

The Florida Baptist Historical Society seeks to **preserve the legacy** of Florida Baptist pastoral leaders and laity, the past and present functioning Baptist churches, the State Convention's cooperating ministries and milestone events that were historically significant to Florida Baptists. The Society's mission is accomplished through a variety of ministry services provided to Florida Baptists. To underscore this emphasis the Society's monthly newsletter, LEGACY, seeks to highlight the legacy endowed by the people, churches and events in Florida Baptist history. During the next several months this newsletter will feature those persons whose legacy in Florida Baptist life was achieved in part, by their service as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention.

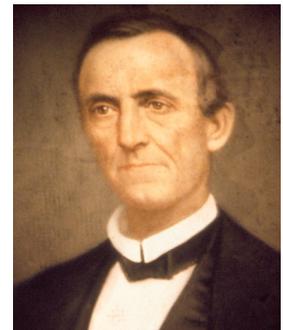
**As noted in previous issues of LEGACY, since 1854 (excluding the seven years at various times the State Convention did not meet), the persons elected as president have included 78 pastors and 16 laypersons. The previous two issues of LEGACY featured brief profiles on those 16 laypersons. Beginning this month, we provide brief profiles on selected pastors who served as State Convention president.**

#### **Richard Johnson Mays, the First President:**

One of Florida's early and prominent advocates of starting churches was a person who was neither initially a Baptist preacher nor a commissioned missionary. Rather he was a successful and wealthy layman by the standards of his day. But material wealth did not quench Richard Johnson Mays' heart-burning desire to be a Biblical servant leader.

That growing spiritual passion led Richard Johnson Mays to become a pioneer church starter. In addition to helping start at least six pioneer Florida Baptist churches, **Mays is credited with being a motivating force behind the organization of Florida's first Baptist association and the Florida Baptist State Convention.** This native of South Carolina, before moving to the Florida Territory, had seen the value and need for cooperation among local Baptist churches. The need for affiliation was driven by the evangelism and missionary impulses of Baptists in the South which began to generate a desire to create an "organization beyond the local level for inspiration, fellowship and the achievement of tasks too large for a single church," a Baptist historian noted.

As one of the founding leaders of the Florida Baptist Association in 1843, Richard Johnson Mays also was a strong advocate for the organization of a state convention which was first discussed during the Florida Association's 1853 annual meeting held at the Olive Baptist Church, then located in Thomas County, Georgia. It was decided that the organization of a state convention would occur during the 1854 Florida Association meeting to be held in Madison. Johnson likely offered to host the organizational meeting at his Clifton Mansion plantation home near the Concord Baptist Church, where the Florida Association would convene.



Richard  
Johnson Mays



Organizational meeting  
Florida Baptist State Convention,  
November 20, 1854

On November 20, 1854, during a recess in the Florida Association meeting in the Concord Church, seventeen delegates (as they were then called) from the then three associations – Florida, Alachua and West Florida – assembled in the parlor of Clifton Mansion – Mays’ plantation home – to organize the state convention.

**Richard J. Mays was asked to preside over the organization meeting,** and D. G. Daniels was appointed secretary. After a reading from the scriptures, a season of prayer likely sought the leadership of God’s spirit as the group undertook its task. The first item of business was the adopting of a constitution.

The State Convention’s first constitution also called for four officers to be elected by ballot at each annual meeting: a president, a secretary, an assistant secretary, and a treasurer. An executive committee was defined, consisting of at least seven members, also elected by ballot at each annual meeting, was to attend to State Convention business between sessions.

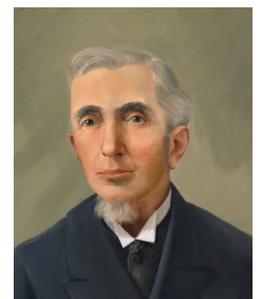
Even without a surviving written record of the meeting’s details, an observer can assume there was cordial agreement among the 17 delegates, as they were able to complete their task before the midnight hour. On that autumn evening of November 20, 1854, the group wrote and adopted a constitution for the Florida Baptist State Convention. They proceeded to elect the following as the State Convention’s first officers: president, Richard Johnson Mays; secretary, D. G. Daniels; assistant secretary, Samuel C. Craft; treasurer, John Cason.

**The one-year service as State Convention president was Mays only official role in the denominational body.** Despite the demands of running a prosperous plantation, Richard J. Mays had a spiritual passion to continue starting and serving area churches as a bi-vocational pastor. As was the practice of many itinerant preachers of that era, Mays served several churches concurrently. **Between 1831 and 1860, Mays is credited – based upon available records –with having started or served as pastor of the following churches:** Hickstown (First Baptist Church of Madison) started in 1831; served as pastor of the Elizabeth Baptist Church in Jefferson County in 1832-33; started in 1841 and served for two years as pastor of the Baptist church at Monticello; served as pastor, beginning in 1843, the Liberty Baptist Church, in Thomas County, Georgia; also started in 1841 was the Concord Baptist Church, Madison, where Mays served as pastor 1843 – 1846 and again 1857 – 1860; and started in 1856, the Piney Grove Baptist Church.

**Between 1832 and 1860 Mays had amassed and developed a plantation comprised of 5,480 acres maintained by over 120 slaves.** Those thousands of acres produced cotton, timber, corn, and sweet potatoes, among other crops. As a loyal Southerner, Mays provided food supplies and all five of his sons enlisted to support the Confederate cause during the Civil War. Before the war drew to an end in Florida on April 26, 1865, Richard Johnson Mays died at age 56 on July 18, 1864.

#### **W. N. Chaudoin, the Longest Serving President:**

William Newell Chaudoin, served as State Convention President from December, 1880 through 1885; and after a brief two-year hiatus, was re-elected in 1889 and served continuously through 1903. Such lengthy service defines the leadership legacy of W. N. Chaudoin as the only person to have served as the elected president for 20 years.



W. N. Chaudoin

There were two State Convention meetings held in 1880, the first in January and the second in December. During the December meeting, Chaudoin was first elected as State Convention president. **A significant action taken by the messengers** (then called delegate representatives of churches and associations), **was the establishment of a State Board of Missions.** The action had been precipitated by a report on missions which cited one-half dozen facts that made the case for the need of a greater missionary commitment by Florida Baptists. “To oppose missions, whether as individuals or as churches,” the committee noted, “produces blight and spiritual decay.” The committee requested the State Convention to appoint a Board of Missions “whose business it shall be to furnish the preached word to every destitute section in our territory.”

The convention delegates agreed to create the board and approved a motion to designate William N. Chaudoin as the Board's corresponding secretary. This was a post Chaudoin would hold continuously until 1901 when failing health caused him to resign.

Subsequently, during the 1881 annual meeting of the State Convention, at which Chaudoin presided, the **messengers entertained the then historically significant question of whether or not women had equal status as men.** Pastor N. A. Bailey asked the State Convention in session, "Are ladies entitled to seats as members of this body, and upon what terms?" By unanimous consent the delegates voted in support of the determination, "They are, upon the same terms as brethren." Following the vote, four women were enrolled as voting delegates to the State Convention. [Ironically, messengers to the 1919 State Convention annual meeting tabled a resolution calling for support of equality for women's right to vote in the civic arena which had been passed in June of that year by Congress as the proposed 19<sup>th</sup> amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The 19<sup>th</sup> amendment was finally ratified by state legislatures on August 8, 1920.]

Affectionately known as "Uncle Shad," William N. Chaudoin was a common, unassuming man who became recognized for his devotion, faith, energy, tact, skill and constructiveness in leading Florida Baptists into the twentieth century. **Chaudoin brought hope and encouragement to a struggling state-oriented denomination that was still seeking to define itself and financially support its missions' dreams.** As the first corresponding secretary for the State Board of Missions of the Florida Baptist State Convention, Chaudoin set benchmarks for church starting, missions giving, and nurturing ministerial education.

Under Chaudoin's two decades of legacy leadership, Anglo Florida Baptist churches doubled to number 468 with a combined membership of 23,136. **This growth was the result of Chaudoin's personal priority to lead Florida Baptists to plant churches in areas where Florida's population was burgeoning.** Initially undertaken with two missionaries, the church starting effort, during Chaudoin's tenure, soon developed into a growing troop of nearly 40 State Board of Missions' appointed missionaries and mission pastors serving across the Florida mission field.

A nineteenth century self-styled Florida Baptist historian, E. H. Rennolds, Sr., once recalled the significance of the State Board's action to employ W. N. Chaudoin as their corresponding secretary. "The work of the Board grew under his [Chaudoin] wise management, in its [financial] collections, in its missionary operations, and in its hold upon the people, till it became a great power for good in the land." Chaudoin died January 22, 1904.

## 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*