

The Legacy of 193 Years of Upholding the Gospel

There were several Baptist churches organized in the Florida Territory as early as the 1820s, but in the course of time several of these churches closed as the congregation either migrated away or the last remaining members died and the churches ceased to exist.

However, in 1825 two churches – separated by only a few miles and a few months in their organization dates – were established in Jackson County, located in the western Panhandle of Florida. These congregations hold the honor – marking 193 years of upholding the Gospel – of being the two oldest functioning Florida Baptist churches: **Campbellton Baptist Church (established as the Bethlehem Church) and Shady Grove Baptist Church (formerly called Sardis Church).**

Campbellton Baptist Church, Jackson County, 1825

Itinerant Alabama missionary-preacher, Jeremiah Kimbrell, traveling across the Florida Panhandle in 1825, went from Gadsden County to Jackson County to assist in the organization of his third Baptist church in the Florida Territory (Florida did not become a state until 1845).

Kimbrell assisted farmer-preacher Elijah Hosea Calloway. The two ministers served as a presbytery to screen the Christian credentials of a group of settlers who wanted to form a Baptist church in the west central end of the Florida Panhandle. Located near Marianna in Jackson County, three miles south of the Alabama line, the Bethlehem Baptist Church was chartered on March 12, 1825. In 1861, the name was changed to Campbellton Baptist Church.



First Baptist Church, Campbellton

The church comprised of 19 charter members soon increased by three new members when it opened its doors for membership that March.

E. H. Calloway was called as pastor. Calloway, who was born April 19, 1789, had migrated from Georgia in 1824 with his first wife Elizabeth and their six children. After settling in North Florida, Calloway purchased a quarter section of farmland which provided his livelihood for many years. During the next eleven years the Calloways had four more children. As was typical of the times, Calloway and his neighbors gathered for prayer and Bible preaching and at some point, decided to organize a church.

The constituting group for the Bethlehem Church consisted of John and Sarah Beasley, Miller Brady, Sextus Camp, James and Lucy Chason, Ephriam and Elizabeth Chambers, Elizabeth Daniel, Clark and Susannah Jackson, Robert Louckston, Martha Parker, W. and Martha Peacock, Nancy Philips, Elizabeth Taylor, Sarah Williams and Calloway.

Sometime later the church affiliated with the Chattahoochee Baptist Association in Georgia. By 1848, the church's membership had grown to forty-six and they called itinerant preacher Joshua Mercer as pastor. This infusion of new leadership also inspired the church's commitment to missions which was evident when the Bethlehem Church became the first Baptist church in Florida to organize a woman's missionary society as early as 1848.

Today, now 193 years later, the Campbellton Church holds the singular distinction as the oldest continuously functioning Baptist church cooperating with the Florida Baptist State Convention.



Shady Grove Baptist Church,
(formerly called Sardis)

Shady Grove Baptist Church, (formerly called Sardis), Jackson County, 1825

As previously noted, four months after the formation of the Campbellton Church, the second pioneer Baptist church was organized July, 1825, in Jackson County. It was the Sardis Baptist Church, located east of the Campbellton Church, between the later established towns of Sneads and Grand Ridge. No *Minutes* of the original organization meeting are available. As a consequence, the size and circumstances for its formation and the original members are not known. The church's original records were destroyed in the 1930s in a fire at the home of church clerk J. M. Blount.

However, the present-day existence of the Sardis Cemetery with burial markers dating from the 1820s, lends credence to a specific location where the Sardis Baptist Church likely could have been established.

The *Minutes* of the West Florida Baptist Association (organized in 1847) regularly listed the Sardis Church from 1849 until 1888 when the church was granted a letter of dismissal. The Association's *Minutes* reflect that during the mid-1800s pioneer itinerant preacher Joshua Mercer served as pastor of Sardis.

As was the case of so many early churches, it may have become inactive as its members migrated elsewhere due to conflicts during the Indian wars and the Civil War. However, two or three families likely served as the remnant church members that continued to meet one Sunday of every month or two without the benefit of an itinerant pastor. Yet these faithful saints continued to study scripture and pray for the day when God would bring more people into their area to become a part of this small fellowship of Baptist believers. Tradition contends that around 1860 this faithful group of Baptists decided to relocate and re-constitute the Sardis Church with the construction of a log structure. Jesse Grantham served as pastor from 1860–66.

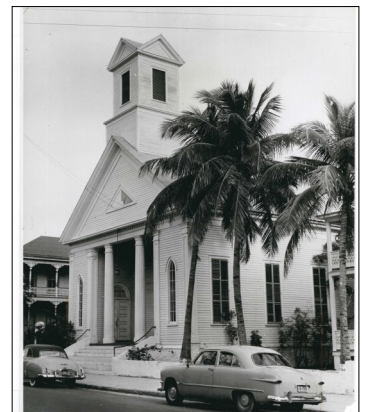
In time the log structure became badly decayed and in 1882 a new church building was constructed, only to be destroyed by fire in 1906. A frame building constructed that same year, continues to serve the church to the present day. By 1935, the church began holding two Sunday services each month. Church records indicate the Sardis Church changed its name to the Shady Grove Baptist Church on October 29, 1916. This year, the church located near Grand Ridge, could observe its 193rd anniversary.

The Legacy of Celebrating Anniversaries

This year 35 Florida Baptist churches are being recognized by the Florida Baptist Historical Society on achieving milestone anniversaries. Each year the Society honors churches that have reached 25-year, 50-year, 75-year, and 100-years or more continuously ministering on the Florida mission field. The Society's breakout of milestone years being recognized in 2018 include four churches observing 150 years, four churches observing 125 years, and five celebrating 100-years of ministry. In addition, two churches will mark 175- years of continuously functioning as Florida Baptist churches: **Providence Baptist Church, Quincy and White Street Baptist Church (formerly First Baptist), Key West.**

White Street Baptist Church (formerly First Baptist Church), Key West

Connecticut sea captain Charles C. Lewis, who surrendered to the call of the ministry, went door to door in Key West to share the gospel and led a number of people to make professions of faith. That resulted in a baptism service being held on Sunday, Christmas Day, 1842. Soon thereafter this small group of new Christians organized the Key West Baptist Church March 11, 1843.



White Street Baptist Church
(formerly First Baptist
Church), Key West

G. G. Tripp became the Key West church's pastor in November 1843, and the following year he organized one of the earliest Sunday schools in Florida. Unfortunately, Tripp was unable to raise funds to support the church and abandoned the work. The scattered Key West flock, consisting of Anglos and African-descendants, continued to hold prayer meetings each week and heard preaching by Austin Smith, a slave who had earlier been licensed and ordained to preach by Charles C. Lewis. With the help and support of these faithful African-descendant members, the new pastor Horace Doolittle, with

about 100 members, reorganized the church's Sunday school in 1845. The contemporary descendant of the Key West church is the Hispanic White Street Baptist Church, which this year should observe its 175th anniversary since founding.



Providence Baptist Church, Quincy

Providence Baptist Church, Quincy

Providence Baptist Church, near Quincy, was constituted on September 24, 1843, by a presbytery of Joshua Mercer and Thomas Lang. Lang served as the church's first pastor by holding monthly services (on the third Saturday and Sunday) from 1843 to March, 1845. A group of 20 persons "holding letters from various Baptist churches in other sections of the country" are listed in the church records as the charter members of the Gadsden County congregation. The location of the first church building was a log school house near McCall's Grist Mill on the Little Telogia Creek.

Oral tradition and some written records support the possibility that this Gadsden County church had one of the first permanent Sunday schools in Florida. Soon after organizing in 1843 the church reported an "evergreen" Sabbath (Sunday) school to be prospering.

Pictured is the church's current sanctuary that continues to serve the congregation which observes its 175th anniversary this year. The church is located in Gadsden County approximately 12 miles south of Quincy.

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 Convention.

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