

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 2026, the LEGACY monthly issues will feature brief personal profiles of those men and women whom we call:

“Florida Baptists’ Heroes of the Faith.”

This month’s “Heroes of the Faith” are the several Oklahoma-based Seminole Indians who served as missionaries of the Gospel of Jesus Christ who brought the message of hope to share with their Florida Seminole brothers and sisters.

Sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with the Florida Seminole Indians has been a daunting challenge, given the language barrier between the Seminoles and English-speaking people. The language barrier is even more challenging inasmuch as the Seminole language has



no alphabet and cannot easily be translated into an English word equivalent. However, that has not stopped Baptist missionaries from attempting to fulfill the Great Commission by going into the South Florida Everglades.

The Florida Peninsula’s Early History

The Seminoles, who had migrated into the Florida Territory from Georgia, established their first community in present day Alachua in 1740. However, foreign settlers had also landed on the peninsula and established military outposts along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. The first were the Spanish, followed by the British, and then again by Spain. Those combined occupations in Florida lasted from 1528 to 1821. Both groups – as they established settlements and encouraged American settlers to move into the territory –

used armed force to push the Seminoles, the Calusas, the Timucuan, the Guale's and the Apalachees Indians further inland and south into the Everglades.

Spanish explorer Pedro Menendez de Aviles in 1565 made the first recorded commitment to bring Christianity to the Florida peninsula. Although his primary effort consisted of Catholic priests serving the needs of the personnel assigned to the Spanish military outposts, efforts were made to convert the Indians. Later during the 17th century, for example, Spanish priests tried to evangelize three groups of Indians: the Timucuan, the Guale's and the Apalachees. That effort, in part hampered by language barriers, was met with resistance by the Indians who would not respond to the priests' attempts to impose codes of Christian moral conduct.

The United States government, eager to bring Florida into the United States negotiated with Spain the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819 in which the Territory of Florida was officially ceded to the United States. The official transfer of sovereignty, which occurred July 17, 1821, set into motion events that would eventually make Florida a state by 1845.

The end of Spanish control of the territory in 1819 also brought an end to most, but not all, Catholic influence. By 1822 as organized groups of Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians and their adherents became established, the religious groups began to flourish in the territory. Some early Presbyterian and Baptist ministers initially attempted to convert the Seminoles from their cultural practices to Christianity. Unfortunately, in 1838 the U.S. military, at the direction of President Andrew Jackson, undertook a massive re-location of Native Americans living in the south. Tribes from North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Florida were forced at gunpoint to move to a new western homeland called the "Indian territory" (now the State of Oklahoma.) The tragic "Trail of Tears" forced march was made by 3,000 Seminoles and 16,000 Cherokees.

Oklahoma Missionaries to the Seminoles

It was not until nearly a century later before an earnest effort to share the Gospel with the Florida Seminoles occurred. Around 1907, Seminole Indian missionaries from the Creek Tribe in Oklahoma came to Florida to evangelize the Seminole and Miccosukee Indians. One such Oklahoma missionary was **Rev. Andrew J. Brown** who delivered his first sermon at Indian Town (located 22 miles south of Jupiter). Brown and fellow missionary **Rev. W. L. Joseph** traveled on an ox-drawn wagon to take the Gospel to the Seminoles villages scattered throughout the Everglades. There were many hardships and struggles for these early missionaries, but they persevered for about one year. Brown and Joseph returned to Oklahoma to seek additional missionary preachers.

In 1909, under the sponsorship of the Indian Baptist Church of Oklahoma, Brown returned to Florida leading another group of Oklahoma Seminole ordained preachers. Those men were **George Scott, John Wesley and Daniel Long**. Accompanying the missionaries were seven Seminole women, who were unnamed [see picture above].

Once the missionary group returned to Oklahoma they reported their activities. Unfortunately, the church was unable to underwrite another missions group. However, the **Creek, Seminole and Wichita Baptist Association**, which was comprised of

26 Seminole Baptist churches, agreed to accept the mission opportunity to evangelize the Seminoles of Florida. Beginning in 1912, and continuing for several decades, the association sent out missionary groups comprised of ordained ministers: **Byer Beaver, George Washington, William Green, Henry Land, Wille King and Stanley Smith**. Some churches in the association decided to also send persons to help. Those were: **Albert Stake, Charley Bowers, Jerry Morris, Alfred Goat, Martin Goat, Lewis Brown and Abe Marks**. [Because the U. S. government administrators of the Oklahoma Indian reservations could not spell or pronounce the family-given tribal names, young children were given randomly chosen English names.] **Alfred and Martin Goat reportedly baptized the first Seminole Indian converts to Christianity in Florida.**

Additionally, the association's women's group over the ensuing years sent several women to aid in ministering to the Florida Seminole women. Those volunteers included: **Mrs. Elsie M. Guinn**, a non-Seminole, who was a Moody Bible Institute graduate; **Mrs. Lena King; Mrs. John Smith; Mrs. Susie Ewin; Miss Minnie Deer; and Mrs. Stanley (Nancy) Smith (who would later return with her husband as a Southern Baptist-appointed missionary).**

Despite the dedicated evangelistic efforts of the Oklahoma missions group, the Florida Seminoles were slow to respond. To accept the gospel message was not easy to understand nor embrace as a lifestyle. So the few "successes" of the missionary effort could only be measured in one changed life at a time.

State Convention Considers a Missionary to the Seminoles

Concurrent to those Oklahoma Seminoles' missionary endeavors, in 1913, a special committee of the Florida Baptist State Convention, was considering similar missionary outreach. **Arcadia pastor A. J. Holt**, who had served as a missionary among the Indians of the West, reported on a Convention-directed study committee's preliminary investigation of sending missionaries to the Seminole Indians of Florida. The committee said that "the Seminoles were hostile because of the way the 'white man' had treated them." As a consequence, the report suggested that it would be unwise to send an Anglo missionary to the Indians. Instead, the committee proposed that the best missionary approach would be made by working through the Southern Baptist Home (now North American) Mission Board to secure a Christian Indian from among the Seminoles in Oklahoma to work among the Florida Seminoles.

Additionally, in 1914, the State Convention passed an unusual resolution protesting the expropriation of Indian lands by the State of Florida and asking that the land be given back to the Seminoles for a home. In 1916, the State of Florida complied with the State Convention request, and the Federal government also gave additional land to the tribe.

However, a world war and subsequent national economic crises delayed the State Convention's implementation of the missionary effort to the Seminoles. In fact, it was

not until 1938 that the Florida Baptist Convention leadership in discussion with the leadership of the Creek, Seminole and Wichita Baptist Association agreed to jointly fund

the salary of **Rev Willie King as the full-time missionary to the Florida Seminole Indians.**

First Seminole Indian Church Organized

This agreement followed on the heels of the organization of the First Seminole Indian Baptist Church on June 7, 1936, established in Broward County. The pastor was **Rev. Willie King, a Creek Indian, under the sponsorship of the Creek, Seminole and Wichita Baptist Association**, who for years had been coming to Florida visiting and preaching in the Seminole camps. Assisting King was **Amos Marks** another Oklahoma Seminole. The church building was located five miles west of Dania on Stirling Road, just east of the entrance to the Indian reservation. King whose tribal name was Weele Micco, served until 1943.

King's ministry field was all around Lake Okeechobee, where he visited the Seminole villages and camps, speaking to the Seminoles in their native language, and even providing health care for some sick Indians in a small hospital room in his house. For many years King traveled around the lake in his 1930 automobile that he literally wore out. Then in 1938-39, a fund drive led by the Florida W.M.U. raised money to purchase a 1939 Ford for King's use.

In 1943, the Home Mission Board sent another Creek Indian couple **Stanley and Nancy Smith**, to assume the missionary work begun by King. Smith's tribal name was Nokus Fixico, which means "nothing to talk about but Jesus." Rev. Smith assumed the pastor role of First Seminole which had dwindled to 11 members. However, within a few years, Rev. Smith leadership and outreach caused the church to grow. His first male convert was Joe Bowers, who subsequently was ordained as a deacon of the church in July 1944. During the six years of leading the church, Smith had baptized 221 Seminoles, mostly women and children.

Before he left the church to return to Oklahoma in 1948, **he ordained Billy Osceola to serve in ministry and had licensed to preach Sam Tommie, Josie Billie and Morgan Smith, all prominent Seminole Indian leaders.** Two of the men ordained or licensed by the church later served as pastor of First Seminole Indian Baptist Church: Sam Tommie (1950 – 1958) and Billy Osceola (1958 – 1971).

The next missionary couple sent by the Home Mission Board in September 1951, to work among the Seminoles were **Rev. Genus and Carolyn Crenshaw** of Kentucky. The couple had recently graduated from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Between their graduation and their appointment to Florida, they worked in New Mexico with the Pueblos and Navajos. The couple served in the Seminole community and church until they retired in 1983. Given the number of native Seminoles pastors serving in the several Seminole reservations, no additional missionaries were appointed in the years ahead.

[RESOURCES: *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, 2000; John C. Hillhouse, Jr., *We Came from Many Nations*, (1998); Donald S. Hepburn and Earl Joiner, *Favored Florida: A History of Florida Baptists; Vol. One, 1784 – 1939*, (2013); *Florida Baptist Convention Annuals, 1913 and 1914.*]