Baptist mission

By EDWARD PRATT
Editor of SATURDAY

n the mid-1800s, Baton Rouge and many towns in the Deep South became prime mission fields for ministers. Baptists, Methodists and African Methodist Episcopal ministers came evangelizing, winning followers, especially black people.

Before emancipation, a few black churches started in New Orleans, but little is known about formal black churches in Baton Rouge at the time.

If Baton Rouge followed the pattern of other Southern towns, there were some "invisible institutions," underground churches where black people worshipped in secret, led by slave preachers, said Gaines Foster, a professor in the LSU history department.

During the early 1700s to mid-1700s, black people in the South had received some religious training from white Baptists who had come to the South from Connecticut.

They considered the eternal destiny of everyone’s business and started evangelizing to both whites and blacks of the region, according to the "Encyclopedia of Religion in the South."

Generally, during the Civil War, black people were not allowed to have their own churches, said Rodger Payne, with the LSU religion department.

White people feared the churches could be used to plan revolts like the Nat Turner slave uprising, he said.

So, in many instances, black people were allowed to attend services at some predominately white churches. But the services were segregated, and the positions of power were held only by white people, Payne said.

After the Civil War and during Reconstruction, those white churches expelled black members, Payne said. However, in some cases, the two sides parted because they wanted separate institutions.

At the same time, different denominations, both white and black, were sending more and more missionaries to the South.

“Black ministers in other areas considered the Deep South a mission field,” said the Rev. Charles T. Smith, pastor of Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church.

And why not. Many former slaves had never been schooled in any denomination.

In 1858, two Virginia ministers, the Rev. Isaac Palmer, a black man, and the Rev. John Bundy, a white minister, and eight other people organized Mount Zion Baptist Church on East Boulevard.

Little is written about the two pastors. However, it is clear that Palmer served as pastor of Mount Zion for eight years. It was one of the first churches in downtown Baton Rouge.

Mount Zion, headed for the past 50 years by the Rev. T.J. Jimerson, had grown into one of the most prominent churches in the city.

In the 15 years following construction of Mount Zion, rapid growth was seen in the development of black churches in Baton Rouge. It would lay the groundwork for expansion of religion throughout Baton Rouge’s black community.

Not far from Mount Zion, a second Baptist church was started in 1866 by the Rev. Richard Harris and friends. It was called Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, now at 1743 Convention St.

The church grew, and the Mount Pleasant Sons and Daughters started Sweet Olive Cemetery, the first major black cemetery in Baton Rouge.

On Sunday mornings, you would see people coming from all directions, said Gertie Abrams, 91. She has been going to Mount Pleasant for 69 years.

During the early years, the members mostly walked to the church, she said. “At times it was hard to see more than one car there,” she laughed.

During services, children had to sit in the front of the church, she said.

“I had to tell my friends that I couldn’t go to the picture show because I was going to be in church,” she said.

That same year, Wesley United Methodist Church, now on Government Street, started.

According to "The Wesley United Methodist Church Story," members had at one time been members of First Methodist Church downtown, but had grown weary of the segregation that the church enforced.

This was a typical situation in many predominantly white churches in the South during this period, said Payne.

Also, black members decided to start their own churches so they could be autonomous and hold leadership positions, he said.

“Black people saw having their own church as a place they could have power,” Jimerson said.

In May of 1866, a number of black people who had left First Methodist purchased a site where services were held outside.

Later, a group of members felled trees and flattened the land to form the Mississippi River to a sawmill, where they saved the wood to planks to build the first building.

An itinerant minister served the small congregation. The building was blown down in a storm in 1883 and rebuilt. That structure was destroyed in a fire in 1892.

Services were held in the Parish Courthouse until a brick church was completed in 1895. Wesley is now on Government Street.

In 1887, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded. The first location was on North Sixth Street. It is now at the corner of South Boulevard and South 14th Street.

About 12 years after Mount Zion was formed, a Virginia minister named the Rev. George Byrd came to Baton Rouge and started Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church on Boyd Avenue in Spanish Town.

The church was a log house, converted into a sanctuary. Inside, the walls were covered with wood from crates built to house pianos for shipment, said Estelle Beauchamp, 95, who attended the original church.

“It was real nice inside,” Beauchamp said. Church services during that time consisted of Sunday school at 9 a.m. and regular services at 11 a.m., 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., she said.

Many people walked to church. Some came by horse and buggy, said Beauchamp, whose family of 13 siblings attended church every Sunday. “The children didn’t have a choice in those days.”

To hold up to the lengthy series of services, Beauchamp said, people would carry lunches, and some of the children would be outside eating biscuits.

The Rev. Jack Mitchell succeeded Byrd as pastor and served for more than 30 years, seeing the church move to South 14th Street.

“Mr. Beauchamp was a light-skinned man who was polite and hollered a lot,” Beauchamp said.

When she looks at the large congregation and multimillion-dollar church that Shiloh has become, Beauchamp said, "I tell them, you all have really been blessed."