History of St. John

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Historical Highlights
St. John Regular Missionary Baptist District Association

History is the up and down experiences of a people, organization or institution. The height of an individual or institution’s attainments cannot be rightly appreciated unless the individual or institution is aware of his or its beginnings. As one listens to or reads the story of old time, he/she is impressed with the idea that through many dangers, toils, and snares, this old body has already come. This is certainly true of the St. John Regular Missionary Baptist District Association. To understand the true meaning of our Associational Theme Song, “Look Where The Lord Has Brought Us”, take a moment and reflect on these historical highlights.

Two years after the Civil War, four ministers from different parts of Texas met under a large oak tree in Wheatsville, Austin Texas on the corner of 25th and Leon Streets (This is where the Treaty Oak is now located). They agreed to divide Texas into four divisions of associations. After this meeting in 1867, these ministers went to their respective sections of the state and organized an association. As a result of this meeting, these associations were organized: St. John Regular Baptist Association, Lincoln Baptist Association, Guadalupe Baptist Association, and Mt. Zion Baptist Association.

St. John Regular Baptist Association was organized in Austin, Texas under an old oak tree by Reverends Jacob Fontaine, Jessie B. Shackles, John Winn, Sr., Calvin Allen, Buffington and Horace Smith.

Rev. Jacob Fontaine was elected as the first Moderator. Other officers: Rev. Nelson Scott, Secretary; Deacon William Scales, Treasurer.

The total membership of the eight pioneer churches was three hundred (300). The association was named “The Travis County Association.” The following churches and messengers formed the organization: First Baptist Church (colored), Rev. Jacob Fontaine, Pastor; Jacob Addison, and Richard Williams; Gildon Creek Baptist Church, Walnut Creek Baptist Church, Rev. Jesse T. Shackles, Pastor, Henry Tweddle and Henry Brown; Gildon Creek Baptist Church, Rev. Jesse T. Shackles, Pastor; Moses Brooks, Henry Brown; Williamson Creek, Rev. Jacob Fontaine, Pastor; William Scales, Wesley Barrow; Webberville Baptist Church, Rev. John Winn, Pastor; Rev. Calvin Allen, Rev. Joseph Jones; Pear Valley Baptist Church, Rev. John Winn, Pastor; Wright Palmer; Union Hill Baptist Church, Rev. John Winn, Pastor; Antioch Baptist Church, Rev. John Winn, Pastor; Rev. Luke Jones.
The first session was held in Wheatsville, Austin, Texas, 1868. The eight pioneer churches and the following churches were enrolled: Mt. Zion, Bastrop; St. James, Dogwood; Petersburgh, St. Phillips, St. James, Macedonia; Mt. Pleasant, Craft’s Prairie, Cannon; and Mt. Moriah. The following ministers were ordained in this session: Reverends: Jacob Adderson, Richard Williams and Anderson Johnson. The association adjourned to meet at Webberville Church, Thursday before the fourth Lord’s Day in July, 1869.

The Travis County Association met at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in 1870. Antioch Baptist Church was host in 1871. Bastrop Church was the meeting place in 1872, and sessions were adjourned to meet at Petersburgh Baptist Church Thursday before the fourth Lord’s Day in 1873. In 1874, the association met with Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Round Rock Church was host in 1875.

In the early years, the Travis County Association was known as “The Association on Wheels”, because it moved from place to place. Most of the places were in the rural, bearing the name of the nearest town. The words “On Wheels” was not an indication of rapid pace, but slow pace, traveling by horseback, horse drawn wagons, mules, and oxen. There were many muddy rugged hills and roads that families had to travel to reach the association. There were those who traveled on foot for miles and miles. It was a little step-up in pace when, after years, some traveled in buggies, horse drawn surreys and mules.

In the late 1800’s, the Association included churches from 80 miles East to West and 75 miles North to South. The places were as follows: Travis County: Austin, Bluff Spring, Manor, Evelyn, DelValle, Garfield, Manchaca; Bastrop County: Bastrop, Hornsby Bend, Littig, Webberville, Jeddo, Rosanky, Giddings, Paige, Elgin, Smithville, Cedar Creek, McDuff; Williamson County: Taylor, Upton, Coxville, Round Rock, Hutto, Fiskville; Caldwell County: Makieville, Waelder; Fayette County: Winchester and LaGrange.

The roads were plenty rugged, hills to climb, valleys swamped and often covered with water because of excessive rain during the month of July. Houses in most areas were far apart. The association attendants often became water and mud bound. Families helped each other, often stranded in travel. It was at this period that the man with a pair of oxen was appreciated. As wagons and families were pulled to safety, some of the caravan would ask, “What do we owe you?” The neighborly reply was, “Do the same to the next neighbor who is stranded as you.” Finally, in reaching their destination, they would arrange house furnishings, attend early service, preach, pray, sing, and shout, shake parting hands and return home rejoicing in the God of their salvation until the next July.

The association bore the title of Travis County Association until the late Rev. J. H. Winn, Sr. became leader and led a caravan of fourteen families from Webberville, Texas on the
banks of the Colorado River to Bastrop County, known as “Hogeye” through a trail blazed by the company of men, namely: Rev. C. A. Allen, Sr., Berry Davis, Deacon Andrew J. Davis, Cary Hill, Joe Hill, Josiah Hill, George Arnold, Lee Winn, Sr., George Mackey, Billy Carter, Lamar Hill, and Sister Jane Roland (widow, not Trail Blazer) to Caldwell County. These men purchased two thousand (2,000) acres of land. There were three Colonies: St. John upper and lower colonies. Makiesville, Texas was the post office and business center.

Rev. J. H. Winn did such a mammoth job in leading, colonizing and building St. John Regular Missionary Baptist Church, Dale Texas (St. John Colony), that the association favored changing the name from “Travis County Association” to “St. John Regular Missionary Baptist Association”. Although the name changed, the association continued “on wheels.”

In the expansion of St. John Regular Missionary Baptist Association, it had achieved great fame, but not so in its incipiency in reference to Travis County Association. The name St. John Regular Missionary Baptist Association rang out clearly during this time. There were five moderators up to this point in history:
Reverends: Jacob Fontaine, John Winn, Sr., George Green, C. H. Anderson, W. M. Massey.

In 1893, the late Dr. L. L. Campbell became moderator. St. John District Association was known to be the largest association for African Americans. Moderator Campbell negotiated plans for an Orphan Home and School. He purchased three hundred and fifty (350) acres of land, and in 1906, built St. John Orphan Home, but not without struggle. The St. John Orphanage, which was located in North Austin on a tract of land, where Highland Mall is presently located. Rev. Campbell was known as the founder of the St. John Orphanage.

A three story stone building was erected for the home of over three hundred orphan girls and a two-story frame building for a boys’ dormitory.

With others constantly on his mind, Rev. Campbell was founder of St. John Institute in order to give motherless and fatherless boys and girls a chance to become educated. Orphans, too, he felt, should have the opportunity to prepare themselves for the future. Rev. Campbell organized and had a standardized high school on the encampment ground for the orphans, with eight teachers holding degrees from Prairie View, Bishop, Wiley Colleges and Howard University.

A tabernacle was also built to accommodate the annual St. John Association Encampment.
During the tenure of Rev. Campbell’s leadership, the association gained recognition in the State and National Conventions. This great association was not only a place where African Americans were learning about God’s word, they were learning how to raise crops and own their own land.

Rev. M. Hurd served as moderator from 1924-1930. The passing of Rev. Hurd in 1930 left the burden on Rev. A. K. Black, who was elevated from secretary to moderatorship. 1932-1942, through the method of appeals and drives, the loyal constituents of the badly disrupted District managed by the Lord’s help, to liquidate the mortgage. It was during this period that St. John was ridiculed, rejected and ostracized by the State Convention, left to the mercy of whoever chose. The Institution had to be abandoned, the public school closed (School for Orphans), and the orphanage abolished….lack of funds.

Starting with 1946, this was a period for marking time, patience, and perseverance. Legal skirmishes had been encountered and “they that be,” the City of Austin Administration was definitely at odds with Moderator Black. Along with the skirmishes with the power structure of the City of Austin, there was internal unrest and misunderstanding of the holdings of more than three hundred acres of land in North Austin, the site of St. John Encampment Grounds (the present site of Highland Mall). The majority of the constituents only had a sense of sentimental value. Being a realtor, Moderator Black was convinced beyond a doubt that the material value was beyond the comprehension of many of our leaders. When asked about the sale of the property, Rev. Black emphatically said, “This land is not for sale.” Faced with threats and constant intimidation, he said, “This land is not for sale”, and especially was it not for sale for their price. A try was made at developing the land for Negro housing. This did not materialize, but born out of the opinion of the same body, thought that consequently the price would be right. Finally this expectation was fulfilled, and the land that had not been for sale was then made marketable. The new era began July 17, 1956. The last session was held on the old St. John Encampment Grounds on Middle Fiskville Road. Negotiations for the present location were spearheaded by Rev. I. W. Robinson, a loyal vice moderator. The mantle of leadership fell upon Rev. Robinson by the death of Moderator Black, October 14, 1956.

As the reconstruction period began, the hammers began to ring as the building committee perfected plans for the construction of a half-million dollar edifice. The building committee consisted of: Rev. I. W. Robinson, chairman, Reverends: R. Q. Allen, A. C. Clark, Robert L. Rowe, and J. H. Washington.

Sunday, June 1, 1958, brought realization to St. John’s anticipation as entry was made into the new ultra Modern Tabernacle, singing “How Did My Heart Rejoice,” lead by Deacon H. M. Brooks. The first ribbon section was clipped by Moderator Robinson. Dr. C. D. Pettaway, president of the National Baptist Convention of America, Little Rock, Arkansas, delivered the entrance sermon.
Rev. M.C. Arnold served as moderator of St. John from 1973 – 1978. He was instrumental in discontinuing the fee for entrance on St. John grounds during the Annual Sessions…each car was assessed .25 cents and .5 cents per person. His widow, Mrs. Gwendolyn Arnold remembers her husband as a moderator who enjoyed serving in St. John. During his tenure, as moderator the association grew spiritually, financially, and numerically.

Vice Moderator, Rev. G. V. Clark was elected as moderator in 1978 and still serves today. Under the leadership of Moderator Clark, St. John continues to progress in the faith. There have been upgrades to the present edifice along with strengthening the auxiliaries that support the St. John Association. St. John is a strong supporter of Belize, a South Central American Country by assisting with revivals, transportation, Vacation Bible School, and other ministries. St. John also purchased materials to assist in the building of a place of worship.

St. John was involved in the community by giving monetary support to Community Advocate for Teens & Parents (CATP) and currently supports Huston-Tillotson University.

St. John promotes and supports Christian Education and Benevolence, and is actively involved in the Missionary Baptist General Convention of TX and the National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.

Moderators and Vice Moderators of 139 years of this association includes:

**Moderators**
- Rev. Fontaine – 1867 (no info as when his tenure ended)
- Rev. John Winn – (no info regarding his tenure)
- Rev. George Green – (no info regarding his tenure)
- Rev. C. H. Anderson – (no info regarding his tenure)
- Rev. W. M. Massey – (no info regarding his tenure)
- Rev. L. L. Campbell – 1893-1924
- Rev. M. Hurd – 1924-1930
- Rev. A. K. Black – 1930-1956
- Rev. G. V. Clark – 1978-Present

**Vice Moderators**
- Rev. Jack Burch
- Rev. A. J. Harris
- Rev. J. H. Winn
- Rev. I. W. Robinson
Rev. J. T. Rillers
Rev. A. C. Clark
Rev. A. W. Winn
Rev. M. C. Arnold
Rev. A. L. Johnson
Rev. R. L. Perry
Rev. S. M. Clark
Rev. G. V. Clark
Rev. M. Hurd
Rev. J. H. Penn
Rev. A. A. Thompson
Rev. J. D. Cleveland
Rev. A. W. A. Mays

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