JAMES H. DEVOTIE, LEADING THE TRANSFORMATION AND EXPANSION OF BAPTISTS IN ALABAMA AND GEORGIA: 1830-1890

by

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ABSTRACT

Southern Baptist pastor, James H. DeVotie, led Baptists to establish, expand, and entrench in Alabama and Georgia from the 1830s to the 1890s. He directed Baptists to become one of the most numerous and influential religious bodies in these states. DeVotie did so by orchestrating the development of Baptist denominational institutions, overcoming resistance from "Hardshell" Baptists, promoting the professional pastorate, providing wartime ministry for the battlefront and home-front, shepherding the suffering South amidst his own suffering, and overseeing dozens of domestic missionaries who launched numerous new churches. He pastored large, prominent congregations in Montgomery, Tuscaloosa, and Marion, Alabama, as well as Columbus and Griffin, Georgia. Moreover, DeVotie poured himself into strengthening regional Baptist associations, propelling state conventions, serving as president of the Southern Baptist Domestic Mission Board, establishing Howard College, overseeing Judson College and Mercer University, launching the *Alabama Baptist* newspaper, developing the Alabama Baptist Bible Society, leading the Georgia Baptist Mission Board, supporting Sabbath schools, and starting a string of public schools. For the first three decades of his ministry he undertook these initiatives as a local pastor of interracial congregations, navigating between his proslavery perspective and his committed ministry to slaves. After the Civil War, he did not make any noticeable attempt to give newly freed slaves equal status among the white-controlled interracial Baptist churches. Yet as black Baptists rapidly left to form their own churches, he continued seeking financial and educational support for black church leaders even when other white Baptists withdrew.

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AN EXCERPT FROM THE INTRODUCTION TO THIS DISSERTATION

While James H. DeVotie still had two decades of ministry and life remaining, an 1872 article in the *Christian Index* lauded his achievements: "No Baptist minister who has ever lived in Alabama has accomplished more for the denomination than brother DeVotie. His very name is identified with every noble enterprise of our state Convention for the last thirty-five years. May his life long be spared to the church that now rejoices in his labors."[1] At his death, another

[1] James H. DeVotie Memoirs, Special Collection, Samford University Library, Birmingham, Alabama, Volume 1, 229. DeVotie began recording his memoirs at around age sixty in the early 1870s as letters to his

newspaper declared that the Baptists had lost "a bright and shining light" and that all in the state of Georgia mourned the loss of "one of its most worthy and exemplary citizens."[2] DeVotie received this praise because of all he achieved: orchestrating the development of Baptist denominational institutions, overcoming resistance from "Hardshell"[3] Baptists, promoting the professional pastorate, providing wartime ministry for the battlefront and home-front, shepherding the suffering South amidst his own suffering, and overseeing dozens of domestic missionaries who planted numerous new churches. For the first three decades of his ministry he undertook these initiatives as a local pastor of interracial congregations, navigating between his proslavery perspective and his committed ministry to slaves. After the Civil War, he did not make any noticeable attempt to give newly freed slaves equal status among the white-controlled interracial Baptist churches. Yet as black Baptists rapidly left to form their own churches, he continued seeking financial and educational support for black church leaders even when other white Baptists withdrew. In this manner, through the period of massive southern transformation from 1830 to 1890, DeVotie enabled Alabama and Georgia Baptists to become one of the most numerous and influential religious bodies in these states, a position that they still enjoy today.[4]

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daughter, Lizzie. He regularly used "+" instead of the word "and" which I substitute throughout the paper. Article pasted from *Christian Index*, Thurs, Oct 24, 1872, written by "Henderson."

[2] *Southern Cultivator,* Apr 1891; 49, 4.

[3] "Hardshell" or "Anti-mission" or "Footwashing" Baptists, as they were interchangeably called, were originally a contingent mixed among the Baptist churches of the South. Many of these Christians eventually formed the Primitive Baptist churches, in distinction from the Southern Baptist Convention. They were Calvinist, like other Baptists at the time, but they emphasized God's sovereignty and de-emphasized human responsibility to such an extreme that they failed to initiate evangelistically. This also led them to reject organized human ministry efforts like mission agencies. Along with these beliefs they held to the practice of footwashing, taken from John 13, as virtually a church sacrament.

[4] Wayne Flynt, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1998), ix. Flynt stated that at the start of the twenty-first century, "One in four Alabamians and nearly two of three church members belong to churches of the Alabama Baptist State Convention (ABSC), the highest percentage of Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) dominance of any state. Every aspect of the state's life – its politics, commerce, and education – is interwoven with the ABSC."; Robert G. Gardner, "Baptists in Georgia: 1733-2010," http://libraries.mercer.edu/tarver/archives/media/History.pdf, Jun 29, 2010. Regarding those aligned with Southern Baptists he wrote, "Membership in 2009 included 92 associations, 3,604 churches, and 1,385,234 members." He listed the Georgia population in 2008 at over 9.6 million. Adding the approximately 800,000 Baptists of other denominations makes the total 22% of the Georgia population. In 1800 an estimated 3% of Georgians were

In 1873, during the latter years of his tumultuous but remarkably influential life and ministry, DeVotie reminisced in his memoirs concerning God's purpose for him. DeVotie believed the Divine One revealed a special message to him in the form of a beautiful flower he once observed along the road: "It grew upon the top of a large heap of barren rocks which had been thrown together at the highway side….There in the freshness of its beauty it was an instructor that we can accomplish a blessed destiny by meeting to the best of our ability our duty, and improving our opportunities, in whatever humble sphere he may assign us our lot." DeVotie continued, expressing the encouragement he received from this botanical messenger for his lifelong pursuit to improve and expand Southern Baptist influence: "That child of spring said, shall an immortal man…called of God to preach the gospel, with the promise of God's presence, and assistance….despond, and despair, when a speechless, blushing little flower, can…succeed in writing ineffaceable truths concerning God, and his government upon human hearts?" He concluded by sharing a motto he sought to live by and hoped all those to come after him would embrace, "Let us ever aim to be beautiful, and beautify the place which God assigns us."[5] If

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Baptist; Arthur B. Rutledge, *Mission to American: A Century and a Quarter of Southern Baptist Home Missions* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 8. "Between 1780 and 1860 Methodists became by far the largest Protestant Christian group in the United States, with almost twenty thousand churches and approximately two million members. Baptists, in the meantime, increased impressively to over twelve thousand churches and a total membership of approximately one million."

[5] DeVotie Memoirs, Vol 1, 1-2 and 199-203. "That lone flower made an impression upon my mind more lasting and blessed than any one sermon, which I have ever heard from the most eloquent lips. It had not grown there by accident, the divine hand had planted it. He had chosen that spot, had ordained that it should be in its…full bloom at that moment. The same precious hand had formed me, had conducted me to the place, and had prepared the photographic filate, of my soul to receive the impression of its beautiful message. No other eye perhaps noticed that eloquent preacher to me, but it had not existed in vain. It taught a lesson of God's love to me. It was by my pathway for me, in the program of my history from the beginning. He thought of me when he perfected its design, and unfolded its crimson leaves….I had been despondent fearing that one so humble could not presume to hope for usefulness." He began his memoirs with the same theme, in less metaphorical form, "Try to surpass the example of any excellence which may herein be placed before you. If any thing in these papers shall incite you to make increased efforts for usefulness, in any way promote your happiness, the ends ardently desired will have been attained. You will see the grace of God, wonderfully magnified in arresting and leading on to final salvation, one of the chief of sinners. In this connection the acknowledgement must conspicuously appear without abatement, that, 'By the grace of God I am what I am.' Praised be his holy name, whose goodness and mercy have followed me all my days. He influenced me to attempt to do some good and I trust in a small measure the world is better for my abode in it."

occasionally poetic in his personal writing, DeVotie was decidedly pragmatic in his numerous and expansive endeavors to "spiritually beautify" the Baptist denomination he transformed. Despite a hard-charging personality that sometimes won as many enemies as friends and a desire for applause, he propelled Baptists to become one of the most influential Christian denominations in the postbellum South.[6]

Born in 1813 in Oneida County, New York, DeVotie's origins in the region known as the "Burned-Over District" proved no small formative influence on him. Revivalist Charles Finney coined this phrase for the region because he eventually believed so many had been evangelized in this area that the "fuel" of potential souls needing salvation had been almost completely "burned."[7] Growing up at this epicenter for the northern explosion of the Second Great Awakening,[8] DeVotie learned the ways of evangelical revivalism from his earliest years. In fact, shortly after Finney's "new measures"[9] for revival first gained significant following in the Oneida region, DeVotie made his own profession of faith. He was a teenager at the time but the models of revivalism he observed would shape his adult ministry methods. In particular, he not only observed revival methods but also how they could successfully be combined with religious

[6] Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7-8. He noted that there were 60 Baptist congregations in America in 1740. By 1790 there were 67,000 Baptists in the United States, 41,000 in South, and half of those in Virginia. Georgia in 1827 had around 20,000 Baptists and 17,000 Methodists. By 1906, just fifteen years after DeVotie's passing, 41 percent of Georgia's approximately 2.45 million residents claimed membership in a Protestant church. Methodists also expanded rapidly in the South during the nineteenth century.

[7] Charles G. Finney, *Charles G. Finney: An Autobiography* (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1876), 77-78.

[8] The First Great Awakening was a spiritual revitalization movement that took place in the 1730s and 1740s, beginning in England and spreading to New England and then down the eastern coast of the United States. The Second Great Awakening occurred at the very end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Some also identify a Third Great Awakening from around 1850-1900. The awakenings generally involved increased activity by church members and conversion of those outside the church, usually leading to some social and moral transformation in the affected communities.

[9] Finney's "new measures" emphasized the need to press the unconverted very directly to make a decision of conversion. He believed strongly in the use of emotional appeals to bring about this decision. Because he also struggled to embrace the historic Presbyterian view of the perseverance of the saints, his teaching stressed the importance of holiness as a demonstration of belief, more than assurance in Christ because of the Holy Spirit's power to sanctify the believer.

societies and institutions. These organizations paralleling the local church not only helped fund ongoing outreach efforts but also extended and deepened the sometimes short-lived spiritual boost of occasional revival events.

DeVotie moved from New York to Savannah, Georgia, in 1830 to work with his uncle's mercantile business. Although reared in his mother's Presbyterian heritage and retaining her Calvinist belief throughout his days, DeVotie was influenced by his uncle to join the Baptist faith. He sensed a call to pastoral ministry and promptly enrolled in Furman Seminary in South Carolina. After briefly serving a Baptist church in Camden, South Carolina, he relocated to Alabama in 1834. From that point until mid-century, his ministry covered the heart of Alabama's population in Montgomery, Tuscaloosa, and Marion. Then, just before the Civil War he relocated to Georgia, serving for fourteen years in Columbus, seven in Griffin, and finally for fourteen more years in a statewide role as the Corresponding Secretary for the Georgia Baptist Mission Board.

From the beginning of his ministerial labors in the early 1830s until his death in 1891, DeVotie "beautified" Baptists in Alabama and Georgia by piloting them from a loosely-structured frontier revival movement on the fringe of southern society to an organized spiritual establishment whose structures spanned the South and wielded considerable political power among the faithful. He did so as much by his strategic denominational organizing as by his pastoral communication skills. Few ministers were as busy or successful. DeVotie worked tirelessly to build institutions that paralleled the work of the local church congregations and extended their influence. He poured himself into strengthening regional Baptist associations,[10]

[10] Baptist associations comprised the gathering of pastors, sometimes several times a year, generally from a nearby local region, to coordinate collaborative ministry activities and encourage the mutual welfare of the churches in that area. A given state might have numerous associations.

propelling state conventions, serving as president of the Southern Baptist Domestic Mission Board, establishing Howard College, overseeing Judson College and Mercer University, launching the *Alabama Baptist* newspaper, developing the Alabama Baptist Bible Society, leading the Georgia Baptist Mission Board, supporting Sabbath schools, and starting a string of public schools.[11]

DeVotie also spearheaded the social elevation of Baptists in Alabama and Georgia by professionalizing the pastoral role. The previous generation of Baptists in the South feared that academic seminary training caused more harm than good and instead promoted a bi-vocational pastoral model where ministers gained their primary income through work outside of the ministry. DeVotie saw that this approach left the growing southern middle and upper class - and its wealth and power - unreached by the Baptist faith. He embodied and encouraged this transformation by insisting on serving in fulltime pastoral ministry, receiving commensurate compensation, and preaching in large, expensive church facilities. DeVotie envisioned a growing number of professional pastors who would give Baptists the opportunity to not only reach a larger portion of the southern population but also benefit from affluent supporters for important Baptist initiatives. Spearheading this dramatic change threatened to make DeVotie a martyr rather than a leader, but he retained a broad base of Baptist support by continuing to maintain crucial footholds in the southern frontier faith: professing orthodox theology, seeking conversions, organizing revival meetings, and practicing church discipline.

[11] DeVotie Memoirs, Vol 1, 105. He wrote, "For many years I was Cor (or Gen) Secy of the Convention, President of the Ala Bap Bible Society, Pres of the Board of Trustees of the Athenaeum of Tuscaloosa three years, President of Board of Trustees of Howard College two first years of its existence, and trustee 15 years, Moderator of Cahaba Association two years, President of Domestic Mission Board Southern Bap Convention many years. The brethren made me do something."

Even as DeVotie stayed in the good graces of many Baptists by keeping a foothold in these beliefs and practices, he faced off against powerful elements within the Baptist fold who fought his methods for expanding the footprint of Baptists. In Alabama and Georgia Hardshell or "Anti-mission" Baptists recognized little connection between entering the kingdom of God in the next life and building up denominations on earth. Out of concern over pursuing any manmade form of spirituality, they even eschewed many organized efforts at social reform and evangelism.[12] In addition, they feared both the power of their own denominational agencies and any collaboration with other denominations. Expanding church institutions frightened these Baptists because they believed the Bible prescribed decentralized authority and they attributed periods of decline in the history of the Christian church to the corruption that sometimes accompanied expanding ecclesiastical power structures. Collaboration with other denominations concerned Hardshells because it threatened theological purity and potentially created multi-denominational authority structures. As a result, they rejected most of DeVotie's efforts to transform Baptists in the South. In so doing, they not only refused to evolve from frontier revivalism, but also lost the evangelistic energy of that movement. In similar fashion but because they saw the Baptist faith as the only legitimate expression of Christianity, Landmark Baptists also opposed the vision of men like DeVotie. Had the Hardshells' regressive vision or the Landmarkers' exclusivism prevailed, the Baptist churches in Alabama and Georgia might have declined with ingrown spiritual stagnation. Instead, DeVotie organized Baptists to build numerous denominational institutions and collaborated in revival meetings with Methodists and

[12] Rutledge, 9. "The remarkable progress of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was realized in the face of difficulties…Parallel with mounting concern for missions was a rising tide of anti-mission sentiment. The Baptist especially faced this, and from some of the men who had served nobly as frontier preachers. These men, largely untrained and unpaid, were suspicious of the centralization required by a missionary society or board…"

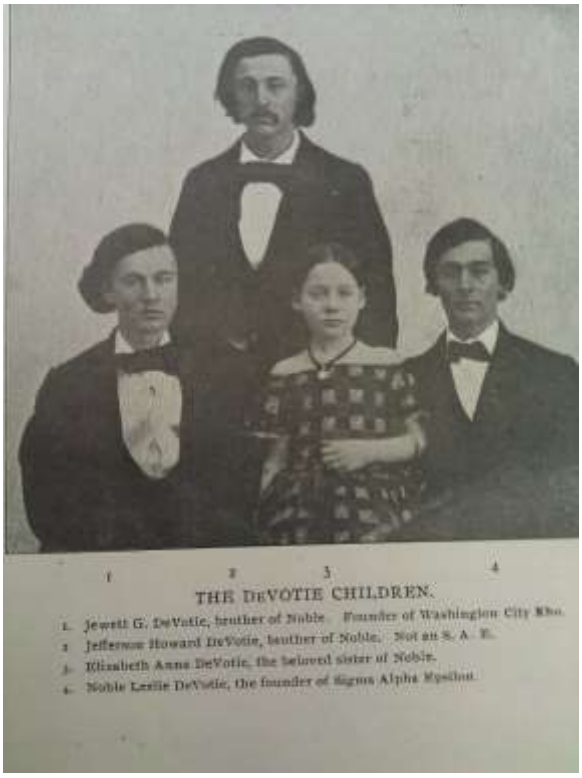
Presbyterian evangelicals, yielding the remarkable expansion of Baptist influence in Alabama and Georgia.

DeVotie also serves as a lens unto the temporary reconfiguration of evangelical ministry during the Civil War. He pastored the First Baptist Church in Columbus, Georgia, in the war years and seized what ministry opportunities he could, both on the home-front and near the battlefront. He served intermittently as a chaplain to troops stationed in the Georgia vicinity and soldiers recalled the special impact of his ministry among them. As a pastor in a town well-behind the lines but which was a manufacturing center for the Confederacy, DeVotie also provides a helpful perspective on wartime life for evangelical ministers and their flocks. DeVotie shepherded his church through the wartime years, speaking messages of encouragement about God's plan, facilitating community-wide prayer meetings, and supporting the efforts of the women in the community to contribute to the war effort.

All of this is even more remarkable since DeVotie accomplished it in the midst of bitter personal suffering that included losing all seven of his children from his first marriage as well as his first wife to disease or accident. He then outlived all but one of the four children from his second marriage.[13] Three sons died in infancy during the 1830s and two daughters in the same manner during the 1880s. He did not see any of his children live past 30. Particularly painful was the loss of Noble, his oldest son to survive infancy and the heir apparent to follow in his ministry footsteps. In April 1861, while just beginning to serve as a chaplain to the Confederate troops from Selma, Noble drowned in the ocean outside Fort Morgan, near Mobile, Alabama. While bidding farewell to some of the soldiers leaving on a transport boat he fell off of a wharf

[13] 1880 U.S. Census , Griffin, Spalding, Georgia, Enumeration District 118, sheet 375, dwelling 347, family 399, James H. DeVotie household, National Archives, T9; *Christian Index*, Dec 12, 1872. Obituary for C. M. Noble DeVotie; *Georgia Weekly Telegraph and Georgia Journal & Messenger*, Dec 23, 1873. This wedding announcement was published on the day of DeVotie's marriage to Georgia Amos.

and became the first official casualty of the war from Alabama. DeVotie's life of suffering and the public nature of his losses intensified his faith, deepening his belief in a loving sovereign God, even while they took an emotional toll. His suffering gave him an unusual ability to minister to the suffering people of the South in the decades after the Civil War. Because of a mutual bond in tragedy, Baptists in Alabama and Georgia not only admired DeVotie's perseverance through trials, but also found it very difficult to resist his overall vision and programs for Baptist expansion, even where they might have initially disagreed with some of his tactics. The successive losses to his biological family legacy also drove DeVotie's relentless labors to leave behind a legacy by building the Baptist denominational family.



DeVotie also provides a lens into the dynamics of ministry in the interracial congregations of Alabama and Georgia through the end of the Civil War. He spent all of his antebellum and wartime ministry years as a local pastor leading congregations with substantial black membership. He led many slaves to embrace faith in Christ, baptized them into the

church, helped them grow to greater Biblical knowledge, encouraged their obedience to God, and in general sought to show them a model of the Christian life. Yet, DeVotie certainly was no abolitionist. In fact he owned slaves and supported the Confederacy to its end. Thus, he provides perspective on how white southern pastors who supported slavery balanced their racial convictions with their often vigorous efforts to see the Gospel extended to slaves and to see slaves formed in the faith.

By the end of DeVotie's life, black Baptists in the South had formed their own churches and thoroughly severed denominational ties with what became the predominantly white Southern Baptist Convention. DeVotie's ministry to the interracial congregations he led reveals potential ways he and other white pastors like him influenced the development of the black Baptist churches when those churches became independent from white leadership. Clearly black pastors and church members served as the chief actors in the rapid advancement of the Christian faith in the black community during the latter years of the nineteenth century. However, they also implemented many of the ministry institutions they would have observed during their years in the interracial churches of the South. In a manner that mirrored many institutions which DeVotie championed, black Baptists launched religious newspapers, established associations, organized mission agencies, and spearheaded educational efforts. Black pastors also sought to build church buildings and receive professional compensation while at the same time holding on to historic Baptist beliefs and preaching with zeal.

After the Civil War, DeVotie failed to make any earnest attempt to grant newly freed slaves equal standing in the Baptist churches. However, even before the Civil War ended he led the efforts of The First Baptist Church of Columbus to transition the black members of the congregation over to the care of their own black pastor and into their own building paid for

partly by black members. In the decades following the war, he resourced and trained black Baptist leaders, including organizing and conducting "theological institutes." He also served among the trustees who established the Atlanta Theological Institute, which would become Morehouse College. Especially during his tenure directing the Georgia Baptist Mission Board, DeVotie helped mobilize black Baptist missionaries and multiply the black Baptist churches which would become pillars of the American black community. In the postwar years, many white evangelicals welcomed the complete separation of black from white Christians and desired little continued connection. DeVotie was clearly no civil rights advocate. Yet he refused to wash his hands of efforts to nurture the separated black Baptist churches. Right up to his death in 1891, he endeavored to equip the black church and challenge his fellow white Baptists not to relent in their support of black Baptists.

In Georgia, during the final fourteen years of his life, DeVotie pursued his enduring goal of expanding the Baptist presence not only by encouraging separate black Baptist congregations but also by directing the establishment of numerous white congregations. This was his primary task as the Corresponding Secretary for the Georgia Baptist Mission Board. In this capacity he helped support and oversee 20 to 30 church planting missionaries, a handful of whom were black, who launched new congregations across the state every year. Just as he had proven himself effective in fundraising for Baptist institutions, church buildings, and ministry programs, he now traveled annually to nearly every association and numerous churches, raising funds to support the missionary pastors of these new churches.