, and Virginia state conventions gave him some financial support.

Snedden was a native of Athens, Ohio, and following his college years in South Carolina, felt God leading him to participate in answering his own prayers that God would send someone to “preach gospel truths” in his home area. In 1949 Snedden accepted the call to become half-time pastor of each of the only two Baptist churches in his home county in Ohio.

On January 1, 1953 the First Baptist Church of Athens, Ohio was established and Snedden was called to be the pastor. During his three years there he preached revivals and conducted funerals and weddings for people who came from the Appalachian

In 1958, there were 33 churches in West Virginia that were affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, all of whom were cooperating with the Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky conventions. The churches affiliated with Maryland Convention are not included in this total.

area of southeastern Ohio. During this time First Baptist Church became the mother church of several new churches in Pennsylvania and West Virginia – Evangel Baptist Church, Weirton; Temple Baptist Church, Moundsville; and Grace Baptist Church, Parkersburg. God was using these experiences to prepare Snedden for the work ahead.

The organization begins

During the 1950’s, God began to bring Baptist pastors together in West Virginia who desired to see the Southern Baptist Convention grow within the

state. Kendall Hatton, Harvey English, Tom Toler, and Bob Young, Sr.² were some of the early pastors who paved the way. They laid a strong foundation for the work in West Virginia.

At the same time these men were meeting and sharing beliefs and dreams, Dr. Toler and the church

In 1958, the first modern era missionary came to West Virginia when the Home Mission Board employed John I. Snedden as area superintendent of missions in West Virginia. The Ohio, Kentucky, and Virginia state conventions gave him some financial support.

he was pastoring, the Witcher Baptist Church, became dissatisfied with their affiliation with the American Baptist Convention. In September 1957 they were received into the Scioto Valley Baptist Association in Ohio.

Earlier in 1956, an unofficial committee consisting of Tom Toler, Harvey English, and Kendall Hatton made a trip to Athens, Ohio to meet with Dr. Ray Roberts, the Executive Secretary of Southern Baptists in Ohio. They talked with him about efforts to get the West Virginia work recognized. The other state conventions surrounding West Virginia had commitments that prevented them from helping at that time; however, Ohio Baptists listened and gave a helping hand.

During this time, Dr. Solomon E. Dowis, Director of the Cooperative Missions Department of the Home Mission Board was preaching a revival at South Toledo Baptist Church, Toledo, Ohio where Snedden was also leading the music. Dr. Roberts traveled to Toledo and discussed with Dowis the possibility of Snedden’s serving as Area Superintendent of Missions in West Virginia.

Dr. Dowis suggested that Snedden serve in southeastern Ohio for a while and then move to West

² His son Tom Young now serves with the West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists state staff.

Virginia to serve that entire state as Area Superintendent of Missions. Dowis stated, “There are about thirty Southern Baptist churches already in West Virginia, and we think it will not be long before enough churches can be established to organize a state convention” (Andes, p.7).

After serving for thirteen months in southeastern Ohio as the area Superintendent of Missions, Snedden was elected by the Home Mission Board to become the Area Superintendent of Missions in West Virginia. He started on February 1, 1958.

The Southern Baptist Convention and the West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists are not affiliated with the National Council of Churches or the World Council of Churches, nor do they support them in any way.

The Birth of the West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists

Early efforts of Unification

During the year of 1958, Southern Baptist leaders in West Virginia recognized that there were four main groups of people among whom the work would be focused. The first group was composed of the existing Southern Baptist affiliated churches and missions. The second group was Christian people who had no church home and no basic doctrinal beliefs. There was a shared concern that this group be reached as quickly as possible before the various cults could draw them into their folds. The third group was the large number of lost people in West Virginia. Snedden wrote in November 1960, “It is the purpose of Southern Baptists to ‘reach the unreached,’ and there are enough of them for everybody.” He continues, “According to some recently published figures, 66% of West Virginia’s population is unchurched. That means nearly one and one-quarter million of the state’s nearly two-million population are not members of any church.

There are many communities without a Baptist witness, even entire counties.”³

The fourth group was other Baptists; American Baptists, National Baptists, and Independent Baptists to name a few of the Baptist groups. It was inevitable that Southern Baptists would come in contact with these latter groups. The leadership believed that it was essential that the relationships and contacts be on the highest ethical standing. Snedden wrote “that these people are our brothers and sisters in Christ and regardless of differences in approach and beliefs must be respected as such” (Andes, p.13). While Southern Baptists faced criticism and accusations from this group, they responded with openness, honesty, and Christian love.

In part this criticism came because Southern Baptists are more conservative in theology than their northern counterparts and more revivalistic in methodology. The Southern Baptist Convention is the only major Evangelical denomination not affiliated with the National Council of Churches or the World Council of Churches.

Quickly the work moved forward. In 1958 A. B. Cash with the Home Mission Board conducted the first state fellowship meeting. In 1959 the West Virginia Pastors’ Fellowship was organized to lay the foundation for a state convention. Snedden reported in November 1960, “From January 1, 1958 to the present, Southern Baptists have grown in West Virginia by some twelve churches and fifteen missions. Four of the missions have fallen by the wayside, leaving a net gain of eleven missions. Southern Baptists now have forty-seven churches and thirteen missions in West Virginia which are affiliated with nine associations and three State Conventions. Two new associations and a statewide Pastor’s Conference have been organized during this period.”

In 1962 a missions committee was elected with Alton McEachern from Huntington as chairman. The committee was to “devise, develop, and promote a limited program of ... mission work ... on a state basis” (Woolley, p.2046).

³ In 2004 West Virginia has 1.8 million people, 1.2 million are unchurched or 7 out of 10 West Virginians. There are still counties and many towns in West Virginia without a Southern Baptist witness.

In October 1958 the Pioneer Baptist Association was organized as the first association in the new emerging state convention. By 1966 four district associations were organized and fifty-four churches were affiliated with the up-and-coming work.

Days of Struggle

Francis Tallant writes in Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists Volume III. “The year of 1966 was set for constituting by agency and state leaders in a meeting at Ridgecrest in August 1963. Early in 1966 it became evident that the fellowship would fail to reach two of the guidelines for constituting into a convention at the date set⁴. At the suggestion of the Home Mission Board, the missions committee postponed constituting, and instead set up a prototype state convention organization in order to enlarge its work better. This resulted in a new name – Baptist General Association of West Virginia – a new constitution, and an enlarged budget with 50 percent to the state with which the church was affiliated – Kentucky, Ohio, or Virginia. Of all undesignated gifts, 20 percent was sent to the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee for worldwide causes.

“A large residence in a good location in St. Albans was rented to serve as a state office building, and a full-time secretary was employed and asked to also serve as financial secretary. An executive board was elected, as provided for in the new constitution. Through this organization all phases of the work were promoted by means of conventions, clinics, conferences, and other state meetings. By the end of the year the work grew until it was necessary to employ a second full-time secretary and a part-time Woman’s Missionary Union director.

“The work was divided into three departments: Missions, Religious Education and WMU. The Missions Department was directed by John Snedden. Added to this department was the responsibility of evangelism and men’s work. Francis Tallant was the director of the Religious Education Department. Besides the regular church programs, this department

⁴ From the associational reports in the fall of 1965 it was determined that 40 churches with a total membership of 8,848 were committed to joining the new convention.

was responsible for the stewardship promotion and the publishing of the state paper. The director served as editor. Mrs. Elmo Cox served as part-time director of the WMU and assisted in other phases of the state work as a special worker. This organization and program of work did much in the progress and growth toward a state convention in 1970” Woolley, p. 2046).

A New Convention is born

By the fall of 1968 the work was growing with 11,000 members in forty-three churches, still they were seven churches and 1,500 members short of having enough to constitute as a state convention. The years of 1968 and 1969 were years filled with anticipation and dreams as the leadership pressed forward, always just short of the goal. However, the growth was good enough so that they could see that 1970-71 would be the year that all would see the fruits from the seeds planted over the previous twelve years.

The West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists was constituted on October 29, 1970 at Witcher Baptist Church with 52 churches and 13,648 members.

Added to the renewed hopes of constituting was a sense of urgency to do so. The Baptist General Association organization had helped to unify the churches to some extent. There was still fragmentation and overlapping of programs as a result of the three state conventions promoting their programs in these same West Virginia churches affiliated with them. It was also a frustrating, but essential fact that since the Baptist General Association was not recognized as a convention, most of the services and materials needed to promote a unified program had to come through one or more of the other state conventions involved.

“At its annual meeting on October 31, 1969, the Baptist General Association voted to constitute itself into a state convention at its next regular meeting. The date was set for October 29-30, 1970, at Witcher Baptist Church, Belle. A new spirit was felt by the messengers as they were instructed by the executive board to proceed with necessary arrangements for constituting. The necessary plans were made including constitution, budget, and program adjustments for the new convention” (Woolley, p.2046). The structure and program would remain essentially the same because the general association had already been working as a prototype convention. The new name would be the ‘West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists.’”

Rain greeted the dawning of Thursday, October 29, 1970 and continued throughout the day. However it did not dampen the spirits of the messengers and visitors who filled the sanctuary of Witcher Baptist Church for the constituting services.

The service began with the youth choir of Pioneer Baptist Association under the direction of Phil Tallant. The music during the worship services was lead by Cliff Holcomb with the Music Department in Nashville. Wellington Johnson, a member of First Baptist Church, Fairlea read the scripture and led in prayer. Tom Lang gave the president's message in which he listed the past accomplishments and then emphasized the challenge before the people and churches of West Virginia to fulfill the theme "Give Me This Hill Country."

At the appropriate time Elmo Cox read the recommendation of the Executive Board of the Baptist General Association of West Virginia to constitute into a convention and made the motion. No hand was raised, no voice vote was taken – everyone stood up making the vote unanimous. The West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists became the 33rd State Convention in the Southern Baptist Convention. Fifty-two churches and 13,648 members affiliated with the newly formed convention.

Following the organization procedures, Dr. W. C. Fields, Public Relations Director of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention brought the key message, "The Future Is Now."

The need for Southern Baptist church plants in West Virginia has never been greater. In order to have one Southern Baptist church for every 2,000 unchurched persons, there is a need for 399 new church starts. Key cities and towns as well as Clay and Ritchie Counties still do not have a Southern Baptist witness.

In the 2002/2003 church year it took 28 resident West Virginia Southern Baptists to reach and baptize 1 lost person, for an average of 4 baptisms per church or mission.

West Virginia Southern Baptists in the Twenty-first Century

A Glance at the last Thirty-four Years

The years following the organization of and constitution of the West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists have been both challenging and rewarding. The birth of the convention came at a time of economic depression as major industries left the state taking with them masses of people. This impacted local, established churches and has made the planting of new works difficult.

Yet, with determination West Virginia Southern Baptists have pressed forward. From the dream and passion of a few men to establish a Southern Baptist Convention and from that platform empower and work with local churches to reach those who were unsaved and then disciple them, the convention has progressed.

Today the West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists is composed of 10 associations, 166 churches and 26 missions made up of 30,790 members and 23,308 resident members. Currently 14, 596 people are enrolled in Bible study with a weekly average of 7,989. Each week 12,001 people attend a Southern Baptist church. During the 2002/2003 church year 835 followed the Lord in baptism. An additional 771 people joined by either statement or transfer of letter. Nevertheless, there is still much work to be done.

In the 2002/2003 church year it took twenty-eight (28) resident West Virginia Southern Baptists to reach and baptize one (1) lost person, for an average of four (4) baptisms per church or mission.

5 Distinguishing characteristics of Baptist:

- **Authority of the Scriptures**
- **Baptism by immersion for believers**
- **Autonomy of the local church**
- **Priesthood of all believers**
- **Separation of church and state/Religious liberty**

The Challenges Facing West Virginia Southern Baptists

Dr. Truett Rogers, in his history of Baptists in West Virginia lists three characteristics that made Baptists a significant body by 1865 in spite of the Civil War. It was these characteristics that resulted in one (1) Baptist to every fifty (50) people in the state (Rogers 1990, p.164-167). These characteristics will serve West Virginia Southern Baptists well as we move into the twenty-first century.

First, Baptist development in West Virginia came through a strong mind-set of evangelistic fervor. While others came preaching, Baptists came planting – church planting! The need for Southern Baptist church plants in West Virginia has never been greater. In order to have one Southern Baptist church for every 2,000 unchurched persons, there is a need for 399 new church starts. Key cities and towns as well as Clay and Ritchie Counties still do not have a Southern Baptist witness. After 200 years of a continuous Baptist witness, West Virginia is still a mission field with over 1.2 million unchurched people – men, women, teenagers, boys and girls. This represents seven out of every ten West Virginians.

A second characteristic of Baptist work in West Virginia is that Baptists developed along the organizational lines of churches and associations. The associational unit of Baptist work was especially effective in West Virginia where the geography grouped people and churches in rather defined areas. The mountainous terrain and the weather of the state make it difficult for people to travel great distances to

attend meetings. Therefore a cooperative, continuous program for the various churches of an association necessitated geographic availability as well as theological compatibility and fraternal friendships. The passing of years has not lessened the importance of associations. As Southern Baptists establish new churches and work to assist and strengthen existing churches, the importance of associations will only be reinforced.

A third characteristic developed along the doctrinal lines of the churches, associations, and state conventions preceding them. The theological distinctions that unite people called Baptists are the Bible as the sole authority for rule and practice; baptism by immersion of believers; the autonomy of the local church; the priesthood of all believers; and the separation of church and state and religious liberty. Even as these doctrinal distinctives united West Virginia Baptists 150 years ago, they must unite Southern Baptists as they move into a new century.

A fourth characteristic we need to emphasize is one that sets Southern Baptists apart from other Baptist groups in the state, Cooperative Program Missions. Since its launch in 1925, the effectiveness of Cooperative Program Missions has been dependent upon individuals, churches, state conventions, and SBC entities cooperating, working toward a common goal of sharing the gospel with every person on the planet.

Cooperative Program Missions enables churches in West Virginia to join together to support ministries and missions. Cooperative Program Missions allows West Virginia Baptists to join in evangelism efforts, volunteer missions, missions education, new churches, colleges and universities, collegiate ministries, camps, and much more. Cooperative Program Missions enables West Virginia Baptists to join with other Southern Baptists in missions across North America and around the world.

Four Characteristics that make Southern Baptists a significant body in West Virginia:

- **Evangelistic fervor**
- **Associational work**
- **Conservative**
- **Cooperative Program Missions**

5 Key things we must do as West Virginia Southern Baptists:

- **We must pray**
- **We must reach the 1.2 million lost and unchurched West Virginians**
- **We must plant new churches**
- **We must give sacrificially, willingly, and liberally**
- **We must go, taking the gospel into the entire world.**

The Future is Now

Reflecting upon organizing a new state convention in West Virginia, Snedden wrote in 1960, "A great economic depression in the expansive coalfields of the interior of the state makes it quite difficult to begin work there. Since there are few churches strong enough to give support necessary in such a mission endeavor, heartbreaking though it is, it is necessary to neglect the underprivileged area until churches in the stronger economic areas can be developed which can support a mission program in areas less fortunate."

Since those words were written the economic conditions across the state have worsened, but that should not discourage West Virginia Southern Baptists. Like Caleb of old, we must determine by God's power to take the mountains (Joshua 14:12). While the people who live in the mountains are a rugged, stalwart people who are noted for their rugged individualism, they are a people who need Jesus. Whether they live in the progressive areas of the Eastern panhandle, along the Interstates, in small isolated towns, or up in the hollows, they need to hear the gospel. We should not rest until every West Virginian has repeatedly heard the gospel and has a Southern Baptist church within driving distance.

While we face an insurmountable task with limited resources, a harsh terrain, and a host of other issues, West Virginians working together, by God's grace and power, can overcome every obstacle and reach the mountains with the gospel.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! (Isaiah 52:7 KJV).

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! (Romans 10:14-15 KJV).

Becoming Involved

The future of the West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists has never been brighter. If we are to reach the state for Christ there are five key things we must do.

First, we must pray. We must pray for lost family members, friends, and neighbors (2 Thessalonians 3:2; 1 Timothy 2:1-4). We must pray for our churches and our pastors. We must pray for God to send forth laborers into the harvest field (Matthew 9:35-38). We must pray.

Second, we must reach the lost and disciple them. With over 1.2 million lost people in West Virginia, we live in a mission field (John 4:35). As West Virginians we must take the gospel into every city and town, up every hollow, and into every community (Luke 19:10; 2 Peter 3:9; John 3:16). Then we must involve them in small group weekly Bible studies where they can learn the Word of God (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 2:42-47).

Third, we must plant new churches across the state. The need for 399 new church starts seems impossible unless we recognize that we are engaged in God's work and nothing is impossible with Him (Luke 1:37). We can pray that God will call out men and women who will be willing and obedient to make the sacrifices necessary to start new works and Bible studies, men who will serve as bi-vocational pastors, and men and women who will go to the difficult areas and plant new works.

Fourth, we must give. We must give sacrificially, liberally, and willingly. We must give out of a heart of gratitude. We must live like the Macedonias of old who gave out of their deep poverty (2 Corinthians 8 and 9). We must give to address the physical needs within the state; we must give so that others can go. We must give to finance the work of God in this state.

Fifth, we must go (Acts 1:8). We cannot depend on others to do what God has called us to do (John 20:21). Every West Virginian can become involved in some type of missions. Some can serve in short-term volunteer service, while others can answer the call to career missions. Others can serve where they are as volunteers. Others can pray and serve as encouragers. All of us can serve, all of us can go.

“West Virginia needs the gospel witness. Some areas are suffering economic destitution, but this cannot compare with the deep spiritual destitution seen in so many places. It is a veritable mission field. Southern Baptists have an opportunity and a responsibility here. The people are seeking satisfaction for deep spiritual hunger, some from the cults and other unscriptural ways, and others by going deeper into sin.

“As God empowers and leads, Southern Baptists can and will establish more new places in West Virginia where the gospel can be preached ... and win many thousands of the unsaved of this needy state to the Lord Jesus Christ.” These words, written thirty-four years ago by John Snedden, still ring true today. Two years later he wrote, “The message of the Gospel must be carried to every hungry, sin-ridden heart. This brethren, is our task. We can do it. ‘If God be for us, who can be against us.’”

“Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons” (Deuteronomy 4:9 KJV).

This, West Virginia Baptists, is our task. The message of the Gospel must be carried to every hungry, sin-ridden heart. We can do it. “If God be for us, who can be against us” (Romans 8:31 KJV).

(For a more detailed history of the West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists read [Go Tell It On The Mountain: A History of the First 25 Years of the West Virginia Conventions of Southern Baptists.](#))

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Appendix 2

WEST VIRGINIA CONVENTION OF SOUTHERN BAPTISTS								
					Other	Total	Resident	Bible Study
Year	Chapels	Churches	Total	Baptisms	Additions	Membership	Membership	Enrollment
1970	11	51	62	619		13187	13187	8729
1975	12	54	66	958		15699	15699	9286
1980	27	72	99	830	827	20144	15803	11669
1985	28	83	111	832	967	26494	20651	7446
1990	17	124	141	764	883	30075	22573	8995
1991	18	127	145	992	1013	31196	23404	14879
1992	20	130	150	935	963	31768	23061	15870
1993	21	133	154	965	1067	31812	23175	17370
1994	23	139	162	989	1215	33688	23699	17487
1995	22	148	170	1000	1035	32240	24029	17518
1996	16	157	173	1081	1051	33351	25586	18376
1997	21	159	180	1174	944	32898	24932	18452
1998	28	157	185	1259	1029	33259	25093	17960
1999	25	161	186	1122	971	32388	24462	16274
2000	29	157	186	1004	888	32027	23349	15990
2001	29	157	186	890	802	31561	23425	15490
2002	29	153	182	969	693	30790	21624	15580
2003	29	166	195	835	771	30790	23308	14596

Data taken from the Annual Church Profile