



Here & Now

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

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

I was recently embarrassed. In a public Florida Baptist worship service I was asked if there was a time in the Florida Baptist Convention when there were more black members than white members. I answered, "I do not know." I was embarrassed because it seems that is the kind of thing I should know. I have researched the issue and my answer is, "I still don't know."

However with some pinpoint research and two good sources I can at least begin to speak to the issue. My two sources for these conclusions are the *Florida Baptist Associational Minutes, 1847-1853*, and the book *History of the Black Baptists of Florida, 1850-1985*, by George Patterson McKinney (1863-1933), and his son Richard I. McKinney.

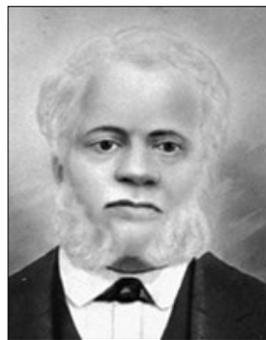


Bethlehem Baptist Church, Bel Air

The official first black Baptist church member was probably a slave named Peter Lopers, who joined Pigeon Creek Baptist Church in Nassau County, Florida, on July 22, 1822.

The first organized black Baptist church in Florida was the Bethlehem Baptist Church in Bel Air, about four miles south of Tallahassee. (McKinney, p. 18). The church began in about 1850.

According to Earl Joiner (1924-1997) Austin Smith was the first licensed black preacher in Florida in 1845, and James Page (1808-1883) was probably the first ordained black Baptist preacher in Florida, and he was ordained in August, 1851.



James Page

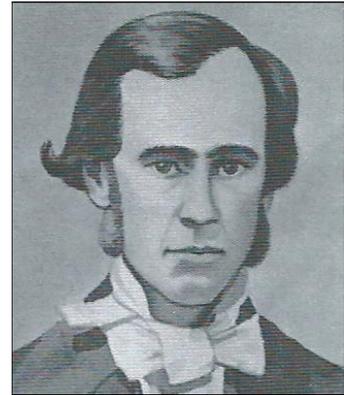
Please note all of these dates are before the Florida Baptist Convention was organized at Clifton Mansion, near Madison, on November 20, 1854. Therefor my research for this topic will center upon the matter of "Race Identifications in the Florida Baptist Association from 1847-1853."

In 1847, there were 23 churches in the Florida Baptist Association. I chose the Florida Baptist Association (afterward FBA) because it is our oldest Southern Baptist association in the state, and was formed in 1842. I chose dates 1847-1853 because we have no 1842-1844, minutes, and racial identifications did not begin until the 1847 Florida associational meeting minutes.

In 1847, we have the first FBA enumeration of white and black members.

In 1847, the FBA did not have a full reporting of membership by race, but there were 366 blacks and 258 whites enumerated in 12 of the 23 churches. Bethpage church had 197 blacks and 55 whites. Hebron had 38 blacks and 10 whites. This Hebron church is of special interest because Thomas Jefferson Bowen (1814-1875) was pastor and he later became a SBC missionary to Africa in 1849, and then to Brazil in 1859.

In 1848, the FBA reported 30 churches. R. J. Mays (1808-1864) was the pastor of Concord church with a Clifton, Florida post office box. Hepburn and Joiner state that Mays had acquired 5,480 acres and 120 slaves prior to the Civil War (*Favored Florida*, p. 108). By this time T. J. Bowen was pastor of Liberty (Gadsden), Providence, Lake Jackson and Hebron. In 1848, the FBA listed seven churches who had more black members than white. Those churches were Concord, 53-39; Sharon, 59-4; Ebenezer, 66-16; Bethpage, 197-47; Alnon, 26-19; Hebron, 41-14; and Friendship in Thomas County, Georgia, 15-0.



Thomas Jefferson Bowen

In 1850, the FBA had 33 churches and that included Tallahassee for the first time (organized in 1849). Eight of the churches had more black members than white. Z. G. Wheeler was pastor of two of the churches and R. J. Mays was still at Concord. Wheeler was pastor at Mount Gilead and at Bethpage that had 47 white members and 188 black members. There were 585 blacks and 545 whites enumerated in the 33 churches but not all churches reported their membership by color because there were a total of 1457 members reported in the association of churches.

In 1852, there were 36 churches in the FBA with 1320 members. R. J. Mays was still pastor at Concord and there were 39 black members and 19 white at Concord.

IN 1853, the FBA had 39 churches and 24 preachers in the association. Two of the preachers were listed as licentiates (C. Howell of Thomasville, Georgia, and R. H. Shackelford of Monticello, Florida). In that neither of them are listed as pastor of any of the churches it probably means it was intended for them to serve as supply preachers until ordination was available. Ebenezer, Concord, Indian Springs, Monticello, Ocklockonee, Summerhill, San Pedro and Thomasville had more black members than white. Bethpage of Jefferson County had been by far the church with the most black members in the previous six years, but by 1853, the total church membership was only 38. In 1851, the church had 224 members, 188 blacks, and 36 white. Apparently the 188 blacks moved and the 36 whites stayed. The Monticello church might be a part of this puzzle because their membership jumped from 32 whites and eight blacks in 1851, to 45 whites and 62 blacks in 1853.

Do I know a time when there were more blacks in the Florida Baptist Convention than whites? No. But the research is intriguing and meeting men like R. J. Mays, Thomas Jefferson Bowen and James Page makes the search worthwhile.

Honoring those who honor Christ,



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Matthew 6:33
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