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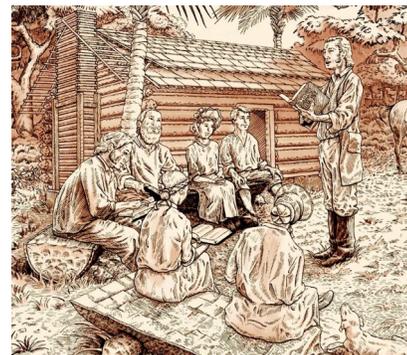
Itinerant Missionaries Brought the Gospel into the Florida Territory – Part 2

Continuing this month and featured in the next several editions of *Here and Now* will be some of the pioneer itinerant missionaries who came into the Florida Territory – as it was called prior to Florida's 1845 admission to statehood – and undertook the challenges to share the Gospel in this spiritual and physical frontier wilderness.

Itinerant Missionary John Tucker – The “Sledge Hammer Preacher”

As the migration of settlers from southeastern states into the Florida Territory continued in the 1830s, itinerant Georgia preacher John Tucker is credited with helping to organize numerous churches in the northeast and north central regions of the territory.

Born in 1785, little is known about Tucker's early life, other than some fragmentary notes that appear in the records of some early Florida churches he served. Tucker began to preach at age nineteen, married at twenty and in 1806 began what evolved into twenty years' service as an itinerant Methodist circuit rider in Georgia. However, by 1828, Tucker experienced a spiritual awakening as his studies of the scriptures most likely caused him to determine that he should be a part of the Baptist faith tradition. He was baptized into his adopted Baptist faith by Elder Jacob King, a Baptist missionary at Thomaston, Georgia.



After coming to Florida in 1832, Tucker was ordained as a Baptist minister in 1833 by the Friendship Church in Lowndes County, Georgia. Like most Baptist preachers of his day, Tucker received the moniker of Elder but supported his family with a paying job, which for him was as a school teacher. Tradition notes that Tucker preached short sermons. But his “fire and brimstone” messages resulted in Tucker being given the nickname “the sledge hammer preacher.”

Following his ordination, Tucker traveled on horseback to a settlement on the Florida side of the OluStee River then located in Columbia County (now part of present day Union County). Tucker was requested to lead a preaching service in the wilderness home of Henry Beals on April 12 – 13, 1833, where the settlers had agreed to organize a church. They requested Elder Tucker to assemble a presbytery to assist in constituting a church. By July 13, 1833, a constituting service was scheduled and present were ordained ministers John Tucker, Fleming Bates, William A. Knight and Paul B. Colson. Twelve persons served as charter members of what would become known as the Old Providence Baptist Church. The church members agreed to call John Tucker as their pastor, whose itinerant preaching travels would bring him through the area once a month.

Also in 1833, 13 members of the Pigeon Creek Baptist Church of Nassau County (the first known Baptist church to be organized in the Florida Territory), who had migrated to Columbia County agreed to organize a church. On August 24, New River Baptist Church was organized in the present-day community of Brooker, (now in Bradford County). The organizing presbytery consisted of Fleming Bates, John Tucker and Paul B. Colson.

By September 1833, the Providence Church agreed to aid in the constitution of a church “at or near Hogtown” (the present day Gainesville). The Providence Church agreed to issue letters of dismission to six members who served as the charter members of what may have been the New Zion Baptist Church that Fleming Bates subsequently served as pastor. At the organization of the new church was a presbytery comprised of Elders John Tucker and Paul B. Colson

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Itinerant preacher Tucker continued his missionary journeys despite the difficulties and dangers of military conflict. During the Second Seminole Indian War (1835 – 1842), many ministers of other denominations left for safer territory. The churches that tried to function during the Indian War held services intermittently. As an example, the New River Church's *Minutes* record, "The church and congregation got in confusion at Indian alarm and broke up. No communion or feet washing, but was postponed until February 1836."

Undaunted, Elder Tucker continued his ministry throughout Northeast Florida at the risk of his life. He went from fort to fort, leading worship services, preaching funerals, and comforting the suffering and the fearful. Eventually Tucker received help from William Friar, who arrived in 1840, and from William Cooper, who came as an itinerant preacher when the Seminole Indian War ended. But mostly, Tucker had to do much of his work alone – sustained and driven by a great sense of God-called purpose.

Despite the hostilities caused by the Seminole Indian War, Tucker continued to serve as pastor of the Providence Church and the New River Church from 1833 to 1843. And he continued to roam the territory assisting in organizing other churches.

For one year – 1843 to 1844 – Tucker served as a missionary for the American Baptist Home Mission Society, which at the time was the only national missionary-sending society among Baptists. This appointment provided Tucker with a steady income inasmuch as he was no longer able to teach school and the churches he served did not pay any salary. He traveled by horseback over a wide area during those years (2,000 miles in 1844, an astounding feat for that time) but concentrated his activities in Hernando County. During those years, he wrote, **"I am a missionary, and I must travel."**

His missionary activities took him into North Central Florida, where he along with missionary James McDonald organized a church at Alligator (later called Lake City), then a part of Alachua County. No details are available on the church. The following year, 1844, while preaching near Lake Lindsey in Hernando County, Tucker baptized Jeremiah M. Hayman, who would become a leading frontier Baptist pastor in his own right. That revival resulted in a Baptist church being organized in September 1845 at Lake Lindsey. Hayman was elected as church clerk. Also in 1844 Tucker organized the Little Branch Baptist Church in Marion County, which later came to be called Fellowship Baptist Church.

After the 1845 formation of the Southern Baptist Convention and its own Board of Domestic Missions, Tucker signed on with the Southern Board to continue his missionary efforts in Florida.

During that year Tucker apparently concentrated his energies on a large area in the center of the state. He found no other Baptist ministers in that area. In August 1845, he gained the help of a minister from Georgia, Daniel Edwards, who later moved to Florida. Tucker continued to travel, preach, baptize Anglos and African-descendants, organize many churches (the exact number is not known), and served as pastor for as many as six churches while ministering to other settlers at the same time.

One of his last letters includes the very understandable statement, "I need much help." After having served for 49 years as a pioneer preacher, Tucker, at age 68, died in 1853. One traditional story relates that Tucker carried to his grave a bullet from an Indian rifle.

Florida Baptist Historical Society Endowment

Honor the distinguished service of Dr. Jerry Windsor by making a gift to the Florida Baptist Historical Society Endowment. Dr. Windsor served 14-years as Secretary-Treasurer of the Society, until his retirement last December. He led in the establishment of the endowment which seeks to ensure the future ministry of the Society. Gifts also may be made in the memory or honor of others who support the mission of the Florida Baptist Historical Society.

The earnings from the endowment corpus will support the Society's future ministries of collection, preservation, publication and interpretation of Florida Southern Baptist historical materials. The society serves the local church by offering assistance in research, writing and publication of local church documentaries and histories.

Gifts to this fund are tax deductible and all checks should be made out to the Florida Baptist Historical Society Endowment. Please send contributions to the Society located at 5400 College Drive, Graceville, FL 32440.