

## ABOUT > A BRIEF HISTORY

### THROUGH THE YEARS 1847

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Two years before Pensacola's original Baptist church was organized, two significant events happened that would influence Baptist. Florida became a state, and the Southern Baptist Convention was formed. Only since 1821, when Florida became an official United States territory, had religious freedom actually been a privilege of Florida's people. Baptists slowly gained a foothold in the state. By the time Pensacola Baptists organized, a smattering of Baptist churches already existed in Florida.

South Alabama, however, with Baptist work well underway, seemed to have an abundance of insightful men willing to endure great hardships to spread the cause of Christ. One of those men was Alexander Travis who, along with Joseph Mitchell, participated in duly constituting the original Baptist church in Pensacola. Its official name was the Pensacola Baptist Church of Christ, later changing the name to The First Baptist Church of Pensacola.

In the beginning, records say again and again that the "Lord's Day service was a disappointment." Establishing a strong evangelical body in a city with Pensacola's background was not an easy task. Although from earliest days the cause of Christ had been among the stated reasons for settlement of the area, the spiritual climate into which the Baptist Church of Christ emerged was challenging.

In 1850 on the third anniversary of the church, a tradition began which still increases in fervor with the years. Mission participation was initiated. For the first time, the Pensacola Baptist Church would be on the "doing" end of missions, by establishing "an arm of this church at the Navy Yard."

### NATIONAL CRISIS 1861

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One nation, founded and built on Godly ideals, whose strength is in its unity, divides itself into two, both claiming God as an ally. What difference of opinion can be of such magnitude that even religious men of great piety, intelligence, and reason are willing to risk life and country to prevail? Many years before the Pensacola Baptist Church was organized in 1847, an underlying conflict was developing in the nation which would someday have to be resolved, even if through the most costly means.

Two years after the Southern Baptist Convention was established in 1845, Pensacolians remained unconcerned about the new organization. The political question, however, was another matter.

By March 1860, the horror of war at the doorstep was a very real possibility. but who could conceive, who could believe, that in less than a year the first shots of the Civil War would be fired, not in Fort Sumter, but in Pensacola, Florida? Apparently this major historical event actually happened in Pensacola, but the story of the surrounding circumstances varies among historians.

The church record book of that era, normally detailed, becomes silent, wounded by an unknown assailant. Ragged edges indicate pages that were ripped from the record. Why were the pages torn? The country was. Families were. The church was. The church record book is appropriately symbolic. Like the nation, the Baptist Church of Pensacola suffered from a wound so deep that healing would require years of recuperation.

### STARTING OVER

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The recorded story of the church in the Reconstruction era focuses more on business than the spiritual life of the congregation.

The church had been organized for only 23 years and much of that time had been spent in turmoil. The record of neither alludes to the Baptist of Pensacola as part of Florida nor mentions beginning a working relationship with the Florida Baptist Convention, which had been functioning for over 20 years. The Alabama affinity remained strong.

The church as an organization of prestige basically reflected Pensacola's patterns of development. By the early 1880's, the population recognized and accepted the existing economic, social, and ethnic divisions of the city. Because the lines were not absolute, a general feeling of good will prevailed among the citizens. Some things one did not do, however, if one wanted successfully to infiltrate early Pensacola society. Included in those things was to join the Baptist Church. Among Protestants, the Baptists were still struggling for the acceptance and recognition needed to enhance their witness for Christ to all groups.

Pensacola was growing rapidly. Its natural beauty and bounty continued to beckon newcomers. The excitement of progress and anticipated good fortune pervaded the city. Lumber, shipping, fishing, and other major industries necessitated more doctors, lawyers, and merchants, as well as laborers. Pensacola became an exciting place in which to live and work. Some of the newcomers founded their way to The First Baptist Church, which still met in the small wooden building on Government Street near Seville Square. The congregation then included a few members who had been involved in the church since its founding and many others who had experienced the struggle of the years just after the Civil War. In addition to those "pillars," there were ambitious newcomers. Many of these factors influenced the decision to move to Palafox Hill in 1895.

With the new location, new building and new organ, a new respectability resulted in steady growth. In the late 1920's, serious redirection in financial matters helped the budget situation to withstand economic hardships that were enveloping the nation. Emphasis on social issues

and Baptist principles strengthened the congregation. During the '30s, a stronger sense of fellowship began developing. A willingness from the pulpit, from young leaders and from others to be more creative and innovative added an element of excitement. The sense of well-being at having survived the Great Depression and making progress in reaching new people was overshadowed by December 7, 1941. Because the Pearl Harbor raid happened on a Sunday morning and because Pensacola is a Navy installation, Sundays took on a degree of fear and apprehension.

Ministering to military personnel gave a sense of serving to those who did not actually go to war. The makeup of First Baptist Pensacola was changed forever because of military influx and influence.

## **MODERN ERA**

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About 1948 a new era evolved. Bible study, scholarly sermons and a strong challenge to learn and progress motivated the congregation. Soon, talk of needing larger and better facilities began. Modern technology, made corresponding with members through newsletters and even by telephone, easier. Communication bred unity.

As life became more sophisticated the life of the church became more challenging. During the '50s and '60s additional committees were formed to cover extended ministries like visual aids, promotion, recreation and television. Lay people were given more responsibility and responded enthusiastically. The bus ministry, begun in 1971, is an example of the expanded role of the laity. With more commitment on the part of the church came a need for an expanded ministerial staff.

The church now reaches out to diversified elements of modern American society. People of other countries and languages have settled in Pensacola, inspiring an Internationals ministry. Aid for the homeless and to those with general economic difficulties is a regular outreach of First Baptist. Both domestic and foreign short-term mission trips are activities that augment the Southern programs of other mission partner organizations.

First Baptist Pensacola is an old, downtown church. Sometimes non-members refer to us as "that big church on the hill." While that is not the description we choose for ourselves it is, however, accurate. There have been major changes in our culture and our denomination. The stability that comes from strong belief in God's written Word, power and love, undergirds us.

Gratitude is given to God that FBC through the years and still provides a spiritual home for anyone who seeks it. Families and individuals, some for generations, some for just a little while, come and go. That is the nature of the age and geography in which we live. In Pensacola, Florida, the First Baptist Church, from its vantage point on top of the hill, looks toward the Father to guide the future that our future might glorify Him.