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**Historical Sketch of the
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Moore Haven, Fla.**

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By **WALTER M. LEE, A.M., Th.D.,**
Pastor First Baptist Church, Cochran, Ga.

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Historial Sketch of the First Baptist Church of Moore Haven, Fla.

The Empire of the Everglades is in its infancy. With proper drainage and cultivation the present narrow ring of luxuriant fertility bordering Lake Okeechobee will extend southward through the saw grass muck to the gates of Miami.

"The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad;
And the waste places shall rejoice and blossom as the rose."

The enterprising city of Moore Haven, the metropolis of the Everglades, is most advantageously located at the head of lake navigation, and is therefore the psychological focus for railway junction. She has sprung from the rich muck soil of Seminolia with a rapidity of development comparable only to the quick growth of that teeming and prolific vegetation which beautifies the fertile paradise that surrounds her.

Not a decade has passed since the lone Sentinel Cypress laved her colossal feet in her vast and shallow bathtub, which stretched to the horizon on every side. The man who cut the first trees and handled the first spadeful of earth in preparation for the Magic City of the Muck still resides as an honored citizen of Moore Haven. The man who laid the roads, constructed the bridges, and planned the improvements of the city still figures for her future. Some of the first settlers from across the lake are among the leaders in civic, intellectual, and religious development. Where a decade ago the semi-tropical sun looked down upon an untouched wilderness of elder growth and saw grass, an expanse of dank and muggy moisture, the abode of the somnolent alligator and the wily trout, there now appears a city of screened residences, paved streets and sidewalks, bridges, docks, hotels, and business houses,—an object of pride and wonder, a Child of Wonderland.

The astounding story of the saw grass section may be told in pregnant phrase: discovery, drainage, reclamation, improvement, cultivation, enterprise, in-

dustry, and initiative. Moore Haven, the Magic Metropolis of the Muck, is the living incarnation of the foregoing features. In spite of occasional adversity, drought, devastation by fire, and the vicissitudes of post-war deflation, the city continues to expand, and her roseate future may safely be left to the sanguine expectations and untiring exertions of her enterprising citizenry.

The political and educational life of the city has kept pace, in its enterprise and initiative, with the physical expansion. Political leaders are to a large extent selected with a view to traits of honor, probity, virtue, and good repute. The superior type of the immigrants contributes a constituency which readily responds to leadership toward superior educational ideals.

The religious development of the section received attention from the origin of the enterprise, and it is to this subject that this brochure shall be largely confined.

While several religious denominations are now represented among the active religious forces of Moore Haven, and while each in its field is pressing forward with gratifying success, it is our purpose to limit our discussion largely to the activities of the Baptists.

With the new impetus of development which came to the Caloosahatchee basin upon the opening up of the Everglades, The Mission Board of the Florida Baptist Convention sent Rev. R. A. Sublette, long time resident of South Carolina, to Ft. Myers to take initial steps in establishing centers of Baptist worship in Ft. Myers, Estero, Naples, Marco, Buckingham, Immokalee, Alva, LaBelle, and Moore Haven. Though sixty-five years of age, he was possessed of untiring energy, vigilance, initiative, and determination. Residing in East Ft. Myers, and preaching regularly in the mission church there, he visited and preached in all the aforementioned localities, gathering a nucleus of adherents at every point, and laying foundations which have proved permanent.

Born Jan. 23, 1850, in Jackson County, Alabama, near Scottsboro, Rev. R. A. Sublette was the son of Col. J. J. Sublette and Sara Wood Sublette. On his father's side, the grandfather of R. A. Sublette was

Benjamin S. Sublette, the son of the celebrated Benjamin Sublette of Revolutionary fame, the Great War Horse of the Revolution. The father of this Benjamin Sublette was Peter Lewis Sublette, who left Paris in 1685, as a result of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and wandering over Europe for fifteen years, finally sailed for America, and landing at Jamestown, settled in Powhatan County on James River above Richmond. The father of Peter Lewis Sublette was Abraham Sublette, who left Paris July 24, 1685, and taking with him his little son, Peter Lewis, went to Germany, thence to Holland, thence to Littleberry, England, and thence to America, landing at Jamestown in September, 1700.

The Sublettes resided in Powhatan County for four or five generations, until a portion of them went west and settled near Bowling Green, Ky. In this party was Benjamin and perhaps also his father, the War Horse, but the latter perhaps returned to Virginia. After remaining near Bowling Green for years, Benjamin S. Sublette and his family located in Tennessee, near Murphreesboro, and from there they all went into the Cherokee Nation, now Northern Alabama. Here J. J. and Mary Wood Sublette were married, to them being born three sons and two daughters, by name, in order of age, Margaret, William Madison, Richard Anderson, John Benjamin, and Mary Ann.

At six years of age, R. A. Sublette lost his mother by death, and he lived for a while with his grandfather. When R. A. was eight years of age, his father married a Miss Woodall. R. A. and his new stepmother clashed. Tying up his duds in a pocket handkerchief, the boy left home, and worked for a widow lady one entire year, receiving as compensation a female pig, two shirts, and a pair of homespun pants. The year afterward he spent in the service of another lady, for which he received a heifer calf and two shirts. He worked outside for a pair of yellow jeans pants, which were dyed with moss gathered from the mountain rocks.

There were panthers, wolves, and bears all through the mountains of North Alabama, during the young manhood of R. A. Sublette. Young Richard hunted at night. While in a big swamp in the

Tennessee River bottoms, a bear got after the party. He ran all the dogs off and went for the boys. They tried to get out of the swamp by wading up to their necks. Being unable, they built a fire and stayed until daylight, standing guard with axes all night. James Jefferson, an uncle of R. A. Sublette, killed by shooting and stabbing thirteen big panthers in one winter. Numbers of wolves were killed annually by poison.

During the Revolution the Tories came down to rob the settlements, when an uncle of R. A. killed their leader on his own front door steps. Another of the early Sublettes was wounded by an Indian, the arrow penetrating his leg. Crawling into a cave to escape, he saw the leg beginning to inflame. Fearing blood poison, he hacked his knife upon a rock and sawed his leg off below the knee and threw it out of the cave. We see that R. A. came from a lusty, sinewy, sturdy, vigorous, and invincible stock. He was the scion of a brawny ancestry, the offshoot of a puissant parentage.

In 1866, under the preaching of a Free Will Methodist preacher, R. A. was converted, the agonies of the new birth being very pronounced in his case. So deep was his conviction for sin, that he felt like getting under the bench in humility. His early education was limited to the three R's. When he was converted he insisted on being immersed. The Methodist preacher advised him to join the Baptists, as he was a Baptist in principle.

Laboring for a period of five years under the conviction that he ought to preach the gospel, he finally started for Texas as captain of a boat, taking twelve passengers. Floating down the Tennessee River into the Ohio, thence into the Mississippi, he found the Father of Waters fifty miles wide with a freshet. The boat struck a snag and was sinking. The life boat got loose and floated down stream. Swimming down stream a quarter of a mile, R. A. caught it, rowed it back, and rescued the twelve passengers, including women and children, just as the boat went under. He landed them on an island two feet above the water stage, and stayed there fifteen days with the mosquitoes, gnats, and flies so thick they would darken the sun in evening. They saved

part of a barrel of flour. They toasted on a stick dough which had neither soda, salt, nor grease in it.

He worked as carpenter and punched cattle in Texas for two years or more. The call of God followed him to the cattle fields. He yielded to the call. His sister remonstrated and opposed the idea. The two quarreled all night, whereupon R. A., just before day, said with determination: "I'll do it or die."

And so he did. Yes, praise God, he preached fifty years in nearly every state in the South, and has led about eleven thousand converts to the Savior.

The aforementioned sister was an infidel. She and her brother turned the back of their hands to R. A. when he decided to preach. Having a few dollars, he spent it for books. He went to school to a Presbyterian preacher, who charged him no tuition. R. A. worked all day for bread and studied at night. Going afterward to Mt. Pleasant, Texas, where a court house was under construction, he secured work for 14 days at \$2 per day, of which amount he spent \$25 for tuition, \$2 for books, and felt rich with one dollar left.

It was in Mt. Pleasant, Texas, that R. A. Sublette was licensed to preach in May, 1873. Preaching as occasion offered, with little or no pay, he plodded on in his high calling. His brother summed up the situation thus: "He has had a fool notion to preach, but he has got stranded, and now he is ready to work." His infidel sister no doubt concurred in the statement.

But the indomitable R. A. held his course with resolute tenacity. He had set his hand to the plow. He would not look back. With characteristic pluck, he burned all bridges behind him.

The sheriff of the county heard he was trying to secure an education to prepare himself for the ministry. He offered him a job as deputy sheriff, marshal, and turn key, with a fee of one dollar for every person locked in jail or turned out of jail, at which he worked two years, with the distinct understanding that his work would not prevent his attending school. He also had an income of \$20 per month from feeding prisoners. He saw the first man ever executed in Texas by law, baptized in the jail, like

the Philippian jailer, by immersion, the act being performed by a Methodist preacher, as R. A. was then only licensed and not prepared by ordination for the performance of the ceremony.

After two years he had \$900, with which he started for Baylor University, but was turned toward Union University in Tennessee, which being suspended for want of endowment, he then went to Furman College, Greenville, S. C., where he remained four years, after which he spent two years in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary at Louisville, Ky. Having been ordained in Greenwood, Texas, by W. R. Billups, John Bannister, L. J. Crutcher, Solomon Williams, and S. H. Brooks, on June 1st, 1879, he started on his career as pastor and preacher of the everlasting gospel of Christ. Pastor at Greenwood, Bethel, and Winnsboro, Texas, in 1879, Pittsburg, Texas, 1881, Lockhart, Texas, 1882-84; Anson, Texas, 1884-86; then missionary pastor of First Street Austin, Texas, and Bastrop, Texas, he resigned to go to Walterboro, S. C., for a period of three years, after which he was pastor of Capitol Avenue Church, Atlanta, Ga., about 1892. He organized Capitol Avenue Church, and was succeeded by Dr. A. T. Spaulding as pastor.

As evangelist for twenty-six years of his life, Rev. R. A. Sublette has held meetings in many of the principal cities and towns of the Southeast and has led thousands to Christ.

After serving as pastor at Doerun, Ga., in 1912, he accepted Immanuel church, Westminster, S. C., where he led in the erection of a \$12,000 church, and built up a membership of over 300 from a band of about thirty. Spending 1916 as pastor at Paul's Valley, Okla., he then became missionary pastor under the State Board of Florida, establishing new congregations at Ft. Myers, Bonita, Naples, Moore Haven, Buckingham, Olga, LaBelle, etc. During 1918-19 he was pastor at Punta Gorda, Fla. Then he removed to Pineview, Ga., where, as pastor, he built a pastorium for the church.

The first person whom he ever baptized was the infidel sister, for whose conversion he prayed while he was at Furman University. She was in a room in Southern Texas at the time, when he was pray-

ing for her, and was converted at the hour of his prayer.

Great and thriving churches in South Carolina and Texas came into being as a result of his ministrations. Immanuel church, Westminster, S. C., was organized and built up by him.

Another city church established by this able, successful and reverend gentleman is the First Baptist Church of Moore Haven, Fla.

On his trips to Moore Haven from Ft. Myers, via LaBelle and the river route, Rev. R. A. Sublette succeeded in organizing a Sunday school among the Baptists of Moore Haven. On Oct. 7th, 1917, assisted by D. G. Lockett and H. L. Carlton in composing a presbytery, Dr. Sublette perfected the organization of the church in the picture show building, twenty-one charter members being enrolled. Upon deciding to join the Caloosa Association, the church entered upon its union and association with the Baptist churches of the state, and has been missionary in its sentiments and activities since its origin. The first building committee appointed by the church was composed of S. A. Wagner, Ira York, Jas. A. Carter, Clark Mounts, and W. E. Daniel. Fidelis and Berean classes were formed in the Sunday School. James A. Carter and W. G. Cowart were elected deacons. W. E. Daniel, one of the first settlers of the city, was elected clerk, and has held the office from the beginning to date. Over 200 members have been received into the church from its origin.

The early finances of the church were managed by J. A. Carter, Clark Mounts, Mrs. T. A. Smith, Mrs. G. K. Stokes, and others. The state board of missions aided in supporting the church for years. In February, 1918, the board recommended that Dr. Sublette make Moore Haven his headquarters. A pastorium was projected soon afterward by the church.

In January, 1919, Rev. P. A. Roberts succeeded Dr. Sublette as pastor. Meetings were still being held in the theater building. The first meeting held in the new church was on June 25, 1919.

August 29, 1919, Rev. F. W. Nolte became pastor. S. A. Wagner, D. T. Lockett, D. L. Lence, E. R. Watson, and F. B. Mills were elected deacons, Sept. 24,

1919. On Oct. 5, 1919, the new church building was formally dedicated, the sermon being preached by Dr. S. B. Rogers.

On Nov. 17, 1919, the church voted to accept a quota of \$25,000 for the \$75,000,000 campaign, thus evincing its willingness to co-operate with the denomination in all its forward movements.

Ritta, Sand Point, and other localities have been investigated by the church as locations for Baptist churches, and the Moore Haven church has shown admirable initiative in its missionary and evangelistic projects. The deacons of the church are active and wide awake to the interests of the kingdom. W. L. Long donated to the church a handsome silver communion set.

January 17, 1920, a meeting was begun, with Rev. W. D. Entzminger of Lakeland assisting. Bro. Sublette preached the first sermon of the series awaiting the arrival of the evangelist. About twenty-five additions to the church resulted from this meeting.

The church has fostered the work of the B. Y. P. U. of late months and the young people of the church are doing excellent work. Two young men have entered the ministry from among the membership. Every week the Bible is read by many of the members, 42 members having reported that they read 770 chapters recently during one week. This shows the church to be in a healthy spiritual condition.

On March 5, 1922, a most wonderful revival of religion came to the church under the preaching of Rev. E. A. Albritton of Wauchula, Fla. More than 100 members came into the church. A large tent was erected in front of the First Bank of Moore Haven, cottage prayer meetings were held throughout the city, the new converts were active in leading sinners to Jesus, and \$1,065 was raised for the expenses of the meeting. The pastor's salary was advanced to \$150 per month, and G. D. Bigbee and C. E. Smith were licensed to preach the gospel.

New out stations have recently been established, and during the time the writer was in Moore Haven recently (July, 1922), the pastor, Rev. F. W. Nolte, was holding a meeting at one of these mission points, assisted by the new licentiates.

The church has exerted a most salutary influence upon the civic and political life of Moore Haven, taking part in every movement for the suppression of vice and for the inculcation of good morals. Among its members may be found some of the political leaders of the section, and they try to stand for truth.

With a few exceptions a most beautiful unity and co-operation has maintained between the Baptists and other religious denominations, and this is to be commended.

If Moore Haven people would prosper, let them seek first the kingdom of God, and all other desirable things shall be added unto them.

On a recent visit to Moore Haven, the writer was cordially invited by the deacons of the church to fill the pulpit, and he was impressed with the organic strength and evident prosperity of the church. May God's blessings continue upon the work as heretofore, and may the church become a spiritual dynamo, from which shall radiate waves of spiritual power which shall transform the educational, social, and spiritual ideals of the section.

**Rev. R. A. Sublette has 115 acres of
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