

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

We have concluded narratives on all the known churches organized in the 1830s that continue to function in 2020

Florida Territory Missionary Baptist Churches Established in the 1840s

Cottondale: Heaven's Way Bikers Church
(formerly Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church) – 1845/2010

A church organized 175-years ago, designed to serve the needs of a rural community of peanut and cotton farmers, has been revived to provide a ministry to motorcycle enthusiasts.

The traditional oral history narrative for the Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church of Cottondale (Jackson County) sets 1845 as the organization date for this community of faith. And based upon the fact that itinerant missionary Joshua Mercer was ministering in Jackson County during that time period, Mercer may have helped organize the church. However, there are no existing church records that provide confirmation to the organization date or the people involved.

As is the case of many early and mid-nineteenth century churches, if records were kept, many were subsequently accidentally destroyed or lost. And such was the case for this church. Although the church did seek affiliation with the West Florida Baptist Association (org. 1847) it was years later in 1859. Then in 1905 the church changed its affiliation to cooperate with the newly organized Bethel Baptist Association. Adding confusion to the confirmation of an organization date is an official federal government-authorized WPA church record developed in the late 1930s and based upon an interview with then current church leaders which set a constituting date of 1860. [Many early churches organized and functioned for years without preparing a constituting document.]



However, like the solution to a mystery, the answer may lie in multiple pieces of supporting evidence. Initially, the existence of the Pilgrim Rest Church Cemetery with at least one tombstone recording a death due to the second Seminole Indian War [1835-1842] could lend credence to the likelihood that the church was functioning. Although the current church cemetery location is at least twice removed from the church's original location. Then there is the handwritten notation on one of the church properties deeds that reads "organized 1845 on [Alligator] creek west of Underwood Crossroads." An article in the *Graceville News*, published around 1970, states that "the church was organized in 1845 in a 'brush arbor' in a place called Alligator Creek." [A brush arbor was a clearing under the canopy of one or more trees that provided shade and protection from the elements to conduct a worship service.] Public property records reveal the church bought and sold its property moving from Alligator Creek at the Underwood Crossroads to the Lovewood Community and then to its current location in the Glass Community located between present-day Graceville and Cottondale.



Again as was typical of many rural churches in the nineteenth century, the church held services one Sunday a month generally with services led by an itinerant circuit preacher. That itinerant preacher may have been Joshua Mercer who in 1845 established the Union Academy Baptist Church (later named Greenwood). 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. While he served as pastor of at least three Jackson County churches (Union Academy, Campbellton and Sardis) between 1845 and 1860, Mercer also started many other churches not only in this county but elsewhere in west Florida. And in his itinerant missionary role he occasionally served as the itinerant preacher for newly organized churches – such as Pilgrim Rest.

Over the ensuing years, the rural Pilgrim Rest church never grew much beyond its nucleus membership of families and friends who lived and worked in the close-knit farm community. Due in part to its rural location and its limited growth the church entered the twentieth-first century struggling to keep its doors open. Finally by 2010 as the church marked its 165-years ministry, it was reduced to a few members who agreed to disband the church. Fortunately the Chipola Baptist Association sought ways to salvage the church property to continue a ministry.

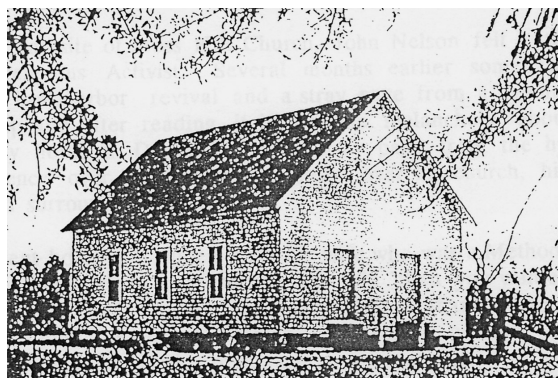
As a result of the commitment of the First Baptist Church, Alford, the Pilgrim Rest church facilities became the home for a ministry to bikers. The mission was designated as the Heaven's Way Bikers Church, which meets each Sunday afternoon. In 2020 the **legacy** of the Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church lives on in a ministry devoted to sharing Jesus Christ with men and women who have an affinity for loud and fast motorcycles.

Vernon: Ebenezer (formerly Holmes Valley) Baptist Church – 1846

One of Washington County's earliest Baptist churches had its beginning as a result of a religious conversion experience caused by the words of a hymn. John Nelson was from Denmark, who after 15 years of seafaring, travelled to Horselot Lake in the Holmes Valley of Washington County, to start a new life.

Soon after arriving Nelson, while working on clearing land for his farm, came across the loose page from a hymnal. The words of the unknown hymn apparently caused Nelson to recall his childhood days in Denmark, his subsequent sea travels, and the need to surrender his life to Jesus Christ. So moved by the spiritual encounter caused by the words of the hymn, Nelson went home and talked to his wife Eliza, a Methodist, about the religious conversion he had experienced and his desire to be baptized. Upon hearing her husband's experience, she said, "So you want to be a Baptist?" Soon Eliza sent a letter to Lemuel Tippins of Alabama, who had held a revival at nearby Moss Hill months earlier. Tippins, a lay preacher, returned to Holmes Valley, conducted a revival under a brush arbor, and received those, including Nelson, who made public their profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

After four months of conducting regular worship services, Nelson and several other Baptist residents, asked Tippins with the help of itinerant missionary Thomas J. Bowen, to constitute a Baptist church on July 20, 1846. The charter members of the new congregation included John Nelson, Espey and G.A. Hill, Eliza Cobb, Mary and James Lolley and W. J. Sanders. Newly



ordained Lemuel Tippins was called to serve as the first pastor. The charter members subsequently chose the name Holmes Valley Baptist Church which would only permit membership to those who walked “the straight and narrow paths of righteousness.”

In 1850, after using the Methodist meeting house for their monthly worship services, the congregation agreed to build their own house of worship near the village of Vernon. In 1865 the church changed its name to the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Now 174- years later, the Ebenezer church continues to minister in the Vernon community.

This series on early churches continues next month

2020 Baptist Heritage Award

The Florida Baptist Historical Society is pleased to announced that the 2020 recipient of the Baptist Heritage Award is L. David Cunningham of Jacksonville, Florida.



The Society’s Board of Directors determined earlier this year, as they considered potential candidates to be the 2020 Baptist Heritage Award recipient, there was one noteworthy individual who has contributed to the preservation of a unique aspect of Florida Baptist history – the Sunday school. L. David Cunningham of Jacksonville, Florida, researched, wrote and published a definitive history of the development of the Sunday school movement in Florida in a book titled, *A History of Florida Baptist’s Sunday Schools*. Published in 2004, this book detailed the beginning of Sunday schools in Florida churches as early as 1843, and recounts the numeric growth of the movement, the churches that were the pacesetters in evangelism through the Sunday school, and the significant laity and pastoral leaders who contributed to the expansion and enhancement of Sunday school work up through the twentieth century.

Continuing his historical research on the Sunday school movement, Mr. Cunningham is nearing completion of his second book that highlights a group of significant Baptist Sunday school teachers across the United States. Tentatively titled, *Uncommon Sunday School Teachers*, the book profiles thirteen well-known business and political leaders – men and women – who have faithfully taught Sunday school for decades in their respective church.

Prior to his retirement in 2001, Mr. Cunningham served as the director of the Sunday school department of the Florida Baptist Convention since 1984. Known to many church leaders as “Mr. Sunday School,” during his 17 years of program promotion leadership, David Cunningham led Florida Baptist church leaders to increase their overall Sunday school enrollment by over 100,000 persons. Under Mr. Cunningham’s leadership, Florida Baptist churches led the Southern Baptist Convention earning Sunday School Leadership Training awards and diplomas for 13 of his 17 years of leadership.

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A native of Little Rock, Arkansas, David Cunningham accepted Christ and was baptized at age seven. He subsequently responded to the call of God by being ordained in 1973 by the Plymouth Park Baptist Church, Irving, Texas. Mr. Cunningham attended and graduated from the Ouachita Baptist University with a B.A. degree (1959); and later attended and earned the Master of Religious Education degree in 1965 from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Prior to joining the state convention staff in 1984, Mr. Cunningham served in the Christian education ministry at various places between 1962 and 1973 before being called as the assistant pastor/minister of education at the First Baptist Church, Orlando, Florida, (1973 – 1984), to serve alongside Pastor Jim Henry. From Orlando, Mr. Cunningham was invited to lead the Sunday school program staff of the Florida Baptist Convention.

David Cunningham is the 24th recipient of the recognition which has been made by the Society's directors since 1997. The former recipients represented a broad range of Florida Baptists including pastors, denominational workers, college and seminary professors, and laypersons, all of whom had an interest and commitment to researching and publishing about Florida Baptist history. Award recipients have exhibited rare and unusual dedication to the cause of Florida Southern Baptist history and have made a significant impact through such means as writing Baptist history, teaching Baptist history, and/or promoting the importance of Florida Southern Baptist history.