

LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the *legacy* forged by the people, churches and events in Florida Baptist history. During the next several months this newsletter will feature those churches and their leadership who between 1821 and 1849 contributed to the development of the Florida Baptist State Convention. Each monthly issue will feature at least one church established in the 1820s, 1830s and the 1840s respectively. **While dozens of Baptist churches were established during these decades, most have not survived time. The featured churches continue to function in 2020.**

Florida Territory Missionary Baptist Churches Established in the 1820s

Grand Ridge: Shady Grove Baptist Church (formerly Sardis) – 1825

The second pioneer Baptist church to be organized in the middle region of Florida was the Sardis Baptist Church in July 1825. Established in Jackson County, it is southeast of the Campbellton Church, which had organized in March, 1825. No *Minutes* of the original organization meeting are available. As a consequence, the size and circumstances for its formation and the original members are not known.

However, the modern-day existence of the Sardis Cemetery lends credence to a specific location where the Sardis Baptist Church likely could have been established. The church's original records were destroyed in the 1930s in a fire at the home of church clerk J. M. Blount. The *Minutes* of the West Florida Baptist Association regularly listed the Sardis Church from 1849 until 1888 when the church was granted a letter of dismissal. The Association's *Minutes* reflect that during the mid-1800s Joshua Mercer served as pastor of Sardis.

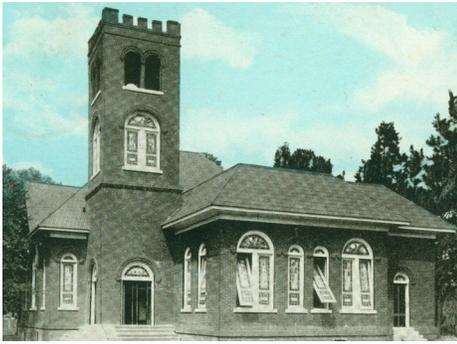
As was the case of so many early churches, it may have become inactive as its members migrated elsewhere. It is quite possible that a remnant of church members met on the fourth Sunday of each month, prayed and hoped for the day when God would bring more people into their area and become a part of this small fellowship of Baptist believers. Tradition contends that around 1888, these faithful Baptists in the Sardis church decided to relocate to the Shady Grove community and constructed a log structure. In time this structure became badly decayed and in 1895 a new church building was constructed. In 1910, the church changed its monthly meeting time to the third Sunday from the fourth Sunday. By 1935, the church began holding two Sunday services each month. Church records indicate the Sardis Church changed its name to the Shady Grove Baptist Church on October 29, 1916. In the year 2020, the church located near Grand Ridge, celebrates its 195th anniversary.



Florida Territory Missionary Baptist Churches Established in the 1830s

Jasper: First Baptist Church (formerly Concord) – 1832

A group of Georgians in search of new farm land in 1832 migrated to Tiger Swamp located in Middle Florida's Hamilton County. Having established a settlement, several of the Baptists, led by Edmund and Unity Register Mathis, sought the help of the Union Baptist Church of Lanier



County, Georgia to sponsor an “arm” (mission). The group requested the Union Church to provide a ministerial presbytery to help organize and constitute a church. A date was set and on June 9, 1832, with the assistance of Elders Elias Knight, John Tucker and William B. Cooper, the Baptist Church of Christ Concord (Concord Baptist Church) was organized. Among the founding members were John Lee, Jesse and Sarah Lee, Perry G. Wall, John L. and Lenora Stewart, Philemon Bryant, Elihu Morgan, William B. Cooper, as well as Edmund and Unity Mathis. The church called Elias Knight to serve as pastor.

Like so many other Baptist churches of the period, the Concord Church in 1839 was confronted by the anti-missions movement. The primary anti-mission proponent was Elder Knight, who was still affiliated with the Union Church in Lanier County. Serving as the pro-missionary apologist was Hamilton County probate judge and ordained Baptist minister William B. Cooper. The discussion of the pros and cons of the missionary movement continued over a series of monthly church conferences. Finally Elder Knight told the congregation that the church would take a vote. He explained that whichever faction was in the majority would grant to the opposing faction letters of dismissal so that the departed members could organize another church. The pro-missionary faction won the standing vote by a slim majority. The missionary faction reportedly voted to provide letters of dismissal to the anti-missions group, sang a song, shook hands with each other and said their good-byes. The anti-missions faction departed and eventually organized the Prospect Baptist Church.

When the town of Jasper was surveyed and platted land was set aside for three churches. The potential for the Concord congregation to re-locate into Jasper in the 1850s was greeted with enthusiasm. To seal the commitment to move, the congregation voted to change its name to the Jasper First Baptist Church. The church observes its 188th year of ministry in 2020.

Florida Territory Missionary Baptist Churches Established in the 1840s

Quincy: Providence Baptist Church – 1843

Providence Baptist Church, near Quincy, was constituted on September 24, 1843, by a presbytery of Joshua Mercer and Thomas Lang. Lang served as the church’s first pastor by holding monthly services (on the third Saturday and Sunday) from 1843 to March, 1845. A group of 20 persons “holding letters from various Baptist churches in other sections of the country” are listed in the church records as the charter members of the Gadsden County congregation. The location of the first church building was a log school house near McCall’s Grist Mill on the Little Telogia Creek.



Oral tradition and some written records support the possibility that this Gadsden County church had one of the first permanent Sunday schools in Florida. Soon after organizing in 1843 the church reported an “evergreen” Sabbath (Sunday) school to be prospering.

Pictured is the church’s first permanent building constructed in 1861 that continues to serve the congregation. It observes its 177th anniversary in 2020. The church is located in Gadsden County approximately 12 miles south of Quincy.

Key West: First Baptist Church – 1843

The founding and developing of Baptist work in the extreme southern end of the Florida peninsula at Key West was the result of efforts by four men. Key West was settled in 1823 by merchants who came from Rhode Island, Virginia and North Carolina to develop – among other things – a lucrative salvage business.

The first Baptist minister to come to Key West was Charles C. Lewis, a sea captain who had

been converted in 1842 in Connecticut and came to Key West the same year. Lewis saw a great need for a Baptist work in Key West and exchanged the title of "Captain" for that of "Reverend." Going from house to house Lewis led a number of people to make professions of faith that resulted in a baptism service being held on Sunday, Christmas Day, 1842. From this nucleus of new Christians and others Lewis soon assembled a congregation and – after being licensed to preach by a Baptist church in Connecticut – he organized a small group into the Key West Baptist Church March 11, 1843.

The six persons who constituted the new church were J. H. Breaker, Ben Sawyer, O. T. Braman, J. A. Wolfe, Asa Sawyer and Elim Eldridge. The congregation then called Lewis as pastor and ordained him. By April, the congregation had 23 members. But the ill health of Lewis' wife caused him to return to Connecticut. He subsequently

became pastor of the Asia Minor Baptist Church (later to be called the Second Baptist Church) of North Stonington, Connecticut. There were no Florida associations (it was later in 1843 that the Florida Association was organized 600-plus miles north in the Florida Panhandle) with which the Key West Church could affiliate. As a result, they applied for membership in the North Stonington Union Association of Connecticut and were received.

G. G. Tripp became the Key West church's pastor in November 1843, and the following year he organized one of the earliest Sunday schools in Florida. Tripp led an effort to construct a church building and decided to go to Connecticut to raise funds. He met with little success in the fund solicitation effort, abandoned the work and never returned to Key West. Without leadership, the Sunday school died, and the church struggled to survive.

In October 1845, Horace D. Doolittle brought together the scattered Key West flock, consisting of Anglos and African-descendants. He observed better discipline and faithfulness among the African-descendants than among the Anglos. Prior to Doolittle's arrival, while the church was without a pastor, the African-descendant members continued to hold prayer meetings each week and heard preaching by Austin Smith, a slave who had earlier been licensed and ordained to preach by Charles C. Lewis. With the help and support of these faithful African-descendant members, Doolittle, with about 100 members, reorganized the church's Sunday school in 1845.

The church faced two daunting challenges: the great hurricane of 1846 which destroyed the church building; and the temporary absence of Pastor Doolittle, who had gone north. Nevertheless, the fire of their spiritual zeal was not quenched. When Doolittle returned, the Key West Baptists worshipped again in the Monroe County Courthouse, as they had done in the beginning.

In 1847, J. H. Breaker was appointed by the American Baptist Home Mission Society to replace Doolittle. Breaker found the Baptist fellowship still without a building. In 1850, Breaker reported that despite a malicious attack by an Episcopal minister who published a tract calling the Baptists heretics, the work was flourishing. This fact was evidenced by the people's strong religious interest, which required three services a day.

Years later, in 1876, W.F. Wood, while visiting Key West, was invited by the church members to serve as pastor. Wood – who soon would become Florida Baptist's missionary to Cuba in an effort called "Cuba for Christ" – met church member Adela Fales who was conducting a ministry to Spanish-speaking Cubans who had migrated from the island nation. That early language missions work among Hispanics was subsequently financially supported by the then named Southern Baptist Domestic Mission Board. The successors to that Board ultimately provided funds for a building to host the mission, which later became the current day Hispanic White Street Baptist Church.



Well before the Coronavirus, there was Yellow Fever that Affected Church Life

Since the start of the twentieth century (1900 – 1999) there have been at least seven major epidemics/pandemics – polio, Spanish Flu, Asian Flu, AIDS, H1N1 Swine Flu, West African Ebola and the Zika Virus – to infect American cities requiring varying degrees of quarantines and stepped-up public health efforts to curb or stop the disease. But the latest pandemic – called Coronavirus or COVID-19 – has probably caused the greatest social and economic disruption, particularly affecting churches and their ability to conduct worship services, even Easter observances. **Yet despite the government-sanctioned quarantines, stay-at-home directives, and the scarcity of some commodities, God’s people have demonstrated their resilience by being focused on worship over worry, faith over fear, and prayer over panic.**

But well before these modern-day epidemics and pandemics, Florida Baptists and their churches were equally affected by the several yellow fever plagues that struck within the Florida Territory and then as a state on at least three occasions: 1877, 1882 and 1888. Yellow fever was the number one public health epidemic that continued to breakout into the early twentieth centuries. It had a debilitating effect upon Florida’s commerce, tourism and church life, particularly in 1888.

Once quarantine was declared, panic usually set in and people would not gather for fear the scourge would spread through human contact. As a result, no public gatherings were permitted including church services. And in those pre-electronic media days – only the telegraph existed, and the wide use of telephones did not begin until the late 1880-90s – people were isolated and without any information source. If a weekly newspaper were printed, people had to take a chance with their health by venturing out to buy a newspaper. Even the movement of goods, supplies and agricultural products was restricted from going in or out of quarantined areas. In some instances, people would permanently move away from their homes – thus leaving behind their friends and church affiliation – to avoid being infected.

It was called jaundice, saffron scourge, Bronze John and even yellow jack. Until the twentieth century, when the source of and methods for control of yellow fever were developed, most people believed the disease to be contagious, which prompted rapid exodus from infected communities. Since it first struck the Florida Territory in 1764 at Pensacola, yellow fever outbreaks occurred almost every two years, inflicting over 25,000 persons, and resulting in five thousand deaths.

Several population centers of Florida were the unfortunate hosts of yellow fever epidemics on at least three occasions: 1877, 1882 and 1888. The 1888 outbreak first appeared in Key West, made its way to the Tampa Bay and the Manatee areas and finally arrived in Jacksonville. From that Northeast Florida port city, the disease spread over Northeast Florida including Macclenny, Fernandina, Gainesville, Ocala, Live Oak, and Green Cove Springs.

Yellow fever is an acute infectious disease caused by a virus transmitted by the bite of the female *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which breeds in stagnant water near where people live.

Yellow fever begins suddenly after an incubation period of three to five days. The symptoms in mild cases included fever, chills, bleeding into the skin, rapid heartbeat, headache, back pains, and extreme mental and physical exhaustion. Nausea, vomiting and constipation were common. Jaundice usually appeared on the second or third day. After the third day the symptoms recede, only to return with increased severity in the final stage, which typically resulted in internal bleeding and finally vomiting that had the appearance of coffee grounds. The afflicted person often lapsed into delirium and coma, with nearly 20 percent of victims dying.

Attempts to cure the disease were often more brutal than the symptoms of the disease itself. Typically, a doctor would prescribe sealing off the patient in his or her room and fumigate it with burning sulfur. Once the smoke cleared, the doctor would cut a patient’s vein to bleed “bad blood” from the patient. To reduce the fever, the doctor often directed the patient to take massive doses of calomel, a toxin that caused a person to salivate profusely and have uncontrollable diarrhea. Then the patient was given cinchona bark which irritated the stomach sufficiently to induce vomiting. And to control the vomiting, the doctor would apply poultices made of powerful irritants to blister the skin over the stomach. Despite this medical regimen, 80 percent of yellow fever victims survived. Finally, once scientists determined the need to eliminate the breeding waters of mosquitoes, could the disease be effectively eliminated.