

Historically Speaking Cal.

By L. S. Walker

THE BAPTISTS COME TO THE MISSISSIPPI COUNTRY

About the end of the Seven Years War in 1763, France had lost most of her New World possessions, and Mississippi, as a British colony, came to be dominated by Anglo-Saxons. Hardy settlers from the older states, attracted by the promise of rich lands in the new southwest, made the perilous journey overland, and down the Holston, the Tennessee, the Ohio and the Mississippi rivers, braved the dangers of travel on the Natchez Trace, and were attacked by Indians time and again before arriving at their Promised Land. Here the Indians were a constant threat, and when Catholic Spain succeeded England in control of the Mississippi Country, rigid religious laws strictly prevented Baptist and Protestant settlers from holding services. Nevertheless, these early Americans to whom religious freedom was an inalienable right, drove a strong wedge of Baptist beliefs and Protestantism into the previously Catholic society, and with their Bible in their hands and hearts, swinging their handy axe, they cut, hewed and constructed crude but sturdy homes in the wilderness. Here they cleared and planted, and began a new life.

The Baptists, led by a strong and zealous young preacher by the name of Richard Curtis, Jr., later organized the first Baptist church in Mississippi in 1791. From that time forward the Baptist faith flourished in Mississippi, and the first association was organized in 1806 with five of the six churches then organized in the Natchez Country of the Mississippi Territory.

Exactly when the first Baptists may have arrived in the Mississippi Country is not known for certain. The first Baptist settlement noted as a matter of record in what is now Mississippi, was a group who migrated from the Great Pee Dee River Valley section of South Carolina in the year 1780. These included Richard Curtis, Sr.,

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and his wife; two brothers, William and Benjamin Curtis and their wives; Richard Curtis, Jr., and his wife; John Courtney and John Stampley and their wives (nee Hannah and Phoebe Curtis, respectively, daughters of Richard Curtis, Sr.); John Jones and his wife; Daniel and William Ogden and their families; a Perkins family and others.

After a long and hazzardous journey through the wilderness on foot and by pack-horse, then by flat-boat down the Holston, Tennessee, Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, they landed near the mouth of Cole's Creek about eighteen or twenty miles above Natchez. They made their way eastward along Cole's Creek in search of a favorable location for a settlement. Here they vigorously began clearing small patches of land for cultivation and the building of homes.

In spite of the laws which forbid all religious gatherings and services other than Catholic, these somewhat militant Baptists now believed that conditions were sufficiently favorable for the establishment of a New Testament Church. Accordingly, a group of seven people with letters from their churches in South Carolina met at the home of "Sister Margaret Stampley" on Cole's Creek in what is now Jefferson County for the purpose of formerly constituting a New Testament Church. This group of pioneers were: Richard Curtis, Jr.; William Thompson; William Curtis; John Jones; Benjamin Curtis; Ealiff Lanier; and Margaret Stampley. Richard Curtis, Jr., a licensed minister who later returned to South Carolina where his home church ordained him, was chosen pastor of the new church. William Thompson was elected recording clerk. The church adopted the name of Salem.

The young congregation adopted a set of four "Church Rules;" six "Articles of Discipline;" and a "Church Covenant."

Thus, the first Baptist Church in all of Mississippi was constituted in 1791 with seven charter members. The militant preaching of Richard Curtis, Jr. had resulted in the conversion of several

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prominent Roman Catholics who had been baptized into the fellowship of Salem Baptist Church. Among these were William Hamberlin and Stephen De Alvo. This had aroused the wrath and resentment of Governor Gayoso and the Spanish Catholic authorities. Arrest warrants were issued for Curtis, Hamberlin and De Alvo. Curtis had to flee through the wilderness to South Carolina for a time. It was during this flight from arrest and hard labor in the Mexican silver mines that Elder Richard Curtis, Jr, was ordained to the full work of the ministry before his return to the Natchez Country and his pastoral duties with Salem Church.

It is thought that it was during the absence of preacher Curtis that the congregation constructed their first crude log house of worship. Historians say that the humble house of worship of Salem Baptist Church stood among the "upper branches of the South Fork of Cole's Creek," in Jefferson County, on what is still known as "the Salem road."

By 1806 there ^{were} six churches in the Mississippi Territory. By 1798 the Mississippi Territory was under the firm control of the United States. By authority of the Salem church, under the leadership of Curtis and other members of the Salem church, Bayou Pierre Baptist ^{church} was organized on Friday before the third Sunday in August, 1798. Bayou Pierre church was organized in the home of Thomas Hubbard near what is now Port Gibson in Claiborne County. New Hope (in Adams County) was constituted in 1800; Bethel church (near Woodville in Wilkerson County) was constituted later in 1800; New Providence (Amite County) on July 27, 1805; Ebenezer church (Amite County), the sixth church, was constituted May 6, 1806.

1806