



Here & Now

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An update for Florida Baptist Historical Society Board of Directors and friends

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Dear Board Members and Friends of the Florida Baptist Historical Society,

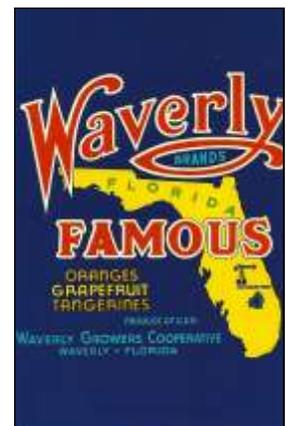
One of the most interesting things about this work is the opportunity to view the original documents of various Baptist organizations and the people who founded them. In a letter that was from the Mays family an interesting assertion is made. The statement is that Rhydon Grigsby Mays married Sarah Butler Smith and they settled at Orange Mills on St. Johns River, south of Jacksonville where they "planted Florida's first orange grove."

According to the *Florida Citrus Industry* web page Florida Domestic groves were planted as early as the 1830's and most of them were destroyed by the most severe Florida freeze on record that came in 1835. The Mays claim of "planting the first orange grove" in Florida may be exactly right. This is one of those Baptist history topics that could bear more research. Baptists in Florida have had a long tradition of "orange fever". Some of the first Baptist preachers in Florida came because of the Civil War, consumption and citrus. The most dramatic of all these efforts was the "Philadelphia Orange Grove" experiment.



According to the *Florida Baptist Witness* of May 1, 1885, the endeavor was begun by Dr. G. J. Johnson, of Philadelphia in 1883. A charter was granted to "The Florida Orange Grove Company" and the attempt was off and running. Four Hundred shares of stock were sold at \$100.00 per share. The largest stock holder was a lawyer with forty shares. All the stock holders were professing Christians and all were Baptists but two. One hundred acres of land was purchased and cleared at Citra. Then 6,200 orange trees and 300 lemon trees were planted.

Forty of the stock holders were Baptist preachers who lived in fourteen different states, Europe and Asia. Some probably invested their life savings and many planned to move to the grove and build a home when they retired. Land was developed and lots were sold for future retirement homes in the area between the grove and the rail line that was to offer residential transportation and ship the annual orange harvest.



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The last tree for the grove was planted on May 6, 1885. On December 29-30, 1894 and February 8-9, 1895, came the terrible impact freezes of north Florida. While more research needs to be done it was probably these last two freezes that dismantled any hope for the 55 shareholders and the "Philadelphia Orange Grove" experiment.

But Florida Baptists still had a fascination for oranges. At the 1905 Florida Baptist Convention meeting it was stated that "Aunt Carrie" the widow of our convention leader Dr. Chaudoin, was "old and feeble and has no income except from a small and inferior orange grove." In that same 1905 meeting the Florida Baptist Orphanage gave its first report and stated they had cleared eight acres at Arcadia for "an orange grove."

Missionaries and preachers must have rejoiced at the coming of the Southern Baptist Convention Relief and Annuity Board in 1918. The board may not have answered all the retirement questions but it sure did beat lemons, oranges and impact freezes.

Honoring those who honor Christ,



Jerry M. Windsor
Secretary-Treasurer
Matthew 6:33

