BIOGRAPHY OF SAMUEL KENNEDY TALMAGE

1798 - 1865

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submitted to Dr. Roger Warlick
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ABSTRACT

Samuel Kennedy Talmage was born December 11, 1798 near Somerville, N.J. He was ordained a Presbyterian minister and moved to Georgia where he helped found Oglorthpe University at Midway. He served as President of the school from 1841 till his death September 2, 1865.
Samuel Kennedy Talmage was born December 11, 1798 near Somerville, N.J. He was the sixth son of Thomas and Mary McCoy Talmage.\(^1\)

In 1815, at the age of seventeen he began teaching in order to earn money to attend Princeton\(^*\) University. He entered Princeton at the age of twenty and was graduated two years later, in 1820.\(^2\) Samuel spent the years 1820 to 1822 tutoring in private schools in New Jersey. In 1822 he returned to Princeton as a tutor and entered the Theological Seminary there. He completed his seminary work in 1825 and was ordained as an evangelist by the Presbytery of Newton.\(^3\)

In that same year, 1825, Reverend Talmage moved to South Carolina, where he worked as a missionary in Hamburg and other points in the Edgefield District for two years.\(^4\) In 1827 he made the short move to Augusta, Ga. to assist the Reverend S.S. Davis as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. In 1828 Samuel Talmage was made pastor of the church and served in that capacity until 1836.\(^5\)

Samuel Talmage married Ruth W. Sterrit of Augusta, on July 11, 1834.\(^6\) The story leading up to their marriage is worth relating. Miss Sterrit lived with her mother in Augusta and was a member of Reverend Talmage's congregation. Ruth had taken ill and Samuel Talmage, as her pastor, came to call on her. She offered him a glass of wine which he drank.\(^7\) Upon returning home, he himself became very ill and suspecting the wine, sent a message to Ruth's mother not to let her have any more. An analysis of the wine apparently turned up Prussic acid. A friend who was ministering to Ruth and had given her the wine was threatened with arrest but fled. It took Ruth Sterrit some months to recover and her health was supposedly impaired for life from the poison.\(^8\)
Ruth Sterritt was so grateful to Samuel Talmage for "saving her life" that she fell in love with him and they were married shortly thereafter. He was 35 years old and she was near 18. She would later be described as presenting a "quaint appearance in her old-fashioned frock and lace cap. She was cultured and refined but rather eccentric," with an incredible love for cats.

In 1835 Talmage and other leaders of the Hopewell Presbytery met in Milledgeville to discuss setting up a college for "the cultivation of knowledge and the diffusion of piety." The town of Midway, nearby, was the site chosen and the institution was named for the founder of Georgia, James Edward Oglethorpe. The Reverend Talmage was chosen financial officer for the new institution but in 1836, when the university was organized, he was elected a member of the faculty, as Professor of Ancient Languages.

In November 1840, Carlisle Beman, first President of Oglethorpe, resigned over his right to flog students above the level of sophomore. Samuel Talmage served as acting president while the university sought a replacement for Beman. Talmage handled the interim job so well that in November 1841 he was named the second President of Oglethorpe University.

Physically, Dr. Talmage was described as small in stature, with black curly hair and blue eyes. He always wore a black broadcloth coat and carried a gold-headed cane. He was profoundly religious and saw his chief duty as preaching the Gospel. He travelled the southeast preaching Christ, performing marriages and burying the dead. After the Georgia Insane Asylum was established near Oglethorpe University, he occasionally preached to those inmates who were capable of understanding his message.

Unlike his predecessor as President, Samuel Talmage was
genuinely liked by the student at Oglethorpe. His sense of humor earned him many friends. One story tells of the night some of his students tried to make a practical joke on him by pulling his carriage to the top of a nearby hill and leaving it there. Dr. Talmage got wind of the plan and decided to hide himself in the carriage. After the boys had finished moving the carriage and were ready to leave, he sprang up and called out, "Now boys, I have enjoyed the ride here, please take me home." The surprised and weary students carried him back to the front gate and resolved never to play another prank on Dr. Talmage.20 Others under his guidance thought Dr. almage to be "a cultured and refined gentleman, and a sincere and undogmatic Christian."21 Although he himself was a classicist, Dr. Talmage's words were "not covered with the dust of past theological thought."22 Another observer classified him as "a learned divine, graceful in his deportment, and of persevering, energetic habits."23 Typical of the public praise that he received was this eulogy written in 1860: "The Rev. Dr. Talmage, the President, is popular with the students as he is with all who know him personally. Thorough in learning and skillful in discipline, he is the model of a finished character--'the scholar, the gentleman, and the christian.'"24

As the sectional tension which would lead to the Civil war increased in the 1850's, Dr. Talmage's health suffered a concomitant decline.25 The students of Oglethorpe, having observed his failing health, unveiled at Commencement in 1859, a portrait of their President.26 Torn between love for his native north and for his adopted south, Dr. Talmage's thoughts seem to have paralleled those of Robert E. Lee.27 But if war came, would Dr. Talmage like-
wise side with the state of his birth, New Jersey?

On November 15, 1860, Benjamin H. Hill addressed the Georgia State Legislature in Milledgeville on the topic of secession.28 Chaperoned by Dr. Talmage, some of the Oglethorpe students went to hear the address. Dr. Talmage cautioned them not to make any show of partisanship on the issue. Ben Hill, in a long speech, gave powerful arguments against secession.29 The students observed that Dr. Talmage, who was wont to rub his hands together when he was pleased, almost rubbed the skin off.30 Even this close to the war, Dr. Talmage was still fervently against secession and for union.

Six months after Fort Sumter was fired upon, Dr. Talmage spoke to the senior class at Commencement on their three-fold duties as scholars, citizens, and christians.31 He urged the graduating class to support the Confederacy and to maintain "our honor and rights."32 The next day, he proposed to be one of 87 Baldwin County citizens to contribute $100 in reply to Georgia Governor Brown's call for aid.33

The confrontation in his orderly mind must have been too much, for shortly after the fall term began in 1862, Dr. Talmage fell seriously ill.34 He experienced paralysis and convulsions and after each attack his mind was so clouded that he had to be placed in the nearby insane asylum.35 No permanent improvement was noted until his "very sudden" death on September 2, 1865.36

The Reverend Dr. Samuel Kennedy Talmage was laid to rest in the Midway Cemetery (currently being reclaimed by nature) near the college that he was trying to reopen after the devastation of war.37 The inscription on his tomb reads as follows:

"In memory of Rev. Samuel K. Talmage D.D., for more than 20 years President of Oglethorpe University, died September 2, 1865, aged 67 years."
At the head of the stone is carved an open Bible with these words inscribed on the pages:

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings that publish peace." 38

After the death of Dr. Talmage, his widow lived alone, except for her two faithful Negro servants, "Uncle Robert" Bailey and his wife "Aunt Sallie," and of course her many cats. 39 Ruth Talmage died in 1891 at the age of 75. 40 She is buried next to Dr. Talmage in the Midway Cemetery. Her inscription reads, "Mrs. Ruth Talmage, consort of Rev. S.K. Talmage D.D., 1816 - 1891. 'Nothing but Jesus.'" 41 The home which she and her husband lived in most of their lives was consumed by fire in 1921. 42

Although Samuel and Ruth Talmage were childless, other family members are noteworthy. Samuel's older brother David and wife Catherine (van Nest) Talmage were the parents of John van Nest Talmage, a noted Dutch Reformed missionary in China. 43 Even more famous was David and Catherine's younger son, Thomas DeWitt Talmage, another Dutch Reformed evangelist and popular preacher of the 19th century American scene. 44
ADDENDUM

DIED

"Very suddenly in Midway, Sat. Aug. (sic) 2nd
Rev. Samuel K. Talmage D.D. President of
Oglethorpe University, in the 70th year of
his age.
Beautiful in all the varied relations of life—
the polished christian gentleman, the scholar,
the pastor, the teacher—he richly merits, and
the christian public will demand a more extended
notice of his worth than we can give. Reserving
this privilege to others, in heralding his
death, we simply pause to drop a tear of affec-
tion over his grave and to add our testimony
to hundreds of others that the eulogy as
penned by inspiration on one of old, was
emphatically true of Dr. Talmage.
'He was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost
and of prayer.'"45
END NOTES


2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Allen P. Tankersley, *College Life at Old Oglethorpe* (University of Georgia Press, 1951), page 15, citing *Trustee Minutes of Oglethorpe University, 1835-70*, page 238. Neither the Georgia or South Carolina census for 1830 lists Samuel Talmage. He was apparently travelling and missed enumeration.

5 Ibid.

6 *Dictionary of Georgia Biography*.

7 Sarah Cantey Whitaker Allen, *Old Oglethorpe University-Midway, Georgia*, page 52. Published by the author and in the possession of Milledgeville Public Library.

8 Ibid., although not too impaired, as she lived to be 75 years of age.

9 Tankersley, page 15.

10 Sarah Cantey Whitaker Allen, *Our Children's Ancestry*, page 445. Published by the author in 1935 and in possession of Georgia College Library Special Collections, Milledgeville, Ga.

11 Allen, *Old Oglethorpe University*, page 52.

12 *Dictionary of Georgia Biography*


14 *The Daily Georgian*, December 8, 1836, p. 2, col. 1. In the same newspaper, dated November 16, 1839, Samuel Talmage is listed as "Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy, Belles Lettres, and Evidences of Christianity." (!) O.B. Arnold is teaching Ancient Languages by this time.

15 Tankersley, page 10. According to Tankersley and the *Trustee Minutes, Oglethorpe U.* was in financial trouble at this time, which may have played a part in Beman's resignation. According to the *Daily Georgian*, between June 7, 1838, p. 2, col. 4, and May 1, 1839, p. 2, col. 4, Samuel Talmage divested himself of about $750 of Georgia RR and Banking Co. stock.

16 Tankersley, page 13.

17 Allen, *Old Oglethorpe University*, page 50. Samuel Talmage was awarded the degree of Doctor of Divinity by Princeton in 1845.

18 *Dictionary of Georgia Biography*.

20 Allen, *Old Oglethorpe University*, page 50.

21 Tankersley, page 68.

22 Ibid.

23 *Dictionary of Georgia Biography*.

24 Tankersley, page 14, citing *Southern Recorder*, November 16, 1841.


26 Tankersley, page 92.

27 Allen, *Old Oglethorpe University*, page 50.

28 Leola Selman Beeson, *Sidney Lanier at Oglethorpe University, Macon, 1936*, page 30.

29 Tankersley, page 43.

30 Beeson, page 30.

31 Tankersley, page 103, citing *Southern Recorder*, June 4, 1861.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., page 107; Allen, *Old Oglethorpe University*, page 50.

35 Tankersley, page 107.


37 *Index of City of Milledgeville Memory Hill Cemetery*, compiled by Mrs. H.D. Allen, Sr., in 1938, supplement, page 1.

38 Ibid.


40 *Index of City of Milledgeville Memory Hill Cemetery, Old Midway supplement*, page 1.

41 Ibid.
42 Allen, Old Oglethorpe University. Beeson, in Sidney Lanier, page 49, remarks that two old manuscript maps of Oglethorpe U. are in the possession of Mrs. H.D. Allen, Sr., the present (1936) owner of the site. From measurements made in March, 1865, the Talmage property was reckoned at 46.1 acres.


44 Lucian Lamar Knight, Georgia's Landmarks, Memorials and Legends, 2 vols., Atlanta, 1914, page 572. This work contains the cryptic remark, "... Rev. Samuel K. Talmage, a graduate of Princeton and an uncle of the great Brooklyn divine..." Dr. Hair (?) in the History Dept. at Georgia College recognized the allusion to T. DeWitt ("the turgid") Talmage, thus providing a valuable lead.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allen, Sarah Cantey Whitaker, Old Oglethorpe University-Midway, Georgia. By the author, 1935. Found in the Milledgeville Public Library.

Allen, Sarah Cantey Whitaker, Our Children's Ancestry. By the author, 1935. Found in the Georgia College Library, Special Collections, Milledgeville.

Allen, Mrs. H.D., Index of City of Milledgeville Memory Hill Cemetery. By the author, 1938. Found in the Milledgeville Public Library. It contains a small supplement for the Old Midway Cemetery.

Beeson, Leola Selman, Sidney Lanier at Oglethorpe University. Macon, 1936. Found in the Georgia College Library, Special Collections.


Daily Georgian, June 7, 1838, p. 2, col. 4


Knight, Lucian Lamar, Georgia's Landmarks, Memorials and Legends. 2 vols., Atlanta, 1914.

Southern Recorder, September 5, 1865, p. 2, col. 6. The best source is the Georgia College Library, which has issues from 1826-1872, currently being indexed. Georgia Historical Society's copies are not indexed.

Because of the nature of the topic and the vagaries of student life, I was unable to cover the primary sources so essential to a complete biography. Material in Savannah is rare. There is no mention of Dr. Talmage in the Grantor-Grantee indexes at Chatham County Courthouse, nor in the Savannah City Directories. Chatham County Marriages and Wills are also silent on this topic. The Savannah, newspapers of the period offer little non-incidental information.

The obvious place to begin a study of Dr. Talmage would be at his birthplace near Somerville, N.J. The town still exists and may possess relevant records. Princeton University, with which he was continously associated also offers a wealth of possibilities. I found out too late that Dr. Talmage spent eight years in Augusta, Ga. The city directories, newspapers, and government records of that city should be searched.

The best sources for an account of his life are the Trustee Minutes of Oglethorpe U., in Atlanta, and Southern Recorder newspaper in Milledgeville. The Georgia College Library has issues from 1826 to 1872. These are currently being indexed.

The Georgia Collection at the University of Georgia might contain useful information, as should the Barnsley Papers in the Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina.

The industrious should be sure to check A.W. Talmage's The Talmadge, Tallmadge, and Talmage Geneal, (1909). Also worthy of note are John S. Wilson, The Dead of the Synod of Georgia. Necrology, or Memorials of Deceased Ministers, (Atlanta, 1869). James Stacy, A History of the Presbyterian Church in Georgia, (Atlanta, 1912). The Southern Presbyterian Review, to which Dr. Talmage was a frequent contributor, is a must.

Samuel Kennedy Talmage was a significant regional historical figure. What has be unearthed about his life must be a drop in the bucket compared to what is still out there waiting. So, go to it.