

The Early Development of Baptist Educational Institutions in Missouri:1849-1906

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## Introduction

Paul wrote to Timothy, “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (*The King James Study Bible*, 2 Tim. 2:15). The Apostle, a well-learned man, encouraged young Timothy to be teachable, so that he might become good at telling others about God’s word. Fast forward to early America, where Paul’s sentiment still applied to a new society. The first school for higher education in the Colonies was Harvard, established by the Puritans in 1636 for the purpose of training up people to spread the gospel (“America’s Education Timeline”). As New England grew and the American Colonies were formed, adventurous settlers ventured west toward the Mississippi River and beyond.

The northern Louisiana territory was under Spanish control prior to the Louisiana purchase in 1803. Many Roman Catholic churches had been established, but Baptists were coming from places like North and South Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee (Duncan 26). After 1803, the northern Louisiana region became the state of Missouri. This opened the opportunity for more Baptist people to settle there, Baptist churches to be started, and association of churches to be formed. The desires of the Apostle Paul and the founders of Harvard University eventually became the desires of early Missouri Baptists. The incredible task of establishing schools that would effectively train Baptists to share the gospel across Missouri was realistically accomplished and was evidenced especially between the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Early Missouri Baptists

John Mason Peck and James Welch were the first Baptist home missionaries to the western frontier (Illinois and Missouri) following the formation of the American Baptist Home Mission Society in 1832 (Baker 68). Peck was considered by many to be “the most outstanding home missionary Baptists in America ever produced. (McBeth 222).” Most early Missouri Baptists settled in rural areas and lived off the land. Baptists and Methodists started most rural churches in those days. “Unlike Baptist ministers normally lived in the communities they served and who had to support themselves, early Methodist preachers were itinerants paid by church conferences in more settled areas to preach full-time of the frontier (Foley 181).”

Most Baptist preachers did not have a formal education. Luther Rice, Peck and Welch were in favor of educating ministers. Rice, to interest Baptist in missions work felt that interest would be sparked through education and campaigned with a theme. “‘Education the high-road to missions’ was his idea (Greene 205).” John P. Greene wrote that:

Peck and Welch caught the spirit of Rice and brought it with them across the Mississippi. They founded a school in St. Louis and later another one near St. Charles. When Peck went to Illinois he started an academy at Hock Spring, which resulted in the founding of Shurtleff College, at Alton, in 1831. He was no longer a missionary in Missouri, but he was on the eastern border and never took his hand off Missouri. The college at Alton, on the eastern bank of the Mississippi river, only twenty miles above St. Louis, was a beacon light of education for Missouri. It inspired Missouri Baptists to found a college. (205)

Paul’s hope for Timothy would begin to come to light for young Missouri Baptist men who were called to minister where they lived. Through the 1930s the educational idea grew and grew among Baptists, both in the minds of leaders and laymen. While people discussed the potential of starting a Baptist college, the greatest challenge among them was that they did not know how poor Baptist settlers might come up with enough money for a proper endowment funding.

## Early Missouri Baptist Educational Institutions

It is estimated that “between 1849 and 1906, Baptists in various parts of Missouri founded more than one hundred different colleges, schools, or academies, all duly reported to meetings of the General Association (Kingsley 36).” A number of these schools, especially colleges, will be documented below. Earlier and more successful schools will be presented chronologically followed by a list of other schools discovered that were founded sometime between 1849 and 1906.

### William Jewell College, Liberty – 1849 - Present

While the schools Peck and Welch tried to start in St. Louis and St. Charles had failed, the first college to be started with a strong collaborative effort was William Jewell College, located in Liberty, Missouri. H. R. Truex, in a report at the Missouri Baptist Centennial in 1906 stated, “As early as 1843 William Jewell College was born in the hearts of Missouri Baptists seven years before a brick was laid (Truex 190).” J. Gordon Kingsley claimed:

William Jewell College, founded in 1849, is the only school established by the Baptist state convention itself. When the Missouri Baptist Convention (“Central Society”) was formed in 1834, no public or Baptist schools were available in the state to which churchmen could send their young; the only school existing was a fledgling St. Louis University, a Catholic institution. If a Baptist youngster wanted to go to a Baptist school in Missouri, he or she was just out of luck. (37)

Dr. William Jewell, a physician from Columbia, provided the first \$10,000 in 1843, “subscriptions” were sold, a special charter was granted by Governor Austin King, and land in Liberty plus \$7,000 was received from Clay County. Thus began the journey of the first men’s college west of the Mississippi River (Kingsley 37-38).

Mt. Pleasant College, Huntsville – 1853 (Greene) or 1857 (Kingsley) – 1882

John P. Greene wrote that Mt. Pleasant College was started in 1853, just four years after William Jewell College opened, making it the second Missouri Baptist college founded (222). It was a co-educational school started by “brethren in Randolph county (Greene 211).” The school closed in 1882.

Lexington Baptist Female College, Lexington – 1850 (*Wentworth*) or 1855 (Kingsley) - < 1900

Lexington Baptist Female College was the first of three “notable schools for girls” that found a home Lexington, Missouri during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (*Wentworth*). Kingsley and Greene suggested an opening date of 1855, with Greene noting that the college was started by “a company of brethren (211).” Kingsley wrote that the college closed sometime before 1900 (92).

Baptist Female College/Stephens College, Columbia – 1856 - Present

The most enduring Missouri Baptist female college was Baptist Female College, which began in Columbia in 1856. Greene stated that it was founded “by good men in Columbia and Boone county (211).” The school initially started in 1833 as the Columbia Female Academy, then came under Baptist control in 1856. In 1870, the school finally became Stephens College in 1870. Stephens is known as “the second-oldest women’s college in the country and the first institution of higher education in Columbia, Mo (“Stephensophia”).”

LaGrange College/Hannibal-LaGrange, LaGrange – 1858 (Greene) or 1859 (Kingsley) - Present

Another long enduring college started by early Missouri Baptists is what is now known as Hannibal-LaGrange University. Initially known as LaGrange College, was founded in 1858 by

the Wyaconda Association (Greene 225). LaGrange was closed during the Civil War and like other Baptist colleges did well to survive (Kingsley 58).

Grand River Baptist College, Edinburgh – 1859 (Greene) or 1876 (Kingsley) - around 1905

Greene and Kingsley offer conflicting founding dates for Grand River Baptist College. Depending on the accuracy, the school was active for either as few as twenty-nine (Kingsley 123) or as many as forty-six years (Greene 211-12). In 1905, alongside Southwest Baptist College, Grand River turned its “properties over to William Jewell, to be conducted as academies (Greene 227).” Unfortunately, the college did not survive long after the changeover (Kingsley 123).

Hardin College, Mexico – 1873 - 1932

“In 1873, Governor C. H. Hardin and his noble wife founded Hardin College, Mexico. It was their purpose to make this a great school for women (Greene 223-24).” Hardin College was not started by the General Association or local associations, but rather by “individuals under ‘private enterprise’ arrangements (Kingsley 37).” Kingsley noted that the college lived up to the hopes that Governor Hardin and his wife had for the college until the Great Depression brought the school to a halt in 1932 (92).

St. Joseph Female College/Seminary, St. Joseph – 1876 (Kingsley) or 1877 (Greene) - 1881

John P. Greene reported that “Dr. Dulin and other brethren” founded St. Joseph Female College in 1877 (212). Kingsley suggests a date of 1876 (36). The college in St. Joseph was very short-lived, having closed in 1881.

### Pierce City Baptist College, Pierce City – 1877 - 1905

Pierce City Baptist College was established in 1877, just one year prior to Southwest Baptist College in Bolivar, which was only a seventy-five mile journey northeast of Pierce City. The college was started with cooperation from four separate Baptist associations (Greene 212). Like Grand River in Edinburgh, the school closed its doors around 1905.

### St. Louis Female College/St. Louis Seminary for Women, Jennings Station – 1871 – 1873

J. Gordon Kingsley described St. Louis Seminary for Women as one of several historical influences that eventually produced Missouri Baptist College in 1968 (150). A brief sketch from the St. Louis County Recorder of Deeds noted that the school was housed in a Victorian homestead, located at 2515 McLaran in Jennings, Missouri. The file indicated that the property was the former estate of James and Ann Jennings and was sold to the Baptist Association of St. Louis in 1871 (“Jennings Survey”). The school closed in 1873, likely due to the toil taken upon it by the Civil War.

### Southwest Baptist College, Bolivar – 1878 - Present

Southwest Baptist College, once known as Southwest Academy and now as Southwest Baptist University, is another long-standing educational institution founded by early Missouri Baptists. Kingsley assessed the early years of Southwest when he wrote, “At the turn of the century Southwest Baptist College had managed to stay alive through twenty-two years of difficulties, but its future was by no means secure. Colleges of that era died more often than they lived (92).” The school carries on even amidst recent changes to offer educational opportunities to over 2,700 students.

Mayfield-Smith Academy/Will Mayfield College, Smithville/Marble Hill – 1878 – around 1932

“Will Mayfield College, Marble Hill, was founded in 1878 by Dr. W. H. Mayfield (Greene 225-26).” It was located near the Missouri Bootheel, where a school was needed. Mayfield lasted more than fifty years, but like Hardin closed during the Great Depression (Kingsley 110).

Liberty Baptist College/Liberty Ladies’ College, Liberty – 1889 - 1930

In 1867, two schools for females existed nearby, the Clay County Seminary and the Liberty Female Institute. For cost reasons, the two schools merged together to form the Liberty Female College in 1889 (“Liberty Ladies College” 1). The name of the college was changed to Liberty Ladies’ College in 1895. The school was located “on an opposite hill from William Jewell College” (Kingsley 92), and when it was destroyed by fire in 1913, the two institutions pursued a partnership. In 1920, the first official female graduate of William Jewell completed her degree (“Liberty Ladies College” 2).

Western Baptist Bible College, Kansas City – 1889 - Present

Among the colleges started by early Missouri Baptists, Western Baptist Bible College of Kansas City “bears the distinction of being the first, and only, Christian Institution west of the Mississippi River founded by Blacks exclusively (“Western Baptist”).” Early in its existence the Home Mission Society of New York, an extension of the Triennial Convention, offered substantial financial support to the school. Kingsley, writing about “Missouri Baptists and Social Concern” in the 1970s mentioned that “Support continued for Western Baptist Bible College, a Negro school in Kansas City (177).” In addition to its main location in Kansas City Western has



campuses in Junction City, Kansas; Olathe, Kansas; St. Louis, Missouri; and Topeka, Kansas.

“The purposes underlying the founding of this school were: first, a desire to meet the demands of ministerial training; secondly, to provide education under Christian influence for young people (“Western Baptist”).”

## Other Schools

Clarksburg College was established in 1876 and remained open until at least 1906 when the Missouri Baptist Centennial took place (Greene 225). The date of establishment of Farmington College was not ascertained, but Greene reported that it was closed at the time of the Missouri Baptist Centennial (213). Louisiana Baptist College, later named Mo-Cune College, was started in 1869 and closed in the 1880s (Greene 212). Finally, the opening date of Webb City College was not found, but Greene indicated that it had closed before the Missouri Baptist Centennial (213). Interestingly in Greene’s printed manuscript of his address to the Missouri Baptist Centennial, both Farmington and Webb City had the word “Dead” where founding and/or closing information was found for the other colleges listed, perhaps indicating that the schools never actually opened (213).

## Conclusion

The eighteen schools mentioned in the research represent a very small number of the schools actually started by early Missouri Baptists. It is likely that the total number of schools opened between 1849 and 1906 is a figure only known to God. Regardless, those years had to be exciting for faithful, hard-working Baptists who shared a deep desire to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to this new territory, just beyond the Mississippi, and open schools of learning that

would help them in that endeavor. Rewind back to the Paul’s letter to young Timothy. . . . “Study to show thyself approved, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed . . . .”

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