Foot-dragging by congregations in Mississippi kept Calvary Baptist Church in Bayou Choctaw from being the first Baptist congregation in Louisiana. (See story on this page.)

"House Upon A Rock," a history of Southern Baptists in Louisiana, says that instead of Calvary being first by eight years, it was second by one month.

If officially became a church one month after Half Moon Bluff in the Florida Parishes. However, Calvary's existence can be traced to 1804, and had certain events in the life of church founder Joseph Willis been different, it would have become a church then.

Joseph Willis grew up in the Carolinas and traveled to Mississippi. He was there by 1800, when he helped organize a church in Wilkinson County.

In the fall of 1804, he traveled to the western parts of Louisiana. Historians point out the great risk he took for this trip. The area was rural and dangerous, and the people there were hostile toward Protestants. This didn't prevent Willis from preaching the first known Baptist sermon west of the Mississippi in what is now Lafayette. He then preached in an area near Crowley and ended in Bayou Choctaw. He had friends there and decided to live there. His family crossed the Mississippi River at Natchez in 1805, and Willis bought land for a home in 1809.

This entire time, Willis worked as an itinerant missionary. He had been licensed as a preacher, but not ordained. Despite his great success in teaching people, Willis felt the recognition of ordination was necessary for him to found a church.

He felt that he must follow "pro"-per procedure. Although other people did not do this.

He returned to the Mississippi church where he was still a member, asking them to ordain him. After some success, he passed him on to another church that outright refused to ordain him.

He turned to the Mississippi Association. In 1810, he presented this group with many recommendations of the people he worked with. The group appointed two men to visit him and to return a recommendation. That visit never happened. The next year, he returned to Mississippi and helped with the association meetings. Again, no visit came through.

In 1812, the Mississippi group appointed Moses Hadley and Lawrence Scarborough, who did travel to Bayou Choctaw. On Nov. 13, 1812, they constituted the church and ordained Willis.

Calvary Baptist Church is the oldest active Baptist church in Louisiana. Willis served as its pastor for 18-20 years.

**Willis highlights**

- Willis was the first resident pastor in Louisiana.
- Willis preached in many other areas of the state and was responsible for founding several other churches in the state.
- These include Occupy Church near Glennmore and Besiah Church in Cheneville.
- In 1954, state Baptists honored Willis with a 7-foot tall granite monument on his grave in Vernon Parish.
- Willis is known as the first Baptist historian in Louisiana.
- He kept extensive journals about his work, which were copied and given to the state association.

Source: "House Upon A Rock" by Ken Lee Green

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