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**Florida Baptists and the  
Orange Fever  
(1852-1905)**

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## Florida Baptists and the Orange Fever (1852-1905)

There is a trace of Florida Baptist bravado that has as much commercial as religious appeal. A published claim has been made that the famous Mays family that came to Florida from South Carolina in the early 1800's "set out during the Civil War, the first orange plantation" in Florida.<sup>1</sup>

The influence of the Mays family is not in question. Richard Johnson Mays (1808-1864) was born in Edgefield, South Carolina, and migrated to Florida about 1830. He and his brother Rhydon became very influential in Madison County, Florida. Richard Johnson Mays developed a plantation by 1860 that covered 5,480 acres and he had 120 slaves.<sup>2</sup> His brother Rhydon Grigsby Mays (1801-1878) had a plantation of 1,516 acres with 82 slaves.

Richard and Rhydon Mays were very much involved in the commercial and civic development of Madison County. In 1838, Richard served as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention that resulted in the Florida Territory becoming a state in 1845.<sup>3</sup> Rhydon Mays became one of the largest cotton producers in the north Florida region and in 1852 he moved to Putnam County, Florida, to grow oranges. The Mays grove at Orange Mills is thought to be the oldest orange grove in the state. The grove was actually planted by Zephaniah Kingsley in 1824, but the three or four acre grove became known as the Mays grove after Rhydon moved to Orange Mills in 1851.<sup>4</sup>



Richard Johnson  
Mays

Richard Johnson Mays served as planter, preacher, postmaster and justice of the peace in the Madison County area. His spiritual commitment and Baptist convictions also led to his being one of the seventeen delegates who organized the Florida Baptist State Convention in 1854 at Clifton Mansion near Madison, Florida.

Rhydon Grigsby Mays was a planter and physician. He was one of the 69 delegates that assembled in Tallahassee in 1861 as a member of the Secession Convention. Sixty-two of those delegates voted for Florida to secede from the Union and the future of Rhydon Mays was cast.<sup>5</sup> Rhydon and his wife, Sara Butler Smith Mays, lost their wealth, influence and son-in-law, George William Call, to the Confederate cause. Call served in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Florida Regiment and was killed in the Battle of Seven Pines.<sup>6</sup>

John Francis Tenney in *Slavery Secession and Success* recalls a solemn occurrence when he, while residing at Orange Mills, witnessed a sad occasion. "One cold, dark,



Rhydon Grigsby  
Mays

rainy night a steamer blew for the landing, and as we were living not far away we lit our lantern and went to take her lines as she tied up. She landed Dr. R.G. Mays and wife, an aged couple, who were coming home for the first time after the close of the war. Their house stood about one-half mile from the landing and to reach it they had to cross a foot bridge through a small swamp. Their house had been shelled by a Union gunboat during the war and robbed of nearly all its furniture. They were formerly wealthy people, owning many slaves and a large cotton plantation, besides an interest in the big saw-mill that lay in ashes. The night was dark, cold and stormy, as I have written. We gave them our lantern and saw them start through the gloom unattended, with feelings too deep to be written in cold type.”<sup>7</sup>

Richard Johnson Mays became the first president of the Florida Baptist Convention in 1854. His political, economic and religious connections made him an abiding influence in Madison County and in the whole north Florida area. Mays is known as the father of the Florida Baptist Convention, but also is known as one who had great influence over other Baptists who came into the new state.

Another early Baptist arrival was William Johnson who moved to Florida in 1854. Johnson was born January 9, 1803, in Barnwell District, South Carolina. His father was William Johnson, brother of Col. Richard M. Johnson, of Kentucky, who reputedly killed Tecumseh. After the rewards of providence, industry and a good estate in South Carolina he moved to Florida in 1854. However he lost nearly all he had in the Civil War. Johnson had been converted in 1829 and immersed by Rev. Prescot Bush. In 1835, he was ordained as a Baptist preacher and when he moved to Florida he served as pastor of churches in the Santa Fe River and Alachua Baptist associations. He served as pastor at Pleasant Grove, Wacahoota, Micanopy, Eliam, Paran, Providence and Ocwilla. He survived the war with only his land intact, but he planted an orange grove. By 1881 his property was considered worth thousands of dollars and he was able to make a living from the groves.<sup>8</sup>

Baptist preachers began to hear of Florida through their state denominational papers, word of mouth, and planned promotions. One of the most effective Florida promoters was Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896). Mrs. Stowe came to Mandarin in 1867 upon hearing of the possibility of mission work, health and prosperity all wrapped up in one package. Mandarin was named in 1830 after the Mandarin orange and was located fifteen miles from downtown Jacksonville on the St. Johns River. Harriet Beecher Stowe bought six acres at Mandarin and lived there for seventeen years. She wrote friends and family about the wonderful climate, breezes, and potential for profit in the orange business. Her book *Palmetto-Leaves* was published in 1873 and is a 321 page promotion of Florida, citrus and the Christian cause. Harriet Elizabeth Beecher Stowe was born in 1811 in Litchfield,



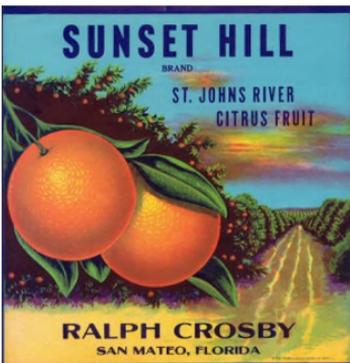
Harriet Beecher  
Stowe

Connecticut. Her father was Lyman Beecher, a Presbyterian preacher, and Harriet had five brothers who also became ministers. The family was bent toward theology, missions and controversy. In 1836, Harriet married, a young minister, Calvin Ellis Stowe. Calvin was a good writer, Greek and Hebrew scholar but a poor provider. This particular failure was eventually remedied after Harriet published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852.



Stowe home at Mandarin, Florida

After the Civil War Harriet became personally invested in Florida. She had heard of the warm weather and the mission opportunities and now she had money to invest. In 1866, she established her wayward son Frederick at "Laurel Grove" a plantation on the west side of the St. Johns River near Orange Park. Harriet invested \$10,000.00 to rent the cotton plantation and employ Frederick. The investment was also to provide much needed employment for freed slaves. The plantation had one time covered over 10,000 acres and had been very valuable in its production of sugarcane and cotton. The great frost of 1835 had killed the sugarcane and only cotton remained. Harriet and Frederick hoped to profit thousands of dollars from cotton production, but Harriet said the Army Worm came and we lost all we invested.<sup>9</sup> Time spent in Florida showed Harriet the possibility of a winter residence and the opportunity of church planting. She wanted to establish a line of churches up and down the St. Johns River. In 1867, Harriet purchased thirty acres in Mandarin on a bluff overlooking the St. Johns River. Mandarin was incorporated in 1841 and became a part of Jacksonville in a 1968 Duval County consolidation. She wrote her clergy brother Charles and asked him to consent to enter the Episcopal Church and be her clergyman at Mandarin. Harriett had embraced the Episcopal faith in 1849 after the death of her infant son Charley. Charles refused but did decide to move to Florida and settled on the St. Marks River at Newport twenty miles from Tallahassee. By 1899, Harriet had persuaded other family members



to move to Florida, and she was shipping oranges back north in orange boxes stenciled, "Oranges from Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mandarin, Florida."<sup>10</sup>

One brother was late in arriving. Henry Ward Beecher of great Congregational fame purchased a few acres near Harriet and hired someone to set out an orange grove for him. Clifford E. Clark in his book *Henry Ward Beecher: Spokesman for a Middle-Class America* points out that Henry wanted his wife Eunice to go to

Florida for the winter months to improve her health. However his dramatic involvement with a family in his church brought about charges and a court battle that was not settled until much later.<sup>11</sup> In 1876, Poet Sidney Lanier (1842-1881) noted the home, community and orange groves of Mrs. Stowe in his *Florida. Its Scenery, Climate and History*. Mandarin was now becoming well known because of the promotions of Stowe and Lanier.

By 1870, informed Baptists were beginning to hear more and more about the wonderful potential of Florida. Harriet Beecher Stowe purchased a house, five or six acres of land, and 125 orange trees for \$6,500.00. Within a very few years with a few improvements to house and land, the Stowe property was predicted to be worth \$20,000.00.<sup>12</sup> The climate, potential for profit and warm weather were too much for some Baptists to resist.

Putnam Peter Bishop (1823-1896) was one of those who succumbed to temptation. His interests in Florida varied, but all of them were legitimate. Bishop lived in snow country, he had poor health, he was called to preach, and he was mission minded.

Reverend Putnam Peter Bishop was born in Panton, Vermont, on March 2, 1823. He studied law, was admitted to the bar, and opened a practice in St. Paul, Minnesota. He sensed a call to preach and attended the Theological Seminary in Hamilton, New York. He was ordained in 1858 and became pastor of First Baptist Church in Auburn, New York, in 1861. Bishop desired to enlist in the Civil War but his health prevented him from entering military service. Bishop was advised to move to a warmer climate and was assigned by the American Baptist Home Missionary Society to serve in Jacksonville in 1870. Bishop established the first school in Florida for black preachers and in 1872 founded the settlement of San Mateo on the St. Johns River between Jacksonville and Palatka.<sup>13</sup>

Bishop became known as “the crazy orange preacher” because of his promotion of orange groves in the sunshine state. James A. Harris nicknamed Bishop and also sold him 200 acres of wild orange trees near Citra. Harris and Bishop helped develop a railroad spur between Hawthorne and Citra and in 1880 the first train arrived in Citra. They were now ready for the shipment of citrus to markets in the state and elsewhere. Bishop is credited with “being the first to put into practice the idea of budding wild orange trees and converting them into groves.”<sup>14</sup> Bishop served as pastor of First Baptist Church, Ocala, in 1873 and was the first president of the Florida Fruit Growers Association in 1874. In 1877, he served in the Florida House of Representatives and was an original trustee at the formation of Deland College, now Stetson University. At age seventy Bishop had the terrible misfortune of losing his entire fortune in a single night in the tragic freeze of 1894. He died two years later.<sup>15</sup>

Harriet Beecher Stowe and Sidney



Lanier turned up the heat for oranges in 1876, but other promoters were not far behind. J.O. Matthews in 1876 carried the water for a “pleasant winter resort” in Marion County. The tract of land he promoted had 160 acres on Orange Lake and he promised thousands of producing trees. There would be a 156 acre orange grove with 100 trees per acre. The grove was to be a joint stock company with 156 shares at \$200.00 per share. It was promised that the shares would increase at the rate of 100 percent per year. Testimonies were published in his brochure and Matthews stated, “This enterprise is especially adapted to those who desire to have orange groves in Florida, but find it inconvenient to break up business at home and go to Florida and wait for the orange trees to bear fruit.”<sup>16</sup> If there were some doubting Thomases out in the reading



Sidney Lanier

audience, Matthews added that Rev. J.F. Young, a Bishop of the Episcopal Church, was one of the company trustees.

Lacy William Simmons (1844-1932) was one of the first out of state Civil War veterans to become a Baptist preacher and get the orange fever. Simmons was born March 6, 1844, in Thomas County, Georgia, and served in the Georgia 54<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in the Confederate Army. He was discharged on May 2, 1865, at Greensboro, North Carolina, and left for Florida 48 days later. He moved to Plant City and was a Baptist pastor, citrus grower and director of the Bradentown Citrus

Exchange. Simmons served as pastor of Good Hope at Hudson, Tarpon Springs, Calvary, Clearwater (present day Calvary Baptist Church), and First Baptist, Bradentown.<sup>17</sup>

Edwin Hansford Rennolds, Sr. (1839-1912) was another Civil War veteran who became a Baptist preacher and headed to Florida. Rennolds fought in the 5<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry, Company K, and saw action in most of the major battles of the war. There were 1,300 men who served in the Tennessee 5<sup>th</sup>, but only thirty men were left on April 24, 1865, when the regiment surrendered. Rennolds never earned over \$220.00 a year in his whole life. He saw Florida citrus as the answer to his financial needs, so he and his family boarded the train and headed to Florida. Sadly, the 1894-1895 freezes ended that dream completely. The major freezes of 1894-1895 changed Florida drastically. In 1881, Hamilton Disston, the Philadelphia saw industrialist, had purchased four million acres of land in Florida for 25 cents per acre. But after the freezes of 1894-1895 land was cheaper than that. People simply walked away from their land. Newly arrived Rennolds preached in a number of Baptist churches in Florida and was pastor of two. He served as pastor of Bethany in Nassau County and later at Macedonia (later Dinsmore). Rennolds was the first director of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, a statewide historical society that in 2016 serves one million Florida Baptists in 3,000 churches and missions. Rennolds also served as chaplain in the Florida Senate and that was the work he enjoyed most in his life.<sup>18</sup>

In 1885, Reverend E. H. Hayden wrote a letter to the *Florida Baptist Witness* newspaper and stated he was living in South Clemsford, Massachusetts, but “think very often of the warm, balmy air and green groves of Florida.” Reverend Hayden went so far as to say, “By and by I hope to be again among my brethren at the South.”<sup>19</sup>

In 1885, A.M. Manning, pastor of Centerville Baptist Church in Leon County, reported that our church is “very weak,” our coldest day was February 11<sup>th</sup>, “but young buds and bloom buds on orange trees, were not killed.”<sup>20</sup>

Florida Baptist preachers mixed citrus and religion in their prayers, reports and correspondence. Orange groves may not have been a panacea but they were a dream worth pursuing. One of the most notable experiments of faith and fruit would have to have been the “Philadelphia Orange Grove” effort of 1885. This project was under the direction of G.J. Johnson D.D., a resident of Philadelphia, and later pastor of Ancient City Baptist Church in Saint Augustine. The project had 400 shares, sold at \$100.00 each. The President was Judge Newman, a lawyer from Iowa. The secretary was a pastor in New Jersey. The treasurer was S.V. Marsh, a New York and Florida Baptist pastor. The largest stock holder was a lawyer who had 40 shares. The next was a woman who had 30 shares. Two foreign missionaries had seven shares. All of the stock holders were “professed Christians” and all were Baptists but two. The project was chartered as “The Florida Orange Grove Company.” The first tree was planted January 18, 1884, and the last tree was planted May 6, 1885. The grove was owned by 55 stock holders and five of them lived in Florida. Forty of the stock holders were Baptist pastors and they lived in 14 states, Europe and Asia.<sup>21</sup> The early days of this endeavor were promising but the 1894-1895 freezes closed the door on that grand effort.

In *Webb's Florida*, it is reported that Dr. E. Leroy Jones, a physician of Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, moved to Fernandina, Florida, in 1883 due to an acute attack of “orange fever.” He became the owner of an orange grove in Starke comprising six acres with 400 trees.<sup>22</sup> Therefore we can safely say that it is a documented fact that doctors, lawyers and preachers were subject to “orange fever” attacks. Dr. W.N. Chaudoin and his wife Carrie, were the heart and soul of the Florida Baptist Convention from 1880-1905. When Dr. Chaudoin died Aunt Carrie was left old, feeble and “no income except from a small and inferior orange grove.” The orange fever for preachers had finally run its course.<sup>23</sup>

The outcome of experiments, investments and risks in the Florida orange growing business varied from person to person. However one thing is perfectly clear. After the impact freezes of 1894 and 1895 the Florida Citrus landscape was changed forever and Florida Baptist preachers learned a lesson. Their investments, income, savings and retirement did not depend upon production or the weather. Their wellbeing depended





upon the one who had called them to service and sustained them day by day.

#### Endnotes

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