



May, 2017



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Itinerant Missionaries Brought the Gospel into the Florida Territory and Fostered the Pro-missions Cause in the Florida Territory – Part 4

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.

Bi-vocational Missionary and Probate Judge William B. Cooper

The founding and early survival of the 185-year old current day First Baptist Church, Jasper, is due in part to the efforts of William B. Cooper, (April 26, 1807-May 1, 1878), an itinerant preacher who defended and promoted the pro-missionary cause.

Cooper’s involvement in Florida missions began when a group of Georgians, in search of new farm land in 1832, migrated to Tiger Swamp located in Middle Florida’s Hamilton County. Having established a settlement, several of the Baptists, led by Edmund and Unity Register Mathis, sought the help of the Union Baptist Church of Lanier County, Georgia, to sponsor an “arm” (mission). The group requested the Union Church to provide a ministerial presbytery to help organize and constitute a church. A date was set and on June 9, 1832, with the assistance of Elders (ordained pastors) Elias Knight, John Tucker and William B. Cooper, the Baptist Church of Christ Concord (Concord Baptist Church) was organized.



First Baptist Church, Jasper

Like so many other Baptist churches of the period, the Concord Church in 1839 was confronted by the anti-missions movement. The primary anti-mission proponent was Elder Elias Knight, who was still affiliated with the Union Church in Lanier County. Serving as the pro-missionary defender was Hamilton County probate judge and bi-vocational ordained Baptist minister William B. Cooper. The discussion of the pros and cons of the missionary movement continued over a series of monthly church conferences. Finally Elder Knight told the congregation that the church would take a vote. He explained that whichever faction was in the majority would grant to the opposing faction letters of dismissal so that the departed members could organize another church. The pro-missionary faction won the standing vote by a slim majority. The missionary faction reportedly voted to provide letters of dismissal to the anti-missions group, sang a song, shook hands with each other and said their good-byes. The anti-missions faction departed and eventually organized the Prospect Baptist Church.

When the nearby town of Jasper was surveyed and platted, land was set aside for three churches. The potential for the Concord congregation to re-locate into Jasper in the 1850s was greeted with enthusiasm, and to seal the commitment to move, the congregation voted to change its name to the Jasper First Baptist Church. The church observes its 185th year of ministry in 2017.

The actions of William B. Cooper in 1839 gave rise to his prominence as a missions-oriented minister who contributed to the demise of the anti-missions movement.

In 1838, William Cooper agreed to serve as pastor of the Hickstown Baptist Church (now First Baptist Church, Madison) in Madison County. Later he served as pastor of Little River/Troupville Baptist Church near Valdosta and the Ochlocknee Baptist Church in Thomas County, Georgia.

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From Georgia, Cooper returned to Florida and served again as pastor to the Hickstown Church (1850), then served the missionary Baptist churches in Concordia (1861), Indian Springs (1863), and Elizabeth (1876).

Cooper also worked as an itinerant missionary in Madison, Leon, and Jefferson counties in Florida and Lowndes and Thomas counties in Georgia. During those travels he preached in wilderness settlements and helped start new churches. He was a key leader in the organization of the Florida Baptist Association and served as its moderator 16 times. He also served three terms as President of the Florida Baptist State Convention (1866, 1872, and 1876).



Indian Springs Baptist Church,
Tallahassee

Highlights of the Semi-annual meeting of the Florida Baptist Historical Society's Board of Directors

The Spring meeting of the Society directors could be characterized as a “search for its identity.” The Board was faced with two issues that affect its future ministry and that had been in the works for the past year: funding support and permanent office space.

The first issue is the planned reduction in Cooperative Program support from the current \$50,000 to \$20,000 beginning in 2018. This is the result of action by the State Board of Missions which entered into a new cooperative agreement with The Baptist College of Florida to fund the establishment of a chair in Baptist history. As a part of the agreement the College will assume management and oversight of the Convention's official archives and the pre-existing Florida Baptist Historical Collection. The State Board of Missions, acting on the recommendation of Convention staff, learned that the management assignment of the Historical Collection would eliminate the need for the Society's two part-time staff, a secretary-treasurer and an office secretary. In response, during their meeting, the Society board discussed and noted the many other tasks performed by the Society in assisting churches and individuals in Baptist history promotion and research that will go undone without personnel.

The second issue involves a cooperative agreement that had been in place for over two decades in which the college agreed to provide office space for the Historical Society. The college administration informed the Society directors that the college needed the space in the Clark House which the Society uses for its offices. The college leadership has decided not to renew the cooperative agreement that provides this accommodation.

The directors were told they should consider creating a virtual office with a greater utilization of its website and social media to communicate with its constituents. It also was proposed that the Society should use volunteers instead of paid staff to carry out the Society's tasks and responsibilities. The directors were unable to make a final determination of their future direction but agreed to continue to develop a strategy.

Other highlights of the Society directors' meeting:

- ◆ Held a dinner honoring the service of the Society's former secretary-treasurer Jerry M. Windsor who served for 14 years prior to his retirement in December;
- ◆ Received reports on its historically significant specialty collections:
 - ◇ During the past year, significant books, personal papers of Florida Baptists, and church records had been added to the **Florida Baptist Historical Collection**;
 - ◇ Agreed to rename its collection of 2,195 biographical files to be called the **Florida Baptist Biographical Collection**;
 - ◇ Learned the Society has one of the largest **collections of Convention Press** volumes totaling nearly 2,500 titles;
 - ◇ Was advised its unique **Church Postcard Collection** – providing historically significant architectural images of Baptist churches located predominately in the South – contains over 5,800 cards representing 15 states, 1,720 cities, 2,227 Baptist churches and 160 state Baptist convention agencies and institutions;
 - ◇ Learned the Society maintains 783 **church histories** on active and deactivated Florida Baptist congregations;
- ◆ Authorized the establishment of the Baptist Legacy Award to be given to those Florida Baptist ministers who have served as least 40 years in the ministry;
- ◆ Approved the recipient of the 2017 Baptist Heritage Award to be presented during the Florida Baptist State Convention meeting in November;
- ◆ Learned the Historical Society this year will recognize and honor over 60 Florida Baptist churches upon achieving a 25-year benchmark anniversary, ranging from 25 years to 175 years of ministry service; and
- ◆ Affirmed the 2017 *Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage* will focus on “The Protestant Reformation: 500 Years Later” that will address the rediscovered Biblical truths that came out of the Reformation and that serve as the basis for the faith and practice of Florida Southern Baptists.

Baptist Building Cornerstone and Time Capsule Presented

A time capsule and the official cornerstone that in 1959 were placed in the exterior wall of the Baptist Building, in Jacksonville, and which recently had been removed, was presented by Micah Ferguson during the Society directors' meeting.

The 58-year old Baptist Building, located on Hendricks Avenue, will be officially sold in June to a new owner who plans a commercial development. The two historic items were recovered from the vacant building without ceremony or fanfare. The Convention offices were relocated in February to a newly purchased building in suburban Jacksonville, making it the third Florida Baptist Convention office building since 1854.

The large marble slab cornerstone measuring 24 inches wide by 16 inches high and two inches thick was so heavy it had to be viewed as it lay on a table. The time capsule was a solid copper box, which had oxidized into a black patina finish, measuring 12 inches high by 17 inches wide and 5 inches deep, and that was welded shut, was opened with much difficulty. All the contents of 15 items, which were dry and in original condition, were removed and highlighted with commentary by Don Hepburn:

- 1) A bound edition of 1958 *Florida Baptist Annual*;
- 2) 1958-59 Book of Reports, [distributed at the 1959 State Convention meeting];
- 3) 1959 Program, Florida Baptist State Convention meeting, held in Tallahassee;
- 4) Letter from S. B. Rogers, dated 1914, [Rogers, as the Florida Baptist Convention's third executive secretary treasurer, served 1909 – 1926, and was responsible for the 1924 construction of the first Baptist building in downtown Jacksonville];
- 5) Agenda of the two previous State Board of Missions meetings [November 9, 1959 (pre-convention) and December 8, 1959]
- 6) Copy of a recent issue of the *Florida Baptist Witness* [which featured a lead story on the new Baptist Building];
- 7) Moffatt's translation of the Bible;
- 8) Plan of Organization;
- 9) Historical data on W.N. Chaudoin [first corresponding secretary of the State Board of Missions, who served from 1880 – 1900]
- 10) Copy of John L. Rosser's *History of Florida Baptists*, [Published in 1949, this was the first extensive publication on the history of the State Convention];
- 11) Copy of Minutes of the State Board of Missions meeting, May 8, 1958, [the significance of which was that it contained Board authorization to purchase a land site to construct a new Baptist building in South Jacksonville and sell the existing 1924 Baptist Building located on 218 West Church Street, in downtown Jacksonville];
- 12) List of State Board of Missions members, 1959 – 1960;
- 13) Florida Baptist Convention audit, 1959;
- 14) Copy of S.B. Rogers' "A History of Florida Baptists, 1825 – 1925," [This 25-page booklet summarizing the State Convention's history had been prepared for the Centennial celebration observing the first 100 years since the first known Baptist church was established in the Florida Territory]; and
- 15) A copy of B. C. Land's "The Stewardship of Stetson" [At the time, Stetson University was the State Convention's premier Baptist institution of higher education and was the beneficiary of a State Convention-approved fund solicitation effort.]



Board members hear Don Hepburn provide commentary on time capsule content.



Dr. Tommy Green, executive director-treasurer, Florida Baptist Convention, with the cornerstone soon after it was removed from the Florida Baptist Convention building on Hendricks Avenue, Jacksonville. The cornerstone has been added to the Florida Baptist Historical Collection.



Time capsule opened by Micah Ferguson, left and David Elder.



Copper box time capsule after being opened



Time capsule contents