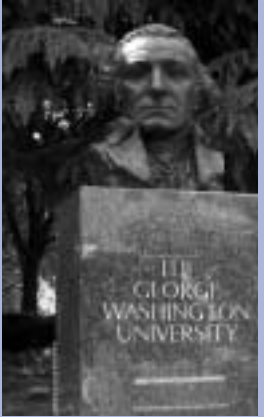


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N OBSERVANCE of the 200th anniversary of the First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, D.C., we are pleased to offer this brochure to celebrate a legacy Baptists have left this city almost since its inception: the significant role early Baptists played in the establishment of the Columbian College, the renowned institution we now know as The George Washington University.

Scott Bell photo



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The First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, D.C.

Robert G. Jones
Professor Emeritus of Religion
The George Washington University
307 Amohi Lane
Loudon, Tennessee 37774
robjones@aol.com

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An Educational Legacy of Baptists: The George Washington University

ALTHOUGH the dream of a national university persisted in George Washington's efforts and admonitions, the actions that led to the institution named after our first president came from an entirely different movement: the missionary vision of American Baptists.

George Washington left stock in the Potomac Company (later absorbed by the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company) "towards the endowment of a University to be established within the limits of the District of Columbia, under the auspices of the General Government, if that government should incline to extend a fostering hand towards it."¹ This never happened. The government never acted and the stock became worthless. One can note the dream of a national university as a legacy from Washington; the history of the founding of that university is unrelated to that dream.

Instead, one can trace a direct line from "The Haystack Movement" to the founding of Columbian College in 1821.² The spiritual vision of the five Williams College "Brethren" who took refuge from a thunderstorm under a haystack in 1806 was to include the first organized American mission society as well as the founding of Christian educational institutions. It is Luther Rice who most symbolizes this movement, and who can appropriately be called the founder of Columbian College.

With Adoniram Judson, Rice had gone to Burma, been convinced of the correctness of the Baptist understanding of baptism, and returned to America to become the pioneer fund-raiser among Baptists, both for the missionary activity and the establishment of an educational institution. Out of the desire for cooperative support for missions, came the Triennial Convention of Baptists. But, largely from the sense of the need for proper education for missionaries, also came the proposal to establish first a theological school, and then a general liberal arts university in the nation's capital. Luther Rice, whose spiritual home was the

1. Elmer Louis Kayser, *Bricks Without Straw*, p. 13.

2. This was later to be called Columbian University and finally renamed The George Washington University as a contingency upon the reception of a gift from the George Washington Memorial Association in 1904 for the construction of a Washington Memorial Building.

First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, D.C., and whose most trusted and intimate friend was its pastor, Obadiah Brown, was a key figure, both in providing financial support at home for the missionaries abroad, and later in saving the troubled college from financial death.

The significance of Rice is well summarized from his epitaph:

"No Baptist has done more for the cause of Education. He founded the Columbian College in the District of Columbia, which he benevolently intended by its central position to diffuse knowledge, both literary and Religious, through these United States. And if for want of deserved patronage that unfortunate institution, which was the special subject of his prayers and toils, for the last fifteen years of his life failed to fulfill the high purpose of its Founder, yet the Spirit of Education awakened by his labor shall accomplish his noble aims. Luther Rice was a portly person of commanding presence, combined a strong and brilliant intellect. As a theologian he was orthodox. Scholar, his education was liberal. He was an eloquent and powerful preacher. A self-denying and indefatigable philanthropist. His frailties, with his dust, are intombed. And upon the walls of Zion his virtues are engraven."³

While Rice raised money with his famous buggy trips all along the Eastern Seaboard, Obadiah Brown became the first president of the Board of Trustees of the Columbian College, indeed presenting the recommendation that it be located in Washington.

The official resolutions of the Triennial Convention were:

"That the Institution for the education of Gospel ministers, be located at the City of Washington, or in its vicinity, in the District of Columbia; and that the Board be directed to cause its removal thither, whenever suitable preparations shall be made for its reception in that place, and when, and in their opinions, such removal shall be expedient.

"That this Convention accept of the premises tendered to them for the site of an Institution for the education of Gospel ministers, and for a college, adjoining the city of Washington, and that the Board be di-

3. Pine Pleasant Baptist Churchyard, Saluda, South Carolina.

rected to take measures, as soon as convenient, for obtaining a legal title to the same. —And that the Board be further directed to keep the Institution, already in a state of progress, first in view, and not to incur expenses beyond the amount of funds which may be obtained for the establishment of either of the Institutions."⁴

First property was bought in Mount Pleasant and called "College Hill," some 48 acres roughly bounded by Florida Avenue and Columbia Road between 14th and 15th Streets. Subsequent moves were to the area of New York Avenue, H Street and 13th Street, and then to the present site in Foggy Bottom.

Founded and supported, then, by Baptists as a part of the missionary and educational vision, the new institution was chartered, after lengthy debate, by Congress in 1821, but with a non-sectarian charter: "And be it further enacted: That persons of every religious denomination shall be capable of being elected trustees; nor shall any person either as president, professor, tutor or pupil be refused admission, or denied any privileges, immunities or advantages thereof, for or on account of his sentiments in matters in religion."⁵ (Another section allowed that financial records be open for examination of the Attorney General of the United States.) At first trustees were chosen by the contributors. Later, it became a self-perpetuating board.

In conclusion, it might be noted that, upon promise of prayers and financial support by Baptists, the non-sectarian charter was revoked for about 6 years—1898—1904. Receiving only the former, the University dissolved Baptist control again. It was in this financial crisis that the arrangements were made for contributions from the George Washington Memorial Society with the resultant change of name. The result is the present self-portrayal of The George Washington University: the only private, non-sectarian university in the Nation's capital. The legacy from the Baptists is recognized in the name of the administrative building: Rice Hall.

4. Kayser, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

5. Kayser, *op. cit.*, p. 32.