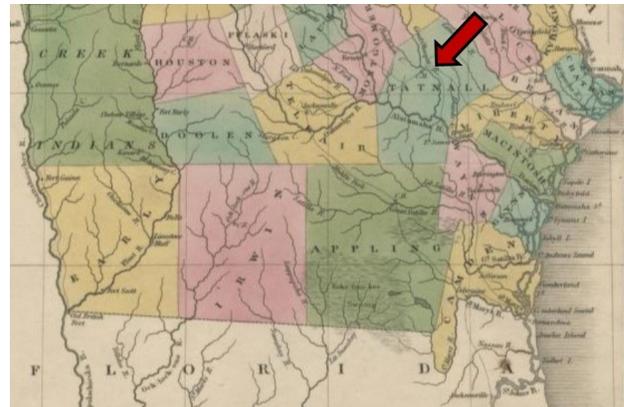


The LEGACY of Florida's early BAPTIST ASSOCIATIONS will be the feature of this newsletter during the next several issues. From their inception, associations in America took on the role of ensuring doctrinal integrity and providing theological stability for the Baptist movement. Isolation by distance was a major reality faced by the members of most churches located in Pioneer territories, particularly Florida. In time the formation of Baptist associations filled a fellowship as well as providing theological stability for geographical scattered missionary Baptist churches in the frontier.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, and particularly between the 21-year period in the Florida Territory when the first Baptist church was established (1821) until when the first indigenous Florida-based pro-missionary Baptist association was organized (1843), Florida's missionary Baptist churches had to affiliate with Baptist associations in Georgia and Alabama. Those Georgia associations, including Piedmont, Ochlocknee, Suwannee River, and Bethel, will be featured in the August and September issues of the LEGACY newsletter. The October issue will feature the Florida Baptist Association which will observe its 175th anniversary of continuous ministry service in the Florida Panhandle.

Piedmont Baptist Association, GA

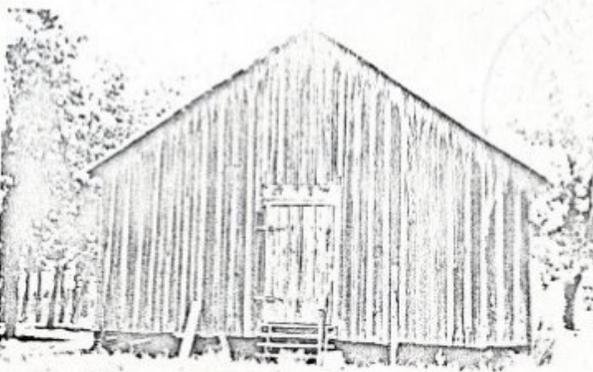
Of the earliest Georgia Baptist associations, Piedmont was the only one close enough in distance to accept Florida churches as contributing members, according to Susan Broome, who leads the Special Collection section of the Tarver Library at Mercer University. Several years ago, Miss Broome provided to the Florida Baptist Historical Society, a report on records of Georgia Baptist associations that had cooperating member churches from Florida. That information serves as the basis of the narrative provided in this issue of the LEGACY.



The Piedmont Association was established in October, 1815 at Little Canoochee Meetinghouse in Tatnall County, Georgia, with Moses Westberry elected as moderator and participation of half-a-dozen churches scattered across the southeast corner of the state. Careful attention was given to preparation of a constitution and rules of decorum in the first two years, and Westberry was designated to write a circular outlining the governing documents which were to be reviewed at the next annual association meeting. However, the minutes of 1817 indicate that “in consequence of a fall from a horse he was unable” to prepare the circular letter nor carry out two other assignments. Subsequently Piedmont developed relationships with a number of neighboring Georgia associations. Within a few years of organizing, the association “voted to have nothing to do with missionaries!” Such a declaration seemed to make clear that one of the reasons for its formation was to avoid connection with the missionary cause. Wilson Conner, Isham Peacock, and Fleming Bates assumed influential roles during these formative years,

Conner as clerk, Peacock as moderator, and Bates as preacher and advisor. Conner was last mentioned in the business of the 1822 meeting when he moved that a letter from a national foreign missions' society be read to the assembly. His motion received no second and, thus, was lost.

Florida's first known Baptist church – Pigeon Creek -- affiliated with the Piedmont (Georgia) Association on October 13, 1821. The association laid claim to being the first Baptist association established in Deep South Georgia and Florida, although certainly not the first in Georgia. When Peacock and Bates set about to establish the first Baptist church in North Florida it was natural that the new congregation would establish ties with the Piedmont Association.



Pigeon Creek Baptist Church,
Nassau County, Florida

Minutes of the 1821 Piedmont Association annual meeting noted that Pigeon Creek Church delegates Britain Knight and Thomas Prevatt presented the doctrinal credentials of the church and after due consideration, the association's delegates voted to receive the church into the association's fellowship. Of the eleven churches that comprised the association that year, Pigeon Creek was among the smallest with fourteen members. Yet its six-dollar contribution to the association was equal to that of the largest church with 43 members. During the ensuing years, Pigeon Creek's membership report to the association revealed steady growth to 22 persons by 1822, 32 by 1823, 34 by 1824, and then 51 by 1826. However, by 1827, the membership had dropped to 34 persons and then made an upswing to 44 by 1830.

At the invitation of Pastor Fleming Bates, the church hosted the 1825 annual meeting of the Piedmont Association, at which Bates was elected moderator. The Nassau County church retained affiliation with the Piedmont Association until 1839 when the church was issued a letter of dismissal, in part because the church had neither sent delegates nor reported statistics since 1831.

Up until this time several Georgia Baptist associations – Hephzibah, Canoochee and Piedmont - had taken up the cause of the anti-missions movement. As previously noted, the Piedmont Association, led by moderator Isham Peacock, as early as 1819 had expressed disdain for the missionary and other benevolent societies. **But by the mid-1830s, Piedmont had become less antagonistic and more tolerant towards the missionary movement.** This change of attitude may have occurred because Peacock had moved on to another association affiliation. This practically made Piedmont a pariah in the esteem of the anti-missionary Primitive Baptists, which resulted in the defection of all but six of Piedmont's cooperating churches by 1839.

Some of these departing churches sought affiliation with the Florida-based anti-missions Suwannee River Association which had organized in 1834. The leadership of the Pigeon Creek Church withheld its cooperation and participation with the Piedmont Association until the 1842 formation of the Alabama River Association (GA). That newly formed association, which grew out of the Suwannee River Association, adopted a strong anti-missionary position which was more in keeping with scriptural teachings and practice appreciated by the leadership of Pigeon Creek.

Before losing its doctrinal luster among anti-missionaries, the Piedmont Association had grown significantly during the mid-1820s by attracting churches from geographically diverse areas of Georgia and north Florida. Because of its practically unlimited boundaries, a meeting was held on August 24, 1827, to consider the feasibility of organizing another association by splitting up Piedmont. The leadership agreed that during the association's annual meeting held that October, a request to form a new association would be accepted. Matthew Albritton and Fleming Bates were appointed to oversee the organization of the sister Baptist body, to be known as the Ochlocknee.

Ochlocknee Baptist Association, GA

On November 17, 1827, an organizational meeting was held for what was to be called the Ochlocknee Baptist Association (GA). Six churches took part in the formation of the new entity, including **two Florida churches: Hephzibah in Gadsden County and Mt. Gilead in Jefferson County.** Within six years the Ochlocknee Association had grown to 35 cooperating churches with a combined membership of 1,010. This growth prompted the association to extend its boundaries to touch the Piedmont Association on the east and the St. Johns River to its southeast and proceeded west along the Georgia-Florida territorial boundary. That area encompassed churches located in six North Florida Territorial counties that abutted South Georgia. **Those twelve churches and their location included: Columbia County's churches, Newington, Shiloh, New River, and Providence; Gadsden County's churches, Hephzibah and Hebron; Hamilton County's Concord Church; Jefferson County's Ebenezer, Mt. Gilead and New Providence churches; and Leon County's Myrtle Springs and Indian Spring [sic] churches.**

Given the influence of anti-missions' proponents Isham Peacock, Matthew Albritton and Fleming Bates, it was only a matter of time before the Ochlocknee Association went on record opposing the "missionaries" who were considered "far from God" in doctrinal integrity.

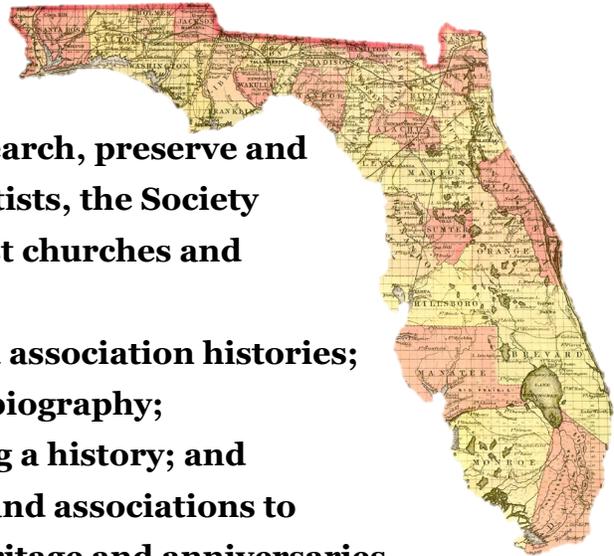
In 1833, the association expressed concern over the growing missionary movement. They objected to societies which "the Savior never called or spoke of, it is man's plan." The association decried what the Primitive Baptists believed to be a heresy of preaching man-devised plans of "temperance and morality and call it righteousness." By 1842, during the association's annual meeting, the delegates approved a revision to their rules of order that declared the association would not have fellowship with any church that supported missionary societies, Sunday school societies or any similar benevolent groups.

This series on Georgia Baptist Associations with Florida affiliated churches will continue in the next issue of LEGACY.

OUR MISSION:

In fulfilment of our Mission to research, preserve and promote the Legacy of Florida Baptists, the Society assists leadership of Florida Baptist churches and associations in a variety of ways:

- ◆ **the research of local church and association histories;**
- ◆ **the research of pastoral leader biography;**
- ◆ **provide resources for publishing a history; and**
- ◆ **encourage and assist churches and associations to celebrate their respective heritage and anniversaries.**



A Cooperative Program ministry of the Florida Baptist Convention

A nine member board, appointed by the State Board of Missions, governs the ministry and mission of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, which is a fraternal organization of the Florida Baptist State Convention [2018]

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