

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

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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].

Jesse Goodman – Itinerant Preacher/Pastor-Elder of the Elizabeth Church, Monticello

After nearly six years of informally being led in worship, the group of Baptists chose Missionary Baptist itinerant preacher Jesse Goodman to serve as their pastor. Goodman's call as pastor followed the official organization of the Church of Christ at Elizabeth (as it was then called) held April 12, 1834. **That made Elizabeth Church the seventh earliest Baptist church established in the Florida Territory.**

Jesse Goodman (b.1790; d.1844), was born in Effingham County, Georgia, as the son of David and Jane Goodman. The assumption is that Goodman's younger years likely were spent working on his family farm. By age 19 he joined and was commissioned as a Lieutenant in the Bulloch County (GA.) Militia. These militias were formed to provide protection to the county's inhabitants against attacks by the Creek Indians.



Jesse Meets Zilpha Wise

Typically, the militia service involved being on maneuvers for several weeks or months at a time, which kept Goodman in Bulloch, Bryan and Screven counties. While on leave Goodman likely met and became acquainted with Zilpha Wise (b. 1793; d. ca. 1850). Zilpha was the eighth of nine children of William and Margaret Wise, who in 1794, had moved from South Carolina to Screven County, Georgia. In a most unusual set of circumstances that are not clearly detailed in history resources, Zilpha, at age 18, was unmarried with a young boy named Jared. But despite the social stigma and the negative religious attitudes toward a young woman in such a circumstance, **Goodman demonstrated not only the highest degree of Christian charity, but he acted as a gentleman and certainly with much love, to proceed in 1811 to marry Zilpha.**

The child, named Jared Wise Everett, was left with his maternal grandfather William Wise as a guardian, when the Goodman family re-located to Bulloch County.

From the time of his marriage and for the next seven years, Goodman and his wife likely lived and worked on his father's farmland, which was a typical practice for several generations of a given family to live and work together during this period. Later, Goodman had saved enough money to purchase several parcels totaling 500 acres of land located on both sides of Bulloch County's Black Creek. This fertile land produced cotton and cash crops until 1823 when Goodman sold all 500 acres. The time between planting and harvesting made it easier for itinerant preachers, such as Goodman, to travel for several weeks at a time to preach the gospel.

Jesse and Zilpha together had twelve additional children – ten in Bulloch County, Georgia, (between 1812 and 1830) and two born in Jefferson County, Florida (in 1833 and 1839 respectively).

The Upper Black Creek Church Influence

Little is known about Goodman's church attendance during his youth until age 12 when his family at some point joined the Upper Black Creek Baptist Church, the only Baptist church in the sparsely populated southeast corner of Bulloch County, located just 30 miles northwest of Savannah. The church was constituted on August 15, 1802 in the home of John Albritton, and subsequently was led by Matthew Albritton. The church became a significant influence, both for the cause of Christ in south Georgia and likely the conversion and future Christian ministry of Jesse Goodman.

Called and Licensed to Preach

Unfortunately, no known record exists that explains Goodman's experiential call to the ministry. What is confirmed in the *Minutes*, of the Upper Black Creek Church, dated **March 21, 1821, is that Goodman and fellow member Henry Melton each shared with the congregation their experiential spiritual calling and God-given "gifts" for the ministry.** The record notes the congregation's judgment was that, "after due consideration, we find it necessary to set them apart for the ministry giving them legal license to preach."

The following month, Goodman served as moderator of the Upper Black Creek Church's May 19 meeting, during which he was presented "the license of our Brother Jesse Goodman to liberate him to preach the Gospel wherever his lot may be cast."

Typically, men "called by God" to the preaching ministry, were not formally educated, but rather only needed to have an "experience" of the call of God upon their lives. This experiential calling would be given as a testimony before an "in order" Baptist church. The church members, would prayerfully determine the validity of the testimony, and if satisfied would affirm the man's "call" by first issuing a license to preach, followed, in time, by an ordination performed by other pastors or elders as they were called.

Up until the end of the nineteenth century, men responding to the call of the pastoral ministry did not necessarily receive formal theological training. Primarily, their pastoral training came as a result of their own intensive study of the Bible and being mentored by an older, more experienced pastor-elder. Likely Goodman was tutored by Matthew Albritton who was becoming a prominent Primitive Baptist pastor-elder in south Georgia.

Serving as an Itinerant Missionary Preacher

By 1823 Goodman had accepted an invitation to serve as a part-time bi-vocational pastor of the New Providence Church (org. 1811) located in Wilkinson County, Georgia. The Sunbury (Ga.) Association also had employed Goodman as their itinerant missionary, beginning in 1823 until possibly 1828. In the nineteenth century it was the practice that Baptist pastor-elders, were not paid for their ministry service. Rather they were expected to have a "tent-making" employment to provide the financial support of their family. In those days many elders were farmers who served one or more churches during the month.

Without an existing collaborating record, it is believed that as a part of his itinerant preaching circuit, Goodman travelled in southeast Georgia as well as the southern counties of South Carolina.

An unnamed friend wrote in a later obituary published by *The Christian Index*, that Goodman did much missionary work in South Carolina, south Georgia and the Florida Panhandle. He wrote, that although **Goodman's fields of ministry presented "many and great discouragements, yet he never relaxed his efforts."** The writer went on to observe that, **Goodman "seemed patient, zealous, and confident, that his Divine Master would not only bless his own labors,** but would change the general state of affairs in the country for the better."

Following his missionary service in South Carolina, Goodman's preaching circuit took him into present-day Lowndes County, Georgia, where he served as pastor of the Bethany Baptist Church (org, 1829) into the early 1830s. Lowndes and its neighboring counties of Echols and Clinch all had southern boundaries that nestled against Florida Panhandle counties. That close proximity likely gave Goodman his first opportunity to venture into the Florida Territory and share the gospel.

Goodman's Ministry in the Elizabeth Settlement

As an itinerant preacher, Goodman would travel to a settlement (typically a cluster of homes and farms) and conduct a preaching service by sharing the gospel. **Most of the time, if there appeared interest and spiritual response among the people, the itinerant preacher returned with some frequency to again proclaim the gospel message.** Sometimes if enough existing Baptists and new believers in Christ agreed, efforts were made to establish a Baptist church.

In a curious history footnote, the *Minutes* of the "Old Union" Church in Lanier County, Georgia, where Matthew Albritton also served as pastor, has the following entry: "In August, 1829, a request was received from 'a people in Jefferson County, East Florida,' and ministerial aid was sent to them." Although the group was not identified, typically a request for ministerial aid generally indicated that the group either wanted someone to come and preach or they wanted a presbytery of pastor-elders to organize a church. Given the long friendship between Matthew Albritton and Jesse Goodman, it raises the possibility that Goodman was asked to return to the Elizabeth settlement.

Although there is no known printed record, likely **Jesse Goodman had previously gone to the Elizabeth settlement in Jefferson County, as early as 1828.** This fact is substantiated by a family oral tradition that identifies James Walker and his wife both made a confession of faith at a preaching service led by Elder Goodman and both were baptized in 1828. Having found a fruitful spiritual field with a nucleus of relocated Baptists from South Carolina, Goodman, returned frequently, beginning in 1831, to lead once-a-month worship services for the community.

During the ensuing years, Goodman was preparing to move his family to Jefferson County. And during this time Goodman and members of his family were becoming acquainted with the Hillery Whitehurst family which had been in living in Jefferson County by the 1830 U.S. Census. This relationship between families grew to the point that Hillery's son Andrew J. Whitehurst (b. 1817; d. 1870) became engaged to and then married on April 3, 1834, to Mahalia Goodman (b. 1816), the oldest daughter of Rev. Goodman. **The wedding occurred the week prior to the organization of the Church of Christ at Elizabeth** (as it was then called) held April 12, 1834. The small gathering of new church members chose Jesse Goodman to serve as their part-time pastor.

Based upon family birth records and public property records, the Goodman family relocated to live in Jefferson County sometime between 1832-1833.

Service in Other Churches

Goodman's service to the Elizabeth Church lasted about one year. There is no known record of why Goodman resigned his pastoral role, although it likely was due to health issues he suffered as he got

older. **Now at age 45, Goodman was considered “old” and more susceptible to ailments not treatable by early-nineteenth-century medical standards.** And certainly, in the interest of financially supporting his family, Goodman had to commit himself and his young adult children’s time and energies to grow and sell crops.

Although the record of other churches makes it apparent that “God was not done using” Jesse Goodman. In September, 1841, Goodman served as a member of the organizing presbytery and was one of the six charter members that organized the **(First) Baptist Church at Monticello**. He did not accept the call to serve as pastor. However, several years later, Goodman accepted the call to serve as pastor of **the Indian Spring Baptist Church**, located in the Miccosukee area, Leon County.

On April 19, 1844, at age 57, Jesse Goodman died in Leon County.

[RESOURCES: Linda Gramling Demott and Donald S. Hepburn, *Elizabeth Baptist Church: The Story of a Pioneer Baptist Church on Mission: 1831 – 2023*, (2023); Folks Huxford, *Pioneers of the Wiregrass, Vol. 1* (2009); Folks Huxford, *Pioneers of the Wiregrass, Vol. 2* (2011); John Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South* (1998); *Minutes*, Upper Black Creek Primitive Baptist Church, Bulloch County, Georgia; *The Christian Index*, July 12, 1844; *Minutes*, Sunbury Baptist Association, 1823; Folks Huxford, *The History of “Old Union” Primitive Baptist Church of Lanier County, Georgia* (n.d.); Samuel Pasco, “Jefferson County, Florida, 1827 – 1910, Part 1,” *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 2.; and James Bryant, *Indian Spring: The Story of a Pioneer Church in Leon County, Florida* (1971).]