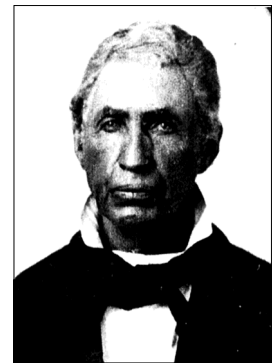


The organizing of churches in the Florida Territory (prior to 1845 when Florida became a state) the dedicated work of itinerant missionaries resulted in the establishment of churches across the Panhandle - from Pensacola to Jacksonville. Among those legacy itinerant preachers were Alexander Travis, Joshua Mercer and James McDonald. It was the committed efforts of McDonald that resulted in several congregations being organized in Northeast Florida whose respective LEGACIES have continued the proclamation of the gospel for the past 180 years.

Jacksonville, Bethel Baptist Church (the genesis of two contemporary congregations, Bethel and First Baptist Church), Duval County, 1838

A significant pioneer itinerant missionary preacher who roamed the East Florida Territory was James McDonald. He is most popularly known for having helped to organize the Bethel Baptist Church of Jacksonville out of which evolved the First Baptist Church. Yet his most enduring service was nearly ten years as pastor of the Sharon Baptist Church in Nassau County, a congregation he started in 1841 and later became the First Baptist Church, Callahan.



James McDonald

James McDonald came to America in 1818 at the age of 20 and settled in Burke County, Georgia. Reared as a Roman Catholic, McDonald developed a burning desire to read the Bible despite the rules of his church against it. But he suffered guilt feelings over the forbidden scripture reading. He migrated to Cuba seeking to escape from his troubled mind and was arrested for unknown reasons. While in a Havana prison, he read the New Testament and had a profound experience of spiritual conversion. Equal to the mysterious arrest and imprisonment, McDonald was released from prison without explanation. Believing that God had come to his rescue, McDonald pledged to become a missionary. He made his way to Georgia where he was baptized into a Baptist church. He later was licensed to preach by the Richland Creek Baptist Church. Beginning in 1832, McDonald was appointed by the Georgia Baptist Association to serve as a missionary to Burke County and eventually was appointed as an itinerant missionary by the Sunbury Baptist Association. While traveling his ministerial itinerary, McDonald read an article that appeared in the July 7, 1836 issue of *The Christian Index*, the Georgia Baptist news journal. A Baptist layman, Edwin Hart, appealed to preachers of the gospel to come to Florida. **“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.”** It was as if the Spirit of God had issued a “Macedonian” call. In quick order McDonald secured the approval of the Sunbury Association for him to travel to East Florida in April 1837.

On a sultry Saturday afternoon, McDonald and his horse crossed the St. Marys River and entered the Florida Territory. He rode up to a barn in the middle of a wilderness settlement and decided to hold a revival meeting. Writing about the experience for *The Christian Index*, McDonald recalled, **“Some had not heard the gospel in years; others never.”** On the following Sunday, a large number of people showed up for his preaching and exhortations. The response by the settlers to the movement of the Holy Spirit was emotional and renewing. “Day and night the power and glory of God overshadowed us,” he reported after his return to Darien, Georgia.

Several months later, McDonald returned to East Florida, preaching at five different settlements. One of those stops was in Jacksonville, where he conducted a two-day preaching meeting. The response was positive, and a delegation of nearly one hundred Anglo and African- descendants asked for prayer and invited him to return in October. McDonald was so impressed by the spiritual need and response in East Florida, that he resigned both the pastorate at Darien and his missionary assignment with the Sunbury Association.

Undertaking this new missionary endeavor would prove to be a long tenure in Florida for McDonald who carried the gospel faithfully. He traveled extensively and faced the same problems of loneliness and danger during the Indian War that many settlers experienced. There were burned out homes, abandoned plantations, murdered men, women and children and the moral depravity of soldiers and settlers alike. He told of the challenges he encountered – swamps, glades, the thick pine forests and even the Indians.



Pictured is the first permanent stone sanctuary constructed by Bethel Institutional Baptist Church following Jacksonville's 1901 Great Fire.

Yet despite the hardships, he reported in a November 5, 1838, *Christian Index* article that he had managed to start three new churches. One of those congregations was the **Bethel Baptist Church** in Jacksonville, at which he and Ryan Frier served as the presbytery. Started in July 1838, the church had six charter members, comprised of four Anglos and two African slaves. In addition to McDonald, were his future wife Teresa Amada Pendarvis, Elias G. Jaudon and his wife, and the two slaves of Jaudon, named Peggy and Baccus.

McDonald served as Bethel's part-time pastor from 1838 to 1846. Within a year, missionary McDonald reported that his preaching circuit involved regularly preaching at 17 congregations, seven of which he served as the pastor. He was followed at Bethel by another pioneer preacher of that time Joseph Baker, who served two separate tenures, first from 1846 to 1850, and then again from 1855 to 1857.

The Bethel church's first meetings were held in the Duval county government block house. In 1840, the congregation numbers having increased, raised funds to construct a church building on the north east corner of Duval and Newman Streets. It was the first church building of any denomination built in the town.

(Interestingly, that property was subsequently sold to the Presbyterian congregation in 1844, who in turn sold it to the Methodists in 1846.) Bethel Baptist acquired two acres in the community of LaVilla (which at the time was a separate entity located about two miles west of the town of Jacksonville). Here the Bethel congregation constructed a small brick building. In 1847 Bethel became a charter member of the Alachua Baptist Association, the second Baptist Association to organize in Florida.

Before long, the church members, the majority of whom were African-descendant, agreed the church's LaVilla location was too far from the center of Jacksonville's growing population. Deacon Elias Jaudon purchased a property site on Church Street between Julia and Hogan within the town of Jacksonville, and donated it to the church for a new building. On February 23, 1861, Bethel's newly constructed house of worship was dedicated.

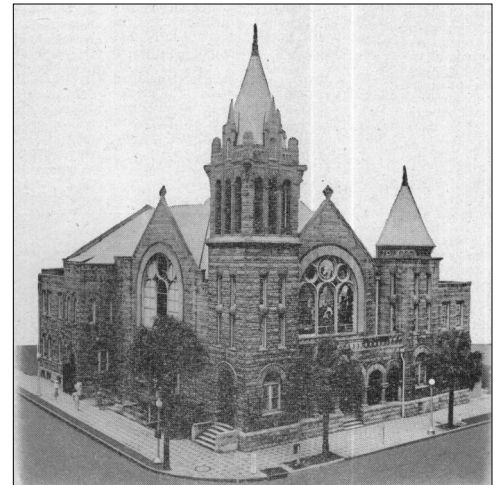
Following the disruption caused by the Civil War, growing racial unrest arose between the Anglo and the African-American members. The two sides agreed it would be in the best interests of the church if the two groups separated as a congregation and go their separate ways. Unfortunately the two sides could not amicably agree on which group should retain the church property. A lawsuit ensued and the county court awarded the property to the African-American members inasmuch as they constituted the majority of church members. The majority also was awarded the name Bethel Baptist Church. They were given the option to accept a cash settlement of \$800 (although some historical accounts say it was \$400) to sell the property to the Anglo group. In 1868 the African-Americans used the sale proceeds to purchase a lot on the northwest corner of Main and Union Streets and built a frame chapel.

The Anglo congregation, having purchased the Church and Julia Street property site, subsequently in 1877 changed their name to the Tabernacle Baptist Church. In 1892, having relocated to Church and Hogan Streets, changed its name to **First Baptist Church**. This missionary Baptist congregation affiliated with the predominately Anglo Southern Baptist Convention.

The Bethel congregation again after re-locating to the LaVilla community and filing paperwork with the State of Florida to become incorporated in 1894, later in 1921 changed its name to the Bethel Institutional Baptist Church. It affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, a denomination that was comprised predominately of Baptist African-American churches.

Unfortunately, both congregations lost their buildings to Jacksonville's Great Fire of 1901 which reduced 144 city blocks to ashes and rubble. (Picture below).

However, by 1904 the two congregations rebuilt their respective permanent worship facilities out of stone and masonry. Over the last 180 years each congregation has continued to grow through evangelistic outreach in their respective communities.



Pictured is the first permanent stone sanctuary constructed by First Baptist Church following Jacksonville's 1901 Great Fire.



Jacksonville Great Fire of 1901