

EDITORS NOTE: Due to Hurricane Michael's disruption of electrical, internet and telephone service in Jackson County, this edition of LEGACY was delayed in being issued.

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 FLORIDA ASSOCIATION ORGANIZED IN 1843

In a letter written in late November, 1842, to the then known 25 to 30 churches along the Florida-Georgia state boundary, Pastor Thomas Lang announced, "*In consequence of a recent separation of several of the churches from the Ochlocknee Association a meeting was held at Shilo church to take into consideration the propriety of forming a new Baptist Association of the churches who wish to be allowed the liberty of conscience.*"

The letter reported on the agreement by representatives from six Florida churches formerly affiliated with either the Georgia-based Ochlocknee Association or the Florida-based Suwannee River Association, as well as other interested pastors, who wanted to organize a pro-missionary association. The information meeting – held October 22, 1842, at Leon County's Shilo [sic] Baptist Church – resulted in the several representatives endorsing the formation of a new Florida-based association of Baptist churches. **Now 175 years later, the Florida Baptist Association holds the distinction of the being oldest continuously functioning missionary Baptist association in Florida.**



Ebenezer Baptist Church, Jefferson County

The concerted effort to form a new association was a reaction to the earlier actions by the **Ocklocknee** and **Suwannee River Associations** (see LEGACY, September, 2018) to withdraw fellowship from churches that were sympathetic and supportive of the missionary cause. As a consequence, these Florida Baptists set about the task of establishing a pro-missions association of Baptist churches. The organizational meeting for the proposed association was initially to be held Thursday, March 2, 1843, at Leon County's Indian Spring [sic] Baptist Church.

Following the October meeting, Lang, in addition to contacting the several dozen churches along the Florida-Georgia border sent a letter, dated November 26, 1842, to the Georgia *Christian Index*. In the February 3, 1843,

issue, the Georgia news journal published Lang's original letter and a second Lang letter about the planned organization of a new association. The second letter also noted that several Georgia Baptist pastors had offered to help organize the association and Lang went on to express the hope that "our brethren that have promised will remember their promises." Subsequently, there was only one out-of-state pastor present at the organization. He was 76-year old Edmund Talbot of Columbia, Henry County, Alabama.

For no publicly announced reason the location of the planned first annual meeting was changed. Only a brief published notice by Editor Joseph S. Baker in the October 6, 1843, issue of *The Christian Index*, with the headline "Florida Association," announced the **first official annual meeting of the Florida Association being scheduled. It would be held in Jefferson County, near Monticello, in the Ebenezer Baptist Church on October 14 – 17, 1843.**

Seventeen churches were represented at the association's inaugural meeting held at the Ebenezer Church, including delegates from the ten churches that participated in the March organizational meeting. The ten founding churches, grouped by county, and the year of their organization were: Gadsden County church Hebron (1833); Jefferson County churches Ebenezer (1828), Elizabeth (ca. 1828-34), and Monticello (1841); Leon County churches Aeon (1842), Indian Spring [sic] (1829) and Shilo [sic] (1840); Madison County churches Hickstown (1835) and Concord (1841); and Nassau County church Sharon (1841). **[There were several extant churches that had been established in Florida as early as 1821 that did not send representatives to the organizational meeting.]**

The seven churches received into the Florida Association during the 1843 first annual meeting included five from Florida and two located in Georgia: Ocilla Church, Bethpage Church near Monticello, and the Hopewell Church, all in Jefferson County; Apalachicola Church, Franklin County; Providence Church, Gadsden County; as well as the Liberty Church, Thomas County, Georgia, and the Little River Church (later called Troupville), Lowndes County, GA.

Among the pioneer pastors present were J. McCall, John S. Broome, B. S. Fuller, Samuel C. Craft, William B. Cooper, Thomas Lang, H. S. Linton, and Joshua Mercer. John Broome was elected moderator and Samuel C. Craft was appointed as clerk.



Ryan Fryer

On the final day of the first annual meeting, the association voted to employ an itinerant missionary. Subsequently, **Elder Ryan Fryer** (also spelled Frier and Friar) was enlisted to minister in East Florida. Born 1800 in Bulloch County, Georgia, Fryer was ordained to the ministry February 9, 1833, by the Union Church in Lowndes County, Georgia. Despite the influences of the anti-missions Primitive Baptists upon his early life, Fryer became a Missionary Baptist of distinction. Within a year of his appointment by the Florida Association, Fryer was serving as itinerant pastor to two Columbia County churches and two Hamilton County churches. He is credited with having started several Missionary Baptist congregations in Florida, as well as starting churches in Georgia counties Lowndes and Echols.

The second itinerant missionary appointed by the association occurred during the fall 1845 meeting held at the Concord Church in Madison County. **Elder James McDonald** was employed as the missionary to East Florida. At the time, McDonald was serving as the itinerant pastor of four churches that existed along a circuit through Duval, Nassau and Columbia counties. The following year, in 1846, the association employed Georgian **Joshua Mercer**, who was the pastor of the Baptist church at Marianna, Florida, as its third "domestic missionary" to West Florida for an annual salary of \$300.

Underscoring their missionary commitment to share the gospel and start churches along the Panhandle, a special committee recommended in 1845 the need for three missionaries *each in west and east Florida*. Pastors across what was then called middle Florida were urged to set aside one month each year devoted to doing church

starting. Unfortunately, within two years, due to the lack of financial support from the churches to fund the association's missionaries' meager salaries, the domestic missionaries were relieved of their duties.

Ever the stalwart Baptist leader, plantation owner and itinerant preacher, **Richard J. Mays** served as moderator of the association in 1844, 1845 and 1847. Another man providing leadership continuity was **Samuel C. Craft** who served as the association clerk from 1843 to 1845. After an absence of several years, Craft was continually re-elected as clerk from 1849 through 1858. He served, at various times, as pastor of the Monticello, Piney Grove, Hopewell, and Shilo churches. Craft also acquired the distinction of being a colporteur – traveling purveyor of religious books and materials.

Association Secured Affiliation with the Georgia Baptist Convention

Within two years of its organization, the Florida Baptist Association sought affiliation with the Baptist Convention for the State of Georgia (organized 1822). [It would not be until 1854 before the Florida Baptist Convention would be organized.] During the association's 1845 meeting – held at the Concord Baptist Church in Madison County – a resolution was approved requesting affiliation with the Georgia Baptist Convention. Elders James McDonald, John Broome and Thomas Lang were appointed to deliver the membership request at the next annual meeting of the Georgia Convention. The church delegates (as they were then called) also supported an appeal to collect funds for domestic missions and “pay them over” to the Georgia Convention.

By this time (1845) the Florida Association had 21 cooperating churches, including the two located in Georgia. During the annual meeting an additional ten Florida churches and one Georgia church were admitted to the fellowship of the association. Those 32 churches had a combined membership of 1,333.

The membership application from the Florida Association was received during the Friday afternoon session of the May, 1846, annual meeting of the Georgia Baptist Convention. Following some discussion, the matter was postponed to the following Saturday morning so that C. D. Mallary, E. H. Beall, and J. H. Campbell could bring an amendment to the constitution which would permit membership by an out-of-state organization.

The proposed amendment stated that, “Associations and Societies located out of the State may be received into the Body, when their peculiar location, and other circumstances, may, in the judgment of this Convention, render it desirable and important.” The revision to the constitution was approved and the convention adjourned.

Later that Saturday afternoon a “protracted debate” ensued over the question of whether or not to admit the Florida Association on the basis of the now revised Georgia Convention Constitutional provision. Finally, before adjourning for the day, the delegates approved the request to admit the Florida Association as a constituent member. James McDonald, who was the only Florida representative present, was welcomed by the moderator to be seated.

Florida Association Helped Start Two Associations and a State Convention

The establishment of new churches within the interior of Florida reflected the immigration of more settlers into Florida, which became a state in 1845. By 1846 the Florida Association had nearly 40 cooperating churches that were spread across the Panhandle from Duval to Jackson counties. During its fall 1846 annual meeting, the association authorized the friendly dismissal of churches that wanted to participate in the respective organization of **two new associations: the Alachua Baptist Association and the West Florida Baptist Association**. [The brief stories of the two associations are expected to be highlighted in the next two issues of **LEGACY**.]

The Florida Association also was responsible for **fostering the establishment of the Florida Baptist Convention November 20, 1854**. The first consideration of organizing a state convention was made during the association's annual meeting on November 22, 1853, held at the Olive Baptist Church, then located in Thomas County, Georgia. A resolution was approved which called for the organization of a state Baptist convention and a committee was appointed to contact the Alachua and West Florida Associations to ascertain their interest in participating in such an organization.

A year later, during a recess of the November, 1854 annual meeting of the Florida Association, held at the Concord Church near Madison, seventeen delegates from the three associations assembled nearby in the parlor of Richard Johnson Mays' home – Clifton Manor – to organize the Florida Baptist Convention.

Missionaries and Churches

As previously noted, the association employed itinerant and part time missionaries starting in 1843 and continuing for the next one hundred years. Although this endeavor was not always continuous given the limited availability of mission funds, many of these missionaries also served as a part-time pastor of one or more churches.

It was not until 1945 when the uniquely administrative post of district missionary was established and jointly funded by the Florida Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention's then called Home Mission Board. John W. Pearce (who served 1945 – 1947) was initially assigned to serve the Florida Association and the region of West Florida. The role of the district missionary assumed responsibility for the day-to-day business of the association and to provide spiritual support to pastors and churches without a pastor.

Subsequently the association's churches gradually were able to more fully financially support their then called superintendent of missions' position which was filled by the following men: Dave O. Alderman (1947 – 1964; 1966); L. W. Woodward (1965); B.D. Locke (1967 – 1970); Leo A. Hebert (1971 – 1992); J. David Sutherland (1993 – 2010); and Sean McMahon (2011 to present).

From its initial 17 churches in 1843, the association's cooperating churches have slowly increased to a current high of 57 churches and missions. Also, the association's geographic footprint has enlarged and shrunk over the years with the formation and dissolution of other nearby associations. The current cooperating churches are located in what is called the Big Bend region, which includes Leon and Wakulla counties and portions of Franklin and Jefferson counties.



The Florida Baptist Historical Society

OF THE FLORIDA BAPTIST STATE CONVENTION

Commends the Biblical missionary commitment of the

FLORIDA BAPTIST ASSOCIATION

of cooperating churches on the occasion of its

175th ANNIVERSARY

1843 - 2018

THIS RECOGNITION IS MADE ON BEHALF OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE FLORIDA BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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DATE: OCTOBER, 2018

On November 29, 2018, the Florida Association plans to officially observe its 175th anniversary with a one-day celebration in its Tallahassee office. The Florida Baptist Association holds the distinct honor and legacy of being the longest functioning Southern Baptist-oriented association in Florida.