

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].

Frank Faris – The Missions' Leader Who Provided Basic Education for Untrained Preachers

"Without him the school would not have been born, or lived. Energy, thought, prayer, miles of travel, teaching and whatever else was needed he gave freely," was said about Frank Faris former, superintendent of missions for the South Florida Baptist Association. The person who made the complimentary observation was T. S. Boehm (b. 1907; d. 1971), the longtime pastor of the First Baptist Church, Lakeland. And the school being referenced was the then named Florida Baptist Institute, which was the predecessor to today's Baptist University of Florida.

The then called Florida Baptist Institute, established September 7, 1943, was the result of the vision and committed efforts of the then association superintendent of missions Frank Faris (b. 1888; d. 1975). Faris was what many would call a "good ole boy," not because he was born and reared in the South. Rather, because Faris was an unassuming man – although his 6'1" height caused him to stand out in a crowd – whose life's work up until 1924 was that of primarily a blue-collar worker who ended up in Kathleen, Florida, as an automobile mechanic.

Faris' Early Years Lacked Education, Faith and Focus

A native of Bristol, Tennessee, where his mother was a devout Catholic and his father was an Episcopalian, Frank Faris did not have a personal faith. And he would pursue a young life of many "careers" before surrendering his life to God's call. Although he attended school in West Virginia, he never advanced further than his junior year in high school. But surprisingly, Faris briefly studied medicine during the days when a person did not have to attend medical school, but learned the medical arts by "hands-on" experience gained as an apprentice to a doctor. He eventually attended the Piedmont Medical School in West Bluefield, West Virginia, 1901 – 1903, before dropping out due to lack of finances.



Faris subsequently worked on the railroad, in a saw mill, mined coal, learned to operate heavy construction equipment, and eventually became a master mechanic. He joined the U.S. Army where he was assigned to the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps. At that time, he “met and became acquainted with the Wright Brothers, Orville and Wilbur, builders of glorified kites known as airplanes!” Faris explained in an interview with Hal Bennett, who wrote a history on the Baptist Bible Institute.

During his military service Faris became a flight instructor at Carlstrom and Dorr Air Fields in Arcadia, Florida. At the end of World War I, he left the Army and opened a garage in Kathleen Florida, about eight miles north of Lakeland.

A Midlife Encounter with God

Finally, at the age of 38, Faris attended a revival service held in Kathleen, led by Rev. A. A. Mathis, a pastor from Fort Meade. Faris, having been moved by the spirit of God, made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Within a year Frank Faris responded to God’s call to the preaching ministry.

Having surrendered to God’s call to be a preacher, Faris was well aware of his limitations caused by his lack of any formal ministerial training. He struggled between 1926 and 1930 trying to self-educate through Baptist Sunday School Board church study course books. About that time, several pastors began a school, popularly known as the “Strawberry Seminary,” in part because it was located in Florida’s Strawberry capital of Plant City. Teaching the courses were pastors from Plant City and Tampa area churches.

Unfortunately, Frank Faris encounters with the pastor-teachers resulted in conflict as he took issue with both their theology and philosophy of education. Faris felt he needed practical help in how to be an effective pastor and preacher. But according to Faris, “All these were hyper-Calvinists who taught the Calvinists approach to the great Bible doctrines of Baptists,” he later told Hal Bennett. After less than a month, Faris withdrew from the classes. He later recalled, “I think it was then that BBI was born in my heart on account of my need at the time and could find no help for me.”

First Pastorate at Dover

In 1935 the First Baptist Church, Dover, called Frank Faris to serve as pastor. The invitation to Faris followed his preaching a missionary message during the annual association meeting. **His initial response to the Dover leadership was “that he was not looking for a church to pastor,” the Dover church history reports.** He told the leaders he had a garage in Kathleen which was a fulltime job and provided him \$40 or more every day. The following month (November) Faris was invited to preach at the Dover church. The church members voted to extend the invitation to Faris to serve as pastor of the part-time church until the end of the year at a salary of ten dollars per week. Faris agreed and ultimately continued to serve the church until 1941.

In the course of his pastoral career Faris served as pastor of Green Pond Baptist Church, Polk City, Clay Sink Baptist Church, Seffner Baptist Church, Richland Baptist Church, Zephyrhills (1934-1935), and First Church, Dover. During his retirement years he served several interim pastorates including First Church, Cottondale (1955-56), Gibsonia Church, Lakeland and Lena Vista, Auburndale.

The South Florida Baptist Association

A major change occurred in Frank Faris’ ministry career when in 1941 the South Florida Baptist Association called him as its superintendent of missions. The association was comprised of 62 primarily rural churches, many of which met less than four Sundays a month. The association covered Polk and the eastern side of Hillsborough counties. In this new ministry assignment, Faris would visit the cooperating churches. **Those visits and conversations with the pastors provided to him a first-hand look at how these churches were struggling in various ways with pastoral leaders that were untrained and without sharpened pastoral skills.**

Bennett reported that Faris, who grieved over the pastors' dismal lack of training and skills, decided to start a pastors' school that soon had "become a sort of obsession" with him by 1942. Faris held a passion and commitment to help his fellow rural pastors who were undergoing some of the same pastoral struggles he experienced, in part due to a lack of ministerial skills and training. Faris' initial effort to start a school was met with indifference by the local pastors and never got off the ground.

A Visionary Joined Forces with a Scholar

However, Faris' enthusiasm and vision were not easily defeated. He soon found a single pastor who grasped the vision and need as laid out by Faris. T. S. Boehm, pastor of First Church, Lakeland "succumbed to Faris' infectious enthusiasm for the projected school." Boehm held a college degree and both the Th.B. and Th.M. degrees from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. **To this new partnership, Faris brought enthusiasm and vision while Boehm brought stability, scholarship and denominational recognition. And in "God's timing," the Florida Baptist State Convention also had undertaken a commitment to provide training for the many rural pastors** – not just in west-central Florida but across the state – who lacked any or minimal formal education. Now the two men had "formal denominational support" to proceed.

On July 6, 1943, Faris and Boehm presented their proposal to the Executive Committee of the South Florida Association. Their modest proposal was a request to "appoint and instruct a committee to investigate the starting of a pastor's school and library in connection with one of our seminaries." The motion was approved unanimously.

Subsequently Boehm was named dean of the school and Faris was designated as the enlistment agent to seek out pastors who would enroll in the institute designed to provide training for "full-time Christian workers." On September 7, 1943, The Florida Baptist Institute opened with 20 students and six volunteer teachers. Two years later the school's name was revised to Baptist Bible Institute of Florida, until 1947 when the "of Florida" was deleted.

Although the subsequent years were filled with challenge and financial hardships for the school, the dream and passion of Frank Faris to establish a school for Christian workers, lived on and eventually matured in an institution of higher learning that today is The Baptist University of Florida.

[**RESOURCES:** Hal Durwood Bennett, Jr., master's thesis on "The Foundation of Baptist Bible Institute" (1973); W. Wiley Richards, *Telling the Story of Jesus*, (1993); Roger C. Richards, *Still Telling the Story of Jesus* (2018); Judith R. Jolly, *Richland Baptist Church 1885-2010*; *First Baptist Church, Dover, 75th Anniversary history* (1979); Biographical files, Florida Baptist Historical Society.]