

A DESERVED TRIBUTE TO OUR OLDER CHURCHES

As we approach the nation's bi-centennial we are reminded again of the great heritage of Mississippi Baptists. This heritage is reflected in a great measure in the life and labors of a large number of churches in the fellowship of the Baptist Missionary Association of Mississippi which have been with us for more than a century. It is these grand old churches we pay tribute to at this time. Only God really knows the impact and influence of these old churches on the winning of souls to Christ, the spiritual fervor of our people, and the moral fiber of the nation.

Just how long since the first Baptists set foot on the land now called Mississippi, no one knows for sure. In the later part of the 18th century a small band of hardy Baptists from the Great Padee River section of South Carolina made their way by flat boat down the Holston, Tennessee, Ohio and Mississippi rivers to the Mississippi Territory and settled in the old Natchez district along the Mississippi River. From this band of Baptists old Salem Baptist Church was organized in the home of Sister Margaret Stampley in October, 1791. The charter members were Elder Richard Curtis, Jr., Benjamin Curtis, William Curtis, John Jones, Ealiff Lanier, William Thompson and Margaret Stampley. According to the most authoritative history on Mississippi Baptists, this was the first Baptist Church established on Mississippi soil. This was some 26^{YEARS} before Mississippi became the 20th state in the Union December 10, 1817. The territory was then under (Spanish) rule and no other religion but ~~the~~ Catholic was allowed. (SPANISH)

Old Salem church, commonly known as "Cole's Creek," built its first house of worship of logs on the south fork of Cole's Creek in what is now Jefferson County about 18 miles from Natchez. From this humble beginning, there are now ^{MORE} Baptists in the State of Mississippi than all other religions combined.

The way has not been easy. It cost something to stand for truth and right. Many of those early Baptist settlers in the Natchez area were flogged at the public whipping post under orders of Roman Catholic officials for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They bore their cross and made no apology. Yes, Baptist blood has stained the fertile soil of Mississippi. Such persecution was the fuel which fired their zeal. They "ceased not to preach Jesus Christ" wherever and whenever they had opportunity. The greater the battle the more glorious the triumph.

The old Mississippi Baptist Association, the first associational fellowship established in Mississippi, was organized at old Salem church in September, 1806 with messengers from the following churches: Salem, organized in 1791; Bayou Peirre, organized in 1798; New Hope in Adams County, in 1800; Bethel in Wilkerson County in 1800; New Providence in Amite County in July, 1805; and Ebenezer in Amite County in May, 1806. Some historians give only five churches constituting the Association instead of six, leaving out Bayou Peirre.

From this humble beginning came the Baptist Missionary Association of Mississippi as we know it today. Let God be praised for His sustaining grace!

While some of the older churches have long since ceased to exist; others have found fellowship with later cooperative groups, there are a large number of older churches which have remained true to the Bible; to the faith of our fathers; true to historic Baptist principles and practices, never allowing themselves to be misled nor identifying with any other cooperative work than old-line Association Baptists. These have our admiration and deserve a grand salute. Our special bi-centennial salute is to a large number of churches in our state over a hundred years old.

Among these century and older churches are: Antioch Baptist Church near Soso which was organized in 1817; Farmington Baptist Church near Corinth, sometime before 1812; First Baptist, Bay Springs, 1828; Union, near Stringer, 1833; Unity, Guntown, 1840; First, Mantachie, 1843; Hopewell, Dorsey, 1843; First (Washington), Neely, 1845; First (Boguefala), Mooreville, 1848; Mt. Moriah, Ellisville, 1854; First, Louin, 1855; Palestine, Montrose, 1864; Shiloh, Mount

Olive, 1860; Bethel, Bassfield, 1869; Fairhope, Beaumont, 1870; Ten Mile, Wiggins, 1870; Sharon, Laurel, 1870; Oak Grove, Poplarville, 1871; First, Henleyfield, west of McNeill, 1874; Parkview, Laurel's oldest, 1875; Bethel, Dorsey, 1875; Big Creek, Soso, 1862; and Oak Grove, Mantachie, 1875.

There may possibly be others which should be added to the honor roll of century-or-more older churches which we salute on this Bicentennial of the Nation, the 185 anniversary of the founding of the first Baptist church in Mississippi, and 170th anniversary of the organization of the Baptist Missionary Association of Mississippi (formerly Mississippi Baptist Association).

In spite of all the human foibles which constantly jeopardize their peace and progress, there are many other great churches in the work of our State Association. But on this august occasion we pay due tribute to these older churches because they have been the foundation upon which we have built.

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