

LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the *legacy* forged by the people, churches and events in Florida Baptist history. During the next several months this newsletter will feature those churches and their leadership who between 1821 and 1849 contributed to the development of the Florida Baptist State Convention. Each monthly issue will feature at least one church established in the 1820s, 1830s and the 1840s respectively. **While dozens of Baptist churches were established during these decades, most have not survived time. The featured churches continue to function in 2020.**

Florida Territory Missionary Baptist Churches Established in the 1820s

[We have concluded narratives on all the known churches organized in the 1820s that continue to function in 2020](#)

Florida Territory Missionary Baptist Churches Established in the 1830s

[Jacksonville: Bethel Baptist Church and the First Baptist Church – 1838](#)

The organization of the first Baptist church established in the Jacksonville community is the first known example of a church that was racially integrated during its first 30 years, but by 1868 was divided into two separate, but equal congregations – the Bethel Institutional Baptist Church and the First Baptist Church – both of which continue to function 182 years later to the present day.

The original church – called **Bethel Baptist Church** – was organized August, 1838, as a result of the efforts of itinerant missionaries James McDonald (1798 – 1869) and Ryan Frier (1800 – 1890). Six persons – four Anglos and two African slaves – constituted the church. Those charter members were McDonald and his future wife Teresa Amada Pendarvis, Elias G. Jaudon and his wife, and a slave of Jaudon, named Peggy (Barton), and Baccus a slave of William Edwards. The church's first building was a small wooden structure that had a seating capacity for 100 persons, including a segregated gallery for the slaves' seating. McDonald continued to serve as part-time pastor until 1846. During the ensuing years – which included



Jacksonville: Bethel Baptist Church



Jacksonville: First Baptist Church

regular changes in pastoral leadership – the church moved to different locations in the downtown area. Finally in 1861 the congregation secured a property site on Church Street between Julia and Hogan Streets, which continues today as the church’s location.

After the Civil War, in 1867, the now designated African-Americans, which numbered over 250 members, decided they would take administrative control of the church and its property. The 40-plus Anglo-American members refused to yield control. In an 1868 lawsuit filed by the African-Americans members, a court agreed that the larger number of African-American members gave them the greater rights to assume full control of the church property.

In a subsequent agreement, the Anglo-American members purchased the church building and property and later in 1877 renamed it the **Tabernacle Baptist Church**. In 1892 the church was renamed as the **First Baptist Church**. In 1903 the church constructed a stone structure sanctuary (pictured) – named in honor of its pastor W.A. Hobson – which replaced an 1893 brick structure destroyed by the Great First of 1901. The church retained its affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Meanwhile the African-American members, who retained the church’s name **Bethel Baptist Church**, used the \$800 in sale proceeds to purchase a property at the corner of Main and Union Streets and built a chapel. The Bethel Church called as its first pastor Rev. Cataline Simmons, who served for the next 12 years, while growing the membership. Subsequently in 1895 the church constructed a brick structure which, like the First Baptist building, was destroyed by the Great First of 1901. The rebuilt church building was the sanctuary (pictured) which was officially renamed and incorporated in 1921 as the Bethel Institutional Missionary Baptist Church. The church is affiliated with the National Baptist Convention.

Florida Territory Missionary Baptist Churches Established in the 1840s

Callahan: Live Oak Baptist Church – 1845

Nassau County in the northeast corner of Florida was so designated in 1821 the same year the first Baptist church in the Florida Territory – Pigeon Creek – was organized. By the 1830s, the Kings Road had been cut through the pine forests providing a north to south roadway, with connecting trails and paths leading to the several small settlements along the St. Mary’s River and a few of its tributaries. Upon these trails travelled itinerant Baptist preachers, including James McDonald and Kinsey Chambers (1814 – 1889). McDonald is credited with starting a number of churches in Nassau and Duval counties, including the Bethel Baptist Church in Jacksonville in 1838, and the Sharon Baptist Church in present-day Callahan in 1841. During the early 1840s, McDonald was regularly preaching at 17 congregations, seven of which he served as pastor. Chambers was the organizing pastor of the Ephesus Baptist Church at King’s Ferry (in present day Nassau County) in 1845. The timeframe places both men in the proximity to make them likely to have organized the present-day **Live Oak Baptist Church of Callahan** in 1845.

Oral history contends that in 1845 a Baptist church was organized in western Nassau County along what was called Dyal Road. There are no surviving available records that detail the organization of the church or its charter members. The church may have been called the Dyal Church, because of its location and it is believed that a one-room log cabin church house was initially constructed for its use. It is reasonable to assume that James McDonald and Kinsey Chambers could have been the ministers in the presbytery that organized the church. Also it is likely that this church was one of the 17 congregations that McDonald led monthly worship services. As was typical for many early churches, the Civil War likely caused the church to disband until sometime in 1869 when WPA records indicate the church resumed meeting in a schoolhouse. By 1885 a cemetery located next to the church site – called Dyal – was established when the first recorded burials occurred.

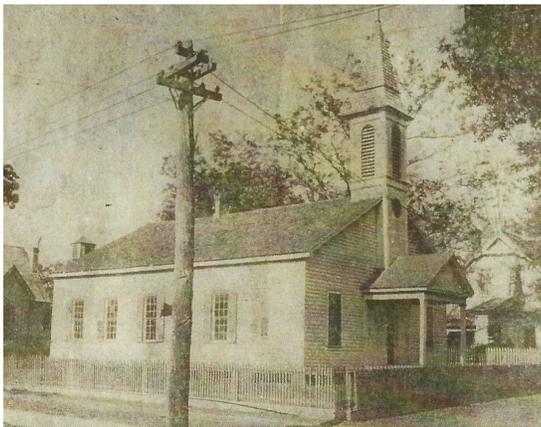


In 1903, B. G. Dyal deeded two acres of land to the congregation where the first permanent church sanctuary was built. In September 1995, the original sanctuary was moved and the foundation was poured for a new sanctuary. The Live Oak church continues to function in 2020 and will observe its 175th anniversary.

Milton: First Baptist Church – 1845

The Baptist Church at Milton, in the Florida Panhandle, was likely organized by itinerant missionary Alexander Travis (1790 – 1852) who was commissioned by the Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Association of Alabama. Travis initially concentrated his missionary efforts in the Alabama counties of Conecuh and Monroe. This itinerant missionary subsequently preached and organized churches in Pensacola, Walton County and present-day Santa Rosa County, where the settlement of Milton was located. No specific details are known about the church’s organization or its charter members, although it is likely the organizing presbytery consisted of Alexander Travis and later designated itinerant missionary Joseph Mitchell (1816 – 1891).

The existence of the Milton church is confirmed by the 1845 annual minutes of the Bethlehem Baptist Association of Alabama which note that “petitioner letters were received from newly constructed churches of Evergreen, Milton, Blakely, Pineville and Stockton.” These churches were accepted as cooperating members of the association. Delegates from the Milton church were J. Savel and A.S. Cobb (who may well have been charter members of the church) who reported that 16 had been baptized that first year and there were “32 white members and 16 colored members.” The following year – 1846 – the church reported to the association that 18 had been baptized, 23 received by letter, for a total membership of 72. By 1848 the church had grown to 106 members, which included 16 baptized and 22 received by letter.



The Bethlehem Association in 1850 expressed its missionary burden and zeal for the spiritually destitute areas of West Florida “especially Pensacola and Milton and parts of Covington and Butler counties in Alabama.” Later in 1858, Domestic Missionary Joseph Mitchell advertised for a pastor who was “An educated Baptist minister to take charge of the Baptist Church in Milton, Florida.” Mitchell sought either a single man or a married man with children whom. Mitchell said, either could “be sustained.” No follow-up report was noted. The church likely was served by an itinerant missionary preacher who held monthly services. Following the Civil War, the first pastor of record was Rev. George W. Kierce, who served from 1867 to 1870.

This series on early churches continues next month