

EARLY SOUTHERN BAPTIST WORK
IN BREVARD COUNTY

The LaGRANGE CHURCH

By

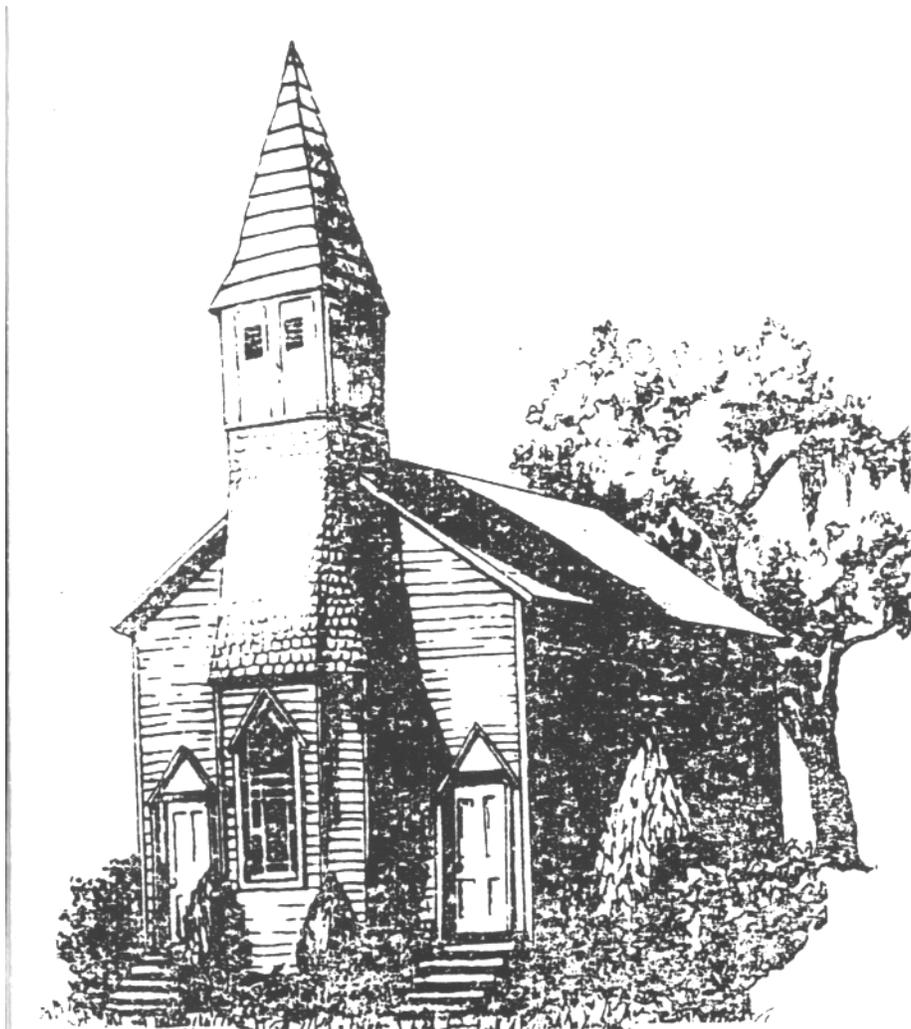
Joseph R. Moss

ADDRESS PRESENTED AT THE
ANNUAL DIRECTORS MEETING
OF THE
FLORIDA BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MAY, 1991
STETSON UNIVERSITY
DELAND, FLORIDA

The First Church

LaGrange community Church was the first Protestant Church between St. Augustine and Key West. Organized in 1869, it was remodeled in 1893 into this one story structure which stands today beside the equally historic LaGrange Cemetery. There early leaders, including Col. Henry Titus, father of Titusville, are buried.



LAGRANGE CHURCH 1870

Located on Old Dixie

EARLY SOUTHERN BAPTIST WORK

IN BREVARD COUNTY

The LaGRANGE CHURCH by Joseph R. Moss

The very earliest Southern Baptist work of record of Brevard County is believed to be that at the LaGrange Church, LaGrange, Florida.

This was the site of the first church of any denomination erected between New Smyrna Beach and Key West on the east coast of Florida. It was the first in the Indian River area. It was built as a community church in 1869. It was located on the Old Dixie Highway two miles north of the present City of Titusville, then called Sand Point. The first structure was made of logs. Another building was constructed in 1872 which was a two-story structure. The church was on the first floor and a community school was on the second floor. The public school was the well-spring of public education in Brevard County.

The early history of Brevard County shows almost no inhabitants prior to 1860. The very first inhabitants were of the Florida cattle ranching families, such as the Platts, the Williams and the Hunters. By 1860, there were 246 people counted in the United States Census living within Brevard County. Of that 225 were listed as free inhabitants, so one can conclude that the remaining 21 were slaves.

The area of Brevard County is a ridge like structure along a wide lagoon. The narrow ridge that forms the west bank of the Indian River is approximately seventy-five (75) miles long and three to five miles wide. It is along this ridge that the towns of Aurland, LaGrange, Titusville, Cocoa, Rockledge, Eau Gallie, Melbourne, and others were formed.

The territory of Florida was organized into two counties in 1821 known as Escambia and St. Johns. Gradually additional counties were carved out of the two and in 1855 the territory of St. Lucie County was divided between Brevard, Dade and Volusia.

LaGrange, Florida began seeing its first settlers after the Civil War. It was located near the site of the ruins of Fort Ann, an old military post along the Capron Trail. It was also across from the Indian River and Banana River Lagoons where a canal connected into the intercoastal waterway. The canal was known as the Haulover Canal.

When the LaGrange Church was formed in 1869 it had no local pastor. Tom Johnson, a Baptist layman, led the early services of an interdenominational congregation. He was a coppersmith by trade and had moved down from Poughkeepsie, New York after the Civil War on the promises, by the Federal Government, of cheap land. Tom Johnson, for forty seven (47)

years, taught a Union Sunday School of interdenominational members of primarily Baptist, Methodist and Episcopalians.

Shortly after the creation of the church, Rev. W.N. Chaudoin, a Southern Baptist preacher, became its first ordained pastor. Rev. Chaudoin was an active member of the Florida Baptist Convention. He, during that period time, served several churches in the east coast of Florida. He worked for the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and also conducted work among the Indians for the Board. One must attribute the strong Baptist ties of this little community church to Rev. Chaudoin. In addition, he was very influential in encouraging the creation of the Indianola Baptist Church on Merritt Island about 1883 and the First Baptist Church of Titusville about 1887. Members from the LaGrange Baptist congregation assisted in starting both of those churches.

This little church is also responsible for starting several Episcopal churches and Methodist churches in the Brevard County area. Again, Rev. Chaudoin's influence should be realized.

It is very interesting to see the "community" of the early pioneers in this area and especially in their relationship to each other and their religious activities. The early church services were held anywhere from one to four Sundays a month, depending on upon the availability of the various pastors, including Rev. Chaudoin's influence should be realized.

It is very interesting to see the "community" of the early pioneers in this area and especially in their relationship to each other and their religious activities. The early church services were held anywhere from one to four Sundays a month, depending on upon the availability of the various pastors, including Rev. Chaudoin. After all, Rev. Chaudoin had responsibilities both to the Home Mission Board and to the Florida Baptist Convention in addition to being responsible to this little church and later others in the area.

This community of early settlers made Sunday a great day for their religion and their social activities. From its beginning in 1869 there was a close relationship between the people of the various denominations. The church roll was made by each person signing the roll and then listing their particular denomination. Services at the church would last all day as crowds attended. People would travel to the LaGrange area late on Saturday afternoon, by sail boat, skiff, ox cart, gig, buggy, wagon, horseback or foot. These folks would come from points as far away as Melbourne, Georgiana, Cocoa, Rockledge, Indianola and up the river closer to LaGrange. They would stay at the homes of the people who lived in and around the little community. So, Saturday night would find a number of families as invited guests in the homes of the residents of LaGrange.

Morning services would begin early and if there were several preachers of several denominations there, each would take their turn and would conduct a service. Then at lunch time the folks would have dinner on the grounds. The records reflect that the noon dinner was served

on crude tables set up in the church yard. An early account of these Sunday festivals tells of a menu of wild turkey, venison, fried mullet, heart of palm salads, mango chutney, sea grape, and sweet potato pie. Of course, all the folks would contribute to a common table.

After a short while of visiting among the people and recreation for the children on the grounds, afternoon services would begin and continue until close to dark. Then the folks would drift away, earlier for those who had to travel farther and those who were near by a little later, until by sunset the folks were gone.

Part of the community effort was to create a cemetery on the property of the church, which still exists today. On these grounds of the cemetery there are some of the important and not so important early pioneers buried. Colonel Titus, who later gave the land he owned in the Sand Point area to create the county seat and courthouse and jail, is buried at that site. The Tom Johnson family, the Carters, the Mims, the Colemans, the Days, the Gardners and many others of that era are buried in the cemetery that is preserved to this day.

The Rev. W. N. Chaudoin and his wife have their grave sites there. His cousin R. R. Chaudoin and his family are buried there, also. R. R. Chaudoin owned the land where the church and the cemetery were situated and later served as caretaker from 1923 until his death in 1960.

The church building that was erected in 1872 was then reconstructed in 1893. The second floor school section of the 1872 church was removed, leaving only the church portion. At the dedication ceremony the Rev. W. N. Chaudoin, who was serving as president of the Florida Baptist Convention, conducted the dedication service. At that time the Rev. A. D. Cohen, who was the first pastor of First Baptist Church of Titusville in 1887, preached the LaGrange sermon. At this time, Rev. Cohen was also serving as pastor to the LaGrange Church. It was not an uncommon practice for a pastor in these frontier areas to serve more than one church because of the sparsity of ordained men.

The newspaper accounts reflecting back into that period even list the men of the community who actually physically reconstructed the church, many of whom were the same early family members and their children who initially settled the area.

As we look back at how these people were able to survive on the frontier, we must remember that the federal government was offering cheap land on this new territory opening up in this state. The early settlers were primarily planting fruit trees and orange groves. Many of those orange groves still exist to this day and are bearing fruit. Part of these Indian River oranges and grapefruit are being sold throughout the world. In addition to that, farming vegetables and timber were other ways that one provided for family. There was a little saw mill constructed south of Sand Point a distance of five miles, which is where the timbering operations took place for creating the broad boards necessary for building the communities as well as selling and sending off to other parts of the state and country.

Obviously, the excellent game and fishing made that a worth while way to provide for the families in the area.

About 1889 the railroads came. This made the ability to ship goods and receive goods much easier for the folks of LaGrange and other points along the east coast. Mr. Flagler opened up this territory to even greater development. Of course, the little community of LaGrange was affected, but essentially did not grow much larger than its 1890 population.

In examining the church itself, led by Rev. Chaudoin, we find it became very active in the Baptist work through the Santa Fe River Association. The annuals of the association from the period of 1876 to 1888 reflect, not only participation by Rev. Chaudoin, as a messenger and in leadership roles, but there are other from the church, such as the Gardners and the Days who were active.

When the church became part of the Indian River Baptist Association in 1889 we find that in addition to those names other members of the church who became active as messengers and as leaders, two also served as clerks; Mr. George Gardner and Mr. R. E. Mims, both served a number of years as clerk. J. W. Day, Mr. & Mrs. A. J. Carter, W. F. Mims, Mrs. J. Coleman, W. D. Day, Mrs. Conover, Mrs. Alice Mims, Mrs. Venessa Mims, R. I. Herndon, Mrs. George Gardner, Mrs. R. E. Mims and B. A. Johnson all were active in association work through the years. The record from the years in the Indian River Association gave an active account of this church and its leadership in the association. Several of these persons also would attend the Florida Baptist Convention with their pastors.

W. N. Chaudoin, while he was pastor of this little LaGrange Church, served as president of the Florida Baptist Convention from 1881 until his death in 1904. He also served on the State Board of Missions and its Executive Committee from 1881 to 1904. He and this little church were active supporters of Stetson University and their church contributed to funds for Stetson.

Rev. Chaudoin subsequently became a trustee of the Stetson University until his death. Chaudoin Hall residence was named in his honor on the Stetson campus.

Other pastors who faithfully served this church, with its strong ties to Florida Baptists through the years, besides W. N. Chaudoin included Rev. Cohen of First Baptist Church of Titusville. In 1898 N. Ian Bell served for two (2) years. In 1900 Rev. Chaudoin again was serving as pastor until his death. J. B. Rogers of Deland served as pastor in 1905. William Stones of Titusville was pastor from 1906 until 1910. W. H. Adams was pastor from 1912 to 1915. He was from Eau Gallie. J. G. Parsons of Titusville served 1917 to 1919. C. E. Sanders of Deland served in 1920. T. N. Conway served from 1921 to 1922. Thereafter, from 1922 to 1926, although a member of the association, there was no record of a pastor.

In 1925 Indian River Baptist Association was changed in which the Titusville Church became a member of the Seminole Baptist Association. However, the LaGrange Church, which

was nearby, does not show up again in any association in the Florida Baptist Convention. The best evidence seems to indicate that about this time, this church became an independent Baptist congregation. The independent Baptist congregation continues to this day and in approximately 1953 built its own building across the street from the current and historic LaGrange Community Church.

Another indication of the turmoil that may have existed during this period was that “Russellism” was fairly rampant in this county. One of the Florida Baptist Convention persons came to the Indian River Association in the early 20’s to announce that he had learned that over a thousand of Russell’s book had been sold in the Indian River Baptist Association.

It also is important to note that the long time members, Mr. and Mrs. George B. Gardner, of the LaGrange Church, were now members of Titusville and show up as messengers from that church to the new association, the Seminole Baptist Association.

In the years that it was active in the Florida Baptist Convention this little church which varied in its membership in its early period from about 17 to its peak 41 strongly supported missions.

In the annuals of the Santa Fe Association the reports reflect funds supporting various missions including Indian Missions, Home Mission Board, Stetson University and others from this little church. It is interesting to note that the pastors’ salaries reflected from \$40 to \$237.93 before 1900. This would indicate that there was one service to four services per month.

The Indian River Baptist Association annuals indicate a continuation of the support for missions. Again the support for Stetson, Home Missions, and Ordained Ministers’ fund and other mission causes are listed with contributions as high as \$130.40. The statistics in this period show an average of \$100 annually for expenses for their pastor.

We don’t have any information on the Sunday School because Tom Johnson was conducting a Union Sunday School of the several denominations in the church. The Baptist didn’t own the building so there is no reflection as to value of property.

When the Columbia College/Stetson University issue came up in our denomination, this little church continued to support Stetson. This is probably due to its ties with Rev. Chaudoin, even though he was deceased for a number of years. He had been a strong Stetson University supporter and trustee. Yet, after the state closed Columbia College and was left with indebtedness, this little church sent money for the Columbia College debt for at least two years.

The records reflect that when the \$75,000,000.00 fund campaign was created by the Southern Baptist Convention, Mrs. R. R. Chaudoin, the wife of the cousin of the late Rev. Chaudoin, was the treasurer for the campaign. For the years 1920 through 1923 there are

reflected contributions to the fund from this church. Their original subscription was for \$2,133.00 and they apparently contributed annually to try and meet that subscription.

When one looks back at the history of the pioneers of this area, including persons like Mrs. Nancy Jane Dixon, whose personal recollections were recorded March 24, 1896, one feels what these people felt; both the hardships and the joys. Mrs. Dixon describes the great difficulties of travel and then of the living along the Indian River. They lived at a place called Dixon Point at a point north of what later became the Town of Cocoa.

One must not forget that during the Spanish American War and the First World War, this little church and other little churches in this area assisted in providing for the troops. In the Spanish American War the trains came through these little towns and at those stops the town ladies from these churches would provide fish fries, bags of goodies and items that the troops would need. There was a great feeling of warmth toward them. Their goal was to lift the spirits of these young men.

CONCLUSION: We, sitting here one hundred twenty years after this first little church in Brevard County was created, need to reflect. Where would the Baptist or other denominations be if it had not been for these pioneers and their dedication to the Lord? If it had not been for these pioneers' efforts to spreading the Good News and making it available to their children and their ancestors places of worship and involvement with their religion, where would Baptist be today?

While this little church has long dropped out of the Southern Baptist work and Florida Baptist work, it should not be forgotten. It is an historic church which is important to the development Baptists in this state.

REFERENCES

Brevard County, From Cape of the Canes to Space Coast, by Elaine Murray Stone. Windsor Publications, Inc. 1st Ed., 1988

Brevard County, The Wilderness, by L .C. Crofton, (1950) (unpublished)

Centennial Committee, Count Down in History, n. p.; J. E. Blake, "Survey of the Haulover at Fort Ann made by Brit. Gen. William T. North" (1843)

Florida Baptist Convention Annuals of 1880, 1881, 1882, 1893, 1900, 1901, 1903, 1904 and 1912.

Florida Baptist Witness, Report on Missions Giving by Churches, January 7, 1890.

Florida Historical Quarterly, July, 1985, "Florida's Cattle-Ranching Frontier," by John Solomon Otto, pages 59-61

Historical Development of Cocoa (unpublished) by Cocoa Planning Department (1984)

Indian River Baptist Association annuals of 1889 to 1929.

Letter written by Mrs. Nancy Dixon, March 24, 1896 on her early years living on the Indian River. (Original placed in the corner-stone of the Cocoa Public Library).

Orlando Sentinel "LaGrange Church Mothered Others Along East Coast." May 13, 1948.

Orlando Sentinel, "Church Becomes Landmark," by Dick Burdette, September 1, 1974, 6-C.

Sante Fe River Baptist Association annuals of 1876, 1877, 1879, 1881, 1882, 1885, 1886, 1887 and 1888.

Speech of L.C. Crofton, March 6, 1942, at the unveiling of monument of LaGrange Church by the Phillip Perry Chapter of D. A. R.

Titusville Star-Advocate, "The LaGrange Church, Areas Earliest Church," May 8, 1947

Titusville Star-Advocate, "Oldest Church Group Moves to New Church," October 6, 1953.

Titusville Star-Advocate, "LaGrange Church Has a Long, Varied History," by Gene Burnett, May 9, 1958.

Titusville Star-Advocate, "Historic LaGrange Church," April 26, 1965.

Titusville Star-Advocate, "LaGrange Church, Headstones Tell Much of Area History." by Quin Sherrer. April 9, 1973, page B-1.

Titusville Star-Advocate, "Church House Legacy," April 12, 1974.

Titusville Star-Advocate, "Early Settlers Liked Their Churches," by Betty Morris, 1981.

Titusville Star-Advocate, "Community's Roots Buried at LaGrange Cemetery," by Connie White (date unknown).

Today (Sunrise Section) "Everybody's Church," by Bob Thomas, November 24, 1974, pages 6-8.

Today, "LaGrange Church Part of Historic Tour," By Betty Morris, October 4, 1989, pages D 1-2

Unpublished and undated writing of Mrs. James LaRoche on the early history of Brevard County, Florida, placed by the Brevard County Historical Society in the county library system.