

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

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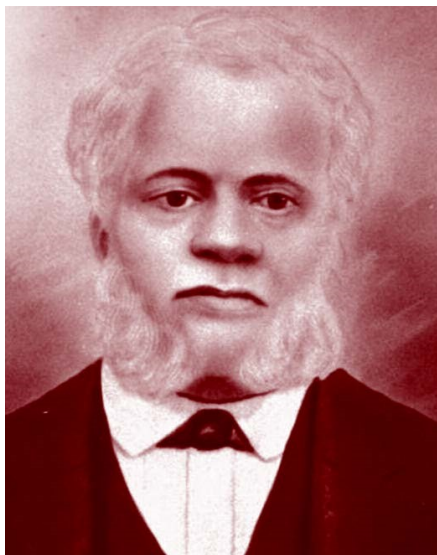
No. 4

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 2024, 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].

James Page: From Slave to Baptist Preacher to Church Starter

James Page (b. 1808; d. 1883) was an African-descendant slave in Middle Florida during the mid-nineteenth century who became a Missionary Baptist preacher who developed into one of Florida's most influential religious leaders of his day. However, this recognition was achieved only after nearly three decades of effectively serving as a bond servant and minister helping other slaves cope with their forced servitude.

Born in Richmond, Virginia, on August 13, 1808, James Page's mother was a slave owned by John H. Parkhill. Page's father had been a free man, who drowned while attempting to go ashore in Liberia during a colonization movement. Little more is known about James Page's early life other than he married another slave named Elizabeth sometime before 1828. What is known is that the Pages were formally united into the slave entourage controlled by Parkhill, a Scots-Irish gentleman and native of Londonderry, Ireland. Parkhill developed a prosperous dry goods store in Richmond, before he followed the migration of other Virginians into the Florida Territory. In the Middle Florida region – situated between the Suwannee and Apalachicola Rivers – the presence of plentiful, inexpensive and fertile land offered great potential for developing a significant farming enterprise.



Settling in Leon County, John Parkhill acquired land south of Tallahassee that he developed into a plantation called Bel Air. This site became the permanent home for James and Elizabeth Page. **At Bel Air, James Page was trained as a gardener, carriage driver, and as a "body servant" to Parkhill. In the role of personal servant to Parkhill, young James Page had the unique opportunity to talk with and learn many things from his master. Additionally, John Parkhill took it upon himself to teach reading and writing to James Page, a luxury to which few slaves had access.**

Initial Religious Training

To his credit, John Parkhill wanted James Page also to undergo religious instruction and training. Part of this desire may have grown out of Parkhill's designation as a Presbyterian elder soon after he settled in Florida. The religious instruction was enhanced

as James Page drove the carriage to transport Elder Parkhill to many Presbyterian Church gatherings. These travels afforded the two men opportunities to discuss the Bible and other spiritual matters.

Although the event is not recorded, James Page made a profession of faith in Christ and sought to follow his earthly master by becoming a member of Leon County's First Presbyterian Church. Unfortunately, at the time, Presbyterian church tradition did not permit African-descendant persons to join the church. As historian Larry Rivers observed, "Presbyterians may have been less harsh in their treatment of slaves, but their attitudes included exclusionary doctrines." **As a consequence, Page sought membership likely in the Tallahassee Baptist Church, which permitted membership, but not a say in the church's administration. The church body did encourage him to respond to God's call to the preaching ministry.**

Florida's Second Black Ordained Preacher

James Page was greatly influenced by the spirit of God moving in his life. He started an ongoing preaching ministry at Bel Air, in which **Page led the slave community to organize in 1850 the first known uniquely Baptist African-descendant congregation in Florida.** It was called the Bethlehem Baptist Church at Bel Air Plantation [pictured]. However, it functioned under the oversight of the Baptist Church of Tallahassee, until after the Civil War. John Parkhill reportedly donated a parcel of land on his plantation on which the Bethlehem Church was constructed. And surprisingly, the friends of John Parkhill provided financial assistance to underwrite the church building's construction, in part for their respect for James Page and "his influence on all their servants."



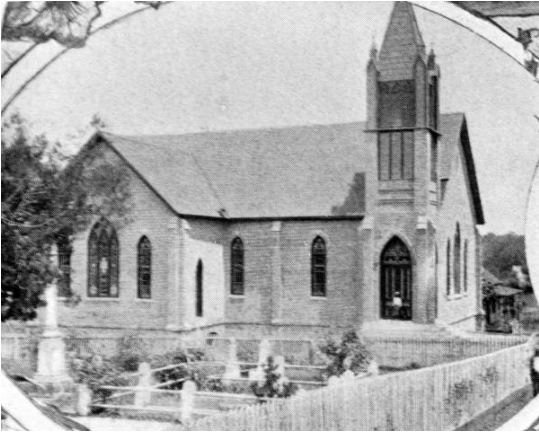
This recognition of James Page's pastoral abilities and gospel preaching among the slave community was further endorsed by many leading Anglo citizens. Among those were James E. Broome (Governor-elect of Florida and a founding member of the Tallahassee Baptist Church) and Benjamin F. Whitner, who provided letters of recommendations for James Page's ordination. Subsequently, **Page was ordained in August, 1851, in an ordination service conducted by a presbytery comprised of Anglo Baptist ministers who assembled at the Newport Baptist Church of St. Luke, Wakulla County.** This action would have made Page the second known African-descendant person in Florida to be ordained as a missionary Baptist minister. The other known **Black preacher was a slave named Austin Smith who had been licensed and ordained by the Baptist Church in Key West in 1843.**

An Effective Evangelistic Preacher

The evangelistic abilities of James Page were chronicled in a *Wakulla Times* article which reported, "On Sunday last twelve Negroes were baptized in the St. Marks River by the Reverend James Page." Continuing, the article noted, "He is one of the most popular colored preachers hereabouts and often has many white people to hear him preach." Another report made several years later **in 1852 indicated that during a Sunday service held on one of many plantations, 41 slaves made professions of faith and were baptized by Page.**

The Start of a Church that Multiplied

By 1853, Page began conducting prayer services for bond servants living in Tallahassee, while continuing his pastoral responsibilities at Bel Air. This ministry in Tallahassee would ultimately result in the establishment in 1870 of another uniquely African- descendant congregation called the



Bethel Baptist Church [pictured], where Rev. Page subsequently served 27 years as pastor. According to McKinney and McKinney's account of James Page's life, "In the course of time, ten or more churches throughout the [Leon] county were organized from Bethel, but all looked to Father Page for advice and counsel in matters of doctrine or church polity."

"Freedom" of an Itinerant Preaching Ministry

Page expanded his itinerant ministry by visiting most of the plantations in Leon County at least one Sunday a month. With the untimely death in 1854 of plantation owner John Parkhill, James Page was designated as the "protector,"

business manager and confidant of Parkhill's widow, roles Page would fulfill for the remainder of his life. **Probably because of this position of trust, Page was granted a rare freedom of movement experienced by few bond servants in the South.** In response to the demand for his ministerial services, James Page was permitted to travel freely throughout Middle Florida, and eventually traveled to Key West and as far north as Thomasville, Georgia. It is notable that between 1856 and the late 1870s, Pastor Page and the Bel Air and Bethel churches were cooperating members of the Florida Baptist Association.

Organizing an Association and State Convention

Following the end of the Civil War, with 28 known black Baptist churches located across the Florida Panhandle, **Rev. Page led in 1869 the establishment of the Bethlehem Baptist Association. This was the first association for the African-American Baptist churches of North Florida. The 12 cooperating churches participating in the association's organization, reported a total membership of 3,150.** Subsequently, with an increased growth in the number of African-American churches across Florida, in 1874 James Page led in the organization of the Florida Bethlehem Baptist State Convention.

According to Larry Rivers, the Bethel Baptist Church and pastor James Page hosted the January, 1880, Florida Baptist State Convention annual meeting. Although African-Americans had developed as many as eight black-majority Baptist associations by 1883, these associations continued to cooperate and report on their 168-member churches and their 71 ordained ministers to the Florida Baptist State Convention. However, by the mid-1880s, these black majority associations had withdrawn their affiliation and united with the black Baptist state convention.

Sermons Focused on the Life to Come

Little is known of the messages preached by James Page. Those sermons probably did not challenge slavery, but the messages may not have been as predictable as some slaveholders believed. Plantation owners who permitted Page to have access to their slaves sought to ensure that Page's ministry involved only 'correct' religious doctrine to make certain that their slaves kept their attention upon a heavenly reward, after their earthly labors. As a consequence, **when Anglos were present at the slave worship services, "preachers such as Page usually taught and preached salvation and obedience . . . At other times their words gained greater passion and appeal as they spoke directly to the hearts and souls of their fellow bondservants."**

On a few occasions plantation overseers blamed the preaching of James Page for the rebellious actions of their slaves. Yet, despite these rare accusations, **Page's reputation for faithfulness and trustworthiness, as well as his demonstrated evangelistic commitment, served him well.** In contrast to the more sedate Anglo worship services at which Page occasionally preached, the slave-run worship services featured an emotionalism bolstered by loud praying, shouting, dancing, and music. Many plantation owners and overseers viewed with fear and suspicion "the intense emotional style preferred by their slaves."

Freedom as a Man and Preacher

Legal emancipation for James Page probably did not come any earlier than it did for all of Florida's slaves. Although President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation became effective January 1, 1863, freedom officially did not come until two years later. That occurred on May 20, 1865, when Confederate Florida formally surrendered to Union Brigadier General Edward McCook at the state capitol in Tallahassee. And yet for many slaves, full citizen rights were not officially sanctioned until ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (December 1865) which finally outlawed slavery. But until that day, Page continued his steadfast itinerant ministry of proclaiming the gospel of Christ among Middle Florida's plantations' bond servants.

Page's Influence Grew Beyond the Local Church

To a large degree, Page understood and took advantage of developing friendships with political leadership, particularly Republicans, who had had an instrumental role in the liberation of former slaves. **His affiliation with the G.O.P. brought lucrative jobs including service as a Leon County commissioner, voter registrar, chaplain, and justice of the peace.** During his lifetime, James Page is credited with other achievements that included, in 1879, the founding at Live Oak the Florida Institute, the predecessor to Florida Memorial College now in Miami; and in 1880 he participated in the organization of the Foreign Mission Convention [a missionary sending agency] that was one of three groups that subsequently formed the National Baptist Convention of the United States, Inc.

James Page's Gospel preaching ministry and life came to an end – March 14, 1883 – five days after delivering his final sermon at the Bethlehem Church at Bel Air.

[RESOURCES: Larry E. Rivers, *Father James Page: An Enslaved Preacher's Climb to Freedom*, (2021); Larry E. Rivers, *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation*, (2000); Larry E. Rivers, "Madison County, Florida – 1830 to 1860: a case study in land, labor, and prosperity," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 78, 1993; Larry E. Rivers, "Baptist Minister James Page," Mark I. Greenburg, William Warren Rogers, and Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida's Heritage of Diversity: Essays in Honor of Samuel Procter*, (1997); George P. McKinney and Richard I. McKinney, *History of the Black Baptists of Florida, 1850 – 1985*, (1987); Leslie L. Ashford, "Loyal to the end: the life of James Page 1808 – 1883," *The Journal of Negro History*. Vol. 82, Issue 1, 1997.]