



# Close vote in 1854 chan

When people think about historic events, they usually think about military battles, elections and rebellions. But in the mid-1800s, something very important happened to Tennessee that you won't find in any textbook. Without it, Nashville never would have become a publishing center, never would have gotten Vanderbilt University and probably never would have become known as the "Athens of the South."

The event I refer to took place in 1854. It was in that year, you see, that the Methodist Episcopal Church South picked a city for its publishing house.

The story starts 10 years earlier. In 1844, the Methodist Episcopal Church — then the dominant Christian denomination in America — split over the issue of slavery. It took several years for the courts to decide how to divide up the assets of the Methodist publishing concern, which had offices in New York and Cincinnati. In 1854, the settlement was finalized, and Southern Methodists were given enough capital to start a new operation.

By this time, there had already been a lot of debate in the editorial pages of Methodist newspapers about where to locate the publishing house of the new Methodist Episcopal Church South. As it happened, the influential Nashville Christian Advocate had as its editor John McFerrin. A friend of the late president James K. Polk, McFerrin used his newspaper to argue in favor of Nashville.

Among McFerrin's arguments: New Orleans was unqualified because it had "broken levees, deluged streets, deserted mansions and epidemic diseases."

Louisville was a "border town," and "there is not a place in the South or West for which nature has done so much and man so little as the city of Louisville."

Nashville, on the other hand, was the political capital of the South, having produced two presidents in the last 30 years. And it was a place where "Methodism is decidedly in the ascendancy, and

Tennessee is a commonwealth of primitive, real camp-meeting Methodists."

Despite McFerrin's arguments, Nashville did not immediately rise to the top of the list of cities for the new publishing house at the annual conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church South in 1854. On the first ballot, leading vote-getters were Memphis, Louisville and Prattville, Ala. One by one, cities were eliminated from the list. On the sixth ballot, Nashville beat out Louisville, 60-57.

So why is this so important?

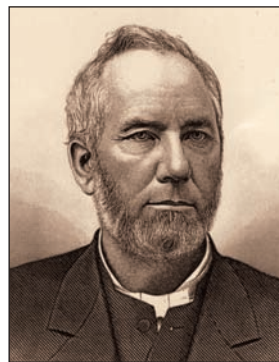
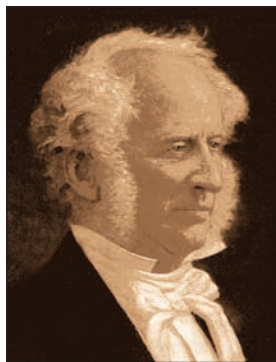
Almost immediately after its opening in Nashville, the Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church South became one of the most important and prolific publishers of books and literature in the South, bringing many jobs and educated people to the city.

After the Civil War ended, the leaders of the Southern Methodist church decided to start a university. In its infancy, it was known as Central University. But when millionaire Cornelius Vanderbilt, a distant relative of Methodist Bishop

op Holland McTyeire, donated \$500,000 to the cause, the school was renamed for him. One of the reasons Nashville was chosen as the site for Vanderbilt University was because the publishing house was already there.

By the 1880s, with the decline of the University of Nashville, Vanderbilt became the most pre-eminent institution of higher learning in a city that had so many universities that it was known as the "Athens of the South." Today, Vanderbilt University is one of the top private universities in the South. The Vanderbilt Medical Center employs in excess of 13,000 people.

The Southern Methodist Publishing House grew in size and stature in the latter part of the 19th century. In 1891, the Southern Baptist Convention voted to form a publishing arm and chose Nashville for its headquarters, doing so in part because of the existence of the Southern Methodist Publishing House. (For generations it was known as the Baptist Sunday School Board.)



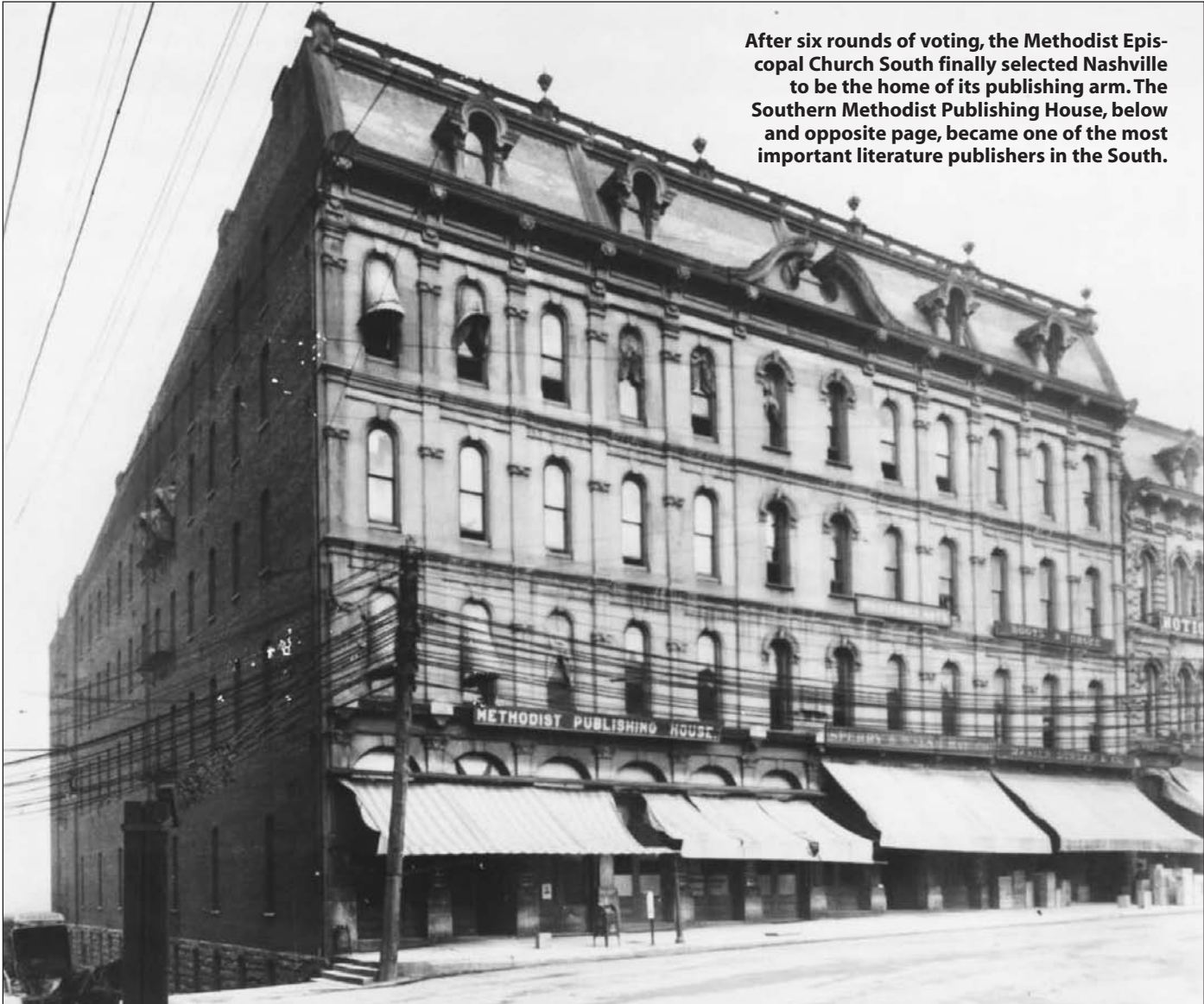
**Vanderbilt University, named for donor Cornelius Vanderbilt, above left, was founded in large part because of the efforts of Nashville Christian Advocate editor John McFerrin, above right, to bring the Southern Methodist Publishing House to Nashville.**





# nged Nashville's history

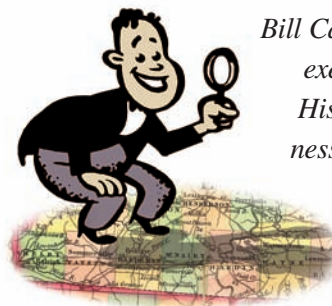
After six rounds of voting, the Methodist Episcopal Church South finally selected Nashville to be the home of its publishing arm. The Southern Methodist Publishing House, below and opposite page, became one of the most important literature publishers in the South.



In the early 20th century the (predominantly African American) National Baptist Convention also located its religious publishing organization in downtown Nashville — again because of the presence of religious publishing in Nashville. It became known as the National Baptist Publishing Board.

Today these three entities are known as the United Methodist Publishing House, Lifeway Christian Resources and R.H. Boyd Publishing Corp., respectively.

And, like I said, I don't think any of this would have happened without that very close vote at a Methodist church convention 153 years ago.



## Tennessee History for Kids

Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of "Tennessee History for Kids," an online Tennessee history textbook. For more great stories of Tennessee history, go to [www.tnhistoryforkids.org](http://www.tnhistoryforkids.org).