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J. M. Hayman
Pioneer Baptist Preacher
in Frontier Florida

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A PIONEER BAPTIST PREACHER IN FRONTIER FLORIDA

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The parents of the Reverend Jeremiah M. Hayman--- the topic of my paper today---were “irreligious and worldly-minded,”¹ according to the biographer of the great pioneer Baptist preacher who spread the gospel in the wild woods of a primitive and jungle-like Florida during the 19th Century.

The writer of the life sketch on Hayman was O.J. (not as in Simpson) but as in Owen Judson Frier, a Baptist minister himself.² He also was the son-in-law of Hayman.³ He wrote fondly of his in-law, that “I have long known and loved as a father.”⁴

Now, back to the parents of the famed preacher. When young Jeremiah was about ten years old “a sad providence” turned his Mom and Dad away from their sinful ways. They lost their second child, Frier reported,⁵ and the Haymans, James and Delila Martin, were converted and united with the Primitive Baptists. The young frontier lad had only scraps of an education. What limited schooling he got was in “poor apologies for schools.”

Hayman was born December 28, 1822, in Bryan County, Georgia, about 30 miles west of Savannah.⁶ In 1837, the family moved to Madison County, in North Florida, hard by the Georgia border. It was while living here that both Jeremiah and his father joined a volunteer company, under command of Captain M.C. Livingston, to engage in the war against the Seminole Indians.⁷ His biographer explained what Jeremiah experienced:

“While old enough to be about grown, he was yet a mere boy in size. In the Army he was exposed to vices incident to Army life, but the advice and warning of a godly mother and the natural repulsiveness of much of this abandoned wickedness, to him, kept him from engaging in these grosser evils...”

In 1839, Hayman joined another volunteer company under Captain William I. Bailey, at Magnolia, Florida, near Tallahassee. He joined for a term of four months. He soon suffered a severe spell of sickness that caused him to almost despair of seeing home again. But he served his time as a non-commissioned officer and was honorably discharged.⁸

The young soldier returned home, hoping to pursue an education. But that was not to be. Schools in the area were primitive. Besides, his father, a poor man, and Jeremiah, the only boy old enough to work, was kept at home to work when he might have been going to school. Still, Hayman “thirsted” for an education. So determined was he to learn, he would often sit up late of nights after days of hard labor, reading and writing, trying to improve himself. He acquired good books to the extent of his means. His

favorite book? The Bible, of course! He was truly a self-educated man. At the same time he developed Christian Character.⁹

In January 1843, he with his father, came to Florida, settling at Lake Lindsey, in Hernando County. (Lake Lindsey was a household name in my family, as I grew up in Floral City near the southern border of Citrus County, not far from the Eden Baptist Church at Lake Lindsey.)

It was the Armed Occupation Act of 1842 that pointed the Haymans to Florida. This measure, offered, 160 acres of land to armed settlers who built a house and farmed at least five acres for five years,¹⁰ was designed to encourage immigration south of the Withlacoochee River.

The Haymans were involved in a lawsuit back in Troupville, Georgia. The son was summoned to testify.¹¹ While there, his horse was attached for a debt his father owed. He also sold his saddle and started back to Florida on foot. The lad walked all the way to Jacksonville. He had a little money, so he went by boat to Palatka. From there he hitched rides when he could, and walked most of the time to his home in South Florida.

He helped his Dad fix up his place, then young Hayman fixed up his own place nearby. Besides reading the Bible and other good books, Jeremiah also attended preaching services, both the variety of Methodist and Baptist. Thus, his son-in-law wrote in the biography of Hayman, “he became impressed with the duty and importance of repenting of his sins.” And, Frier quoted Hayman’s words from his journal:¹²

“...For the last two years...I was moralist. But the gospel which was conveyed to my understanding by the living ministry and the Holy Scriptures, and an examination of my dangerous situation as a sinner before God, urged me to repent of my great transgressions, especially of the sin I had so fondly indulged, that of self-righteousness. I had faith, but it was in my own good works. I indulged that hope that I should be saved, but it was not through Christ. I was conscious of my imperfections, but it was not for Christ’s sake that I asked God to forgive my sins. Oh, how mistaken was I! Yet, how sure, in my own view. Thanks be to God, I was not left to myself. I plainly saw there was no other name given under heaven or among men whereby I could be saved, but only in and through the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

It was a funeral sermon preached by the Reverend John Tucker, a missionary Baptist minister, that finally converted Hayman. That very afternoon, July 7, 1844, he and one of his sisters were baptized by the Reverend Mr. Tucker in Lake Lindsey.¹³ The following year, 1845, the Eden Baptist Church at Lake Lindsey was constituted.¹⁴ In that same year, Florida was admitted to statehood!¹⁵ He was an active church member, and became the church clerk. Later, he was ordained a deacon.

Soon, he was hearing the call to preach. But he realized his lack of an education. The urge to preach, however, would not go away. He was living alone, and was lonely. He proposed a proposition and pledge to God: If God would bless him with a good wife, he would work full-time as a minister.¹⁶

Enter: Miss Martha J. Carlton. In September 1845 Hayman was on his way to Georgia on business. At a meeting in Alachua County, when he saw Miss Carlton, his heart skipped a beat. He

learned that she was of a different denomination than he. His future son-in-law picks up the story: “On his return home he determined to write Miss Carlton a letter, stating his desire to make and cultivate her acquaintance, which was answered favorably...”

The result soon was an engagement to be married. The wedding took place on August 27, 1846, with a Methodist preacher, the Reverend Thomas W. Cooper, performing the ceremony.¹⁷ The young bridegroom established a family altar the first evening they spent in their humble home, which they named, “Rural Cottage.”

What about that “deal” he made with God? It became evident early on that God had, indeed, blessed him with a “good wife.” Hayman had stalled on his end of the bargain. And calamity had hit the young couple. Their first child died at birth. In January 1849, a second child, a girl, was born. In November that same year, the baby died. Nothing Hayman undertook seemed to prosper.¹⁸ This pricked his conscience about his unfulfilled vow. About this time, Mrs. Hayman changed denominations, becoming dissatisfied with her sprinkling in infancy. She became a Baptist.

Frier reported Hyman “was now very much encouraged to take up the cross and engage in the work he had promised God to do.”¹⁹

Shortly after, Hayman sold out, and moved to a place on the Alafia River in Hillsborough County. He learned of a Baptist Church there with no regular preacher. His duty was clear. Members asked him to preach. On June 18, 1851, he preached his first sermon, taking John 1:29 as his text. It goes like this:

“The next day John saw Jesus coming to him, and said ‘Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.’” (Good News version) Hayman was ordained as a minister on November 10, 1851, at a session of the Baptist association in Hernando County.

The Reverend J.M. Hayman was now a full fledged minister of the gospel!

D. B. McKay, the noted Tampa newspaper publisher and Florida historian, summed up Hayman’s life work, stating: “The Lord has never had a more faithful servant.”²⁰ What a beautiful testimonial to his man of God!

Hayman was living at Alafia, in Hillsborough County, at the time of his ordination. It was there, according to McKay, on June 18, 1851, he preached his first sermon as a minister at a pastor-less Baptist church.²¹ But Frier said in his first month of work, in addition to preaching for the Salem Church, near where Plant City is now located, and at Indian Pond, afterward known as Socrum Settlement, in Polk County, where Bethel Church was later organized, having noted this sequence, he agreed with McKay on the date and place where his father-in-law first preached.²²

Quoting from the biography written by the Reverend Mr. Frier, who at one time served as pastor of the First Baptist Church at Lakeland,²³ Hayman preached for a group of blacks at Manatee, near Bradenton. And in January 1852, he commenced preaching at Thonotosassa, in Hillsborough County, and in the following March he preached at Old Tampa, then called Clear Water (two words), for which he received \$.50 in cash, the first pay for his work. At his next appointment there, in April, the collection

plate content picked up, and Hayman's "take home" pay was \$3.67!²⁴ Pinellas County, at that time, was a part of Hillsborough County.²⁵

Also, in March 1852, he commenced preaching at Bethesda Church in Hernando County. In June that year, he started preaching at Peace Creek, near the present site of Bartow, in Polk County, where he received the third amount contributed to his work---the sum of \$6.25.²⁶

At the end of his first year's ministry, his journal revealed he had traveled 1,450 miles. Bear in mind this was done by horseback, maybe some was horse and buggy in woody areas. He preached 69 sermons that memorable first year, had baptized 28 persons---and had received \$12.62 in pay.²⁷

By the way, the Alafia Baptist Church, where Hayman preached his first sermon, was still standing, at least as late as 1992!²⁸ The church is now called the Hurrah Church named after the creek that borders the property and whose waters baptized the new members.²⁹ Old tombstones in the historic cemetery bear such names as Carlton, Hendry, Alderman, Pollack and...you guessed...Smith.³⁰

In 1853 Hayman was employed by the Alachua Baptist Association as a missionary, keeping up his former appointments, however, and adding such others as he could.³¹ Included were Long Pond (now Valrico) in Hillsborough County, and Spring Hill, near Brooksville, in Hernando county. That year he baptized 13 persons and received in compensation \$63.³² In 1854 and 1855 he was employed by the Southern Baptist Convention, continuing his regular appointments.

He wrote in his journal: " for these two years I would sometimes preach in the woods, being on the frontier, and very few schoolhouses or meeting places to use. But the Lord seemed to bless my humble labors, and I was greatly encouraged to go on in the discharge of my duty as a minister of the gospel."³³

During the two-year period, he preached 186 sermons, traveled 3,094 miles, baptized 42 persons---and received about \$235 in pay.³⁴

Hayman lived in Bartow, which was still called Fort Blount. As the Florida Seminole War was still raging, and the presence of hostile Indians surrounded Bartow this caused him to move to Tampa in 1855,³⁵ for the protection of his family. To his support his family, he took employment as a carpenter and painter.³⁶ However, Brother Hayman continued to preach the gospel in Tampa and nearby settlements. In Tampa services were held sometimes in the courthouse and sometimes in a room under the Masonic Hall.³⁷

The Hayman remained in Tampa through "the terrible plague, yellow fever," in 1858 and on until 1862.³⁸ Many residents sought refuge in the country, but Hayman remained in town, "considering it the best thing I could do for the cause of Christ and the good of humanity."

The minister reported "The death rate was high. Every dissipated person who took the fever died in three days. I escaped the plague myself. My wife had it but got well. My mother-in-law and one daughter died."³⁹

Hayman told of one incident he experienced in caring for the sick and dying:

“In my rounds...I found a father unconscious; he had been so for 24 hours, and no one to do anything for him. His jaws were set from the excessive nausea and vomiting caused by the fever...one can readily imagine his filthy condition. With some help, I made him more comfortable by bathing him and changing his clothes as well as that of his bed, procured the services of a physician, and in the course of 36 hours, I found him conscious, and he thanked me for saving his life. He recovered entirely from the attack...”⁴⁰

Reverend Mr. Hayman is credited with organizing and being the first pastor of the First Baptist Church of Tampa, after the city was declared free of the yellow fever infection.⁴¹ But in his own diary, Hayman wrote: “In July 1860, Dr. Joseph S. Baker came to Tampa, and we organized the First Baptist Church,” thus sharing with Dr. Baker the credit.⁴² Hayman is listed as the church’s first pastor,⁴³ in 1861.⁴⁴

Hayman tells of baptizing in 1857 a “John Brown” whom he identified as a U.S. soldier and he regarded him as “a peculiar case.” He continued : ”He knew he would die soon and said he wanted to be baptized. After hearing his experience of grace, and he being too feeble to go to the water, I had a large, long bathtub filled sufficiently full of water in his room, and two men took him from his bed, sat him in the water, and I baptized him as completely as if he had been in a river or bay. He seemed happy and said he felt resigned to the will of the Lord...”⁴⁵

Mrs. Marvin Snell, in her book, Testimony to Pioneer Baptists, wrote this tribute to the Rev. Mr. Hayman:

God needed a man. He needed a powerful man, strong in his body and strong in the spirit. God needed a man who would endure hardship and pain, heartbreak and sorrow. God needed a man who was tender with love and compassion for his fellow man and one who was strong willed, to do that which was right in the sight of Him... God saw the man he needed in Jeremiah M. Hayman...⁴⁶

Today, the First Baptist Church of Tampa is a thriving metropolitan church with many long-time members and their families still faithfully supporting it. In 1984, when the church celebrated its 125th anniversary, the then pastor, Dr. Marvin R. Gibson, wrote these words in addenda to Sherrill’s history of the church:

The First Baptist Church of Tampa thanks God for its past and asks His continued blessing on its future. The original little band of believers--- twenty three men and women, both black and white, slave and free---could not have envisioned the present impressive membership and property...⁴⁷

Historian McKay recounted an experience of Hayman’s in Tampa, but ran a disclaimer that he could not “vouch for the authenticity of the story, only was repeating the way it was told to him:

“Reverend Hayman, then in the prime of manhood, met a tough citizen on a Tampa street, greeted him pleasantly and invited him to attend a service to be held that night. The tough citizen responded with a gross insult. Reverend Hayman shucked his coat, placed it on a bench and addressed it: ‘Lay there, old Baptist, while I give the rascal the thrashing he deserves.’ And that he proceeded to do.”⁴⁸

So far, we have covered the formative years of Brother Hayman's ministry. Time does not permit to detail his wonderful work which continued up until his death in 1902. We might mention that he moved from Tampa in 1862 to his former residence near Bartow where he resided until his death.⁴⁹ Let's call on our resident, in-house historian, Dr. Earl Joiner, to summarize Hayman's life as he wrote it in his great history of Florida Baptists:

His subsequent ministry was to be spent in DeSoto, Manatee, Hillsborough, Hernando, Polk and Pasco Counties... Traveling 38,000 miles through difficult terrain he ministered sacrificially to hundreds of isolated areas and established churches in Bartow (originally called Peas Creek--- 1854), in Tampa (1860) and in Plant City (1866).⁵⁰

Once again we quote from the memorial sketch on Hayman's life and works written by his son-in-law, the Rev. O.J. Frier, this lovely tribute to the pioneer Baptist preacher:

He was one of the happiest, most cheerful Christians I ever knew, and was especially during the latter period of his life, notwithstanding his blindness and other infirmities, was this noticeable. It was a benediction to be with and talk with him on the subject of religion. He always found so many things to be thankful to God for, and his mouth was continually filled with praises to God for his goodness. He was a man 'full of faith and the Holy Ghost'... How beautiful it is for a man to die upon the walls of Zion! To be called like a watch-work and weary sentinel to put his armour off and rest in Heaven.⁵¹

Amen

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