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*HERITAGE*

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## N. B. Johnson

N. B. (Napoleon Bonaparte) Johnson was born in Fayette county Ky., about 1816. His parents being in reduced circumstances, he received only a moderate common school education. In early life he joined the Campbellites, and was immersed in order to the remission of sins. He turned his attention to mechanism, and became a skillful mechanic; but, alas! he also became a drunkard, and, for a number of years, spent much of his time in dissipation. On the 28th of October, 1846, he was married to Edith Martin of Clark county. He continued to divide his time between dissipation and labor, till about 1858, when he was arrested by the Holy Spirit, and brought penitently to the feet of Jesus. Finding peace in the Savior, he was baptized, and entered into the constitution of Waco church in Madison county, in the year last named. Shortly after his union with the church, he began to exercise a public gift, and, on the 25th of October, 1862, was ordained to the ministry, by Thornton I. Wills, Nathan Edmonson and J. J. Edwards.

Although now passed the meridian of life, he entered upon the duties of his sacred calling with great zeal and energy. About the first of October, 1866, he accepted an appointment from the board of the General Association, to labor as missionary in the mountain counties of Eastern Kentucky. In this position he labored twelve and a half years. His reports for about eleven years of this time show that he traveled over his mountainous field, 19,096 miles; 2,603 sermons; delivered 1,139 exhortations; made 1,323 religious visits; witnessed 1,109 additions to the churches; baptized (in eight years) 861; constituted (with proper helps) ten churches; organized 112 Sunday-schools, and distributed large quantities of religious literature. He occupied the same field in which the famous J. J. Edwards was laboring, and his labors were the more valuable on account of his being an excellent organizer and disciplinarian.

In 1879, he left the missionary field, on account of failing health, and devoted the brief remainder of this days to the duties of

the pastoral office. He served the churches at Crab Orchard in Lincoln county, Waco in Madison, Cow Creek in Estill, and perhaps others. He proved to be a good pastor. After lingering several months with paralysis, he died at his home near Waco, November 12, 1882.

**Spencer, J. H. *A History of Kentucky Baptists: from 1769 to 1885.* LaFayette, Tennessee, Church History Research & Archives, 1976. pp.613-614.**

## **A Johnson Letter**

Waco, Kentucky April 4, 1870

Mrs. Lizzie Alberta

Dear Sister in Christ,

This beautiful morning finds me at home again in the middle of my dear family and through the blessings of our father we are all enjoying good health. I arrived home on last evening about sundown having rode from Cow Creek after meeting. I have been absent from home three weeks and four days laboring in the cause of my blessed Saviour in the counties of Estill, Wolfe, and Breathitt. I can truly say that the good Lord has owned and blessed his truth though delivered through a weak servant. I have been permitted to pass through many scenes since I left home. I did not preach longer than three days, no point. My object was to keep up a sort of running fire, or was acting on the skirmish line all the time. I captured from the army of the devil 22 persons and they having sworn allegiance to the cause of Christ they are now enlisted in the cause of Christ and marching under the glorious flag of Jesus. My object in visiting from church to church and from house to house, was to mix with the old anti-brethren and sisters

and try to get them right upon the subject of missions and S.S. and I am satisfied that my visit among them has proved a great success, and they are fully satisfied now that a Missionary is not such a huge and dangerous animal, as they supposed him to be. I had an appointment in a neighborhood through which a show had passed a few days before. So the morning of my meeting an old lady came in and found her two girls fixing for meeting. She say [*sic*] to them, where are you going? They replied [*sic*], to meeting. That you ain't not a foot do you go today, for it's my time now. You went to the show the other day, and as the missionary has come it's my time to go now, for I never saw one in my life. So she came and was well pleased. She said if that was a sample of a missionary she had no objections to them. So I found the brethren and sisters everywhere willing to receive the truth as it is Christ Jesus. But they have been gulled by ignorant men and those that would be leaders, but where God's truth is presented prejudice and ignorance give way.

I will now give you a short sketch of my trip.

I left home on Thursday after the 1st Sat. in March, and reached old Bro. Lowery's six miles above Furnace on Friday. I reached Bro. L. Drake's in Wolfe Co. where I held a few days meeting and left six approved for baptism. I then crossed the North Fork of the Ky. River, (here I had to swim my horse, but I didn't mind that, for you know we Baptist believe going down into the water) and preached at Bro. C. Lutes at night, to a very large congregation. Next morning in company with several brethren and sisters, I passed over to the middle fork and preached Sat. and Sun. I then in company with Judge Strong and Mr. Bailey, a young lawyer, went up within four miles of Jackson, the Co. seat of Breathitt and preached there three days and nights. It being quarterly court, Judge Strong kindly gave me the Courthouse every day at 11 o'clock. I had a large crowd day and night and good attention. It was remarked by many that I had larger congregations and better attention than any man that had ever preached there. They urged me to visit them again as often as possible. There is no Church of any kind in the town. From here, I passed up 10 miles to

a Church at Quick Sand, and preached two days, from here I passed over on Bloody Creek and then to White Oak and preached at Union Church, I constituted in Jan. last. She has received 17 additions since organized. From here, I passed over Upper Devil's Creek and preached at Mr. Wm. Drake's at night. Next I passed over on lower Devil's Creek and preached at Booth's Mill. Next day Thursday, I laid up at Bro. Drake's, it being to [*sic*] disagreeable to travel. Friday, I had to start for home, rain or shine, so I set out for home and had to cross Devil's Creek, Walker's Creek and Hell Creek and reach Bro. Wm. Barnes on Cow Creek, Friday, about 5 o'clock, Preached at Cow Creek Sat. and Sun. The people in the mountains are well pleased with the prospect of our S. School celebration. I am fully satisfied my dear sister, that Bro. Little's glorious week of carried out, well proved a grand success and be the means in the hand of God leading many souls to Christ.

I sent to Waco today and the box you sent had not come to hand yet. Sister Lizzie I captured by consent of owner while in the mountains two very nice vension [*sic*] hams, and I shall send you one of them by the stage in a day or two and I want you and Sister McCann to meet at the half way house (Sister Darnaby's) and have it cooked to suit your taste. Try and meet on the same day that will suit Bro. Woolfolk. I think if he could get a mess or two of vension [*sic*] he would be fully able to demolish Campbellism completely and for the sake of manners, don't forget Bro. Alberta and Darnaby and Buckner.

And now Sister Lizzie, I know you are a woman of sense and judgement, but I think something you like is discretion. Be sure when you are eating the vension [*sic*] to remember the sassafras tea and beef steak. A hint to the wise is sufficient. I shall not be able to do much labor or missionary work this month. I have to start to Irvine next Thursday and from there to Booneville to repair some machinery to get some money to pay my way to Louisville 1st of May.

My horse (the only one I have) caught his foot in a bridge in the mountains and is very lame, so I am a foot for this, but my motto is trust in the Lord and do good. If two or three of our



wealthy churches would take this matter in hand 50 cents or 1.00 from each one would enable me to get a horse. I think I aught [sic] to have two so my wife could go to meeting sometimes with me.

N.B. Johnson

[Born March 5, 1816  
Died Nov. 12, 1882]

**(Copy of a letter given to Chester Young, Williamsburg, by Prof. Kenneth Fraught, Cumberland College)**

## Daniel Englehart Yeiser

A history of the Daviess County (Daviess-McLean) Baptist Association would be incomplete if it did not take into account the more than fifty year ministry of Daniel Englehart Yeiser. This pioneer servant of our Lord was born in Todd County, Kentucky, on May 17, 1825. His father, Adam R. Yeiser, was a native of Pennsylvania, and came to Danville, Kentucky, while a small child with his parents. Here Adam R. Yeiser married Susan F. Walker, a native of Virginia and a daughter of Hugh Walker of Adair County, Kentucky.

Brother Yeiser learned the tanner's trade with his father but never followed this profession after he left his father's home. In 1847 he went to farming with an uncle, Richard Walker, his worldly possessions being his clothes, fifty cents and a horse. The next year he worked with another uncle, John Roberts, and the following spring, March 11, 1849, he married Miss Helen K. Newton, a daughter of Kirtley Newton. Her father died while she was an infant and she was reared by her grandparents. The first year after his marriage Brother Yeiser rented land, and the following year bought land in the southeastern section of Daviess County, Kentucky. He lived here three years but unsettled financial conditions forced him to give back the land to its original owner. He then bought 200 acres adjoining it. He later sold this property and bought some more near it. This was all wild land when he moved on it but later all was placed under cultivation. The original homeplace is still the property of a son, Maple D. Yeiser, near Red Hill community in Daviess County.

Up to the age of twenty-eight Brother Yeiser had made no pretension of religious enlightenment. His father was an Episcopalian and his mother a Methodist. In the latter part of the year 1853 he was awakened to the reality of his spiritual condition by the sudden death of his second child. Accordingly he gave his heart to Christ and his life in service. Green Brier Church, near where he

lived the remainder of his earthly life, licensed him to preach in the year 1858. On the 5th day of February, 1860, he was fully set apart to the work of the Gospel ministry. The same day on which he was ordained he baptized five converts. From that time on his labors as a missionary, founder of churches, and as pastor, made history in the Green River Country. He was largely instrumental in the formation of the Walnut Street Baptist Church in Owensboro, Panther Creek, Sugar Grove and Glenville in Daviess County, and Woodward's Valley in Ohio County.

From first to last he served the following churches during his long and impressive ministry: Brush Fork 1865-1872, 1884-1895, and 1899-1901; Walnut Street 1876-1879; Sugar Grove 1874-1861-1886; Yelvington 1866-1868; West Point 1866-1869; Roseville 1897-1898; Bells Run 1892-1893; Panther Creek 1889-1890, 1891-1901; Birk City (Stanley) 1876-1885; Curdsville 1871-1878; Glenville 1865-1866, 1876, 1886-1890; Hopewell 1890-1901; Macedonia 1875; Red Hill 1896, 1901-1902; Mt. Liberty 1889; Mt. Carmel 1869-1872; Woodward's Valley 1893-1;898; and Zion 1863-1867, 1870-1876. Perhaps there were others but we have no information concerning them.

Besides helping to found the churches already mentioned we find that he was instrumental in the founding of the Sugar Grove, Stanley and Red Hill Churches. He became a constituent member of the Sugar Grove and Red Hill Churches at their organization in 1860 and 1894 respectively. His membership was with the Red Hill Church the time of this death which occurred on December 17, 1920, at the ripe age of 95 years and 7 months. His wife had previously died in the year 1916. Seven children were born to this union with three living at the present time (1941).

Brother Yeiser was an active, laborious, and efficient minister until about ten years before his death. Failing health caused his retirement. He preached occasionally in the neighborhood churches a short time before his death. Even though he had very little educational equipment he waxed strong in the work of the Lord. He is buried in the family cemetery on the old home place near Red Hill

Church. The untiring missionary example of Daniel E. Yeiser is well worthy of Emulation today. He rests from his labors but the magnitude of his works still follow and speak of his untiring devotion to the cause of the Lord he loved and served.

**Rone, Wendell H. *A History of the Daviess-McLean Baptist Association in Kentucky: 1844-1943.***

# Theodore Harding Harris

## Banker, Financier, Philanthropist

*(Note: Doris Yeiser joined the secretarial staff of the General Association of Baptists in Kentucky July 6, 1951. During the years through 1957 she often noticed the portrait which hung above the inside front entrance of the Baptist Building at 127 East Broadway, Louisville, Kentucky. Not knowing the reason for the portrait or the connection of Theodore H. Harris with Kentucky Baptists it was, nevertheless, moved to the new Middletown site in 1957.*

*Last winter when the Convention was given the opportunity of acquiring a small portion of the library files of George Raleigh Jewell, formerly an employee of Western Recorder, Barry Allen and Doris Yeiser spent a cold day selecting some items for the Convention files and Archives. Jewell had two file folders on Harris and much more was learned about this philanthropic person whose portrait had been hanging around the Baptist Building for many years.)*

The church life of Theodore Harris (1828-1909) was primarily within the Chestnut Street Church, as the right-hand man to pastor J.M. Weaver. A wealthy, self-made banker, Harris was a great friend to the Orphans' Home and Southern Seminary. In addition to leaving funds in his will for church building statewide, Harris left a residence at 205 East Chestnut which became state Baptist headquarters. When offices of the General Association moved to the education building of Broadway Church in 1943, the Harris building became WMU headquarters.

Birdwhistell, Jack. *Gathered at the River*. Long Run Narrative history.

The East Chestnut Street property became the first-owned office building for the General Association of Baptists in Kentucky.

In Masters' *History of Baptists in Kentucky* we find the following:

Also a school was started in Pineville, the county seat of Bell County, called the Theodore Harris Institute, in honor of Mr. Theodore Harris, a member of the Chestnut Street Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky, whose generosity made the beginning of the school possible. The new Pineville Hotel, a four story brick building, well adapted to school purposes, was purchased by the citizens of the community, and turned over to the Baptist State Board on condition that the General Association would support the academy. The school opened with a good faculty and the enrollment reached 333 pupils the first session. The school continued well until 1903 when it ceased to exist, for the reason that the citizens of Pineville failed to meet the payment on the property, and the General Association withdrew from the field.

Excerpts from the report of W.D. Powell, corresponding secretary, as published in the *Proceedings of the General Association of Baptists in Kentucky*, 73rd anniversary held November 16-17, 1920, Cynthiana, pages 13-14, gives this account in his report of State Mission Board:

The Theodore Harris Fund - Mr. Harris, at whose bank we make our deposits, became very much interested in the appalling destitution existing in our beloved State, and, on his death, August 7, 1909 he willed the residue of his estate to the General Association of Baptists in Kentucky to aid in building Baptist churches at needy points by loan... At the death of the last child the estate was to be turned over to the General Association by the trustees, consisting of the Louisville Trust Company, Mr. S. Thruston Ballard, representing the heirs, and the third member was to be elected by the Baptist State Board. W.D. Powell was elected. We soon found that the will was not satisfactory to the family, who insisted that two lawyers be secured, before the court for a construction of Article 14 which willed the residue of the estate to the Baptists.

The estate consists of securities worth more than some \$400,000. We knew that nothing was more uncertain than how a

judge and jury would decide a will case. They are usually influenced rather by sentiment and sympathy than by law. We ascertained that a contest of the Parr will cost some \$175,000. I found that the lawyers in this case would want \$20,000 each. We found Mr. Thruston Ballard, while guarding well the interests of the family, to be most reasonable and just in his opinions and desires. He and I agreed to a plan by which the heirs were to receive \$32,000 of life insurance and the General Association the residence. This has been deeded to us, but we have agreed not to sell until the estate is able to pay the family the \$32,000. We are occupying the residence, which relieves us of office rent and gives us some income.

The annuities to Mr. Harris' children will be paid as he desired. The estate will be evenly divided between the children and the Baptists. The denomination will receive ultimately some \$200,000 as a loan fund. The settlement was satisfactory to the family and the denomination, and seemed to be just and equitable. We had no litigation, and the utmost good feelings prevails among all parties. Mr. Ballard has shown himself a perfect gentleman in the whole matter.

Another excerpt from an editorial, "Theodore Harris," in the August 12, 1909 *Western Recorder*, page 8, presumably written by J.W. Porter, editor, though it may have been written by Jonathan G. Bow, associate editor, stated:

Mr. Harris was not only a great financier, whose advise was sought by leading business men, but he was also one of the best of our Baptist writers. He wrote clearly and strongly on religious subjects, as all know who have read his articles in the *Recorder* and in the book, *A Preacher's and a Banker's Views on Important Subjects*, which was the joint work of himself and his pastor, Dr. J.M. Weaver.

For more than forty years Mr. Harris was a member of the Chestnut Street Church. For many years he was superintendent of the Sunday School. Chestnut Street Church and its pastor occupied

the warmest corner of his heart and he was always ready with brain and heart and purse to aid in their work. Many much younger men, without one-tenth part of his business responsibilities, are "too busy" to do their part in the Lord's work. Theodore Harris never was.

For all these forty years he and his pastor have been life brothers. Each could have said of the other what David said of Jonathan, "Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women."

And while we sympathize with his children, our deepest sympathy is with Dr. Weaver, who has lost his dearly beloved brother, his wife [sic] counselor and the leading member of his church.

This writer would be remiss if Masters' note were not added to this article which indicates others were interested in aiding churches with their building programs:

Another gift for the church building fund was received from Dr. W.C. Jones, Walnut Street Baptist Church, Louisville, who also gave \$5,000 in stock in the Louisville Railway to be used as a permanent church building fund, of which the dividends were to be paid quarterly for that purpose. Mr. G.W. Davidson Auburn, Logan County, gave \$500 as a permanent building fund. Masters. *A History of Baptists in Kentucky*. pp. 459-460.

In 1986 when Dr. William W. Marshall, our present executive secretary-treasurer, established the Convention Archives and assigned this writer to begin work in that area, she again found the portrait of Theodore H. Harris in the Archives and now she appreciates it even more knowing something of his love for his Lord and Kentucky Baptists in upgrading their church buildings.

I can only speak for those executives for whom I worked but I assume all of those who served from 1909 until the time of W.C. Boone, in 1946, Harold G. Sanders, who followed Boone, and Franklin Owen, were designated a trustee in the Harris estate and received a small stipend for that service, but each endorsed that



check to become a gift to the Cooperative Program.

On March 25, 1983 Franklin Owen reported:

That he as executive secretary-treasurer, functioned as a co-trustee with the Liberty National Bank and Trust Co. of Louisville. Because of the death of the last survivor of Theodore H. Harris Estate, Liberty National Bank had recommended a final distribution of the corpus of the estate be made. The Convention would receive approximately one-half \$60,000. The Cooperative Program was the beneficiary. Owen reported these funds would be transferred to the Foundation for the Cooperative Program fund in our usual manner. "Minutes of Business and Finance Committee, Executive Board, Kentucky Baptist Convention, March 25, 1983" (It was only in that year of 1983 that the estate was finally closed.)

Now all Kentucky Baptists may have the privilege of knowing and seeing the portrait of Theodore H. Harris as it is displayed in Convention Archives in Middletown, Kentucky.

**Doris B. Yeiser, Archivist**

*(Note: George Raleigh Jewell needs your prayers as he continues to live in a nursing home in Louisville. He is now in his late nineties.)*

# John William Lester

*(Karen Stone, the author, teaches at Southern Union State Junior College, Wadley, Alabama. This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Alabama Baptist Historical Society, April 8, 1989 and appeared in the January 1990 issue of The Alabama Baptist Historian. At his request Lester came to Eastern Kentucky in the late 1950's as a missionary and stayed for approximately 15 years.)*

One of the most apparent trends of the twentieth century has been the rapid urbanization of America. At the turn of the century only twenty percent of the nation lived in urban areas. By the 1980's this percentage had increased to seventy-four. The transformation from rural to urban caused changes in every aspect of American life. The success of many institutions during this century has depended upon how well they have adapted to this basic transformation. J.W. Lester was one of the men who helped the Southern Baptist Convention maintain its viability in the face of these changes.

In 1941 John William Lester dedicated his life and career to the improvement of rural churches in the South. At a time when educated or skilled people were deserting the rural areas of the South by the millions, it was rare to find a seminary educated man who chose to remain in the country. Lester's career coincided with a period of exceptional interest in rural churches by the Southern Baptist Convention. As an educator, Southern Baptist leader, and a concerned pastor, Lester exemplified the best of the Rural Church Movement.

The year in which Lester was born marked the beginning of the Rural Church Movement. Concerned that the changing demographics of the country would destroy the nation's basic core of rural values, President Theodore Roosevelt organized the Country Life Commission in 1908. The President charged the Commission

to study the problems of rural life and suggest some solutions. The report of the Country Life Commission resulted in the passage of legislation creating the Cooperative Extension Service, funding better rural roads and expanding postal services, establishing high school vocational training, and improving public health services. The formation of the American Farm Bureau Federation was also one of the results of the activities of this commission.<sup>1</sup>

The Country Life Commission and other progressive reformers saw the rural church as one of the keys to developing contentment with rural life. They criticized nonresident and bivocational pastors for their lack of community involvement. The solution suggested by these people was the consolidation of churches to form larger congregations which could afford to pay full-time, resident pastor to develop church and community activities. Southern Baptists rejected the panacea of the federated church and worked to develop their own program for rural churches.

Lester was influenced by the Country Life Movement at an early age. County extension agents and progressive rural ministers shared the ideology of the Country Life Movement with him. A county extension agent encouraged his father to diversify the family farm. Because of the agent's encouragement, the Lester farm switched to dairy production before the boll weevil devastated the cotton economy of the area.<sup>2</sup> A local Presbyterian minister shared books and tracts discussing the Country Life Movement with Lester during his teenage years and encouraged him to enter the ministry. The influence of these two men convinced Lester that a flexible, experimental approach to country life could produce a healthy, prosperous environment.

Like over a million other Southerners, Lester left his home on the farm to find work in the northern cities during the 1920s. Forty percent of all those who began working in northern factories, offices, and stores during that decade were from the rural South. Lester went to Detroit where he was fortunate to get a job with the Ford Motor Company. He later said that he was hired over 800 other applicants because of his honesty and his calloused hands. Unfortunately, he lost the job less than a year later when the stock

market crash of 1929 forced closing of the plant.

Lester decided to travel to Chicago and enroll in the Moody Bible Institute. The school helped him find work as a waiter to pay his expenses. In 1931 he was called back home to Alabama to replace the retiring pastor of Eagle Creek Baptist Church in Tallapoosa County. Four other churches were included in his church field: Daviston, Salem, Wadley, and Rocky Creek. All five congregations combined could only manage to pay their new pastor \$92.82 that first year.<sup>3</sup>

In the midst of the Great Depression, Lester decided to apply the ideas of the Country Life Movement to his churches and attempt to improve their financial situation. He instituted the Lord's Acre Plan of Stewardship whereby each farmer would pledge the proceeds of one acre to the budget of the church. He asked the women of the church to donate the Sunday production of their hens in the same way. Within two years, proceeds from Sunday eggs and the Lord's Acre had allowed one of these churches to purchase a new organ and two of them had budgeted one hundred dollars for the next year's pastor's salary.<sup>4</sup>

Lester did not remain on this field to reap the rewards of his programs. In 1933, with six dollars in his pockets, he moved to Birmingham to attend Howard College. While there, Lester took as many courses as possible in rural life, but he began working in city churches. He accepted a call to Irondale Baptist Church. The \$18 a week the Irondale church paid him was the largest salary he had ever received from a church. The 400 member congregation responded to Lester's pleas for increased involvement by establishing a soup kitchen for unemployed steel workers and by beginning a building program. While at Irondale, Lester married Hazel Hurr from Birmingham, and their son, John William Lester, Junior, was born.

Lester moved to Texas in 1937 to attend Southwestern Baptist Seminary. Once again he worked with a large urban church, Westmoreland Baptist in Dallas (which later became the Hollywood Baptist Church). The congregation was so large that two services had to be held on Sunday morning to accommodate it. The

five years spent in Texas were busy and prosperous times for the Lester family.

It was during a visit home to Alabama that the reality of the stark needs of the country churches were once again brought to Lester's attention. His father took him to visit a nearby cemetery and pointed to a tiny grave. He said:

This little girl was buried here by a layman. There was no preacher here and we don't call out city preachers to bury our dead. Your mother and I want only the best for you. But you only have one life, we pray that you will give it to country people.<sup>5</sup>

Lester returned to Texas only long enough to resign the pastorate at Westmoreland and pack his family's belongings.

Lester's first field after making his decision to dedicate his life to rural church work was near his home. Between 1942 and 1945 he worked with the churches of Rockport, Equality, Concord, and Bethesda in Tallapoosa County.

Shortly after his arrival on this field, the building at Equality burned. Because of Rockford's old, inadequate facilities, Lester convinced it to work with Equality in building a new auditorium and educational building for their joint use. After Lester left the field these churches continued to work together, hired a full-time, resident minister, and built a pastorium. Under Lester's leadership, Bethesda and Concord had developed their music programs and organized vacation bible schools.

The outstanding work in the Tallapoosa field brought Lester to the attention of state denominational leaders. In 1945 Lester was hired by the Alabama Baptist Executive Committee to "work himself out of a job."<sup>6</sup> He was one of the seven district workers hired to help over fifteen thousand rural Alabama churches develop full-time programs. Lester worked tirelessly to establish full-time churches, institute programs of stewardship, and teach soil conservation.

The work with soil conservation demonstrated Lester's holistic approach to church development. Statistics showed that soil erosion was a major cause of rural church decline because farmers

with poor soil were unable to contribute financially to the development of church programs. Lester believed it was the duty of a rural pastor to help farmers in every aspect of their lives. He delivered a sermon entitled "And He Will Heal Their Land," which emphasized soil conservation, in many churches and community meetings throughout the central district.<sup>7</sup> To further dramatize the need for soil conservation, he began to use green ink as a symbol of soil fertility for the printing of church bulletins and in his personal correspondence.

His work in the central field district was rewarding, but it demanded that Lester be away from home much of the time. After his wife became ill, Lester decided to accept the pastorate of a full-time church. He was called to Bethlehem East, a prosperous country church in Kent, Alabama, composed of farmers from Coosa, Elmore, and Tallapoosa counties. While at Bethlehem East, Lester encouraged the farmers to diversify their incomes by developing grade A dairies. He became heavily involved in 4-H and FFA programs to share the joys of country life with a new generation. He continued to speak out for the country church at statewide evangelistic meetings, mission conferences, and soil conservation programs, and through articles written for denominational publications.

Lester's efforts on behalf of the rural church were recognized by many agencies. He was appointed to the Southern Commission on Training Rural Ministry and was the first pastor to be saluted by the Alabama Farm Bureau for outstanding zeal and ability in rural work. In 1949 he was named by *Progressive Farmer* magazine as Rural Minister of the Year from Alabama.

Later that year, Lester became involved in the organization of an extension school program for rural ministers at Wetumpka. His success with the extension program caused Howard College to ask him to help Dr. Gilbert L. Guffin develop extension centers around the state. During his tenure as assistant director of the Howard College Extension Division, Lester visited churches throughout the state preaching on soil conservation; he had the opportunity to participate in summer schools and seminars concerning the training

of rural ministers; and he wrote several articles urging the Southern Baptist Convention to develop a long range plan for training ministers and developing rural church programs.

Lester resigned his position with Howard Extension in 1952 to return to the rural church. He moved to Selma and became the pastor of the Benton, Bethany, Sister Springs, and Shiloh Baptist churches. During his pastorate at Selma, Lester made important contributions to Baptist mission work among Negroes. He organized institutes for rural Negro pastors, taught them how to establish regular programs of finance and teaching, and lectured to them on soil conservation.

Lester summed up his own philosophy of education when he told a group of Negro pastors that they would find progress not in keeping up but in keeping ahead, and that they would find satisfaction not in adequate preparation but in helping to prepare others.

From Selma, Lester moved to Enterprise to be pastor of the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church. At Mount Pleasant Lester instituted a Negro vacation bible school, helped the local Home Demonstration Club organize a fall harvest festival, and used Rural Life Sunday as an occasion to commend local county agents, 4-H girls and boys, and state leaders for their contributions to rural improvement. Lester contributed to the improvement of local economic conditions by convincing farmers to develop a single variety cotton community and to adopt the API pasture improvement program. His work there was so successful that Mount Pleasant was chosen to appear on the cover of *Progressive Farmer* magazine as an example of what a country church could do.<sup>8</sup>

Lester left Mount Pleasant in 1957 to accept an unusual call for help. Colbert Heights, located in the heart of a developing industrial area of northwest Alabama, wrote that it desperately needed leadership because the church was growing too fast. Poor farmers from Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee were flocking to the area to work in various expanding industries. The influx of new residents caught the small church south of Tusculumbia by surprise. Even though he was kidded by some of his fellow rural pastors for accepting a city church, Lester knew that he was still

dealing with the same people, poor rural southerners. He used his old rural programs with only a slight modifications [sic] in the new setting. His sermons on soil conservation became sermons on "soul conservation," his involvement with 4-H was transferred to the Boy Scouts, and he used a citified version of the Lord's Acre stewardship program called the Lord's Hour Plan.<sup>9</sup>

Lester continued to support denominational programs to improve the rural church. He spoke at rural church conferences and addressed a 1958 conference on the problem of training pastors. In addition to working with the Southern Baptist Long Range Rural Church Development Committee, he taught classes at the Tusculumbia extension of Howard College.

Howard College recognized J.W. Lester's years of dedication and vigorous leadership in rural church work in 1958 when it granted him the Doctor of Divinity degree. Rural leaders from all over the South wrote to congratulate him on the honor.<sup>10</sup>

After receiving the honorary degree from Howard, Lester applied to the Home Mission Board to be sent to the Kentucky mountains as a missionary. He was soon asked to head the Department of Rural Church at Clear Creek School for Mountain Preachers in Pineville, Kentucky. Lester's acceptance of the position at Clear Creek coincided with a national interest in the poor whites of Appalachia.

Television coverage of John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign in West Virginia exposed the grinding poverty of the southern mountains to a shocked nation. Several pieces of legislation were quickly passed by Congress to improve the economic situation of Appalachia. The government's programs emphasized industrial development in an attemp [sic] to bring that area into the mainstream of American life.<sup>11</sup>

In 1965 Lester was able to set an example of how the special problems of these churches could be handled. Alva Baptist Church had lost two hundred and seventy-five families from the congregation between 1960 and 1965. After a flood destroyed the educational building of the church, members appealed to Clear Creek for special help from Dr. Lester. He found the situation critical enough



to require an immediate loan from the state convention. He then began to work on a long range solution to the problem. A survey of the nonresident members showed that they had migrated to nine different states but that a large group of them was concentrated in Ohio. Lester visited the group in Ohio and was disappointed to find that they no longer worshipped together. He worked with Ohio leaders to begin a pilot project for Pioneer Missions Development. Upon his return to Alva, Lester led the church in a program to reestablish contact with all nonresident contributions to help pay the church debt, and encouraged nonresidents to join local Baptist churches.

Alva's story was told in a 1965 issue of *Home Missions* which was devoted to denominational work with southern migrants. Lester's program was cited as an excellent approach because it dealt with the migrant problem at each end.<sup>12</sup> His success at Alva convinced denominational leaders that a consolidated approach to urban and rural problems might be a good idea. Lester later suggested that mission work among southern migrants produced some of the strongest Baptist churches of the 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

Lester left Clear Creek in 1968 to become missionary of the Upper Cumberland Association of Kentucky. As missionary, Lester supported denominational and community programs with as much zest as ever. He implemented programs to increase Brotherhood membership, train Sunday School teachers, and organize youth retreats for boys and girls. He became involved in community discussions of federal mining regulations, brown-lung payments, and new methods of finding lost miners.

Lester retired in 1974 and returned to Selma, Alabama. In retirement, he worked with the Alabama Law Enforcement Career Camp and the Kiwanis youth program. He developed a nursing home ministry which included Bible classes, recreational activities, and educational lectures. He accepted a part-time call to Bethsaida Baptist Church where he reorganized the Sunday School and encouraged the aging membership to have pride in their rich rural background.

Lester became impressed with the need to preserve the history

of country churches and collected minutes of his former pastorates to be placed in the Samford University library. The records of his own ministry were deposited in the Auburn University Archives.

Lester's career spanned nearly half a century of tremendous change. His work was a practical attempt to deal with the complex social and economic churches, more flexible denominational policies, and progressive training in rural values for a new generation. Lester once told a group of ministerial students that "you can no more teach what you don't know that [sic] you can come back from where you ain't been."<sup>14</sup> Lester's career proved his dedication and love of country life, and he successfully passed that love along to another generation.

- 1 William C. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America 1900-1920* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1974), pp. 25-27.
- 2 World War I and the approach of the boll weevil drove cotton prices up in 1919 to between thirty and forty cents a pound. By the fall of 1920, though, there were no areas left untouched by the weevil. Black farmers, tenants, and many small land owners deserted their farms. During the 1920s the total number of farms declined by almost fifty percent in many areas; see Arthur F. Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1943), pp. 149-163.
- 3 Oral History Project with J.W. Lester, December 18, 1979, at Sardis, Alabama, by Wayne Flynt.
- 4 "Rural Minister of the Year 1949," Box 9 ff 330-333, J. W. Lester Papers, Auburn, Alabama. The Lester Papers will be referred to henceforth as JWL Papers.
- 5 "Tape no. 2—J. W. Lester's Oral Reminiscences," Box 12, JWL Papers.
- 6 "Oral History Project," Box 6 ff 224, JWL Papers.
- 7 "Addresses—Land Use," Box 1 ff 6; "Agriculture—Subject File," Box 1 ff 351, JWL Papers.
- 8 "Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church, Cemetery," Box 6 ff 251, JWL Papers.

- 9 "Urban Rural Church," Box 9 ff 329, JWL Papers.
- 10 "Long Range Rural Church Committee, 1964," Box 8 ff 309, "Church Bulletins—misc." Box 2 ff 223, JWL Papers.
- 11 James S. Walls, *Appalachia*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), pp. 69, 32; President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, "The People Left Behind," (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1967), pp. 25-93.
- 12 "Alva Baptist Church," Box 1 ff 20 and 21; Ellis Easterly, "Church Programs to the Out Migrants," *Home Missions*, 36 (June 1965): 6.
- 13 Oral History Project with J. W. Lester, December 14, 1979.
- 14 "Baptist Education Study Task," Box 1 ff 32-36, JWL Papers.

**Stone, Karen.** *The Alabama Baptist Historian*. 26(1): pp.3-9, January 1990.

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