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Itinerant Missionaries Brought the Gospel into the Florida Territory – Part 3

This issue of Here and Now continues the featured series on some of the pioneer itinerant missionaries who came into the Florida Territory – as it was called prior to Florida’s 1845 admission to statehood – and undertook the challenges to share the Gospel in this spiritual and physical frontier wilderness.

The Alabamians Who Evangelized West Florida

Much of the early Baptist church development in the far regions of West Florida is the result of missionary efforts initiated by Alabama Baptist associations and missions’ societies. These groups sent two early and prominent itinerant preachers Alexander Travis and Keidar Hawthorne.

Before the formation of Alabama as a state in 1817, an association of Baptist churches was formed a year earlier in 1816. Originally called the Bigby Baptist Association, it was comprised of a few churches in Washington and Clarke counties located at the southwestern corner of the state near Mobile Bay. Within six years the association, which changed its name to Beckbe, grew with the addition of 17 Baptist churches located in the Alabama counties of Conecuh, Monroe, Covington as well as the original two counties. In 1827, the association again changed its name, referring to itself as the Bethlehem Baptist Association. Until 1850 this was the only association of Baptist churches along the Alabama and Florida boundaries stretching from Georgia to Mississippi.

One of the most esteemed ministers of the day, who was a driving force within the Bethlehem association, was Alexander Travis. Born in the Edgefield District of South Carolina on August 23, 1790, Travis made a profession of faith in 1809 and immediately began preaching to sinners to turn to God and live. Tradition contends that while his clothes were still wet from the baptismal waters, he delivered a “warm sermon.”

Recognizing Travis’ fervent call to be an evangelist, the Addiel (SC) Baptist Church licensed Travis as a preacher of the gospel on October 24, 1810. Within three years, on July 13, 1813, he was ordained into the gospel ministry by the Cambridge (SC) Baptist Church. Travis joined the exodus of South Carolinians who migrated to South Alabama in 1817.

The following year, after settling in Conecuh County, he drew together a group of Baptists to form the Beulah Baptist Church. But Travis was not content to being a farmer and part-time preacher. His missionary zeal motivated him to travel 15 to 20 miles a day by foot to preach the gospel wherever he could find a settlement of people.

In the early 1830s, a few destitute churches on the Conecuh River and the Florida border took up yearly collections and sent them to the Bethlehem Association in the hopes the association would send a preacher their way. Messages sent with the funds noted that many of the young people in the respective areas had never heard a sermon. One person was reported to have asked, “What sort of a thing is a preacher?”



Yellow River Baptist Church
and graveyard

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These “Macedonian” calls led a group of individuals to act independent of the association of churches to form the Bethlehem Baptist Domestic Missionary Society in 1835. In those days, the formation of a Missions Society was the primary means for funding and sending missionaries to domestic and foreign locations. Heading the group were Alexander Travis, Keidar Hawthorne, and J. H. Schroebel. Until the society could afford to employ a missionary, Travis and Hawthorne assumed the missionary tasks. Their missionary journeys followed the Conecuh, Yellow and Escambia rivers that flowed south into the Florida Territory and Mobile Bay.

Travis also had an official governmental interest in traveling into Florida. On December 17, 1821, the Alabama Legislature authorized the opening of a road from Cahaba, Alabama, to Pensacola, Florida. Alexander Travis was one of four individuals appointed as commissioners to “view and mark out a way for a road.” In time this came to be called the Old Stage Road. Given this official task coupled with his missionary zeal, it was quite possible that Travis made his way down Murder Creek and then followed the merged Conecuh – Escambia Rivers to reach the Gulf of Mexico at Pensacola.

Preacher Travis probably held brush arbor-type revival meetings wherever he found settlers who would listen to his message of hope. This would have been a great evangelistic opportunity inasmuch as Pensacola’s religious community had been controlled by Roman Catholics from 1781 to 1821. As a result of British influence, in 1824 the Episcopalians established a mission. An 1827 religious census was conducted by a missionary of the General Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America. Pensacola’s total population of 2000 yielded “twelve communicants of our church [Episcopal], ten Methodists, two Presbyterians and two Baptists.” Subsequently, a Methodist circuit rider preacher named Alexander Talley laid claim to being the first evangelical Protestant messenger to the city set on a hill, as Pensacola also was called. As a result of Talley’s initial effort, by February 1827, the first Methodist church was established in Pensacola. It would be several decades before other denominations would establish churches, including the Presbyterians in 1845, and the Baptists in 1847.

In 1840, Keidar Hawthorne was employed as the Bethlehem Baptist Domestic Missionary Society’s field missionary. That same year Hawthorne reportedly traveled 3,000 miles on horseback preaching the gospel along the way and baptized 106 persons. He found a group of Baptist settlers in what is now northern Okaloosa County, Florida, and organized the Yellow River Baptist Church. This was one of the earliest Baptist churches (that continues to exist today) organized in the western end of the Florida Panhandle. The church thrived as a monthly meeting church until 1916, when its members migrated and the church became inactive. The church reportedly revived in August, 1938, and continued holding monthly services.



First Baptist Church, Pensacola

The following year, in 1841, Keidar Hawthorne also established and served as part-time pastor of the Escambia River Baptist Church, which is now extinct. Subsequently, the Pensacola Baptist Church of Christ, as it was called, was established May 2, 1847. Elder Alexander Travis and Elder Joseph Mitchell, also a missionary of the Bethlehem Baptist Domestic Missionary Society, served as the constituting presbytery. The seven charter members were Aaron and Mary Hendrix, Henry and Jane Maulder, Joseph and Jane Steele, and W. L. Jamison. Within a short time the congregation was composed of 123 Anglos, including 50 men and 73 women, as well as a group of 24 African-descendant men and 98 women. Five years later the church changed its name to the Pensacola Baptist Church. One hundred and seventy years later, the now called First Baptist Church, Pensacola, continues to thrive and minister in its downtown location.

Society’s Board of Directors to Meet this Month

The Florida Baptist Historical Society Board of Directors is set to convene at the end of this month for their semi-annual gathering. The nine-member board is led by Judith (Mrs. Lawson) Jolly of Dade City, chair, and David Hecht of Panama City, vice chair.

A featured highlight of the two-day meeting is a planned dinner in honor of Dr. Jerry Windsor who retired at the end of December after serving 14 years as Secretary-Treasurer of the Society.

The board is expected to hear several reports of the various ministry services that the Society provides through its part time staff. These services include the addition and maintenance of several historically significant collections of pastor biography files, church history files, book collections, and other aspects of the Florida Baptist Historical Collection.

Additionally, the board is expected to review and endorse plans on two major publication projects currently underway: (1) the Fall, 2017, *Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*; and (2) *Favored Florida: A History of Florida Baptists, Volume Two, 1940 – 2015*, by Donald S. Hepburn and E. Earl Joiner.

A strategy planning session on the Society’s future role and ministry is expected to require the board’s attention during the second day.