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Itinerant Missionaries Brought the Gospel into the Florida Territory – Part 5

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.

Joshua Mercer: Itinerant Preacher – Missionary – Part One

A pioneer Florida Baptist, Joshua Mercer was an itinerant preacher who started many churches, served as a domestic missionary and established one of the first educational academies for Baptists in Florida. Joshua was the youngest brother of Jesse Mercer, who was not only a dedicated itinerant missionary in his own right, but he also as instrumental in establishing the Georgia Baptist Convention. As a result of his commitment and dedication in starting churches in Georgia, Jesse Mercer was lovingly called “Father Mercer.”



Joshua and
Mary Mercer

No doubt the evangelistic zeal and role modeling of Jesse Mercer had a profound effect upon young Joshua. The Wilkes County, Georgia, native was born June 10, 1788. Little is known about his early life other than he was the ninth and youngest child born to Silas and Dorcas Green Mercer. He was left, at the age of eight, an orphan, in the care of his brother, Jesse Mercer.

Joshua received a common school education, but never advanced to a higher school of learning. As a young man he was baptized by his brother Jesse into the Bethesda (GA.) Baptist Church [see photo courtesy <http://hrcga.org/bethesda-baptist/>]. At age 20 (1808) Joshua Mercer married the eighteen-year-old Mary D. Wells in Wilkes County. Between 1809 and 1830 the Mercers had nine children, which included six sons and three daughters.

Mercer volunteered to serve in the War of 1812 against the Creek Indians. He served two separate tours of duty with the Georgia Volunteers and Militia, holding the rank of sergeant. Following his military service, Mercer apparently returned to making a living as a farmer and supporting his growing family. In God’s providence in 1830, Mercer surrendered to the call of the preaching ministry at age 42 – old age by the standards of the day. He was licensed to preach in 1830 and two years later he was ordained to the ministry, by the Reverends Joseph Ross and Travis Everett.

In those days most Baptist preachers did not receive any compensation for their pastoral responsibilities, but were expected to work at a secular job, such as farming, to support themselves and their family. For five years Mercer served as a pastor for and started churches in southwest and central Georgia as well as served as a domestic missionary for the Georgia Baptist Convention.

Joshua Mercer apparently came to the Florida Territory first in 1835 as a domestic missionary sponsored by the Georgia Baptist State Convention. The Executive Committee of the state convention in 1839 gave a glowing report on the missionary labors of Joshua Mercer: “In the southern part of the state he reports one hundred and sixty-two days labor in which he traveled eighteen hundred and fifty-five miles, preaching one hundred and seven sermons, baptizing thirty-one, and assisting in constituting one church, for which he received \$162.00.”

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The report on the work in Florida continued. "Brother Mercer states that he met with a family in this state in which there were two children fourteen years of age who had never heard a sermon, and that all the other children had never been to a meeting. He represents the destitution as vastly distressing."

As a result of these itinerant journeys Mercer wrote a letter to the Georgia Baptist State Convention president sometime in 1841 and shared his impressions of the missionary needs that existed in the Florida Territory. Mercer reported on one trip he took down the Chattahoochee River, just past where the Flint River intersects and on to the Chipola River. There he came upon an unnamed town in which there was "a Methodist church of some standing, and a beginning with the Presbyterians. Here we had [a] meeting in the day and at night, and gave notice that we would stay the next day and talk with any that wished to become Baptists. We found by the applications made, that there were Baptist sentiments sufficient to save the name in the place, which is a very important one to the denomination in West Florida."

Mercer's letter went on to describe his continuing itinerary to a place called Ferrell's Meetinghouse. The letter observed, "They told us that in time past, say fifteen or twenty years ago, there were three preachers in the country and near forty members in this church." Mercer noted that no records were found for such a church. But when he began his preaching services, Mercer reported, "Here, we had a large congregation; many tears were shed, both on Saturday and Sunday. The old members have gotten hold of us and we of them, so that we have promised, if possible, to make an effort to build them up again."



Bethesda Baptist Church,
Georgia

"This is one of the best and richest parts of the Floridas. The people in the main, are rich and generous, but not all Christians. There is a great deal of intelligence here and much inquiry on the subject of religion."

In part due to his itinerant preaching, when the Florida Baptist Association organized in 1843, Mercer was employed as a domestic missionary. He was assigned the task "to travel and preach in the destitute places in this Association and adjacent neighborhoods."

Part 2 to be continued in the July Here and Now Newsletter



SPECIAL NOTICE – SOCIETY OFFICES ARE MOVING

As a result of action taken by the Board of Directors during the Florida Baptist Historical Society's April meeting, plans are under way by the part-time staff to vacate the Society's office space in the Clark House on The Baptist College of Florida campus. This move-out is necessitated by the college administration's stated plan not to renew the cooperative agreement between the college and the Florida Baptist Convention which defines the office space accommodation. The immediate challenge has been packing up all the Society-owned property that is located in the Clark House and vacate by the mandated June 30th deadline. This will conclude a 20-year relationship in which the College provided office accommodations for the Historical Society. **However this move will not affect the Society's ministry to churches and individuals that seek information and research assistance in Florida Baptist history.**

After July 3, the Society can be reached via Email: Society2@FloridaBaptistHistory.org or by postal service mail at P.O. Box 95, Graceville, FL 32440. A temporary telephone number is 904-910-8255.