

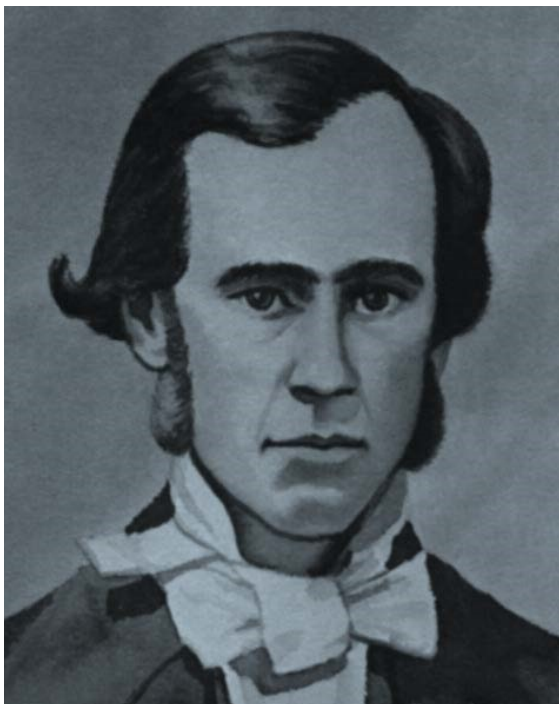
## February 2023 – Volume 15, Number 2

*LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people and events in Florida Baptist history. During 2023, the LEGACY's monthly issues will feature brief personal profiles of selected Florida Baptist men and women, who through their Christian commitment, have demonstrated Legacy Leadership in their ministry service on the Florida Baptist mission field. These persons, could join with the Apostle Paul, in declaring as "God's fellow workers" they have "laid a foundation" for God's kingdom on earth and upon which "someone else is building" [II Corinthians 3:9-10NIV].*

### **Thomas Jefferson Bowen – Pioneer Missionary to Africa and Brazil**

Former Florida Baptist pastor Thomas Jefferson Bowen (b. 1814; d. 1875) holds the distinction of being the first Southern Baptist-appointed missionary to serve in Yoruba, Central Africa and Brazil, South America.

Born in Jackson County, Georgia, January 2, 1814, Bowen by age 20 had joined the Georgia militia to respond to the Indian uprisings in Georgia and Florida. Soon thereafter he found himself leading troops against military troops in Mexico in an effort to make Texas an independent state. Bowen's military leadership abilities were quickly recognized. In his diary, Bowen said he had served only a week as a private before he was commissioned, quite unexpectedly, as a captain. He served about 18 months in the fight for Texas and received as compensation 1,280 acres of land in Texas, which he sold.



Having come under the convictions of the claims of Jesus Christ, the young man surrendered his life to Christianity in October, 1840. **Bowen later wrote in a biography that he had resigned his military commission with regret out of a "deep seated conviction that I could not become a Christian while my life and heart were devoted to military service."** Two years later – 1842 – Bowen responded to God's call to the preaching ministry and was ordained. He began an itinerant preaching ministry which covered south Georgia, north Florida and southeast Alabama.

### **Florida Missionary and Pastoral Service**

As a result of his itinerant preaching ministry in the Florida Panhandle, the Florida Baptist Association appointed Bowen as one of its domestic missionaries to serve in 1845 and 1846. During the years 1847 and 1848, Bowen served as pastor of three churches in Gadsden County, including Liberty, Hebron and Providence. He also served the Lake Jackson Church in Leon County. While serving the Providence Church (December, 1847 to August, 1849), Bowen came to understand that God was calling him into foreign missions and submitted a request to be appointed to missionary service by the then-called Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

### **Responding to the Missions' Challenge of Africa**

Bowen's visionary calling to take the gospel to the peoples of Central Africa was realized between 1849 and 1856. Bowen's proposal to the Foreign Mission Board initially was met with "much fear and trembling," according to an 1849 report in the *Southern Baptist Missionary Journal*. **The Board's investigation considered the difficulties of "the inaccessibility of the country and the alleged insalubrity of the African climate."** However, impressed by his missionary vision, and after "long and prayerful deliberation," **the Board on February 22, 1849 agreed to commission Bowen.** Two other missionaries were appointed to assist in the pioneering endeavor. They included experienced missionary Henry Goodale (b. 1822; d. 1850) and a young free-African Robert F. Hill. Unfortunately upon the party's arrival in Monrovia, the capitol of Liberia, Hill decided not to further participate in the missionary endeavor. And within a few months Goodale died.

Although Southern Baptists' African mission work had been limited to the coastal country of Liberia, Bowen's ambitious missionary efforts were to penetrate the interior to Yoruba (modern day Nigeria). In preparation for his endeavor, Bowen spent 18 months in Abbeokuta where he made a study of the Yoruba language.

Bowen explained that with a "musical ear" he was able to pick-up the rhythm of the Yoruba language. Immediately upon his arrival in Yoruba he began to preach – initially through an interpreter, and then venturing with his own limited command of the language. **He travelled further into the country's interior, visiting the villages which forced him to better understand and learn the native language. As a result of those efforts, Bowen in 1858 published a book on the Yoruban language, which then made it possible to translate from English the gospel message and scripture portions.**

### **Contending with African upon African Slavery**

Cal Guy, in his account of Bowen's missionary service in Africa, noted Bowen was "distressed by the wreckage wrong in Africa by the slave trade." Although the practice of slavery had been outlawed by Great Britain, the world power had "no control at that time over the African territories" where the slave trade was the worst. Guy said Bowen, in his correspondence to the Foreign Mission Board, explained that wars between local tribes resulted in captives being sold for profit to slave traders. Roland Oliver in his book, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa*, credits Christian missionaries, such as Bowen, as being "influential in leading Great Britain to establish colonial control" as a means for curbing the inhuman ravages of slavery inflicted by Africans upon Africans.

### **Recruiting Missionaries for Yoruba**

At the encouragement of leaders of the Foreign Mission Board, Bowen between 1852 and 1853 returned to the United States to recruit additional missionary personnel to serve in Yoruba. While on furlough, Bowen met and married on May 31, 1853, Lurena Henrietta Davis of Greensboro, Georgia. Five weeks later, with two other couples – the Rev. and Mrs. J. S. Dennard and the Rev. and Mrs. J. H. Lacy – the entourage sailed for Africa.

Upon arrival the Bowens established mission stations in Ijaye and Ogbomosho. Bowen's mastery of the language and his assimilation into the cultural ways of the Yoruban tribes made him acceptable to at least be given a hearing. **Unfortunately, Bowen encountered much resistance sharing the gospel in the Muslim-dominated country.** Missionary Bowen kept a diary which resulted in a book that detailed his missionary efforts and other exploits that went beyond the purview of his assignment.

### **Assigned to Brazil, South America**

Soon health maladies caused the Bowens to end their work in Africa and return home in early 1859. But ever the zealous missionary, Bowen requested that the Board assign him to Brazil, a country the Board had long targeted for missionary expansion. Later that year Bowen was granted the assignment to establish a mission in Rio de Janeiro.

Ironically his initial missionary efforts in Brazil were directed toward Yoruban slaves who had been transported and sold in Brazil. The slaves who spoke the Yoruba language “flocked to him when they learned that he knew their country and their language.” This outpouring of response by the slaves proved concerning to Brazilian authorities who, fearing a possible slave revolt, had Bowen jailed. As a result of the intervention of the commander of the American naval fleet at Rio, Bowen was released.

Unfortunately, Bowen’s health had not sufficiently recovered from his African illness and the climate of Brazil proved to be daunting. Additionally, America’s developing Civil War, made it impossible for the Southern Baptist Convention to continue providing financial support to its missionaries. **By 1861, Bowen returned to America. Doubtless Bowen holds the distinction of being the first Southern Baptist missionary appointed to Brazil. However, it was the 1880 appointment and sacrificial commitment of William B. and Anne Luther Bagby of Texas that re-initiated a missionary endeavor that flourished in the South American country.**

### **A Return to Domestic Missions**

Upon returning to Georgia Bowen admitted himself for evaluation and treatment in the Georgia State Hospital for the Mentally Ill beginning in mid-1861. Although he was released after being treated, Bowen was later hospitalized at least two other times, including the last 12 months of his life. However, between 1868 to 1874, Bowen continued his itinerant preaching in Georgia and Florida, during which time he organized churches in and around Valdosta, Georgia. He died November 24, 1875.

[RESOURCES: Donald S. Hepburn, “Thomas Jefferson Bowen – Pioneer Missionary to Africa and Brazil,” *Favored Florida – A History of Florida Baptists*, (Gainesville: StorterChilds Printers, 2013); Florida Baptist Association *Minutes*, 1845, 1846, and 1848; E. C. Routh, “Thomas Jefferson Bowen,” *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists, Vol. I*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958); Cal Guy, “T.J. Bowen – Southern Baptist Innovator on the African Scene,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, July, 1967; “Designation of Brother T. J. Bowen,” *Southern Baptist Missionary Journal*, November, 1849; Mary Emily Wright, *The Missionary Work of the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1902); H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987); H. A. Tupper, *The Foreign Missions of the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1880); Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd, 1952); and T. J. Bowen, *Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labors in the Interior of Africa*, (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857).