Religion in Louisiana: A History

Pioneer Baptists Had Start in Rural Areas of Louisiana

By WESLEY JACKSON
(The Times-Picayune Religion Editor)

Louisiana's Baptist, unlike other Protestant denominations of the time, had their beginnings not in New Orleans or any of the larger "outposts," but instead in such unlikely places as Half Moon Bluff and Bayou Chicot.

And, unlike some of the other denominations, they came independent of each other, evangelizing as pioneers in the newly-opened wilderness that was then the Territory of Louisiana.

After running afloat of the authorities during the Spanish regime, the Baptists lost little time in colonizing the new area of the United States to start their unique brand of gospel preaching. However, they did not establish congregations as such right away. Because they entered rural areas where not even Catholic priests had ventured during the Catholic monopoly, they met with a good deal of success, after apprehensions were curbed on the part of the residents.

Without a doubt, the real pioneer of Baptists in what is now Louisiana was Joseph Willis, who reportedly had been one of those who preached in Louisiana before free, public worship was allowed.

This man, much maligned when he first came to Louisiana, later spent more than 50 years as a preacher in the state and was to become one of the most beloved of all Baptist ministers in the state's history. Of English and Cherokee ancestry, he was branded as a mulatto by those opposed to his preaching, but this never stopped him from preaching and establishing many of the first Baptist congregations in Louisiana. His first congregation, in fact, is still in existence today and is the oldest, continuous Baptist church in Louisiana.

"Father" Willis, as he was called by many in the Opelousas area, was the first Baptist to preach in this area west of the Mississippi River, then a part of Louisiana, which includes the town of Vermilion, or today's Lafayette. He established his first church at Bayou Chanot in 1812 and that church, as is today, was known as Calvary Baptist Church.

Calvary Church was founded about one month after the first Baptist congregation in Louisiana. This church, known as Half Moon Bluff Baptist Church, was located in Washington Parish between Franklin and Clinton.

Half Moon Bluff Church was organized Oct. 8, 1821 with Rev. Ben Crawford as pastor. Located on the Bagne Slough, this church existed until about the war of the Civil War and at one time was used as a store. Little is really known about this church, although a historical marker and a stone memorial are nearby today.

Colorful History

The first Baptist preacher to settle in Louisiana was Henry LeBlanc, who came to the area in 1815, where he established the Church of New Orleans Baptist Church, which was to be known as Hephzibah Baptist Church. This church was the third Baptist church in Louisiana, but also went out of existence about 1820.

Other early Baptist congregations were founded in southeastern Louisiana in 1816, with the first congregation in New Orleans, which existed today, being founded in 1817, ranking it as the second oldest continuous Baptist church in Louisiana.

Hephzibah Church and its members made for one of the most colorful periods in Louisiana church history in the 1820s, incident recorded for posterity by H. Skipwith in his 1809 history of East Feliciana Parish, entitled "Sketches of the Pioneers."

According to Skipwith's description, "The congregation multiplied amazingly under the zealous ministrations of its venerable founder (Courtney)." It remained a harmonious community, without any family jars, except when old Chester Jackson, one of Hephzibah's stock holders, took it into his head to head the church into the path of Unification.

An interesting note is that Willis died in 1854, just one year after the first Baptist congregation in Louisiana was formed. Time marches on, and today, Louisiana has more than 50 Baptist churches, each with its own history and traditions.

These two signs disclose that the early years the Baptist Church was in Louisiana were the days of the U.S. 7L. Half Moon Bluff Church no longer exists but Buena Church is the second oldest in existence among Baptist churches.

Though the Baptist Church was in its infancy, it was growing strong and spreading its influence throughout the state. The first Baptist church to be organized in Louisiana was in 1812, and since then, the Baptists have been instrumental in shaping the state's history and culture.

The Rev. William Cook, a prominent leader in the early 19th century, was a key figure in the Baptists' move to establish churches in Louisiana. He founded the Baptist Church in New Orleans, and later moved to Shreveport, where he established the first Baptist church in that city.

In 1823, the Rev. Henry Adams, who was born in Kentucky, was called to preach in the Baptist Church. He was the first pastor of the Baptist Church in Shreveport, and later moved to Bayou La Batre, where he established the first Baptist church in that city.

For many years, the Baptist Church was the center of the community, and its members were active in the community and in the state. The Baptist Church was instrumental in shaping the state's history and culture, and its members have been active in many social and political causes.

The Baptist Church has been a beacon of light in Louisiana for more than 200 years, and its members have played a vital role in the state's development.

The Baptist Church has been a beacon of light in Louisiana for more than 200 years, and its members have played a vital role in the state's development.