

# Benjamin Lloyd's *Primitive Hymns*

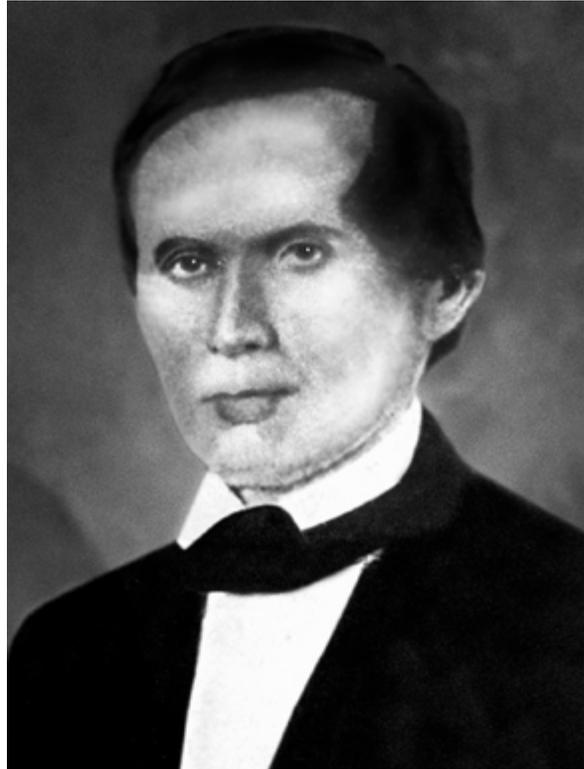
Joyce Cauthen, Alabama Folklife Association

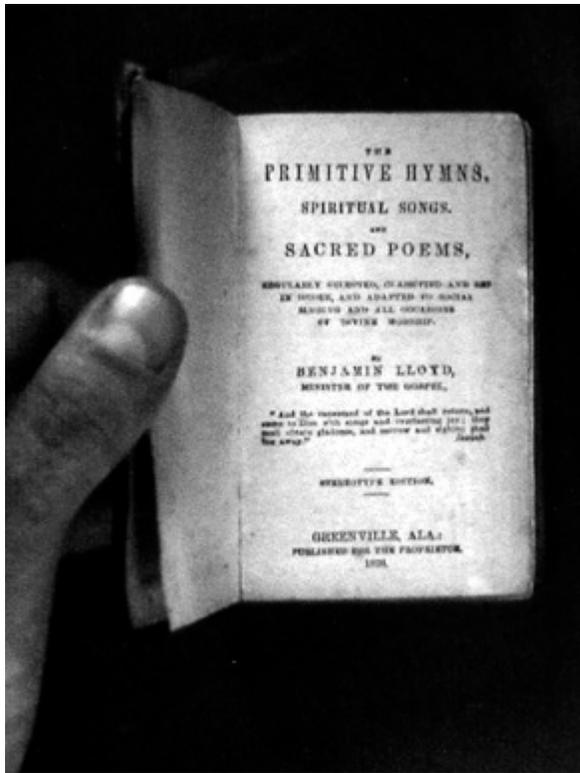
Benjamin Lloyd *The Primitive Hymns*, a hymnbook first published in 1841 in [Wetumpka, Elmore County](#), is still in use by Primitive Baptist congregations across the country. During the late 1820s and early 1830s dissension had arisen among Baptists over various theological issues and practices, including the use of [music](#) during worship. This eventually led congregations to withdraw from the main body and join with other like-minded congregations under the name "Primitive" Baptists to identify them with the practices of the early church.

Benjamin Lloyd, a successful businessman from [Chambers County](#) and later a public official in [Greenville](#), was a prominent Primitive Baptist elder. He saw the need for a hymn book with selections that expressed—or at least did not conflict with—the beliefs of the new denomination. Thus he selected 535 hymns from other popular hymn books and published

the words, without musical notation, in palm-sized books under the title *The Primitive Hymns: Spiritual Songs and Sacred Poems, Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship*.

Lloyd included hymns by prominent English writers such as Isaac Watts, John Newton, and Charles Wesley, as well as those by his contemporaries in the Primitive Baptist church. As the hymns were intended to be sung a cappella, thus without the guidance of a pianist or organist, he placed at the top of each hymn an abbreviation signifying its meter. Markings such as C.M. (common meter), L.M. (long meter), S.M. (short meter), and P.M. (particular meter) indicated to song leaders the type of tunes to which the words could be sung. If the congregation wished to sing a hymn marked C.M., for instance, a good song leader would have in his memory a number of tunes to which that hymn might be sung. One week he might call for the hymn to be sung to one tune, the next week to another. The hymns passed from one generation to the next as oral tradition and thus have taken on regional variations as well as varying preferences for tune and lyric combinations among congregations.





The Primitive Hymns African American Primitive Baptists who sing from *The Primitive Hymns* use a style that was brought to the colonies by British immigrants in the early eighteenth century and that has remained essentially unchanged. This style has many regional folk names, the origins of which are unclear. "Dr. Watts singing" is the most commonly used, though "meter music" or "old one-hundreds" are popular regionally. All of the styles generally follow a similar format: A deacon or elder will perform, or "line out," the first line or two of the hymn in a sing-song voice, and then the congregation will repeat his words in a slow, mournful manner to a meandering, highly embellished tune. The process is repeated until the congregation has finished the hymn. Few white churches practice "lining out" today, but the practice remains popular among more conservative African American congregations. Such groups have a tradition of standing and shaking hands

with people on either side of them as they sing and are thus unable to hold a hymnal. This explains the need for the leader to call out the words to them.

Primitive Baptists also sing from D. H. Goble's *The Primitive Baptist Hymn Book* (1887) or the *Old School Hymnal* (1930), but the most conservative congregations hold allegiance to *The Primitive Hymns*. Published and revised by members of the Lloyd family for 130 years, the hymnbook, which now contains 705 hymns, is published by The Primitive Hymns Corporation of Rocky Mount, N.C., which is owned by a group of Primitive Baptists who incorporated to keep the book in print.

### Additional Resources

Cauthen, Joyce. *Benjamin Lloyd's Hymn Book: A Primitive Baptist Song Tradition*. Montgomery: Alabama Folklife Association, 1999.

Lloyd, Benjamin. *The Primitive Hymns*. Rocky Mount, N.C.: The Primitive Hymns Corporation, n.d.  
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