

*Our Mission: Researching, preserving and promoting the Legacy of Florida Baptists*

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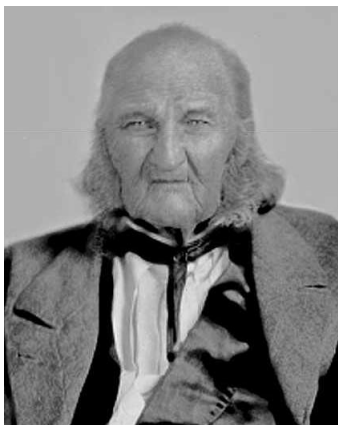
## October 2023 – Volume 15, Number 10

*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].*

### Joshua Mercer: Pioneer Preacher - Missionary

A pioneer Florida Baptist leader, Joshua Mercer was an itinerant preacher who started many churches, served as a domestic missionary and established one of the first educational academies for Florida Baptists.

The Wilkes County, Georgia, native was born June 10, 1788. Little is known about his early life other than he was the ninth and youngest child born to Silas and Dorcas Green Mercer. He was left, at the age of eight, an orphan, in the care of his brother, Jesse Mercer. Joshua received a common school education, but never advanced to a higher school of learning. As a young man he was baptized by his brother Jesse into the Bethesda (GA.) Baptist Church. At age 20 (1808) Joshua Mercer married eighteen-year-old Mary D. Wells in Wilkes County. Between 1809 and 1830 the Mercers had nine children, which included six sons and three daughters.



After serving in the War of 1812, Mercer returned to making a living as a farmer and supporting his growing family. In God's providence Mercer surrendered to the call of the preaching ministry in 1830 at age 42 – old age by the standards of the day. He was licensed to preach in that same year and two years later he was ordained to the ministry.

In those days most Baptist preachers did not receive any compensation for their pastoral responsibilities, but were expected to work at a secular job, such as farming, to support themselves and their family. For five years Mercer served as a pastor and starter of churches in southwest and central Georgia, as well as a domestic missionary for the Georgia Baptist Convention.

### Traveling into the Florida Territory

Joshua Mercer apparently came to the Florida Territory first in 1835 as a domestic missionary sponsored by the Georgia Baptist Convention. The Executive Committee of the state convention in 1839 gave a glowing report on the missionary labors of Joshua Mercer: "In the southern part of the state he reports one hundred-and- sixty-two days labor in which he traveled eighteen hundred and fifty-five miles, preaching one hundred and seven sermons, baptizing thirty-one, and assisting in constituting one church, for which he received \$162.00."

The report on the work in Florida continued. “Brother Mercer states that he met with a family in this state in which there were two children fourteen years of age who had never heard a sermon, and that all the other children had never been to a [church] meeting.” Mercer reported the spiritual “destitution as vastly distressing.”

In part due to his itinerant preaching, when the Florida Baptist Association organized in 1843, Mercer was employed as a domestic missionary. He was assigned the task “to travel and preach in the destitute places in this Association and adjacent neighborhoods.”

### Observations about Mercer’s Ministry

Soon after the organization of the Florida Association, one of the pastors wrote to the *Christian Index* and reported: “One church, I believe the Campbellton Church, had been constituted, but for the want of regular preaching, it had become pretty much disbanded. About this time Elder Joshua Mercer came to Florida and commenced his labors, and to his indefatigable efforts we must attribute in a great measure the prosperity of our denomination.”

The letter writer described Joshua Mercer as “a man of a powerful and vigorous intellect, though he did not enjoy all the advantages of a finished education. His eloquence is of a superior order, and when he pours forth his meek and burning thoughts, clad in forcible language, one feels as though he was carried along on the bosom of a rapid but gentle stream. We had the pleasure of participating in several of Brother Mercer’s meetings. I heard him preach on one occasion and was reminded very forcibly of the distinguished Andrew Broadus, whom I heard in my native state.”

This correspondent went on to conclude: “For twenty-five years he has been proclaiming the truths of the Gospel, and according to the testimony of his works as well as of his brethren, he has used faithfully the sword of the spirit in fighting the battles of his Master.”

### Relocating His Family to Florida

Around March, 1843, a notice appeared in the *Georgia Christian Index* indicating that Joshua Mercer had moved from Baker county, Georgia, to Marianna, Jackson county, Florida.

In June of that same year, Mercer sent another letter to the *Index* to report on his missionary efforts and it was published two months later. “Our religious affairs are in a gloomy condition here [Florida]; and how can this be any better, if faith comes by hearing, and they have not the opportunity to hear. I am now on the west side of the Chattahoochee, and entirely alone, as a Baptist minister.”

Although he noted he could spend all his time as an itinerant preacher, Mercer said that he had to “maintain my family” which he was doing with the help of his youngest son Henry. He then called upon Georgia Baptists for missionary help. “The Baptists of Georgia are able to fill Florida with missionaries; and, brethren ought we not to do it? If we ought, shall we not do it?”

### Starting Churches and Serving as a Pastor

Mercer’s missionary endeavors led him, along with Thomas Lang, to serve as the presbytery that certified the formation of the **Union Academy** (later named **Greenwood**) Church in Jackson county on March 16, 1845. So committed to this newly established church that the Mercer family comprised eight of the nine persons who were the charter members. The Mercers included Joshua and his wife Mary Wells, as well as their three adult sons and three adult daughters. The one other charter member was pioneer resident Mary E. Horne.



This group then called Joshua Mercer to serve as pastor. Mercer served a total eight years at the Union Academy Church; first from 1845 to 1848 and then returned in 1851 and served until 1855 when he resigned.

Concurrently, with his service to the Union Academy congregation, Mercer served as the pastor of two other Jackson county churches: the **Bethlehem Church** (1844-1853) (now known as **Campbellton**) and the **Sardis Church** (now known as **Shady Grove**).

### **Denominational Leader and Educator**

With the growing number of Baptist churches being started in the Panhandle – many the result of Mercer's labor – Mercer led in the organization of the **West Florida Baptist Association** in 1847. He later served as its moderator from 1850-1859.

Mercer also is credited with establishing in 1851 what may have been the first school in Florida to be operated by a Baptist, the **Orange Hill Male and Female Academy**, in Washington County. The courses of study included English, Latin, Greek, mathematics, and music. This was in a day before free public schools existed.

When the organization meeting for the **Florida Baptist State Convention** was held November 20, 1854 at the Concord Baptist Church, near Madison, Joshua Mercer was one of the seventeen delegates present. He, along with David Porter Everett and G. W. Underwood, represented the West Florida Association.

Joshua Mercer continued to preach throughout West Florida until 1855, when he became an agent for the Bible Revision Association. As one of its agents, Mercer continued his itinerant travels to distribute the new versions of the Bible and preach until 1861, when declining health and the infirmities of growing old prevented further service in the ministry.

Mercer is believed to have died February 4, 1869, at age 81 [although some records reflect a January 4 death]. Family tradition notes that several Mercer sons transported Mercer's body (to be buried in Alabama), their grieving mother, and the senior Mercers' belongings from north Florida to the community of Gordon, Alabama, which is now located in Houston county. His wife Mary lived until 1880 when she died on September 17.

One unidentified writer, calling Joshua the "Father Mercer" of Florida, said Mercer "always showed himself a faithful, manly, Christian soldier, praying, preaching, toiling for the Redeemer's Kingdom. As a Baptist he was very sound in doctrine, and faithful in the duties of Christianity."

[RESOURCES: Donald S. Hepburn and E. Earl Joiner, *Favored Florida: A History of Florida Baptists, Vol. One: 1784 – 1939*; Robert G. Gardner, Charles O. Walker, J.R. Huddlestun, and Waldo P. Harris, *A History of The Georgia Baptist Association, 1784 – 1984*; "Joshua Mercer, The Pioneer Baptist Leader of Florida," Unpublished paper, no author, held in the Special Collections of Baptist and University Archives, Mercer University; James C. Bryant, *Indian Springs, The Story of a Pioneer Church in Leon County Florida*; *Minutes*, Union Academy Baptist Church (Greenwood, Florida); *Florida Baptist Witness*, January 4, 1923, March 19, 1925, and March 26, 1925; Edward Earl Joiner, *A History of Florida Baptists*; and selected Mercer family-related websites.]