

Florida Baptist Historical Society Biography Collection

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Smith, Austin the first African American preacher of record in Florida. Smith was a slave who, in 1843, had been licensed and ordained to preach by Charles C. Lewis at the Key West church. He served as interim preacher for the African Americans and conducted prayer meetings each week.

Favored Florida

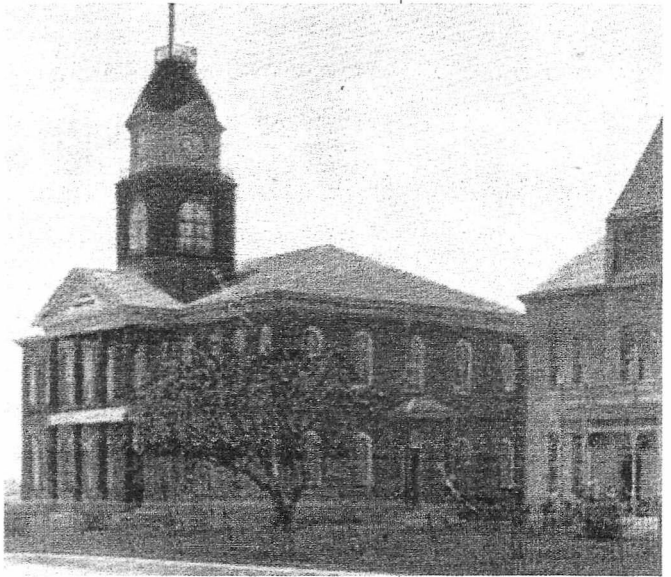
A LEGACY OF FAITH AND PRACTICE (1821 – 1839)

constituted the new church were J. H. Breaker, Ben Sawyer, O. T. Braman, J. A. Wolfe, Asa Sawyer and Elim Eldridge. The congregation then called Lewis as pastor and ordained him. By April, the congregation had 23 members. But the ill health of Lewis' wife caused him to return to Connecticut. He subsequently became pastor of the Asia Minor Baptist Church (later to be called the Second Baptist Church) of North Stonington, Connecticut. Inasmuch as there were no Florida associations with which the Key West Church could affiliate, they applied for membership in the North Stonington Union Association of Connecticut and were received.

G. G. Tripp became the Key West church's pastor in November 1843, and the following year he organized one of the earliest Sunday schools in Florida. Tripp led an effort to construct a church building and decided to go to Connecticut to raise funds. He met with little success in the fund solicitation effort, abandoned the work and never returned to Key West. Without leadership, the Sunday school died, and the church struggled to survive.

In October 1845, Horace D. Doolittle brought together the scattered Key West flock, consisting of Anglos and African-descendants. He observed better discipline and faithfulness among the African-descendants than among the Anglos. Prior to Doolittle's arrival, while the church was without a pastor, the African-descendant members continued to hold prayer

meetings each week and heard preaching by **Austin Smith**, a slave who had earlier been licensed and ordained to preach by Charles C. Lewis. With the help



The Monroe County Courthouse in Key West served as the early meeting site for a group of Baptists who organized a church March 11, 1843. The contemporary descendant of the congregation is the Hispanic White Street Baptist Church.

Epist Church, Key West, Fla.



Favored Florida

ORGANIZED TO SERVE (1854 - 1879)

and in a number of instances slaves were among the founding members of Baptist churches.

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. 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 these 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. As noted in Chapter Two, a slave named Austin Smith was licensed and ordained by the Baptist Church in Key West in 1843.

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FLORIDA'S FIRST BAPTIST GOVERNOR

James E. Broome was elected as Florida's third governor and served from October 3, 1853, to October 5, 1857.

Prior to his election, Broome was one of the charter members of the First Baptist Church, Tallahassee. On November 10, 1849, the church was established by Broome and eight other persons including: Theodore W. Brevard and his wife Catherine; Hugh and Sarah Archer; Robert B. Hilton; Mrs. E. Swicord; Mrs. M. A. Corley; and Miss Catherine Smith. James Broome and Theodore W. Brevard were chosen as deacons.

It would be two years before the congregation called its first pastor, Rev. J. T. Zealey. By 1853 the church reported a membership of 109.

In 1853 Broome was elected Governor of Florida and his friend and fellow deacon

Theodore Brevard was elected comptroller.

Broome was a native of Hamburg (the Edgefield District), South Carolina, having been born December 15, 1808. He migrated to Tallahassee in 1837 to work as a merchant.

During his career in Florida, Broome married five times and amassed one of the largest plantations in the state.

During his tenure as governor, Broome was a strong advocate of states' rights and garnered the honor of having vetoed more acts of the Legislature than any of his predecessors. He died in 1883.



in the state grew.

Early African American Baptists in Florida

While the earliest African Americans to embrace Christianity in Florida were runaway slaves attracted to Catholicism, in all probability the first Baptists in the territory were African American. African American Baptists had been around since 1639 in Providence, Rhode Island. There had been African American Baptist churches since 1756 at Lunenburg, Virginia; 1773 at Silver Bluff, South Carolina; and 1778 at Augusta, Georgia. It was a matter of time before African American Baptists arrived in Florida. According to Florida Baptist historian Dr. Edward Earl Joiner, "No one knows for certain exactly when the first Baptists set foot on Florida soil, but it appears possible, even probable, that some of the first Baptists were Southern slaves who had escaped to promised freedom under the second and last period of Spanish rule (1738-1821)."² Based on the scholarship of Joiner, it is possible to conclude that the African American Baptists were probably the first Baptists in the state. Certainly they were among the first. So, African American Baptist roots go back to the earliest Baptist presence in Florida.

Very little is known about these earliest African American Baptists of Florida, since their story is almost totally lost to history. However, we do know that they held meetings in St. Augustine in 1784.³ They were runaway slaves from Georgia or South Carolina attracted to Florida by promised freedom from the Spanish. Their names and dates are unknown. Their work was undocumented. However, their presence laid the groundwork for the foundation of African American work in the state.

Nineteenth Century Florida African American Southern Baptists

This section will be characterized by listing significant facts about Florida Baptists and the African American community

The nineteenth century was a period of significant African American presence among Florida Baptists. The greatest percentage of African American presence in the history of the Florida Baptist State Convention occurred during the nineteenth century. Some significant facts are:

- *The first established Baptist church in Florida was integrated.* The Pigeon Creek Baptist Church, organized in 1821, was the first Baptist church in the state, and had at least one African American member, Peter Lopers.⁴ Lopers joined the Pigeon Creek Baptist Church in Nassau County near what is now Callahan on July 22, 1822.⁵

- *African Americans comprised forty-six percent of the membership of the Alachua Association when it was organized in 1847.* In the twelve churches there were 230 African Americans out of the total of 500 members.⁶

- *African Americans were part of the first Sunday School in the state.* When G. G. Tripp organized the first Sunday School at Key West Baptist Church in 1844, African Americans were part of the membership.⁷

- *African Americans were the most faithful members of the first Sunday School in Florida.* When H. D. Doolittle reorganized the Sunday School at Key West Baptist Church in 1845, he observed better discipline and faithfulness among the African Americans than among the whites.⁸

- *The first African American preacher of record in Florida is Austin Smith.* In 1843 Smith was licensed to preach by the Key West Baptist Church under the pastorate of Charles C. Lewis. During the period when the church was without a pastor, he served as interim preacher for the African Americans and conducted prayer meetings each week.⁹

- *Most Florida Baptist churches were "integrated" during the nineteenth century.* Joiner states, "Integration in the churches, moreover, was the rule rather than the exception. Negroes held membership in most Baptist churches in all areas, often outnumbering white members."¹⁰

Sid Smith