

ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF THE CHURCHES

By L. S. Walker

Love for the souls of men; concern for their eternal welfare, has been the motivating force in the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in every land and every age. It is no less true in the propagation God's Word and the establishing of the churches in our country and in our immediate area.

Marching under the orders of the great Biblical Commission given by Christ Himself, men have hazzarded their lives to carry the message of salvation and life to men of every nation and tongue.

The origin and growth of the early churches in the area now known as Pearl River and Hancock Counties and surrounding territory to the east and west of Pearl River is likewise a story of men with a message and a mission to spread the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sometime between 1835 and 1840 an itinerant Baptist missionary from from around Osyka in Pike County, Mississippi, made his first trip on horseback east across Pearl Rvier and down the historic Columbia-to-Gainesville road which followed along the high ground east of the river into this section of the country, most of which was then Hancock County. This zealous and courageous minister was Elder W. H. Varnado (we use the Biblical, and then, familiar, term "Elder" for ministers since that was the title used for all Baptist ministers until near the close of the century in this country). It was under his firm and aggressive leadership that all the early Baptist Church^{es} were established in this area. From the time he first surrendered to the minister^{RY}, he actually lived to preach about 57 years in all.

There were relatively few settlers in this area at that time. A man had to be rough, rugged and ready to survive the kind of ministry the times demanded. The nation was young - sixty years or less

since we had become an independent nation. Mississippi had become the 20th state in the Union December 10, 1817 - only some twenty years before. Martin Van Buren was then serving as the nation's eighth president. This was some twenty-five years prior to the war between the states. There were no modern highways, and no means of modern conveyance. Only trails through the dense piney hills and river bottoms. There were no bridges. The streams had to be forded in whatever way a man knew how.

Preacher Varnado, like other ministers of his time, had to ride horse-back, spending many nights sleeping under star-studded skies and among friendly whispering pines along the creek banks and river ridges, or occasionally with an accommodating family along the way.

Most of those who had made a profession of faith or held church membership where they previously lived were either Baptist or Methodist. He conducted preaching services in the homes of the scattered settlers and at times ^N under brush arbors or other such provisions made by interested adherents to the gospel. His efforts were confined mostly to the area along Pearl River and along the east and west forks of the Hobolochitto Creek. His first preaching was done among settlers along the ~~west~~ ^{EAST} side of the old Columbia-to-Gainesville road west of what is now Nicholson. It was here that the first church was organized in 1842 with seven charter members. They were Thomas Stockstill and wife, Joshua Stockstill and wife, John Penton and wife and Elder W. H. Varnado. The new church was named Palestine. A minister by the name of Calvin Magee from Pike County assisted Bro. Varnado in the organization of the church which stands today on the south side of the road from Nicholson to Jackson Landing about a quarter of a mile southeast of the site of the first log house of worship. It is believed that Thaddeus Mitchell and his wife were the first members baptized into the fellowship of the church.

There were soon established a number of other regular or occasional places of preaching. These included Henleyfield, Yamacraw and Caesar. In the early 1940's there was a Methodist minister by the name of Lewis, a great friend of Brother Varnado's, who was also holding worship services at each of these communities. It is believed that Bro. Lewis was instrumental in establishing Byrd's Chapel Methodist Church north of Henleyfield sometime before 1850. This venerable Methodist preacher, ~~is it said, had charge some in the Morehey.~~

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it is said, had three sons who were ministers. It was Henry Lewis, believed to be a son or grandson of the elder Brother Lewis who ... establishing the First Methodist Church in Picayune with 30 charter members in 1913.

W. H. Varnado, "Uncle Billy," as he was later affectionately known by the multitudes who knew and loved him, was born in South Carolina March 5, 1804. He moved to Pike County with his parents by packhorses when he was only 5 years old, or about 1809. He grew up in Pike County where he was converted and baptized into the fellowship of Mount Olive Baptist Church. Not long after his conversion he made known his calling of God to preach the gospel. He was licensed to preach by Mount Olive church about 1839, two or three years after he surrendered to preach. He was ordained to the full work of the gospel by the Mount Olive Baptist church August 8, 1840. After a long and eventful ministry in which he was the prime factor in establishing most, if not all the early Baptist church^{es} along the east and west sides of Pearl River in Mississippi and Louisiana, He passed on to await the resurrection on July 28, 1893. He was buried in the Varnado cemetery, near his old home place east of McNeil. He became a legend in his time. He was a regular missionary Baptist preacher, listed in history as the first Baptist preacher in Hancock County which included about two thirds of Pearl River County. It was inscribed on his tomb that he was a "Landmark Baptist Preacher," that is, he never did agree with the work of the Southern Baptist Convention.

In the history of Mississippi Baptist Preachers by L. S. Foster in 1894, he is discussed as one of the great doctrinal preachers of his era. With a persuasiveness and power in his preaching that would often hold the attention of his audience as long as three hours at a time and the people desiring to still hear more from the venerable man of God. Many of the churches of this section of our country will find that he figured prominently in the establishment of a foundation work of God that was to live on and on. His messages seem to have been fresh from the Bible and straight from the Lord.

By 1849 there were two other churches - Bethel at Ricaville about 1847, and Elm (Bay St. Louis Post Office address) about 1848.

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While there had been a mission work at Caesar for several years, the Union Baptist Church was not formally organized until 1852 with ten charter members - Mr. and Mrs. Freeman Jones, Mr. and Mrs. Madison Holcomb, Mr. and Mrs. Noah Stanford, a Mr. and Mrs. Frazier, Joshua Stockstill, Sr., and H. L. Pearson.

Gainesville Baptist Church at old ^{As} Gain^eville and Juniper Grove Baptist Church south of Poplarville were both organized in 1855. Two other churches were organized in 1856 - Zion Hill and Salem. Zion Hill was first established near where Henleyfield First Baptist Church now stands. The Post Office address was Pinetucky, Mississippi. After a few years the church was moved east to a place just north of what is now McNeil. Later it relocated again to its present location east of McNeil. Salem was located to the south and east of the present Picayune area.

For a long number of years it seemed that Brother Varnado had the work of this area to attend to alone. Only Elder Calvin Magee, a Brother Vane, and occasionally others, to assist him with the burden of a growing responsibility of eight churches in the area in 1856.

FIRST MINISTER ORDAINED:

Brother Varnado had prayed for help. It seemed he had waited a long time. Andrew M. Slaydon was converted and was baptized by Bro. Varnado into the fellowship of Palestine church in the cool placid waters of Pearl River with 13 others in September, 1855. He was ~~was~~ licensed to preach by Palestine church in the same year, 1855. He was ordained to the full work of the ministry in 1856.

A. M. Slaydon was born in Texas September 15, 1826. His father was from Virginia. He was a professional dancing master who never made a profession of faith. His mother was Mary Bell who was raised on Bell Island west of New Orleans. She was a Methodist but later in life became a Baptist. Brother Slaydon was raised in Texas and southwest Louisiana. He surrendered to preach when he was 29 years old. He was active till near his death in 1898. He was a tower of strength for God in this section for some 43 years. He was the first ~~the first~~

missionary sent out and supported by the churches of the Hobolochitto Baptist Association. In my early ministry 30 to 35 years ago I heard many of the older men and women who knew him so well tell about his strong convictions and uncompromising stand on the scriptures. Most of them remembered the old iron-gray saddle and buggy horse which was his means of travel to and from his appointments.

He is well remembered by older masons of this section. He was Master of Moses Cook Lodge # 111, F & A .M. for a number of times. He was a leader in Masonic work here. In his autobiography in history of Mississippi Baptist Preachers (1894) it was said that he had only about seven weeks of formal schooling. He felt that God's call to the ministry deserved and demanded the best there was in a man. He applied himself. He was dedicated to his calling. He left his indelible mark in the history of God's work in this section. He helped in the organization of many churches in this area.

ASSOCIATION ORGANIZED

The Hobolochitto Baptist Association was organized with messengers from seven churches in a meeting at Palestine church in September, 1856. The churches were Palestine (now called Old Palestine), Bethel, Elem, Union, Gainesville, Zion Hill and Salem. Juniper Grove worked with the Association in the following years, but for some unknown reason was not in the organization of the Association at Palestine. Elder W. H. Varnado who had led in organizing Palestine and was its pastor for a long number of years, was elected the first moderator of the Hobolochitto Baptist Association. Elder A. M. Slaydon was elected the first clerk. Brother Varnado was chosen to preach on the historic occasion. He served as moderator until 1870 with the exception of one year when Bro. Freeman Jones was elected in 1865. Bro. Slaydon was clerk through 1864. The next annual session was held with Union church at Caesar in 1857. The third annual session convened with the church at Gainesville, and the fourth annual session was with Zion Hill in 1859.

MEMORIAL MARKER

On the south side of the lower or south Jackson Landing road about halfway between Nicholson and the Walker Hill stands a large granite memorial marker which was erected by the churches of the

Hobolochitto Association in 1956, on the occasion of the One Hundredth Annual Session held with the Mt. Calvary Baptist church in Picayune. The marker stands just 300 feet north of where the original log house of worship of Palestine church was, and where the Hobolochitto Association was organized.

The influence of these early churches and the persistent and powerful preaching of men like W. H. Varnado, A. M. Slaydon, Thedeaus Mitchell, R. R. Breland, W. W. Mitchell, Roland Burks, E. W. Moore, W. H. Adams, J. C. Seale and others was evidenced by other churches being organized and casting their lot with the old Hobolochitto. Pine Grove was organized in 1865 at Yamacraw. Oak Grove church was established in the Silver Run community east of what is now Poplarville in 1871. Henleyfield First Baptist was organized ^{with} eight charter members in 1874. They were George Mitchell and wife, Joe Burks and wife, Harvey Stuart and wife, and Hezekiah Wheat and wife.

Churches in Washington Parish in Louisiana had been organized and petitioned for fellowship in the work of the Hobolochitto by this time. In 1871 the number of churches west of Pearl River in Louisiana had increased sufficiently to organize a district association of their own. The West Pearl Association was organized that year. Eight years later, in 1879, the churches to the north and east organized the Red Creek Baptist Association. These two associations of churches still exist and carry on in the fellowship of the gospel in those areas. Where there was one small association with eight small churches in 1856, there was then, only 23 years later, three thriving district associations of churches in an area embracing the entire Mississippi Gulf Coast counties and Washington and St. Tammany Parishes in southeast Louisiana. This development restricted the Hobolochitto again to Pearl River and Hancock counties.

The minutes of the Association show that the churches up to and some time after the Civil War, listed both white and Negro members, but they were listed separately. For example: Pine Grove showed a membership of 53 in 1871 - 49 whites and 4 blacks. The two races, for the most part, sat in separate sections of the church house.

During the early 1880's the Salem church was received into the fellowship of Palestine church. Elim church desolved and lettered

~~out for members to various churches. The old Bethel church also
seemed to exist about this time. This fact only old Palestine~~

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out her members to other churches convenient to them. The old Bethel church also ceased to exist about this time. This left only Old Palestine, Union, Gainesville (name changed to Corinth in 1888), Juniper Grove and Zion Hill of the original eight churches which were organized by 1856.

The old minutes show some of the early post office addresses of the pastors and church clerks as Gainesville, Shieldsboro (Bay St. Louis), Riceville, Pearlinton, Chinquapin, Lacy (Carriere) and Pinetucky in Mississippi, and Sun, Franklinton and Shady Grove in Louisiana.

For some 75 years, or from 1842 till after World War I, the churches held worship services only once a month. Most of the early houses of worship were built of logs or rough hewn lumber with benches of roughly dressed timber with one side hewn flat and holes bored into the under side for legs, or later when nails were more available, crudely made lumber benches. Only tallow candles or kerosene lamps used for lights in those pioneers days. The children were put to sleep on pallets about the floor; and horses and wagons and buggys waited about the church grounds.

Elder W. H. Varnado was honored to serve as moderator of the Association 13 times. Eld. A. M. Slaydon served as moderator nine times and as clerk nine times. Elder J. B. Flanagan was elected moderator 9 times, and Eld. Thomas Dossett served 10 times. But it was Eld. J. Q. Sones who served longer than anyone else. He was elected moderator 22 times. Brother Sones was baptized by Eld. A. M. Slaydon in 1895. Bro. Sones pastored Sones Chapel church 46 years. Governor and United States Senator Theo. G. Bilbo, who was onced licensed to preach, was elected clerk of the old Association in 1901. P. R. Mitchell served as clerk 12 years, but it was Eld. August Holden who served as clerk more than anyone else - he served 14 years in all.

The late Eld. L. G. Varnado, grandson of W. H. Varnado, was licensed to preach the same year his grandfather died in 1893. He was active in the ministry until near his deathⁱⁿ 1967. He preached 74 years. This writer has never heard of anyone preaching that long.

ASSOCIATION DIVIDED

According to the Minutes, from about 1896, there was much confusion because of sharp disagreement over the issue of whether or not it was scriptural to cooperate with the work of the State and Southern Baptist Convention boards. This issue divided many good friends, including some ministers, into two opposing groups. The contention was courteous and orderly, but emotional and unyielding. The result was a division of the old Association into two cooperating fellowships in 1902: the Pearl River Baptist Association which has 32 cooperating churches, and the Hobolochitto Baptist Association with 31 cooperating churches. Some of these are out side of Pearl River County. There are 12 other churches in the county who do not cooperate with either group. They work with other groups. Of course, there are also a goodly number of Baptist churches among the Negro people. In all there are Baptist churches who cooperate with six or seven different groups.

Since that humble beginning almost 140 years ago with the preaching of William Henry Varnado, and the organization of the Hobolochitto Baptist Association 120 years ago, there are now, in this bi-centennial year, 1976, a total of 72 Baptist Churches in Pearl River County alone. There are 58 white churches and 14 Negro churches. There are, of course, many other churches representing several denominations in the county.

There are eight churches in Pearl River County which are well over one hundred years old. They are Old Palestine, 134 years old; Byrd's Chapel Methodist, about 129 or 130 years old; Union, 124; Corinth and Juniper Grove both 121; Zion Hill, 120; Pine Grove, 111; Oak Grove, 105; and Henleyfield First, 102 years old.