

Divided Nation, Divided Faith: Baptist Churches in Greene County During the Civil War

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3/30/2026

On April 12, 1861, at 4:30 AM, Confederate soldiers began to fire on Union forces located in Fort Sumter at Charleston, South Carolina. After 34 hours of deadly conflict, and suffering, the Union forces had no choice but to surrender. This event officially marked the beginning of the deadliest war in American history, resulting in the highest number of casualties ever recorded. The Civil War left a horrible stain not only on the history of the United States of America, but also on Baptist Churches located all over the country. The division was marked by a break in unity of faith, culminating in the separation of Confederate and Union churches. One region of Missouri experienced this separation greatly: Greene County.

Baptist Churches in Greene County suffered from pain and fear brought on by militias dominating their churches during battle. Even through these many trials, ministers still carried out God's Will, spreading the Gospel to soldiers, and many gave their lives to Jesus Christ. Through Greene County's history and its participation in the Civil War, our generation can see how God works even in the darkest times of our country. Overall, the Civil War deeply impacted Greene County by creating lasting divisions in both political loyalties and religious life, as seen by the growing divide between the Southern and Northern Baptist Conventions and the destruction dealt to Baptist Churches, and the lasting shockwaves years later.

Before the Civil War affected Greene County, tensions were rising in the Baptist Church. Eliza Griswold, writer of religion, politics, and the environment for *The New Yorker*, discusses these early pressures in her article "The Fight for the Heart of the Southern Baptist Convention." The largest evangelical group in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention, was created in 1845. The original purpose for separating was due to the belief that the North was overreaching with restrictions on slaveholders. The North reached a verdict that slaveholders could no longer be missionaries, as it opposed their Christian witness. The Southerners insisted

that, as national bodies, they had no right to impose such restrictions. Griswold provides details on how the slaveholders convinced themselves they were correct to continue in their ways of slavery, saying, “Founders of the new organization claimed that, according to the Bible, slavery was ‘an institution of heaven.’” They pushed the idea that Black people were descended from the Biblical figure Ham, Noah’s cursed son, and that their subjugation was therefore divinely ordained.” (Griswold). Such separation among Baptists early on created more conflict as time led to the Civil War. In 1861, the Southern Baptist Convention began to socialize their beliefs through their greater interest in the Confederate States of America.

The *Baptist History Homepage*, which preserves original Baptist documents, includes the writings of Samuel Boykin, who in 1881 later wrote about a report issued by Southern Baptist representatives in 1861 concerning the “State of the Country.” In the original report issued by the representatives during the Civil War, they stated

“Resolved, 2. That we most cordially approve of the formation of the government of the Confederate States of America, and admire and applaud the noble course of that government up to the present time.

...

Resolved, 4. That we most cordially tender to the President of the Confederate States, to his Cabinet, and to the members of the Congress now convened at Montgomery, the assurances of our sympathy and entire confidence. With them are our hearts and our hearty co-operation.”

Clearly communicated in their report, the Southern Baptist Convention expressed its deep allegiance to the Confederate States of America. They were, in a way, enthusiastic about supporting the Confederates during the conflict. As seen in “Resolved 2,” they convey their

endorsement, and mention their actions as “noble,” which justified them morally. Additionally, in “Resolved 4,” it is shown that the representatives have complete trust in and align with the leaders of the Confederacy, including its president, cabinet, and Congress. As the divide between the two conventions seeped into their politics during the Civil War, it spread throughout the rest of the country’s Baptist churches, and in the midst of this infection was one state: Missouri.

Within the local communities of Greene County, Missouri, a location that succeeded in spreading the Gospel and building churches, the Civil War brought shockwaves. Greene County, Missouri, was experiencing growth it had never seen before. Springfield, a city in Greene County, experienced a massive population increase and commercial growth, and church congregations were planning to build larger places of worship to express their faith. While this was an incredible thing for Springfield, the Civil War brought it all to a halt.

The Green County Historical Society published an article, “Green County Historical Sites,” that discusses significant religious sites connected to the Civil War. When mentioning the Civil War, the Historical Society notes that Prospect Baptist Church was greatly affected by the war, saying that “According to local tradition, a Union Army encampment called Camp Prospect was located at this site in 1861.”(Greene County Historical Society) The church’s use as an encampment site disrupted the facility's purpose as a place of worship. Members were devastated that they could not worship Christ comfortably. On top of this, their sense of community was temporarily destroyed. While this church was disturbed by the war, thankfully, it was only used as a soldiers' encampment and was not severely damaged. Prospect Baptist Church did not suffer from physical damage, but other churches, such as First Baptist Church in Greene County did.

A historical text digitized by the Springfield-Greene County Library sheds light on the history and origins of First Baptist Church. In Chapter 19, “Church Denominational History” of

the book *In Past and Present of Greene County, Missouri*, the author of this chapter, Rev. Fayette Hurd, describes how the church was first organized. Rev. B. McCord Roberts, who previously served as a minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church, was later baptized at Liberty Baptist Church due to a change of views in baptism. After this change in denomination, he became the founder of First Baptist Church.

In July of 1852, eleven people, including Rev. B. McCord Roberts, gathered in a small brick house on Olive Street to hold the church's first services. The congregation frequently met in various locations for additional meetings, including a schoolhouse east of Benton Avenue, Temperance Hall, and later at a Methodist house of worship. During a meeting at Reverend Roberts' residence in 1860, they hoped to create a plan for a new worship building to be completed at the beginning of 1861. Their hopes for this were soon dashed, just as many other things were. In June of 1861, the church was taken into possession for military use. Both parties used the church for their own benefit. The Confederates used it as a hospital after the battle of Wilson's Creek, and later as a storehouse. Then the Federal forces earned possession of it and used it as a hospital and a location for Union refugees.

After the Civil War, in September 1866, the church undertook work to rebuild. Members saw the destruction and terror that the war had left in its path. Seats where members previously praised were destroyed, walls used for displaying art to worship Christ were defaced, and only the pulpit was standing in the middle of all the desolation. The repair for the church took many resources, expenses, and labor in order for the church to be considered fit for worship. Though they were able to reconstruct the church, there was still difficulty in mending the people. The congregation was disorganized, and felt scattered. With their hearts burdened from the destruction and driven to fix their community, 18 members gathered to work together in an

attempt to restore what they had lost. Through the devastation caused by the Civil War, it is seen that congregations were disturbed and destroyed, ruining churches like First Baptist Church's progress in expanding and sharing the Gospel. After having to recover from such tragedy, eventually, Baptist Churches were able to move on, including the Southern Convention.

One hundred and thirty years after the Civil War, the Southern Baptist Convention officially showed how it is in no way, shape, or form the same convention as it was in 1861. According to the Southern Baptist Convention's resource library, on June 1st, during their 1995 Annual Meeting, they issued their "Resolution On Racial Reconciliation On The 150th Anniversary Of The Southern Baptist Convention," where they stated:

"WHEREAS, our relationship to African-Americans has been hindered from the beginning by the role that slavery played in the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention; and

WHEREAS, Many of our Southern Baptist forbears defended the right to own slaves, and either participated in, supported, or acquiesced in the particularly inhumane nature of American slavery; and

...

WHEREAS, Racism has led to discrimination, oppression, injustice, and violence, both in the Civil War and throughout the history of our nation; and

Therefore, be it RESOLVED, That we, the messengers to the Sesquicentennial meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, assembled in Atlanta, Georgia, June 20-22, 1995, unwaveringly denounce racism, in all its forms, as deplorable sin; and

Be it further RESOLVED, That we affirm the Bible's teaching that every human life is sacred, and is of equal and immeasurable worth, made in God's image, regardless of race or ethnicity (Genesis 1:27), and that, with respect to salvation through Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for (we) are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28)”

This statement shows the great change Southern Baptist Churches have experienced since the Civil War, representing self-examination and repentance. Their connection with African Americans was damaged from the start, due to slavery originally being the root of the creation of the Southern Baptist Convention. The admittance to ancestors defending the right to own slaves, shows acceptance of responsibility morally for their past actions. On top of this, their document shows initiative, displaying Scripture and saying that racism is a deplorable sin and a violation of Christian teaching.

The Civil War had a massive impact on American history, as well as Baptist history. The separation of the Northern and Southern Baptist Convention further developed throughout the divide of the Union and Confederates, effecting and creating shockwaves in Greene County Baptist Churches. This separation created destruction and trauma for all parties involved in Missouri. After the war it took some time for the churches to recover, along with the Southern Baptist Convention. Learning from their history, the SBC was able to formally apologize and make an official statement reconciling their previous racism during the Civil War. Through all of this, it is seen that the Civil War deeply affected Greene County, creating lasting divisions in political loyalties and religious life through the growing split between the Southern and Northern Baptist Conventions, the damage to Baptist churches, and the effects that remained for years afterward.

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