Baptists in Baton Rouge

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The early history of Louisiana records no references to Southern Baptists. It would be 1838 before any record of a Southern Baptist church in Baton Rouge, and then only sketchy records exist of a "newly constituted church in the town of Baton Rouge," according to the Rev. C. Penrose St. Amant in his book, "The Southern Baptists of Louisiana." St. Amant writes that at the beginning of the 19th century, Baptists entered the old world of French and Spanish cultures, the Catholic Church and a new world of predominantly American culture and "Frontier Protestantism.

When small numbers of Baptists filtered in throughout the state, they were often met with discouragement by the French, he writes. According to researcher Elaine Webb, who is writing a history of the Judson Baptist Association to which most Southern Baptist churches in Baton Rouge belong, there were serious concerns in the earlier years of the denomination's Louisiana formation.

"One of the conditions of greatest concern to the Judson Baptist Association was the lack of adequately trained ministers during the latter half of the 1800s and early 1900s. When the association was formed, there were few educationally trained ministers. Southern Baptists served two to three churches." There are records of a small Baptist fellowship in downtown Baton Rouge meeting for nine years beginning in 1838 at the corner of America and St. Ferdinand streets.

The gathering began when a prominent military and political figure, Gen. Philemon Thomas, invited fellow Baptists to join him for worship in his house, where he installed church furniture for the worship experience. Following his death, there were scattered attempts to start another church, but 25 years passed before First Baptist Church officially opened for worship in downtown Baton Rouge.

In the morning, a group of 12 Baptists had organized in 1850 on Harrell's Ferry Road, referred to as "The Baptist Church." It relocated to Jones Creek Road in 1900, coming to be known in modern times as Woodlawn Baptist Church. Eva Miller, 85, remembers her grandparents, charter members of Woodlawn, picking up visitors, including a young minster, at the train station and taking them to the house for his lodging.

"I remember we (children) would try to get in that room because we thought it was something special being the preacher's room and all, but she (grandmother) would shoot us out. We weren't allowed in there, you see, and we just thought there was something magical about it.

Miller's grandfather, Daniel Denham, was the church clerk until blindness forced him to turn church business over to his son.

"Back then, they would turn people out of the church for stealing a hog or dancing on Sunday," she reminisced.

Dinner on the grounds would be at least once a month, and literally on the ground, she laughed. People would come by horse and buggy, and services were led by the light of reflector type lamps. In the winter, a lone pot-bellied stove in the center of the one-room building was the only warmth, she said.

"Mamas would take the kids and put them on a pallet where they would stay as long as we were there. Houses at the time were miles apart, yet if there was sickness and crops needed tending, church members would pitch in to help, Miller said.

"When I walk into the church now, I marvel at those 12 charter members and think about what kind of vision they had. You just never know what the Lord has in mind," Myrth Mayfield, 73, says services ran every other Sunday and with it being the only Baptist church for miles around, people would have to travel long distances to get there.

"People used to say we were in the sticks. Now, they say it's the silver stocking district." Mayfield's parents were members in the early 1900s when church members sat on hard wooden chairs for services. Pews didn't come until much later. Mayfield says worshippers would fan themselves in the heat of the summer with hand-held fans supplied by the funeral home. Mayfield said when she became a member of the church in 1937, her baptism was in the Amite River. It was where all the baptisms were conducted at the time, she said.

Preachers were compensated for their sermons without fancy benefit packages in those days, she said.

"I remember Mama said they'd give the preachers eggs and chickens or some type of groceries for their services...

By 1879, First Baptist had grown to a membership of 32, and the church bought a lot on Florida Street for $400. The one room building served the church for 32 years. Ground was broken in 1914 at Fifth and Convention Streets for a temporary tabernacle until funding for a permanent building could be found. World War I delayed construction, and it was the early 1920s before a permanent church was built. There would be many other expansions, including the present sanctuary, dedicated in 1955.

Church history notes that in 1956, attendance remained small and the pastor's salary was $50 a month.

The present sanctuary of the First Baptist Church on Convention Street was dedicated in 1955.

Minutes relate that the church was often behind on payment.

At the time, church members were expected to sign a church covenant and articles of faith in order to remain a member.

In the early days, most people lived within five miles of the church, recalled 89-year-old church member Alton Lea.

Lea, who joined the church in 1926, said he remembers riding a bicycle to services from his home, about a mile away.

"You had to get to church some way. Some days, I didn't make it because I had a paper route and I didn't get there on time," he said.

Lea remembers his Bible class meeting at the local YMCA because the church at the time was too small to accommodate them.

The years have seen an increase in programs offered by the church, a change Lea said has made him enthusiastic throughout his faith journey.

"It's a great thing" to see a church grow for its real purpose, "to win souls for Jesus Christ," he said.