

LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the *legacy* forged by the people, churches and events in Florida Baptist history. During the next several months this newsletter will feature those churches and their leadership who between 1821 and 1849 contributed to the development of the Florida Baptist State Convention. Each monthly issue will feature at least one church established in the 1820s, 1830s and the 1840s respectively. **While dozens of Baptist churches were established during these decades, most have not survived time. The featured churches, with the exception of Pigeon Creek, continue to function in 2020.**

Before there were Missionary Baptist churches in the Florida Territory, there were Baptists present.

The discovery of the Florida peninsula was first recorded by Juan Ponce de Leon who in 1513 landed on what he thought was an island and named it La Florida. During the next two hundred-fifty years, with the arrival of additional contingents of settlers and Catholic priests, Spain continued to settle and establish missions along the coast and solidify its claim upon La Florida.

As early as 1687, African runaway slaves, mostly from South Carolina and Georgia, began arriving in Florida, enticed by Spanish leniency and the possibility of freedom from British oppression. The first free African settlement in North America was Fort Mose (also referred to as Mossy), north of St. Augustine. It was established in 1738 and served as home to 100 Africans who lived and farmed there until 1740 when the fort was destroyed in a battle against British troops. This settlement may have been the group identified by Dr. Johann D. Schoepf in his journal as Black Anabaptists, which is noted later in this newsletter. Meanwhile, the British continued in their campaign of wresting control of the peninsula from the Spanish.

Under the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Florida was ceded to England, which dominated the area until 1783. Within a year all Catholics, except eight laymen, had left Florida. During the twenty years of English rule, the Anglican Church was established. Although Catholicism survived, its influence was greatly weakened.

There was no recorded Baptist church established in the Florida Territory (which became a part of the United States in 1845) prior to the 1820s, although there were Baptists present.

Black Anabaptists Discovered in 1784

It is possible that some Baptists moved to Florida from Georgia, which was being settled by an influx of people that included many Baptists. Furthermore, state boundary lines were not as precise as today, which resulted in parts of South Georgia becoming a part of the Florida Panhandle after Florida's statehood was recognized in 1845.

Meanwhile, during the late eighteenth century, Dr. Johann D. Schoepf, a German surgeon who served with Hessian troops assigned to the British army, traveled through Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, West Florida and the Bahamas. He kept a diary, titled "Travels in the Confederation, 1783 – 1784," in which he recorded scientific observations, as well as descriptions of the American people and customs. Schoepf wrote



in 1784 of finding a group of Black Anabaptists holding worship services in St. Augustine. “Anabaptists” was the early description of those Christian believers who followed the New Testament practice of believers’ baptism by immersion under water. This would denote the first recorded Baptist meetings in Florida.

First Baptist Preacher Arrived in 1811

Wilson Conner assumed the distinction of having been the first known ordained Baptist minister to have set foot in the Florida territory in 1811. Although his entry was not primarily missionary, it was motivated by a belief that every person had the right to be free to worship God any way he or she pleased. Most likely his missionary views served as a motivating force which caused him to participate in a secret United States-commissioned military expedition into the Florida Territory. President James Madison enlisted the Georgia militia, in which Conner served as a captain, to undertake armed force against the Spanish that resulted in the establishment of the short-lived Republic of East Florida between 1811– 1814.

By June 1812, the United States was officially at war with Great Britain and the patriots of the Republic of East Florida were on their own. For Missionary Baptist Conner the intrusion into Spanish Florida may have been a dual purpose “crusade.” On the one hand it was a military action against the Spanish. And secondly, it was a religious crusade to rid the territory of the influence of the Roman Catholics. From his Baptist perspective, the need existed to break the bonds of Catholic religious control that restricted access to the minds and hearts of the Anglo and African settlers, as well as the native Indians that lived between the St. Marys River and St. Augustine.

Florida Territory Missionary Baptist Churches Established in the 1820s

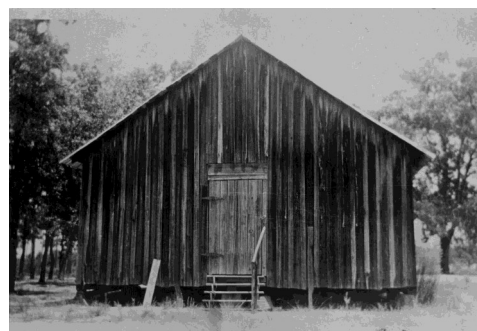
Nassau County, Pigeon Creek Baptist Church – January 7, 1821

Two leading Georgia hyper-Calvinists and anti-missions Baptist preachers – Isham Peacock and Fleming Bates – on January 7, 1821, organized the first Baptist church in Florida – Pigeon Creek Baptist Church. It was located in current day Nassau County. Although some preaching and organized worship may have occurred earlier within the Territory of Florida, the Pigeon Creek Church, established just south of the Georgia-Florida border near present-day Callahan, was the first organized Baptist church in Florida. Bates was listed in the minutes of the church as its first pastor. Wilson Conner later served as church clerk.

The following year on July 20, 1822, the church received as a church member an African slave whose name was Peter Lopers. Pigeon Creek Church, like many frontier churches, accepted African- descendant persons on a regular basis. Membership rights (including voting privileges) and responsibilities varied from church to church. Generally African- descendant persons were permitted to participate in the regular worship services, although they were required to sit in designated seating at the back of the church building.

The newly established church reflected the hyper-Calvinist theology of its founding leaders who had incorporated their scriptural perspective into the statement of faith and into the rules of decorum which provided for a strict code of discipline. As an example, when the question of foot washing arose, it was discussed and readily accepted as an appropriate part of the observance of the Lord's Supper. But the church was anti-missions and would neither participate in any effort to overtly evangelize people, nor did it condone support of mission societies and the Sunday school movement of the era.

Subsequently, the Pigeon Creek Church turned away from its Missionary Baptist heritage and by theological faith and practice became a Primitive Baptist congregation, as did some other early Florida Missionary Baptist churches. The church was affiliated with the renamed Alabama River Primitive Baptist Association through much of the twentieth century. Without pastoral leadership the church by late 2010 ceased holding its twice monthly services and disbanded.



Florida Territory Missionary Baptist Churches Established in the 1830s

Monticello, Elizabeth Baptist Church – 1831



The Elizabeth Baptist Church was organized in 1831 and established about nine miles southeast of Monticello. Few records exist, other than some fragmentary identification of the seven founding members: James Walker and wife Elizabeth Padgett Walker, Jesse Walker, Charles and Sarah Walker, and Joseph and Caroline Kinsey. In that first year Elder Jesse Goodman served as the pastor in 1831. The following year, the church called Richard Johnson Mays, a plantation owner in nearby Madison County, to serve as its lay-preacher. This preaching responsibility – which is believed to have lasted only a year – was likely limited to traveling by horseback from Madison County once a month. The Elizabeth Church officially constituted on April 12, 1834.

Florida Territory Missionary Baptist Churches Established in the 1840s

Oak Grove, Yellow River Baptist Church – 1840

In 1840, Keidar Hawthorne was employed as the Bethlehem (Alabama) Baptist Domestic Missionary Society's field missionary. That same year Hawthorne reportedly traveled 3,000 miles on horseback preaching the gospel along the way and baptized 106 persons. He found a group of Baptist settlers in what is now northern Okaloosa County, Florida, in the Oak Grove community near present day Baker. With the help of fellow pastor J. J. Sessions, the two men served as a presbytery to assess the theological faith and practice of the Baptists seeking to organize the Yellow River Baptist Church on June 14, 1840. Among the founding members were: John Robertson, James Barrow, David Girtman, Elizabeth Stegall, Margaret Weeks, Elizabeth Wood, Mary Wood, Mary Senterfitt, Nancy Busby and ten African slaves. This was one of the earliest Baptist churches organized in the western end of the Florida Panhandle. The church thrived as a monthly meeting church until 1916, when its members migrated and the church became inactive. The church reportedly revived in August, 1938, and continued holding monthly services.



Wewahitchka, First Baptist Church – 1840

In 1840 a Baptist church at Jehu was organized on bluffs overlooking the Dead Lakes in what was then Franklin County, is the present day First Baptist Church, Wewahitchka. The lakes connect to the Apalachicola River which was a major source of commercial steamboat travel as early as the 1830s. Would-be settlers and entrepreneurs originated from Eufaula, Alabama, and Columbus, Georgia, as well as various landings along the Chattahoochee River. In the Florida Territory the Chattahoochee connected at Lake Seminole with the Apalachicola River which provided uninterrupted sailing into the Gulf of Mexico.



As early settlers disembarked from the waterway and traveled inland to take advantage of the free land, small farming settlements were established. One such early settlement on the Dead Lakes is confirmed by the Jehu Cemetery, which was established by the Baptist church in the 1840s. The Baptist Church at Jehu was likely built of logs, but sometime later was replaced by a frame structure. In 1891, the frame church building was moved two miles on logs drawn by oxen, from the cemetery into the town of Wewahitchka. That frame building continues to serve the church in the present day. Itinerant preachers travelled by steamboat from Blountstown and Apalachicola to the Dead Lakes settlement to lead worship services held every third Sunday of the month.