



FLORIDA BAPTIST
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LEGACY

Our Mission: Researching, preserving and promoting the Legacy of Florida Baptists

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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 year 1847 Marked the Formation of the Alachua Baptist Association and the West Florida Baptist Association

"These churches are composed mostly of members poor in things pertaining to this life, but they seem to be rich in faith and good works," reported missionary John Tucker in the February, 1848, *Southern Baptist Missionary Journal*. He went on to characterize the evangelistic zeal of the churches that had recently organized as the Alachua Missionary Baptist Association, by observing, "Judging from the spirit they exhibit their desires of the extension of the Redeemer kingdom exceed their abilities."

The Florida Association, three years after its 1842-43 organization, was the only missionary Baptist association functioning across the Florida Panhandle which stretched from Duval (along the Atlantic coast) to Escambia (to the west) counties. Serving as moderator was layman and itinerant missionary Richard Johnson Mays. The association had 35 cooperating churches that were spread 350 miles east to west and 250 miles to the south. And yet there were many other functioning Baptist churches that were not affiliated with the association.

During the 1846 Florida Association annual meeting delegates approved the dismissal of its member churches "east of the Suwannee River" and "west of the Chattahoochee" River for the purpose of forming new associations. The resolutions approving the establishment of the two association was regarded with "peculiar interest" and a prayer that "the God of Israel crown their efforts with His everlasting Grace!"

The growth of new churches within the interior of Florida reflected the immigration of more settlers into Florida. Part of this influx was fostered by the end of the Second Seminole Indian War in 1842. Additionally, Congress approved the Armed Occupation Act (AOA) of 1842 to encourage Anglo population growth in south Florida. The act permitted a settler to claim 160 acres of any lands between Gainesville and the Peace River without payment, if the person was capable of armed self-defense. It was believed the free land would generate an increased migration of settlers who would in turn force the remaining Seminoles to emigrate.

"After 1842," explained Florida historian Michael Gannon, "wagon caravans of settlers and their slaves, crowded with tools and supplies, rolled through Jacksonville headed for new homes . . . carrying Georgians and South Carolinians to cotton plantations in Marion and Columbia counties." Once isolated outposts in the Territory – from Pensacola to Key West and selected settlements in-between, including

Fort Pierce, Tampa, Tallahassee, St. Augustine, Apalachicola, Monticello – became destination centers for persons seeking a new beginning and free land. The influx included northerners and foreign-born workers. Among these settlers were southern states missionary Baptists.

ALACHUA ASSOCIATION – Now known as the Nature Coast Baptist Association

Although only six churches from the Florida Association decided to participate in the new "association of the east," six other previously unaffiliated churches sent delegate representatives to attend the organizational meeting of the soon to be designated Alachua Missionary Baptist Association. Church representatives met at Fort Clarke (later called Gainesville) April 16-17, 1847, to constitute an association of churches scattered across northeast and north central Florida.



Those 12 congregations [**with Florida Association churches highlighted in boldface**], grouped by their county location and noting their year of organization, included: Ft. Clarke Church [Gainesville] (1847) in Alachua County; Benton (later called Hernando) County churches of Bethesda (ca. 1847) and Eden (1845); Columbia County churches of **New River [Brooker](1833)**, **Columbia (1847)**, **Providence [Olustee] (1832)** and **South Prong (1847)**; **Bethel Church [Jacksonville] (1838)** in Duval County; Marion County churches of Fellowship (1844) and New Providence (1847); and Nassau County churches Ephesus (1845) and **Sharon [Callahan] (1841)**. [Editor's note: It was previously incorrectly reported in the book, *Favored Florida, A History of Florida Baptists* (2013), that 13 similar and different

churches constituted the founding churches of the Alachua Association. That determination was based upon various conflicting information from sources dated 1850 and later. Now, a recent review of the only known copy of the 1847 Alachua Association Annual, held by a third-party historical organization, serves as the basis for the amplified and corrected listing of the Alachua Association's 12 charter churches.]

The three Baptist elders (pastors) serving as the organizing presbytery were itinerant missionaries John Tucker, Daniel Edwards and James McDonald. A presbytery was responsible to verify the doctrinal orthodoxy, as well as the faith and practice, of a Baptist church applying for participation in the association. Missionary James McDonald was elected moderator and Thomas J. Prevatt was designated as clerk. **Also, present was Elder Jeremiah M. Hayman who represented the Eden Church. As best can be determined, at least eight of the founding churches, including Eden, continue to function 170-plus years later in 2018 as missionary Baptist congregations.**

In the course of time the geographic expanse of the Alachua Association was reduced with the establishment of other Baptist associations in neighboring counties, until today the Association's 45 churches and missions are primarily located in Citrus, Hernando, Sumter and Pasco counties. In a historic action taken in 2006, messengers to the annual association meeting voted to change the association's name to Nature Coast Baptist Association to better reflect the region along Florida's Gulf central coast in which the cooperating churches minister.

WEST FLORIDA ASSOCIATION

Florida's third missionary-oriented association, called the West Florida Association, was formed by churches located west of the Chattahoochee and Apalachicola rivers. Encompassing a land area of 10,000 square miles the association's territory stretched west to Escambia Bay. At the called meeting, held on the second Saturday in November, 1847, in Jackson County's Bethlehem Church (current day Campbellton Baptist Church), representatives from 11 Florida and three Alabama churches were present to discuss the formation of an association. According to Baptist Historian Jack Dalton, the selection of the Bethlehem Church as the meeting site for the organization of the new association was because the church was considered the "mother church of West Florida," having been the first established in the region and which was "dear to the hearts of the people."

On this occasion only three Florida Association churches [**highlighted by boldface**] chose to be a part of the 14 congregations establishing the new association and are grouped by their county location and noting their year of



SKETCH OF EDEN BAPTIST CHURCH BUILDING AS IT APPEARED OVER 100 YEARS AGO BY ARTIST MARYLEEN WEBB.

organization, included: Jackson County churches included **Bethlehem (1825), Sardis (1825), Union Academy (1844)**, Holmes Creek (1847), and Mt. Pleasant (1847); Washington County churches were Econfina [St. Andrews Bay] (1846), Liberty Hill (1846), Holmes Valley (1846), and Rehoboth (1847); New Hope Church (1846) in Walton County; and Harmony Church (1846) in Holmes County; Also present were delegates from three Henry County, Alabama churches: Big Spring (1845), New Hope (1845) and Woodville (1847). [Editor’s note: It was previously incorrectly reported in the book, *Favored Florida, A History of Florida Baptists* (2013), that 12 similar and different churches constituted the founding churches of the West Florida Association. That determination was based upon various conflicting

information from sources dated 1859 and later. Now, a recent review of a history narrative printed in the 1849 West Florida Association Annual serves as the basis for the amplified and corrected listing of the West Florida Association's 14 charter churches.]

The organizing presbytery assigned to verify the doctrinal orthodoxy, as well as the faith and practice, of the applicant Baptist churches, who were appointed by the Florida Association included elders (pastors) N.M. Havens, Thomas Lang, H.S. Linton and J.W.F. McCall. Inasmuch as there was no state convention in Florida with which to affiliate, the newly formed association agreed to affiliate with the Alabama Baptist State Convention. This affiliation apparently was easily accomplished because, prior to the formation of the association, most of the churches were affiliated with the Alabama Convention.

The association’s first moderator, Elder Davis Porter Everett, was not elected until 1849, during the entity’s third annual meeting. Subsequently itinerant missionary Joshua Mercer was selected as moderator beginning in 1850 and served continuously for ten years.

Elder J. H. Wombwell was employed as the first domestic missionary in 1849. In quarterly messages to the *Southern Baptist Missionary Journal*, a joint publication of the Southern Baptist Domestic and Foreign Missions Boards, **Wombwell told of his challenges of evangelizing in West Florida. In an 1849 message he noted, “The field is destitute – the calls for aid are many. If I leave them, where to get a preacher they know not.”** But he managed to establish a home base in Marianna and reported in June, 1850, “we have procured a house in Marianna and fitted it up for meeting (preaching services) purposes.” Wombwell’s West Florida missionary service was cut short after one year when the Southern Baptist Domestic Missions Board sent him to Brownsville, Texas, to do mission work along the Rio Grande River.

Today the West Florida Association – greatly reduced in geographical expanse as a result of the development of other county-based Baptist associations – is located in the Panhandle’s Washington County and is comprised of 18 churches and missions.

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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