



Here & Now

Vol. 8

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

No. 10

October, 2016



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

Who was the first Baptist to come to Florida? Gordon Reeves in *A History of Florida Baptists* (1938, M. A. Thesis at Stetson) probably answered that question best. Reeves said, "This question will never be answered to the complete satisfaction of all" (p. 1). However even Reeves took the plunge. Reeves said, "In 1743, Edward Kimber, son of Reverend Isaac Kimber, a learned Baptist minister of London visited Florida with General James Oglethorpe" (p. 1). Reeves therefore concluded that Edward Kimber was the "earliest known person of Baptist extraction or faith to leave a record of his trip" to Florida (p. 1).

Don Hepburn and Earl Joiner in *Favored Florida*, made another distinction. German surgeon Johann D. Schoepf, who served with Hessian troops wrote that in 1784 "a group of Black Anabaptists" held services in St. Augustine. Hepburn and Joiner conclude this would "denote the first recorded Baptist meeting in Florida" (p. 26).

If the first person of Baptist extraction came to Florida in 1743, and the first Baptist meeting in Florida was in 1784, when did the first Baptist preacher come to Florida?

To quote Gordon Reeves this may never be answered to the complete satisfaction of all. But let's try. From 1821 to 1838 there were 14 Baptist churches begun in Florida and 21 preachers who served. I want to highlight some of those early pioneer Baptist preachers.

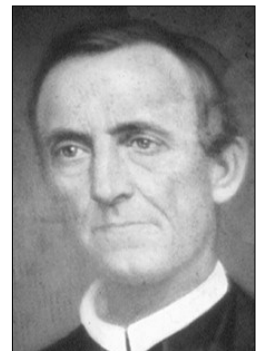
Wilson Conner (1768-1844) was the first Baptist preacher to come to Florida (Rosser, Joiner and Hepburn agree). He was born in South Carolina and came to Florida with some frontier militia men in about 1812. He died immediately after preaching at Hawkinsville, Georgia in the summer of 1844.

Fleming Bates (1771-1840) was the second Baptist preacher to come to Florida. He assisted in establishing the first church in Florida on January 7, 1821. The Pigeon Creek church in Nassau County, near Callahan, was the first Baptist church organized in Florida, but the church became anti-missionary in philosophy and did not become Southern Baptist in 1845, when the convention was formed. No regular services are held there now but the block building still stands near the St. Mary's River and the Georgia State line.

John B. Lacy (1793-1878) was the second pastor of Indian Springs Baptist Church in Leon County. He was born in Virginia and served in the Army from 1812-1824. Lacy and his wife moved to Georgia and later served in Leon, Jefferson, Madison and Gadsden counties in Florida.

John Tucker (1785-1853) came to Florida in 1832 and was ordained as a Baptist preacher in 1833. He taught school and preached in south western Georgia and northeast Florida. Tucker was a missionary preacher and became pastor of Old Providence church in Lake Butler.

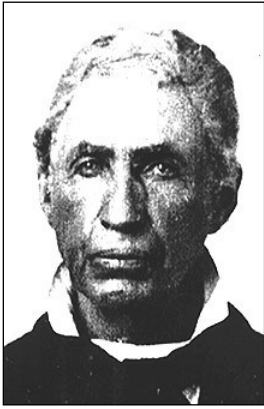
Richard Johnson Mays (1808-1864) was truly the father of the Florida Baptist Convention. His commitment to missions, cooperation and service sets this South Carolina native up as a true Florida Baptist icon. His work in the Madison, Florida, area is well remembered and documented to this day.



R. J. Mays

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James McDonald

James McDonald (1798-1869) was one of the most unusual and exciting preachers to ever appear on the Florida Baptist scene. His conversion, difficult life, courage and commitment led him to organize (Bethel) the First Baptist Church of Jacksonville.

Joshua Mercer (1788-1869) is a favorite of mine when I think of early Baptist preachers in Florida. He came from the famous Mercer family of Georgia and served as a farmer, soldier, preacher, missionary and pastor. It was a very exciting day for me years ago when some church members and I at the Greenwood Baptist Church were doing some "church cleaning" and found a wonderful picture of Joshua and his wife Mary Wells Mercer. Joshua was one of nine children and he and his wife Mary had nine children of their own. Joshua was one of the 17 delegates that organized the Florida Baptist Convention, near Madison, on November 20, 1854. I had the privilege of serving as interim pastor at Greenwood where Joshua formally served. I also had the privilege of teaching Loran Mercer at the Baptist College of Florida. Loran was a Joshua descendant and a Florida Baptist pastor.

Honoring those who honor Christ,

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Matthew 6:33
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Joshua and Mary Mercer