

By L. S. Walker

B. M. A. OF MISSISSIPPI CONSTITUTED IN 1806

Mississippi Baptists have a great heritage - one of which every true Baptist should feel justly, humbly and gratefully proud.

All the Baptists of Mississippi probably have a common heritage. Most can trace their lineage directly or indirectly back to the founding of Salem Church in 1791, and the churches composing the old Mississippi Baptist Association since 1806.- the Baptist Missionary Association of Mississippi, Mississippi Baptist Convention (SBC), American Baptist Association churches, Faithway Baptist Churches, and perhaps others.

The most historic of the several cooperative fellowships of churches in the State of Mississippi today is the Baptist Missionary Association of Mississippi (formerly the Mississippi Baptist Association, General Association of Baptist Churches in Mississippi and Mississippi State Baptist Association).

The Baptist Missionary Association of Mississippi was constituted as The Mississippi Baptist Association at a meeting of "messengers" representing five churches at Salem church in September, 1806. This was only thirty years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the birth of the Nation.

The BMA of Mississippi is one of the oldest State Associations in the United States. It is probably the oldest Association among Association Baptists.

The history of the BMA of Mississippi is rooted deeply in the rich history of Mississippi and the South.

Those early Baptists who had moved into the Mississippi Territory, and established the first churches, had been accustomed to cooperating with sister churches. The Baptists from the great Pee Dee River region of South Carolina came from churches that maintained fellowship in the Charleston Association. After the pattern of Baptist churches through past centuries, this was a typical

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form of organization of Baptist churches throughout the Colonies.

Salem Church was organized in the home of "Sister Margaret Stampley" with seven charter member under the leadership of "Elder Richard Curtis, Jr." in October, 1791. By 1798 there were six small churches: Salem, 1791; Bayou Pierre, 1798; New Hope, 1800; Bethel, 1800; New Providence, 1805; and Ebenezer, 1806.

As the number of churches in the Mississippi Territory increased, it was logical and according to historic practice for the leaders of the churches to plan for cooperation among the churches. It was fitting and appropriate that Salem Church should suggest to the other churches the desirability of a cooperative relationship. At the invitation of Salem Church, representatives from five of the six churches met a Salem Church in September, 1806, and organized the Mississippi Baptist Association. The churches sending "messengers" were Salem, New Hope, Bethel, New Providence and Ebenezer. The Bayou Pierre church did not represent in the Association until 1808. Thus the Baptist Missionary Association of Mississippi had its humble beginning in the historic organization of the old Mississippi Baptist Association at Salem Church in what is now Jefferson County (first called Pichering County) about 18 miles from Natchez. These few small churches were scattered in the general area of the old Natchez District in what is now southwest Mississippi.

While the Mississippi Baptist Association was the first and only Association in Mississippi for some fourteen years after its organization, we would, perhaps, think of the small fellowship of churches in terms of associational structure as in our time, as a "local" or "district" association. By 1820 there were about 42 churches cooperating in the work of the Association. These churches were spread over an area in southwest Mississippi from old Natchez south to St. Francisville, Baton Rouge, Washington and Tangipahoa Parishes in southeast Louisiana; from the Mississippi River on the west to east of the upper reaches of Pearl River to the east. Two other Associations, the Union and Pearl

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River, were organized in 1820.

Within a few years afterward, the Association was being disturbed by those holding views of cooperative work identified today as the modern "Convention" system. An abortive effort was made to organize a state general body along these lines in 1824. The leaders of the old Mississippi Association resisted, and this organization ceased to exist within three or four years. However, the present State Baptist Convention was organized in 1836.

The growth and increase in number of churches continued. By 1836 there were eight other Associations in Mississippi: The Union and Pearl River Associations both constituted in 1820; the Buttahatchie in 1825; Leaf River before 1829; Yazoo, 1833; Choctaw, 1834; Bethel, before 1834; and Yallahusha, 1836. All these local (district) Associations were either disbanded or merged with others later.

Among other local or district Associations organized soon afterward were the Judson in 1853, and the Hobolochitto in 1856. These are the two oldest of twelve Associations whose churches are now identified with the cooperative work of the Baptist Missionary Association of Mississippi. By this time the gospel was being preached in most every section of Mississippi and southeast Louisiana.

Such men as Zachariah Reeves, 24 times moderator of the old Mississippi Baptist Association; J. R. Graves, moderator during the Civil War years, and others who were always identified by their contemporaries as "Landmark" Baptists, were their leaders. These men all stood firmly in opposition to the modern "Convention" system of cooperative work.

The old Mississippi Association continued as "The State General work" to some. It was relegated to the status of a local Association in the minds of those sympathetic with the principles of State Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention.

To the honest and objective researcher tracing the history of our State Associational work, it can understandingly be confusing. The trail may, at first glance, seem blurred, but looking

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more closely, as a matter of historic principle and practice, one finds the trail clear and well-defined. The historical lineage of our State Associational work was never identified by prestige nor popularity, but rather by Biblical principles and practices. We submit therefore that our historical chronology is very clearly defined.

When the old General Association of Baptist Churches in Mississippi was constituted in 1855 under the able leadership of Dr. Nathan L. Clarke and others, it was simply the old Mississippi Baptist Association continued as the state-wide (General) body of old-line Association or "Landmark" Baptists. It was realized by some that the old Association was being swallowed up by the State Convention.

Clarke College at Newton was established after the turn of the century by the churches of old General Association under the leadership of Dr. Clarke, who never was in sympathy with the principles and practices of the State Convention. Clarke College was actually taken from our people, perhaps legally, but rather craftily at a time when the old General Association had become rather weak and compromising. Dr. Clarke was moderator of the Genetal Association in 1855 and for a long number of years to follow.

Elder James P. Johnston was a missionary for the churches of the old General Association throughout south Mississippi for most of his ministerial life. A man of great courage and deep conviction, he constantly warned the churches of the error of "Conventionism." He, like Dr. Clarke, and others of his time and before, was every wit an old-line Association or Landmark Baptist.

Brother Johnston was licensed to preach by Mt. Nebo (now First) Baptist of Bay Springs in 1850. He was ordained by the same church in 1853. He pastored the old church (constituted in 1828) for a long number of years according to Brother E. B. Cox in his book, "Life and Works of James P. Johnston."

When the old General Association of Mississippi began to compromise its principles, and cooperate with the State Convention work,

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our State Associational work once again suffered division as a result. Realizing that what had happened in the past may be about to happen again, old Mt. Nebo (First) Baptist Church invited the churches to meet with them in 1908 for a "re-organization" of the state associational work. From that time for a number of years our State Association was known as The Mississippi State Association of Baptist Churches. In the years which followed, the year-books showed various other modifications of the Association's name, adding or dropping such words as "Regular," "Missionary," "State," etc. which may or may not have been by official action of the body. In later years the original name, "The Mississippi Baptist Association," was again officially adopted. The old Association was familiarly and affectionately known by its historic name until 1969 when the name was changed to "Baptist Missionary Association of Mississippi."

We believe the spirit which moved men like Richard Curtis, Jr., William Hamberlin, Stephen DeAlvo, Moses Hadley, Thomas Mercer, Ezra Courtney, Zachariah Reeves, Nathan L. Clarke, J. R. Graves, M. P. Lowery, James P. Johnston, J. P. Martin, John Moffatt, and later C. A. Gilbert, J. E. Glenn, Marion Walters, D. N. Jackson, L. T. Simmons, and others, their associates and contemporaries, along with those people they pastored, still lives in a great host of true Association Baptists in Mississippi today! May God richly bless them, and may their tribe increase to the glory and in the service of our Lord!