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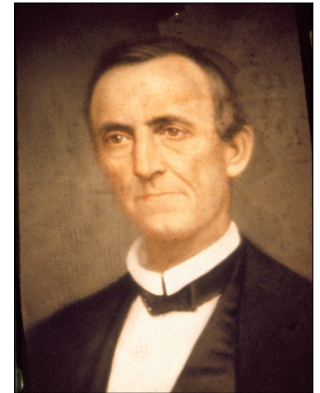
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Itinerant Missionaries Brought the Gospel into the Florida Territory – Part 10

This issue of *Here and Now* continues the featured series on some of the pioneer itinerant missionaries who came into the Florida Territory – as it was called prior to Florida’s 1845 admission to statehood – and undertook the challenges to share the Gospel in this spiritual and physical frontier wilderness.

Richard Johnson Mays – Bi-vocational Itinerant Preacher/First State Convention President

During this month of November, the **Florida Baptist State Convention** held its 163rd annual meeting in Brandon. The highlights of this annual meeting included inspirational preaching and the consideration by messengers of the reports of its agencies of mission and ministry, now called cooperating ministries. This recent convention meeting followed a tradition begun 163 years ago when the first meeting of the Florida Baptist State Convention was convened. And the one individual who was elected as the first president of the newly formed state convention was a bi-vocational itinerant preacher/pastor and plantation owner named Richard Johnson Mays.



Richard Johnson Mays

The suggestion that a **Florida Baptist State Convention** be organized was first made in the Florida Association annual meeting on November 22, 1853, at Olive Church, then located in Thomas County, Georgia. The name of the person who made the proposal is not known, but John Rosser, author of *A History of Florida Baptist* (1948), reported that oral tradition credited Concord Baptist Church in Madison County as the place where the idea first emerged and where Richard Johnson Mays was a founding member. At the Florida Association’s annual meeting at the Olive Church, a resolution was approved which called for the organization of a Florida Baptist State Convention. Delegates (as they were then called) also appointed committees to contact the only other two associations within the state to determine their interest in the venture. William B. Cooper and William J. Blewett were asked to contact the West Florida Association, and S. W. Baker and W. H. Goldwire were to contact the Alachua Association. Both delegations were to report at the next annual session of the Florida Association, which also clearly proved to be a State Convention organization meeting.

About a year later on November 20, 1854, when the Florida Association was meeting in Concord Baptist Church near Madison, seventeen delegates from the three associations assembled nearby in the parlor of Richard Johnson Mays’ home – Clifton Mansion – to organize the state convention. They met there instead of the church building probably for several reasons. Likely the one-room church building being small, it probably would not have held all the Florida Association delegates along with those from the other two associations who had come to organize the State Convention. No doubt there was the convenience factor of the Clifton Mansion – with its ten-bedrooms, two dining rooms and a spacious parlor – which provided ample lodging and meeting space for the convention delegates.

The seventeen delegates, grouped by their association representation, who participated in this organizational meeting of the State Convention, were: Joshua Mercer, Davis Porter Everett, and G. W. Underwood from the West Florida Association; Jeremiah M. Hayman, Daniel Edwards, J. H. Breaker, and William Connell from the Alachua Association; and Richard Johnson Mays, William B. Cooper, B. S. Fuller, W. H. Goldwire, William J. Blewett, D. G. Daniels, H. Z. Ardis, Samuel C. Craft, T. W. Terrell, and John Cason who represented the Florida Association.

Richard J. Mays was asked to preside over the organization meeting, and D. G. Daniels was appointed secretary. After a reading from the scriptures, a season of prayer likely sought the leadership of God’s spirit as the group undertook its task. The first item of business was the adopting of a constitution. A comparison of the similarities between the first constitutions of the newly defined “The Baptist Convention of the State



“FBSC Organization at Madison,”
Illustration by John Lane

of Florida” [hereafter referred to as the Florida Baptist State Convention] and the first constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention, adopted nine years earlier in 1845, suggests that the national version was the model. Even without a surviving written record of the meeting’s details, an observer can assume there was cordial agreement among the 17 delegates, as they were able to complete their task before the midnight hour.

On that autumn evening of November 20, 1854, the group wrote and adopted a constitution for the Florida Baptist State Convention. They proceeded to elect the following as **the State Convention’s first officers**: president, Richard Johnson Mays; secretary, D. G. Daniels; assistant secretary, Samuel C. Craft; treasurer, John Cason. **And they named an executive committee** (the forerunner to the State Board of Missions) that would conduct the business of the State Convention between annual meeting sessions. The committee members included: H. Z. Ardis, Samuel C. Craft, William B. Cooper, B. S. Fuller, W. H. Goldwire, and William J. Blewett. As their final decision of the evening, the group set the first official meeting of the newly constituted State Convention to be held on the Friday before the first Sunday in December, 1855, at Union Academy Church in Jackson County. Later records indicated a

change in location to Concord Church in Madison County. Union Academy changed its name to Greenwood and did host the 1856 State Convention, though the convention’s *Minutes* have been lost to history.

Richard Johnson Mays, born in 1808 in Edgefield, South Carolina, migrated to Florida sometime after October 29, 1830, when he married Eliza Anne Williams. Mays, along with his wife, Eliza, and daughter Elizabeth, joined his brother James Mays and family, and together they loaded several carriages and filled covered wagons with household goods, tools and supplies. Assembling their slave servants, cattle and horses, they began the long trek to North Florida. The families initially settled near Lake Sampala, in an area called San Pedro in southern Madison County. This area served as a settlement for other South Carolinians. Yet the swampy conditions produced mosquitoes and malaria which resulted in the untimely death of their only child, Elizabeth.

The physical and emotional stress experienced at San Pedro proved too much for the couple, so in 1832 Richard and Eliza Mays moved to the northern part of the county near the present-day town of Lovett. There Richard Johnson **Mays began acquiring land that by 1860 developed into a plantation comprised of 5,480 acres maintained by over 120 slaves**. Those thousands of acres produced cotton, timber, corn, and sweet potatoes, among other crops. On the highest point in the area, Mays constructed a two-story, ten-bedroom home known as Clifton Mansion. Ten more children were born into the Mays family, but only seven survived childhood. To accommodate the educational needs of his children and his neighbors’ children, Mays established in the mid-1840s the Mays Academy at Concord Church.

A Baptist by conversion and conviction Mays, in 1831, **led in starting the Hickstown Baptist Church**, the forerunner to the current First Baptist Church of Madison. Although the Mays family soon moved to the north end of Madison County, he continued to attend and hold leadership positions in the Hickstown Church.

Soon the Biblical servant skills of Richard Mays were recognized by others. Although not ordained as a minister, members of the **Elizabeth Baptist Church in Jefferson County** in 1832 asked Mays to serve as their lay-preacher. This responsibility – which is believed to have lasted only a year – was likely limited to traveling by horseback or carriage for half a day to the church once or twice a month to preach a message from the Bible. This experience likely served as a training ground for Mays to express his spiritual stirrings, as well as provided needed practice for his sermon delivery.

By June 1841, Mays decided there were sufficient numbers of people residing near his Lovett community plantation to start a church. He, along with the McCall and Johnson families – including six of Mays’ African slave servants – established the **Concord Baptist Church**. He provided the 20 acres of land for the church site and helped construct the original meeting house out of hand-hewn logs.

One month after the church was constituted, **Mays requested the church to ordain him as a deacon**. This was a surprise to many who thought Mays was an ordained preacher. But Richard Johnson Mays continued to feel the spirit of God speak to him through the Bible. **He soon asked the church to license and ordain him as a Missionary Baptist preacher**. His request was granted. Being ordained conferred upon Mays the designation of “Elder” which was the modern-day equivalent of “Reverend.” Subsequently, Richard Johnson Mays would serve at two different times as pastor of the Concord Church. The first was between 1843 and 1846. The second tenure occurred from 1857 to 1860.

Following the leadership of God, Mays responded to the “Macedonian” call of several Baptists to **establish a Baptist church at Monticello in 1841**. Despite a distance of approximately 30 miles, Elder Mays traveled by carriage and horseback several times a month for two years to serve as pastor of the young congregation.

During the summer 1843, Mays responded to requests from Missionary Baptists in Thomas County, Georgia, to help start the **Liberty Baptist Church**. The church was established in reaction to the growing anti-missionary sentiment which had taken hold of churches in South Georgia and north Florida. Elder Mays served for nearly two years as the church pastor leading the church to grow and discipling the members in the Christian faith.

Within another year, Elder Mays was back at the task of church starting. In 1856, he went to the Piney Grove community to start a new church. Once the **Piney Grove Baptist Church** was functioning, Mays returned to the Concord Church to serve as pastor.

Ever the stalwart Baptist leader, Richard J. Mays served as moderator of the Florida Association (organized 1843) in 1844, 1845 and 1847. A cursory review of the first decade of available association *Minutes* reveals Mays served on a variety of the association's committees and prepared a number of annual circular letters – written doctrinal sermons sent on a circuit to the pastors within the association. He died at age 56 on July 18, 1864.

JUST RELEASED: The 2017 Issue of *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*
This year's Journal addresses: ***The Protestant Reformation... 500 Years Later.***

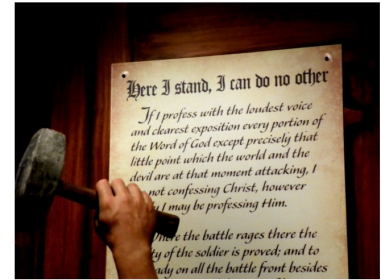
October 31, 2017, marked the 500th anniversary of the start of the reformation of the Christian church. The Protestant Reformation was symbolically started by Martin Luther posting on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church a declaration of *Ninety-Five Theses* or *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*. The Roman Catholic Church condemned these propositions as being “heretical.”

Yet the theses that Luther proposed had evolved from his own spiritual struggles which led to his careful and intense study of the scriptures. It was through this intense immersion into the scriptures that brought a discovery of God's grace and a revolution in Luther's thinking. The scriptures provided a rediscovery of certain biblical truths that for centuries had been forgotten or ignored by the Church hierarchy.

These biblical principles included the propositions of: *sola Scriptura* (scripture alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone); *sola fide* (faith alone); *sola gratia* (grace alone); and *solus Deo gloria* (glory to God alone). And although Baptists were not a part of the Reformation movement, those rediscovered Biblical truths of 500 years ago, serve as the basis for the faith and practice of Florida Southern Baptists which are explored in this issue of the *Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*. *Historical Society members will soon receive their complimentary copy of the Journal in the mail.*

If you want to order a copy of the Journal for \$15.00, which includes postage and handling, please send a check in the amount of \$15.00 payable to the Florida Baptist Historical Society, and provide your name and mailing address. Please send to P.O. Box 95, Graceville, Florida 32440.

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*The Protestant Reformation –
500 Years Later*

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