SLAVE MISSIONS AND MEMBERSHIP IN NORTH ALABAMA

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SLAVE MISSIONS AND MEMBERSHIP IN NORTH ALABAMA

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THESIS ABSTRACT

SLAVE MISSIONS AND MEMBERSHIP IN NORTH ALABAMA

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As white landowners settled the North Alabama towns of Florence, Huntsville, and Tuscaloosa with their slaves, they began to create missions for the religious education of blacks. Many did so out of a desire to share their eternal conviction and hope with their slaves, while others saw a means to instill obedience and efficiency in their slaves. Some, such as the members of the Southern Baptist Convention, showed evidence of both conviction and control.

Blacks found ways to gain some freedom in churches and missions through formal church offices – such as exhorter and watchman – and through unique expression in worship and ceremony. Blacks in North Alabama found their greatest expressive freedom in semi-independent churches such as First African Baptist Church in Huntsville and in brush arbor meetings throughout the area. While blacks could maneuver within the formal church, slave testimonies reveal that their most memorable religious experiences came during revivals and brush arbor meetings.

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INTRODUCTION

The discussion of white ministry to slaves and the slave's response to these membership efforts has ranged across many states in the South and through several decades in the antebellum period. Historians have carefully considered the motives of missionaries, pastors, and masters as they sought to bring the Gospel to their black brethren. Scholars have also delved into the black response to white efforts by looking at the involvement of blacks in both white meetings and in their own clandestine services. Scholars have further looked at the existence of independent and semi-independent black churches in cities across the South, as blacks sought a medium through which they could make their own decisions and shape their own religious destinies.

The following thesis considers those topics, but takes historians' analyses further by researching the towns of north Alabama. These towns have inexplicably escaped the attention of most historians, and no historian has offered a comprehensive assessment of slave missions and membership in North Alabama. Through the examination of church records and minutes, church histories, associational minutes and meetings, slave testimonies, and secondary literature, the thesis will examine the slave missions and membership in Florence, Huntsville, and Tuscaloosa, and it will also examine the extent to which state and regional religious organizations promoted and encouraged slave membership. When possible, the thesis will focus on people who contributed much of their time and energy to its promotion.

The thesis will also examine the extent to which blacks went along with the white system. To a large extent, slaves did not have a choice in the matter. Civil law in the state of Alabama prevented them from congregating in large groups and from learning how to read and write. Slaves overcame these obstacles, however, and they derived religious freedom from both the white churches and from their own religious gatherings. Slaves within the white church could exercise a limited amount of power from church offices such as the watchman or the exhorter that gave them the authority to preach and to oversee the conduct of fellow blacks. They also exercised some power during disciplinary meetings at the church. Although blacks did come under more discipline than did whites, blacks could still address disciplinary committees and argue in their defense. Slaves took comfort in the fact that their white masters could suffer under the wrath of a disciplinary committee in the same manner as they.

Slaves also gained religious freedom through participation in black churches. One church in particular, First African Huntsville, showed that blacks and whites could operate as equals in the religious sphere without oppressive restrictions from whites or fear from blacks. The First African church became larger than many white churches in the state, but white members of the Flint River Association never took steps to limit First African's power and influence in the Association. As a result, First African maintained significant loyalty for the Association, to the point of joining the Primitive Baptist ranks after the Association did so in the late 1830s.

First African's pleasant story, however, did not echo across other congregations and missions in north Alabama. With a few exceptions, First African among them, the majority of churches and associations across north Alabama began in the 1850s to restrict the freedom that they had given to their black members. Churches faced pressure to tighten control on black members from local slaveholders and from the state. The churches also feared that blacks would come under control of black preachers that would subject them to subversive doctrine, and the religious bodies felt they had little choice but to place restrictions on their black members to prevent this potential subversion. Despite this restriction, slaves had been able to gain enough religious independence to foster the skills necessary to create lives for themselves after they gained their freedom.

Before discussing each part of the thesis, it would be best to discuss the prominent terms used in the thesis. Slaves participated in three types of worship services during their time on the plantation. When white churches and plantation meetings come under discussion, the slaves in these meetings will be referred to as the slave membership of these bodies. When the thesis turns to outside missions created by white churches and missionaries, they will be referred to as slave missions. Clandestine slave meetings in the woods and arbors of Alabama will be known, as in the writings of Donald Mathews and others, as brush arbors. Finally, the thesis will discuss revivals on occasion. These revivals, while set up by white preachers and missionaries, don’t quite fall under the definition of slave missions, since the revivals served more as building blocks than in the foundational capacity of slave missions.

The thesis consists of five parts. The first chapter will explore slave missions and membership as discussed by other historians and will set forth the questions considered in the rest of the thesis. The second chapter will look at the Baptist mission to the slaves in Alabama as set forth by the Southern Baptist Convention and the state convention. The two conventions worked with the state Baptist publishing arm, the Alabama Baptist, to set up programs through which churches could reach out to their local slaves. The programs proved successful, and the state convention felt little urgency in pushing their efforts after the early 1850s. The system created by Baptists in Alabama and the Southern Baptist Convention was the most extensive program for slave missions and membership in the state, and the motivations and results of the Baptist ministry paralleled that of other denominations across the state.

The other three chapters will explore the slave missions and membership in Tuscaloosa, Huntsville, and the Shoals area of northwest Alabama. These three areas became the economic and social hubs of north Alabama during the four decades after Alabama achieved statehood. Huntsville and Tuscaloosa both served as state capitals for brief periods of time. Tuscaloosa also became one of the academic centers of the state after it became the site of the University of Alabama in 1831. Both Huntsville and the towns in the Shoals area (Florence, Muscle Shoals, and Tuscumbia) were able to take advantage of their locations on or near the Tennessee River to promote the establishment of stable economies. All three locations were able to build thriving societies due to their economic stability and could turn attention to slave membership as a result.

Tuscaloosa's churches had the greatest opportunity to create vibrant slave missions, as the University of Alabama and Tuscaloosa's position as state capital brought many masters and slaves into the city. The two most effective proponents of slave missions in the city were the Baptist minister Basil Manly, Sr. and the first Episcopalian Bishop of Alabama, Nicholas Cobbs. Cobbs spent a great deal of his time and energy traveling around the state, ministering to white and black alike. He stressed from the beginning of his Alabama ministry in 1845 that black members served as much of a role in the church as white members, and he took pride in the fruits of his efforts. Slaves also joined the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches, but they found that they were restricted in these churches during the 1850s.

The churches of Huntsville also pursued successful slave membership, but they were often overshadowed not only by First African Huntsville, as previously discussed, but also by the outside missions set up primarily by Methodist ministers. Some of the Huntsville missions grew larger than the churches themselves, and First African came to be the largest church in the Flint River Association by the beginning of the 1860s. Finally, the churches of Florence and the Shoals area tried to institute effective slave membership, but largely did not have the chance to succeed. The people of the Shoals area had to focus as much on subsistence as on setting up effective church ministries. The Baptist church in Florence did not establish a permanent home until the 1880s, and the only church to establish effective slave missions in Florence was First Methodist. Their mission eventually became its own church, the Church Street Mission, under the supervision of First Methodist’s trustees. Baptists set up effective slave membership in the counties south of Florence, but none ever reached the level of success found at First African and in some of the churches in Tuscaloosa.

CHAPTER 1

SLAVE MISSIONS IN HISTORY

Historians have actively discussed many facets of slavery since the 1950s, when Kenneth Stampp published his seminal work, The Peculiar Institution. In the following five decades, scholars have threshed out arguments on the origins of slavery, the methods of control used by planters and overseers, the level of interaction between blacks and whites, and the ideology of the slave system, among many other topics. Slave religion and Christian missions to slaves have merited discussions in many of the premier volumes on slavery, and a general understanding of the literature on slave religion and missions is essential to contextualize the actions of churches and slaves in North Alabama. The literature addresses many questions regarding slave missions and their impact on both ministers and slaves, and several stand out as important concerns for the reader.

Why did churches and planters inaugurate slave missions?

The Wesley brothers and George Whitefield brought their unique styles of lay ministry and open-air preaching to America in the late colonial period, setting the stage for the Great Awakening and the genesis of a new evangelical movement. As the movement swept America in the late 18th century, planters were skeptical about the benefits of slave membership. They had seen the example in early Jamestown where some slaves turned to Christianity for the sole purpose of gaining their freedom, and planters wanted to avoid the prospect of their own slaves taking similar advantage. Planters supported slave membership only after colonies passed laws that retained the slave's subservient status in spite of his or her conversion to Christianity. Planters gave their full support to slave membership after Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831. The rebellion spooked slaveholders and made them more amenable to the churches' claims that properly controlled religious education was the key to regulating slave behavior and preventing similar rebellions in the future. [1]

Aside from the common interest of preventing slave rebellion, planters supported slave membership for different reasons. Some prioritized the economic and social benefits inherent in Christianizing their slaves and making them into well-behaved people and hard workers. Other masters had been converted during the evangelical fervor of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and they felt genuine concern for their slaves' spiritual welfare and religious education. These masters deduced that their personal conduct carried as much weight as their behavior inside the church, so they tried to embody Christian principles as they dealt with their slaves. Some masters tried to care not only for slaves' religious welfare, but also for their physical well-being. They showed their concern by educating slaves, giving them medical care, working for restrictions on the slave trade and the breakup of slave families, and promoting a milder servitude in the confines of the house. They acted from religious conviction and the responsibilities of a divinely ordained worldview. They converted the sense of humanity given to them by

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[1] Sylvia Frey, "The Dialectic of Conversion," in Ted Ownby, Black and White Cultural Interaction in the Antebellum South (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1993), 25; Kenneth M. Stampp, The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South (New York: Knopf, 1956), 156, 158; Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), 103..

Christianity into a mentality that promoted the slave's health and worked to preserve the slave family.[2]

Still others had been stung by the rhetoric of abolitionists and felt the need to disprove claims that masters had no concern for the spiritual welfare of slaves. Others had noticed that black preachers could instill slaves with ideas that ran counter to planters' ideas. As a result, planters required church membership in order to keep slaves away from subversive black preachers. In fact, some planters took comfort in the fact that their slaves were attending white, instead of black, preaching. Masters also ensured that slave meetings took place under white supervision and enforced the legal restriction of the meetings to times between sunrise and sunset. Ironically, in order to use religion as an effective social control for slaves, masters had to manifest sufficient Christian feeling to convince them. In turn, the feeling worked against the idea of social control as the masters became genuine in their ministry.[3]

Planters tried to control their slaves through many facets of the church, not the least of which was funerals. Masters held many different attitudes about the sanctity of the slave funeral and treated the mourning slaves in various ways. The most pious buried their slaves in coffins over which white preachers prayed, and they gave their slaves the day off to mourn. Other planters allowed an hour for slaves to sing over the funeral procession and listen to words from a master or a black preacher, and then the slaves had to return to work. In the worst case, slaves could only place the corpse between two boards or in a shallow grave, after which slaves had to work again.[4]

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[2] Ira Berlin, Generations of Captivity (New York: Belknap Press, 2003), 206; John Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 62, 169; John Allen Macaulay, Unitarianism in the Antebellum South: The Other Invisible Institution (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 162-4; John W. Quist, Restless Visionaries: The Social Roots of Antebellum Reform in Alabama and Michigan (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 340.

[3] Stanley Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 60; Richard Carwardine, Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 156; Blake Touchstone, "Planters and Slave Religion in the Deep South," in Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870, ed. John Boles (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1998), 101-10; Eugene Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York, NY: Random House, 1976), 189-90.

Churches became more vocal in their support of slave membership in the aftermath of Denmark Vesey's revolt in 1822 and Turner's rebellion in 1831. The churches had attracted many black followers in the first decades after the Revolution, but their task became more immediate after the two revolts. Proslavery advocates pushed for religious instruction of slaves on the basis that it would provide peace, safety, order, and stability for the slaves and for their communities. White Baptist churches inaugurated their own missions to reach slaves who had escaped their attention, protect those who had come into their fold, and bring both unchurched and churched blacks under tighter control. The Methodist church modified its earlier position on slave ministry in light of the Vesey and Turner rebellions. Black missionaries and preachers had proven essential to early Methodist efforts, but the church changed its course in the 1830s as it focused on promoting a safer slave mission led by white missionaries.[5]

The churches reached the peak of their slave missions in what Donald Mathews has termed the "Mission to the Slaves," a series of slave ministries beginning in the 1830s that spanned across the South. Despite the fact that the Mission was in fact many independent missions, ministers justified their ministries with reasoning similar to that of churches and planters before them. Methodist ministers felt that the Mission was a

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[4] Touchstone, "Planters and Slave Religion in the Deep South," 125.

[5] Janet Cornelius, Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 28, 49-51, 74-5.

"compromise of conscience" in which they could make up for the failure of early abolitionist positions. They felt a deep spiritual inclination to minister to the slaves on local plantations. They wanted to convey God's law to slaves and to elevate them to a higher moral plateau. At the same time, ministers had more personal motives for carrying out slave missions. They sought to prevent the rise of insurrectionary black leaders by controlling the supply of religious education, which would ensure that slave behavior would conform to white standards of respectability. Having encountered abolitionist critique, Mission adherents answered in two ways. The religious instruction of slaves would modify black behavior and decrease the need for masters to employ cruel punishments, making the slave system better as a result. Slave membership would also counter the critique that the South had no interest in slaves' religious education.[6] In the end, however, the Mission was based on a belief system that kept slaves in a subservient state, as Mathews writes:

> [T]he Mission to Slaves was developed to combat African heathenism, foil abolitionism, and continue the earliest commitments made to blacks during the early antislavery impulse. That the missionary ideal was honorable and benevolent or that it elicited the devotion of admirable men like William Capers and Charles Jones did not diminish the fact that it was also in conception and implication an extension of invidious distinctions between true believer and infidel, the knowledgeable and the ignorant, the wise and the foolish, the superior and the inferior. These inherent, inadvertent distinctions, when fused with middle-class aspirations, easily reinforced the tendency to consign the black people to the periphery of whites' concerns – The back of the church, the galleries, the missions. The implications of the Mission were clearly contradictory – it was both a benevolent reaching out and a defensive holding off.[7]

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[6] Donald Mathews, Religion in the Old South (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 136-7, 139-40, 143, 149; Donald Mathews, Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 62-6.

[7] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 205.

How did churches and planters reach slaves?

During the first years of the American republic, Protestant churches had difficulty converting slaves. The Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel had trouble with its mission to the slaves for two reasons. Christianity had a tradition of uprooting native beliefs and rituals, and the Christian tendency clashed with a slave generation that was unwilling to give up its African culture and religious heritage. The SPG also faced trouble from masters who were unwilling to let missionaries preach to their slaves.[8]

The rise of the evangelical movement and the passage of slaves from the seaboard states to new territories in the Old Southwest changed the nature and substance of slave membership. The rigors of what Ira Berlin calls the Second Middle Passage combined with the stresses of the cotton revolution to break slaves' bodies and spirits, and the evangelical movement served as a potent tonic for their broken souls. Young slaves found comfort in the emotion of conversion and the baptism of the church. Baptists' theological beliefs and democratic inclusiveness proved enticing to slaves, and many came into the Baptist fold as a result. Methodists also found success in their slave missions, but encountered some problems along the way. As their circuit riders traveled throughout the South, the slaves' responses to their preaching declined as they found more organized groups of slaves. Other preachers had problems reaching slaves, as the ministers often talked above slaves' heads. They could not successfully address the crises of credibility that came with the combination of their slaveholding and slave ministries.

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[8] Frey, "Dialectic," 24.

Some preachers did show that they genuinely cared for slaves, but others put off their audiences with both their manner and their messages.[9]

Ministers realized that they had to deal with indifference from both slaves and masters. Many ministers paused when blacks seemed to come into the church with motives other than their spiritual edification. Ministers suspected both the possibility that blacks sought the church in order to escape from work and the possibility that masters were dragging unrepentant slaves into the church on a wholescale basis. Despite these misgivings, preachers continued to preach to white and black alike, perennially expressing optimism that the conversions they witnessed were in fact genuine.[10]

Missionaries worked with local societies to reach slaves and sometimes teach them how to read and write. Missionaries preached the same message of conviction and conversion to slaves as to whites. Churches successfully educated black leaders in early churches and used their new leaders to go out and reach fellow slaves. Black leaders bore fruit in their efforts to create and support slave ministries in places like Virginia and Savannah, Georgia. Black laypeople helped start churches in cities and towns across the South and first found the message of Christ in these churches.[11]

Missionaries primarily used two media through which to teach religion to their slaves: catechisms and Sabbath schools. Missionaries employed catechisms to teach the English language and European culture as well. Teachers often used catechisms written by the Methodist William Capers and by the Presbyterian Charles Colcock Jones to teach their students. Catechisms normally took the form of question-and-answer sessions backed up by Biblical quotations. Though the catechisms were often written for children, teachers found them effective for slave education because their simple formats provided a way for slaves to quickly and thoroughly learn Biblical teachings.[12]

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[9] Berlin, Generations of Captivity, 193; Cornelius, Slave Missions, 28, 59-60; Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 202-9.

[10] Christine Leigh Heyrman, Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 47-9.

[11] Cornelius, *Slave Missions*, 14, 28; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 145; Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 373.

Missionaries also used Sabbath schools as places in which they could gather slaves together and impart the lessons in catechisms and in the Bible itself. Teachers often relied on oral instruction to educate their students in the schools, but some did teach them to read and to help conduct classes. Slaves quickly recognized the opportunities present in Sabbath schools and supported them in order to encourage their children's educational development. Some whites also recognized the potential for black education and attacked the schools as possibly "dangerous" institutions.[13]

As evangelical religion took hold in the South, Methodists and Baptists most successfully reached blacks in their areas. Why did these two denominations reach more slaves than the Presbyterians, Catholics, and others? Albert Raboteau proves especially helpful in this regard. The Methodists served themselves well by their program of circuit riders, which brought enterprising missionaries to frontier towns before most other denominations had infiltrated the wilderness. The Baptists had several points in their favor. Baptist preachers were locally autonomous, which fit the rural nature of Alabama's pioneer settlements and allowed local congregations to initiate mission enterprises without relying on word from higher authorities. Baptist practices also commended themselves to slaves. The most important practice in the Baptist church was immersive baptism, which had similarities to the African practice of water cults.[14]

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[12] Cornelius, Slave Missions, 128, 130-1; Mathews, Slavery and Methodism, 77-83.
[13] Cornelius, Slave Missions, 132-4, 138-9.

As Raboteau points out, however, baptism was one of many factors that made the Baptist faith attractive to slaves, and these other factors were shared by the Methodists. Evangelists in both denominations were enthusiastic preachers who communicated personally emotional appeals. Both Baptists and Methodists stressed the conversion experience as opposed to the need for religious instruction, and that emphasis opened both denominations to illiterate and semi-literate attendees. Baptists and Methodists did not require an educated clergy, and this opened opportunities for uneducated whites and blacks to expand their horizons by preaching to congregations of both colors. In both denominations, blacks would take advantage of this preaching ability to create pockets of freedom for themselves.[15]

Missionaries and ministers reached out to slaves with dynamic presentations on the reality of sin and the necessity of conversion. Slaves responded positively and joined many early churches. The churches continued to reach out to slaves by training black leaders and sending them out to minister to fellow slaves. Once the slaves entered the church, they received instruction from teachers who used the Bible and written catechisms to train them within Sabbath schools. Blacks took advantage of the opportunity to educate themselves and their children, while some whites were wary of the implications that such education could have on society. They channeled their distrust of black education and the grouping of slaves for religious services by segregating them away from whites in church services. As further exploration will show, however, the physical segregation of blacks could prove advantageous for slaves as well as whites.

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[14] Raboteau, Slave Religion, 58, 132.
[15] Raboteau, Slave Religion, 58, 133-4.

How did churches and planters accommodate black worshippers?

When slaves tried to enter local churches, most churches welcomed them. The churches realized that slaves had little control over their location and could not give advance warning about possible departure. Baptist churches often allowed blacks to join without explicit permission from their masters. Blacks and whites also received the same consideration when inquiring for letters of dismissal, as blacks often petitioned for letters of dismissal through the auspices of white members. Churches accommodated slaves in the reality of lost and nonexistent letters of dismissal due to the fact that the slaves were regularly forced to move and had little control over when and to where the moves would take place. Some churches required the permission of masters for slaves to join their congregations, but many made no mention of permission slips or other such tokens that demonstrated the masters' control over church membership.[16]

During the early evangelical movement, the emotional nature of the camp meeting and the baptism brought blacks and whites together as one assembly. In the wake of Vesey and Turner's revolts, churches thought better of the inclusive revival structures and sought to segregate blacks from whites in the worship services. Churches most often segregated their black members by building galleries at the back of the church in which slaves were required to stay. The galleries normally had separate entrances from the rest of the church, so that blacks and whites could be segregated even while entering the church. The separation could take other forms, such as sheds built behind the pulpit, rear seats behind the rest of the congregation, or locations only described as "boarded up place[s]." Some slaves were forced to watch the service from outside as whites worshipped in the sanctuary.[17]

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[16] Larry James, "Biracial Fellowship in Antebellum Baptist Churches," in Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870, 42-51.

Churches and planters also accommodated slaves in ways that allowed them to develop their own culture. Churches often hosted slaves in separate services after the morning service. Some people believed the separation to be a segregating act, but many blacks regarded the move to a separate service as a seizure of independence, since blacks could worship as they wished during these services. Blacks also had the option of worshipping on their own in separate buildings. Planters often built chapels for their slaves, and some of these chapels were praised as models of equality, since they had no galleries. Churches also gave or sold old buildings to groups of slaves for worshipping purposes. Whites patrolled the services held in these buildings haphazardly, and blacks could worship in their fashion and develop their own culture as a result.[18]

When churches took in slaves, they often segregated their new members into galleries, sheds, or back pews during worship services. They also placed slaves in separate services so that preachers could devote time to them apart from the morning service. Blacks did not always see this as negative, and they used the separation to fashion a worship culture for themselves. They worshipped in their own fashion during separate church services and the services held inside chapels or old church buildings.

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[17] Cornelius, Slave Missions, 35-6; Frey, "Dialectic," 31; David Bailey, Shadow on the Church: Southwestern Evangelical Religion and the Issue of Slavery, 1783-1860 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 191-5.

[18] Stampp, The Peculiar Institution, 160-2; Cornelius, Slave Missions, 89; Berlin, Generations of Captivity, 208-9; Frey, "Dialectic," 31; James, "Biracial Fellowship," 52-7.

Although whites did supervise the chapel meetings, they did so loosely, and this enabled blacks to preserve some aspects of their religious tradition.

How did blacks respond to the messages given to them?

Some slaves did not look well upon masters who tried to take up their free time by asking them – or forcing them – to attend church on Sunday, but many embraced the essence of evangelical Christianity as a religion in which they could vigorously participate. In the church or the chapel, they could retreat from the stress and toil of slavery and encourage the hope of a better future. They took the religion of their masters and shaped it into an institution for survival that allowed them to endure slavery.[19]

Blacks often emphasized different beliefs from whites and created their own forms of expression in worship services. Blacks placed great value in the ideas of freedom and deliverance. They endorsed the idea of millennialism – the idea in Revelation that God would create a thousand-year reign of peace at the end of time – and projected that idea into a present hope for freedom. They understood the idea that Christianity was not only the religion of white men, and that the freedom promised in the Bible was no respecter of color. Slaves noticed the fact that Christianity placed a Master above their earthly masters, and they incorporated that facet into their own belief. Christian rebirth gave them a way to find an identity of freedom. In fact, the power of black preaching often dulled the influence of white preachers. While whites had adopted a dichotomy between the religious and secular spheres, traditional African practice had no such dichotomy, so blacks expressed their hope of freedom inside and outside church walls. They sang of freedom in the fields, preached it to their brethren in the slave quarters, and shouted it in churches and chapels. They combined the Christian celebration of the individual soul with an African indifference to the self-mutilating qualities of sin and repentance to fashion a powerful force of uplift that helped facilitate personal and community survival. They also expressed their hopes in spirituals, songs that became outpourings of sorrow and hope. The songs showed the daily experiences of slaves as they toiled on Earth and hoped for solace from Heaven. They sang of freedom, the future new order, and the justice of Christ's last judgment.[20] Donald Mathews aptly describes the black perspective on religion and history:

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[19] Berlin, Generations of Captivity, 207; Cornelius, Slave Missions, 21; Stampp, The Peculiar Institution, 371.

> Blacks experienced the century before Emancipation much differently, as they found in Christian commitment and communal identity shelter from the slave system, an institutional framework to confound the logic of their social condition, an ideology of self-esteem and an earnest of deliverance and ultimate victory.[21]

In which medium did blacks best worship?

Slaves shaped the tenets of Christianity to help them survive and preserve their bodies and souls. Where did slaves best express their hope? Did their moments of joy come from within the walls of a church, inside their dedicated chapels, or outside the confines of the white church? Whose preaching best encouraged the slaves to sing and dance in worship? What aspects of worship were most important to blacks in their meetings?

Blacks derived much more benefit from their own meetings than from the services of white preachers, no matter how well the white preacher did his job. Slaves could have their own meetings in the chapels built for them by masters, but they most often met together in brush arbor meetings out in the periphery of the plantations.[22] Slaves gathered the necessary materials to make the arbors and often used inverted pots to catch the sound, so that masters and overseers would be unaware of their meetings. The brush arbor meetings mixed European beliefs with traditional African rituals and practices to create a unique syncretism through which blacks more easily expressed their spiritual feelings and desires. During brush arbor services, blacks sung both hymnbook songs and their own vocal expressions of life experiences and trials. They emphasized the importance of prayer in the services, and brush arbor prayers could be long and intense as both prayers and listeners experienced the emotions present in their petitions. The services entered a trancelike level of emotion when the participants began the ring shout. Shouts normally began with the service leader proclaiming a promise from the Bible. The participants would respond by shuffling in circles around the leader and shouting their affirmation. They would continue the process long into the night, placing themselves in trances and opening the path to direct communication with the spiritual world.[23]

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[20] Mechal Sobel, "Whatever You Do, Treat People Right: Personal Ethics in a Slave Society," in Ted Ownby, Black and White Cultural Interaction in the Antebellum South, 74; Frey, "Dialectic," 26-7; Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 190, 195, 220-1, 238; Blassingame, The Slave Community, 64, 66-74; Cornelius, Slave Missions, 19; Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 165-7, 212.

[21] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 208.

The brush arbor meeting was important to slaves in many respects. As blacks gathered together to worship, they could express their desires in ways that they could not do on the plantation, save for the messages encoded in spirituals. They had the opportunity to celebrate themselves and their unique heritage through the actions and rituals of the meetings, and they cultivated a modicum of self-esteem from those meetings that worried whites. As the dichotomy between white and black worship increased, blacks eventually came to respond only to their own style of worship, and they created space within white churches and missions by their enthusiastic response to practices that resembled traditional customs. The brush arbor meetings also worried whites for other reasons. They encouraged blacks in leadership roles that diverged from the careful cultivation of amenable black leaders by the white church. Some whites also believed that the spiritual enthusiasm of brush arbor meetings and other religious gatherings was devoted not to Christ above, but to Satan below.[24]

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[22] Donald Mathews calls the clandestine meeting places “brush arbors,” while Janet Cornelius calls them “hush harbors.” See Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 211 and Cornelius, Slave Missions, 9.

[23] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 211; Cornelius, Slave Missions, 9-12; Stampp, The Peculiar Institution, 374-6.

Although white and black worship did diverge in the middle of the 19th century, blacks and whites influenced each other's beliefs and practices throughout the antebellum era. As they interacted, whites allowed blacks to preach and worship within limited boundaries, and blacks responded with shows of emotion and spiritual fervor that often impressed their white audiences. Whites and blacks also interacted in matters outside the realm of worship, as churches allowed certain black men to exercise gifts of preaching at the churches and within local areas. Blacks and whites compromised on matters of church discipline, and they came to agreement on membership requirements, discipline, punishment, and restoration. The heyday of interracial interaction regarding worship came in the early 1800s, but subsequent research shows that the two races exchanged viewpoints on discipline, membership, worship, and autonomy up until the latter decades of the 19th century.

What interaction did blacks and whites have within the church?

The beginning of the evangelical movement produced many scenes of interaction between blacks and whites. Both races responded to evangelical preaching with release and celebration, and the conversion ritual used elements of black and white religious tradition to convert both races. Evangelicals actively encouraged blacks to participate in religious meetings, and they came together at baptisms and camp meetings to worship and commiserate. Blacks and whites worshipped in similar preaching styles that elicited emotional behavioral responses from both races. The Methodists proved the most proactive in encouraging black and white interaction, as they came together in camp meetings to worship, quarterly meetings to take the Eucharist, and class meetings to learn the Bible. Black and white Baptists organized churches together and black preachers taught both races within these interracial churches.[25]

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[24] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 216, 220; Cornelius, Slave Missions, 60; Heyrman, Southern Cross, 52.

Whites admired many facets of black worship and appropriated some of their practices. Whites were consistently fascinated by the black tendency to receive truth in very lucid visions. The intensity of the experience and its perceived out-of-body nature led some whites to wonder if blacks had the natural ability to express divine grace better than whites. Whites admired the intensity of black music at the same time that blacks embraced European hymns and harmonies. White preachers noted the effectiveness of black preaching styles and tried to integrate techniques such as dramatic role-playing into their own sermons. Whites incorporated the shout and trance-generated vocalizations into their own worship styles.[26]

Antebellum churches allowed slaves to exercise religious autonomy within the limits of civil law. Baptists and Methodists encouraged the development of black congregations and leadership during the early national period. The churches realized that blacks responded most fervently to black preachers, so churches actively cultivated black leaders and encouraged them to preach to fellow slaves. Methodists used class meetings to find potential leaders and train them to be local exhorters. These leaders learned to mediate between black and white culture, and they managed to pass through the dangers of racism and white authority. Blacks gained the greatest measure of autonomy within Southern cities. White missionaries encouraged blacks to set up city churches, where they could make their own decisions and lead services under the most nominal of white control. The white missionaries endorsed black city churches for several reasons. They used these churches to impress white benefactors as to the success of slave membership. They also mollified their own feelings of guilt over the restrictive nature of the civil law. Finally, white missionaries assisted city churches because it was the most practical way to facilitate large-scale conversions without an abundance of travel.[27]

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[25] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 191-2; Cornelius, Slave Missions, 26, 33, 60-1.
[26] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 210; Cornelius, Slave Missions, 18.

Black leaders knew that their positions were precarious, although they did have the support of some white missionaries and ministers. Not only were they bound by civil law in their movement and expression, but they also had to face the disapproval and jealousy of white masters and evangelicals. Some whites made known their displeasure at and jealousy of black preachers who, in spite of being social inferiors, were using their spiritual gifts to become superiors within the church. Although black leaders knew about this disapproval, they also knew that they had little practical power to change the situation. They realized that whites could dissolve their meetings if they grew too fearful of black autonomy. Baptists brought their black congregations under tighter control in the 1820s and 1830s to control black autonomy and as part of an effort to formalize their overall congregational structure. Black churches could still meet, but they now required white sponsors or trustees in order to establish themselves as legitimate congregations.[28]

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[27] Cornelius, Slave Missions, 29, 62-4, 107-8.

The church disciplinary structure gave slaves a limited voice in church issues and limited the extent to which masters could control them. Denominations conducted disciplinary meetings in different ways. Baptists and Presbyterians addressed discipline during monthly conferences, and Methodists used their class meetings to enforce discipline. Lutherans and Episcopalians used the standard of proper conduct to determine membership fitness, while Methodists and Baptists allowed their members to join and then chose to enforce disciplinary measures. Churches conducted church discipline in an orderly fashion for both races. Disciplinary meetings were conducted in a spirit of repentance and reconciliation, and the church members met with an open mind to discuss infractions and exchange viewpoints over guilt, innocence, and the proper resolution of conflict. Blacks did fall under discipline more frequently than whites, but slaves took comfort as they saw masters squirm under the same discipline as blacks. Slaves also found voices in the church when members discussed the right of slaves to vote on church matters. At the same time, slaves knew that the church discipline system had its share of inequality. In a civil system that did not permit slave marriages and that restricted what a slave could own, slaves often came under punishment for having a wife or for procuring the food necessary to feed their families.[29]

As the literature shows, churches and missionaries dealt with blacks in a variety of ways. Missionaries actively sought out black converts during the early national period and trained them to be leaders to their fellow slaves. Missionaries evangelized slaves to save souls, counter abolitionist critiques, assail their own doubts about slavery, and to keep blacks from learning their religion from more revolutionary sources. Missionaries and teachers taught slaves in Sabbath schools through the use of basic catechisms. Blacks took comfort in the message of evangelical Christianity as they faced the perils of the Second Middle Passage and the cotton revolution. Slaves saw in baptism and camp meeting worship similarities to traditional African practices, and they enthusiastically embraced worship that paralleled the traditional style. Blacks brought in other styles of worship and expression taken from traditional practices, and whites were often impressed by the emotion and vitality that the traditional practices could bring to black worship.

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[28] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 200; Cornelius, Slave Missions, 30-2; Heyrman, Southern Cross, 217-25.

[29] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 146-7, 225; Cornelius, Slave Missions, 36-40; Berlin, Generations of Captivity, 207-8.

Despite the tentative approval of whites, blacks still found themselves segregated in white churches and expressed themselves best within their own brush arbor meetings. In these meetings, they blended white and black religious forms into a unique syncretism that allowed them to worship honestly and express their utmost hopes and feelings. They communicated hope in the deliverance of Moses and the judgment of Christ. They took a measure of joy in the knowledge that Christ looked down upon them and would take them to eternal bliss when their earthly toils ended. They expressed their feelings through prayer, song, and shout. The brush arbor meeting brought blacks together and helped them to experience a *joi de vivre* that they could not find on the plantation fields.

Although blacks found their greatest freedom to worship within brush arbor meetings, they did find some freedom by interacting with whites inside traditional churches. Whites respected and appropriated black worship styles, especially the shout and trance-generated vocalizations. Whites also admired black preaching, and some ministers adopted such tactics as dramatic roleplaying in order to reach both black and white audiences. Blacks similarly adopted European hymns and other songs into their own worship, even to the extent of using them during brush arbor services. Blacks also found freedom in the semi-objective nature of the discipline committee. Though blacks fell under more discipline than did whites, disciplinary committees held most of the same standards for blacks and whites, and blacks could take comfort in seeing a master receive the same condemnation as they. White missionaries helped support slave missions in cities, where black leaders could make their own decisions and the missions could exist with minimal white supervision.

Whites brought black meetings and churches under more control during the 1820s and 1830s. In response to the Vesey and Turner revolts, Baptist and Methodist churches placed black congregations under tighter control to curb black independence and limit the influence of potentially dangerous black preachers. Evangelical churches also intensified their mission interests not only to save more souls, but also to limit religious teaching to lessons that would inspire black obedience. The Methodist Mission to the Slaves, while benevolent, held blacks to be depraved and in need of education that only whites could provide. At the same time, black preachers continued to preach to slaves within the auspices of local churches, and black congregations continued to meet under white supervision. Despite the decrease in religious freedom, blacks found that they had room to create their own religious sub-cultures within the white churches. After the Civil War, blacks would use the knowledge that they had gained inside white churches to branch off and create their own churches and religious culture.

As the above readings show, blacks and whites in the antebellum South experienced religion in different ways. Blacks created religious cultures based on a blend of African tradition and southern reality, while whites derived their religious culture from southern reality and European heritage. As whites created a civil and religious system that enforced the doctrine of slavery, they struggled to bring blacks into a religious environment that whites could understand and control. The two races worked together in some instances, as whites and blacks reached out to comprehend the traditions that they shared and the joy that could come from interracial worship. In other instances, blacks and whites had a harder time coming together and blacks took refuge in brush arbors as a result. In which of the two situations did churches and religious organizations in north Alabama find themselves? To what extent did churches encourage black religious independence, if at all? How, in turn, did blacks create space for themselves within their respective churches? The remainder of the thesis will examine the slave membership and missions in three north Alabama towns: Florence, Huntsville, and Tuscaloosa. The thesis will also examine the measures that the Southern Baptist Convention and Alabama Baptists took to facilitate slave missions in the state. By looking at the testimonies and accounts of the churches, religious organizations, and slaves of North Alabama, the historian can find the lengths to which churches attempted to reach slaves in the cities and how slaves responded to their efforts.

CHAPTER 2

THE ALABAMA BAPTIST MISSION TO THE SLAVES

The majority of Baptists in Alabama could look to three worldly institutions on matters of policy and direction: the Alabama state convention, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), and the state Baptist newspaper, the Alabama Baptist. The SBC proposed and endorsed policies that the state convention and the Baptist impressed upon their audiences in the local churches. Denominational and state authorities worked together in the mid-1840s to create a slave ministry that aspired to bring the Gospel to slaves throughout Alabama. Although the state and regional Baptists began their formal efforts far later than had churches across Alabama, the ministry initially had great success as all three authorities devoted their pens and purses to its support. The ministry became less visible, and in some cases less successful, in later years as finances limited its reach and other concerns loomed large, directing attention elsewhere.

The Southern Baptist Convention, founded in 1845, came about for many reasons, the most important of which was the dispute over the appointment of James Reeve, a Georgia slaveholder, as a domestic missionary.[30] The Baptist organizations of eleven states joined the new SBC in Augusta on May 8, 1845, and the Convention soon exulted in its numerical strength. The Convention began with 352,000 members and had more members in 1855 than the national organization had before the split.[31]

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[30] Baptists in the South had claimed since 1835 that the Baptist Home Mission Society had been neglecting the old Southwest in its missionary efforts, and their complaints escalated until the SBC's creation a decade later. See Alfred Ronald Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention: 1845-1882" (Th.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1967), 15-7. For descriptions of the Reeve controversy, see Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 23-5 and Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 162-3.

The Convention moved quickly to direct its members into the slave ministry. Members realized that the ministry needed to reach out to the most remote plantations of the South in order to find and instruct as many as possible.[32] The Convention took another important step at the Augusta meeting by creating the Domestic Mission Board, headquartered in Marion, Alabama. The Convention ordained it with two tasks: Take all necessary steps to further the religious instruction of Negroes and to aid efforts to build the Baptist church in New Orleans.[33]

The Board wasted little time in declaring its intention to Convention members and imploring local churches to aid the effort.[34] Domestic Mission Board statements, beginning in 1846, consistently addressed the need for slave missions and encouraged churches to increase their activities on the slaves' behalf.[35] In spite of the Board's aggressive rhetoric, it had to deal with problems that would slow its momentum and imperil the ministry from the beginning. The first and most immediate problem that the Board dealt with was the question of leadership. Basil Manly, Sr., a Convention leader and one of the most important Alabama Baptists of his time, served as the Board's first president. His tenure on the Board was short, however. He resigned after two months of service.[36]

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[31] Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 27; John Edward Hughes, "A History of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ministry to the Negro: 1845-1904" (Th.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1971), 40.

[32] Hughes, "Southern Baptist Convention's Ministry to the Negro," 23.

[33] Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 32.

[34] Hughes, "Southern Baptist Convention's Ministry to the Negro," 66-70.

[35] Hughes, "Southern Baptist Convention's Ministry to the Negro," 72-8.

Manly's resignation hurt the Board's slave ministry for two reasons. The ensuing instability proved the most obvious injury, but his rationale for leaving the presidency underlined another problem for the Board. Manly officially resigned due to the pressure of his obligations as President of the University of Alabama, but correspondence with his son, Basil Manly, Jr., revealed that the Board had internal disputes over the need for slave ministries.[37] Manly, Jr. expressed these disputes in a letter to his father on May 23, 1845:

> Your Board [Domestic Mission Board] will have that matter [work among the Negro population] to deal with. Can you stir them up to it? I was doubtful from what I saw of the action of the last Convention [1845] whether the Marion people were willing to take hold heartily in that thing. How is it? Am I mistaken?[38]

The Board responded to Manly's resignation by electing Jesse Hartwell, another Alabama Baptist, to the office. Hartwell continued as president until 1849. James DeVotie, pastor of Siloam Baptist Church in Montgomery, became president in 1849 and stayed in the office until 1857.[39]

The Board also had difficulty keeping corresponding secretaries during its first year of operation. J.L. Reynolds of South Carolina was elected during the Augusta meeting, but he sent his letter of resignation in shortly thereafter. The Board elected D.P. Bestor to replace him in June 1845, but he resigned five months later due to his frustration over sparse state support for the Convention's overarching ministries. Russell

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[36] Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 34; For the most recent work on Basil Manly Sr., see A. James Fuller, Chaplain to the Confederacy: Basil Manly and Baptist Life in the Old South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

[37] Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 34-5.

[38] Quoted in Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 35.

[39] Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 35-6.

Holman was elected as Bestor's replacement in December 1845 and brought stability to the corresponding secretary's office.[40]

The Board faced two other problems that related to one another: a dearth of agents and funds. Agents represented the Board in certain geographical areas and spoke to local churches and organizations. They were essential not only in promoting the Board to churches that had no access to the Convention's printed materials, but also played very important roles in securing the money that the Board needed for its maintenance and growth. In fact, Alfred Tonks called the Board's agents "the umbilical cord upon which the Board's continued existence depended."[41] Given the importance of agents to the Board's financial welfare, the fact that the Board could not send any into the field until January 1846 proved significant in limiting its initial scope.[42]

Funding issues would plague the Board from the start and would hamper its future movement. Board members took a very conservative attitude toward their financial dealings and decided not to appoint missionaries for whom they did not have the money. While the strategy was prudent in keeping the Board out of debt, it undermined the enthusiasm that the Board had after the Augusta meeting.[43] Crop failures and inclement weather further limited the Board's available assets and hindered its missionaries. The expansion of the Board into Texas, California, and New Mexico stretched the distance that missionaries would have to travel and spread resources even thinner. Finally, funds for mission work were diverted to other domestic causes over which the Board did not have control.[44]

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[40] Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 36-7.

[41] Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 38.

[42] Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 38-9.

[43] Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 39-40.

In spite of the Board's continuing financial difficulties, its members continued to campaign for greater attention to slave missions and took positive steps to increase the effectiveness of current efforts. The Board announced in 1852 that it had modified its slave mission strategy. While the Board had mandated and controlled the dispersion of ministries and missionaries on its own, it now endorsed a program by which it would collaborate with churches and associations that desired to expand their own Negro ministries. As a result, the Board could focus more resources on burgeoning mission fields in the new states of the Southwest while it continued to oversee and work with older states, such as Alabama, in their slave ministries.[45]

Alabama's slave ministry benefited from the new partnership plan, as the Board had the flexibility to appoint ministers who would work under the state's local associations. The Board appointed two missionaries to the state in 1852. Several other missionaries served in the state during the later years of the 1850s, where they ministered to slaves in the Bethel and Cahaba associations. By 1855, corresponding secretary Joseph Walker had the pleasure of attesting that six Negro mission stations had been set up across the South. The Board also reported that domestic missions had grown as a whole, with ten appointments of missionaries in November 1856. [46]

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[44] Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 50, 55-6.

[45] Hughes, "Southern Baptist Convention's Mission to the Negro," 85-101; Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 66-8.

[46] Hughes, "Southern Baptist Convention's Mission to the Negro," 116-8; Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 94, 99.

The finances of the Board began another decline, however, in late 1857. Russell Holman, appointed as corresponding secretary again in 1857, reported after a trip to Kansas that present funds would not cover expenses during the third quarter. The Board grew concerned that it would not be able to pay its missionaries. The next three years showed little improvement for the Board's financial woes. Even with the Board receiving more money in 1860 than ever before, domestic missions suffered. Crop failures in 1860 led to decreased funds in 1861. The number of missionaries fell, with 156 serving in 1860 and 111 in 1861. The slave ministry suffered significant depletions, as only two reported success in the first half of 1861.[47]

Regardless of finances, the Board continued to express optimism that continued attention to the Negro ministry would bring results. The Board advised not to reduce efforts, but to expand them. Board members showed their encouragement in 1861 and related glad tidings for the future of the slave ministry:

> Now that we are (as it is to be hoped) removed from those political exciting causes that have had, for years, a tendency to embarrass our evangelical efforts for the good of the black man, we look forward to a brighter day, when no suspicions can be thrown upon devoted, honest labor for the religious instruction of members of our families.[48]

Southern ministers and slaveholders (often one and the same) had been locked in debate with Northern abolitionists since the rise of the abolition movement in the 1830s. Over time, the arguments grew heated and intense, as abolitionists fervently denounced the sin of slaveholding and derided Southern support of colonization and slave religious education as hypocritical, face-saving measures. Southerners struck back by relying on the Bible's endorsement of slavery in the Old Testament and asserting that the slave benefited from his position in bondage, as it provided a unique opportunity to instill civilization and salvation upon him and his family. When the Southern states seceded from the Union during the winter of 1860-61, Southerners no longer had any reason to listen to or debate with abolitionists, and Southern ministers expressed their appreciation of the fact that they could now devote more energy to ministering to slaves as opposed to the defense of slavery.[49]

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[47] Tonks, "A History of the Home Mission Board," 100, 103, 107; Hughes, "Southern Baptist Convention's Mission to the Negro," 121-4.

[48] Quoted in Hughes, "Southern Baptist Convention's Mission to the Negro," 124.

As the Southern Baptist Convention worked through the Domestic Mission Board to establish a regional slave ministry, Alabama's state convention promoted the slave ministry within its borders and took steps to promote slave education and Biblical literacy. Basil Manly Sr. steered his fellow delegates toward slave ministry with a speech at the 1844 state convention. The convention recorder noted that Manly spoke enthusiastically on the issue during the evening session of November 17, "At night, B. Manly delivered a discourse on the Oral Religious Instruction of our slaves population, arguing the subject with pathetic earnestness and great power."[50] The convention quickly moved to put Manly's words into action. A three-man committee was commissioned to obtain and publish Manly's speech for the press, and another committee took up the matter of slave religious instruction.[51]

The committee for Religious Instruction of Slaves published their report later in the 1844 convention, and they took a multi-stage approach to slave ministry that the convention would modify and use in the years to come. The committee first outlined the need for slave ministry and called qualified ministers and slaveholders to make accommodations for the religious education of their chattel. It also enticed masters with the benefits that they could derive from slave ministry. The committee also detailed the accountability of ministers and slaveholders for evangelizing slaves. Finally, the convention later addressed the need for slave religious literature and also sought to increase the Biblical literacy of both masters and slaves.

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[49] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 154-73.

[50] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings of the Baptist State Convention in Alabama, 1844, 2; located in the Alabama Religious Organizations (ARO) collection at the Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH), Montgomery, Alabama.

[51] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1844, 2-3.

The convention emphasized the need for slave ministry and for faithful workers early and often. The committee noted in 1844 that over a quarter of a million slaves resided within Alabama, and that the Baptists had a duty to reach these slaves and provide for their moral education. In order to create and nurture an effective slave ministry, slaveholders needed to bring blacks together either in churches or at plantations. Once gathered, ministers could provide special services for the slaves at a given time of the week, complete with scripture reading, sermons, prayer, and singing. Masters could further promote the spiritual welfare of their slaves by building "suitable houses" in which slaves could worship free from neighborly annoyance or disruption.[52]

The convention reinforced its obligation to minister to slaves in its 1847 report. The report noted that Christian ministers had a special obligation to minister to slaves. They could not relax in light of their success, as spiritual destitution lay before them. They also galvanized themselves by remembering that Christ was the only way to salvation, and that reaching the Negroes with that message was the only way that the slaves could be saved.[53] The convention later promoted slave ministry to its listeners, reminding them that the slave ministry did not require extensive relocation, slaves were present and willing to learn, and ministers could achieve a great deal by the simplest of ministrations.[54]

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[52] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1844, Appendix K, 13.

[53] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1847, Appendix K, 15.

The convention's mission to promote masters' duties in the slave ministry came in 1849. That year, the convention noted that no volume existed that extensively discussed the duties of masters and slaves. As a result, the convention asked Basil Manly Sr. to head a committee that would solicit essays on masters' duties to slaves.[55] The composition of the committee provides an interesting detail about the state Baptist slave ministry. Of the ministers who were on the committee, Basil Manly and A.S. Lipscombe were Baptists, while J.L. Kirkpatrick was Presbyterian and Nicholas Cobbs was an Episcopalian. The committee reported back the next year with a compilation of three essays that would make up the treatise. C.F. Sturgis and Holland McTyeire won shares of the $200 premium, while A.T. Holmes had his essay published with the other two as a commendation of special notice.[56]

Two of the three essays, those of Holland McTyeire and A.T. Holmes, kept within the traditional discussion format of the theological polemic. Holmes, in "The Duties of Christian Masters," placed extraordinary stress on the impending judgment for both masters and slaves, pointing out at least three times that masters would be accountable to the Master of masters, and that their efforts to educate slaves in the Gospel – or the lack thereof – would come under Heavenly examination. C.F. Sturgis' essay, on the other hand, pursued the topic in a different format. Titled "Melville Letters," Sturgis presented his essay as a series of letters between two brothers, William and Joseph Melville. William was the elder brother, more spiritually focused than his younger sibling and more inclined to discuss the world in theological terms. Joseph, his foil, was concerned with the welfare of his slaves, but displayed that concern in physical care alone. William spent a good portion of the letters convincing his brother that his slaves had spiritual needs, as well.[57]

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[54] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1847, Appendix L, 18.

[55] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1849 Edition, Appendix I, 14-6.

[56] Alabama Baptist, 5 June 1850, 22 Oct. 1851; Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1850, Appendix B, 14. The state convention records of 1849 conflict with those of 1850 and the Baptist over the identity of one of the committee members. The convention records stated the member to be "Rev. N.L. Cobb," while the 1850 records and the 5 June 1850 edition of the *Baptist* stated that the member is Nicholas Hamner Cobbs, the Episcopalian Bishop of Alabama. As Bishop Cobbs was not listed as one of the alternates in the 1849 report, it is reasonable to believe that Bishop Cobbs did in fact participate in the committee. Unfortunately for the historian, checking up on many matters regarding Bishop Cobbs is difficult, as little has been written about him. For the most recent work on Nicholas Cobbs, see David Kearley, "Nicholas Hamner Cobbs, First Bishop of Alabama" (Th.D. diss., General Theological Seminary, 1958).

The three essays had several points in common. Each of the three addressed the spiritual facets of masters' duties to slaves, while only two examined the physical facets of these duties. Each author discussed the fact that the duties did not rest solely with masters. Servants also needed to obey their masters and show them respect. As both groups had their duties, they also depended on each other. Masters could not feasibly look after their servants' well-being when the servants regularly ignored and disrespected the masters, and slaves could not expect to respect and look up to a master who treated them harshly and had no regard for their physical and spiritual welfare.[58]

Each essay also agreed that the spiritual instruction and physical care of slaves served not to harm the master, but benefit him in every way. McTyeire, in "Master and Servant," pointed out that the simple acts of supplying slaves with adequate clothing, food, and housing made as much business sense as any spiritual sense. Servants who were judiciously worked were more efficient and worked for longer periods of time. C.F. Sturgis examined the business sense in slave treatment from another angle when he examined the prospect of punishment. The younger brother, Joseph Melville, advocated preventative measures before corporal punishment, but if corporal punishment were to happen, it needed to be in full measure. According to Joseph, the master had a duty to punish a slave until the malfeasance was properly cured. If the master did not apply the full punishment, then he was doing himself and the slave a disservice by letting the malfeasance crop up again.[59]

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[57] Holland McTyeire, et al., Duties of Masters to Servants: Three Premium Essays (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1851), 134, 137, 140.

[58] McTyeire, et al., Duties of Masters to Servants, 8, 59, 133.

The authors also agreed that the religious education of the slave would conform him or her to moral standards that fit the master's purposes. McTyeire stated that when the master brought his slaves to church with him and included slaves in family devotions, he would discover that his slaves were more content, better tempered, honest, and loyal. William Melville, in Sturgis' essay, asserts that blacks could only fully comprehend and appreciate Christianity in the white church. Blacks could be supervised by whites who would prevent them from being caught up in superstition and would "protect" them if they chose to overstep their boundaries. Holmes, after asserting that the master had a duty to be both just and fair toward the slave, listed several ways through which masters could balance justice and fairness. The master needed to be a slave's friend and protector without inspiring undue familiarity or diluting his own authority. The master also needed to guide and teach the slave to be morally responsible, both through his own teaching and through Biblical instruction.[60]

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[59] McTyeire, et al., Duties of Masters to Servants, 9-11, 89-92.
[60] McTyeire, et al., Duties of Masters to Servants, 38-45, 115, 143-50.

While all three authors implicitly endorsed the social *status quo* by placing the vast majority of the authority and power with the master, Sturgis proved the most outspoken author in delineating the power that the master had over his slaves and the lengths to which the master could go in bringing his religious will to the slaves. The prudent master could take advantage of three "peculiarities of the black race" that made them amenable to Christianity. The first "peculiarity" was the slave's "childlike dependence" on the master that would incline him or her to absorb every religious tenet spoken by a master. The second was a slave's inherent self-respect that could be drawn upon to demonstrate that they could adopt better morals and pass them on to their children. The third was the slave's religious fiber that caused him or her to sing in the fields and preach in the slave quarters. The master could take advantage of this religious fiber and steer it toward Christian beliefs.[61]

Later in the essay, William becomes more adamant about the master's superiority and his duty to enforce social and religious structure on the slave. He applauds slave marriages as wholesome, provided they don't exist over long distances and inspire slaves to wander about in pursuit of their spouses. The slave marriage could also be good public relations for the master, as it would allay one of the key critiques about the harsh nature of mastery. He goes on, however, to suggest that the master had a duty to place every slave, single or married, into a family unit. When forced into these family units, masters could optimally communicate Christianity to slaves in an environment through which slaves could best comprehend the message.[62]

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[61] McTyeire, et al., Duties of Masters to Servants, 95-104.
[62] McTyeire, et al., Duties of Masters to Servants, 105-9.

The essays were similar in audience and intent, but they did differ in a few respects. Holmes' essay was the only one in which the physical nature of the slave did not come under discussion. Holmes instead made a tighter Biblical argument for a master's duties to his slaves, supplying proof of the master's duty from as far back as the creation of man in Genesis. Holmes also detailed the life of Job as the perfect example of a master who treated his slaves with justice and fairness, in spite of his own formidable problems. While all three writers consented that slaves needed to undergo punishment as an agent of moral correction, Sturgis' full cure was by far the most extreme of the three positions. The other two authors advised mild but consistent punishment levels to humanely inculcate moral standards on the slave. Finally, Sturgis and Holmes disagreed on the time during which slaves should be instructed. Sturgis believed that slaves needed to be assembled and taught at night, so that late-night activity would be curbed and the slave's performance could be improved the next day. Holmes, on the other hand, believed that religious instruction should take place during the slave's hours of work and that, as an exchange for the physical respite, the slave should be required to attend. Holmes did not specify the punishment for slaves who chose to avoid these instruction sessions.[63]

The compilation of essays quickly became a cornerstone of the convention's slave ministry. M.B. Clement mentioned that the impending publication of the essays, along with the statements made by past committees on Negro religious instruction, rendered any statement in 1850 by that committee unnecessary. After 1851, little mention was made by the convention of the slave ministry, and the treatise probably played some role in making further recommendations unnecessary.[64]

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[63] McTyeire, et al., Duties of Masters to Servants, 25-7, 89-92, 119-22, 131-2, 138-42, 147-9.

The convention spoke tellingly of its motivations for slave ministry in the context of its discussion of the slave ministry's benefits for masters. The 1844 committee provided the most compelling evidence of masters' benefits and motivations near the end of its second resolution:

> [A]s we cannot doubt that intelligent masters, with the lights of experience before them, will regard the communication of sound religious instruction as the truest economy, as the most efficient police, as tending to the greatest utility with regard to every interest involved, and will therefore be willing to sustain the reasonable expense incident to the maintenance of such instruction for the slaves…[65]

The statement had many implications. Masters were constantly haunted by the fear that slave rebellions such as Denmark Vesey's conspiracy in 1822 and the Nat Turner revolt of 1831 would arise on their plantations or in their towns. Religious instruction could serve both as a catalyst for revolt, as it did for Vesey and Turner, or as a pacifying agent on the plantation. Masters held the key to determining which of the two outcomes would take place. If they controlled or at least closely supervised the flow of religious education to their slaves, they could ensure that slaves learned the lessons that would civilize them and render them more obedient to their masters. When masters brought their slaves to the local church or built houses in which slaves could worship, they took steps to educate their slaves in proper religious doctrines. When they did not, they risked either eternal damnation of their slaves or the prospect of slaves learning their religion from potentially incendiary sources.[66]

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[64] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1850, Appendix G, 19.
[65] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1844, Appendix K, 13.
[66] Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 137, 146.

The convention addressed the impact of the slave's religious education on the welfare of masters in 1848. T.F. Curtis, future corresponding secretary for the Southern Baptist Convention, reported on the Religious Instruction of the Colored People and examined the impact of slave missions on white owners:

> It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the moral and religious instruction of the colored people. Their moral and religious condition, whatever it is, must most vitally react upon our own. They nurse our tender years and their children mingle in the sports of childhood with our own. Moral and religious influences rise from the lower to the higher grades of society more, perhaps, than they descend from the higher to the lower, as water is heated from below and not from the top. The unseen and insensible influence of the moral condition of this class of the community, is one that enters into every house and family.[67]

Curtis voiced the fact that the convention had not only considered the effect of slave ministry on the slaves themselves, but also the impact that ministry – or the lack thereof – had on white families throughout the state. If the master effectively educated his slaves in the basics of religion, then he could promote the slave's salvation as well as protect his own family's moral well-being. Curtis and his committee realized, however, that the obligation went both directions. He spoke to the white family later in his report with the statement, "But it is most important also that the influence of the Christian family, of the pious householder, be brought to bear on them. Let them see an example of piety there."[68] The master could not be content simply telling the slave of the Bible and of his obligation to obey his superiors. The most complete slave ministry would be one in which masters backed up words with actions.

The convention spent a small amount of time specifically emphasizing ministers' and masters' accountability toward future slave ministry. The 1844 committee encouraged slaveholders and ministers to keep the state convention updated as to the success of individual ministry efforts. Committee members also suggested that interested parties contribute to refining the convention's efforts to reach as many slaves as possible. They specifically asked ministers to keep journals about the success and failure of their efforts and to present those journals to the convention in the next meeting. The committee also sought to ensure the future of the slave ministry by setting up a fund for future slave ministry expenses. The fund was started from money that First Baptist Tuscaloosa sent in to finance a slave ministry.[69]

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[67] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1848, Appendix I, 21.

[68] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1848, Appendix I, 22 (emphasis original).

The committee did not discuss the encouragement of slave religious literature and Biblical literacy during the 1844 convention. They took up the issue the next year, as many members of the committee presented their thoughts on the slave ministry. Several members endorsed Charles Colcock Jones' Catechism for general use, but the state convention decided to set up a committee that would select or prepare a catechism that masters and ministers across the state could use. As it turned out, the committee decided to stay at home for their catechetical needs. A.W. Chambliss, one of the members of the committee prepared a catechism for the 1846 convention, and the convention showed no hesitation in accepting it and recommending its use for Baptists across the state.[70]

Chambliss' Catechetical Instructor, published the next year, was an extensive examination of Baptist doctrine and practice. Chambliss expressly wrote it to assist teachers, ministers, and slaveholders in the religious instruction of slaves, though it ranged widely enough to be used for far more than slave religious education.[71] Chambliss began the Instructor with a set of verses for each member of the family as well as masters, servants, employers, and employees. Through them, Chambliss reminded masters that they also had a Master looking down on them from Heaven (as noted in Col. 4:1 and Eph. 6:9) and that they should treat their slaves fairly in light of impending judgment (as noted in Titus 2:9-14). Chambliss instructed slaves to obey their masters in anticipation that they would be rewarded for their obedience (Eph. 6:5-6, Col. 3:22-25, I Peter 2:18).[72]

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[69] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1844, Appendix K, 13.

[70] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1845, 4; Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1846, 5.

[71] A.W. Chambliss, The Catechetical Instructor (Montgomery: Bates, Hooper, and Co., 1847), iii.

Chambliss addressed a wide range of subjects in his Instructor, but he split the catechism into four parts. The first part dealt with questions concerning God and the Bible (pp. 25-114), while the second part examined the creation of the world, the fall of men and angels, and the doctrine of sin (115-72). The third and fourth parts of the *Instructor* emphasized knowledge of the New Testament. The third area of the catechism looked at the ministry of Christ, as well as his redemption and atonement (173-322). The final part of the Instructor addressed the church, along with its structure and discipline (323-65). Each chapter in a given section had a series of questions followed by their answers and Scriptural justifications, a style typical of antebellum catechisms.[73] The instructional questions often took up small portions of each chapter. The bulk of each chapter came in “Remarks” that extrapolated each chapter’s doctrinal content for the teacher and general reader. The “Remarks” focused on distilling the chapter’s theological lessons for black students, but the general reader could benefit from them as well.

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[72] Chambliss, The Catechetical Instructor, *xiv-xv*.

[73] See, for example, Benjamin Keach, The Baptist Catechism (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851).

The state convention's four stages of slave ministry showed that the ministers devoted a good measure of energy and time to the effort, but the result of that expended time and energy was less evident. The convention and its committees testified to the success of the slave ministry on several occasions, but seldom did they cite the number of souls that had been saved during a given year.[74] Only twice did the convention minutes or appendices comment as to the number of slaves brought to Christ. A.G. McGraw commented in his 1846 Report on the State of Religion that five thousand blacks had been saved over the past year. Russell Holman reported the next year that "thousands" had been saved through Baptist efforts in the state.[75] Although it is impossible to determine the overall impact that the state slave mission had, the reader can deduce that it did motivate masters and ministers to improve their slaves' welfare by bringing religious instruction to their slaves and religious accountability to their own lives. The state slave mission did not have the extensive limiting factors that impaired the Southern Baptist Convention's ministry. The state convention did not show any symptoms of having the money problems that so heavily curtailed the SBC's slave ministry, though the state convention did have cause to lament that they had not reached their goal of seeing every minister preach to his local Negroes and every master build a house of worship for his slaves.

The state convention's publishing arm, the Alabama Baptist, expressed a ministerial pattern similar to the convention itself, beginning strong in the mid-1840s and later turning its focus to other matters as it expanded its general ministry. The Alabama Baptist began publication in Marion in 1843 as a statewide denominational newsletter that served its constituents by giving spiritual advice, keeping readers updated about the spiritual matters of the day, encouraging knowledge of secular news, and providing advertising services for its readers. The paper focused on the Baptist ministries of the South, but it also informed readers about the missions of other denominations and ministries around the world. As one of the main periodicals in the Southern Baptist denomination, it expanded its focus as Baptists set up missions in Texas, New Mexico, and California during the 1840s and 1850s.

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[74] The 1845 Journal Report on the State of Religion is a typical example of the state convention's reports on the progress of its Negro ministry. See Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1845 Edition, Appendix M, 18.

[75] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1846 Edition, Appendix E, 15; Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1847 Edition, Appendix K, 16.

The paper used a multi-stage approach to slave ministry similar to that of the state convention. The first stage of the Baptist's ministry came in its capacity as publisher of the state convention's records and missives, which have already been discussed. The second stage of the paper's ministry centered on the debate against abolitionism, in which the paper occasionally made sweeping statements as to the efficacy of slave ministry. The third stage of the paper's ministry involved the regular updates of missionaries and others involved in Southern slave ministries. Finally, the fourth stage involved articles that reminded masters and slaves of their duties to each other and to the Lord.

The paper began its attack on abolitionists early and continued their efforts until the Civil War. In fact, the paper's first article about slave ministry was an editorial on abolitionism. The author of "Slavery As It Is" attacked the Rev. Boucher for taking his information about slavery from "the ex parte testimony, of a raving Abolitionist" as opposed to taking it from the slaveholders themselves. The article went on to claim great success in slave religious education:

> The ministers of all denominations feel it to be their duty to preach to the slaves, and they often hold a service on the Sabbath for their especial benefit. The ministers also endeavor to impress upon the masters their obligations to treat their servants with humanity and kindness, providing especially for their spiritual wants. These points are enforced with great plainness and earnestness, and without offence. In thousands of families too, the colored children are taught to read, and in the prayer meetings held among the colored church members, some leader is always found who reads a chapter from the Testament and gives out the lines of a hymn from the book.[76]

The article contained several interesting assumptions about the scope and breadth of slave ministry. While several ministers throughout the South did minister to slaves from a sense of divine motivation, many ministers also chose not to preach to slaves in any special capacity. Whereas ministers in the state convention, among others, preached that masters should build worship houses for their slaves and instruct their slaves out of written catechisms, many did not stray from simply teaching slaves to obey their masters. The assertion that thousands of black children and adults were taught to read was especially interesting, considering that the state convention stressed the need for oral instruction of slaves in its 1844 convention report. The Southern Baptist Convention also stressed oral instruction, as Southern states had forbidden teaching slaves to read and write.[77]

Other authors contributed to the paper's fight against abolition. The article "Do Right" appeared in the 14 March 1846 edition of the Baptist, penned by an author calling himself "H." H lambasted the North for using high-strung and vitriolic rhetoric against the slaveholding South while holding hypocritical policies about racial law enforcement in its own cities. Many others wrote articles about abolitionism in the following years, especially in the 1850s. The articles did not dwell on the success of slave ministry, but focused on defending the right of Southerners to hold slaves while ridiculing the North for its high moral tones.[78]

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[76] Alabama Baptist, 20 April 1844.

[77] Alabama Baptist State Convention, Journal of the Proceedings, 1844 Edition, Appendix K, 13; Hughes, "Southern Baptist Convention's Mission to the Negro," 79-82.

The Baptist published missionary accounts in Alabama and across the nation, especially during the period from 1849-1851. T.B. Altom and S.W. Sexton sent reports of their activities in November 1850 and July 1851, and both detailed that they had found blacks eager to receive God's word. They exhorted readers to contribute to the slave ministry through gifts of time and money. The Baptist also followed the Southern Baptist mission in Texas, detailing the success of its African mission on at least one occasion. Articles about blacks in the North ironically endorsed levels of spiritual education and intelligence that the editors refrained from endorsing for slaves in the South. An article on 25 May 1849 praised a black man in Vermont for his knowledge of scripture as he debated a prominent Universalist. The paper also printed an appeal for a "Colored Baptist Church" in New Haven, Connecticut.[79]

The Baptist published articles that informed masters of the duties and benefits of slave ministry. The enigmatic H published an article in the 28 February 1846 edition of the paper that cajoled masters to take part in the slave ministry. He did not resort to the language of control that had appeared in the state convention's records, but he did share their assurance that masters stood to reap heavenly rewards for their participation. His most potent encouragement came near the end of the article, "For the encouragement of the minister it may be recollected that the gospel is adapted to the poor of this world, and that his reward will be as great, in turning many of them to righteousness, as if they were all kings, or potentates of the earth."[80] The paper echoed the state convention's attention toward the white family in another article, a reprint of the Presbyterian titled "Are Your Servants at Family Worship?" The author stressed that effective slave ministry would improve slaves' moral character and create a better environment for masters and their families.[81]

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[78] Alabama Baptist, 14 March 1846. For other examples of articles against abolition, see Alabama Baptist, 2 November 1844, 16 August 1845, and 20 September 1845.

[79] Alabama Baptist, 27 Nov. 1850, 30 July 1851, 13 Aug. 1851, 25 May 1849, 4 July 1849.

The paper also printed articles that promoted slave religious education, though none of the authors advocated instruction beyond basic Christian principles. The editors published an article in December 1844 that spoke of using the Child's Scripture Question Book for educating both children and adults. The students were taught little more than basic Christian hymns. H published a series of lessons that stressed the basic tenets of the Christian faith. In the lessons, H had short lessons on principles such as "The Existence of God" and "Man is a Sinner." He followed up the lessons with brief scriptural citations for each theme, echoing the standard catechetical archetype.[82]

The editors of the Baptist focused less on slave missions and more on general Christian living in the years after 1851. Many of the articles on slave ministry came not from the editors or other readers, but from state and regional conventions. Articles that focused on blacks often took on an anecdotal quality, detailing the occasional act of heroism or the humorous spiritual insight of blacks. The paper also turned its focus to Indian missions, and published many articles and letters from Rev. H.F. Buckner, one of the most prominent Indian missionaries in the area.[83]

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[80] Alabama Baptist, 28 Feb. 1846.
[81] Alabama Baptist, 21 Nov. 1849.
[82] Alabama Baptist, 7 Dec. 1844, 21 February 1846, 28 February 1846.
[83] Alabama Baptist, 5 March 1857, 30 April 1857, 13 Aug. 1857, 27 Nov. 1850.

The Southern Baptist Convention, the state convention, and the Alabama Baptist inaugurated slave ministries in the mid-1840s that combined to create a ministry with limited success. The ministers in each organization exerted a good deal of time and energy in promoting slave ministries and celebrated when their efforts showed results. The SBC's ministry unfortunately suffered from early trouble with leadership and organization, and financial troubles plagued the Convention for much of its first two decades. These factors prevented the Domestic Mission Board from fulfilling the ambitious goals that it had for the South's slave ministry. The state convention worked to cajole masters into slave ministry and to improve the religious education and Biblical literacy of both masters and slaves. The state convention succeeded with the publication of Chambliss' Catechetical Instructor and its compilation of essays on the duties of masters and slaves, but the numerical progress of the state's slave ministry was not as evident. The Alabama Baptist published articles on the success of slave ministry, the education of masters and slaves, and the efforts of missionaries nationwide. Ultimately, the Baptist's ministry fell off after 1851 as the paper focused on the Indian mission, general Christian living, and the anecdotal experiences of blacks. The three organizations succeeded in bringing slave ministry to the forefront of attention for several years, but the missions lost vigor as they exhausted their rhetoric or focused on other topics.

CHAPTER 3

SLAVE MISSIONS IN TUSCALOOSA

The city of Tuscaloosa, located on the banks of the Black Warrior River in the central part of Alabama, became one of Alabama's most vibrant cities in the antebellum period. The city served as the state's capital for a brief period, and its place as the home of the University of Alabama ensured that the brightest and most successful students and faculty would grace its halls. The city's affluence and important economic position made it an ideal place for churches and missions that wanted to convert large numbers of slaves. Churches responded by reaching out to local slaves and by building missions around them. Four religious bodies engaged in the most active slave missions in the Tuscaloosa area by building missions both inside the church and out in the rural community. The four bodies were First Methodist Church, First Baptist Church, the Tuscaloosa Presbytery, and Christ Episcopal Church.

Of the four religious bodies, the Baptist and Methodist churches oversaw the largest slave missions in the town and county of Tuscaloosa. Both churches were founded by early settlers of the area and the churches grew alongside the town. As Tuscaloosa took on more economic and political importance, the Baptist and Methodist churches ministered not only to the white settlers of the town, but also to their slaves. As the slave missions grew, however, the leaders in the Methodist and Baptist churches felt pressure from in their churches and from civil authorities to place controls on their missions. As a result, the nascent freedoms blacks had gained in these missions either vanished or were substantially reduced.

The Episcopalian church came to Alabama much later than did the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, but they wasted little time in creating active slave missions. Although these missions never approached the enormous size taken on by Baptist and Methodist missions, the Episcopalians made substantial progress toward functional slave missions in a short time. Nicholas Cobbs, first Episcopal Bishop of Alabama, was essential to the creation and progress of the Episcopal slave mission, and he worked tirelessly to promote the young Episcopal church to both whites and blacks. Whereas the Baptist and Methodist churches eventually had to worry about controlling their slave populations, the Episcopal church struggled primarily to survive. As a result of this struggle, the church could not risk alienating an essential part of its membership, so it did not take the controlling steps that the Baptists and Methodists employed.

Finally, the slave missions undertaken by the Tuscaloosa Presbytery prove more difficult to track, but the evidence shows that Presbyterians began their own slave mission around the same time as did the Baptists and Methodists. The Presbyterians found success similar to that of the Episcopalians, but had to confront problems that Cobbs and his fellow ministers did not. The Presbytery eventually had to settle a pressing disciplinary problem with one of its black missionaries, Harrison Ellis, who had been brought into the church through slave missions and freed for the purpose of mission work in Liberia. Through the disciplinary trial, the Tuscaloosa Presbytery was forced to restrict Ellis’ freedom to exercise his religious gifts and his status as a free black in the church.

Tuscaloosa is built on a plateau at the navigational head of the Black Warrior River, near present-day Birmingham. The Creek and Choctaw Indians both made their homes in the Tuscaloosa area before white settlers began to move in during the early 19th century. Accounts differ as to just when the first white settlers did make their homes on the Black Warrior plateau, but the area saw some military presence as early as October 1813, when Colonels David Crocket and John Coffee made a raid on the Choctaws' hunting town there. The raiders found, to their disbelief, that the town had been fully provisioned and that its crops rested in the fields, but there was no trace of Choctaw Indians anywhere in the town.[84]

Through the disparate settlement accounts, one can reason that settlers began to populate the Tuscaloosa area in 1815 or 1816. Several came to Tuscaloosa in 1816, including men such as Jonathan York, William Wilson, Josiah Tilley, and John Barton who would take their places as the founding fathers of the city. When the men settled Tuscaloosa, they took advantage of the area's Indian heritage in two ways. They named the city Tuscaloosa, a combination of two Choctaw words: *tusca*, meaning warrior, and *loosa*, meaning black. The founders also took advantage of the town's heritage by picking up the trade structure that the Indians had already instituted in the area. Indians had been trading with settlers from St. Stephens since 1805, and the new citizens of Tuscaloosa incorporated the trading post that they found into their own economy. The town grew as people journeyed to it from Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and the Carolinas. The territorial legislature created Tuscaloosa County in 1818 and the town grew quickly enough that it became incorporated on December 13, 1819, one day before

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[84] Archibald Bruce McEachin, The History of Tuscaloosa, 1816-1880 (Tuscaloosa, AL: Confederate Publishing Company, 1977), 10-12.

Alabama became a state. With Tuscaloosa's incorporation, the town became a steady location for slave missions, which began soon after its incorporation.[85]

As Tuscaloosa grew into a trading town, it attracted the attention of missionaries who sought to set up churches in the area. The first and most famous of these missionaries was the Methodist itinerant Ebenezer Hearn. Hearn came to the town in June 1818 and found several Methodists, including John Owen, Edward Sims, and Dr. Samuel Meek, among its earliest settlers. Hearn preached a sermon in Josuha Halbert's tavern, and tradition cites this tavern meeting as the beginning of the First Methodist Church. The church received its first permanent pastor, Rev. William Curtis, on Christmas Day 1824.[86]

As First Methodist grew and became one of the largest churches in the town, the church realized that it needed to set standards for the behavior both of slaves and slaveholders within the church and in the community. The church instructed that its slaveholders should treat their chattel properly in both spiritual and physical matters. When confronted with the need to discipline slaves, masters had a duty to adjudicate disputes with justice and humanity toward the participants, whether white or black. Masters should show concern for their slaves' physical and spiritual welfare by treating them properly and either bringing the gospel to slaves themselves or allowing others to educate their slaves in the truths of Christianity.[87]

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[85] McEachin, The History of Tuscaloosa, 11-15; Matthew William Clinton, Tuscaloosa, Alabama: Its Early Days, 1818-1865 (Tuscaloosa, AL: The Zonta Club, 1958), 12-16.

[86] James Benson Sellers, The First Methodist Church of Tuscaloosa, Alabama: 1818-1968 (Tuscaloosa, AL: Weatherford Printing Company, 1968), 9-30.

[87] Sellers, First Methodist Church of Tuscaloosa, 74-7.

The masters who populated First Methodist had a variety of reasons for bringing the gospel to their slaves, and in that respect, they proved no different from other masters across the South. Some masters had been converted to Christianity themselves, and they sought to bring to their slaves the same hope and joy that had come from their own conversions. Other masters did not have such lofty spiritual ambitions for their chattel, but they did allow slaves to hear the gospel for both the potential behavioral reform that religious education could bring and the pecuniary benefit that would come from slaves who worked hard and did not have the inclination to steal or get into other trouble. Masters of either persuasion may have justified their efforts with an Alabama Supreme Court decision that encouraged slave religious education:

> Though they are property, they are intelligent beings, and under moral accountability. The master, or whoever stands in his place, is morally bound to furnish to his dependent and subject class such moral and religious instruction as is adapted to its political status. Such instruction, properly directed, not only benefits the slave in his moral relations, but enhances his value as an honest, faithful servant and laborer.[88]

The Supreme Court decision highlighted several aspects of slave missions that concerned First Methodist's slaveholders and ministers as they conducted the missions. Their charges were in fact intelligent beings, despite the fact that they were chattel. They would receive the same judgment that their masters and ministers would receive and would be saved or judged in the same fashion. At the same time, if the masters or preachers did not provide the spiritual education that slaves both needed and deserved as fellow human souls, then the slaves would suffer for their ignorance and their betters would also be divinely punished for failing in their essential duty to instruct the slaves.

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[88] Pickens' Adm'r v. Pickens' Distributors, 35 Alabama, 444, quoted in Sellers, First Methodist Church of Tuscaloosa, 77.

At the same time, masters or ministers could only instruct within the limits of the slave system. The decision strongly encourages them to maintain the presence of slave missions under white control, so as to discourage blacks from receiving religious instruction outside the system. The extent to which willing teachers could educate slaves was also limited by the civil code. Alabama passed a law in 1832 that forbade the education of slaves in reading and writing, and the Supreme Court decision further encouraged teachers to keep their lessons within the legal system. The decision further supported the slave system by reminding owners that slave education served their pecuniary interests.[89]

The church took several practical measures that had the unintended result of giving slaves a limited measure of freedom in the 1840s and 1850s. First Methodist had more black members than white members from 1825, when the church had 68 white members and 71 blacks. The high point of the church's black population came in 1857, when the church had 415 blacks and 208 whites.[90] As a result of the massive influx of blacks and their expressed preference for black preaching, the church instituted the policy that blacks and whites would worship in separate services. The church also allowed several preachers and exhorters to practice in a semi-official capacity, following the Methodist practice of cultivating black leadership through the appointment of exhorters. A few of them gained reputations for their eloquence and talent in ministering to congregations of both whites and blacks. One exhorter, Charles, often led prayer during Sunday services and served as a prime example of the potential for both the church and the exhorter to take advantage of his preaching skill. The Methodist pastor had needed blacksmith work done and subsequently protested the charges for the job. He stated that he could have had the work done at another shop for half the price. The blacksmith retorted by reminding the pastor, “Yes, and we would get old Uncle Charles to preach for us for half what we are paying you.” The story does not detail how the pastor responded to the comment, but it does show that Charles was an effective preacher who could gain success and some measure of freedom through the church.[91]

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[89] Sellers, First Methodist Church of Tuscaloosa, 77.
[90] Sellers, First Methodist Church of Tuscaloosa, 51, 103.

The Baptist church in Tuscaloosa proved to be just as active as the Methodist church in its slave missions. A small group of Baptists met with two ministers at the house of Dr. Benjamin Higginbottam on January 24, 1818, and they quickly set up a church with the requisite articles of faith and constitution. The church soon showed evidence of an active black ministry and leadership. The church sent a black man named Billy as a messenger to the Cahawba Association in 1825 and 1826. During the next three years, William Martin, a black preacher, attended the Associational meetings as a messenger. Given the similarity in name and the fact that Associational messengers were customarily influential members of a church, the two men were likely one and the same.[92]

Following the mention of Billy and William Martin, there is little mention of the church’s slave mission until 1844, when the church reported to the state convention that the pastor, along with prominent member Basil Manly, Sr., had been particularly attentive to the needs of black members. Manly came to Tuscaloosa from his previous pastorate at

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[91] Sellers, First Methodist Church of Tuscaloosa, 78; George Little, Memoirs of George Little (Tuscaloosa, AL: Weatherford Printing Company, 1924), 22.

[92] Luther Quentin Porch, History of the First Baptist Church, Tuscaloosa, Alabama (Tuscaloosa, AL: Drake Printers, 1968), 7; Wayne Flynt, Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 45.

First Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where he had served for a decade. Manly moved to Tuscaloosa to take up his position as president of the University of Alabama, vacated by the beleaguered Alva Woods. Manly had ministered to an overwhelmingly black congregation in Charleston and had exercised his power over church administration and discipline in a fashion that recognized the humanity of his black members, even after the dangers of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy. Despite the fact that Manly was never a pastor at the church in Tuscaloosa and he did not preach as often in Tuscaloosa as he had in Charleston, Manly still served as a powerful member of the congregation and often filled in between pastors. As previously mentioned, Manly served a crucial role in the genesis of the state convention's slave mission, and Manly undoubtedly promoted the increase of slave missions during his time in the church.[93]

Beginning in 1846, the church had more blacks than whites in its membership and as a result, the church enacted measures for the control and instruction of its black members similar to those of First Methodist. The church set up the position of watchman at some point before 1845. The watchman was a trusted black member of the church appointed to observe and oversee the spiritual conduct of fellow blacks in certain parts of town. The watchmen reported their findings to the church and were seen as counterparts to the white deacons of the church. From the program's foundation until 1846, six watchmen served the church. In 1846, however, the church decided to expand the watchman program to encompass eight districts with the addition of two watchmen. Though no reason was given for the expansion of the watchman program, the white members likely noted the rising slave population of the church and sought to better ensure their spiritual accountability and growth.[94]

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[93] Porch, History of the First Baptist Church, 12, 24; Fuller, Chaplain to the Confederacy, 101-2, 154, 182; Quist, Restless Visionaries, 342-3.

The church also allowed the church's blacks to assume a limited amount of freedom in the realm of church governance and discipline. The church allowed black members to meet in separate business sessions, but white members kept overall control of the proceedings. The black meetings had to be overseen by a white member appointed as a superintendent of the colored body. Any actions taken by the meeting had to be sent to white members for approval. The church also moved quickly to combat suspicions that the black meeting constituted its own religious body. During several months from late 1845 to March 1846, the church clerk had referred to the black meeting as the colored church. The church responded on March 14 by passing a resolution that the black meeting be referred to as a body, not a church. By doing so, the church eliminated any notion that they were allowing their black members to split off from the parent body.[95]

Black members took actions to increase their presence in the church and to exercise their spiritual gifts. Several black members petitioned the church in 1845 to permit them to exercise preaching gifts. The white membership considered this request in December 1845 and January 1846. During the latter meeting, the request was indefinitely postponed. Despite the setback, blacks continued to petition for the ability to exercise their gifts, and they finally won approval in October 1846 to administer weddings and funerals. Six black members could administer these ceremonies given the permission of the pastor and the white superintendent. The black body had been worshipping in separate meetings from whites, and the situation came to the attention of civil authorities in 1849 and 1855. On both occasions, the church temporarily suspended the worship meetings for a short time to ensure that the meetings complied with state laws requiring meetings of more than five slaves to be accompanied by white supervision and regulating that black could only preach with requisite licenses. Authorities found that the black body was in compliance with civil laws in both cases, and the services resumed shortly thereafter.[96]

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[94] Porch, History of the First Baptist Church, 26-8. Of the eight watchmen, seven were definitely slaves while one might have been a free black. The eight watchmen were Tom (Fields), Edwinboro (Carson), Sawney (Somerville), Ned Berry, Miles (Fitts), James (Drash), Watts (Glascock), and Frank (Peck). Porch speculates that Berry may have either been a free black or a slave who had established a surname.

[95] Porch, History of the First Baptist Church, 27-9.

Black members of the church occasionally ran afoul of the church's discipline, and the church demonstrated patience and the willingness to work with the black leadership in settling the cases. Two cases sufficiently express the point. In February 1846, Lewis and Tom (Fields) and Priscilla Jasper, Lewis's wife, were called before the church for improper conduct. The black leadership recommended that Jasper be suspended for six months for her part in the incident, but the white body decided that she should be admonished by the pastor and assured of the church's disapproval of her actions. The record does not establish whether the admonition was in front of the church or in private.[97]

The second case showed the extent to which the black and white bodies of the church worked to ensure fair treatment of members involved in disciplinary cases. The church cited James Abbott in February 1846 for violating his promise to marry Eliza (Fields) without sufficient cause. He also came under citation for falsely accusing Eliza of having bewitched him and enticed him to give the promise of marriage. The church took action against James only after the pastor and Richard Furman consulted with two of the black leaders, Sawney (Sommerville) and Frederick (Black). Abbott proclaimed at the disciplinary meeting that he did not believe in witchcraft, but the church found the two charges to be proven and solemnly excluded him from the church's fellowship.[98]

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[96] Porch, History of the First Baptist Church, 27, 29-31; Tom Garner, Chronicles of the Church, Oct. 12, 1846 (located at the Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL).

[97] Porch, History of the First Baptist Church, 28.

Although First Baptist had the most active Baptist slave ministry in Tuscaloosa County, it was by no means the only church to minister to slaves. The Tuscaloosa Baptist Association, founded in 1833, made some attempts to encourage its members into stronger slave missions. The Association issued a report to its members in 1848 that echoed similar proclamations from the state Association and other denominational agencies. The special committee recommended that ministers devote special services for blacks, as they would learn the best in their own assemblies. The committee asked masters to be sympathetic of ministers' struggles as they traveled near and far, and stated that masters needed to lend more support to their struggling ministers. Finally, the committee recommended that ministers personally converse with black converts to be assured of their salvation and that respected black members could also direct their fellow slaves' inquiries.[99]

Of the twenty-two churches in Tuscaloosa County that participated in the Tuscaloosa Baptist Association in 1846, sixteen had some slaves in their membership. Over half of these churches had less than ten black members in their congregations, and the largest slave ministry belonged to Gilgal, with twenty-three members. In thirteen years, these churches would gain 161 black members overall, with most of the gains coming from the churches in Tuscaloosa and Big Creek. Several other churches made modest gains while other churches suffered dramatic losses. The church at Spring Hill lost nearly half its black population from 1846 to 1859, as ten black members left its fold. The Association as a whole showed substantial gains in its black membership over the thirteen years. The Association had 258 black members in 1846; by 1859, the number had increased to 444. Meanwhile, the white membership in the Association increased from 1548 to 1902 in that same period. Black membership had grown by 72% in thirteen years, while white membership grew 23%. The churches in the Association had taken interest in at least the numerical growth of slave missions.[100]

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[98] Porch, History of the First Baptist Church, 28-9; Garner, Chronicles of the Church, Feb. 9, 1846.

[99] Hosea Holcombe, History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Alabama (Philadelphia, PA: King and Baird, 1840), 182; Minutes of the Tuscaloosa Baptist Association, 1848 edition, 7-8; located at the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

Some of the churches in the Association demonstrated that they had taken steps to accommodate slaves in their churches, but many of these steps did little to encourage black leadership or agency. Hopewell built a shed at the back of the church in February 1844 for its black worshippers. Northport constructed a slave gallery within its new sanctuary in 1857 and 1858. Gilgal asked the Association to employ a missionary to its local slaves in 1853, and the church allotted $50.00 to that effect the next year. The church realized a temporary boost in its black membership, as its numbers rose from twenty-three in 1850 to thirty-two in 1853 and thirty-six in 1854. The increase in membership faded, however, as the church's slave population fell back to twenty-four in 1859, one more than its total in 1846. The one exception to the conventional slave missions came from Rock Creek in 1823, when it accepted the services of a black preacher named Job Davis. Davis proved to be such a powerful preacher that he single-handedly reinvigorated a suffering revival in Tuscaloosa County.[101]

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[100] Minutes of the Tuscaloosa Baptist Association, 1846 and 1859 editions.

Despite the overall success of Tuscaloosa Baptists' slave missions, First Baptist eventually felt the need to restrict its black membership. The question of the black body's relation to the church surfaced on October 12, 1857, and the church responded with a series of resolutions that effectively limited black independence within the church. The church allowed the black leaders to meet twice a month after the whites' afternoon meetings, and any other meetings of the body were forbidden. Any night meetings required the supervision of the pastor and he had the duty to provide another conductor if he could not direct it himself. Black members could no longer obtain church permission to preach and Communion services were separated. The motives for this specific meeting are unclear, but the church had encountered problems both with state law and national tension in the past, and these two factors probably motivated the church to place the firm restrictions on their black membership.[102]

The Episcopal church also made efforts to encourage slave missions and membership, despite the fact that Episcopalians entered Tuscaloosa's and the state's religious scene nearly two decades after the Baptists and Methodists had begun their own ministries. The Episcopal church created its Diocese of Alabama in 1830 in Mobile, and the Episcopal church in Mobile looked after the needs of its colored population as early as 1840, when the church set up a colored school in the city. The Episcopacy struggled to grow in its first decade in Alabama, as the church began with two pastors and grew to only nine pastors serving churches in seventeen towns across the state. Outside of the mission in Mobile, the slave ministry of the Episcopal church made little progress until the state received its first Bishop, Nicholas Hamner Cobbs, in 1844.[103]

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[101] Charles Octavius Boothe, The Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama: Their Leaders and Their Work (Birmingham, AL: Alabama Publishing Company, 1895), 48; Stevenson Nathaniel Reid, History of Colored Baptists in Alabama (Gadsden, AL: Published by author, 1949), 48; Henry B. Foster, History of Tuscaloosa County Baptist Association (Tuscaloosa, AL: Weatherford Printing, 1934), 240, 248, 258; Minutes of the Tuscaloosa Baptist Association, 1850, 1853, 1854, and 1859 editions.

[102] Porch, Minutes of the First Baptist Church, 32-3.

The Episcopal state convention had tried to procure the services of a Bishop from as early as 1842, when they elected Martin Parks to the position. He refused, and the convention appointed the Bishop of Louisiana, Leonidas K. Polk, as a provisional Bishop. He served the state until 1844, when the convention unanimously elected Nicholas Cobbs of Virginia to accede to the post. Cobbs began his ministry in Virginia, where he became a parish priest and chaplain.[104] He showed interest in cultivating slave missions long before coming to Alabama, as he noted the attention that they gave to the liturgy and the efficacy of his prayers:

> The Rector is . . . encouraged by the prospect of being useful in his preaching to the coloured [sic] people, for whose benefit he holds a second service on each Sunday. When he commenced his labors a few years ago amongst this too much neglected people, he doubted whether they could ever be brought to be interested in the Liturgy; but he now finds from experience, that ignorant and uneducated as they are, they may be taught to unite in a considerable portion of the worship of the Church, particularly in the General Confession, the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the ante-communion service. And he is now fully convinced that one of the most direct and efficient means of building them up in the pure faith . . . will be to instruct them in the forms and services of the Church. Indeed, the Rector can truly say, that he never duly appreciated the value and importance of forms of prayer, till he began his feeble labours among the coloured people.[105]

Cobbs headquartered his ministry in Tuscaloosa when he arrived in 1845, and he gave every indication that he would continue to make the education of slaves one of his top priorities in the burgeoning Diocese. During his Bishop's Address to the convention in 1845, he expressed his desire to carry his zeal for slave missions into Alabama, "It is my purpose to pay special attention to the Slave population in the Diocese, and thus to remove, if possible, one of the popular objections to the Church, and I am most happy in the belief that in this purpose I shall be sustained both by the Clergy and Laity of the State."[106] Cobbs never detailed just what objections that slave missions might counteract, but the state convention expressed its hope in 1858 that the slave missions would overcome specific objections:

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[103] Minutes of the Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1830 Minutes, 43-7; 1842 Minutes, 1, 14; located in the Alabama Religious Organizations collection at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.

[104] William Stevens Perry, The Episcopate in America (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1895), 95.

[105] Kearley, "Nicholas Hamner Cobbs", 6.

> The Committee heartily respond to the remarks of the venerable Bishop, and express the hope that he will continue to give upon this subject line upon line, until in every Parish in the Diocese there shall be established a regular colored congregation. It would give the Church an incalculable moral influence and power, and would do away the groundless, but still existing prejudice, that ours is the Church of the rich. The Church of Christ is the Church of master and servant, rich and poor, of high and low, one with another.[107]

As Cobbs' ministry grew over the years, his devotion to slave missions did not decrease. He found that he felt some of his greatest ministerial fulfillment when he preached to black communicants in the church, and he expressed his joy in 1854:

> In all my ministerial life, I have but seldom been more gratified than on this occasion, when I beheld before me a large, attentive and devout congregation of colored persons, eagerly listening to the preaching of the word. As their voices, in deeply touching tones, rose in the Hymns and Psalms and Chants of the Church, my whole soul was moved and stirred within me, and I felt that it was a privilege to carry the Gospel to the poor. . . .[108]

Under Cobbs' leadership, the state Diocese made two decisions unique to the Episcopal church's slave mission: placing its ministerial focus squarely on children and choosing to use traditional materials to instruct and educate slaves. The Diocese stated their intent to focus on the education of children within three years of Cobbs' arrival:

> The Committee are gratified to see, that the instruction of colored children is claiming an increased attention. If anything is to be done by us for that interesting class of our population, it must be by training the children in the truths of the Gospel as held and taught by the Church.[109]

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[106] Minutes of the Convention, 1845 Minutes, 12.
[107] Minutes of the Convention, 1858 Minutes, 32.
[108] Minutes of the Convention, 1854 Minutes, 25.
[109] Minutes of the Convention, 1848 Minutes, 25.

The Diocese renewed its emphasis on the education of children the next year with some frustration, "The great difficulty, we are sure, consists not in will and disposition of the Clergy to labor among them, but in the almost utter impossibility to make any impression on the present adult population. The work must begin at the foundation, in catechising the children . . ."[110]

While the move to focus on catechizing children seems to have been supported both by Cobbs and the Diocesan convention, the move to stay with traditional educational literature was Cobbs' alone, and the fact that the convention followed along with his recommendation showed both his personal influence and the strength of the Episcopacy's emphasis on the Bishop's leadership. The Diocese passed a resolution near the end of the 1851 convention that asked Bishop Cobbs "to set forth a form of service proper to be used in officiating to the colored people, and such catechism or other system of instruction as he deems advisable."[111] Cobbs answered the inquiry the next year with a firm belief in the church's traditional materials and methods:

> After deep reflection and much experience on the subject, I am persuaded that the best form of instruction for that class of people is to be found in the Catechism and in the Worship of the Church, as set forth in the Prayer Book. In the Confession, in the Lessons, in the Creeds, in the Commandments, in the Chants and in the Catechism, are to be found these elementary, doctrinal and devotional truths that are specially needed by an ignorant and uneducated population. By a little practice and perseverance, on the part of Ministers and Instructors, this class of people can be interested in the Worship of the Church; and the more so as the African has a constitutional, hereditary, and national tendency towards a responsive and liturgical worship.[112]

The Diocesan convention accepted Cobbs' statement without any record of complaint.

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[110] Minutes of the Convention, 1849 Minutes, 39.

[111] Minutes of the Convention, 1851 Minutes, 30.

[112] Minutes of the Convention, 1852 Minutes, 24.

Cobbs carried his enthusiasm for slave missions into his work as the Rector of Tuscaloosa's first Episcopal church, Christ Church. He became the church's Rector in 1845 and served the church until late 1850. He conducted services at the church when he was not busy traveling around the state to minister to its far-flung congregations. The church had begun baptizing servants the year before Cobbs reached Alabama, but the church's slave mission picked up after his arrival. The church had three infant baptisms in 1844 and expanded its ministry to baptize several adults and children in the following years. The church had instituted a black Sunday School as late as 1844 and set up separate services for its black members in 1848. The church carried on the services in a sporadic fashion during the first year but found the time and resources to meet nearly every week in 1849. The church's high point during Cobbs' Rectorate came in April 1850, when Cobbs informed the church's leaders of his intention to build a chapel for the church's slave population. The leaders unanimously approved Cobbs' motion and the church began to create plans for the new chapel. Cobbs, however, would oversee little of the planning stages and none of the construction. He resigned his position as Church Rector on Sept. 15, 1850, and the church elected William Johnson on the same day to take his place.[113]

The slave mission of Christ Church reached its most active stage during Johnson's Rectorate. Johnson approved plans for the slave chapel, later named St. Philip's, on

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[113] See *Minutes of the Convention* for the statistical totals for Christ Episcopal Church. Christ Episcopal Church, Early Records, Vol. I, 4 (located at W.S. Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL); Vestry Minutes, Christ Church Tuscaloosa, Volume I, April 1 and Sept. 15, 1850 (located at W.S. Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL); Minutes of the Convention, 1849 Minutes, 9 and 1850 Minutes, 18.

January 1, 1851, and the chapel was completed shortly thereafter.[114] Johnson commented early that the chapel's services commanded a sizable congregation. Johnson oversaw the majority of the chapel's services himself, but when he was on the road or otherwise indisposed, a white lay-reader conducted services, ensuring that the church would not run afoul of civil law. Later records indicate that the chapel became more dependent on lay readership for the leadership of its services. The church encouraged blacks to participate in the service by allowing those who could read to help conduct services and lead chants. A black layman also conducted a funeral on May 7, 1852 on Johnson's behalf when the latter was indisposed. Cobbs commented favorably on the new chapel on two occasions. He visited the church shortly before Easter 1851, but could not consecrate the chapel due to illness. He was finally able to consecrate the chapel on May 14, 1852. After the consecration, he remarked, "In the afternoon, consecrated the Chapel of St. Philip's – a very neat, comfortable building, designed for the use of the colored congregation. A large and deeply interested congregation of colored persons were present on the occasion."[115]

The church's slave mission picked up after the construction of St. Philip's. Johnson baptized seven blacks in 1851, all after St. Philip's had been completed. The most active year of Johnson's ministry came in 1852, when he baptized six adults and twelve infants. He also had four blacks confirmed into full membership that year. Johnson continued as Rector of Christ Church until mid-1855, when R.D. Nevins took over. Nevins supervised a less active slave ministry than that of Johnson, but the services at St. Philip's continued without interruption.[116]

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[114] Vestry Minutes, Christ Church Tuscaloosa, Volume I, Jan. 1, 1851; At the very latest, St. Philip's was finished shortly before Easter. See Minutes of the Convention, 1851 Minutes, 18.

[115] Minutes of the Convention, 1851 Minutes, 10, 18; 1853 Minutes, 15; Christ Episcopal Church, Early Records, Vol. I, 50.

The slave ministry at Christ Church had an active element that proved unique in Tuscaloosa's slave missions: black slaveholders. The two slaveholders who participated in the mission at St. Philip's were Francis Ash and James Abbot.[117] Ash first appeared in the church records in June 1851, when he served as a sponsor for three baptized infants, Elizabeth Alexander, James Washington Davis, and William Richard Sims. The record does not indicate whether the three infants were Ash's slaves, but one of his slaves was baptized in August 1852 on the same day that his wife joined the church by baptism. Ash brought three other slaves into the church in later years, but he did not involve himself solely in the salvation of his slaves. Rector William Johnson, upon receiving the plans for St. Philip's, asked Ash to speak with the black members of the church and petition them for funds to construct the chapel.[118] James Abbot and his wife Martha were confirmed into full membership by Bishop Cobbs on May 17, 1852, and two of Abbot's slaves eventually followed him into the church. Solomon Petete joined the church on July 20, 1856 while Madison Willson joined on October 30, 1859.[119]

Alabama's Episcopal church could not pull in the large number of slaves in its three decades of missions that the Baptists and Methodists did during their own missions, but the Episcopal church also had a couple of obstacles that the other two denominations did not have to overcome. The Baptists and Methodists had settled in Tuscaloosa and other parts of Alabama during its early territorial days, and some churches in the state predated the state itself. As a result, these churches could grow along with the town and build a secure religious base as years turned to decades. The Episcopal church, on the other hand, did not arrive in Alabama until the 1830s, and they had to create a Diocese in the midst of more established churches. The other obstacle for the Episcopalians was their previously discussed reputation as a church of the rich. The church overcame these obstacles largely through the work of Nicholas Cobbs and the Rectors at Christ Church, and Cobbs could rejoice in 1860 that he had baptized sixteen hundred blacks during his sixteen year ministry and that the state had 214 communicants by that year.[120]

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[116] Christ Episcopal Church, Early Records, *Vol. I*, 8-11, 14.

[117] The records at Christ Church refer to the former as both Ash and Ashe. As the records use Ash more frequently, he will be called Ash herein.

[118] Christ Episcopal Church, Early Records, Vol. I, 8, 11, 14; Vestry Minutes, Christ Church Tuscaloosa, Vol. I, Jan. 1, 1851. The blacks of Christ Episcopal were not the only ones to undertake the support of building projects in Tuscaloosa churches. First Baptist requested that its black members help liquidate the debt incurred by the church to supply seats for the lecture room where they often met. (Flynt, Alabama Baptists, 103) The participation of blacks in matters of church debt and liquidation contradict David Bailey's assertion to the contrary. For Bailey's assertion and the statement that paying for the church's upkeep could be seen as a privilege as well as a duty, see Bailey, Shadow on the Church, 191.

[119] Christ Episcopal Church, Early Records, Vol. I, 14-15, 24.

In the same manner that the Episcopal church could not entirely depend on numbers to measure the effect of its slave ministry, the Presbyterian church in Tuscaloosa showed its involvement in slave missions as much through its membership in the Synod of Alabama as in its own activity. The Presbyterian church had many black members taking Communion in its weekly services, but few ever joined the church. Eighty blacks took Communion on October 25, 1828, and five to twenty-five blacks partook of the service during other meetings in the church's first decades, but the church's highest black membership came in 1828, when the church had twenty-five black members. In fact, from 1847-1865, the church never had more than fifteen members.[121]

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[120] Kearley, "Nicholas Hamner Cobbs," 26.

[121] Louis Friedman Herzberg, "Negro Slavery in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, 1818-1865" (M.A. thesis, University of Alabama, 1955), 64-6; Bailey, Shadow on the Church, 181.

Despite the low numbers, the church did take some steps that spoke of active black involvement in its ministry. Two significant steps include the creation of a black Sunday School and an attempt to improve slave literacy. The church created a Sunday School for blacks in 1845, and the school served as many as 150 members. The church took pleasure in the fact that some attendees had become "respectable church members" and that one had gone on to Gospel ministry. The drive for slave literacy came in 1854, when one of the church elders forwarded a letter from one of the church's members asking to allow Sunday School teachers to instruct slaves in reading skills. The church approved the motion on the contingency that it did not violate state law. As expressed earlier, state law forbade the education of slaves in reading and writing skills as early as 1832, so the church's further silence on the issue probably indicates that they discovered the possible violation of state law and let the issue quietly pass away.[122]

The churches located in the Tuscaloosa Presbytery also undertook slave missions with varying degrees of success. Two churches, Mt. Zion and Eutaw, evinced slaves and whites in their founding memberships. Bethlehem Church listed twenty-eight slave members until they withdrew after the Civil War to form their own church. Bethel Church in Summerville maintained an active slave ministry in 1841, when forty blacks entered the church as a result of a recent revival. The Presbytery tried to streamline the process by which it secured and appointed missionaries to local slaves and the process showed results in 1848, when they divided the presbytery into three sections through which committees could oversee slave missions. One committee oversaw missions west of the Black Warrior River, a second did so between the Black Warrior and Tombigbee Rivers, while the third oversaw efforts east of the Tombigbee. The Presbytery appointed missionaries on a pecuniary basis. A lack of funds prevented Mr. Rogers from becoming a missionary to slaves in 1849, but the Presbytery could afford to hire Lemuel Hatch as a part-time missionary in 1855 and commission him full-time with another missionary in 1856.[123]

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[122] C.H. Rogers, Presbyterian Church Histories of the Synod of Alabama – Tuscaloosa Presbytery (located in the Alabama Church Records at the ADAH, Montgomery, AL), 130-1; Herzberg, "Negro Slavery in Tuscaloosa County," 67-8.

The Presbytery participated actively in the Synod of Mississippi and South Alabama until 1834 and in the Synod of Alabama after the Alabama body withdrew from its Mississippi brethren in 1834. The year 1834 proved to be instrumental in the Synod's slave missions as well, as its members made seminal statements regarding the importance of slave missions. The writer of the Synod's Narrative on the State of Religion demonstrated the slave's right to hear the Gospel by stating, "We regard them as creatures of the same God with ourselves, and as subject to the same divine law, and objects of the same plan of salvation; and we therefore labor to prepare them for the same heaven." The writer also published a long list of resolutions about slave missions, including the following:

> Resolved, That the Synod consider the moral and religious instruction of our colored population of vast importance; and that a solemn obligation rests on all persons having the control of servants, and especially on professors of religion, when servants are subject to their authority.
>
> Resolved, That all proper measures be adopted for bringing Christian masters to a sense of their duty, with respect to their religious instruction of their servants.

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[123] Rogers, Presbyterian Church Histories, 27, 176, 181; James W. Marshall, History of the Presbyterian Church in Alabama (located in the Alabama Church Records at the ADAH, Montgomery, AL), 1766, 1771-2, 1774, 1778-80.

> Resolved, That it be considered the duty of all pastors, and stated supplies, and also missionaries employed within our bounds, to give special attention to the colored people, as a part of the flock over which the Holy Ghost has made us overseers.[124]

After the Alabama Synod separated from its Mississippi counterpart, the members continued to promote slave missions, placing their emphasis on catechetical instruction. The Synod brimmed with success in its 1839 report, "In many of our Churches, the instruction of the Colored populations has received a good degree of attention, and many of the class have been brought into the fold of Christ, and exhibit the temper and spirit of the Gospel. We hope it may not be long till all the colored families in these United States, shall enjoy the rich and inestimable blessings of a preached Gospel."[125] The Synod turned its focus to catechetical teaching in 1843. "An increased and still increasing interest is felt in the spiritual welfare of our colored population. They are receiving catechetical instruction in some of our churches, and instruction statedly from the pulpit in most others within our bounds. The success which has attended our labors in their behalf is truly encouraging."[126]

The Synod's mission culminated in the preparation of blacks for foreign missions, and one example shows that blacks did not have freedom from white supervision even on the foreign mission field. The Synod moved in May 1843 to purchase a slave named Harrison Ellis, along with his family, so that they could be commissioned to preach the Gospel in Liberia. The Synod collaborated with its Mississippi counterpart to raise the money for Ellis' purchase. The Synod finally proved successful in 1846, when the members purchased Ellis from Col. Robert Creswell for $2500. Ellis and his family sailed from New Orleans to Liberia the following January, thanks to support from friends from Mobile and dignitaries such as Rev. Charles Stillman. Ellis served faithfully as a minister in the small Presbytery of West Africa for five years.[127]

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[124] Synod of Mississippi and Alabama, Extracts from the Records of the Synod of Mississippi and South Alabama, from 1829 to 1835 (Jackson, MS: Clarion Steam Publishing Establishment, 1880), 1834 Synod, Narrative of the State of Religion.

[125] Minutes of the Synod of Mississippi and Alabama, 1839 Synod, Narrative on the State of Religion (located in the Church Records Collection at the ADAH, Montgomery, AL).

[126] Minutes of the Synod of Mississippi and Alabama, 1843 Synod, Narrative on the State of Religion.

Ellis' story would not end happily, however. The Synod noted in 1852 that rumors had come up about Ellis' conduct. As a result, the Synod dissolved its West Africa branch, ordered its two other members to investigate Ellis' conduct, and transferred the case to the Tuscaloosa Presbytery, for reasons that they did not specify. The Synod brought three charges against Ellis in 1853. He came under trial for "[a]dultery or the attempt to commit it," "[p]rofane and unbecoming language," and "[u]sing violence, or threatening it." The third charge was subdivided into three separate accusations, but the Synod only sustained the sub-charge that Ellis had fought a woman named Triplet.[128]

The Presbytery commenced Ellis' trial in September 1854. Charles Stillman represented Ellis' interests, as the missionary was tried in absentia. The Presbytery dismissed the charge of adultery unanimously and dismissed the profanity charge by a vote of seventeen to three. Ellis was convicted of using violence, and the elders of the Presbytery voted the charge sufficient to merit his suspension by a vote of ten to six. Stillman did not let the matter rest, officially filing a complaint with the Synod shortly thereafter. The result of Stillman's complaint has been lost to history, but even if it was detrimental to Ellis, he did not let the matter dissuade him from Gospel ministry. Ellis applied to the Presbytery in 1860 for reinstatement into foreign missionary work.[129]

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[127] Minutes of the Synod of Mississippi and Alabama, 1843 Synod; Marshall, *History*, 1769, 1771, 6441, 6637; "Rev. Charles A. Stillman, D.D.," pg. 3, in Marshall, History, between pp. 6441-2.

[128] Marshall, History, 1775.

One former slave discussed the impact that Christianity had on her and her family in Tuscaloosa. Mary Watson shared the story of her father's participation in their local church and gave some insight into the ways that blacks could bend the civil law for their religious benefit.

> My father was a preacher. He could word any hymn. How he could do it, I don't know. On his Sunday, when the circuit rider wasn't there, he would have me read the Bible to him and then he could get up and tell it to the people. I don't know how he managed it. He didn't know how to read.[130]

Watson and her father both showed that blacks could make strides within a white church in need of guidance. Watson's father had proven to the leaders of his Methodist church that he was a trustworthy figure at the pulpit, as he had a set Sunday in each month during which he preached. He undoubtedly had the gift of a good memory and the ability to think on his feet, since he could extrapolate sermons from the Scripture reading of his daughter and a little time to ponder. He used his talents to become an asset to his church when they needed help.

Mary Watson herself also used her position as an exhorter's daughter to further her own talents. In a state where it was not legal to teach slaves how to read and write, her connection to her father's exhortation and to his church may have been the only factor that kept her from being punished for her literacy. While Watson did not detail her master's opinion on reading the Bible to her father, that very silence indicated that her master and other white authorities at least did not take punitive action against her. There is no evidence to suggest that authorities condoned her literacy, but its use in a religious atmosphere may have tempered an otherwise heated response. She could, because of the passive response, continue to read and become a little more independent than slaves who did not have that opportunity.

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[129] Marshall, History, 1775-7, 1781.

[130] George Rawick, ed., The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1972), Vol. 11A, 67.

As previously demonstrated, churches of several denominations undertook some measure of slave missions during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Some churches proved to be more successful than others, with the Baptists and Methodists bringing in the most members. Churches and religious organizations in the Tuscaloosa area promoted slave missions by showing masters and ministers how slave missions could bring more souls into the body of Christ and more obedient workers into the fields. As slave missions grew, some churches took steps to accommodate their members and gave them some freedom to exercise authority within the church. The steps proved generally successful, as black members showed that they could manage their own affairs without rebelling or incurring more than their share of disciplinary problems. As the churches' slave populations grew, however, Tuscaloosa's Baptist and Methodist churches placed restrictions on the freedom of their black members, while the Tuscaloosa Presbytery came to find that their experiments with black independence had limits. Only in the case of Christ Episcopal Church did black members continue their limited independence unabated, largely due to the fact that the nascent Episcopacy in Alabama needed black members as much as they needed whites. The slave missions proved successful on a limited scale, but ultimately they demonstrated that blacks would only find true religious independence in the churches that they would set up after the Civil War.

CHAPTER 4

SLAVE MISSIONS IN HUNTSVILLE

Huntsville, located in the eastern half of North Alabama, was the most prosperous of settlements along Alabama's newly developed Tennessee River valley. As the area drew attention from land developers and pioneer settlers in the first decades of the 19th century, Huntsville grew into one of the largest cities in the northern half of the state. Huntsville became the state's temporary capital and served as the city in which the first state Constitution was drafted. Even after the state moved its capital further south, Huntsville continued to serve as a viable site for regional commerce and trade, as well as a fitting agricultural site. As a result of Huntsville's prosperity, planters came into the city and brought many slaves with them. Churches in the area had opportunities to minister to these incoming slaves, and the Baptists and Methodists took the lead, as they did in Tuscaloosa. The slave ministry of Huntsville's Episcopal church, though never large, benefited from the charismatic leadership of its young Rector, Henry Lay. The white churches in Huntsville, however, came to be trumped by an independent black church, First African Huntsville, that gained substantial membership and received considerable independence from its white counterparts.

The Huntsville area began to draw the attention of settlers a couple of years before the government came into possession of "old Madison county" in 1807 from Creek and Cherokee cessions. The trader "Old Man Ditto," for whom Ditto's Landing was named, lived among the Indians several years before Huntsville came to be settled, but the first white settler of Huntsville was the town's namesake, John Hunt, who settled in 1805 on the banks of what was then known as the "Big Spring."[131] Explorers such as Hunt and Joseph and Isaac Criner sent word to friends and relatives about the area's potential, and the resulting flood of settlers brought people into the area from Georgia and the middle and east portions of Tennessee. These squatting pioneers joined wealthy slave owners from North Carolina, Virginia, and Georgia to create a sizable community that helped bring the county's population to five thousand by December 1808, when Madison County came into formal commission.[132]

The town grew apace, and the Territorial Legislature quickly moved to create a town in its new Madison County. The Legislature passed resolutions in December 1809 commissioning the town of Twickenham and setting up commissioners and courts for the new town. The town attracted its share of future dignitaries during the early years of its settlement. Important men who bought land during the land sale of 1809 and settled in Twickenham included Thomas Bibb, the first state Senate president and the state's second governor after the demise of his brother William, Gabriel Moore and Clement Comer Clay, both state governors, and Leroy Pope, seen as the "Father of Huntsville" for his various contributions to Huntsville's foundation, including his service as the town's first Chief Justice of Madison County's court system and his presidency of the Planters' and Merchants' Bank of Huntsville.[133]

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[131] John Hunt was not the first white man to settle in Madison County itself, as his journey to the Big Spring bore out. See Edward Chambers Betts, Historic Huntsville: Early History of Huntsville, Alabama: 1804-1870 (Birmingham, AL: Southern University Press, 1966), 5-6.

[132] Betts, Historic Huntsville, 6-7; 11.

The new town of Twickenham soon became the staging ground for controversy. The controversy surfaced over the town's name, chosen by Leroy Pope. Pope chose the name due to his admiration of the great English poet Alexander Pope, no relation to Leroy. Alexander Pope's English home was called Twickenham, and Leroy Pope used his own influence to christen the town Twickenham upon its inception. Local reputation and international conflict soon worked against him. Despite the fact that the town was legally known as Twickenham, the "Big Spring" and the settlement around it had long been known as "Hunt's Spring" after the first settler John Hunt. Hunt, ironically, had been forced to leave his settlement shortly after the 1809 land sales for failing to pay the government for the land that he had purchased. Many settlers felt that the town should be named in honor of Hunt's memory.[134]

International strife between Great Britain and the United States also worked against Pope's choice of name for the town. Tensions between the two nations had escalated to the breaking point in the early years of the town and finally broke with the onset of the War of 1812. During this time, anti-British sentiment kindled even in the small settlement of Twickenham, and the town's settlers pressed the Territorial Legislature to change the town's name. The Legislature complied on November 25, 1811 by enacting a resolution to change the town's name to Huntsville, and the town became incorporated two weeks later.[135]

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[133] Betts, Historic Huntsville, 14-5, 22-3; Daniel Dupre, Transforming the Cotton Frontier: Madison County, Alabama, 1800-1840 (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 76.

[134] Betts, Historic Huntsville, 23, 25; Dupre, Transforming the Cotton Frontier, 37.

The Baptists organized the first churches in the Huntsville area three years before the town was incorporated. Flint River Primitive Baptist Church was organized in October 1808 while Enon Baptist, which would become First Baptist Huntsville, came into being on June 3, 1809.[136] First Baptist showed evidence of a limited slave ministry from its first year of operation. The church received its first recorded slave members when Ben and Peg Camady joined the church two days before its first anniversary.[137] The church's slave population grew slowly until 1815 and greatly picked up momentum in the 1820s. Whereas eighteen slaves had passed through First Baptist's doors from its foundation until 1820, the church saw more than fifty new slaves pass through during the 1820s. Of the seventy slaves that came to First Baptist in its first twenty years, only twenty went elsewhere, giving the church nearly fifty slave members by 1830. The most active year during that decade was 1827, when twenty-five slaves from eleven families joined the church. Eleven of those slaves joined on April 1, all by experience of salvation and baptism. It is likely that the church had experienced revival shortly before the April service, and the revival may have been conducted outside the church, since the minutes make no mention of special services.[138]

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[135] Betts, Historic Huntsville, 25-6; Dupre, Transforming the Cotton Frontier, 37.

[136] Avery Reid, Baptists in Alabama: Their Organization and Witness (Montgomery, AL: Paragon Press, 1967), 11-3; Flynt, Alabama Baptists, 6; Minutes of the First Baptist Church Huntsville, 1. Although the church began as Enon and remained with that name until after the Civil War, the church will be referred to as "First Baptist."

[137] Minutes of the First Baptist Church Huntsville, 5. Despite the fact that Ben and Peg Camady [Kennedy] were the first recorded slave members of the church, they may not have been the first members. Another slave, Frank Pruet, appears in the records a year later as a subject of exclusion. His exclusion was the first time that he appeared in the records, leading to the ambiguity. See Minutes of the First Baptist Church Huntsville, 5, 7.

The church continued to gain members in its next three decades, with its greatest gains coming in the 1850s. The church made significant gains in September 1853 and in April and July of 1858. Seven slaves from the Townsend family joined by experience in September, while Lawrence Watkins' eleven slaves joined by letter in April and Steven Harris' thirty-three slaves joined by letter in July. While Watkins' slaves would depart the church in November 1858, seven months after their arrival, the large influx of slaves in the early months of 1858 provide an interesting dilemma. The records do not reveal why the slaves joined the church in such massive numbers, but one can infer a couple of possibilities from the evidence of First Baptist and its contemporaries. All of the slaves in 1858 joined the church by letter, meaning that they had first been exposed to the Gospel at a previous church. As a result, they may have been motivated to join the master's church out of a sense of religious duty. The mass enrollment, however, has a more likely explanation. In many cases, masters required their slaves to attend churches along with them, primarily to keep their slaves under observation and ensure that they did not learn religion at the hands of subversive black preachers. It appears that Townsend, Watkins, and especially Harris had the authority and power to cajole or force their slaves to attend the same church, and the church's slave mission showed dramatic improvement because of that authority.[139]

The church focused primarily on membership and disciplinary issues when dealing with its slave population, but also sought to improve black worship to a limited extent. The church commissioned William Hellums, Jacob Preuit, and William Watkins in August 1813 to draw up plans for a shed to be used for blacks during Sunday worship. The building may have served as a mission building, since the church had only four blacks at that point in time.[140] The church also looked into the issue of special preaching for black members but, unlike other churches in Alabama that pursued the idea early, First Baptist did not examine the issue until 1851, when members employed William Chastain to preach to slaves on the fourth Sunday of each month.[141]

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[138] Minutes of the First Baptist Church Huntsville, 18-9, 25-52.
[139] Minutes of the First Baptist Church Huntsville, 129, 139-40.

In contrast to the limited attention devoted to black worship and preaching, the church set up several meetings and committees to oversee efficient membership and disciplinary administration. The first of two committees came in July 1833 and the second came two years later. Neither found any significant problems among the black membership, and the second found only that twenty-two slave members had left without letters of dismissal. The discovery of these twenty-two missing letters represented a dereliction in First Baptist's desire to keep track of its members, but the dereliction likely did not adversely affect the black population. A slave had little control over his or her mobility and, as established earlier, churches often undertook slave membership with the knowledge that a slave may not be able to produce or secure letters from their previous churches at will. Another factor in the membership disorder may have come from simple human error, although the clerks compiling their records do not admit to any mistakes.[142]

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[140] Mildred Burden Bobo and Catherine Ryan Johnson, First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Alabama (Huntsville, AL: First Baptist Church, 1985), 5; Minutes of the First Baptist Church Huntsville, 5-13.

[141] Minutes of the First Baptist Church Huntsville, 123.

[142] Minutes of the First Baptist Church Huntsville, 67-8, 74-5.

The church devoted special attention to its black membership in one other way. The leaders of the church in 1838 set aside the third Sunday of every month for them to meet and oversee the reception and examination of black members and candidates. Even with a separate meeting to examine black candidates and two committees to investigate the affairs of the black membership, the white members of First Baptist found they had little to worry them. In more than fifty years after the church was founded, only eleven black members were dismissed for reasons other than the traditional transfer of membership letter, and of those eleven, four were dismissed for no reason. Of the seven that did fall under the church's discipline, the majority of them were convicted of adultery and disorderly conduct. A final note of interest concerns the fact that the church conducted only three trials against blacks in its first five decades. Of the three trials, only one man, Peter Kinard, was excluded from the church for his offense. The other two trials witnessed either outside settlement or the repentance and restoration of the defendants.[143]

While the Flint River church eventually took a different doctrinal path from its sibling church at First Baptist, Flint River also cultivated a moderately active slave ministry and worked to define viable boundaries for its black members. As previously alluded, the church was founded on October 2, 1808 at the home of James Deaton, making Flint River the first Baptist church in Alabama. The church received its first black members two years later and its slave mission grew slowly thereafter. Many blacks entered Flint River in the 1820s and 1830s, and the vast majority of the blacks in the church entered through experience and baptism. Unlike First Baptist, Flint River never saw an extended period during its first four decades in which it did not receive black members, even after the church joined the Primitive Baptist ranks in May 1838. Despite the fact that missionary members withdrew from the church and joined First Baptist at this time, the slave mission at Flint River was not affected, probably due to the fact that their masters stayed in the church. In fact, the first slave to leave the church after the Primitive/Missionary schism came in July 1841, when Evelina Weaver was excluded from the church for unknown reasons.[144]

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[143] Minutes of the First Baptist Church Huntsville, 5, 7, 20-1, 32, 43, 53, 67, 70-1, 75, 85, 90; For more discussion on the ambiguity of disciplinary standards, see Cornelius, Slave Missions, 37-45.

More than ninety slaves joined Flint River from 1808 to 1844 and ten of them eventually fell afoul of the church's discipline. The ten came under fire for offenses ranging from falsehood and fornication to disorderly conduct and theft. Black members did not have the advantage of bringing their cases before black disciplinary bureaus, as did other churches in North Alabama, but blacks could argue their cases in the same fashion as whites. Flint River conducted their disciplinary sessions in the same fashion as other Baptist churches by reporting an offense and then sending a committee of three to four church deacons to deal with the accusation. The disputing parties likely appeared before the deaconate to argue their cases and the deacons then weighed the evidence to decide whether or not to exclude the defendant. Blacks at Flint River were often excluded during these trials, but they did provide the opportunity for blacks to work with whites in the church to establish boundaries in both discipline and preaching.[145]

One example of such cooperation came in August and October 1840. Frank Weaver had applied to exercise preaching gifts two years earlier, but the true test of the black preacher's freedom came during the two months in 1840. The church brought an accusation against Cuggo Scruggs for inappropriate preaching and the propagation of unsound doctrine. Scruggs proved his innocence two months later, and the church worked to set up boundaries that would ensure the ability for blacks to preach in appropriate arenas. Scruggs received a license to preach at home and within the church, and a committee set out to define the boundaries of black preachers. Another committee set out three years later to ensure that the black preachers kept their preaching within the church, in correspondence with church and association rules. As a result of this action, blacks could gain a limited amount of freedom to preach within the church and home. Blacks in the church did not have the freedom that would be accorded their brethren at First African Huntsville, but they could express themselves in some fashion.[146]

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[144] Dorothy Scott Johnson, transc., *Flint River Primitive Baptist Church Organized Oct. 2, 1808*, 73; Flint River Primitive Baptist Association, History, Flint River Church, Flint River Association, 1808-1955 (Huntsville, AL: Flint River Association, 1955), 2-4.

[145] Flint River Primitive Baptist Church, 21, 29, 40-4, 49, 73.

First African Huntsville proved to be the most successful slave church in the area and one of the most successful slave churches in the state. First African benefited from a cooperative relationship with white churches that allowed it to function without the boundaries imposed on slave missions and memberships. First African was founded in 1820 and entered the Flint River Association the next year. The slaves of First African had to build their church on the grounds of the Georgia graveyard, since they could not purchase the property on which they could build a church. The church entered the Association with seventy-six members and had a steady stream of members join each year. The church grew from seventy-six members in 1821 to over 600 members in 1861, losing only a handful of members during occasional years. The large membership increase in the church likely came as a result of its talented preacher, the free black

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[146] Flint River Primitive Baptist Church, 65, 70-1, 78

William Harris. The Baptist preacher and early historian Hosea Holcombe called Harris "a good preacher" and modern historian Edward Crowther also commented about Harris' preaching skill. Harris may have received the greatest endorsement of his preaching skill posthumously, when First African renamed itself St. Bartley Primitive Baptist Church after the Civil War.[147]

Although the church did suffer subtle discrimination during its membership in the Flint River Association, the church had more freedom to conduct its affairs than other black churches in the area. William Harris never did have the privilege of preaching the Association's annual sermon, but that was the only mention of discrimination in the Association's dealings. As the church's membership grew, it sent members to the Association as instructed in the Association's 1814 Constitution, and the church could comprise 15% of the associational electorate when joined with First African Cottonport, a smaller independent black church in the area. The Association did not seem scared off by the size and importance of First African; they did nothing to impair First African's sizable influence in the delegation. In fact, the church could call on the Association to help settle membership disputes without fearing the restriction of white oversight committees or the use of the disputes to demean its membership. None of the other early independent black churches in Alabama had such freedom, and First African showed that it could handle such freedom well through its continued existence.[148]

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[147] Bartley Harris had been a member of Flint River church until July 1829, when he was excluded for fornication. As Bartley Harris was the inspiration for First African's name change and William Harris was known to be a powerful preacher at that point in time, they may have been the same person. See Flint River Primitive Baptist Church, 49 for Harris' charge and exclusion. Edward R. Crowther, "Independent Black Baptist Congregations in Antebellum Alabama," Journal of Negro History 72 (Summer/Autumn 1987): 66-7; Larry Hale, comp., Flint River Baptist Association Minutes and Historical Articles (2005), x, lxxxi, 65, 299; Holcombe, History of the Rise and Progress, 110-1; Reid, History of Colored Baptists in Alabama, 46; Boothe, Cyclopedia of Colored Baptists, 32; Bobo and Johnson, First Baptist Church of Huntsville, 11.

The Methodists of Huntsville established successful black missions both in First Methodist and in two missions in Madison County. The First Methodist Church in Huntsville was established in 1820, and blacks wasted little time in joining the church. The church showed signs of a vibrant mission to blacks in 1823, when it reported 213 black members to the Tennessee Conference. Of Alabama's churches in the Tennessee Conference, Huntsville remained its strongest asset in slave missions, rivaled only by the Methodist church in Limestone County. The church's mission dropped off in the early 1830s, but it picked up again in the latter half of the decade and only dropped below 100 members once in the next twenty years. By 1850, the church had 177 black members, representing nearly half of its congregation. The church acquiesced to the wishes of its black members in 1850 by setting up a mission in West Huntsville, overseen by the pastor of First Methodist until 1856. The church saw a need to establish additional facilities in 1853, when Pastor Thomas Maddin and Dr. William Sawrie established a second mission at Bell Factory.[149]

In addition to the missions at Bell Factory and West Huntsville, the Methodist church also sponsored other missions to blacks in the area. The church maintained a group of forty-five ministers who devoted themselves to plantation missions, and each minister served a number of plantations on his circuit. Madison County received its portion of these forty-five ministers in 1831, and the church had established five "charges to the people of color" across the Tennessee Valley by 1845. The missions did not have an easy road to survive. The Madison County mission closed in 1831 due to a lack of money and the fear that abolitionists would infiltrate the meetings to cause unnecessary conflict. The records do not show which reason predominated, but the mission overseers seemed to have put aside their concern about abolitionists by 1839, when the mission reopened as the "Madison African Mission." The renewed mission did not seem to have money problems, as it stayed open and reported membership up until 1858. The Madison mission reached its peak membership in 1847, when it reported nearly 300 members, numbering more than twice the number of blacks in First Methodist. Unlike the relatively stable membership of First Methodist, however, the Madison mission's numbers swung dramatically. The most dramatic of these swings came in 1847, when the mission went from 20 members to 298, and in 1849-51, when the mission went from 136 members to 232 and back down to 126. Despite such swings, the mission proved to have a viable foundation, as it had less than one hundred members only twice in the 1840s and 1850s.[150]

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[148] Crowther, "Independent Black Baptist Congregations," 67.

[149] Note that Huntsville proved to be the strongest church for black missions in the Tennessee Conference. As shall be discussed shortly, the missions themselves drew more blacks than the church at certain points. Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Vol. I, 429; Vol. II, 49, 87, 131, 178, 236; Vol. III, 1847 Minutes (located at the Archives and Special Collections of the Alabama-West Florida Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church, Huntingdon College, Montgomery, AL); Ruth Sykes Ford, A History of the First Methodist Church of Huntsville, Alabama, 1808-1958 (Huntsville, AL: Official Board of the First Methodist Church, 1958), 23, 42-3, 47; Marion Elias Lazenby, "Methodism's Amazing March Through Alabama and West Florida," (Church Records Collection, ADAH) pt. II, 68.

The Episcopal church in Huntsville, Church of the Nativity, established a moderately successful slave mission in spite of its late start. The Episcopalians formally commissioned their church in Huntsville during the last two months of 1843 and the Rev. F.H.L. Laird served as its first Rector. He reported one black baptism during his five years of Rectorship, but the church's greatest gains came during Henry Lay's eleven years as Rector. He took charge of the church in 1848 and quickly began to increase the church's focus on slave missions. He established a Sunday night meeting for slaves soon after he arrived, and he reported that a "numerous and attentive congregation" attended each night.[151] Lay's slave mission never took on the size that other missions in Huntsville would assume, but it slowly grew throughout the 1850s. The church baptized forty blacks in the 1850s, the vast majority of which were infants. In this way, the church kept with the Episcopal Diocese's 1848 assertion that the church should focus most of its attention on the salvation and ministry of slave children.[152] Lay did not keep his personal slave mission to the halls of the church, as the events of March 29-30, 1855 showed. Lay went to the Madison County jail on March 29, where he preached to and baptized a slave who had been sentenced to death. The slave received his punishment and Lay preached his funeral the next day.[153]

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[150] The two missions of First Methodist appear to have been reported within the church's own numbers, as the Madison mission appears from 1824 and seems to have been the only reported *mission* in Madison County, excluding the alternate designation of the Huntsville church as the Huntsville mission. Albert Burton Moore, History of Alabama (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1934), 365; James Benson Sellers, Slavery in Alabama (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1964), 301-2; Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Vol. I, 427, Vol. III, 1847 Minutes, 1849 Minutes, 1850 Minutes, 1851 Minutes; Lazenby, "Methodism's Amazing March," 148.

Several Huntsville slaves offered their own testimony about slave religion through the WPA narratives. Those who discussed their religious states in extensive detail suggest that the white version of slave religion was not as effective as whites might have thought. Stephen McCray discussed his religion and that of his fellow slaves as an affair that differed significantly from, and clashed with, that of white authorities.

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[151] Frances C. Roberts, Sesquicentennial History of Church of the Nativity, Episcopal, Huntsville, Alabama, 1843-1993 (Huntsville, AL: Church of the Nativity, 1992), 23; Minutes of the Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1848 Minutes, 11.

[152] Minutes of the Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1848 Minutes, 25; 1851 Minutes, 11; 1852 Minutes, 11; 1853 Minutes, 12; 1854 Minutes, 14; 1855 Minutes, 15; 1856 Minutes, 15; 1857 Minutes, 11; 1858 Minutes, 14; 1859 Minutes, 31; 1860 Minutes, 30.

[153] Roberts, History of Church of the Nativity, 31.

> We had church, but iffen the white folks caught you at it, you was beat most nigh to death. We used a big pot turned down to keep our voices down. When we went to white preachers, he would say, "Obey your master and mistress."[154]

McCray's short testimony highlighted several facets of his religious life and that of his fellow slaves. White religion did not satisfy their spiritual tastes, so they sought the same religious freedom that other slaves found in brush arbor meetings, as demonstrated by authors such as Janet Cornelius. The slaves in McCray's acquaintance placed great value in the meetings that they could have in brush arbors, as they didn't back down when threatened with severe beatings. McCray did not mention that the beatings stopped anyone from holding brush arbor meetings; the slaves likely prized whatever escape they could gain from the rigors of plantation life and the restriction of white religion. McCray's master did require his slaves to attend white services on some basis, perhaps in retaliation for the brush arbor meetings and in fear that his slaves would grow subversive in their meetings. The preachers in the white church did not have as great an effect on McCray and his fellow slaves as they might have thought, considering that McCray remembered only the constant advice that slaves obey their masters.[155]

Thomas Cole, in nearby Jackson County, offered a view of slave religion that served to highlight the pageantry that could result when whites and blacks came together to celebrate momentous religious occasions. Cole's master gave his slaves more leeway than did the master of Stephen McCray, allowing his slaves to read the Bible and ensuring that they received consistent religious instruction. Cole and his fellow slaves attended baptisms on an occasional basis, and the baptisms served as social events when whites and blacks could come together and worship in unison.

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[154] Rawick, ed., The American Slave, Vol. 7A, 208.

[155] Rawick, ed., The American Slave, Vol. 7A, 208.

> When baptizin' comes off, it almost like goin' to de circus. People come from all over and dey all singin' songs and everybody take dere lunch and have de good time.[156]

Cole described baptisms as unique social events that brought blacks and whites together as the church could not. Cole's baptisms became arenas of interaction in the same vein as early camp meetings, when black and white attendees stood among each other and took part in singing and other charismatic activities of the meeting. To Cole, the baptism offered an opportunity to find an extended period of respite from work, as the attendees brought their lunch in anticipation of a long event. Cole testified to another example of white and black interaction at these baptisms when he described the shouting that went on there. The shouts were an essential part of black worship and proved to be one of the points at which blacks and whites could intersect in their religious paths.[157]

Huntsville quickly became one of the major settlements in the Tennessee Valley of Alabama, and its churches soon sought to bring slave members into their folds. The Baptist and Methodist churches proved the most successful in their efforts, although they did have to endure some struggles to survive. The Baptist churches eventually limited the freedom that their black members could express in the church, although both gave some leeway to black preachers in their ranks. The Baptist churches had few problems with discipline, and the black member could find fair treatment before the disciplinary board when the need came about. The Methodist churches in Huntsville and Madison County drew their fair share of blacks during the period, but they found themselves eclipsed by their missions. The missions, established in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, grew to include hundreds of slaves in their decades of service. The Episcopalian slave mission, though consistently small, grew with the help of Rector Henry Lay, who devoted himself to preaching to blacks and to ministering to their needs, regardless of location.

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[156] Rawick, ed., The American Slave, Vol. 4A, 227-8.
[157] Rawick, ed., The American Slave, Vol. 4A, 227-8.

In spite of the efforts of white churches, slaves proved by both numbers and testimonies that they preferred their own religion over that of whites. The largest and most important slave ministry proved to be the independent church of First African Huntsville. First African grew far larger than any of the other slave missions or church ministries in Madison County and gained the freedom to largely conduct its own affairs within the Flint River Association. The Association took no overt steps to limit First African's influence and authority and the partnership seemed to have worked for both parties, as shown by its uninterrupted duration until the Civil War. The partnership, though unusual, proved that blacks and whites could work together to peaceably conduct church affairs in antebellum Alabama without imposing restrictions on the black church. Former slaves testified that they sought the freedom of brush arbors in spite of the recrimination of white authorities, and they prized the opportunity to worship with their fellow slaves and to celebrate their religion in their own way. The former slaves found their personal expression of religion far more memorable than the expression given to them by whites and cast a shadow of doubt on the success that whites felt that they had achieved in slave missions.

CHAPTER 5

SLAVE MISSIONS IN THE SHOALS

Florence, Muscle Shoals, and Tuscumbia came into being late in the second decade of the 19th century. The three cities shared economic and social ties, as all three were located on or near the Muscle Shoals area of the Tennessee River. Just as the three cities shared river ports and economic ties, they also shared spiritual ties. Since the cities were located across the river from each other, they each grew as they took advantage of the river traffic that came down the river. Each city developed churches and religious traditions as people moved into the area and brought their religious persuasions with them. Even in the area’s earliest years, preachers and traveling missionaries journeyed to cities on one side of the river and followed by visiting cities on the other side. Preachers in Tuscumbia started churches and slave missions in the rural areas of Florence, and the area’s ministers worked to support ministries in each city. The three cities became intertwined in economic, religious, and social matters, and the historian can only understand the slave missions of one city if those missions are examined in light of all three, beginning with Florence.

Florence rests at the southern edge of Lauderdale County, on the north shore of the Tennessee River. The city came about as a vision of several land contractors from the Cypress Land Company. The Cypress group was led by two distinguished military heroes: Generals John Coffee and Andrew Jackson. The two men met after Coffee moved with his widowed mother to Nashville in 1798. Coffee quickly grew to respect Jackson, and Coffee eventually joined his friend in the military. The two fought in and became famous during the War of 1812 and the Indian campaigns that opened up much of Alabama and Mississippi to American settlers. After the wars, Coffee became the surveyor general of public lands first in the northern Mississippi Territory and then throughout the Alabama territory. As a result, Coffee was in great position to realize and profit from the development of a town on the banks of the Tennessee River.[158]

The Cypress Company that established Florence had come about due to a union of two rival companies that were interested in developing in the area. Generals Coffee and Jackson were members of "The Tennessee Company," headquartered in Nashville. The second company, "The Alabama Company," featured land developers from Huntsville such as Leroy Pope, Thomas Bibb, and Waddy Tate. The developers placed the city on a hill that overlooked the Tennessee River to keep the city from being flooded during the river's seasonal overflow. They Cypress trustees established Florence on March 12, 1818 and incorporated the city eight years later. The city began growing early, with two log houses, a jail, a tavern, a blacksmith's shop, and possibly one hundred residents in Florence by 1820.[159]

As the city grew, churches quickly organized in the area. Baptists organized several churches in eastern Lauderdale County by 1825. The Presbyterians set up the first church in the city of Florence, as the traveling minister Gideon Blackburn set up a Presbyterian congregation in 1818 and Hugh Campbell purchased a lot for them later that year. Methodist missionaries had visited the area as early as 1799, and circuit riders proved instrumental in organizing two churches in the area, Center Star United Methodist and Wesley Chapel United Methodist. Florence's First United Methodist Church began holding services on September 8, 1822. Episcopalians set up their first congregation, Trinity Episcopal Church, in 1836 and the Church of Christ set up a congregation in 1823-4 that would become Stony Point Church of Christ sixty years later. Ironically, although the Baptists had set up the first churches in Lauderdale County, they were among the last to organize a formal church in Florence, constituting First Baptist Church on May 27, 1888.[160]

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[158] William Lindsay McDonald, A Walk Through the Past: People and Places of Florence and Lauderdale County, Alabama (Killen, AL: Heart of Dixie Publishing, 2003), 2-3, 8; Jill K. Garrett, A History of Florence, Alabama (Columbia, TN: Published by author, 1968), 4.

[159] McDonald, A Walk Through the Past, 2, 5, 7-8.

Churches in Florence began slave missions shortly after the town had been founded. First Presbyterian Church constructed a gallery for its slave members at some point in the church's history. None of the Episcopal churches in the Shoals area had significant slave missions, due in part to the financial straits in which the Shoals parishes seemed to find themselves. Trinity Episcopal Church began its ministry to the slaves in 1839, when Rev. William Harris baptized four slaves belonging to C.D. Weems. The Rev. James Young proved to be Trinity's most active slave minister, as he baptized several slaves on three occasions. Trinity's slave mission was most active in 1842 and 1850. James Young baptized forty-six slaves during a service on Sept. 11, 1842, and the church baptized twelve infants in 1850.[161]

The Florence church with the most active slave mission proved to be First Methodist Church. First Methodist entered the Shoals circuit of the Methodist Church after it was founded in 1822 and reported that the circuit had sixteen black members that year. The church reported twenty-eight black members in 1829, and the number vacillated between twenty and thirty members in the next decade.[162]

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[160] McDonald, A Walk Through the Past, 36-8.

[161] Parish Register of Trinity Church, Florence, Alabama, 1836-1869, 9-12; Minutes of the Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1850 Minutes, 23.

The 1840s proved a pivotal time for the slave mission of First Methodist, as black members made their interests known. The church had made separate seating accommodations for blacks in each of its structures, starting with the small meeting house in West Florence where the church began. When the church built its first permanent structure in 1835, the church placed a gallery in the back of the church for black members. Blacks, however, soon expressed their own worship preferences. They informed white members that they preferred not to worship within the confines of First Methodist, but in their own church. Blacks got their wish and organized a congregation at Church Springs in 1837. The trustees of First Methodist purchased a brick shed for them in the early 1840s, but the congregation soon moved to a brick cowhouse near the town center owned by the free black John Rapier. First Methodist purchased the property from Rapier in 1857 and later converted it into the Greater St. Paul AME Church.[163]

The degree to which the Church Springs congregation was in fact a free, independent church is unclear. Blacks did have the freedom to worship in their own church building, but the purchases by First Methodist trustees indicate that the church and its authorities took a great deal of interest in maintaining contact with its black congregation. The records do not indicate how much freedom that blacks had in conducting their ecclesiastical affairs, but they likely had some white supervision over their affairs, in accordance with state law. At the same time, First Methodist sponsored Rapier's church and devoted its slave mission efforts to promoting the Church Street congregation.[164]

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[162] Mrs. Thurman M. Kelso, A History of the First Presbyterian Church, Florence, Alabama, Sesquicentennial Observance: 1818-1968 (Florence, AL: Printed by the church, 1968), 25; Mary Holland Lancaster, Gathering Our Sheaves With Joy: A History of Trinity Episcopal Church: 1824-1976 (Nashville, TN: Williams Printing Company, 1985), 27; William Lindsay McDonald, History of the First United Methodist Church, Florence, Alabama: 1822-1984 (Birmingham, AL: Birmingham Printing and Publishing Company, 1983), 17, 31, 38.

[163] McDonald, History of the First United Methodist Church, 40-1; McDonald, A Walk in the Past, 39.

The south bank of the Tennessee River provided space for five cities that would later become Tuscumbia, Muscle Shoals, and Sheffield. Speculators and pioneers arrived in the lands on the south bank at the same time as did settlers on the north bank of Florence. By 1820, the land had been partitioned into the cities of Cold Water (later Tuscumbia), Yorks Bluff (which became Sheffield), South Port, Bainbridge, and Marion. The latter two cities did not survive tumultuous economic movements in the 1820s and 1830s, while South Port lasted on at least until the Civil War as South Florence. Of the five cities, only Cold Water survived in its first incarnation, while Yorks Bluff declined and then was later revived as Sheffield. Cold Water was incorporated in October 1819 and the town received its present name of Tuscumbia on the last day of 1822. Tuscumbia became a commercial center for the area when the city hosted the first railroad built west of the Allegheny Mountains. The railroad was built from 1831-1832 and traveled just over two miles from the city to the Tennessee River. The railroad merged into the Tuscumbia & Decatur Railroad in 1834. The railroad allowed the city to become a trading hub for the region, as it could facilitate both railroad transit and river transit for traders shipping their goods up and down the Tennessee River.[165]

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[164] McDonald, History of the First United Methodist Church, 140-1.

[165] Nina Leftwich, Two Hundred Years at Muscle Shoals: Being an Authentic History of Colbert County, 1700-1900, with Special Emphasis on the Stirring Events of the Early Times (Tuscumbia, AL:

Settlers quickly created churches in the area and showed some evidence of ministering to slaves in the area's early years. The Methodists established the first congregation and church in the area, as the itinerant Lorenzo Dow visited the area with his wife Peggy during the area's territorial days. Rev. Thomas Strongfield came from Huntsville to establish a Methodist church in 1823, and the congregation met in a small schoolhouse that hosted services for each of the area's denominations for several years. The Methodists used the schoolhouse until 1827, when they moved to the brick church that they had built. The church stood sixty by thirty-six feet and contained a gallery for its slave members. The Methodists went on to report in 1828 that ninety-four blacks had joined this and other churches included in the Franklin Circuit.[166]

Early religious meetings showed the influence that evangelical enthusiasm had on white and black worshippers in the Shoals area. Ministers and church members established a number of camp grounds in the area, and these grounds hosted many revivals during their early years. One important example of the effectiveness of camp meetings came in November 1828, when the Methodists held one at Spring Valley while the Presbyterians conducted a meeting at LaGrange, only four miles away. The presiding elder of the Spring Valley meeting commented on the influence that the meeting had on both white and black souls:

> Our sacrament on Sunday night was interesting beyond any description that I can give of it. More than 500 whites and a large number of blacks received the Holy Communion, while they contemplated with holy pleasure and with shouts and tears of joy the great object of this holy institution. . . . Many will long remember the days and nights which they spent at Spring Creek Camp Meeting. . . The Lord in His tender mercy is permitting many 'camels to pass through the needle's eye' in the Valley. . . Never have I seen such work as this before . . .[167]

Privately published, 1935), 37-47; Arthur Henley Keller, History of Tuscumbia, Alabama (Sheffield, AL: Tennessee Valley Historical Society, 1981), 8.

[166] Leftwich, Two Hundred Years at Muscle Shoals, 140-1.

[167] Leftwich, Two Hundred Years at Muscle Shoals, 142-3.

The meeting shows that blacks in the Muscle Shoals area could worship with whites in the camp meeting, as they could in many other parts of the South. They were able to express their religious feeling in the manner that they felt appropriate and to receive similar responses from whites and from the ministers present. They had a limited amount of religious freedom in spite of the fact that they had to attend church with the physical separation of a gallery.

The Baptists in the southern part of the Shoals area quickly set up churches and organized themselves into the Muscle Shoals Baptist Association, founded at Russel Valley Baptist Church in Franklin County on July 15, 1820. The Muscle Shoals Association was made up of churches in Franklin County, just south of Muscle Shoals, its eastern neighbor Lawrence County, and nearby Morgan County. Although the Association's minutes have survived only in sporadic bursts, one can observe that slave missions grew in many of the churches in the Association and that some black populations in these churches came to overwhelm their white counterparts. The Association had eight Franklin County churches in 1839 and the largest slave ministry in Franklin County proved also to be the largest in the Association at Concord Baptist Church in Tuscumbia, which had been founded in 1823. The slave mission of Concord continued to increase as the years passed, and the church had 167 slave members in 1845 when it changed its name to Tuscumbia Baptist Church, over twice the number of slaves than it had six years earlier.[168] The church maintained its slave population up until 1855, when the church had 176 slaves. By that point, Tuscumbia Baptist no longer had the largest slave ministry in the Association, though it still retained the honor of having the largest slave population among the churches in its district. Tuscumbia had been eclipsed by Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Leighton, which went from having sixty-one slave members in 1839 to having 191 slave members in 1855, as well as Liberty Baptist Church in Courtland, which increased its black membership from fifty-two to 268 in the sixteen-year period.[169]

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[168] Minutes of the Muscle Shoals Baptist Association, 1839 Membership Table and 1845 Membership Table (located at the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, TN); Leftwich, Two Hundred Years at Muscle Shoals, 147; Reid, Baptists in Alabama, 23-4; Holcombe, History of the Rise and Progress, 165.

Although the Muscle Shoals Baptist Association had noted the existence of slave members in its churches in the past, the Association took no action to minister specifically to slaves until 1847, shortly after the Association took its stand on behalf of missions. The Association spoke through its Committee on the Religious Instruction of the Blacks:

> Your committee feel that they cannot too earnestly recommend the utmost attention on the part of the ministers, churches and Christian owners, to the religious improvement of their servants – to ministers, both pastors and evangelists, to permit no available opportunity of special instruction to the negro to pass unimproved, and whenever practicable and prudent, that a discourse especially to the colored portion of the congregation be delivered immediately upon the close of the general preaching on the Lord's Day. And, as the command of the Great Master to every true minister of the gospel is go, and as he goes, to preach, your committee think it very appropriate, that the preacher, when on his journey he calls to share the hospitality of a Christian family for the night, to call together, by the permission, and in the presence of the master, those that serve, and by whose toil he is made comfortable, and tell them of the better land, where the weary are at rest.[170]

The Association made sure to promote the religious welfare of its black members while staying within the bounds of civil law. It recommended the same measure taken by many other churches across the state in setting up separate meetings for blacks after Sunday morning services had ended. The Association also encouraged preaching to a plantation's slaves during an overnight stay, but made sure to keep the preaching under the supervision and permission of the plantation's master. These recommendations did little to shake up the status quo or foster unnecessary religious independence, and the Association maintained them in 1850 when they again encouraged the religious instruction of plantation slaves in the area.[171]

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[169] Minutes of the Muscle Shoals Baptist Association, 1839 Membership Table and 1855 Membership Table.

[170] Josephus Shackelford, History of the Muscle Shoals Baptist Association from 1820 to 1890 (Trinity, AL: Published by author, 1891), 49-50.

Slaves in the Shoals area gave a mixed picture of slave religion in the region. While none expressed the active dislike of black religious gatherings that one slave in Huntsville discussed, the slaves showed facets of black religion that both meshed and intertwined with white worship and worked against white religion to promote the black psyche. Spencer Barrett discussed the shared nature of religion on his plantation both at church and inside the home:

> We took turns bout going to white church. We go in washin' at the creek and put on clean clothes. She learned me a prayer. Old mistress learned me to say it nights I slept up at the house. I can still say it:
>
> 'Now I lay me down to sleep
> I pray the Lord my soul to keep
> If I should die fo I wake
> I pray the Lord my soul to take'"[172]

For Barrett, religion was a family affair. He doesn't mention whether or not his master accompanied his slaves to church, but he likely did so either out of religious fervor or to keep them from getting into trouble. The weekly service on Sunday was a special occasion on Barrett's plantation, as the slaves had to ensure that they were clean and ready to present themselves before God. Barrett also had his religion overseen by his mistress, as she taught him the common bedtime prayer. Although Barrett's mistress did teach him the prayer and require him to say it when he slept in the house, her jurisdiction over his religious life was not total. He did not have to say the prayer on nights that he slept in the slave cabin, and he gives no other evidence that either his master or mistress tried to impinge on the religious affairs of Barrett or his fellow slaves.

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[171] Shackelford, History of the Muscle Shoals Baptist Association, 50, 56.
[172] Rawick, ed., The American Slave, Vol. 8A, 117.

Jenny Greer gave evidence of the religious enthusiasm that could occur during certain religious events, as did Thomas Cole of Jackson County:

> Useter go ter de bap'isin's en dey would start shoutin' en singin' w'en we lef' de church. . . I useter go ter camp meetin's. Eve'rbody had a jolly time, preachin', shoutin' en eatin' good things.[173]

Greer noted that these meetings gave slaves an opportunity to express themselves as they may not have been able to during typical church meetings. Whites at least went along with these singing sessions and probably participated in them to some extent. As expressed with Thomas Cole's testimony, baptisms and camp meetings were special religious events in which blacks and whites could come together to worship on equal footing. Greer's description of the events, albeit brief, contains many of the typical elements of a baptism and camp meeting. Participants sang and participated in shouts that increased the meeting's spiritual fervor to high levels. The meetings had much less structure than typical church services, so participants could freely express the moving of the Spirit without running afoul of the church's structure. The baptism and camp meeting was an opportunity for blacks and whites from near and far to meet and catch up on the lives and affairs of their friends and family, and they would ensure that the meeting had proper culinary delicacies to enhance its special nature. Greer and Barrett both emphasized the communal nature of slave religion and the interaction that they could have with whites, while the Rev. W.E. Northcross emphasized in his account both the communal potential of slave religion and the reality that he had to step outside the boundaries of white religion in order to fully embrace his religious calling.

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[173] Rawick, ed., The American Slave, Vol. 16T, 27.

Northcross was born in 1840 in Colbert County. He first encountered religion in his early teen years, when his mistress required the children to attend religious sessions at the plantation house each Sunday when she would conduct Sunday School. She ensured that her weekly instructions did not violate state law by teaching the slaves the Lord's Prayer and a few statements from her favorite catechism. Her teaching stressed religious piety and obedience to both God and man. Northcross was influenced enough by these teachings to declare faith in Christ when he was thirteen years old. Several years later, Northcross had matured enough in his religious outlook to begin leading prayer meetings at the plantation, but he eventually felt called to the ministry.[174]

Northcross' calling to ministry led him to step out on his own and go beyond the conventions that white religion had set for him. He gained permission to preach at and around the plantation, and he filled a void in an area that did not have a church or chapel. As he grew into his ministry, he knew that the only way he could shake his stigma over being "unlearned and ignorant" was to find someone to teach him to read. He did so and found a speller that he could use. He and his teacher went into the mountains on Sunday and spent all day learning to read, even without the comforts of food and drink. Northcross could make this arrangement work because he had gained the ability to hire out his spare time and delegate it as he pleased. Northcross was never caught up on the mountain, but he was turned in later by some of the fellow slaves on his plantation. Unusually, his master only warned him not to be caught with his speller and sent him on his way. Northcross attributed his deliverance to divine authorities and speculated that his master had been touched by God. Northcross continued to teach himself how to read and planted the seeds of a congregation that would become the First Missionary Baptist Church of Tuscumbia after the Civil War.[175]

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[174] Rawick, ed., The American Slave, Vol. 6A, 299.

Northcross placed himself in both the world of white religion and the world of religious independence during his years of slavery. White religion served him well enough to provide salvation and the basics of religious instruction, but as he realized his calling, he found that he had to escape the confines of white religion in order to fulfill it. By going up into the mountain to learn how to read, he risked discovery and severe punishment, as slaves could not legally learn how to read during that era. Despite his knowledge of the consequences, he continued to defy white authorities by preaching and learning how to read. By happenstance or divine intervention, he did not suffer punishment at the hands of his master or other authorities when his drive for literacy was discovered. Northcross successfully mixed white religion with his own ambition to not only improve his religious understanding but also to carve out freedom. His experiences before the War would serve him and his church members well after the War concluded.

Finally, Mary Ella Grandberry of Sheffield and Bill Towns of Tuscumbia each related that they had no choice as to their desired place of worship. Both slaves had to accompany their respective masters to white churches. Grandberry's father did learn how to read the Bible shortly before the Civil War, and his family was able to diversify their religious experience through her father's songs. Neither slave, however, had the option of experiencing the brush arbor meetings that took place in the Shoals area, despite the fact that Bill Towns had a master who permitted his slaves far more comforts of humanity than did other masters in the area.[176]

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[175] Rawick, ed., The American Slave, 300-2, 304.

The towns of the Shoals area, although lacking in the advantages that made Tuscaloosa and Huntsville sprawling frontier settlements, had their own benefits and drew pioneering men and women to them in the early decades of the 19th century. Churches quickly followed suit and began to reach out to the slave populations around them. The most successful slave mission in Florence and across the region was that of First Methodist Church, which devoted a great deal of attention to its slave population in the 1830s and 1840s. The church's slave mission grew so successful that it branched off into its own body at Church Springs, though the black church remained under the supervision of the members of First Methodist. The towns south of the Tennessee River also had churches with active slave ministries, as shown by the Methodist church in Muscle Shoals and Tuscumbia Baptist Church. Slaves and whites in the Colbert and Franklin County area also took part in baptisms and camp meetings that allowed them to express their religious enthusiasm in ways that they could not do in traditional churches. Slaves recalled the shared nature of religion on their respective plantations, as they learned religion both from their masters at the white church and the singing and shouting of baptisms and camp meetings. As W.E. Northcutt demonstrated, for some slaves, the basic instruction of white religion was not enough to slake their religious thirst, and these slaves took the risk of discovery and punishment in order to learn how to read and how to become independent. White and black religion did not perfectly come together in the

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[176] Horace Randall White, ed., Weren't No Good Times: Personal Accounts of Slavery in Alabama (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, Publisher, 2004), 29-30, 58.

Shoals area, but the two races worked together well enough to give blacks some freedom to create their own religious destinies and exercise their gifts.

CONCLUSION

Masters, slaves, ministers, and churches in north Alabama had many different experiences as they sought to accommodate each other within the slave missions and church memberships across the state. The state Baptist convention worked closely with its member churches and the Southern Baptist Convention to develop a program of slave missions that sought to help churches create viable slave memberships and local missions. Their program, featuring the dissemination of catechetical literature from prominent state ministers and the active support of the state Baptist publishing organ, the Alabama Baptist, enjoyed its heyday in the late 1840s and early 1850s. During those years, state convention members celebrated their successes and devoted much time and energy to the development of an active mission to Alabama slaves. After the early 1850s, however, state convention members felt that they had spoken their piece on the subject, and their corporate attention to slaves diminished as a result.

Long before the state Baptist convention began its mission to the slaves in 1844, churches in Tuscaloosa, Huntsville, and the Shoals area had begun to minister to local slaves in a limited fashion. Tuscaloosa came to have the most active missions and memberships of the three, but each town and area had active ministers who promoted the mission to the slaves and each had blacks who participated in white churches and missions as well as their own religious gatherings.

Tuscaloosa had the benefit of hosting the University of Alabama beginning in 1831 and the state capital for a short time. Because of these prestigious institutions, Tuscaloosa drew the best and brightest members of society. These professors, lawyers, doctors, and others brought their slaves into the town and county, and the town's churches reached out to both the masters and slaves. Among the most important contributors to Tuscaloosa's slave ministry were the Baptist Basil Manly and the Episcopalian Nicholas Cobbs. Manly, as an active member of Tuscaloosa's First Baptist Church, worked to promote separate meetings and missions for the town's slaves. He also played a large role in developing the state Baptist convention's mission to the slaves.

Nicholas Cobbs came to Alabama as its first Episcopal Bishop in 1845, and he brought a desire for slave missions that had motivated him to minister to slaves during his early years in Virginia. Cobbs combined that desire with a tireless work ethic to travel across the state each year and nurture the church's mission to the slaves from its humble beginnings in Mobile to a statewide effort that had brought sixteen hundred blacks into its fold by 1860. Through Cobbs' efforts, strong churches had been planted and their slave memberships proved dynamic and fruitful. This was especially the case in Cobbs' own Christ Church in Tuscaloosa. Christ Church promoted its slave membership to the point that it set up a separate chapel for its black members in 1851, and the white church leaders worked with black leaders at St. Philip's Chapel to supervise an active slave membership there.

The town of Huntsville and its surrounding area had been the subject of a great deal of speculation from interested settlers and land speculators for years before the first settlers made their presence felt in the first decade of the 19th century. As the town grew and endured strife over its name and heritage, the churches of Huntsville also sought to build missions to their local slaves. The Methodist church proved to be the most active promoter of slave missions and membership in Huntsville with the Baptists in close competition, but none of the white churches could compare to the popularity and esteem of the First African Church of Huntsville.

Created by local slaves and based in a cemetery, the church proved popular from its origin. The church entered the Flint River Baptist Association in 1821 with seventy-six members to its credit and grew steadily until it entered 1860 with over six hundred members. First African enjoyed the services of a dynamic young preacher, William Harris. Under his tenure, the church not only grew in membership but also became more powerful within the Flint River Association. The biracial association had far more white churches than black ones, but the white churches never imposed restrictions on either First African or its fellow black church, First Cottonport. In fact, the Association and First African worked together on disciplinary issues and formed a bond of cooperation secure enough that First African remained in the Association when it joined the Primitive Baptist ranks.

The churches of Florence and the Shoals area of northwest Alabama did not have the secure footing that churches in Tuscaloosa and Huntsville had in the antebellum period. Many of the churches in the area struggled to keep their doors open as settlers concentrated on carving out stakes in the rough frontier wilderness. In spite of these struggles, churches in the area managed to build active slave memberships in both Florence and Tuscumbia. The most active mission to the slaves in Florence came from the Methodists, who promoted slave membership first through the church itself and then through a semi-independent black congregation at Church Street. The leaders of the First Methodist Church continued to oversee the services at Church Street, but the extent to which they controlled the daily affairs of Church Street is unknown. The church likely had some measure of freedom, but also had to deal with the specter of white supervision.

The First Baptist Church in Tuscumbia had the most active slave membership of churches on the southern bank of the Tennessee River, across from Florence. Tuscumbia's Baptist Church was one of many members of the Muscle Shoals Baptist Association, which made a limited attempt to promote slave membership in the 1840s. The Association came to have a few churches with active slave memberships, including First Baptist Tuscumbia, Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Leighton, and Liberty Baptist Church in Courtland.

Former slaves gave different pictures of the impact of religion on their lives. The difference between slaves that gave a favorable picture of white religion and those who gave unfavorable pictures usually came in the master's treatment of religion. Mary Watson of Tuscaloosa, for example, helped her father prepare for the occasional Sunday sermon by reading him the Bible, supplying the Scripture that he would then expound into a message. Watson's master and other white authorities did not resist her father's presence in the pulpit, and as a result, she and her father operated contentedly within the white church. W.E. Northcross of Colbert County, however, grew dissatisfied with the extent that white religion was handicapping him and sought religious instruction on his own. He went into the mountains outside Sheffield and Muscle Shoals to learn how to read and interpret Scripture for himself. As he learned, he started his own congregation and led them through the turbulent years of the Civil War and the Reconstruction period.

Other slaves spoke about baptisms during which they would interact with white Christians and brush arbor meetings during which they would not.

Black church members and mission participants gained some measure of freedom through their religious activities. The members who gained the most freedom were those who had the spiritual gifts to preach before congregations of blacks and whites. Blacks in some churches were able to form disciplinary boards that supervised the behavior and moral upbringing of fellow blacks. Blacks could also gain freedom from measures that appeared to only segregate them. Although blacks were often seated in galleries and other church sections that were separate from whites, blacks could sing and worship in their own styles while within these galleries, to the chagrin of white worshippers. They could also find influence within the church disciplinary structure. Blacks did come under discipline more than whites and were often the subjects of special church oversight, but they found comfort in the fact that their masters could also fall under the same discipline as their slaves. Church disciplinary meetings gave blacks the forum to defend themselves and to work with white leaders to fairly dispense church judgment.

Churches across north Alabama had ministers and slaves who took religion seriously. Ministers such as Basil Manly and Nicholas Cobbs sought to create strong missions and memberships to slaves throughout the state. They set up programs that would reach out to local churches and instruct them on the means to set up slave memberships and missions in local communities. These programs and missions proved moderately successful, as churches in many parts of north Alabama had several hundred slaves in their ranks at certain points in time. The churches and missions set up by whites also had some competition from churches run by blacks. The black churches, whether under white supervision or independent, drew numbers of slaves that proved far larger than many white churches during the period. Blacks proved that they could operate these churches well, and worked together with white church leaders to sustain independent functions and promote Christian values.

Former slaves came away with mixed opinions on the efficacy of white missions. Some slaves participated in white churches and found great spiritual satisfaction from their activity alongside white brethren. Others could not reconcile themselves to the tenets of white religion and sought the solace of their own brand of Christianity, whether through independent study or through the alternate services of revivals and brush arbors. Despite the fact that blacks found religion both with and without the help of whites, they gained the spiritual knowledge that would see them through the hard times of the Civil War and into the Reconstruction years during which they would build free lives for themselves and their families.

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