



FLORIDA BAPTIST
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LEGACY

Our Mission: Researching, preserving and promoting the Legacy of Florida Baptists

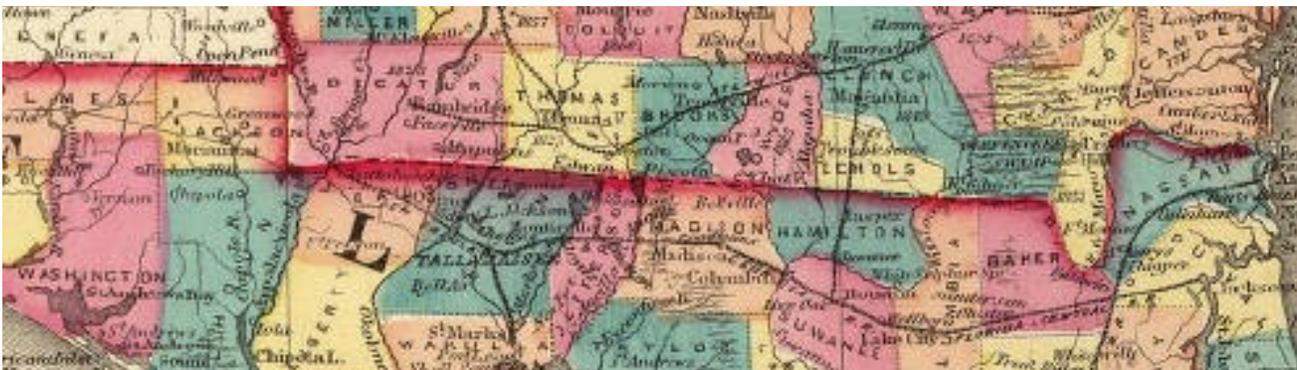
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The LEGACY of the BAPTIST ASSOCIATION will be the feature of this newsletter during the next several issues. From their inception, associations in America took on the role of ensuring doctrinal integrity and providing theological stability for the Baptist movement. Isolation by distance was a major reality faced by the members of most churches located in pioneer territories, particularly Florida. In time the formation of Baptist associations filled a fellowship as well as providing theological stability for geographical scattered missionary Baptist churches in the frontier.

Many Baptists who had migrated to the Florida Territory were familiar with Baptist associations from their home churches in Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina. Florida Baptists soon realized that to overcome their spiritual vacuum they needed to affiliate with existing associations of Baptist churches in Georgia or Alabama. Key among those Georgia associations were the Piedmont (1815), Ochlocknee (1827), and Bethel (1833). The first two Florida-based associations were called the Suwannee River (1834) and the Florida (1843). But within a decade the Suwannee River Association became anti-missionary in commitment, which resulted in Florida missionary Baptist churches joining together to establish their own Florida Baptist Association.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF ASSOCIATIONS

Organized in 1707 as the first American organization of cooperating Baptist churches, the Philadelphia Association **sought to provide advice on polity and practice issues raised by local churches** and to represent the “mind of Christ” to the world at large. Many of the doctrinal and polity concerns also were addressed in the issuance of circular letters to cooperating churches. From their inception, associations in America took on the **role of ensuring doctrinal integrity and providing theological stability for the Baptist movement**. This was evidenced by the adoption of doctrinal faith statements, such as the Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742) and the New Hampshire Declaration of Faith (1833).

However, as a uniquely Baptist concept, the Baptist association did not retain hierarchical powers over local churches. Rather, as stated in the Philadelphia Confession of Faith, **the independent sovereignty of Baptist churches was affirmed by specifying their sole authority with respect to the church’s doctrines, organization, officers, members, discipline, worship and ministry**. As a consequence, the positions or actions taken by the local association were not binding upon their cooperating churches. A church could accept or reject an association’s decisions.

Yet the Philadelphia Association sought to clarify its own role as the theological guardian of Baptist life. Benjamin Griffith in 1749 set forth an abiding principle on the association's doctrinal authority in his "Essay on the Power and Duty of an Association of Churches." Griffith defended the authority of an association to "declare any person or party in a church, who are defective in principle or disorderly in practice, to be censurable."

As a consequence of that essay, the Philadelphia Association adopted a principle that became the established norm for future Baptist associations. This **monitory role would ensure the doctrinal integrity -- encompassing theology, faith, practice and polity – of the association's cooperating churches.** Subsequently, in rare cases, this guiding principle was used by associations to withdraw fellowship from a church for deviations from Baptist doctrine or practice. Another means of ensuring doctrinal integrity among the cooperating churches, was for the association to examine the credentials of itinerant preachers and, if necessary, expose imposters.



FLORIDA ASSOCIATIONAL AFFILIATION

With the growing development of churches along the Florida Panhandle, whether started by itinerant missionaries such as James McDonald or John Tucker, or resident pastors such as Richard Johnson Mays and others, the need existed to be affiliated with other Baptists of like faith and practice. This desire for affiliation grew out of several needs, not the least of which was fellowship and inspiration. Through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it was the custom for Baptist churches to send delegates (as they were then called) to the annual meeting of other churches. And as churches affiliated with a Baptist association, the churches sent representatives to the association's annual meeting. To further broaden the bonds of fellowship, associations would designate several individuals to visit other associations' annual meetings. To be appointed a delegate to another association's meeting was considered a honor.

These delegates (later called messengers) were not representatives who possessed delegated authority. Rather, they were merely Baptists who were visitors from a given church or association who were permitted to express their personal opinion on issues being considered. More importantly, they were expected to bring back information about what other Baptists were doing. In addition to the delegate exchange, associations shared copies of their annual meeting minutes with other associations and churches. These exchanges of information -- personal interaction and the printed word -- served as significant mediums for maintaining harmony and unity while nurturing a far-reaching network of like-minded Baptists.

As a source of inspiration, the association annual meeting featured two to three days of preaching intermingled with the handling of business. Typically held in the fall, these meetings would begin on Friday and conclude on Sunday. Some Baptist historians have noted the sermons, generally delivered by guest preachers, provided the motivation, joy and enthusiasm for the association's preachers and church members which enabled them to return to their church field with renewed energy and zeal.

Another source of inspiration and doctrinal teaching provided by the association was the preparation and sending of circular letters to its member churches. Those letters that addressed timely issues -- such as the anti-

missions movement -- would be sent to sister Baptist associations as well. The circular letters covered a variety of topics – doctrine, polity, church and home life, missions and evangelism – and served to provide instruction, guidance and encouragement to the members and leaders of the geographically scattered congregations within the association’s sphere of influence. Such letters can be credited with undergirding orthodoxy of the Baptist faith and practice for these diverse churches. [TO BE CONTINUED NEXT MONTH]

Highlights of the annual meeting of the Florida Baptist Historical Society’s Board of Directors

The Board of Directors held their annual meeting at the end of June in Orlando. The most significant business item was the consideration and approval of a group of proposed revisions to the Governing Document of the Florida Baptist Historical Society. This was the first major revision to the document since it was first created in 1996. The proposed changes now go to the State Board of Missions for final review and disposition.

A major change would reduce the number of the Society board members from the current nine to six members. Currently the nine-member Board is comprised of seven persons appointed by the State Board of Missions, and two permanent member positions. The revision proposal would provide for three persons being appointed to three-year terms by the State Board and increase the number of permanent members to three positions that would include: the Executive Director-Treasurer, Florida Baptist Convention; Curator, the Baptist Archives, The Baptist College of Florida; and the Secretary-Treasurer of the Florida Baptist Historical Society.

Other proposed technical changes would streamline the operations and responsibilities of the Society.

Other highlights of the Society directors’ meeting:

- Elected David Elder of St. Augustine, as chairman of the Society Board; and elected Roger Richards, Graceville, as vice-chairman;
- Re-appointed Donald Hepburn of Jacksonville to serve as the volunteer Secretary-Treasurer of the Society through December, 2019;
- Approved an increase in the annual fees for the three basic membership categories as follows: Individuals (\$30); Churches and organizations (\$50); and Lifetime \$500
- Approved the posthumous presentation of the 2018 Baptist Heritage Award to be made to the family of Dr. Sid Smith, who researched and produced an outstanding history narrative on African American Florida Baptists;
- Affirmed the 2018 *Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage* as the 20th anniversary edition to feature the reprint of 15 significant articles from *Journals* produced during the past 19 years; and
- Learned the Historical Society in 2019 will recognize and honor over 50 Florida Baptist churches upon achieving a 25-year benchmark anniversary, ranging from 25 years to 175 years of ministry service.



David Elder



Roger Richards

A nine member board, appointed by the State Board of Missions, governs the ministry and mission of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, which is a fraternal organization of the Florida Baptist State Convention [2018]

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