

FROM _____
AGE^{TO} AGE

A History of the
Delaware Baptist Association
and the Faithfulness of God

Champ Thornton

Foreword by Tom J. Nettles



Delaware Baptist Association, Newark, DE 19713

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Photo Credits & Comments

Front cover (and page 24): Second Baptist Church (Wilmington, photograph dated 1891), courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society.

Page 19: Welsh Tract Baptist Church (Iron Hill, photograph dated 1929), courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society.

Page 28: Delaware Avenue Baptist Church (later Immanuel Baptist Church, Wilmington, photograph dated ca. 1870s), courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society.

Note about these three historic churches: The church pictured on page 19 is the Welsh Tract Baptist Church, the first Baptist church in the state of Delaware (founded 1703). Welsh Tract Baptist helped start First Baptist Church (Wilmington) in 1785. Second Baptist Church (Wilmington), on the front cover and page 24, came from First Baptist in 1835. Three decades later members of Second Baptist planted Delaware Avenue Baptist in 1865 (on page 28). Delaware Avenue Baptist, having changed its name to Immanuel Baptist Church, started Bethany Baptist Church (Newport) in 1951. Bethany Baptist aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention in 1956, becoming the first Southern Baptist Church in the state of Delaware.

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PART ONE

TRACING ROOTS

*Our parents knew your goodness,
and we their deeds record;
and both to this bear witness:
one church, one faith, one Lord!*

The sanctuary at First Southern Baptist Church was empty most weekday afternoons. But this was no ordinary Tuesday.

As the clock struck 2 p.m. on October 10, 1967, the sound of singing rang throughout the room. Just over 100 men and women, messengers representing six Delaware churches and two mission chapels, had gathered in Dover to witness a happy event for which they had long planned and prayed.

Since the early 1950s Southern Baptist Churches in the state of Delaware had belonged, at the local level, to an association headquartered in Maryland—either the Eastern or the Susquehanna Association. But with 28 churches just in the Maryland portion of the Eastern Association and 29 Maryland churches in the Susquehanna—and with the combined area of the Associations spanning over 1,400 square miles in Maryland alone—many Baptists in Delaware felt the need for an association that more closely shared both local geography and local concerns.

So for all who attended, this was an historic moment for Delaware. After singing, *To God by the Glory*, listening to a reading of Matthew 9:35-38, praying together, and reading letters of official commendation from the Eastern and Susquehanna Associations, the time had finally come. The motion was made: that “all messengers elected by said churches constitute the first annual session of the Delaware Baptist Association And we further move that the said churches join together in the official constitution of the Delaware Baptist Association.”

This motion, to form the Delaware Baptist Association, was seconded and approved without a dissenting vote. The DBA had begun . . . for a third time.

CHAPTER ONE

THE EARLY DELAWARE BAPTIST ASSOCIATIONS

Almost exactly 172 years before the DBA began in 1967, twelve delegates from six Baptist churches left their homes and began traveling to another historic meeting. From all three counties in Delaware and one in Maryland they came. Until on October 24, 1795, these representatives gathered together to constitute the Delaware Baptist Association.



Welsh Tract Baptist Church, exterior view of graveyard and church, 1929

The earliest of these churches, the Welsh Tract Baptist Church, had been started in 1703 by men and women who had recently emigrated from Wales and purchased a tract of land in New Castle County, near Iron Hill. For the next 75 years, most of the handful of Baptist churches in New Castle and Kent

Counties could trace their lineage to this church.² So by 1795 God had raised up at least five Baptist churches in Delaware who also belonged to the Philadelphia Baptist Association: the Welsh Tract Baptist Church (1703), the Cow Marsh Baptist Church (1781), the Duck Creek (later Bryn Zion) Baptist Church (1781), Mispillion Baptist Church (1783), and First Baptist Church of Wilmington (1785). These five churches, along with Queen Anne's Baptist Church, which likely belonged to an association in Maryland, united to form the very first Delaware Baptist Association.³

“The numbers and influence of the denomination in this State for many years was small, yet it was for a long time equal, in proportion to the population, to any of the Middle States.” —David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America* (1848)⁴

The design for this new association in Delaware was rooted in Scripture⁵ and already modeled by the association in Philadelphia. Having begun in 1707, the Philadelphia Baptist Association was the first Baptist association in America. They “gathered yearly around the preaching and teaching of scriptural and theological issues, to maintain orderly churches, but also to consider the unique needs of member churches. To this end, the Philadelphia Association minutes display the Association’s involvement in essential church matters. Observing the minutes reveals two aspects of this involvement: (1) accountability toward doctrinal purity and church order, and (2) protection of unity among local congregations.”⁶

By the end of the 1700s, the focus of the Philadelphia Association had begun to widen. As the 1800s unfolded, “the Philadelphia Baptist Association mirrored Baptist churches, in general, by shifting its focus toward missionary and educational needs at the expense of . . . the once common interchange between the Association and its member churches regarding internal church matters.”⁷ As cooperation for missions became more central to Baptist associations, mutual theological sharpening and accountability among churches and their leaders may have waned, but church planting and evangelism flourished.

In the Lord’s kindness, the first 40 years of the fledgling Association in Delaware were marked by the same kind of growth and health. In 1801, the six churches within this Delaware Association saw a combined membership of 293 members, but by 1825 the number of churches had grown to nine and their membership to 596.⁸ Describing Baptist churches in Delaware during this time period, pastor and historian, Richard Briscoe Cook, said, “the Baptists of Delaware were a missionary, and consequently a growing, people, and Delaware was a center of Baptist power and influence. . . . And for a quarter of a century after the formation of the Delaware Association these were missionary churches, favoring [mission] societies for extending the Redeemer’s kingdom at home and in foreign lands.”⁹

Supporting and energizing this missionary zeal was a strong doctrinal conviction. For like the majority of Baptist congregations in America,¹⁰ all DBA churches held to the Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742),¹¹ which rooted its evangelism deep in doctrine. It affirmed that without both the working of the Holy Spirit and the giving of the gospel, no one could turn to Christ for salvation.

“Although the gospel be the only outward means of revealing Christ and saving grace, and is, as such, abundantly sufficient thereunto; yet that men who are dead in trespasses may be born again, quickened or regenerated, there is moreover necessary an effectual insuperable work of the Holy Spirit upon the whole soul, for the producing in them a new spiritual life; without which no other means will effect their conversion unto God.” — *The Philadelphia Confession of Faith*, section 20.4

Delaware Baptists, through the 1700s and into the 1800s, were vigorous to connect their theology and practice. And God was faithful, enabling this combination to bear much fruit. A letter from this era, written in 1816 by pastor of First Baptist in Wilmington, John M. Peck, and also officially approved by the Delaware Baptist Association, reflects a radiantly evangelistic spirit and thankful heart for all that God had done across the state.

“If we take a cursory view of what has been effected in the last twenty-five years, who can withhold the exclamation, ‘What hath God wrought!’ At that period the missionary flame commenced in Europe: it hath kindled across continents and islands, until the same holy fervor, in a good degree, warms the hearts of God’s children on every side of the globe. No difficulties are insuperable to the zeal which animates the heralds of salvation: they go forth in every direction, bearing the precious treasure of eternal life. . . . The real Christian, while viewing, on the one hand, the darkness, misery, and guilt of a large portion of the human family who are famishing for the ‘bread of eternal life,’ and on the other the ardent zeal discovered to relieve their miserable state, pants for the privilege of entering into the harvest. . . . Had we lived half a century ago, we might have been suffered to sleep securely, insensible to the wants of our perishing fellow-men. . . . Let us cast our eyes on

the multitudes around us in this land of gospel light, . . . [who are] without the means of religious instruction. . . . Let us be aroused by these considerations to make one united and vigorous effort to spread the gospel of Jesus both at home and abroad.”¹²

Yet less than four decades after the DBA had begun, a turn of events threatened to extinguish this missionary zeal across the state.

New Pastor, Old School

In 1831, the Welsh Tract Baptist Church called a new pastor, the 12th in their history to that point. His name was Samuel Trott.¹³ Within the first two years of his ministry, he had written letters to the Delaware Baptist Association both decrying so-called “modern methodologies” in churches such as ministerial salaries, theological education, and missionary societies, and also labeling all evangelistic efforts as merely “resorting to the plans of human contrivance.”¹⁴ He offered this explanation for such inactivity: “Hence we prefer praying to him, the Lord of the harvest, to send forth laborers into his harvest such as he shall choose and qualify, and [we] rely on his wisdom, power, and faithfulness to provide all things necessary for gathering in his elect and extending the knowledge of his salvation to the ends of the earth . . .”¹⁵

Churches of this hyper-Calvinistic and anti-missionary perspective are commonly called Primitive, Hard Shell, or Old School Baptists. And Baptist churches in Delaware, as throughout the United States, during the early decades of the 1800s, became divided over the issue of missions.

“The anti-mission forces in the churches were opposed to centralization of authority, to an educated and paid ministry, and to such man-made organizations as Sunday schools, missionary societies, and theological seminaries. The hyper-Calvinism, which so often characterized the theological frame of mind of this group, was frequently used to bolster and justify their other arguments against exerting any effort to evangelize the lost.” —Robert Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*¹⁶
