

# PORTRAITS OF COURAGE

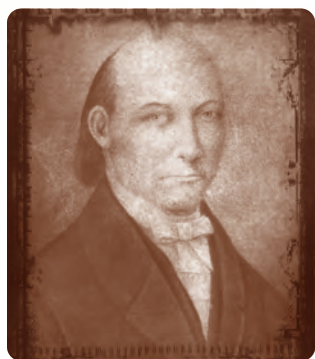


STORIES OF  
BAPTIST HEROES



Julie Whidden Long

# JESSE MERCER BAPTIST DENOMINATIONAL LEADER



(Photo courtesy of Jack Tarver Library,  
Mercer University)

**Who:** Jesse Mercer

**Where:** Georgia

**When:** 1769-1841

**What he did:** Encouraged Baptists to work together; worked to begin Georgia Baptist Association and Mercer University

**J**esse Mercer's Baptist experience started early. He was born in Halifax County, North Carolina, on December 16, 1769. His father, Silas, was a minister. Although Silas Mercer grew up as an Episcopalian, he disagreed with their form of baptism. Instead of having his infant son sprinkled, he had the baby dipped in a barrel. And from that point on, Jesse Mercer was raised as a Baptist. Jesse's family moved to Georgia when he was a child. He later said that he went back and forth between



praying and sinning. His faith in Christ came at the end of a long process. In 1787, however, Jesse decided for himself to follow Jesus. He was baptized for the second time in his life by his father.

After his baptism, Jesse began preaching, and people encouraged him to become a minister. He was ordained at the age of twenty by Phillips Mill Baptist Church in Wilkes County, Georgia. Jesse married Sabrina Chivers, who was his wife for nearly forty years.

During Jesse's time, many Baptists thought education for ministers was unnecessary. Schools for ministers were rare, particularly in the South, but Jesse believed in education. After his ordination, he studied with a Presbyterian minister, John Springer. John had been educated at Princeton University, and he taught Jesse more about the Bible and how to be a minister. Jesse studied for an additional year at Salem Academy, a school led by his own father. Salem Academy was the first private Baptist school in Georgia.

While he was studying with Springer, Jesse also served as pastor of Hutton's Fork Baptist Church in Wilkes County. After his father died in 1796, Jesse moved back to his family's home and became pastor of the churches that his father had served before his death. Jesse served churches




at Phillips Mill for thirty-nine years, Bethesda for thirty-two years, and Powelton for twenty-eight years. He eventually was pastor of seven churches in his area of Georgia, an area where two-thirds of the population of Georgia lived, and he also volunteered as an itinerant preacher, traveling to preach to people in areas where no churches or ministers existed.

Jesse believed strongly that Baptist churches should work together to share the gospel with others. He encouraged churches in Georgia to join **associations**. In Georgia, churches had begun working together when the General Association of Georgia Baptists was formed in 1784. Jesse became one of the leaders of this group.


In 1801, a conference of Georgia Baptists was held in Jesse's Powelton church.

At that conference, Georgia Baptists committed to work together to do mission work with the Creek Indians. As the association continued to meet and to grow, Jesse was involved. Seven of the first eleven meetings of the group were held at churches that he pastored.

In 1822, the Georgia Baptist Association influenced the rise of the Georgia Baptist Convention. Jesse was chairman of the committee that wrote the organization's constitution, and he became the convention's first president. He



**Associations** are groups of Baptist churches in the same area who work together to support missions and ministry in their communities and around the world.



continued to serve as president until his death in 1841. He also served as clerk of the association for twenty-one years and moderator for twenty-three years. Jesse also attended national Baptist meetings, such as the Triennial Convention, as a delegate from Georgia.

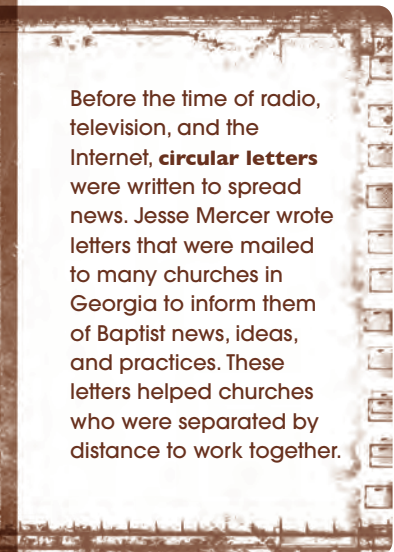
Jesse used his influence as a Baptist minister and leader to participate in state politics. As a delegate to Georgia's Constitutional Convention in 1798, he worked to defeat a proposal that would have prevented ministers from holding public office in Georgia. The convention also gave Jesse the responsibility of writing the section of Georgia's constitution that allowed religious freedom to all citizens of the state.

Later, Jesse himself ran for Senate but was defeated. After his loss, he claimed that "few occasions should call

down ministers from their elevated office to engage in legislation."

Despite his influence in public affairs, Jesse was first a minister and considered his involvement in larger organizations to be a part of his ministry.

Jesse's writings served as another important part of his ministry to Baptists in Georgia. Most influential were his **circular letters**. Before Baptist newspapers existed, circular letters were distributed and



Before the time of radio, television, and the Internet, **circular letters** were written to spread news. Jesse Mercer wrote letters that were mailed to many churches in Georgia to inform them of Baptist news, ideas, and practices. These letters helped churches who were separated by distance to work together.

read at churches. These letters communicated Baptist ideas and practices so that churches around the state could be unified.

Jesse observed in his ministry that many Baptist churches in Georgia lacked hymnals. In 1810, he published *The Cluster of Spiritual Songs, Divine Hymns, and Sacred Poems*. This hymnal became very popular. Seven editions were published, and copies were distributed as far away as Philadelphia. More than 35,000 copies were sold in the forty years that the *Cluster* circulated around the South. The hymnal was so special to Jesse that he sang hymns from it to comfort his wife upon her deathbed in 1826.

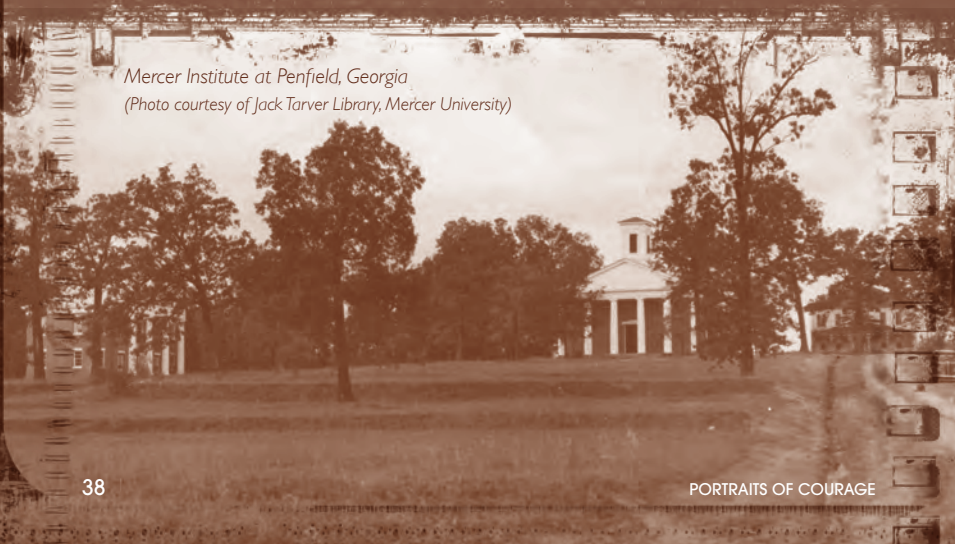
In 1833, Jesse purchased a religious newspaper called the *Christian Index*, and he moved it from Washington, D.C., to Washington, Georgia. He wrote articles and edited the newspaper so that Georgians could know what was happening with Baptist work around the state. He later gave the newspaper to the Georgia Baptist Convention, and it has become the nation's oldest continuing weekly religious paper.

Jesse published another newspaper, *Temperance Banner*. This newspaper contained articles about the dangers of drinking alcohol. In 1838, Jesse wrote *A History of the Georgia Baptist Association*, sharing the story of the Baptists whom he influenced in so many ways. Jesse's writings helped to connect Baptists to those in other churches so that they could better work together for a common purpose.

Jesse was a Baptist preacher, denominational leader, and publisher. He was respected for all of these accomplishments, and rightly so. But his most recognizable gift to Baptists was his work for Baptist education. His first efforts in education came about when his father died. Jesse became the principal of his father's school, Salem Academy. For two years, he helped to train young ministers in the first Baptist school in Georgia. Salem Academy provided an important first step for Baptist education in Georgia. Jesse later became a supporter of Columbian College in Washington, D.C., and served as a trustee of the school and gave money for its support.

Jesse is most recognized for his support of the school that now bears his name—Mercer University. Jesse and the school's other founders opened the school in Penfield, Georgia, in 1833. The Georgia Baptist Convention proudly blessed the school with Jesse Mercer's name, calling it Mercer Institute.

*Mercer Institute at Penfield, Georgia  
(Photo courtesy of Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University)*





At its beginning, the school was not intended to be a college. When Jesse saw how the Presbyterians in the state had opened Oglethorpe College in 1835, he pushed to make this new school into a college for Baptists. Mercer Institute became Mercer University in 1837, and Jesse Mercer served as the first president of the board of trustees. Of all his involvements and activities, Jesse devoted his best energies to Mercer University. He gave the school large sums of money.

As Jesse's health began to decline, he moved to Washington, Georgia, so that he could slow down in his work. Once there, he founded the First Baptist Church and became its pastor. He and his second wife, Nancy Simons, gave large gifts of money to many organizations and causes, including the Georgia Baptist Convention.

On the Saturday before his death, Mercer asked his friend, James Carter, if he remembered a song in the *Cluster* with the words, "I did to him my all commit." When his friend replied that he remembered the song, Mercer stated, "That is continually in my mind. Forty odd years ago I committed my all to the Lord . . . and there is my dependence now." Jesse died on September 6, 1841, at Carter's home and was buried at Penfield, the original site of Mercer University.

Jesse Mercer's dying thoughts were correct: he committed his life to doing the Lord's work. His influence among Baptists in his own state makes him a Baptist hero. He served as pastor and preacher of many Baptist churches. He helped to organize a state convention for





*Jesse and Julie Long, author of Portraits of Courage  
(Photo courtesy of Julie Long)*

Baptist cooperation. He founded a university to educate young ministers. He published a newspaper and wrote articles to educate church members about Baptist ideas and Baptist life. He published a hymnal to serve churches all over the South. He gave money to support many good organizations from which Baptists benefit. Jesse Mercer was committed to the Baptist cause and to the cause of Christ, and that makes him a Baptist hero.

# PORTRAITS OF COURAGE

STORIES OF BAPTIST HEROES

Written by Julie Whidden Long, this 128-page book, designed especially for younger youth and older children, presents the stories of Baptist heroes. These heroes lived in various countries and centuries and represent many phases of Baptist life. By highlighting the biographical dimension of the Baptist past, these inspiring stories help readers appreciate the personal contributions of heroic Baptist men and women.



Rev. Julie Whidden Long is the pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Georgia. She previously served as minister of children and families (2005–2013) and associate pastor (2013–2018) at FBCX Macon. Additionally, Rev. Long was the associate director of Baptist Women in Ministry (2018–2019) and launched a coaching and consulting practice in 2020. A native of Fitzgerald, Georgia, she is a two-time graduate of Mercer University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Christianity and History from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2002 and a Master of Divinity from McAfee School of Theology in 2005. She is married to Jody Long, executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, and they have two children.