

Florida Baptist Historical Society  
**MONOGRAPH**

May, 1984

**James McDonald:  
Missionary To East Florida**

By  
James C. Bryant  
Professor, Florida State University  
(b. 1931; d. 2008)

An Address to the  
Florida Baptist Historical Society

Stetson University  
Deland, Florida

May 5, 1984



Published by the  
Florida Baptist Historical Society  
Graceville, Florida

Copyright 1984. All rights reserved.

James McDonald: MISSIONARY TO EAST FLORIDA

by

James C. Bryant

Professor of English

Mercer University Atlanta

James McDonald went to East Florida Territory as a missionary in 1837. By that time the Second Seminole Indian War had broken out with sporadic violence all over the territory. Indian agent General Wiley Thompson had set January 1, 1836, as the date for all Seminoles to leave Florida for the “Indian lands” out West. But three days before the deadline, an Indian party murdered and scalped General Thompson just outside the walls of the stockade where he had gone after dinner for a stroll. And before the day ended, Major Francis Langhorne Dade and 103 of his men lay dead from a Seminole ambush near Wahoo Swamp. Only three soldiers escaped.

President Andrew Jackson ordered General Winfield Scott to take command in Florida, while the war department dispatched fourteen companies to assist General Duncan L. Clinch. Consequently the Florida into which James McDonald rode differed greatly from what he must have expected. The moral relaxation that inevitably follows military establishments and insecurity and fear with which the frontier settlers lived would not discourage McDonald, however. Instead it would intensify his sense of commitment and calling to preach the gospel without counting the cost. In doing so, he would carry a musket by night and a Bible by day.

The thirty-nine-year-old bachelor who spoke with an Irish accent had left a successful pastorate in Darien, Georgia, where the black members far outnumbered the white, and he had responded to what he considered a Macedonian call to come over and help the destitute in Florida. Having labored as a missionary in Georgia associations, including most recently the Sunbury Baptist Association, and earlier having preached in several Georgia churches and taught school in Burke County, he had known more peaceful times and seen more evidence of success for his labor than he would realize in East Florida. But refusing to count the cost, as he put it, he followed the direction of divine providence and headed south.

Six months earlier, McDonald had read in *The Christian Index*<sup>1</sup> the words of Edwin Hart, a Baptist layman in Middle Florida, appealing to preachers for aid in the infant Baptist movement.

If there is any country in these United States that stands in need of preaching, it is Florida. We are all most destitute of preachers .... I solicit your aid and influence with the General Convention that they would turn their attention in some degree to Florida instead of those wild savages who are daily spilling the blood of our fellow-citizens.<sup>2</sup>

In a series of articles published in *The Christian Index* under the head “Traveling Preacher”, which he sometimes signed as “Silas”, McDonald chronicled his movements, interlacing them with relevant Scriptural verses. He described his first trip to East Florida in April 1837 while still a missionary of the Sunbury Baptist Association in Georgia.

Early in Monday morning, after prayer and recommitment of himself to God, McDonald began the journey from Darien. Using the editorial “we”, he wrote, “We were bound for a strange land and wavered not to deem our faith too small.” He stopped at the Altamaha River to preach and also at the

Satilla. “Leisurely did we ride along the rude wiregrass,” he wrote, “now and then miring our horse to the knees.”

On Saturday afternoon, McDonald crossed the St. Marys River and entered East Florida. Somewhere on the south bank he entered a huge barn and used it as a meeting house in which to preach a three-day protracted meeting. Apparently the people in that region had not seen a visiting minister in a long time, judging from McDonald’s description.

Some had not heard the gospel in years; others, never. On Sabbath, all cried for prayer. The throng was mighty and immense. Sobs and groans thrilled, and tears of penitence made us happy. Such a three-days meeting we had never witnessed. Day and night the power and glory of God overshadowed us.<sup>3</sup>

Itinerant preachers depended upon volunteers among the congregation to house and feed them while performing ministerial labor. But his diplomatic way of explaining why he did not stay beyond three-day protracted meeting may suggest hardship and poverty among those to whom he preached. “The citizens lately settled in Nassau (County) had no time to procure provisions,” he wrote. “In consequence therefore of their scarcity, we were obliged to return to St. Illa.” No doubt the poverty impressed him. He more than once expressed compassion for poor people among the settlers. Once he described entering a small frontier house which had been offered for his entertainment overnight.

Entering a small house we got the experience of a man and his wife .... Very poor, they had but one room and one bed. This they gave us. We slept easy, and were happy – happy because we loved them for the sake of Christ. In the morning the mother took her chair, called for her elder child who was seven years old ... Reading the Bible she thought we could not see her piety. But we did.<sup>4</sup>

Retracing his path, the missionary returned home to Darien, where he baptized thirty more black converts, making a total of sixty-four since the year began. “Many of these poor Africans have I seen and heard telling about Jesus Christ,” he wrote, “Until my soul has been bathed in tears of gratitude and love. Four hundred of them stood on the east bank of Altamaha as I took those thirty into the water and baptized them.”<sup>5</sup>

During the summer of 1837 McDonald made a second mission to East Florida, preaching at five stations along the way. This time, however, he rode on to Jacksonville, where he preached a two-day protracted meeting. Large congregations, he wrote, were “orderly and attentive.” Among those who turned out to hear him preach were some of the soldiers who had been brought to Florida to fight the Indians. McDonald, to his apparent surprise, found the soldiers “very respectful.” Then when he prepared to leave Jacksonville, nearly a hundred white and black people asked for prayer and invited him to return in October.<sup>6</sup>

That visit to the small town of Jacksonville, which seven years earlier had numbered but a hundred citizens,<sup>7</sup> must have convinced him to resign his pastorate at Darien and as a missionary of the Sunbury Association and take up residence in East Florida as a missionary preacher. His initial visit to that Florida town gave him opportunity to see the best and the worst. The best was represented by the beautiful St. Johns River, which he described at length.<sup>8</sup>

If the natural scenery and its signal of hope for the future represented the best of things, McDonald's first description of a victim of the Indian War signals worse times to follow.

Saw Mrs. Johns, who was scalped by the Indians, and whose husband was killed. Her head was still hurtful; she appeared well resigned, and had a wish to be baptized only for "her unworthiness." Her husband was killed and burned to ashes; she escaped with her own life by crawling on her feet and hands, the blood of her wounded head quenching the fire which otherwise would have consumed her.<sup>9</sup>

Having returned home one last time, McDonald bade a tearful farewell to his congregation in Darien and then moved on to East Florida to settle in Nassau County. Nassau County had been created in 1824 with Fernandina as its seat, but by the time McDonald arrived the seat had been moved to a community known as Court House Ditch at Waterman's Grant, between King's Ferry and Fernandina.

In his report dated March 31, 1838, McDonald described something of the state of religion in the new mission field.

And what is the condition of these persons among whom it is my lot to spend and be spent? Here are nineteen extensive counties, and perhaps, seventy thousand people. If in Florida there has ever been a real revival of religion I do not know it; and if there is on the peninsula one intelligent Baptist minister, I do not know it .... May the God of Heaven end this unfortunate warfare and invite to this genial climate and these fertile lands the faithful of every nation.<sup>10</sup>

Later, on the basis of more experience and better information, he described the religious situation more factually.

In 1837 when our first sermon was preached in East Florida, we found about 60 whites and blacks in three churches, from 20 to 80 miles distant from each other .... The Indian War was in progress. ... It seemed as though the phials of Divine wrath were unsealed and emptied on the people of Florida.<sup>11</sup>

McDonald was not alone in lamenting the unsettling effect of war and the moral decline which accompanied the military. Methodist circuit rider John L. Jerry described similar conditions in Middle Florida in a letter dated August 29, 1838.

Eleven years ago I formed this mission (Monticello, Florida). Nassau and St. Augustine (Methodist missions) have since been taken from it. Four years ago I travelled it again. We then had four temperance societies, numbering three hundred members, and not one grog shop in Hamilton or Columbia counties. Religion flourished, and peace and harmony prevailed; but her glory is departed. Our temperance officers are now the first to take the bottle, and our grey-headed Methodists and Baptists drunk, drunk, wallowing in their filth! Whiskey shops are scattered over our once happy land! Go to the different military posts and your ears are saluted with the horrid yells of drunken men, and others are gambling from morning till night .... The country seems to be in consternation. Some are moving away, some going into fort, and some making forts of their houses .... But

notwithstanding all these difficulties, I believe the most of us feel like standing at our post.<sup>12</sup>

Years later McDonald recorded his initial impression of the conditions he found when he began his work as a missionary preacher in East Florida.

Houses were burned to ashes; plantations were abandoned; and hundreds of men, women, and children were murdered by the merciless savages. Every species of wickedness followed in the train of our own army. Moral depravity, a common appendage of the camp, sought no disguise.<sup>13</sup>

McDonald wrote that before the war commenced in East Florida there were but two Baptist houses of worship. Although he does not name them, other sources reveal that while preaching and organized worship occurred earlier, the first Baptist church established in Florida was Pigeon Creek Baptist Church in Nassau County, near what is now Callahan. It was organized on January 1821, by Isham Peacock and Fleming Bates, with twelve members, including Bates, who became its first pastor. Pigeon Creek was received into the Piedmont Baptist Association on October 13, 1821.<sup>14</sup>

In Nassau County, McDonald wrote in 1838, we have “the prospect of three new meeting houses. Our people are generally poor, but very kind and attentive to the Gospel.”<sup>15</sup>

By the fall of 1838, McDonald had lived a year in East Florida and had grown accustomed to the hard life of a frontier missionary, traveling from one preaching station to another. On November 5, 1838, he described something of the background against which he traveled.

Dreary indeed and bleak is this part of nature’s workmanship. – Swamps, glades, and pine ridges vie for ascendancy; but swamps have the triumph .... The Indians have hiding places everywhere .... Minorcans and refugees have left a deplorable state of morals ...<sup>16</sup>

But that tells only part of the story, because despite the gloom, McDonald has reason to rejoice, as he explained.

Even now a moral death gloom overspreads the land. Our faith has been tried. Like culturing the marble had been much of our preaching. But there is a cloud which overhands the sullen sky. Three new churches have been dedicated to our use, and two more are in prospect.<sup>17</sup>

Although McDonald did not name the three churches that had been dedicated during 1838, other records show that one of them was Bethel Baptist Church near Jacksonville. James McDonald and Ryan Frier are said to have served as officiating ministers and constituted the Bethel Baptist Church of Jacksonville in July, 1838. There were six charter members.<sup>18</sup>

Early in February, 1839, McDonald described a preaching tour to Newnansville, the seat of Alachua County at the time.

This is rare traveling for a Baptist preacher. Started at daybreak for Newnansville. Three of the brethren were with me. Each of us had a firelock and

magazine of powder and lead. Our course lay over the Indian gangway, between Alachua and Oakafanoke (Okefenokee Swamp). Went 28 miles without seeing a house or a human being. We took a close survey of every living thing, thinking Indians were in the route.

Arrived at Lieut. Affa's military station. Asked for a house to preach in to the villagers, but could get none. Immediately a poor sister, whose husband had been murdered by the Indians, hearing us came and offered us her cabin to preach in, which we accepted.

The situation of the poor people at the place, having fled from the savages, drew many a tear from us. The meeting with them was well attended and much excitement prevailed. God giving preserved our lives, brought us 50 miles that day, and granting us joy in his house of prayer that night, our hearts glowed with gratitude, and we never slept until we praised his Blessed Name for his manifold mercies.

At Newnansville, we preached in company with four Methodist ministers and one Baptist minister, four days and nights in great peace and quietness ....

On our return, preached again at Fort Harley. We tried to preach on "Mercy and Judgment," whilst we endeavored to console the afflicted widow mentioned above in the funeral sermon of her deceased husband. It is impossible to listen to the tales of widows, children, and relatives of murdered victims in the Seminole War without feelings of the deepest sorrow and the most painful regret.

One says, "When they killed my husband, he was ploughing in the field, making bread for my poor children. I went to him when I thought the savages were gone and found him and my brother both dead and in their blood. We were then doing pretty well, but now I have six children to support who are without a father."

An old man who was 90 years of age, a member of the Baptist church, and an example of great piety, was murdered by the Indians. He was living with his daughter and helpless from sickness and old age .... One morning about 7 or 8 o'clock the Indians were seen near the house by the daughter. She had a number of young children. The Indians approached fearfully. What must I do? Said she. Shall I leave my poor father to be massacred? Shall I stay and die myself and my little children with him? If I stay we will all be murdered. I must then save my children – I will run. My father is near the grave; at all events he can't live long if they do not kill him. The old man lay on his bed; his daughter and her children were fled; he was all alone. In came the savages. They sat him up on his couch, covered his face with a cloth, and shot him through the head!...

Florida has been chastised as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke. It is said that 600 persons have been killed in battle and murdered at home and on the highway during the war, and that six or seven hundred have lost their lives by exposure and trouble of mind ...

I never felt more grateful to God for his great mercy than at present! For the last 13 months I have been almost among the Indians, striving to preach the gospel; and in

traveling from place to place have been mostly alone; but the Lord has always accompanied me ....<sup>19</sup>

In his writing, McDonald occasionally alluded to some events in his early background which he nowhere explains. One example appeared as a denial of self-interest in maintaining an attachment to Andrew Fuller's doctrines.

He [God] deserves more from me than perhaps from any other Christian in this country. He rescued my soul from popery; from civil oppression in Ireland; from the grave, from sin, from the pit; has given me to see 34 revivals of religion, and has added seals to my ministry; and in sickness and persecution and fiery trials of the most appalling kind, has healed, delivered, and given me to rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.<sup>20</sup>

Actually McDonald must have given his personal testimony before congregations on a number of occasions, because years later a ministerial colleague of long standing put into print some of McDonald's background. According to Charles Harden Stillwell<sup>21</sup>, a successor to McDonald's pastorate in Monticello, Georgia, and whose wife McDonald had baptized while pastor at Monticello, James McDonald was born in 1798 in Limerick County, Province of Munster, Ireland. Although of Scotch-Irish descent, he, like others known in America as Scotch-Irish, descended from Scottish ancestors who had fled or had been transported to Ireland for religious or political reasons. Scotch-Irish, of course, does not imply Irish ancestry.

"I was bred a Papist," McDonald wrote, "was exceedingly wicked in my youth; spurned the Bible [teachings of right and wrong]; quenched the Spirit eleven years from the date of my conviction when 17 years of age; became, if possible, a deist, and almost an atheist; and since my conversion and call to the Gospel ministry, I have suffered persecution enough ...."<sup>22</sup>

Based on these statements and referring to C. H. Stillwell's recollection over many years, part of the mystery can be explained. After having gotten into some kind of trouble in Ireland because of his "wickedness", seventeen-year-old James McDonald emigrated to America, a confirmed Roman Catholic. But shortly after his arrival and perhaps sensing the religious freedom cherished by Americans, he felt a great urge to read the Bible for himself. But having been taught from childhood that it was forbidden for the faithful to read the English Scriptures, he suffered guilt feelings for doing so anyhow. Stillwell explains the rest in his own words.

Under the influence of his early training, this thought took the shape of a terrible temptation; and strange as it may seem in a country where religious freedom is enjoyed, the mental distress to which he became subject harassed him for ten years. His sufferings at last became intolerable, and in a fit of desperation he determined to enter the navy of some of the Central or Southern American States then at war, vainly hoping he might lose in death what he felt unable to bear in life. For that purpose he took passage for Havana.

On his voyage God was pleased to put forth the hand of his providence and direct him to the only source of relief. The captain of the vessel discovered by his looks and actions that some strange horror was preying upon him, and became suspicious that he

meditated self-destruction. Being a Christian, his sympathy for the sufferer impelled him to seek his confidence, and our brother was persuaded to impart to this kind man the cause of his distress.

Before his arrival at Havana, the captain did all he could to convince him it was not a mortal sin to read the Scriptures; this it seems he had been taught to believe, and was the cause of his trouble. He tried to lead him to Jesus Christ as the only and great High Priest of the Christian's faith, and the Saviour who alone could give him peace.

Half convinced, but still sorely troubled, he landed in Havana, and shortly after for some cause was arrested and thrown into prison. The dungeon of the Don became the Bethel of his journey. There God met him; and the door looking heavenward a light and a glory he had never seen before. Here he covenanted with God: if thou shalt deliver me hence, then will I take "thy word for the man of my counsel," and I will walk in thy ways.

He believed to the day of his death that God heard his prayer and delivered him; for mysteriously a friend appeared, and he was released. He immediately returned to the United States, made a public profession of his faith in Christ, and some short time after began to preach His gospel.<sup>23</sup>

Actually when McDonald returned to America he made his way to Georgia and spent most of his time in Jefferson, Burke, and Twiggs counties.<sup>24</sup> He lived in Twiggs County near Macon in 1829 and part of 1830, and it was in that county he was licensed to preach by the Richland Creek Baptist Church. He exercised his gift for preaching there for 13 months.<sup>25</sup> He may have read for the law and attended a private academy as well, and he taught school and pastored churches.<sup>26</sup> The Georgia Baptist Association appointed McDonald as a missionary in Burke County on January 27, 1832.<sup>27</sup>

A prospect for an end to the Seminole War appeared in spring of 1839 when General Alexander Macomb, commanding general of the army, came to Florida to take over military operations. He began by inviting chiefs to come to Fort King for a conference and offered them a reservation south of the Peace River. But the plan fell through on July 23, 1839, when a force of 160 Indians attacked the camp and killed the storekeeper.<sup>28</sup>

In a later dated August 25, 1839, McDonald referred to the general frustration on the frontier concerning a peaceful conclusion of the war.

Since the treaty of Gen. McComb [Macomb] June 9, forty-eight soldiers and citizens have been killed by the Indians. That treaty gave the savages sixty days to get ready for their departure south of the Peace River: but they are yet hostile, and every day announces the fact that Indian integrity is not as plentiful as the perfidious treason of the Seminoles.<sup>29</sup>

McDonald then expressed the sentiment of most of the fright-tented citizens who blamed the military command and the Washington bureaucracy for trusting in the integrity of savages rather than acting firmly and decisively to end the war.



Public charity and official confidence in behalf of the Florida Indians have done much in shedding human blood. If dome whites were villainous, surely the innocent of this territory ought not to have been left unprotected and un-avenged on that account. The officers of the army from time to time have the savages within their power, but they have given them rations, turned them loose, and indirectly approved their bloody massacre. Our nation is come to all this. Four years' war in Florida has published to the world a burlesque on the "pomp and circumstance" of war. A few Spartans mocked the powers of Persia; and a few Seminoles have laughed at the drums and fifes and bugles and bayonets and heavy ordnance of the United States.<sup>30</sup>

But if his frustration with the ever-present threat of Indian attack resulted in a diatribe against the officials in charge, it could not long delay his satisfaction with more evidence of successful evangelistic efforts. He announced the organization of a new church at Six-mile Creek in East Florida and another at Fort Mays, Georgia.

"My traveling per month is 400 miles," McDonald reported, "my congregations are 17, and our churches, to which only myself preach, are 7."<sup>31</sup>

Like a good missionary with a gift for starting and organizing rather than sustaining and maintaining, McDonald raised the familiar cry for ministerial help, even using an early public relations gimmick to lure helpers.

Never have I seen such woeful want of God's ministers. I do cherish the hope that God will end the bloody massacre in Florida and send ministers among us to break to the people the bread of eternal life. This territory has many noble advantages in agriculture, commerce, and raising cattle; and though it was the asylum of many wretched characters from the claims of justice; and though it has been the scene of a shameful and scandalous warfare; I do humbly trust it will yet be numbered among the pleasant places of the earth.<sup>32</sup>

By the first day of January 1840, Missionary McDonald reported successful efforts in Nassau County where he resided. Following a six-day protracted meeting at Brandy Branch, sixteen were converted. Another meeting at New Hope in Nassau County netted similar results.

Among the churches for which he reported sole responsibility was the Jacksonville church, located a mile out of town. "There is a delightful work of grace among the negroes in the vicinity and town of Jacksonville," he wrote. "Exertions are being made to build a Baptist meeting house in that place."<sup>33</sup>

Conscious, no doubt, of his own poverty as a frontier preacher, McDonald comforted himself with honest confession. "The past year has, indeed, been a time of great and marvelous works in these wild woods, among these poor and afflicted people of the Lord," he wrote. "Our lot, as a preacher, is cast in the shades of poverty and in places of great peril." But, he concluded, "the humblest cabin among these herdsmen and hunters where Jesus is praised is a temple of beauty and glory and happiness and life."

One wonders how much the confession was expressed to convince the confessor, especially when the speaker's next words are these: "But we weep when we recollect our early associations in religion in the temples of God in Georgia with His dear, chosen people."<sup>34</sup>

By June 1, 1840, McDonald had moved to Jacksonville from Nassau County. "We have rolled and rambled until we almost despair of being stationary," he wrote. Jacksonville lived with the prospect of an Indian attack each day. "Our best guard here seems to be the St. John's River on the east of which the savages are said to be prowling," he wrote.<sup>35</sup> But having become resigned to a war that might go on for years to come, he reported on the progress of the meeting house at Jacksonville.

Our meeting house is raised, and will be ready for worship very soon. Since the first of January, I have baptized between this and Altamaha, 20 whites and 80 colored people, in all 100 .... When we first visited those places which lie between Darien and Jacksonville, we found in them about 60 of our faith and order, and only three little churches, which were without a pastor ... Now we number nearly 500, most of whom are walking in the fear of the Lord. Seven houses of worship have been built for our denomination, and four more are being erected. We have nine constituted churches, and three more are shortly to be constituted ...

Within the time above mentioned, I have never been able to procure ministerial help to ordain a deacon, or constitute a church. I have therefore constituted churches and ordained deacons alone.<sup>36</sup>

By September 1840, McDonald announced that the dreaded Indian attack had struck.

Two of our most pious members were lately killed by the Indians. One of them was the mother of three little children; the oldest was not more than three years old. She was converted and baptized last winter .... She fell like a flower from its stem ... She was shot through the neck, and when she asked, "Where is my babe?" she fell asleep in Christ .... Her funeral sermon must be preached; and to us the task will surely be painful.<sup>37</sup>

"Florida is covered with blood," McDonald lamented.

Then in characteristic fashion of giving bad news and good news, he reported that the Baptist meeting house in Jacksonville had been dedicated on September 13, 1840. Its cost, exclusive of the lot, will be \$2,500, he reported.

It is a remarkably neat building, 38 by 32 feet, with a gallery for the negroes. If some minister of our order, who has much property, would come to East Florida, he might imitate Dr. Judson, by giving first of his property, and then himself, to the Lord. A minister of talents might occupy St. Augustine, Picolata, Pilatka, etc., very advantageously. This is missionary ground. Self-denial, severe riding on horseback, humble entertainment, and illiterate intercourse, to be sure, await him; but the delight of turning the wilderness into a fruitful field is compensation of the most enviable kind.<sup>38</sup>

A few months later, on March 6, 1841, McDonald reported the good news first, stating that three new meeting houses had been dedicated and a Foreign Missionary Society organized. And then the bad news.

Whoever writes a history of the Florida war will have materials for wonder, admiration, and sympathy. The Lady of Lieut. Montgomery, lately killed near

Workahoota was ... the only child of a rich gentleman ... She had been but a short time married.

On the morning of her murder, she left a post near Workahoota to attend a officer's lady who was sick. She rode a noble horse and was a first rate rider. Lieut. Sherwood, a sergeant, and eight private dragoons accompanied her. The Indians fired on the party from a hammock. Mrs. Montgomery was wounded and dismounted by the savages. Lieut. Sherwood fought by her side till he fell, covered with wounds, holding in his hand a discharged rifle. The sergeant was mortally wounded; two privates were also killed, and the other privates made their escape.

In the meantime, Mrs. Montgomery's horse galloped back to the Fort, frightened. Lieut. Montgomery, seeing his lady's horse, caught and rode him on to the scene of action. So soon as he saw the savages, he also saw his wife, who was yet alive, and shrieking aloud for help, and crying for mercy. –Lieut. Montgomery pretended, by calling to his men, that he had a troop, but seeing and hearing him, they soon dispatched their fair victim, tearing from her person her splendid riding dress and other valuables.<sup>39</sup>

“Florida, gory with human immolation, and wreaking with the flood of the lamented, shall merit the pity and praise of the children of God,” McDonald concluded.

Six months later, the missionary reported a thriving black church in the town of St. Marys, Georgia, but no white church. “Our coloured brethren there number about 160,” he wrote, “and are truly a pious and devoted people.”<sup>40</sup>

The church in Jacksonville, known as Bethel continued to swell with black members.

In this beautiful river [St. Johns] opposite our town, I have never baptized but one white person, whilst thirty blacks have gone down into the water, and been buried with Christ by baptism into death. The white person baptized is a brother-in-law to Professor [Adiel] Sherwood.<sup>41</sup> He arose out of his sick bed, dressed in white, and pale as a corpse, and was immersed with tokens from Heaven, of peace and love.<sup>42</sup>

Earlier in 1841, McDonald had organized the Sharon Baptist Church in Nassau at what is now Callahan. He preached the first sermon on May 15, 1841, using as his text Acts 11:26:

And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

At the time of its organization, the church consisted of McDonald as pastor, one deacon, a clerk, and fourteen members in all. Eventually, when the town of Callahan appeared in 1857, the church changed its name from Sharon to Callahan Baptist Church.<sup>43</sup>

After having been a bachelor all his life, forty-four-year-old McDonald began to contemplate marriage with sixteen-year-old Teresa Amanda Pendarvis of Duval County, a lady twenty-eight years his junior. On January 15, 1842, McDonald acquired the property known later as LaVilla, a 225-acre farm on

the north side of the St. Johns River, beginning at the mouth of McCoys Creek and lying north of it. And on March 19, 1842, John Warren deeded the additional 250 acres of the original tract to allow single ownership once again.<sup>44</sup> That became his farm.

The marriage of McDonald and Miss Pendarvis followed on May 15, 1842, in a civil ceremony performed by Judge John L. Dogget.<sup>45</sup> It must have been a marriage made in Heaven, however different their ages, for they had eight children and gave them all Bible names: Mary, Elizabeth, Ruth, Sarah, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

As if the year 1842 were not already pivotal enough for McDonald, a hope for the future emerged on August 14, 1842, when Colonel William J. Worth announced an end to the war by permitting the Seminoles to remain on a temporary reservation at Big Cypress. The occasional Indian raids continued, however, until well into the next year.

In 1843 the American Baptist Home Missionary Society appointed McDonald as a missionary to East Florida, which would have been a means of helping sustain him in his status as a married man. But because of the well known sectional dispute over the question of slavery, the Baptist denomination in America divided. From it emerged the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. "So soon as the North and South were divided," McDonald wrote, "I resigned my commission."

But at that crisis, the Florida Baptist Association, which had been organized at Indian Springs Baptist Church in Leon County two years previously,<sup>46</sup> hired McDonald as a missionary for two years.<sup>47</sup> "But," explained McDonald, "their funds failing, I applied to the Southern Baptist Board,"

The Southern Baptist Board hired him as a missionary until 1849, when the Southern Baptist Domestic Missions Board had to decline reappointing most missionaries because of limited funds.<sup>48</sup>

Before McDonald knew his appointment with the Southern Baptist Domestic Missions Board would not be renewed, he wrote an article in *the Southern Baptist Missionary Journal* appealing to others to come and labor in Florida and strengthen the Baptist work in the new state.

Beloved brethren, we have but five preachers in East Florida, which extends from St. Marys River north, to Cape Sable on the south, and from the Atlantic on the east, to Lawrence River on the west – a distance of 300 by 200 miles. Some of this to be sure is occupied by Indians, but we have a field which could be advantageously occupied by twenty Baptist ministers. The few that are here are farmers and poor. The board, however, ought to be exceedingly circumspect in their selection of men to preach as missionaries. To be a missionary, a man should be blameless, intelligent, truly pious, discreet, and persevering.<sup>49</sup>

Earlier, while serving as a missionary for the Florida Baptist Association, McDonald wanted to organize the new association for better efficiency. And since the Florida Baptist Convention would not be organized until eight years later, on November 20, 1854, McDonald attended the twenty-fifth annual meeting of the Georgia Baptist Convention in Macon, on May 15, 1846, and presented an application from the Florida Association to be received as a constituent member. While the question was under consideration, it was moved and carried to postpone the subject until the next morning and appoint a committee to report by resolution.

Next morning, the committee reported that before voting on the Florida Association's application, the Georgia Convention would have to vote on a proposed amendment to the constitution and change the wording to permit membership to associations out of the state of Georgia "when their peculiar location, and other circumstances, may in the judgment of this convention, render it desirable and important."

They adopted the change unanimously. Then the application from the Florida Association was again taken up, and after a lengthy debate, and before its decision, the convention adjourned until three o'clock in the afternoon.

At three, McDonald was called on to lead the Convention in prayer. The unfinished business was taken to a vote and it was approved. Moderator Billington M. Sanders repeated the action for the record.

Resolved, That the Florida Association be received as a constituent member of the Convention. Brother James McDonald, the only delegate in attendance, was welcomed by the Moderator to a seat among us.<sup>50</sup>

In the fall, McDonald preached the introductory sermon at the Florida Baptist Association on October 10, 1846.

On March 8, 1847, McDonald published a prospectus in *The Christian Index*, announcing the first Baptist periodical to be published in Florida. It would be called *Baptist Telegraph, and Florida Emigrant*.

*The Subscriber* proposes to publish in the Town of Jacksonville, East Florida, a monthly newspaper, of the above title. It shall be neutral in politics, shall contain general intelligence, and in religion shall be frank and explicit.

The paper will advocate the faith and practice of the Baptist denomination in the United States, and shall be particularly devoted to the interests of the southern and South West States. The secular and religious improvements of the people of Florida, it shall consider as its paramount obligation. To reprove vice, to promote virtue, to elevate the mind to the worship of the true God, and to improve the worldly condition of mankind, will be its leading features.<sup>51</sup>

But within a few months McDonald discontinued publishing the Baptist paper. A notice appeared in the *Ocala Argus* on May 25, 1848, announcing that James McDonald had ceased publication of *The Baptist Telegraph a, and Florida Emigrant*. It needed stronger support, although such a paper was needed.

When the year 1849 ended and McDonald learned that he could not be reappointed by the Southern Baptist Domestic Mission Board, he must have realized that his days in Florida were numbered. The marriage and arrival of children had changed his circumstances. Finally, he arranged for Joseph S. Baker, the editor of *The Christian Index* from 1842 through 1848, to come to Florida as pastor of the Jacksonville church in 1850.<sup>52</sup> Ironically Editor Joseph S. Baker had written in 1843, in response to an appeal from Joshua Mercer for ministerial helpers: "The Baptists of Georgia are able to fill Florida with missionaries, and, brethren, ought we not to do it?"<sup>53</sup> In 1850 Baker answered his own call.

In February 1851, Joseph S. Baker purchased part of McDonald's acreage at LaVilla.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, McDonald decided to leave his family in Jacksonville while he traveled to Atlanta in search of employment. Joseph S. Baker wrote him a recommendation on January 29, 1851, saying the McDonald visits Georgia with a view of seeking a field of labor in the upper part of the state. "I know my Georgia brethren too well to deem it necessary to ask for Bro. McDonald your kind attentions and the aid which it may be in your power to render him in his search for a new home and a new field of labor," Baker wrote.<sup>55</sup>

As a kind of swan song to Florida, McDonald wrote of his departure from Sharon Church in Nassau County.

After 13 years and 9 months, speak together, in the enjoyment of the grace of God, and in much mutual suffering, we bid the church of Sharon, East Florida our farewell ... Sobbing, sighing, and lamentation, consummated our separation. That small, poor church of the Redeemer have adorned the doctrine of God their Saviour in all things. To leave the charge of a church, and go to the other gentiles, is but commonplace, yet the short history of that section of Florida is so rife with interest, that were it not near our home it might find a place on the shelf of the pious, in many portions of this country.<sup>56</sup>

Then, recalling conditions thirteen years earlier, McDonald wrote of the war years.

In the midst of all this vengeance, and these merited tribulations, the Gospel was preached with the most glorious effect ... Such was the sentiment of the converted in Florida. They prayed near the graves of their wives and children; they rejoiced over the sepulchers of those whom they lamented ... Amidst savage yells and the cries of the wounded and dying were heard the songs of the redeemed.<sup>57</sup>

James McDonald would move his family to Atlanta, where they would remain during the War Between the States and from where they would send their oldest son to fight in that war. McDonald would serve as a missionary of the Stone Mountain Association and pastor of several churches in the area, while always report-the results of his evangelistic efforts through the pages of *The Christian Index*.

Then after the War, sick and feeble, he moved his family to Rome, Georgia, in January 1869 and died three months later on April 25, 1869, in his seventy-first year. His wife would outlive him 21 years.

Nearly a hundred years after McDonald left Florida for the last time, the pastor of St. Augustine's Ancient City Baptist Church, John Leonidas Rosser, wrote an important beginning for a history of Florida Baptists. Knowing only a portion of McDonald's worth, Rosser wrote these words: "Because of the heroic nature and of the lasting influence of his work, the name of James McDonald belongs in the hall of fame of early Baptist life in Florida."<sup>58</sup> This present study takes a step toward that end. But it does more, for aside from the demonstrated self-sacrifice and determined effort to minister to frontier settlers at the dawn of East Florida history under American control, James McDonald's faithful record both chronicles and reflects life among the pioneers against the backdrop of the Seminole Indian War. It is a treasure no other participant in those events has given to students of Florida history.

## Notes

1. In 1833 Jesse Mercer, the prominent divine who inspired organization and development among Georgia Baptists during the first half of the nineteenth century, purchased *The Christian Index* from W. T. Brantly in Philadelphia and published his first issue from Washington, Georgia, on September 14, 1833, as owner and editor. It became the weekly periodical for religious news of concern to Baptists in Georgia, Florida, and Alabama. See Jack U. Harwell, *An Old Friend with New Credentials: A History of The Christian Index* (Atlanta: Executive Committee of the Baptist Convention of the State of Georgia, 1972).
2. *The Christian Index*, July 7, 1836, p. 402 f. Before Mr. Hart died in 1838, he lived to see his pleadings for ministerial help answered with the arrival of O. T. Hammond, a missionary appointed by the American Baptist Home Mission Society in June 1837. Hart referred to him in a letter to the editor (*The Christian Index*, Feb. 22, 1838, p.10) as “a young preacher just arrived from the North” . . . But missionary life in Territorial Florida may have been too much for him and his wife, for they soon left for Alabama where he died. See Edward Earl Joiner, *A History of Florida Baptists* (Jacksonville, Fla.: Convention Press, 1972), p.25, n.42. Other appeals for Baptist preachers to come to Florida appeared in *The Christian Index* over the next several years. See, for example, the issues of July 2, 1841, p.425, and Aug. 18, 1843, p.519.
3. *The Christian Index*, May 25, 1837, p.329.
4. *The Christian Index*, May 25, 1827, p.329.
5. *The Christian Index*, Aug. 31, 1837, p.554 f.
6. *The Christian Index*, Aug 31, 1837, p.554 f.
7. Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1971), p.146. While Jacksonville’s population in 1830 was only 100, Duval County had a total of 1,970 inhabitants, living largely on farms.
8. *The Christian Index*, Aug. 31, 1837, p.534 f.
9. *The Christian Index*, Aug. 31, 1837, p.534 f.
10. *The Christian Index*, April 26, 1838, p.250 f.
11. *The Christian Index*, June 19, 1851, p.98.
12. *The Christian Index*, Nov. 15, 1838, p.715.
13. *Southern Baptist Missionary Journal* (Richmond, Va.), IV,
14. Joiner, 17-18. For biographical data on Isham Peacock see Folks Huxford, *Pioneers of Wiregrass Georgia* (Jesup, Ga.: The Jesup Sentinel, 1971), VI, 207-208. According to Piedmont Baptist Association Minutes for 1821 (see *Huxford Genealogical Society, Society, Inc., Magazine*, VI, 3 Sept. 1979, 1225), Fleming Bates was pastor of Salem Baptist Church in 1822.
15. *The Christian Index*, April 26, 1838, p.252.

16. *The Christian Index*, Nov. 29, 1838, p.745.

17. *The Christian Index*, Nov. 29, 1838, p.745.

18. The church historian at First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, Belton S. Wall, Jr., writes in an unpublished letter that records of the Bethel Baptist Church are scarce: "On three different occasions our records were destroyed, and in the great fire of 1901, all our municipal records were burned. In the years 1861-64, Jacksonville was occupied by Federal troops and during the Battle of Olustee our church was commandeered for a hospital and left in a deplorable condition." Aug. 1, 1980. On July 17, 1938, the First Baptist Church of Jacksonville printed a centennial program which listed Rev. James McDonald as the first pastor (1838-1846) and named the six charter members as Rev. Josiah [sic] McDonald "and wife"; Elias G. Jaudon and wife, and two blacks, Peggy and Baccus, slaves of Mr. Jaudon. But since McDonald was not married at the time, the "wife" may have been the future Mrs. McDonald, Teresa Amanda Pendarvis, whom he married on May 15, 1842. See *Duval County Marriages*, Book O, pp.221-222. For data on Ryan Frier, see Huxford, *Pioneers of Wiregrass Georgia*, III, pp.100-101. In 1844 Ryan Frier was hired as a missionary of the Florida Baptist Association to serve "east of the Suwannee River. See *The Christian Index*, Dec. 13, 1844, p.1.

19. *The Christian Index*, March 28, 1839, pp.199-200.

20. *The Christian Index*, March 28, 1839, pp.199-200.

21. *The Christian Index*, June 24, 1869, p.97.

22. *The Christian Index*, Jan. 21, 1847.

23. *The Christian Index*, June 24, 1869, p.97.

24. *The Southern Recorder*, July 26, 1832.

25. *The Christian Index*, July 14, 1832, p.21.

26. *Georgia Baptist Convention Minutes* 1831, Report of Executive Committee on Domestic Missionaries, p.7.

27. *Minutes and Proceedings of the Mission Board Appointed by the Georgia Association in 1815*, January 27, 1832, p.42. The appointment was made by the Executive Committee, Jesse Mercer as moderator and Jabez P. Marshall as secretary. According to the terms of employment, for which McDonald was to receive \$20 per month, he is to keep a daily journal of labors, report quarterly, and expend \$5 worth of tracts each quarter for distribution to commence when his present engagements are closed. Jesse Mercer was to instruct him.

28. Tebeau, 166-167

29. *The Christian Index*, Sept. 12, 1839, p.584.

30. *The Christian Index*, Sept. 12, 1839, p.504.

31. *The Christian Index*, Sept. 12, 1839, p.584.



32. *The Christian Index*, Sept. 12, 1839, p.584.
33. *The Christian Index*, Sept. 12, 1839, p.584.
34. *The Christian Index*, Sept. 12, 1839, p.584.
35. *The Christian Index*, June 25, 1840, pp.415-416.
36. *The Christian Index*, June 25, 1840, pp.415-416.
37. *The Christian Index*, Oct. 15, 1840, p.665.
38. *The Christian Index*, Oct. 15, 1840, p.665.
39. *The Christian Index*, April 2, 1841, p.218.
40. *The Christian Index*, Sept. 24, 1841, p.618.
41. At the time McDonald wrote these words, Adiel Sherwood was professor at Mercer University at Penfield, Georgia, where he had gone to organize the theology department. See *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958), II, 1199.
42. *The Christian Index*, Sept. 24, 1841, p.618.
43. *The Florida Baptist Witness*, Sept. 14, 1939, p.9.
44. T. Frederick Davis, *History of Jacksonville, Florida, and Vicinity* (Jacksonville, Fla.: Florida Historical Society, 1925), p.43.
45. *Duval County (Florida) Marriage Records*, Book O, pp.221-222. According to the inscription on the tombstone in Myrtle Hill Cemetery in Rome, Georgia, Mrs. Theresa McDonald died on May 11, 1890, at age 64, a resident of Atlanta. See George Magruder Battey, Jr., *A History of Rome and Floyd County* (Atlanta, 1972, I, p.586.)
46. For a resolution of the controversy surrounding the organizational date and place of the Florida Baptist Association, see James C. Bryant, *Indian Springs: The Story of a Pioneer Church in Leon County, Florida* (Tallahassee: Florida State University, 1971), p.37-44.
47. *Florida Baptist Association Minutes*, Oct. 21, 1845, p.2. They hired him to be missionary as soon as his present engagement with the Board at New York shall have expired.”
48. See *Southern Baptist Convention Annual*, 1850, Annual Report of the Board of Domestic Missions, p.42: “From October 1<sup>st</sup> to February, the receipts were extremely small and the prospects gloomy. During this period, several commissions issued the preceding year expired. Although in most instances, applications for a re-commission were made, and the Board were desirous to grant them, yet the state of the treasury was such, and the probability of much increase of funds was so doubtful, that the Board felt constrained in most instances to decline a renewal of appointment.”
49. *Southern Baptist Missionary Journal*, IV, 1, June 1849, p.19.

50. *Georgia Baptist Convention Minutes*, 1846, p.3.

51. *The Christian Index*, April 1, 1847, p.112.

52. The black members of the Bethel Baptist Church assumed control of the church in 1866 because of their majority status. Two years later, they worked out an agreement for separation of the races, the blacks retaining the Bethel Baptist Church name, and the white members naming their worship house Tabernacle. In 1892 the white members moved to their present location and named the church First Baptist. Two years later the black members renamed their church Bethel Baptist Institutional Church. See *Guide to Supplement Vital Statistics from Church Records in Florida* (Jacksonville, Fla.: 1942), I, 211.

53. *The Christian Index*, Aug. 18, 1843, p.519.

54. Davis, p.43. "It has been published that when Mr. Baker bought the McDonald farm, his son, J. McRobert Baker, remodeled the McDonald home and named the plantation LaVilla. He built a school house on the land and named it LaVilla Institute. This school continued until the beginning of the War Between the States." p.44.

55. *The Christian Index*, March 13, 1851, p.42.

56. *The Christian Index*, June 19, 1851, p.98.

57. *The Christian Index*, June 19, 1851, p.98.

58. Rosser, p.8.