

THE MISSIONARY JOURNEY OF LOUISE “LULU” FLEMING, M.D.



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An Address Given to
The Florida Baptist Historical Society

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This article will describe the life and missionary ministry of a remarkable young women whose short life was heroic in her accomplishments.

Louise (Lulu was a nickname) Cecilia Fleming was born on January 28, 1862 in Hibernia, Clay County, Florida. Hibernia was a little community near Green Cove Springs. Her mother was a slave and was owned by a white family of a farming business. Her mother's first name was lost in antiquity as is the name of her owner. However, her mother appears to have been a personal maid of the lady of the house. Her father was unknown.

There was an attempt to check the records of the Clay County Courthouse for the period of the taxable year of 1863. The purpose of checking the record was to find the names of any children born to slaves, which would be added to the personal property tax role. It also could reveal the first name of Louise Fleming's mother. Neither of those were available because the courthouse burned down and records prior to 1865 are near non-existence due to the fire.

While she was still a child, she would accompany her mother, along with other slaves, with the families which owned them, to the church where the white families were members. That church was the Bethel Baptist Church of Jacksonville. It was the nearest church for them to attend at that time.

In looking back at the historical records concerning Bethel Baptist Church during the period of 1862, it is interesting to discover who the membership roles revealed.

Bethel Baptist was started by Pastor James McDonald, and by the Home Missionary Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. It initially organized in 1848. The initial membership consisted of eleven whites and 145 slaves. A subsequent statistical record of 1850, when J.S. Baker was the pastor, showed there to be 33 whites and 241 slaves. An additional statistic was found for 1859, which showed that Reverend P.R. King was now pastor and there were 40 whites and 250 slaves.

From as much as I could learn, the white slave owners intended that their slaves would be brought up with a Christian background. However, it was obvious that no slave would hold any leadership role or have any role in the business affairs of a local Baptist church.

At the conclusion of the Civil War, the slaves were now free men and free women. Apparently, a decision was made by the white members of the church, at that time, to separate themselves from their former slaves, who were now free. In doing so, they informed those former slaves that they would have to find another church. However, there was resistance amongst the free men and free women in being told they would no longer be able to participate in the Bethel Baptist Church and that they would have no interest in any property which the church had at that time.

With the assistance of some white missionaries from the American Baptist Convention, there was undertaken a court case on behalf of the free blacks against the white members of the church. It should be noted that about this time, the court system was largely in the hands of persons who had been friendly toward the union and certainly not sympathetic toward the confederacy. Since these new free blacks now had standing in court, the matter was decided by the court in Duval County and the ruling was in favor of the blacks. The white members were ordered to pay the black members of Bethel Baptist Church, for the value of the property in proportion to their interest in it and they were permitted to retain the name of Bethel Baptist Church. The free men and women then withdrew in peace, bought property and built elsewhere.

Bethel Baptist Church's first black pastor was Elder C. B. Simmons, who undertook to lead the congregation. It organized as a Regular Black Baptist Church in 1866.

The remaining white members of the former congregation undertook to call themselves First Baptist Church of Jacksonville. That historic church stands today as one of the largest Southern Baptist churches in the state of Florida.

Remaining also in the community is the historic church which the free blacks then took under control after winning the court case. It is now called Bethel Baptist Institutional Church and remains in Jacksonville.

While Ms. Fleming had only been with the congregation of whites and blacks as a very young child with her mother, she ultimately grew up within the Bethel Baptist Church which is now consisting of the free blacks of the area.

Little is known of Louise Fleming's early education except that some of the information available through her university and the American Baptist Convention indicates that a white lady undertook to see that she received a good education from a normal school in the area. The indications were that this may well have been the wife of the former owner of Louise Fleming's mother. In any case, it was through assistance from a friendly white person who saw in her early, some opportunity to educate a very bright child.

Upon completing her education, which today would probably be equal to a tenth grade education, she began teaching school. Little is known as to where she was teaching school, but we do know she was teaching school for at least three to perhaps seven years, and ultimately found herself in North Carolina as a teacher.

I must now address to speak about institutions of higher education in the South after the Civil War.

It is fair to say there was very little in the way of private education for Southern Baptists shortly after the Civil War. In the State of Florida, the first School related to Florida Baptists was Stetson

University, which was founded in 1883 and that was eighteen years after the Civil War. The other southern states had similar circumstances concerning the creation of private colleges related to Southern Baptist or State Baptist work.

It also should be noted that because of the separation of the races, for a period of time, that number of Southern Baptists dropped dramatically. In many of the Baptist churches in the South at that time, there was a substantial portion of the attendees at those churches that were slaves. After the separation of the races into separate churches following the Civil War, there was a dramatic drop off in the number of Southern Baptists in the South.

While Southern Baptists were not answering to the need for higher education for the children of Southern Baptists, the opposite was true of the American Baptist Convention.

During the Civil War, a policy was adopted by the American Baptist Home Mission Society to begin organizing institutions for the education of the free men and free women, who were the former slaves, operated and aided by the American Baptist Home Mission Society.

Many of these institutions are well-known institutions that exist today. Included was Shaw University in North Carolina. Shaw University was the second school for African-Americans founded by the American Baptist Home Mission Society in 1865. It was based on the policy adopted in May, 1862, that the board of the American Baptist Home Mission Society decided to take steps to supply Christian instruction by means of missionaries and teachers to the emancipated slaves where-ever they were living.

When Congress passed an act prohibiting slavery in the United States in January, 1865, the society shortly thereafter, went forward with its plans for southern colleges and universities. Shaw University, after being founded in 1865 by H.M. Tupper, D.D., ultimately incorporated in 1875. It started with ten acres with a residence in the suburbs of Raleigh, which was purchased in 1870. In its earlier beginnings classes were held in a local church of which Tupper was a member.

In the period of time for 26 years after the emancipation, over 600,000 African-Americans became American Baptists and attended American Baptist schools of higher education.

Dr. Tupper, in attempting to raise the money, decided to name the school for the honorable Elijah Shaw of Wales, Massachusetts, following Mr. Shaw's generous donation to purchase the initial property. Shaw pledged \$5,000.00 and made additional generous gifts for the first \$13,000.00 necessary to purchase the property. He continued to provide money for the remainder of his lifetime. Mr. Shaw was a friend of Dr. Tupper's and a keen businessman.

Now, the philosophy behind the American Baptist Home Mission Society's education of the African-Americans was to try to educate one-tenth (1/10) who were to return back into the community to teach and train others. This was called the "Talented tenth" program.

We know that Louis Fleming was teaching in the Raleigh, North Carolina area in about 1880. During the period of time, she was familiar with the work of Dr. Tupper at Shaw. Somehow it was discovered that this bright, young African-American teacher was in the community. Arrangements were made to have her come out for an interview concerning an attendance at Shaw.

She was accepted in the "talented tenth" program so she could further her education and qualifications. After four years of rigorous study at Shaw University and a very active involvement in a local Baptist church, she found herself graduating as class Valedictorian on May 27, 1885.

In her final six (6) months of schooling, she became interested in the work of the American Baptist Convention through its foreign mission society. She began seeking an appointment through the Women's American Baptist Foreign Missionaries Society to serve as a missionary to Africa.

This was highly unusual, in that there had never been an African-American woman appointed by the society. She wrote a number of letters to the leaders of the board of the society, pleading with her cause and desire to serve the Lord on the African continent. Despite return letters, which were less than encouraging, she continued until she finally received an interview. She so impressed members of the board at that interview, that they immediately began looking for a place for her service.

In May, 1886, she was appointed by the Women's American Baptist Foreign Missionaries Society to serve as a first missionary to the Congo. She also was the first African-American woman appointed by the society. After an arduous journey, she ended up at Palabala Station, Congo Free State (now Zaire), Southwest Africa.

A photograph of this young lady shows a face which reflects strength, beauty, intelligence and foresight. She wrote numerous letters home to the people who sent her there to make them aware of what it was like in service in this new area for Baptists.

In an article which appears in The Baptist Missionary Magazine of The American Baptists Missionary Union in 1888, she described a day at Palabala, Congo.

“This is a second station from the coast, in the stations above get supplies from here. We are on a plateau 1700 feet above sea level, and are in the clouds up until a late hour some mornings. The mornings have been very cold here now as this is the cold season. The community has made it seem like home and this has been a pleasant surprise to me. I have never felt better than since I've come here. Our “family of children” consists of nine girls and 18 boys. I have full charge of the girls and enjoy them very much. We are having a new house go up, one end of which is to be used as a school and chapel, and the other to be the girls' and my rooms.”

She goes on to suggest that they imagine what it is like to spend the typical days on the mission field and describes it with great clarity and understanding for the people who had sent her there. She also concludes, “the Lord give us patience to train them.”

In her numerous letters back home, she continues to inform Dr. Murdock of the American Baptist Historical Society, and the others she writes to about her progress, and the efforts in the area. She notes it is much easier to have the young boys and men come to know the Lord and be willing to learn, then it is the young girls. She recognizes this as the culture of the area and that it will take more effort to reach the girls.

She also begins sending students back to Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. The first of whom go back in 1888. In an article in The American Baptist Missionary Union, it has the pictures of two of the young men sent back along with a young lady. She describes them as Estey Carolina, an orphan of about 14, but uncertain as to her age. She lived with her half-sister, who was cruel to her after the death of her father. She was also sent back with her brother, who is in the picture, for education, along with another friend of her brother's. The assistance was arranged by King Noso of the Congo, but the King attempted to change his mind and marry Estey. She ran away, and so Ms. Fleming decided to send her to Shaw with her brother and other friends as soon as possible. She planned to have them study for six (6) years and then return as missionaries to help their people in that part of the world.

Henry Stevens is the brother who went with Estey Carolina. He was a little bit older, about 18. He was a gifted speaker and churches in North Carolina were greatly interested in having them come visit

and give information about the people of the Congo. He also spoke in a number of churches in the Washington, D. C., Philadelphia and other parts of the eastern part of the United States.

The young friend was Robert Walker. Robert had been a slave to King Noso. The King had treated him cruelly and thanks to the work of Louise Fleming, she convinced the King to free him from the bondage he kept him in. During the night after being united, Robert Walker ran away. Again, Louise Fleming took a chance and later travelled to England and met with Dr. Guinness, and helped him arrange a grammar for the Congo language so they could come back home and teach. Which they did.

This was the typical approach to her mission effort. She was training and teaching in the field, but also finding some young people who she thought should be further educated and then come back to their homeland.

Dr. Thomas E. Skinner sent reports back to Ms. Fleming to inform her of the student's progress and that they told him they expected to go back to Africa as missionaries.

As her work was progressing, Lulu Fleming suddenly had a debilitating illness and had to return home for treatment. She returned to Raleigh, North Carolina and began recuperating. In the meantime, Dr. Tupper had started Leonard College of Medicine at Shaw University. While Lulu Fleming was recuperating, she realized that the people in the mission field in the Congo where she was working needed medical attention desperately. So, she began to study medicine at Shaw.

Shaw was relatively new and ill-equipped to truly train her at this stage so with the assistance of the American Baptist Missionary Society; she was permitted to study medicine with the Society paying her tuition at the Women's Medical College at Philadelphia. That is now the well-known Medical College of Pennsylvania located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Again, she broke new ground when she attended Women's Medical College of Philadelphia as the first African-American female to attend that school. She completed her education and training in 1895 and was prepared to go back to the field for service now as a medical missionary.

During the time of preparation for her return, Dr. Fleming was not only petitioning the board for her own return to the field as a medical missionary, she also recommended for appointment by the board, the American Missionary Society board, one of her young men from the Congo, a "Crowned Prince" of Palabala, with training in carpentry and farming, with a desire to do mission work among his own people. She attached a copy of his letter, requesting appointment, which is written in a beautiful calligraphy and in perfect English. She succeeded in getting him an appointment and at the same time the board appointed her to return.

On October 2, 1895, the Women's Missionary Foreign Mission Society assigned her to be stationed at Irebu in the Upper Congo. There, she undertook to provide medical care as a medical missionary for a large geographic area. The work was undaunting and at times, overwhelming, but the people of this area had never had a medical doctor with the kind of training she had, let alone an African-American woman. In 1898, approximately three (3) years later, the Irebu Station was closed and she was reassigned to the Bolengi Station. She again undertook long hours of arduous work to provide the necessary medical skills to treat people and to train young men and young women to assist in treating people so that they would learn as best they could what needs to be done for their people who become ill or injured.

It was during this period of time that she became ill with what is known as African Sleeping Sickness. It was shortly before the end of her second term and therefore was reluctantly returned to the United States early. While she was attempting to recuperate in and near the hospital and medical school in Philadelphia, her illness turned for the worse. She died on June 20, 1899.

This young lady is considered a heroine amongst the American Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Women's Missionary movement. Although her life was short, it was filled with much accomplishment both on her first missionary service and again on her second service. She was supported largely by the women and children of the American Missionary Society as it was their desire to share their faith and to provide others with the opportunity for education that had been given to them and to Louise Fleming.

She touched lives as they struggled to overcome ignorance and prejudice with the love of Christ. She affected the future in ways that cannot yet be measured or comprehended even after these many years.

I undertook to learn about this young lady upon the recommendation of Dr. James Sawyer, Pastor Emeritus of First Baptist Church of Cocoa, and a long-time member of the Historical Society and former member of the board of the Florida Baptist Historical Commission.

Dr. Sawyer was born and raised up in the area where this young lady comes from. He had learned about this young lady through the reading in an American Baptist publication and suggested I might look at her as a subject for a paper.

What struck me about this, is that the slavery issue in the aftermath of the Civil War caused the Florida Baptist and Southern Baptist to turn away from the many African-Americans who had been in their churches when they were slaves and separate themselves from them. Whereas even when they were like slaves, there was at least a concern for the slaves and their Christian experiences.

It was because of the efforts and the policies of the American Baptists that education was provided for many, many African American young men and young women. The influence of the 27 colleges and universities started by the American Baptist Convention and particularly, the "talented tenth" program, provided so much that is not recognized.

It is that concept that allowed the southern blacks despite the segregationist efforts to separate, to become educated and then to educate others in their community, and to advance rather than remain uneducated and without abilities in this new society where slavery no longer existed.

It was that far reaching and thinking policy that made a difference.

It is perhaps to shame that we Southern Baptists did little in this area, and it was our northern brethren led persons such as Dr. Louise Fleming to give so much time and energy and even her life to the work of the Lord.

As I think about this young lady, I think about the missed opportunities of the Southern Baptist.

I also think about the open door that was provided by our northern brethren in finding places for Louise Fleming and those like her.

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