

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.

The Georgia-based Ochlocknee Baptist Association (see LEGACY August, 2018) by 1833, included 15 churches in East and Middle Florida being affiliated with the Georgia fellowship of churches. The churches grouped by their Florida counties included: Alachua (New Zion); Columbia (Newington, New River, Old Providence and Sheloh); Gadsden (Hephzibah and Hebron); Hamilton (Concord); Jefferson (Mount Moriah, New Providence, Ebenezer and Mount Gilead) and Leon (Indian Spring [sic], Myrtle Spring and Salem). Other than the association's registry, little is known about one-half of these churches. The association served to provide encouragement and contact between these sister Baptist churches located in Georgia and the Florida Territory, separated by the frontier wilderness.

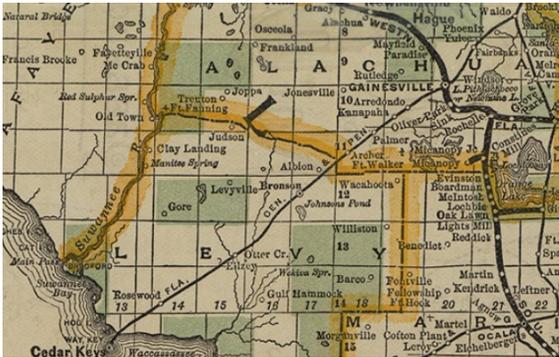
Because of its extended geography, during the **1834** annual meeting delegates considered and approved a proposal that the association favorably dismiss eight churches to help form the **Suwannee River Baptist Association**. The action by the Ochlocknee Association to dismiss without prejudice eight Florida churches grew out of two realities: the "large" number of Florida churches; and their distance from the Georgia churches which was believed to be making the association unwieldy. During the 1834 annual meeting, the Ochlocknee Association delegates voted to issue letters of dismissal to eight churches – including five churches in Florida – to permit them to organize Florida's first Baptist association, the Suwannee River Baptist Association. The five Florida churches included Old Providence, New Zion, Concord, Newington and New River. Other than the Old Providence Church (Columbia County), Concord Church (Hamilton County) and New River Church (Hamilton County), little is known about those other two Baptist congregations.



Suwannee River Association, FLA-GA.

The organization of the very first Florida-based Baptist association -- the Suwannee River Baptist Association – was defined by the territory from a boundary line “beginning at the mouth of the Suwannee River and running up that stream to the mouth of the Withlacoochy thence up Little River to the boundary line.” The new association functioned about a decade before its anti-missions' theology caused the departure of several missionary Baptist churches who subsequently formed in 1843 the first truly missionary Baptist association in Florida (to be highlighted in the October issue of LEGACY).

The Suwannee River Baptist Association's organizational meeting was scheduled to be held on the first weekend in December, 1834, at the Concord Church in Hamilton County, Florida. To the chagrin of the assembled church delegates, the appointed presbytery of ministers -- who were to approve the theological credentials of the churches wanting to organize the new association -- failed to attend. A subsequent meeting was held at Old Providence Church, Columbia County, September 1835, with Melos Thigpen and William A. Knight serving as the constituting presbytery.



Unfortunately, the Second Seminole Indian War (1835 – 1842) had a debilitating effect upon the young association and its ability to grow in the number of cooperating churches. During its first five years the Suwannee River Association only added four new churches, mostly in Georgia. The Florida territorial unrest prevented some churches from sending delegates to the annual meetings which were held in the safe haven of Georgia. Ever mindful of the threat to "life and limb" to members of its cooperating churches, the association's September 21 – 23, 1839, annual meeting included a vote by the delegates to encourage its churches to observe days of fasting and prayer. **Their proceedings document noted that prayers were to seek God's help, "so that the war-whoop of a savage foe, might not be heard any longer**

in our land, to the great disturbance of our fellow citizens, while numbers of our women and infant children are falling victims to their relentless hands." According to Primitive Baptist historian John Crowley it was 1842 before the association's annual meeting could again be held in the Florida Territory.

Although the Indian conflict slowed the growth of the association, it did not slow down the growing theological conflict that divided churches on the Biblical support of missions or anti-missions sentiment. Within ten years after the association was established, the Missionary Baptist churches, including most of the original churches, had already left or were excluded from the Suwannee River group. Those churches that departed were prompted by an 1840 declaration against missions made during the association's annual meeting. That resolution was formalized in 1842 by the Suwannee River Association when it revised its rules of order to make permanent the anti-missions' position. Subsequently, the few remaining cooperating pro-missionary church delegates who arrived for the 1846 annual meeting, were denied access into the host church. Upon arriving, delegates were surprised to discover that the anti-missions Primitive Baptists had arrived first with a majority of their delegates, and voted that the Missionary Baptists be refused recognition and participation.

As a result of the growing minority of Baptist churches in Georgia's wiregrass region that embraced the anti-missions' cause (which were represented by the Suwannee River, Ochlocknee and Alabama River Associations) subsequently became known by various names, including "Old School," "Regulars," "Hard Shell," and as "Primitive Baptists." In 1847 the association changed its name to the Suwannee River Primitive Baptist Association, thus relinquishing its claim as Florida's first missionary Baptist association.

Despite their efforts to ensure the doctrinal purity of their cooperating churches, the leadership of the several anti-missions associations could do little to stop the influx into the Florida Territory of the missionary advocates and practitioners. These included some of the leading itinerant preachers of the day – John Tucker, James McDonald, Ryan Frier, Richard Johnson Mays, William B. Cooper, John B. Lacy, and William J. Blewett. The exclusionary efforts by the anti-missions' associations with which most Florida Baptist churches had been affiliated presented a growing dilemma for the missionary- minded Floridians. The solution was to birth their own missionary- oriented Baptist associations.

This series on Baptist Associations with Florida-affiliated churches will continue in the next issue of LEGACY with the organization of the Florida Baptist Association in 1843.



THE 2018 BAPTIST HERITAGE AWARD

The Florida Baptist Historical Society is pleased to announce that the 2018 recipient of the Baptist Heritage Award is to be presented posthumously to Dr. Sid Smith.

Since 1997 the Florida Baptist Historical Society has conferred the Baptist Heritage Award to 21 individuals who 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.

Dr. Sid Smith, for more than 11 years, led the Florida Baptist Convention in the development of African-American ministries, including an aggressive effort to start primarily African-American congregations. Although since the 1940s, the Convention had been committed to and developed piecemeal outreach and ministries to African-American Baptist congregations, this work was never assigned to an African-American individual. And that work which was done by Anglo leadership was focused primarily upon developing relationships with existing African-American Baptist conventions within Florida.

Sid Smith (b. 1943; d. 2009) was the first director of the Florida Baptist Convention's African-American ministries division from May 1994 until his retirement Oct. 31, 2005. In that role, he served at the convention's highest administrative and decision-making level in directing a unique cultural outreach among state Baptist conventions.

During his tenure, Smith gave leadership to an aggressive program of starting more than 400 predominantly African-American congregations as well as instituting a program department of church development to assist pastoral and lay leadership in African-American churches. "Sid was a scholarly man with a great grasp of the local church," said John Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention, who selected Smith to fill the newly created position in 1994.

"He was a pioneer in many ways in Baptist life," Sullivan said. Serving as that division's director, Smith "gave us immediate recognition in the African-American community because of his stature," Sullivan continued. "He energized church planting in that community. His contribution among African American congregations cannot be overestimated. I'll miss him as a friend."

Dr. Smith wrote a well-researched article titled, "A History of African American Baptists in Florida," which was featured in the year 2000 *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*. It was one of several articles on Florida Baptists' ethnic and cultural congregations featured in that annual publication. A prolific author of numerous books and articles on the African-American history and experience within Southern Baptist life, Smith lectured at every Southern Baptist seminary and numerous divinity schools.

Smith served more than 40 years in Southern Baptist denominational roles, longer than any other African American leader. He worked in California, Tennessee and Florida but his influence permeates multicultural strategies now in place at the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board and Life Way Christian Resources.

Smith began his work among Southern Baptists in 1968 as the South-Central Los Angeles director of Christian social ministries for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board (now known as NAMB). In 1979, he began an 11-year tenure with the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board (now known as Life Way), first as a consultant and then as manager of the black church development section, as well as serving as part-time pastor of several African American congregations in the Nashville area.

He was president of his own consulting firm, Black Church Consultants of America from 1990-94 and concurrently served as a professor with the American Baptist College in Nashville. Smith worked behind the scenes in the establishment of the National African American Fellowship in 1992. He was the founder of the Black Southern Baptist Denominational Servants Network in 1997, an organization that provides mentoring and encouragement to African American staff members at Baptist entities.

A native of Texas, Smith graduated from the University of Corpus Christi with a B.A. and earned the master of religious education degree from Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif., in 1968 and the doctor of philosophy degree from California Graduate School of Theology in Glendale in 1973.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY ENDOWMENT

You can create a personal, God-honoring Legacy by contributing to the Florida Baptist Historical Society endowment fund that will support the future on-going mission and ministries of the Society. Society ministries include researching, collecting, preserving, and publishing Florida Southern Baptist historical materials. The Society assists local churches in preserving their respective Legacy by offering assistance in research, writing and publication of local church documentaries and histories. Gifts to this fund are tax deductible and all checks may be made out to the Florida Baptist Historical Society Endowment Fund. Mail to: Florida Baptist Historical Society, PO Box 95, Graceville, FL 32440.



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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