



LEGACY

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

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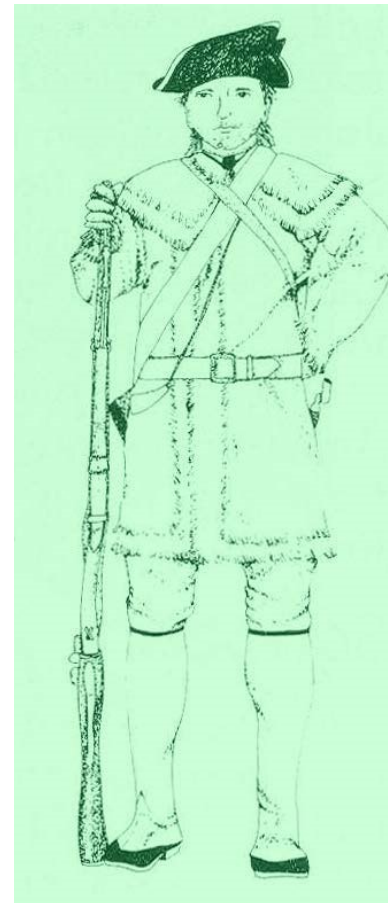
LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people and events in Florida Baptist history. During 2022, the LEGACY's monthly issues will feature Florida Baptists' missions' commitment as reflected in the people and events that inspired their fellow Baptists in the fulfilment of the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to faithfully, "go and make disciples of all nations."

The Baptist Preacher-Patriot Enters the Florida Territory

The Rev. Wilson Conner (b. 1768; d. 1844) holds the distinction of being the first known Baptist minister to enter the Florida Territory, although his purpose was not necessarily a religious endeavor. In 1811, the Georgia patriot was a part of a military expeditionary force of the Georgia militia led by General John H. McIntosh, whose secret orders were to aid in suppressing the native Indian population and create an American settlement in Spanish-controlled East Florida. According to Jack Dalton's doctoral dissertation on the history of Florida Baptists, "Being a Baptist, Conner resented the lack of religious freedom in Florida." At the time the Territory was controlled by the Spanish who "permitted only the Roman Catholic faith to be practiced. Believing that a new deal was needed," Captain Conner and his fellow East Florida Rangers managed to capture Amelia Island and established the Republic of East Florida.

To protect its political and property claims, leaders of the Republic appointed Conner to carry a petition appealing to the U.S. Secretary of State for recognition. Conner was delayed by health problems and finally sent a letter outlining the Republic's request. The request was set aside as the United States had engaged in the War of 1812 against Great Britain. Disheartened, by 1814, Conner returned to Georgia where he resumed for the next 30 years his ministry as a bi-vocational itinerant Missionary Baptist preacher. Having never again returned to Florida, Conner continued preaching throughout South and Central Georgia until June 5, 1844, when he died while preaching at the pulpit.

Those aggressive efforts of the Georgia patriots and the War of 1812 subsequently prompted the United States government to pursue efforts to take control of Florida from Spain and defend the peninsula from all other foreign invaders. In 1820 the United States purchased the Florida Territory, among other areas, controlled by Spain. As a result, the Territory became a destination for settlers from Georgia, South Carolina and Alabama who were in search of free or low-cost fertile farmlands. By 1822 organized missionary societies of Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Methodists were sending itinerant missionaries to establish mission points across the Panhandle from Jacksonville to Pensacola.



First Baptist Itinerant Preacher

Rev. Fleming Bates (b. 1771; d. 1840), an itinerant Baptist preacher from Georgia, holds the honor of being the first Baptist preacher to devote his full time to preaching in Florida. He is responsible for organizing the first Baptist church in the Territory along the Florida-Georgia border in Nassau County, the Pigeon Creek Baptist Church, on January 7, 1821. For the next 19 years Bates continued his preaching ministry in Georgia and subsequently migrated to Alachua County, Florida.

Four years after the organization of the Pigeon Creek church, in January, 1825, the second known Baptist church established was the Hephzibah Church in Gadsden County. Fourteen former members of the South Georgia Beards' Creek Church, who had migrated into North Florida, served as the nucleus of the new congregation. It was organized by William McElvey and Alabama itinerant preacher Jeremiah Kimbrell.

Both the Pigeon Creek and Hephzibah churches got drawn into the anti-missions' controversy of the 1830s, and subsequently committed their respective allegiance to the anti-missionary Primitive Baptists.

Other Missionaries Labored to Spread the Gospel

During the decades of the 1830s and 1840s, other itinerant Baptist preachers entered the Territory to proclaim the gospel and establish churches in the "middle of nowhere" where people had settled. Among the many stalwart Missionary Baptist missionaries who ministered in Florida prior to the organization of a State Convention in 1854 were: John Tucker, James McDonald, David P. Everett, Herman Mercer, Joshua Mercer, Stephen Rowe, William B. Cooper, Samuel C. Craft, W. W. Maund, D. G. Daniel, Thomas Muse, J. D. Taylor, A. B. Campbell, Kinsey Chambers, Lewis Price, G. D. Campbell, Ryan Frier, Richard J. Mays, Thomas J. Bowen and Dr. J. S. Baker. These men preached God's Word to the religiously devout, evangelized spiritually lost settlers and established churches.

In 1825, in what became two historically significant churches, were organized in the Florida Panhandle in what was then known as Middle Florida. One of those new churches was initially called the Bethlehem Baptist Church. It was organized by Jeremiah Kimbrell and farmer and bi-vocational founding pastor Elijah H. Callaway.

Established near Marianna, in Jackson County, the church was chartered on March 12, 1825. This congregation, as committed Missionary Baptists, later change its name to Campbellton Baptist Church. Just four months later, across the county near Grand

Ridge, another church was organized and named Sardis Baptist Church. Both churches hold the unique distinction of continuing to function for 197 years to the present day and are among the oldest Florida Baptist congregations.



Growing Missions' Awareness among Laity

God, in His own time, awakened the missions' awareness of Baptist men and women to become concerned with spreading the message of Jesus Christ to other parts of Florida and beyond. Initially, women in local churches responded to the Great Commission by organizing mission societies and raising money to contribute to the missionary effort within Florida.

By 1850, what has been determined to be first Female Missionary Society was functioning in the Bethlehem (Campbellton) Church. In that year, the Society sent a letter and \$24.20 [\$862.35 in 2022 dollars] to the West Florida Baptist Association requesting the funds be used for missionary purposes. In 1852 the Association's Annual Minutes noted the Bethlehem's Female Missionary Society to be "prospering and eminently useful in aiding the support of the ministry." Those funds were used to support an association-appointed itinerant missionary to minister in the western half of the Panhandle. Within a short time, similar societies were organized in the Baptist churches at Orange Hill, Paran, Hickory Grove, Shiloh, Saluda, Eliam, Beulah, and Peniel.

The women who became involved in these missionary societies undoubtedly, "talked of their Kingdom responsibilities and their desire to do something to spread the good news of salvation," wrote Lelia Boring Lassiter in her history of Florida's Woman's Missionary Union. "They prayed and perhaps sewed and discussed ways of securing money for missions since these are the things the woman did in the days before there were formal plans for a missionary organization."

A Statewide Missions' Vision Developed

Prior to the organization of the Florida Baptist State Convention in 1854, the missionary work done in Florida was fostered by associational missionary societies in Alabama and Georgia. Subsequently, with the formation of Florida's earliest Baptist associations – particularly the Florida (1843), Alachua (1847), and West Florida (1847) – funds were raised from their respective cooperating churches and their female missionary societies to underwrite the ministry of associational itinerant missionaries.



It was not until years after the Civil War that Florida Baptists attending the annual State Convention meeting began to consider how they could help churches evangelize the state. During each annual meeting three separate offerings were taken to support foreign, home and state missions. An example of the sacrifice some persons made, occurred in 1875 when a pair of socks, knitted by a hard-working Baptist woman who had nothing else to give, was sold for \$1.25 [\$31.58 in 2022 dollars] and the money given for state missions. In the 1881 annual meeting,

mission gifts were received from 12 women, several church Ladies Mission Societies, and even one children's Little Helpers mission group. "Here and there women were beginning to catch a missionary vision," wrote Mrs. Lassiter.

Lifting up the Status of Women in Missions Support

With the growing outcry for more concerted and organized missionary efforts by the State Convention, resulted in the creation of a State Board of Missions in 1880. W. N. Chaudoin (b. 1829; d. 1904), a missionary of the then named Home Mission Board, SBC, was elected as the Corresponding Secretary (director) of Florida's Missions Board.

The following year, during the 1881 annual session, Micanopy Pastor Napoleon Bailey, in his report on state missions, proposed, "to earnestly urge the importance of our sisters' organizing societies in all our churches for systematically collecting funds for missions." He went on to request the State Board of Missions, "be authorized to appoint a sister state Secretary" to undertake the organizing of Ladies Mission Societies in every church and association. In short order the State Convention directed the State Board of Missions to appoint a woman to organize and lead a statewide Ladies Missions Society. In response the Board's Corresponding Secretary Chaudoin subsequently appointed Mrs. Ann B. Hester Bailey of Micanopy as the "Sister secretary" for Woman's Mission Work.

Ann Hester Bailey Promoted Missions “For Jesus’ Sake”

During the ensuing five years (1881 – 1886) Mrs. Bailey worked diligently promoting the starting of Women’s Missionary Societies in churches and associations despite passive resistance by some women and outright opposition by some pastors. She used as her theme, “For Jesus’ sake,” to inspire and mobilize women in supporting missionary efforts. Mrs. Bailey introduced the use of mite boxes to encourage women to save their pennies as mission gifts. And she also promoted the creation of children’s mission bands which provided fun musical activities while cultivating “a missionary spirit.”

In her second report to the State Convention meeting Mrs. Bailey reflected upon the joys and challenges: “It affords me much pleasure to state that valuable and efficient aid has been received from some of our pastors. . . Much has been done in this way in removing the prejudices existing in the minds of some good brethren and sisters to this work. As these prejudices give way under the light of correct information, the natural sanctified impulses of women’s hearts lead them once in this new field of usefulness; they realize that God has honored them with a place beside their brethren in the great work of evangelizing the world.”



On September 16, 1886, Mrs. Bailey succumbed to an undisclosed illness that had plagued her during the last several years of leading the woman’s mission work. During her five years tenure, the number of organizations had increased from four women’s societies and one children’s band to 109 societies and bands. By 1886 annual mission gifts had increased to \$1,225 [\$36,222 in 2022 dollars] from the \$74 [\$2,016 in 2022 dollars] collected in 1881. “Our sainted sister, it is true, was not an ordained minister,” observed J. J. W. Place, “but, she was the ministry of love and consecration to the service of the Savior,” in a report to the 1886 annual State Convention.

This series on Florida Baptists’ Missions’ Commitment continues next month