

WRITING ALABAMA BAPTIST HISTORY: USING THE BAPTIST HISTORICAL COLLECTION

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The Baptist Historical Collection, sponsored by the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission and located in the Special Collection Department, Samford University Library, holds a wealth of resources for persons researching church and associational history. These tools for research and writing are varied. They include church records, association records, convention annuals, books, periodicals, and more.

In addition to the items one might traditionally use in such a project, the collection houses other sources. Oral histories, manuscripts and diaries of pastors and laymen, state and local histories, newspapers, and biographies await the writer. Information about the county, region, state, and nation helps place congregations in the total historical perspective.

The collection, open to the public, is ever growing and changing. For more than thirty years, preserving and collecting denominational history and heritage has been a primary goal and reason for existence of the collection. The treasures deposited there by many individuals, churches, and institutions allow the researcher a wide variety of sources and choices as to what and how he will write. The Special Collection Department also houses many other collections in addition to materials related to specific Baptist historical materials.

CHURCH RECORDS

Church records are the primary source for writing a church history. Records of over seven hundred Alabama churches are available for study and review in Special Collection. Church records containing rules of decorum, date of constitution of the church, listing of charter members, minutes of conference (business) meetings, financial records, and membership rolls provide a chronicle of a church's history. Writers of church history who have access to complete records are fortunate. In Special Collection, we often hear: "Our church records burned," "Our records have been lost," or "Our records aren't complete." The innovative and diligent writer will do in-depth research to compensate for missing or inadequate church records.

Reading the records of a neighboring or mother church will often reveal significant facts. For example, 1826 records of Old Salem Baptist Church, Mexia, Alabama, state: "[The Church] agreed that Brother Ellis receive and baptise persons at the new meeting house on Limestone Creek in behalf of this church." Limestone is now First Baptist Church, Monroeville, and members observed their 160th anniversary in November 1986.

ASSOCIATION RECORDS

Association records are excellent sources of church history information. Serious efforts to collect and preserve association records have been a priority of the Special Collection Department since its inception in 1957. Available for research are more than 7,500 Alabama minutes, the most comprehensive collection on record.

Association records generally record the proceedings of the annual meeting. Significant church data can be gleaned from a careful study of association minutes. When a church joins an association, the body presents a petitionary letter and sometimes there will be a phrase, "newly constituted." Statistical tables provide a wealth of historical information on churches and individuals: pastors, clerks, treasurers, Sunday School superintendents, delegates (messengers), and membership statistics. Memorial and obituary tributes provide biographical information about pastors and other prominent association workers.

THE ALABAMA BAPTIST AND OUT-OF-STATE BAPTIST PAPERS

The Alabama Baptist and its predecessors with variant titles, 1843 to present, are available. News about preachers, churches, associations, local and state events, as well as candid items reviewing doctrinal disputes are recorded in the pages of *The Alabama Baptist*. To facilitate the use of the paper, detailed indexes are available for

issues 1843-1888, and 1958 to date. Use of that weekly denominational paper should be a high priority for researchers.

In addition to our own state paper, we have extensive runs of forty-nine (titles) out-of-state Baptist newspapers. These can be useful for obtaining biographical information on pastors who have moved from Alabama and those coming to Alabama.

STATE CONVENTION ANNUALS

The Alabama Baptist State Convention *Annals*, 1823 to date, are available. The *Annals*, indexed for 1823-1875, record meeting proceedings. Since 1905 associations are listed with individual churches and include statistical details. A listing of ministers with addresses provides information as to where a pastor is serving in a particular year. Death dates are often included in convention annuals.

MANUSCRIPTS

Manuscript holdings are an important segment of the resources available in Special Collection. Holdings include papers of several early convention leaders: James H. DeVotie, Basil Manly and William Carey Crane. These papers provide data about early churches and people in Alabama and in the Southern Baptist Convention. The results of the 1908 Survey of Alabama Baptist Churches give information about churches - constituting dates, charter members, kind of buildings; etc. Another valuable collection is the American Sunday School Union Papers, 1817-1915. The papers chronicle development of Sunday Schools, often citing dates when work was started, funding, membership, and so on.

PRINTED EPHEMERA

Extensive vertical files for churches, associations, and people are preserved. These include clipping, church anniversary programs, historical sketches, and biographical information on ministers. Papers prepared by students of Dr. James H. Chapman are among the contents of the vertical file collection.

PUBLISHED BAPTIST HISTORIES

Perusing published church history can give the writer ideas about format, printing, and so on. In addition, biographical facts and related information can be obtained from published histories. An attempt is being made to secure a copy of each published Alabama church and association history for the Special Collection.

ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is an innovative way to gather the history of a church, an association, a community, and/or any individual. The interviews, housed in the Baptist Collection, tell the story of leaders and lay persons, church members, laborers and professional. The transcribed interviews give a personal perspective that written history does not always reflect. Researchers are encouraged to use these interviews that are already in file and learn the techniques of conducting and recording oral history interviews in order to save the special heritage of their own church or area and make such information available for future researchers.

SECULAR NEWSPAPERS

Special Collection has numerous Alabama newspaper holdings. These are rich in church news and should be consulted by Baptist researchers.

ALABAMA HISTORY

Special Collection has as a part of its collecting policy the development of an Alabama history collection. Included in the collection are county, city, and state histories that provide historical data about Baptist churches and the membership of those churches.

BAPTIST HISTORY

Writers of church history should be aware of the importance of historical developments among Baptists. Special Collection houses a comprehensive collection relating to the Baptist denomination. Materials are available that will bring issues and events into perspective.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Always a challenge to the writers of Baptist history is the collecting of biographical information on pastors. Several publications are available for this purpose: Lasher, Graham, Ramond, Wilks, Cathcart, Sprague, and Hayes. Another source of such information is census records. These records provide data concerning pastors and members of the congregation of the church.

PHOTOGRAPHS

A collection of photographs has been assembled in the Special Collection Department and includes churches, pastors, individuals, baptismal scenes, convention scenes, and so on. Capabilities for reproducing photographs from books, *The Alabama Baptist*, and other materials, are available in the department.

HOWARD COLLEGE/SAMFORD UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Many of the pastors of Alabama churches attended Howard College (now Samford University). Some information about the students is available from student records and campus publications that might be helpful to church historians.

MICROFILMING

As already stated, recorded in the pages of church records is much of the history of a church and its people. Every church should preserve historical documents on microfilm. The Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, in cooperation with Samford University Library, provides a simple and efficient microfilm procedure without charge to the church. For additional information, contact personnel of the Special Collection Department, Samford University Library, telephone (205) 726-2749. The mailing address is Special Collection Department, Samford University, 800 Lakeshore Drive, Birmingham, Alabama 35229.

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