

# Georgia- Cumberland Conference

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## GREG HUDSON

Greg Hudson, D.Min. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan), is the senior pastor of the Georgia-Cumberland Academy church in Calhoun, Georgia. He has worked as a registered nurse, and served as a pastor and academy chaplain in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Georgia.

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Georgia-Cumberland Conference is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Southern Union Conference.

Territory: Georgia, Cherokee County in North Carolina, and eastern Tennessee to the eastern boundaries of Cannon, Clay, Coffee, DeKalb, Franklin, Jackson, and Smith counties.<sup>1</sup>

Statistics (June 30, 2019): Churches, 177; membership, 41,712; population, 13,362,981.<sup>2</sup>

## Origins

The Seventh-day Adventist work in Georgia and eastern Tennessee began in the 1870s. The southern states, including Tennessee and Georgia, saw heavy fighting during the four years of the Civil War (1861-1865), resulting in widespread devastation to families, towns, and the general economy. Reconstruction, the process of reinstating to the Union the states that had seceded, continued through 1877. Following the federal government's withdrawal from enforcing equal rights, a system of racial segregation became dominant in the southern states. It was in this historical context that the Adventist faith gradually gained a foothold in the territory that would eventually comprise the Georgia-Cumberland Conference.

Initial Efforts



Georgia-Cumberland Conference office, Calhoun, Georgia, the United States.

Photo courtesy of Georgia-Cumberland Conference.

In 1872, letters and reports began appearing in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* from J. A. Killingsworth, who was living in Georgia.<sup>3</sup> He related that the Adventist teachings faced serious opposition in this state because they “originated with the Yankees.”<sup>4</sup>

In late 1876, C. O. Taylor, the first official Seventh-day Adventist worker in Georgia, arrived in the area of Quitman in the southern part of the state. Taylor seemed to have received a warm welcome, describing the people as “glad to have northerners come among them.” At the same time, he felt he was alone in his mission, not knowing if there was anyone else in the state that kept the Bible Sabbath.<sup>5</sup> Taylor eventually met with Killingsworth,<sup>6</sup> and soon after shared his faith with J. S. Killen, a Baptist planter and lawyer.<sup>7</sup> Soon Killen, along with employees who had formerly been slaves, were keeping the Sabbath and were later baptized.<sup>8</sup>

Also in 1876, the Adventist work was taking root in the hills of Tennessee. M. J. Wetherbee, a member of the church in Blendon, Michigan, who had moved to Bledsoe County, Tennessee, sent a letter to the *Review* calling for someone to come and work in that state.<sup>9</sup> Orlando Soule, a young man from Michigan, responded, leaving his home to share the Gospel in the South, starting in Bledsoe County, near Pikeville, Tennessee.

Soule met with much difficulty during his work in Tennessee. He often walked many miles between homes over mountain roads in very poor condition. He also endured terrible weather, and even had meetings disrupted by snakes.<sup>10</sup> Despite these challenges, Soule found families who were interested in learning more about the Bible, and in time, a group of believers was formed. In late 1876, after being ordained by D. M. Canright,<sup>11</sup> Soule formed the first Adventist church in eastern Tennessee, the Mt. Gilead Church in Cumberland County!<sup>12</sup> This new group of believers included P. D. Moyers, who became one of the earliest southern-born preachers and later was a prominent worker in the Graysville area.

In 1878, “the first general meeting of those in Georgia who keep all the commandments of God” took place in Reynolds, Georgia. The few believers in attendance gathered from three counties (Houston, Bibb, and Spaulding), but interest from the wider community was also strong, with individuals walking up to five miles to attend.<sup>13</sup>

#### A Martyr for Sabbath Reform

An incident early in the history of the group in Quitman, Georgia, foreshadowed an ongoing struggle about Sabbath-keeping in the state. In 1878, Samuel P. Mitchell was imprisoned in Brooks County, Georgia, for “his adherence to the Sabbath.” He was tried and found guilty. Most people, including the judge, assumed he would just pay the required fine. But Mitchell thought “he could do more good, could better help on the great work of the reform on the Sabbath, and bring it before more minds, by passing 30 days in jail.” Imprisoned in poor conditions, he soon became sick and would never recover. At the age of 30, this husband and father of two died for his faith.<sup>14</sup>

After years of continued work, with both successes and failures, W. F. Killen organized the first church in Georgia, located in Quitman with eight members in March 1882.<sup>15</sup> As time went on, some of these church members dispersed for various reasons, and the church had to be reorganized in 1885 by G. G. Rupert,<sup>16</sup> who was overseeing work in both Georgia and Florida.<sup>17</sup>

#### Literature Evangelism Leads the Way

George A. King, the original Adventist literature evangelist, and Charles F. Curtis came to Georgia in 1885 to sell Gospel literature. They returned north with enthusiastic reports of future prospects for the South. Curtis would soon come back to work in the Atlanta area for the next 40 years.<sup>18</sup>

Rupert was joined by Charles Bliss in 1886. Bliss held meetings throughout the state, pitching a tent in Fort Valley and then in Atlanta.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Curtis was again canvassing through the state. Reports were presented describing people beginning to keep the Sabbath in multiple locations, including Atlanta and Macon.<sup>20</sup>

Curtis and his wife were next asked to move to Atlanta to work with George W. Anglebarger and his wife, who were starting a mission in that city. This group arrived in Atlanta in March 1887, and soon rented a large house that could accommodate up to 20 workers. Rooms were also available to hold weekly Sabbath School and other meetings.

After only five weeks, Anglebarger and his wife had to leave for Colorado due to poor health, leaving Curtis to oversee the Atlanta mission. More workers and literature evangelists soon joined Curtis and his wife, and the Sabbath School grew to 22 members.<sup>21</sup>

This emphasis on literature evangelism became a strong pillar of the Adventist work in the state of Georgia. Over and over, reports mentioned this form of outreach as a successful avenue for reaching the hearts of those living in the rural areas and that it was effective in sharing with both the various populations.<sup>22</sup>

S. H. Lane replaced Bliss in Georgia and Florida in 1887. Under his direction, the Atlanta Mission moved to a less expensive home and continued holding meetings at its new location. In the Fall of 1888, a church was organized in Atlanta with 11 members.<sup>23</sup> Lane, along with O. C. Godsmark, held meetings throughout the state, including in the towns of Austell, Reynolds, and Quitman.<sup>24</sup>

In 1889, the first camp meeting in Georgia was held in Reynolds, with about 60 Adventists in attendance. Four people were baptized at this event, bringing hope that “the time is not far distant when hundreds of SD Adventists will attend these annual gatherings in Georgia.” There was also a training course in canvassing at which ten canvassers received instruction.<sup>25</sup>

In 1889, the growth in Georgia was aided by the opening of a Review and Herald office in Atlanta. Robert M. Kilgore, who had been selected to lead the General Conference’s District No. 2 (Southern District) earlier that year,<sup>26</sup> noted that this branch office would “give permanency to the work in the South. Much depends upon canvassing work in this field, and with the imprint of Atlanta, will give the South an advantage that has not been

had in the past."<sup>27</sup> This office remained active until the Southern Publishing Association was formed in Nashville in 1901.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, in Tennessee, E. R. Gillet built a church in Graysville with the help of P. D. Moyer and J. W. Scoles.<sup>29</sup> J. M. Rees organized this church of 10 members on September 8, 1888, and it was later voted into the Tennessee Conference.<sup>30</sup> This small town about 30 miles north of Chattanooga became a center for the Adventist work in the South for several years.

#### Graysville: Headquarters and a School

In 1889, as R. M. Kilgore toured the churches throughout Georgia and Tennessee, and one of first items he brought attention to was the need for an Adventist school in the South. Church members felt that a more local school would allow a greater number of the southern youth to receive training for outreach in their home territory.<sup>31</sup> Many churches offered property to host the new school, including Alpharetta, Marietta, and Atlanta, Georgia, as well as Chattanooga, Graysville, and Dayton, Tennessee.<sup>32</sup> Kilgore and the leaders of District 2 finally concentrated on the school that was beginning in Graysville.<sup>33</sup>

Kilgore made Graysville the headquarters of District 2 in 1890. The church constructed here was "the first building erected for the worship of God in the Cumberland Mission Field."<sup>34</sup> Arthur Spalding, who would later be a church leader and well-known author, also came to Graysville as Kilgore's secretary.<sup>35</sup> In 1892, George W. Colcord opened the Southern Training School in this small town.<sup>36</sup> In 1916, this institution would move to Collegedale, Tennessee, and grow into what is currently known as Southern Adventist University.<sup>37</sup>

Kilgore's leadership had a major impact on the early development of the Adventist work in both Georgia and eastern Tennessee. He went on to serve as the first president of the Southern Union from 1901 to 1902, and also as the second president of the Georgia Conference from 1903 to 1906.

In 1893, churches were organized in several places. J. W. Scoles organized a church in Webster, Roane County, Tennessee;<sup>38</sup> W. A. McCutchen in Gainesville, Georgia;<sup>39</sup> and Grant Adkins in Knoxville, Tennessee.<sup>40</sup> Also in Knoxville, a company of African-American believers was formed following house-to-house Bible studies.<sup>41</sup>

#### Sunday Law Prosecutions

Challenges to Sabbath-keeping were soon seen again in two different places. First, in November 1893, two believers, W. A. McCutchen and E. C. Keck, were arrested in Gainesville, Georgia, for building benches for the new school on Sunday. After two trials, the charges were dismissed in August 1894 on the grounds that labor being performed was not their usual occupation, thus not "an offense according the statutes."<sup>42</sup> The people of the city were sorry for the charges, and the city of Gainesville even granted electricity and water free of charge for the camp meeting held in 1894. It was voted at this camp meeting to begin taking steps that would lead to the organization of a conference in the state of Georgia,<sup>43</sup> though it would be several more years before that took place.

In 1894, 20 members from the Graysville and Dayton churches in Tennessee were arrested for Sunday labor. This group, including Professor G. W. Colcord, founder and principal of Graysville Academy, and other faculty members, was sentenced to prison time as well as work on the chain gang, including building a bridge near Spring City.<sup>44</sup> This incident, which was featured in newspapers across the country, forced the school in Graysville to close for a short time.<sup>45</sup>

Conference organization of the territory of Georgia and eastern Tennessee went through several configurations before the current alignment was finally established.

## Cumberland Conference

Eastern Tennessee was originally included in the Tennessee Conference, which encompassed the entire state. In 1889, the General Conference voted that the eastern portions of Tennessee and Kentucky would be joined together as the Cumberland Mission Field while the western portions of those states were organized as the Tennessee River Conference.<sup>46</sup> In 1893, the Tennessee River Conference expanded to include the entirety of both the states of Tennessee and Kentucky.<sup>47</sup> Later in the decade, the Tennessee River Conference was reshaped to once again include only the western portions of Tennessee and Kentucky.

The eastern part of both states again comprised the Cumberland Mission, which was organized as the Cumberland Conference on September 14, 1900, during a specially called camp meeting in Harriman, Tennessee. Sharp Smith was elected president. Formal operations as a conference officially began on January 1, 1901.<sup>48</sup> One year later, on January 1, 1902, the first annual session of the Cumberland Conference convened at Graysville reporting "eight churches having a total membership of four hundred and 17 [sic]," an increase of 37 members and a small increase in tithe.<sup>49</sup>

The Cumberland Conference had many changes in territory. When organized, it included eastern Tennessee and eastern Kentucky, with the western boundary made up of the Kentucky counties of Bullitt, Nelson, La Rue, Green, Metcalfe, and Monroe as well as the Tennessee counties of Clay, Jackson, Putnam, White, Warren, Grundy, and Marion.<sup>50</sup> In 1908, the counties in eastern Kentucky were transferred to the newly-formed Kentucky Conference.<sup>51</sup> In 1909, the conference grew with the addition of three Tennessee counties (DeKalb, Smith, and Macon) transferred from the Tennessee River Conference and seven counties in northwest Georgia (Dade, Walker, Catoosa, Whitfield, Murray, Tannin, and Gilmer).<sup>52</sup>

In 1918, when North Carolina and South Carolina were combined into one conference, eighteen counties in North Carolina were added to the Cumberland Conference,<sup>53</sup> and the Georgia counties, except for Dade and Walker, were returned to the Georgia Conference.<sup>54</sup> In 1923, Catoosa County, Georgia, was added again,<sup>55</sup> and in 1924, seven more Georgia counties were transferred to Cumberland, bringing the total to 10.<sup>56</sup> This was the final territorial change in the Cumberland Conference until it was united with the Georgia Conference in 1932.

## Georgia Conference

The Georgia Conference, with five churches and 145 members,<sup>57</sup> was organized in 1901 during a camp meeting held August 9-19, in Austell, Georgia. R. M. Kilgore reported that “although the membership of the Georgia Conference is small, and their tithe income is insufficient to support the laborers, yet, with the assurance given at the last general conference that the deficit should be supplied, they enter in their new life as a Conference with courage and hope.”<sup>58</sup> C. A. Hall was elected as the first president. In 1904, Kilgore, still residing in Graysville, Tennessee, was elected as the second president. By then the membership had increased to 216. The conference office was located in Macon, Georgia.<sup>59</sup>

The Georgia Conference was made up of the entire state of Georgia with the exception of a few northern counties that were at various times part of the Cumberland Conference.

### Further Growth

Medical evangelism work in forms such as treatment rooms, sanitariums, and hospitals improved communities and expanded opportunities to share the Church’s message about the healing love of Jesus in the two conferences. In 1903, a sanitarium opened in Graysville, and in Atlanta, the Review and Herald Publishing building was transformed into the Atlanta Sanitarium.<sup>60</sup> The Atlanta Sanitarium continued operating in various locales in the city until 1958.<sup>61</sup> Treatment rooms were opened in Knoxville in 1909.<sup>62</sup>

Another example of ongoing medical missionary work was seen in Greeneville, Tennessee. The Takoma Medical Center was established there in 1924, first as a treatment room and cafeteria, then soon expanding to a sanitarium and fully functioning hospital.<sup>63</sup> The Takoma Hospital became part of the Southern Union, then the Adventist Health System, and was sold by the denomination in 2017.<sup>64</sup> Over the years, hospitals functioned in other places such as Jellico, Tennessee, and Elizaj, Calhoun, Smyrna, and Lakeland in Georgia.<sup>65</sup>

## Georgia-Cumberland Conference

In 1932, the Cumberland and Georgia conferences were finally brought together as part of a broader restructuring that took place at a joint quadrennial session of the Southeastern and Southern Union conferences held in Macon in February 1932. After 24 years of separation, these two unions merged to form the Southern Union Conference. In the midst of the Great Depression, the 1931 General Conference Autumn Council had called for this merger “in the interest of economy of administration, and to make a stronger union.” In harmony with this action, study was given to readjusting the local conferences of this new Southern Union to strengthen the conferences, to reduce administrative costs, and to keep traveling expenses as low as possible.<sup>66</sup>

This action led to the re-districting of several conferences in the Southern Union. Most of the territory of the Cumberland Conference was merged with Georgia to form the Georgia-Cumberland Conference with headquarters in Atlanta at 547 Cherokee Avenue.<sup>67</sup> The Georgia-Cumberland Conference retained Cherokee



County, North Carolina, while the other 17 counties in North Carolina were transferred to the Carolina Conference. H. E. Lysinger was chosen to serve as the first president of this new conference,<sup>68</sup> overseeing 49 churches and 2,634 church members.<sup>69</sup>

On January 1, 1946, churches with a primarily black membership were reorganized as part of new regional conferences. The black churches of Tennessee entered the South Central Conference, while the black churches of Georgia joined the South Atlantic Conference.<sup>70</sup> After this transition, the Georgia-Cumberland Conference continued with 63 churches and 3,592 members.<sup>71</sup> Since 1946, the territory of the Georgia-Cumberland Conference has remained the same.

In the late 1940s, under the leadership of I. M. Evans, the conference saw congregations moving from homes and rented spaces to the construction and expansion of church buildings. It was a period of growing churches and building new centers for ministry. New church buildings were constructed in many places, including Brayton and Daisy, Tennessee, and Albany, Georgia. In Griffin and Calhoun, Georgia, congregations built new churches that included space for schools. Other churches, including Cleveland, Tennessee, and Atlanta First, remodeled or expanded existing structures.<sup>72</sup>

#### Institutional Development

The conference was also strengthened during this period by the important work of many self-supporting institutions. These institutions worked to spread the message of the Adventist Church through a variety of means, including educational and medical facilities, without funding from the conference. Some of the self-supporting institutions eventually closed while others, such as Wildwood Sanitarium, Laurelbrook Academy and Little Creek Sanitarium,<sup>73</sup> continue to this day. Still others, such as the Hurlbutt Farm, took on new life as conference institutions.

In the 1950s, the conference acquired two pieces of property that would make an immense impact on its ministries. In 1955, the conference purchased 265 acres near Clayton, Georgia, including a small lake.<sup>74</sup> This property would be the site of the first permanent youth camp in the conference, Camp Cumby-Gay. Prior to this, summer camp sessions had met for a week or two on rented properties. The purchase of a permanent camp property reflected the importance placed on youth ministry in Georgia-Cumberland. In 1973, the camp would be renamed Atoka Springs.<sup>75</sup>

The Hurlbutt Farm property, located in Reeves, Georgia, just outside of Calhoun, had a long history with different lay-led ministry organizations. This property was purchased by Emeline Hurlbutt for agricultural, educational, and medical outreach, and started as a farm in 1915. It became the site of Scott Sanitarium, sponsored in part by Lida Scott and later obtained by the Layman's Foundation.<sup>76</sup> The Georgia-Cumberland Conference purchased this property in 1959 for the purpose of constructing a boarding academy. Churches throughout the conference contributed money, with several special offerings collected during the fund-raising process.<sup>77</sup> One of these unique fundraisers was a "penny campaign" that raised over \$38,000 in the form of 11

tons of pennies. These coins were brought to the academy property from across the conference for a celebration in March 1964.<sup>78</sup> With construction completed, Georgia-Cumberland Academy opened on August 30, 1965, with Ed Reifsnnyder serving as the first principal.<sup>79</sup>

### The Cummings Era

In 1964, Des Cummings, youth director for the Southern Union, was elected president of the Georgia-Cumberland Conference.<sup>80</sup> His 16 years of service, ending in 1980, stands as the longest presidential tenure in the conference's history. Conference membership during the Cummings years grew from about 8,000 to nearly 17,000.<sup>81</sup>

In addition to the opening of Georgia-Cumberland Academy, Cummings led the conference in undertaking several other large projects. In September 1975, the conference office moved from Atlanta to a new office building in Calhoun, Georgia. This building, sitting on seven acres, was constructed in a highly visible location along Interstate 75, a major highway in Georgia and Tennessee.<sup>82</sup>

Another sizeable project Cummings directed was the purchase of property for a new youth camp and conference center location. In 1978 at a specially called constituency meeting, delegates voted to purchase 580 acres, including a 45-acre lake, near Eton, Georgia.<sup>83</sup> Construction on Cohutta Springs Youth Camp began immediately, and groundbreaking took place on April 29, 1979.<sup>84</sup> After 23 years at the Atoka Springs property, summer youth camp opened at Cohutta Springs on July 6, 1980.<sup>85</sup>

Over the years, Cohutta Springs has continued to expand, purchasing more property and constructing new hotel units and facilities for both the retreat center and the summer camp program. This has equipped the facility to host a variety of events and conferences.<sup>86</sup>

### Evangelistic Advances

Evangelism continued to be a major focus of the conference. An emphasis on Branch Sabbath Schools led to 14 churches forming in the span of five years (1976-1981). These churches included Stone Mountain, Peachtree City, and Summerville.<sup>87</sup> Evangelism '86 and Harvest 90 were just some examples of the coordination of lay and pastoral evangelism that has continued throughout the history of the conference.<sup>88</sup>

In 1995, NET '95, the denomination's inaugural satellite evangelism seminar was broadcast from the host site in Chattanooga and downlinked by nearly 700 churches across North America. Pastor Mark Finley, speaker-director for the *It Is Written* media ministry, was the main speaker for this seminar, a project of the North American Division, Adventist Media Center, Georgia-Cumberland Conference, and several other entities.<sup>89</sup> The endeavor resulted in over 5,000 baptisms, including 250 in Chattanooga. The success of this project led to many more satellite evangelistic series over the next few years.<sup>90</sup>

Tragedy struck the conference on December 2, 2004, when a plane carrying six people, including four conference officials, crashed on takeoff from the Collegedale Airport. Five people were killed in the crash: Dave



Cress, president; Jim Frost, vice president; Jamie Arnall, communication director; Clay Farwell, assistant to the president; and the plane's pilot, John Laswell. There was one survivor, co-pilot Jim Huff.<sup>91</sup>

## Twenty-First Century Progress

In the months following the tragic crash, Ed Wright was elected to serve as president. Previously, Wright had served as pastor of the Collegedale Church on the campus of Southern Adventist University.<sup>92</sup> He served as president from 2005-2019, making his tenure a close second in longevity to Cummings'. Under Wright's guidance, the conference membership grew to over 40,000, Cohutta Springs has been expanded and remodeled, and educational and evangelistic endowments have been started to insure growth into the future.

In 2006, the conference adopted Atlanta Adventist Academy (AAA) as a second conference-sponsored high school. The school had opened in 1979 and was funded by several local churches with C. Keith Gibbons as its principal.<sup>93</sup> Since 2006, AAA has developed a unique operating system, with students and staff meeting at three main campuses in the Atlanta Metro area. These campuses are connected with virtual video streaming technology. This format has allowed other schools, both within the conference borders and in other locales, to become distance-learning campuses of AAA.<sup>94</sup>

Continuing the long-standing tradition of a strong literature evangelism ministry, the conference in 2014 took over the management of Home Health Education Service (HHES) within its territory. Soon, several other conferences in the Southern Union joined in this cooperative. The conference Publishing Department has been able to "provide support services to successful full-spectrum ministries that includes full-time, part-time, and student Literature Evangelists."<sup>95</sup> This program has since grown to provide an online portal to support this ministry in many states and various countries around the world.

In 2015, Smyrna Towers, a conference-owned low-income housing complex near Atlanta, was sold. This property, originally funded from a \$10,000 conference investment in 1979, was sold for \$11 million. This money was used to fund several conference projects, including construction of a Cohutta Springs Life Center building, new buildings at Georgia-Cumberland Academy, and an endowment for Atlanta Adventist Academy.<sup>96</sup>

The conference has also set up endowment funds for Georgia-Cumberland Academy and Cohutta Springs Youth Camp. These endowments ensure that money will remain available for the upkeep and growth of these key ministries. In 2018, both of these entities completed construction on new buildings with money raised through capital projects. Cohutta Springs opened a new building that includes an auditorium, fitness center, nurse's quarters, and a new outdoor pool.<sup>97</sup> Georgia-Cumberland Academy opened the Wally Fox Wellness Center that includes a new gymnasium, classrooms, and a cafeteria facility. New classrooms and a student center were also added to the administration building.<sup>98</sup>

## Outlook

The Georgia-Cumberland Conference has been built upon a solid foundation of pastoral and lay evangelism, coupled with dedicated literature evangelists, strong educational facilities, and a vision for youth ministry. As the Conference continues to minister in this growing region of the country, it is strongly positioned with healthy churches, schools, and institutions to aid church members in reaching more and more people with the Gospel of Jesus.

## List of Presidents

*Georgia Conference:* C. A. Hall (1901-1903); R. M. Kilgore (1903-1906); George W. Wells (1906-1910); C. B. Stephenson (1910-1912); L. T. Crisler (1912-1913); N. V. Willes (1913-1916); W. H. Branson-acting (1916); B.J. White (1916-1917); B. W. Brown (1917-1918); W. F. McMahan (1918-1919); B. W. Spire (1919-1922); A. S. Booth (1922-1926); B. F. Kneeland (1926-1932).

*Cumberland Conference:* Smith Sharp (1900-1903); O. C. Godsmark (1903-1905); W. W. Williams (1905-1907); J. F. Pogue (1907-1910); P. G. Stanley (1910-1913); W. H. Branson (1913-1915); R. W. Parmele (1916-1917); J. L. Shuler (1917-1919); A. W. Coon (1919-1921); B. F. Kneeland (1921-1926); R. I. Keate (1926-1932).

*Georgia-Cumberland Conference:* H. E. Lysinger (1932-1937); R. I. Keate (1937-1943); I. M. Evans (1943-1949); G. R. Nash (1949-1956); A. C. Fearing (1956-1958); N. C. Wilson (1958-1960); A. C. McKee (1960-1963); LeRoy J. Leiske (1963-1964); Desmond Cummings (1964-1980); Gary Patterson (1980-1985); Bill Geary (1985-1994); Gordon Bietz (1994-1997); Larry Evans (1997-2002); Dave Cress (2002-2004); Ed Wright (2005-2019); Gary Rustad (2019-).

*Headquarters:* 255 Conference Road N.E., Calhoun, Georgia 30701-9387

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