From Rogers to Netherton:
A Heritage of Baptist Presidents
The Fourth: Dr. Matthew Hillsman

“Dr. Hillsman was the finest reader of the Scriptures I ever heard. His chapel lessons were Scripture readings, generally from Proverbs, with a word of comment, and every reading was equal to a sermon.”

This quotation came from an unidentified professor who served under Hillsman during his brief presidency at Mossy Creek Baptist College. Although only here from 1857-1859, the above eulogy speaks volumes about one of Tennessee’s finest Baptist servants.

One of eleven children, Hillsman was born to John and Rebecca Hillsman near Knoxville, TN on August 7, 1814. His father was a veteran of the American Revolution and had witnessed Cornwallis’ surrender at Yorktown, VA in 1781. John went on to become active in Baptist life. He was moderator when Knoxville Baptist Church was first organized and tradition has him receiving the first baptism witnessed in Knoxville. It was conducted by Elijah Rogers in August, 1825.

Matthew studied at East Tennessee College which later became the University of Tennessee. In 1832 at the age of 19, he made a “profession of religion” and was baptized by Elder Samuel Love at Third Creek Church. In the spring of 1833, the church approved Hillsman to “exercise a public gift in preaching, prayer and exhortation in any of the sister churches” in the area.

On January 28, 1834, Hillsman married Ann Eliza Mynatt of Knox County and they would become the parents of eight children. In June of the following year, he was ordained by Bethel Church in Anderson County. This was to begin a career of lifelong Baptist ministry.

Autumn of 1835 found Hillsman traveling to Talladega, AL. For the next eighteen months he served the young Baptist community there, pastoring and preaching. In 1837 he returned to Tennessee and set up a mercantile business in Ross’s Landing, present day Chattanooga. He continued preaching and worked for both
Baptists and Presbyterians in the ever-growing Chattanooga area.

From 1843-1849 he was active in pastoring several churches in middle Tennessee: Fairfield, New Hope, McMinnville, Winchester, Mulberry, and Shelbyville. In 1849 he went to Murfreesboro and would stay there until 1852.

In 1852 Hillsman began pastoring the First Baptist Church in Knoxville, a position he would hold until 1858. During this time he started and edited the Baptist Watchman, a paper for East Tennessee Baptists. In 1857, it appears he began providing leadership and teaching in the areas of logic, rhetoric, moral science, and ancient languages for Mossy Creek Baptist College after the departure of president Samuel Anderson late in the year. On May 21, 1858 he was officially named president. Continuing his bi-vocational practice, he also preached in Knoxville, Morristown, and New Market.

In 1859 Hillsman left Mossy Creek and became the Corresponding Secretary of the Bible Board in Murfreesboro. He then moved on to pastor in Jackson until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1862.

At this point, in February of 1862, Hillsman began twenty-one years of pastoring in the Trenton area. The churches he ministered to were Trenton, Poplar Grove, and Hickory Grove, the last of which he served twenty-six years.

While always active in preaching, Hillsman continued to serve Tennessee Baptists in other capacities as well. For twenty-seven years (1853-61, 1866-1883) he was vice president of the state’s Foreign Mission Board. In 1870, Union University recognized his work and awarded him the Doctor of Divinity. Burnett notes that he also served as moderator of the Central and Tennessee Baptist Associations and was president of the West Tennessee Baptist Convention and its Board of Missions. In addition, he served as president of the Tennessee Baptist Convention in 1882.

His interest in Baptist education went beyond the two years he spent at Mossy Creek. He was a trustee at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and served on the committee responsible for choosing Louisville, KY as its new location. He was also on the committee that presented the organizational plan for the establishment of Southwestern Baptist University.

After a long life of service, Hillsman died in October of 1892 and was buried in Trenton, TN.


After extensive planning and eager anticipation, Carson-Newman is proud and excited to be in the midst of celebrating 150 years of Baptist higher education. A variety of events and programs have been planned. Among them are: the dedication of the Memorial Bench and Time Capsule, Campus Birthday Party, the On Eagles’ Wings pageant, and Gala. On September 13, Walter B. Shurden gave the annual
Carlyle Marney lecture sponsored by the Center for Baptist Studies.

We are grateful for the countless hours spent by President Netherton, Carolyn Blevins, Chair of the Sesquicentennial Steering Committee, the Sesquicentennial Subcommittees, and all those who have contributed to making this year one to remember.

Baptist History Resources: The Baptist Style for a New Century Pamphlet Series


For ordering information please contact the Baptist History and Heritage Society. Contact information is on the back of this newsletter.

Carson-Newman to Host Annual Baptist History and Heritage Society Meeting

Carson-Newman will proudly host the Baptist History and Heritage Society’s annual meeting June 20-22, 2002. If you missed this year’s meeting at First Baptist Church, Pensacola, FL, make plans to attend next year here in Tennessee. For more information contact Charles W. Deweese, Executive Director-Treasurer at (800) 966 - 2278. (Email: cdeweese@tnbaptist.org) or Dr. Mel Hawkins, Editor, Baptist History & Heritage at (865) 471 – 3246 (Email: mhawkins@cn.edu). Hope to see you there!

Baptist Archives Annual Report
(July 1, 2000 – June 30, 2000)

Accessions: 4

Patrons: 57 (50 in 1999-00 / 40 in 1998-99)
  Carson-Newman Staff: 6
  Carson-Newman Students: 17
  Others: 34

States Represented
  Alabama: 3
  California: 2
  Florida: 1
  Georgia: 2
  Massachusetts: 1
  Michigan: 1
  Missouri: 1
  North Carolina: 3
  Tennessee: 17
  Texas: 1
  Virginia: 1

Walk-Ins: 36
Phone: 9
Letter: 5
Email: 6
I.L.L. (Inter Library Loan): 1

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BAPTIST HISTORY AND HERITAGE SOCIETY
Formed in 1938 under the leadership of W.O. Carver at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the Society functioned from 1951 to 1995 as an auxiliary of the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. When the SBC decided in 1995 to eliminate the Commission, the Society became an independent organization. Today, the Society operates on its own, does not receive Cooperative funds, and is self-supporting. The Society is a voluntary, non-profit organization whose primary purpose is to provide leadership and direction for the study, preservation, and communication of Baptist history and heritage. Membership entitles members to receive the journal *Baptist History and Heritage*, the *Baptist Heritage Update* newsletter, a 10% discount on other Society publications and products, and reduced fees for participating in the annual meeting.

For more information, contact Charles W. Deweese, Executive Director & Treasurer.
Mailing address: BHHS, P.O. Box 728, Brentwood, TN 37024-0728
Phone: (800) 966-2278
Membership: $25/1 yr. $45/2 yrs. $60/3 yrs. $15/1 yr. (student) $20/1 yr. (senior 60+)
Email: cdeweese@tnbaptist.org Website: www.baptisthistory.org

TENNESSEE BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY
The Tennessee Baptist Historical Society is composed of individuals, churches, associations, institutions, and other organizations that are willing to share their resources and interests for the cause of Baptist history in Tennessee. Membership ($15 per year) entitles members to receive publications of the Society and attend the annual meeting that is usually scheduled in conjunction with the Tennessee Baptist Convention.

For more information, contact Albert Wardin, Jr., Treasurer.
Mailing address: 208 Old Williamsburg Court, Nashville, TN 37215

Albert L. Lang, Archivist
C-N 71997
Jefferson City, TN 37760
(865) 471-3542
alang@cn.edu