



FLORIDA BAPTIST  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# Here & Now

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Serving Florida Baptists through historical research and resources

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*Historical Society Board Names Baptist Heritage Award Recipient – See announcement following this 9th in a series of articles on itinerant missionaries.*

## Itinerant Missionaries Brought the Gospel into the Florida Territory – Part 9

This issue of *Here and Now* continues the featured series on some of the pioneer itinerant missionaries and committed Baptists laypersons 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.

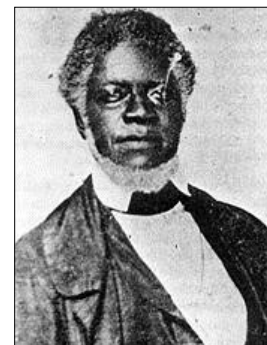
### James Page – Florida's First African-American Itinerant Preacher

James Page was an African-descendant slave in Middle Florida during the mid-nineteenth century who became a Missionary Baptist preacher and who developed into one of Florida's most influential religious leaders of his day. However, this recognition was achieved only after nearly three decades of effectively serving as a bond servant and minister helping other slaves cope with their forced servitude.

Born in Richmond, Virginia, on August 13, 1808, James Page's mother was a slave owned by John H. Parkhill. Page's father had been a free man, who was drowned while attempting to go ashore in Liberia during a colonization movement. Little is known about James Page's early life other than he married another slave named Elizabeth sometime before 1828. The Pages were formally sold into the slave entourage controlled by Parkhill, a Scots-Irish gentleman who had developed a prosperous dry goods store in Richmond. Sometime in the 1830s, Parkhill packed up his family and worldly possessions, including slaves, and followed the migration of other Virginians into the Florida Territory. They settled in what was then called Middle Florida a region situated between the Suwannee and Apalachicola Rivers.

Settling in Leon County, John Parkhill acquired land south of Tallahassee that he developed into a plantation called Bel Air. At Bel Air, James Page was trained as a gardener, carriage driver, and as a "body servant" to Parkhill. In the role of personal servant to Parkhill, young James Page had the unique opportunity to talk with and learn many things from his master. Additionally, John Parkhill took it upon himself to teach reading and writing to James Page, a luxury to which few slaves had access. To his credit, John Parkhill wanted James Page also to undergo religious instruction and training. Part of this desire may have grown out of Parkhill's designation as a Presbyterian elder soon after he settled in Florida. The religious instruction was enhanced as James Page drove the carriage to transport Elder Parkhill to many Presbyterian Church gatherings. These travels afforded the two men opportunities to discuss the Bible and other spiritual matters.

Although the event is not recorded, James Page made a profession of faith in Christ and sought to follow his earthly master by becoming a member of Leon County's First Presbyterian Church. Unfortunately, at the time, Presbyterian church tradition did not permit African-descendant persons to join the church. As historian Larry Rivers observed, "Presbyterians may have been less harsh in their treatment of slaves, but their attitudes included exclusionary doctrines." Consequently, Page sought membership in a Missionary Baptist church, which permitted membership and encouraged him to respond to God's call to the preaching ministry. This was not particularly difficult because most Baptist churches of the era permitted African-descendant slaves to join as members, and in several instances slaves were among the founding members of Baptist churches.



James Page in his  
younger years.



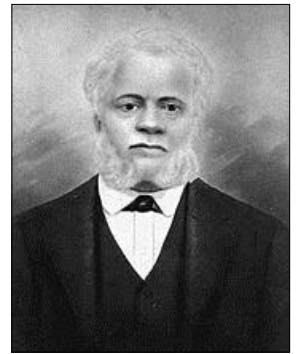
Bel Air Baptist Church

James Page was greatly influenced by the spirit of God moving in his life. He started an ongoing preaching ministry at Bel Air, in which Page led the slave community to organize in 1850 the first known uniquely Baptist African-descendant congregation in Florida. It was called the Bethlehem Baptist Church at Bel Air Plantation. John Parkhill reportedly donated a parcel of land on his plantation on which the Bethlehem Church was constructed. And surprisingly, the friends of John Parkhill provided financial assistance to underwrite the church building's construction, in part for their respect for James Page and "his influence on all their servants."

Subsequently, Page was ordained in August, 1851, in an ordination service conducted by a presbytery comprised of Anglo Baptist ministers who assembled at the Newport Baptist Church of St. Luke, Wakulla County. This action would have made Page the second known African-descendant person in Florida to be ordained as a missionary Baptist minister. The other person was a slave named Austin Smith who was licensed and ordained by the Baptist Church in Key West in 1843.

The evangelistic abilities of James Page were chronicled in a *Wakulla Times* article which reported, "On Sunday last twelve Negroes were baptized in the St. Marks River by the Reverend James Page." Continuing, the article noted, "He is one of the most popular colored preachers hereabouts and often has many white people to hear him preach." Another report made several years later in 1852 indicated that during a Sunday service held on one of many plantations, 41 slaves made professions of faith and were baptized by Page.

By 1853, Page began conducting prayer services for bond servants living in Tallahassee, while continuing his pastoral responsibilities at Bel Air. (This ministry in Tallahassee would ultimately result in the establishment in 1870 of another uniquely African- descendant congregation called the Bethel Baptist Church.) Page expanded his itinerant ministry by visiting most of the plantations in Leon County at least one Sunday a month. With the untimely death in 1854 of plantation owner John Parkhill, James Page was designated as the "protector," business manager and confidant of Parkhill's widow, roles Page would fulfill for the remainder of his life. Probably because of this position of trust, Page was granted a rare freedom of movement experienced by few bond servants in the South. In response to the demand for his ministerial services, James Page was permitted to travel freely throughout Middle Florida, and eventually traveled to Key West and as far north as Thomasville, Georgia.



James Page in his later years.

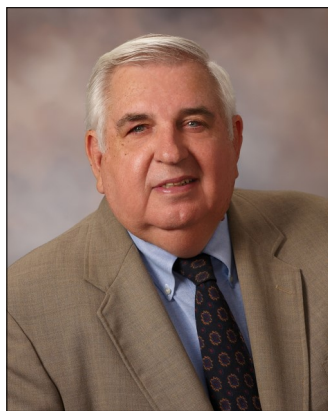
Little is known of the messages preached by James Page. Those sermons probably did not challenge slavery, but the messages may not have been as predictable as some slaveholders believed. Plantation owners who permitted Page to have access to their slaves sought to ensure that Page's ministry involved only 'correct' religious doctrine to make certain that their slaves kept their attention upon a heavenly reward, after their earthly labors. Consequently, when Anglos were present at the slave worship services, "preachers such as Page usually taught and preached salvation and obedience... At other times their words gained greater passion and appeal as they spoke directly to the hearts and souls of their fellow bondservants," one scholar noted.

In contrast to the more sedate Anglo worship services at which Page occasionally preached, the slave-run worship services featured an emotionalism bolstered by loud praying, shouting, dancing, and music. Many plantation owners and overseers viewed with fear and suspicion "the intense emotional style preferred by their slaves." On a few occasions plantation overseers blamed the preaching of James Page for the rebellious actions of their slaves. Yet, despite these rare accusations, Page's reputation for faithfulness and trustworthiness, as well as his demonstrated evangelistic commitment, served him well.

Page and most other slaves in Florida did not receive true freedom from bondage until after the 1865 ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which outlawed slavery. However, Reverend James Page continued his steadfast itinerant ministry of proclaiming the gospel of Christ among Middle Florida's plantations' bond servants and the newly emancipated. Page expanded his ministry of preaching by starting African-descendant, schools and associations, until his death in March, 1883.

#### **2017 Baptist Heritage Award Recipient: Dr. Jerry Windsor**

The Board of Directors of the Florida Baptist Historical Society has named Dr. Jerry M. Windsor, of Graceville, Florida, as the 2017 recipient of the Baptist Heritage Award.



Jerry M. Windsor

Board chair Judith (Mrs. Lawson) Jolly of Dade City, noted in announcing the selection of Dr. Windsor, that he “has exhibited rare and unusual dedication to the cause of preserving and promoting Florida Southern Baptist history. Dr. Windsor made a significant impact through his researching and writing about Baptist history. Additionally, he searched for and collected historically significant publications and memorabilia, which have been added to the Florida Baptist Historical Collection. And last, but certainly not least, Dr. Windsor has been a strong advocate in promoting the importance of preserving and collecting Florida Southern Baptist history.” Mrs. Jolly in notifying Dr. Windsor of his selection, said the Board wanted to simply say: “Well done, you good and faithful servant of the Cross.”

Dr. Jerry Windsor began working as the part-time Secretary-Treasurer of the Florida Baptist Historical Society in 2002 while concurrently serving on the faculty of The Baptist College of Florida. In 2006, Dr. Windsor retired from his faculty position, having completed 16 years’ service as a professor of preaching. Since that time, he worked to enhance the role, purpose and Florida Baptists’ awareness of the Historical Society which seeks to help individuals and churches research significant Florida Baptist history. Dr. Windsor led the Society from 2002 until his retirement in December, 2016.

“I felt led to teach (1953), called to preach (1956) and called to research, write and publish in successive order,” Windsor told the Society directors in his retirement announcement. “The Florida Baptist Historical Society was very fitting for my interest, my calling and training.”

The Baptist Heritage Award is presented annually by the Historical Society to individuals who have exhibited rare and unusual dedication to the cause of Florida Southern Baptist history and who have made a significant contribution through such means as writing Baptist history, teaching Baptist history, and/or promoting the importance of Florida Southern Baptist history.

Since 1997 the Florida Baptist Historical Society has conferred the Baptist Heritage Award upon 21 Florida Baptists, including four laymen, three women, six pastors, and eight Baptist college or seminary professors/administrators.



## FLORIDA BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY



### Remembering the Legacy of Florida Baptists is Our Ministry and Mission

A legacy is the story of a person's or organization's life, the things they did, goals they accomplished, and even their shortcomings in their efforts to bring the gospel to the Florida mission field. Preserving legacies ensures that the memories and history of the past are not forgotten by the present or future generations of Florida Baptists.

The dual ministry and mission of the Florida Baptist Historical Society are to research, preserve and promote the legacy of Florida Baptists. The Society seeks to preserve the legacies of: Florida Baptist pastoral leaders and laity; collect the histories of past and present functioning Baptist churches; and secure the records of cooperating ministries and events, all of which are historically significant to Florida Baptists.

*If the Society can assist your church in preserving its legacy contact us at:*

**FLORIDA BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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