

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

[We have concluded narratives on all the known churches organized in the 1820s that continue to function in 2020](#)

Florida Territory Missionary Baptist Churches Established in the 1830s

[Madison: First Baptist Church \(formerly Hickstown\) – 1831; 1835](#)

Richard Johnson Mays (b.1808; d.1864), a plantation owner and a bi-vocational itinerant preacher, and his good friend Alexander Moseley led several other families near Madison County's Lake Sampala, in an area called San Pedro, to establish the Hickstown Baptist Church (later to be known as the First Baptist Church of Madison). Edwin Browning's brief history of the church sets the founding as 1835.

However, an earlier founding date is plausible because of the settlement of the Mays families who migrated from South Carolina to Madison County between 1830–31. By 1832, the Mays family had moved to the northern end of Madison County to the present community of Lovett. Additionally, the San Pedro settlement was comprised of other South Carolinian families and individuals who would have been anxious to carry on their religious traditions. It is also probable that, like so many other earlier churches, people held worship services in private homes until the attendance "warranted" the starting of a church.

It is known for certain that by 1840 the Hickstown Church was re-located to the town of Madison courthouse and retained the Hickstown name until 1850 when it was re-named the Madison Baptist Church. The earliest pastor of record in 1838 was William B. Cooper, an attorney/judge turned itinerant preacher. Since 1922 the church has been known as the First Baptist Church of Madison and continues to function in the present day.

The church holds two significant places in Florida Baptist history. First, reflecting a close relationship with the Florida Baptist State Convention (which organized in 1854 in the nearby R.J. Mays' Clifton Mansion) the Madison church hosted the annual meetings of the State Convention seven times in the nineteenth century (1866, 1868, 1871, 1876, 1878, 1880, and 1898. Additionally, during the 1880 meeting of the State Convention, the State Board of Missions was established.



One of the earliest pastors – Stephen Crockett [who served 1895 – 1901] – was instrumental in the design and construction of the church’s third sanctuary in 1898 and that was used until 1956 when a new sanctuary was completed. The all wood structure had several unique architectural features, including four gables and a nearly round auditorium that had perfect acoustics. This architecturally significant building, which was restored in 2018, was designated in 1970 as a State of Florida historical landmark.

Alachua County: Ft. Clark Baptist Church – 1835; 1869

An Alachua county church, which in some records was reportedly organized in 1850, may well have been established as early as 1835. In that year, a Baptist church may have been established in the Fort Clark military outpost, which served American troops during the Seminole Indian War (1835 – 1840). The fort was located about seven miles west of present-day Gainesville, along the Newberry Road, in the middle of agricultural fields. As early as 1829, the Rev. Daniel Simmons, had purchased land in Alachua County near Spring Grove to live among and evangelize the Seminole Indians. Samuel Geiger. served as the Fort Clark settlement postmaster from 1840 until 1850. Geiger and Simmons were listed in the 1830 U.S. Census as permanent residents of Alachua County. This same Samuel Geiger was a member of the Fort Clark Baptist Church, which hosted the organizational meeting of the Alachua Missionary Baptist Association in 1847. Serving as the organizing presbytery for the new association were Elders (reverends) John Tucker, James McDonald and Daniel Edwards. Tucker had moved to Newnansville, Alachua County, as early as 1832 and established the Newnansville Baptist Church in 1832 in a building directly behind the then Alachua County Courthouse. The following year (1833), Tucker helped Fleming Bates (formerly of the Pigeon Creek Church, Nassau County), organize the New Zion Baptist Church, (now disbanded). It is reasonable to conclude that Tucker and/or Daniel Simmons, as a part of their separate itinerant ministries, could have held preaching services that led to the organization of the Fort Clark church by 1835 – the same year for the official establishment of the military post, although no official record is known to exist. A cemetery was established at the church location and divided into “White” and “Negro” sections. What is certain is that by the 1847 organization of the Alachua Association, the Fort Clark church had a membership of approximately 60 members including cotton growers, their families, and their slaves. The church is believed to have disbanded due to the Civil War’s military battles in the area and the repurposed use of the old fort by Confederate forces. The church re-organized in 1869 mostly as an African-American congregation of former slaves, and continues to function in 2020 as a predominately African-American missionary Baptist church. Due to a corruption of the local vernacular language for Fort Clark, the church came to be called “Four O’clock” church in local records. [With many unanswered questions, this is a church history still being researched by the Florida Baptist Historical Society.]

Florida Territory Missionary Baptist Churches Established in the 1840s

Nassau County: Ephesus Baptist Church (Hillard) – 1845



Kinsey Chambers (b.1814; d.1889) was a Milledgeville, Georgia, native, who was ordained into the ministry in 1839. He subsequently moved to the Florida Territory and settled in Columbia County and became the organizing pastor of the Ephesus Baptist Church at King’s Ferry (in present day Nassau County) in 1845. The charter members included: William Vanzant; Lavinia Vanzant; Joseph Haddock; Elizabeth Haddock; Eliza McKendree; E. and Rachel Brown; and Mr. and Mrs. Whiting (whose initials were lost when the original church records were destroyed by fire). The first church building was a log structure that served the church for 25 years, which typically was used for the once a month Saturday and Sunday meetings.

As an itinerant missionary-preacher for nearly the next three decades, Chambers served as pastor of six churches –

Bethlehem Church at Lake City; Deep Creek and Sharon Churches in Callahan; Ephesus and Hebron Churches at King's Ferry; and Mount Pleasant Church at Wellborn – until 1872 when he was employed by the State Convention as the statewide missionary-evangelist

Chambers was instrumental in the formation of the Santa Fe Missionary Baptist Association in 1857 (later renamed the Santa Fe River Baptist Association). He then served for two years as the association's domestic missionary and was responsible for the starting of eight churches in a single year. He baptized over 500 persons during his lifetime ministry.

Jackson County: Greenwood Baptist Church (formerly Union Academy) – 1845

Joshua Mercer (b.1788; d.1869) of Wilkes County, Georgia, likely came to the Florida Territory first in 1835 as a domestic missionary sponsored by the Georgia Baptist State Convention. A decade later, Joshua Mercer's missionary endeavors led him, along with Thomas Lang, to serve as the presbytery that certified the formation of the Union Academy (later named Greenwood) Church in Jackson County on March 16, 1845.

So committed to this newly established church that the Mercer family comprised eight of the nine persons who were the charter members. The Mercers included Joshua and his wife Mary Wells, as well as their three adult sons – Thomas K., Joshua J., and William – and three adult daughters – Polly, Mary Syphrett, and Elizabeth. The one other charter member was pioneer resident Mary E. Horne. This group then called Joshua Mercer to serve as pastor. Mercer served a total eight years at the Union Academy Church; first from 1845 to 1848 and then returned in 1851 and served until 1854 when he resigned. Concurrently, with his service to the Union Academy congregation, Mercer served as the pastor of two other Jackson County churches: the Bethlehem Church (1844-1853) (now known as Campbellton) and the Sardis Church (now known as Shady Grove). The Greenwood Church observes its 175th anniversary of ministry this year. On September 1st 1855, the name was changed to Greenwood Baptist Church and in 1946 the church joined the newly formed Chipola Baptist Association.

With the growing number of Baptist churches being started in the Panhandle – many the result of Mercer's labor – Mercer led in the organization of the West Florida Baptist Association in 1847. He later served as its moderator from 1850-1859.



[This series on early churches continues next month](#)