

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

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Volume 16

November, 2024

No. 11

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].

Georgia-based Pastor Robert Fleming Served as the Second President of The Florida Baptist State Convention

This November 11-12, will mark the 170th annual meeting of the Florida Baptist State Convention since founding in 1854. When the organization meeting was held in Madison, November 20, it was hosted in the plantation home of Richard Johnson Mays. The seventeen representatives from three associations elected Mays as the convention president in recognition of his leadership in bringing about the state convention. Unfortunately, the records of the annual meetings of 1855 and 1856 are lost to history and there are no supplemental records on who was elected as president. Although it could be reasonably assumed that R. J. Mays continued as president, if not as the "father-leader" during those two years.

However, the 1857 annual meeting was significant in two ways. It was the only time the state convention meeting was held outside the State of Florida, specifically in Georgia. And the second significance was that a Georgia bi-vocational pastor – Robert Fleming – was elected to lead the convention during that year.

Florida Baptists Only Meeting in Georgia

During the period from 1843, when the Missionary-oriented Florida Association was organized, until the start of the Civil War, churches in Georgia and Alabama along the border with Florida typically would cooperate with one of the three Florida Baptist associations – Florida, West Florida and Alachua.



As a result of the number of Georgia churches cooperating with one of the Florida-based associations, many of those churches naturally participated in the Florida Baptist State Convention. In response to the number of cooperating churches in Georgia, delegates to the 1856 annual state convention approved a recommendation to hold the 1857 convention meeting at the Baptist Church in Thomasville, Georgia. Fleming often served as an appointed delegate – but not as pastor – representing the Thomasville church which cooperated with

the Florida Association beginning in the 1850s. Likely Fleming urged the convention to hold its 1857 annual meeting at the Thomasville church. Fleming's reputation as an effective and well-known itinerant preacher/pastor in south Georgia and north Florida made him a preferred choice as state convention president.

However, the responsibilities of the state convention president were mostly ceremonial, as it is today. Beyond serving as the presiding officer of the annual state convention meeting, President Fleming did not have an opportunity to make an indelible mark on the state convention organization. Although it was a high and rare honor to be elected to the post.

According to Florida Baptist Historian Earl Joiner the 1857 state convention was equally noteworthy because delegates (as they were then called) voted to appoint a board of directors to manage the mission efforts and business affairs of the state convention. That group was the forerunner to the 1880 creation of the State Board of Missions.

Robert Fleming's Early Life

Robert Fleming (b. 1797; d. 1880) was a native of Warren County, Georgia. His father Samuel Fleming (b. 1760; d. 1844) had migrated from Ireland to Georgia by 1830. Robert's mother, Mary Grier (b. 1762; d. 1832), whose family also had migrated from Ireland, was born in Pennsylvania. Samuel and Mary married in 1784 in Jefferson, Georgia, and had seven children, including Robert.

From an early age Robert Fleming demonstrated an interest in reading books having purchased his first book, "Webster's American Spelling Book." **He formally completed his education at age 17 and soon embarked upon a career of teaching. In those days, advanced training, let alone a degree, were not required to teach basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. Despite not having formal training, Fleming was considered an excellent English scholar which was reflected in his teaching.** In the course of his career Fleming wrote several small publications, which included the "Elementary Spelling Book." Among the works with a religious theme were: "John's Baptism;" "Life of Rev. Humphrey Posey;" and the "Georgia Pulpit," which was a collection of sermons.

A Compelling Voice from Heaven

In 1820, at age 23, at a revival camp meeting held by Methodist Pastor Rev. James O. Andrew, Fleming became convicted of his sin nature. **He later reported, "The necessity of a divine mediator, of a divine atonement, of a divine righteousness – the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ – was most powerfully presented.** I felt that I was entirely unfit to appear before God in the judgment. I was without God and without hope." This was a message with implications which Fleming had not heard while growing up in a family of Irish Presbyterians.

Intrigued by the Sunday night's message by Rev. Andrew, Fleming returned to the Monday night revival session to again hear from Rev. Andrew. However, the voice he subsequently heard was not Rev. Andrew's, rather a spiritual voice that challenged Fleming: "*You are a lost sinner; none but God, who made you, can save you.*" The young man fell back in his seat, overcome by emotion and began to cry uncontrollably. Several ministers gathered around Fleming to pray for the young educator. By his own account, Fleming said it was, **"some months later that I fully embraced Christ Jesus as my Saviour, and was able to leave all my interests for time and eternity to His hands,"** according to a history written by J. H. Campbell.

“It was by searching the scriptures, especially by reading prayerfully the 6th chapter of Romans,” Campbell related, that Fleming, “became convinced of the truth of Baptists” teaching and preaching. In June, 1821, Fleming was baptized into the Union church, Warren County, Ga. During the next six years later, through pray and scripture study that matured his Christian walk, resulted in Robert Fleming realizing that God was calling him into the ministry. In November, 1827, Fleming was licensed to preach the gospel.

An Itinerant Baptist Preacher

After several years of itinerant preaching, that further confirmed his ministerial calling, Fleming in 1830 was ordained into the pastoral ministry. Fleming filled his Sundays by preaching in churches across south Georgia’s Wiregrass between Thomasville and Brunswick. Some of those churches which met once or twice a month called Fleming to be their regular parttime preacher/pastor. As a bi-vocational minister, Fleming continued his full-time teaching career in the Georgia counties of Warren, Merriweather and Talbot.

In Campbell’s biographical profile of Fleming, he said Rev. Fleming, “preached laboriously and successfully. Few men of his day were so particular in the preparation of their sermons. He frequently wrote them in full, which not many ministers of that day had either time or inclination to do.”

Another observer of Fleming’s preaching ministry, as noted in a *Christian Index* biography, reported, **“As a preacher he excelled until after he passed the zenith of his ministerial life. He was always sound to the core in doctrine and occasionally, up to the very last of his pulpit life, he would rise into flights of eloquence truly sublime.” His spellbound oratory often resulted in children, men and women responding to the conviction of sin in their life.**

Florida Association Involvement

Although Fleming served as a school teacher and itinerant preacher, by the 1850s, the Thomasville Church, in Thomas County, Georgia, had become his home church. His first involvement in the Florida Association was in 1854, which was held in the Concord Church, Madison County, that was across the road from the Richard Johnson Mays home. Clifton Mansion hosted the organizational meeting of the Florida Baptist State Convention in that same year.

During the 1850s and up until at least 1862 (records for the subsequent years are lost to history) Fleming was active in the Florida Association. When the association in 1857 established a Bible Society to aid in securing funds to send “the Holy Scriptures to our own land and to other lands,” Fleming served as Society president for several years. Twice he was selected to bring the “Introductory” sermon as the opening feature of two separate annual meetings (1856 and 1862). And for several years, Fleming was among a group of pastors who were appointed as association delegates to the state convention annual meeting.

Fleming Family Life

Robert Fleming was married three times, all of his wives having pre-deceased him. Those Georgia women and the marriage dates were: Elizabeth Gunby (1822) in Columbia County with whom they had three children; Charlotte Sherwood (1829) in Putnam County; and a widow with a son, Rebekah Ann Baldy Harris (1845), with whom they had three daughters.

Third wife Rebekah Ann died in 1871 after 26 years of marriage. Fleming getting older (age 74) and suffering from poor health, moved to Texas to live with a daughter. At age 83, in 1880, Robert Fleming died in Navasota, Texas.

[**RESOURCES:** *The Christian Index's History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia* (1881); J. H. Campbell, *Georgia Baptists: Historical and Biographical* (1874); E. Earl Joiner, *A History of Florida Baptists* (1972); Florida Baptist Association *Annals* 1854 through 1861; Florida Baptist Historical Society files; and some family biographical information sourced from [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com).]