

Answering the call

BY ALAN LEFEVER | *Texas Baptist Historical Collection*

As immigrants from the United States began to pour into the Republic of Texas in the late 1830s, Baptist leaders in the republic quickly realized the need for missionaries to minister to this growing population.

Z.N. Morrell, one of the earliest Baptist ministers in Texas, was part of a group that appealed to Baptists in the United States to send missionaries to Texas. One of his letters, printed in the Georgia Baptist paper on Feb. 2, 1838, noted:

“There is not one itinerant Baptist minister in our whole country. Perhaps one-half of our fellow-citizens do not hear preaching once in six months, and many of them have never heard a gospel sermon since they have been in Texas.”

These Texas Baptists appealed for “men of understanding, of deep research, of giant intellect, clothed with the spirit of the gospel as a garment, that they may confound all our opposers, disseminate light, establish the church and be the means of pulling down the strongholds of Satan and building up the kingdom of God.”

James Huckins responded to the plea. Raised in New Hampshire and educated at Brown University, Huckins accepted an assignment by the American Baptist Home Mission Society to raise money for home missions in Georgia and South Carolina. After attending the Georgia Baptist Convention in 1839, he decided to go to Texas. The mission board appointed Huckins to survey and report back on the religious conditions in Texas.

On Jan. 25, 1840, Huckins arrived in Galveston, becoming the first Baptist missionary sent to Texas. He found unbelievable hunger for the gospel. In only a few days, hundreds gathered to hear him preach. By Feb. 3, Huckins had organized a small group of believers into the First Baptist Church of Galveston. Two days later, Huckins conducted a baptismal service in the Gulf of Mexico. Gail Borden, founder of the Borden milk company, and his wife, Penelope, were two of the people Huckins baptized that day.

Huckins also helped organize Union Association in 1840 and the Texas Baptist Home Mission Society and Texas Baptist Educational Society in 1841. In January 1841, he returned to Galveston to preach and in May established First Baptist Church in Houston. He also served as editor of the Texas column in the *Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*. Huckins resigned from the Home Missionary Society in 1845 and joined the Domestic Mission Board of the recently organized Southern Baptist Convention.

Huckins was a key player in securing the charter for Baylor University. After the university's establishment, he served as an agent for Baylor five years and a charter trustee. Huckins also served as three-term president of the Texas Baptist Convention. He returned once again to Galveston in 1853 and served as pastor there until 1859. When yellow fever ravaged Galveston in 1854, Huckins helped found a community effort to minister to anyone affected by the outbreak.

After almost 20 years in Texas, Huckins moved to South Carolina in 1859 to become pastor of a church in Charleston. He died on Aug. 6, 1863, while ministering to the wounded at Charleston during the Civil War. Although Huckins left Texas in the later years of his ministry, his influence is felt to this day.