

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH IN MISSISSIPPI

The first Baptist church established in the "Mississippi Territory" and the entire State of what is now Mississippi was Salem, popularly known in her early years as "Cole's Creek Church," in the historic "Natchez District," in what is now Jefferson County, in October, 1791, before territorial days. A group of some thirty-five persons, mostly of the Baptist faith, left the Great Pee Dee valley in South Carolina, early in 1780, traveling overland by foot and horse-pack to the Holston River, then by flat boats down the Holston, Ohio and Mississippi rivers to a landing some 20 miles north of Natchez. This Great Southwest territory was then under Spanish rule, intolerant toward all except those of the Roman Catholic faith. The Baptists carried on their spirural activities in the homes of the people, and thus were not molested to any great degree for some time.

In October, 1791, they ventured to formerly organize a New Testament ^{CHURCH} in the home of Sister Margaret Stampley with seven charter members, namely: Richard Curtis, Jr., a licensed minister (later ordained by his home church in South Carolina), Benjamin Curtis, William Curtis, John Jones, Ealiff Lanier, William Thompson and Margaret Stampley. A memorial marker marks the site of the first house of worship on the south fork of Cole's Creek about 18 miles from Natchez. It was a common frontier type house constructed of logs.

The youthful preacher, Richard Curtis, Jr., the congregation's first pastor, visited zealously and boldly about the different plantations, and influenced two of the Catholic faith to become Baptists - William Hamberlin and Stephen DeAlvo - who he baptized

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in Cole's Creek. News of this spread beyond the neighborhood and came to the ears of the Commandant at Natchez. Curtis was given orders to cease violating the laws of the Province. Curtis also waxed bold enough to perform a wedding. The young lady in the ceremony was a neice of Brother Curtis. The activities of the preacher and others of his congregation hastened the day of persecution by Spanish Catholic authorities who ordered the arrest of Richard Curtis, William Hamberlin and Stephen DeAlvo. They were forced to flee the territory for a time.

Curtis was ordained by his home church while in South Carolina to escape arrest and imprisonment. He later returned to continue leadership of the young church. Another Baptist minister by the name of John Hannah, was publicly beaten and then imprisoned for preaching in old Natchez in 1797.

Welcome relief came when the Natchez Territory became a part of the United States and "Old Glory" was hoisted to wave gently in the sweet breeze of freedom.

Richard Curtis assisted in the organization of Bayou Pierre Baptist Church in 1798. He was a "messenger" to the Mississippi Baptist Association (organized in 1806) from New Hope Baptist Church in 1810 and 1811. He died October 28, 1811.

The church records show that Salem Baptist Church, at the time of her organization, adopted four "Church Rules," six "Rules of Discipline," and a "Church Covenant" and six "Articles of Faith." The membership of the church later included many negro slaves. The Mississippi Baptist Association, from which came the Baptist Missionary Association of Mississippi, was organized at Salem Church in September, 1806.

Internal strife over a period of several years, created irreparable division, and the church, all her glorious and eternal achievements notwithstanding, was disbanded August 29, 1834, but her work lives on.

The fire of faith lighted in the midst of Papal and pagan darkness has not been extinguished.

- L. S. Walker