

Gleanings from the Annual Minutes
More Notes on the History of the
Union Baptist Association. 1835-1875
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One of the under-utilized resources of information about local and family history in the rural South is the minutes of the Baptist Associations. Here in Pickens County we are blessed with a complete set of minutes dating from 1835. Recently, I published an article surveying the earliest years of the Union Baptist Association. It focused on the controversy over missions among Baptists in the 1830s. In this article I will be picking up beginning in 1842 and taking note of the events reported in the associational minutes that seem to me to be of great local and historical significance on through 1875. I am projecting additional articles of this nature in the future. Note, the Pickens Baptist Association has the full set of minutes available. If you are interested in reading through them, just call and make an appointment.

1842. Grant's Creek, Tuscaloosa, joins from the Cahaba Association. This church continued for about 80 years in the association. Its pastor, Elder J.C. Foster was moderator of Union Association for 24 years. The missionary heritage of the association is closely tied to this man and this church. I wonder if Grant's Creek's decision to unite with Union was not an intentional effort by the pro-missionary forces in the state to solidify mission support in the Union Association. The Foster family also provided leadership at First Baptist of Tuscaloosa and in the Tuscaloosa Association.

Apparently, the Pilgrim's Rest Church that was pro-missions changes its name to Spring Hill in this year. T. Williams continues as a leader, there and in the association. He was a legislator and planter. This church continues as a member. (When the Primitive Baptists separated from Union Association about 1838, the pastor of Pilgrim's Rest, near Pickensville, was a leader of the anti-mission board sentiment. His church seems to have splinted into three, perhaps four, congregation. Initially, there seems to have been a Primitive and a Missionary Baptist Pilgrim's Rest Church. There was an Oak Ridge Missionary Baptist about four miles north and a little west of Pickensville. It was led by the Nash family. And in 1847 the Missionary Baptist started a church back in Pickensville. Perhaps the Missionary Pilgrim's Rest met in the church house in Pickensville for a while and then moved about 8 or 9 miles north and east and began meeting in the Spring Hill Academy building.)

The first of many resolutions related to the support and usefulness of Sunday Schools is adopted. Education was a passion of the Fosters and the Grant's Creek church.

1843. Mt. Pleasant, a new congregation made up of mostly folk from South Carolina, is formed near Gordo and unites with the association. It continues as a member to the present. This calls for a shifting of district alignments. From almost its beginning the association had four districts which clustered the church in the north, south, east and west portions of the association which then included churches in Tuscaloosa and Greene, as well as Pickens Counties. (Later there were churches in Lamar, Fayette, and Sumter too.) This organizational structure continued for many

years. Each district met in the summer, prior to the annual meeting. It was a meeting for Deacons and Pastors, primarily. It involved some training. (Note: apparently, the Lebanon Missionary Baptist Association continues this heritage with 5th Sunday Pastor and Deacon Union Meetings.)

A process is initiated this year that brings the association into active affiliation with the Alabama State Convention. Soon, the association is sending messengers to it, as well as corresponding with neighboring associations—Columbus and Tuscaloosa on a regular basis. These three associations were the strong missionary oriented ones in this area. Ministers moved back and forth among them. This relationship continues to the present. (Currently the Pickens Association is assisting in the planting of the Eastwood church in Tuscaloosa County and is working with the Golden Triangle Association to provide a ministry for Hispanics in Aliceville and in Columbus.) Later the association will also send messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention

1844. Zion transfers from the Tuscaloosa Association. It was formed in 1838, perhaps as a result of the missions controversy.. Its address was Pleasant Grove. (In 1864 Mt. Pleasant, Zion and Corinth form a circuit with Elder A. A. Spiller as pastor of all three and the missionary for the association.) This church served the Zion community north of Gordo. It died about the time of World War II.

1845. Mt Moriah church joins from the Columbus Association. The pastor is Ellis Gore. It was near the modern-day village of McShan.

A resolution calling for the oral instruction in the Christian faith of the slaves is adopted.

Another resolution approves of the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention which had occurred earlier that year in Augusta, Georgia.

1846. Carrollton joins as a new church.

Again a resolution calls for active evangelization of the slaves.

1847. Three new churches join—Pickensville, Bridgeville and Salem. The locations of the first two continue to be known. My guess is that Salem may be the old church north of the current New Salem. Its messengers are named Yeatman, Drake, and Smiley. The pastor is a Perry. The post office address is Yorkville. Later Gore will be pastor.

1848. Arbor Springs joins. The messengers are T. S. Thomas, a pastor, a Trailer, and T. Deloach who will become a pastor, I believe. I think that this congregation is the predecessor the current Arbor Springs church. It dies about 1868 and then is revived in 1872, as New Arbor Springs. There is some controversy related to the New River Association, up Fayette way involving Columbus and Tuscaloosa Associations. Union does not join in.

Salem becomes New Salem. It has 22 members. Gore is pastor.

1849. Providence church joins from Columbus association. This church was near where Hickory Grove now is, about two miles west of the former village of Liberty. An African American Baptist Church named Providence still serves this area. It may well be the continuation of this

church. Providence in the old Union Association closed in the 1890s.

Bethlehem which was formed in 1835 joins from the Tuscaloosa Association. It continues as a member of the association down to the present.

Four Greene County churches, Friendship, Clinton, Eutaw and Pleasant Ridge left the association to help form a new association, Bigbee.

New Salem also withdraws from the association, probably because it has adopted the Free Will, or Arminian theology.

1850. Ellis Gore has converted to the Free Will Baptist position. Mt. Moriah which he founded a few years earlier pulls out of the association along with New Salem. This is the beginning of the Free Will movement in West Alabama. Mt. Moriah had 72 members and New Salem 25. The language referring to the division seems to be congenial. The Union Association leadership speaks of personal good will, although there are theological differences. The Free Will Baptist Association that serves our county is still called Mt. Moriah. And this church is seen as the “mother” church of the Free Will Baptist movement in this area.

1851. South Carolina (Ethelsville) excludes 37 members. This seems to be related to the Free Will doctrinal issue. Some charges regarding his theological perspective are brought concerning their pastor, Dabney Duncan, but he is successful in convincing the Union Association that he continues to be Calvinistic and missionary Baptist. He is retained in the fellowship and provides good leadership for many years thereafter.

1852. The first of several statements supporting abstinence from alcohol is adopted. A lament is raised about the spiritual lukewarmness the churches and the hardness of the work.

1853. Memphis church asks to join Union but is told that it must first withdraw from its present membership in the Choctaw Association. This is accomplished in 1855.

Memorials for M. C. Curry and for T. Williams are printed.

1854. An offering for Martha Foster Crawford, missionary to China, is passed through the association from Grant’s Creek to the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Grant’s Creek is her home church.

During these years well-known Baptist leaders such as Basil Manly, Sr. and Jr., Charles Manly, Daniel Bestor, George Washington Banes, and Russell Holman attend and speak at the annual meetings of the association.

1855. Mineral Springs church joins. This church was comprised of the Calvinistic members of the Mt. Moriah church. Also, \$31 is collected to help finance the training of Charles Bain of the Buck Creek (later Bethel) church in Tuscaloosa County. He is attending Howard. There is also a mention of a gift of jewelry to be sold to support missions from students at the Spring Hill Academy. (I understand that it was located where the Spring Hill community center is now located. It was a two story building.)

1856. C. Bain returns from college to be hired as the missionary of the association. By now the association has an Executive Committee which hires and supervises a missionary who works within the association to plant new churches and to help needy churches as supply.

A book depository for the association is noted. A.M. Hanks of the Unity church manages it for the association. It sells religious books to ministers and others.

Note is taken on the death of Elder Charles Stewart. He was one of the pioneer ministers and helped keep the association missionary during the controversy some 20 years before. He lived in the Big Creek community and pastored that church, as well as others. His home was the two story frame home still standing on route 86 to the west of the road to the site of Big Creek.

1857. Dr. D. O. Baird comes to the annual meeting as a fraternal messenger from the Columbus association. For more than 50 years he will be one of the outstanding leaders of the association. By 1860 he has become pastor of Bethlehem. (He donates the land on which the present churchhouse stands. He completes his ministry after 1901 as the founding pastor of Gordo First. He continues there until 1908 and dies the following year. Some years he would pastor six churches. He was also a physician.

Shiloh church in Greene County joins the association. It is now a member of the Tuscaloosa association. And Pleasant Ridge which had been a member, then joined Bigbee a couple of years before, and then returned to Union, now goes on back to Bigbee.

Only six of the churches report Sunday School work.

Money to assist the widow of Elder Richard Wilkins, another of the founding ministers, was raised. She was destitute. The Wilkins are buried at Hebron. When she died a year later, the association bought her tombstone.

Money is also given to help Elder J. N. Ackers replace his horse which had just died.

A resolution asking for the churches to help Carrollton church pay the debt it had incurred in the building of its new church, is adopted.

Note is taken that the annual meeting is being held in the new meeting house of the Spring Hill church. This may help us date when the current building was constructed, ca. 1857. It along with Pickensville Methodist and Soule's Chapel Methodists is one of the oldest church buildings in Pickens County.

Memphis church disappears from the list. It may have joined another association, or it may have died. This is the only church that I am aware of south and west of the Tombigbee that was ever a member of the association.

Interestingly, there is a resolution favoring the publications of J. R. Graves. Graves had just launched the Landmark movement in Southern Baptist life. In subsequent years there will be resolutions supporting the publications of A. C. Dayton, a colleague of Graves, as well. At this point; however, I do not know of the Landmark issue becoming a divisive one in this association, however. (Landmarkism, among other things, was opposed to cooperation by Baptists with other Christians.)

Through out the 1850s missions offerings are taken at the annual meetings. They seem meager. Offerings for Domestic and Foreign Missions brought from the churches are also meager. Interestingly, the churches gave much better financial support to associational missions.

1858. The annual Circular Letter to the churches is a defense of the practice of slavery. Given its presuppositions about truth and how to interpret scripture, it is a well reasoned piece. A. M. Hanks was the principal author. Since 1838 the association had had one of its ministers write a letter dealing with some point of doctrine almost every year. This document was read to the association. If approved, it was printed in the minutes and sent to the churches with the hope that it would be read in each of them as well. (There is an article on this subject in this series.)

Note that at this time the total membership in the churches of the Union Association is comparable to that of Tuscaloosa and Columbus Associations. Union had 26 churches and 2,058 members.

The association recommends G. M. Lyles as a potential missionary to the Indians. This did not happen. For many years he was a leading pastor in the association. The minutes seem to indicate that there was a strong interest in missions with the Indians in the association.

1859. Apparently inspired by the efforts to assist Nancy Wilkins the association formed a Ministerial Aid Society. Money is raised to help retired ministers and their families.

1860. The state of religion report, which focuses on the association, again complains about the spiritual lukewarmness of the populous.

1861. Note is taken of the need and opportunity for evangelism within the Confederate Army.

1863. Elder W. H. Robinson, is commended to the domestic board as a potential missionary to the army. I do not think that this happened, but he continued for many years to be an effective pastor in Union and in Columbus associations.

1864. Corinth, a new church in Tuscaloosa County, now just across the line and off of US 82, joins. It along with Zion and Mt. Pleasant form a field of church with A. A. Spiller as pastor. Today this church is in the Tuscaloosa Association.

Memorial for Elder James Toole is published.

1865. Springhill, I think the one in Lamar, joins, although the minutes say Fayette.

1866. Pleasant Grove, I think the one in Lamar, near the modern town of Millport, joins.

A resolution addresses tension between the white and former slave members in many of the churches. This is a recurring theme for the next several sessions of the association.

1867. Recommendation is made that the churches encourage the Freedmen members to form separate, but related congregations. Redmon Jones, perhaps a Freedman preacher, is recommended to the churches to assist in this and as pastor for these new congregations. It seems that the whites wanted to maintain as much control as they could of these new churches, however.

1869. Again discussion is held concerning the need to help the Freedmen create churches of their

own. There seems to be some movement toward recognizing and encouraging their independency from the church of which they were formerly members.

Quarterly meetings of the Sunday School leaders is called for. This is initiated the following year at the Carrollton church. Sunday School becomes the passion of the association for the next several years. This is true across the country.

1870. Memorial for J. W. Taylor. He is a second generation pastor, and the author of several of the recent circular letters of the association.

1871. Money is provided for J. L. West to study for the ministry at Howard College. A few years later he offers to repay what the association had given to him, apparently because he felt led not to return to the association to do ministry. The association released him to go elsewhere and would not accept repayment.

1872. This is the first correspondence with the New River and the Yellow River Associations to the north. They served mostly Fayette and Lamar Counties. Also correspondence is renewed with the Choctaw Association which had churches in Sumter and Choctaw Counties as well as in Mississippi.

It is recommended to the churches of the association that they begin weekly prayer meetings. Someone has suggested that one of the fruits of the Civil War was in institution of prayer meetings in the churches.

1873. Very few of the Freedmen continue membership in the churches of the association.

New Arbor Springs church comes into the association. This appears to be a restart.

1874. Sunday schools are reported at Carrollton, Pickensville, Corinth, Zion, Forest, Ebenezer, Forest, Grant's Creek, and Hall's School (near Gordo). This number will grow over the next decade.

1875. Chalcedony church joins. It is in Tuscaloosa County. It had a difficult life. I believe that it may continue but as a Independent Baptist church.

Note is taken of the death of John L. Foster, deacon at Grant's Creek and the father of Martha Foster Crawford, missionary to China. The 30 churches of the association reported 1,538 members. Forty-four of these were Freedmen.

This concludes a summary of the minutes of the first 40 years of the Union Baptist Association. Its territory had changed, somewhat. Most of the churches in Greene County were gone. Several churches north of Coldfire Creek had joined it from Columbus and Tuscaloosa Associations. A couple of the churches were located in what is now south Lamar, and six were in Tuscaloosa. It had weathered three losses of churches to what became other segments of the Baptist movement—Primitive, Free Will, and African American. It had planted new congregations in the areas where they had lost churches and where population had grown. At this point only the churches in Carrollton and Pickensville might be considered town churches. The others were in

the open country, or nearby a hamlet. It is obvious that the churches were small, averaging only about 50 active members each. Most of the member churches met only one weekend per month. They would meet on a set Saturday afternoon to conduct church business. Often a major concern would be the resolution of problems that separated the church members. There would be a worship service that evening. They again on Sunday there would be another worship service. The meeting houses at Spring Hill and Ebenezer are arranged much like those of this period were. The next forty years will see many additional changes.

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