Circuit Riding Preachers: They Sowed the Seed

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Early circuit riding preachers, an elite group of dedicated men of God who perceived themselves as "sowers" of the spiritual seed, compelled by the "holy fire" which burned deep within their very souls and inspired them to totally devote themselves physically and spiritually to the divine but lonely and often dangerous task, began to preach their doctrines soon after the American flag had replaced the Spanish flag in St. Augustine.

With the establishment of the state capital in Tallahassee on the "old fields" of the Seminole Indians and the development which followed in Middle Florida, settlers who, drawn by the beauty of the vast wilderness and believing that its potential far outweighed the risk of hostile Indians, began to arrive in the "new frontier," the recently formed Territory of Florida. Dedicated Baptist and Methodist circuit riding preachers whose names now appear in the annals of early Florida history began arriving soon thereafter. The spiritual needs of these undaunted trail blazers, many of whom would settle in isolated areas of the new frontier, these early pioneers who would literally hack their way through thick vegetation, dense forests and swamplands, clear the land, till the soil and carve homes for their families amid magnificent old oaks and magnolias surrounded by rich pasturelands and expansive woodlands where the majestic bald eagle soared, would be met and ministered to by these "men of God."

Lack of a building in which to hold church services did not hinder the efforts of the early circuit riding preacher; homes, barns, stables, or blockhouses would suffice until churches could be constructed. The Methodist Episcopal Church would play a prominent role not only in ministering to white settlers but in carrying the gospel to the Indians as well.

Methodist minister John C. Ley had this to say about pioneer clergyman John Slade: "He preached from a heart overflowing with love. To him the cross, heaven and hell were all awful realities, and while he preached sinners trembled."\(^1\)

The zeal with which the early Methodist circuit rider preached to the far reaches of the wilderness should not be understated. Methodism itself was a pioneer religion; its message of individual salvation was accompanied by emotionalism and its philosophy of evangelism was embraced by many of central Florida's earliest pioneering families regardless of their prior religious affiliation.\(^2\)

The Methodist church in Florida had its beginnings in Pensacola and St. Augustine and in December 1821, the Mississippi conference met and established the Pensacola mission, appointing Rev. Alexander Tally as circuit riding missionary to Pensacola; thus the beginning of organized Methodism in Florida. Henry P. Cook succeeded Rev. Tally on the circuit and Cook received only $72.31 for his last year of services (1825) prior to his death that year in Pensacola.\(^3\)
As the circuit rider made his way from settlement to settlement, usually situated many miles apart, and often almost totally isolated, it is reasonable to believe that the sighting of a single man on horseback atop a dust covered horse, a messenger of the "Great Spirit" with his Bible often tucked under his armpit, his knapsack and bedroom in tow, the twosome slowly making their way through the "land of the Seminoles," was seen by them as posing no threat, allowing the rider to pass through peaceably. It is also reasonable to believe and history substantiates the fact that circuit riders were often welcomed and befriended by many of the Seminoles who, desiring to live peaceably with the "white man," were willing to share the paradise they knew as their home.

Many hours for the circuit riding preacher, whose early efforts led to the establishment of many churches which are still in existence today, would be spent "in the saddle," his only earthly companion, his trusty old horse. Unhindered by the heat of the blazing sun and often endless hours of pelting rain, the dedicated circuit rider trudged on, traveling through rich green meadowlands covered with soft blankets of colorful wild flowers, across rich savannas and soggy swamplands filled with brightly plumed birds and a variety of wild animals; this became the daily fare of the early circuit riding preacher. The setting sun often brought much needed rest for both man and beast. Probably no natural commodity of the scenic although rugged terrain became more familiar to the circuit rider than the long-leafed yellow pine, about which much has been written and whose virtues nineteenth century historians often extolled. The pine, although not as prolific today as in centuries past, continues to rank highly on the list of Florida’s natural aesthetic attributes.

Thick pine forests not only provided concealment and safety for the circuit rider, but at night a soft mat of long brown pine needles made a comfortable bed under the stars. Unlike the giant groves of oaks draped in their velvety gray blanket of Spanish moss where one is totally shaded and concealed beneath a giant "parasol," the tall and stately yellow pine’s branches allowed the lone circuit rider to get a restful night’s sleep beneath the illumination of a peaceful moon, its light penetrating beneath the randomly positioned branches of the pine.

Awakening to the warm sun’s rays upon his cheek, with physical nourishment provided by the meager fare he carried in his saddlebag or from small game freshly roasted over a warm campfire, he continued his "mission" to carry the message of salvation to early pioneering families.

In 1823, Rev. J.N. Glenn, the first Methodist minister in St. Augustine, had found only one Methodist in the entire city. Rev. John L. Jerry, who in 1824 was sent to the St. Augustine mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, is said to have been one of the most fearless men to serve in Florida. Throughout the Seminole wars, he bravely traveled his circuit and was never harmed while massacres were taking place all around him. When asked the reason for his remarkable record of safety, he replied, "the people say the reason I was not troubled was that the Indians knew me, but I say God protected me." He devoted many years to the St. Augustine mission prior to serving in the Tallahassee district where a church was built in 1825. A Methodist Church building had been constructed in St. Augustine very early, and Pensacola constructed a permanent church building by 1830.4

Presbyterianism was administered as intensely in the territory as Methodism. In
1820, a group of Scottish travelers came from North Carolina and befriended Sam Story, chief of the Euchee Indians who lived near Pensacola. The chief granted the early Presbyterians permission to settle on any lands in the section they chose, with other Scottish Presbyterian families soon arriving. The log cabin church they built in 1828 served as a stronghold of Presbyterianism in Florida until construction of a larger building in 1847. From the old valley Euchee church membership, many Presbyterian churches would grow, with the organization existing for many years entirely dependent upon visiting ministers for the "bread of life." Rev. Samuel Robinson, who served for ten years, was the first to serve the church for a long period of time.\(^5\)

Many pioneer preachers of the Baptist faith were on the field soon after the establishment of the Territory of Florida on March 20, 1822, and Wilson Connor, who was in St. Augustine in 1812 with the United States Army, is considered to be the first Baptist preacher on Florida soil. Baptist frontiersmen soon followed, crossing over from South Georgia and settling in North Florida, thus beginning their life’s work in the ministry. In 1825, Jeremiah Kembril and E.H. Callaway organized the first Baptist Church during the territorial days with the second Baptist church in Florida being established in Newnansville in 1828. Rev. John Tucker of the Newnansville church "reported to the Baptist Home Mission Society in 1843 that during that year he had found eighty-one scattered Baptists, organized them into churches, delivered sermons at 180 different places and had baptized twenty-nine converts. His work was typical of that being done by many pioneer Baptist preachers."\(^6\)

The first Baptist Association of Florida was organized in 1841. It joined the Southern Baptist Convention in 1844, following the split of Baptist churches in America over the slavery controversy with a separate Florida Baptist Convention being organized in 1854. The organization of Sunday schools, temperance societies and prayer meetings was an important phase of the work of Protestant churches in the territory, with regular prayer services being held each Sunday in private homes including that of Rachel Jackson, wife of Andrew Jackson. Mrs. Jackson was a deeply religious woman and was considered to be a pioneer in the movement.\(^7\)

During the frontier days, being somewhat rough rather than polished and knowing how to ride and care for a horse proved to be desirable qualities of circuit riding preachers who were often required to preach thirty sermons in the same number of days. It was not unusual for early settling families to walk or travel by horse and buggy to the designated meeting place which was often ten to fifteen miles from their homes. Services were held in brush arbors, homes, barns or blockhouses which had been built to provide protection from the Indians. A place in which to hold meetings was not a concern for these wandering circuit riders who were more concerned with conquering the wilderness for Christ. They officiated at marriages and funerals, comforted the sick and feeble and delivered the message of salvation. Camp meetings which often lasted several days were much anticipated by the settlers who welcomed the circuit riders to their humble cabins for much needed rest.

The dangers faced by circuit riding preachers who would devote many years and often their lives to the challenging task included many hours of riding horseback through soggy swamps and thick hammocks where hostile Indians often lurked. It was also necessary to cross the dark waters of
swollen creeks and rivers filled with alligators and poisonous snakes.

While tales regarding hostile Indians have circulated through the years, incidents regarding "friendly Indians" have been recorded in many area family histories. These accounts include lifelong friendships and the sharing of survival secrets. When renegade Indians were on the loose during the early years when the white man and Seminoles shared central Florida, many of these "friendly" Indians often accompanied the settlers as they sought protection in nearby forts.

Such incidents are sure to have occurred during the time when Rev. Daniel Simmons of Savannah, Georgia, who, being concerned for the soul of the "red man," in 1829 purchased a piece of land in the middle of "Indian country" on which to establish a mission. He and his wife Elizabeth dwelled among the Seminoles he had come to evangelize. His efforts are believed to have preceded the arrival of any circuit riding preacher in central Florida.

In 1842, following the conclusion of the Second Seminole War, a religious awakening began to sweep Middle Florida which produced a missionary fervor among Baptists and Methodists alike, both of whom seemed to adapt well to the frontier conditions early settlers faced in the Territory of Florida. Families provided tents and food for the camp meetings which lasted for several days.

The Methodist Church would become the largest in Florida during the antebellum period with its system of circuit riders and itinerant preachers being organized to meet the religious needs of a thinly settled but rapidly expanding region. A minister could establish classes and appoint class leaders, thus allowing him to call on a larger number of settlements each month. Settlers of other faiths who had no place to worship often became Methodists.

The Hillsborough County Census of 1850 would show that 1,703 persons were then residing in the county which comprised a much larger area than it does today.

Many of this number were former soldiers who had trudged through the area's swamplands, waded through its creeks and streams, and in so doing had not only seen and admired its beauty for the first time but had also come to better appreciate the unwillingness on the part of the Seminoles to part with it. These soldiers had returned...
with their families, erected cabins, began tilling the soil and planting crops with which to feed their families in the thick forestlands which had been the favorite hunting grounds of the Seminole Indians.

The need to sow "seeds" of another kind in the fertile field of developing settlements soon became apparent to "men of God" determined to meet the spiritual needs of the new settlers. Many of these dedicated men would devote many years and often their lives to the challenging and dangerous task which often required serving churches in several counties throughout the state as they delivered God's word to pioneer settling families. Their visits, often monthly or bi-monthly due to the number of churches served, were much anticipated by children and adults alike.

Meeting days included Sunday morning preaching and dinner on the grounds, followed by an afternoon of singing favorite hymns. These religious gatherings also provided an opportunity for neighbors living as much as ten miles apart to congregate and fellowship together.

Clement C. Clay, who visited Tampa in 1851, remembered it as a "poor little village without any objects of interest save the Indian mounds and old barracks.... There is no church in this benighted town; whoever chooses may preach in the courthouse, where I'm told they have services twice a month."9

Within three short years Tampa would have a public school, two private schools and a newspaper; it would also have two churches, a result of the efforts of dedicated men such as circuit riding minister Rev. John C. Ley.

His efforts were instrumental in laying the groundwork for Methodism in Hillsborough County. In a book entitled Fifty-two Years in Florida, Rev. Ley, who was born in Burke County, Georgia on December 20, 1822, told of his conversion at the age of fifteen and his life as a circuit riding preacher in early Florida. Like many early circuit riding preachers, he traveled on horseback and believed that no horse could throw him; however, he was soon convinced he was wrong, when soaking wet, he picked himself up from a swollen stream and followed his horse on foot nearly nine miles before recapturing him. Rev. Ley's first wife died within a year after joining him in his work. Three sons and two daughters were born of the second union with two of his sons also entering the ministry. In order to serve all the churches on his circuit, he often traveled horseback from daylight to long after dark to make his appointments which were often seven per week. He rode many hours in the pouring rain, often sleeping in wet clothes which resulted in long sieges of fevers, often on his way again before fully recovering.10

Rev. Ley was in St. Mary's during the 1854 yellow fever epidemic and noted the following:

It proved a terrible scourge, some whole families passing away, and scarcely any that were not decimated. It was estimated that one-fifth of the people who remained in town died. I was the fourth person taken down, having officiated at the funerals of the previous three. Although my attack was a very violent one, yet through the skill of my physician, good nursing, and above all, the kind hand of my Heavenly Father, I was able to walk about a little in ten days. From this time, I was engaged night and day, praying and administering to the sick, counseling with the families and
burying the dead. The epidemic lasted about three months, and for weeks after my recovery, I attended funerals every day. At about the height of the scourge, my wife was taken. Nurses were scarce for we had no professionals in those days. Doctors were overworked and absolutely unable to meet the actual needs of the suffering. For nine days and nights, I did not undress ... The epidemic finally passed away, leaving many sad memories, none of which was more sad than that the people failed to learn righteousness.11

One early conference report showed that these valiant ‘soldiers of the cross’ were paid one hundred dollars annually.

Rev. Ley also wrote about the experience of another early minister, Rev. R.H. Howren:

It was during the Indian war when the torch, tomahawk and rifle were doing their deadly work in this country. My work was mainly with the soldiers and with the citizens clustered together for protection. I knew that I was exposed to sudden and violent death every day, but the Divine Providence sustained me: 'Lo, I will be with you always, even unto the end of the world.'

On one occasion while holding a protracted meeting near Newnansville, we were surrounded by 75 warriors who withdrew without interfering with us at all. We learned afterwards that their intention was to make an attack upon us, but seeing such an unusual stir among the people, they became alarmed and withdrew. During one of our night services, they climbed into the pines around the house, intending to fire on us, not being able to do so from the ground owing to the stockade. Fortunately, we heard the signal given for firing and ran into the body of the house and escaped. One of our local preachers, Brother McCrary, was shot from his horse and killed while returning from one of his appointments Sabbath afternoon.12

Of the organization of the Tampa Methodist Church, Rev. Ley wrote: "In 1846, I called together the few members we had in Tampa -- 17 in number -- in a small building
belonging to the United States garrison and organized them into a church. I look at their magnificent building, their numbers and wealth and thank God and take courage."\textsuperscript{13}

Of his faithful horse which served him so many years, Rev. Ley said:

His name was "Willie" and a more delightful saddle horse with a few exceptions, was not to be found. He could live and keep fat where most horses would have starved, would eat almost anything from the kitchen or dairy, bear his rider forty miles or more in a day so smoothly ... that ... many were the streams he swam with the feet of the rider on top of the saddle reaching the opposite shore perfectly dry. ... But I learned by experience that when he was proper, and I was off my guard, he could place his head between his forelegs, kick so high that his back was nearly perpendicular, at the same time making so sudden a whirl that his head would be in the opposite direction and as his heels came to the ground, he found himself in an awkward pile in the road. But farewell, Willie, I shall never look upon your like again.\textsuperscript{14}

In addition to Rev. Ley, early circuit riding preachers and ministers whose names appear often in central Florida church history include Rev. Jeremiah M. Hayman, Rev. Levi Pearce, Rev. Walter Malanthion McDonald, Rev. E. J. Hull, Rev. Ben Guy, Rev. Tom Jaudon, Rev. Enoch Giles, Rev. John C. Pelot, and Rev. Leroy G. Lesley. Many of these brave men also served as soldiers during the Seminole Indian Wars and the Civil War.

It is doubtful that any area of Hillsborough County produced more early circuit preachers than the southeastern section of the county. Rev. Jeremiah M. Hayman, who was instrumental in organizing the First Baptist Church of Tampa, was one of these. In the early 1850s as settlers began "putting down roots," establishing farms, and carving homes from the wilderness then found in southeastern Hillsborough County, desiring a place of worship, they cleared a small area of turkey and water oaks found beneath towering yellow pines growing on the south prong of the Alafia River and constructed a small log cabin which became the Hurrah Church, now known as Alafia Baptist Church. Each Sunday the small church, one of the earliest churches in central Hillsborough County, was the scene of an assemblage of early settlers, their horses tied to young saplings on the church's grounds; they came from as far away as Ft. Meade, Bloomingdale and surrounding settlements to worship, hear "the word" preached and to congregate together. It often became necessary for a church layman to lead the worship services in those early founding days until a young man whose name would be indelibly forged into Florida church history began attending the Hurrah church.

0. J. Frier, in his \textit{A Memorial Sketch of the Life and Ministerial Labors of Rev. J. M. Hayman}, told of the life ministry of Rev. Jeremiah M. Hayman (his father-in-law), whom Frier said he had known and loved as a father.

Jeremiah Madison Hayman, son of James and Delila Martin Hayman, was born December 28, 1822 in Bryan County, Georgia, about thirty miles west of Savannah. Jeremiah was the oldest of twelve children, the second, James, had died at a young age. It was soon after the death of their child that the Haymans were converted
and joined the Primitive Baptists. The family moved to Madison County, Florida, where in 1838 young Jeremiah and his father, as did many male members of pioneering families, joined a volunteer company in the Second Seminole War under the command of Captain M.C. Livingston. In 1839, Jeremiah, who was seventeen years of age at the time, joined a second volunteer company at Magnolia which was under Captain William I. Bailey.

According to early records, young Jeremiah devoted much time to reading, writing and studying the Bible in depth. He had heard a funeral sermon preached by a Missionary Baptist minister who at the close of the service extended an invitation to all who wished to make a public profession of faith. His son-in-law, O. J. Frier, A Baptist minister himself, told of Rev. Hayman's experience: "I felt an ardent desire to be in the church and especially to follow my Saviour in the ordinance of baptism, but I didn't have a satisfactory evidence that my sins were pardoned, so the opportunity closed and the congregation dismissed to assemble that afternoon for baptism."15

"I immediately retired to a grove nearby, where I was concealed from human view, prostrated myself before God, and renouncing all my sins; I yielded my soul to the God of all grace to be saved or lost. I was enabled to lay hold of Christ as a Saviour; that is, it seemed that I was just then enabled to believe. I then felt sure it was my duty to unite with the church."16 That evening, he was baptized by the preacher. Hayman was still single and living alone and promised God that if he would bless him with a good wife, he would "enter the work."17

On August 27, 1846, Jeremiah Madison Hayman and Martha Jane Carlton, daughter of Alderman and Martha Maria Alderman Carlton, were married. The first evening in their humble home which they called "Rural Cottage," the young couple established a family altar which continued until their family was broken up either by marriage or death.

Their first child died at birth and nothing Hayman undertook seemed to prosper according to Frier, "all of which impressed him of his unfulfilled vow."18 Another child, born in 1849, died at the age of 11 months and, remembering his disobedience, young Hayman decided to follow God in earnest. Soon after the child's death, the couple picked up their belongings and moved to a place on the Alafia River in Hillsborough County near the home of Martha's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Alderman Carlton.

The Haymans soon found a small Baptist church without a regular preacher. It was at this church, the early Hurrah church found near the south prong of the Alafia River that Jeremiah finally yielded to God's call. On June 18, 1851, Rev. Hayman delivered his first message, taken from the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verse 29: "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world."

Circuit riding preacher, Rev. Jeremiah M. Hayman, rode horseback to the communities of Ichepucksassa, Socrum, Peas Creek, Thonotosassa, Clearwater, also Manatee and Hernando counties, then known as the Alafia circuit. Thus began a life dedicated to "spreading the gospel" in central Florida which would have far reaching effects.

In addition to preaching at Alafia, he also served as minister to a black congregation at Manatee in 1851 began preaching at Thonotosassa in January 1852, and in March
he preached at Old Tampa (now Clearwater). In June of that year, he preached near present day Bartow, at Tampa, and at Manatee, where the boat in which he was crossing the river capsized and he nearly drowned. Rev. Hayman baptized twelve believers that same day while still in his wet clothing from the earlier boating incident.19

Rev. Hayman, who kept accurate records of his ministry, wrote that in his first year's work, he had traveled 1,450 miles, preached 69 sermons, baptized 28 persons, and received a total of $12.62 for his dedicated efforts.20

In 1853, Rev. Hayman conducted the first recorded preaching service in what is now known as Brandon. In 1854 and 1855, he was employed by the Southern Baptist Convention, moving from the community of Alafia to Tampa, and soon thereafter to Polk County, with hostilities existing in the area that year seeing the beginning of the Third Seminole War.

For the protection of his family, in January 1856, Rev. Hayman moved back to Tampa where he made his livelihood as a carpenter, painter, and by clerking in a land office. He continued to preach, remaining in Tampa during the 1858 yellow fever epidemic when many were taking refuge in the country in the hope of avoiding the terrible plague.

The number of persons residing in Tampa who died during the yellow fever epidemic of 1858 was substantial, with "every dissipated person who took the fever, dying in three days." Almost every family was affected; in one family of four, Rev. Hayman buried the family's two sons and grandmother, leaving only the father, whom he found having been in a state of unconsciousness for twenty-four hours with no one to do anything for him. His jaws were set from the excessive nausea and vomiting caused by the fever and was in an unimaginably filthy condition. With assistance, Rev. Hayman bathed him, changed his clothing, and obtained medical help for him. Within thirty-six hours this man the lone survivor of his family, sufficiently recovered to thank the minister for having saved his life. Rev. Hayman said, "I escaped from having the yellow fever myself. My wife had it, but got well. My mother-in-law and one daughter died with it."

The following is Rev. Hayman's concluding account of his work in Tampa and the organization of the First Baptist Church of Tampa as recorded by Rev. Frier:

In the year 1859, the yellow fever being gone in Tampa, I commenced work in good earnest to build a church house, though I was not encouraged by some of my brethren as I expected to be, for they seemed to think it impracticable at that time. But I continued to talk it up and solicit subscriptions, and continued preaching till I felt safe to make contracts for material with which to build, and when ready to commence work, contracted with a carpenter to enclose the house so we could use it. The lot was given by the county commissioners for a Baptist church. The lot was obtained through the efforts of Martin Cunningham, who died before the church was organized. In July, 1860, Dr. Joseph S. Baker, came to Tampa and we organized the First Baptist Church. I cannot from memory, give all the names of those in the organization, but I am glad to name: Mrs. Sarah Cail, Mrs. Elizabeth McCarty, Mrs.
Matilda McKay, Mrs. Nann'e Haygood, and Mrs. Jesse Carter. I baptized eight persons at Tampa; one a peculiar case, a volunteer soldier in the United States service. He sent for me to come and see him. I did so, and found him very sick. He knew he would die soon, and said he wanted to be baptized. After hearing his experience of grace, and he being too feeble to go to the water, I had a large, long bathtub filled sufficiently full of water in his room, and two men took him from his bed, sat him in the water, and I baptized him as completely as if he had been in the river or bay. He seemed happy and said he felt resigned to the will of the Lord. His name was John Brown. This was done in the year 1857. There were no Baptists in Tampa then.22

In 1862, the faithful old circuit rider’s horse died, and with a combined collection of $20 which was donated by members of the churches Hayman served, he was able to purchase a badly needed replacement.

Rev. Frier paid tribute to his father-in-law with the following:

He was one of the happiest, most cheerful Christians I ever knew, and was especially during the latter period of his life, notwithstanding his blindness and other infirmities, was this noticeable. It was a benediction to be with and talk with him on the subject of religion. He always found so many things to be thankful to God for, and his mouth was continually filled with praises to God for his goodness. He was a man 'full of faith and the Holy Ghost'. How beautiful it is for a man to die upon the walls of Zion! To be called like a watch-worn and weary sentinel to put his armour off and rest in Heaven.23

Rev. Hayman and other early "men of God" busied themselves in "spreading the word" and in carving homes for their families from the vast wilderness then found in central Florida.

The brave settlers who ventured as far south as central Florida were lured to the area by its beauty, fresh game, and the availability of rich soil on which to grow food for their families, but all of this was at the risk of hostilities from Indians who were less than eager to surrender the land they loved.

Sometime during the 1870s, John W. Hendry, a young man who would earn recognition as one of the foremost pioneer Baptist preachers of South Florida, began his lifelong ministry at the old Hurrah church. Born in Lowndes County, Georgia in 1836, he had moved with his parents to Jasper, Hamilton County, Florida in 1849. There was no public school system at that time and private education was beyond his parents’ reach, but young John did not lack personal ambition. In 1856, when he was twenty years of age, Hendry first came to Hillsborough County with an uncle, "reaching as far south as the Alafia River." Like many who would follow, the beautiful Alafia appealed to John Hendry, who soon returned to middle Florida, married, and returned in 1859 to make his home near the south prong of the Alafia at Chicora. It was while attending the yearly camp meetings of the Methodist Church held in Ft. Meade, together with his parents, who by this time had also settled in Manatee County, that the young husband felt God’s call.
In his study of the scriptures, and in spite of the fact that his entire family belonged to the Methodist church, "Hendry resolved to sever his connection with the Methodists and cast his lot with the Baptist church." The Hendry home was some seven or eight miles distant from the little Hurrah Baptist church which he attended as a zealous Christian whose leadership and ability did not go unnoticed. He was soon ordained by the church, guiding the small membership through the difficult post Civil War period; the devastating war had taken its toll, morally, financially, and spiritually. During this "healing" period, religious meetings in central Florida as well as throughout much of the state were held in homes, early schoolhouses, barns, and under brush arbors, regardless of weather conditions. During this time of spiritual awakening, Rev. Hendry traveled from his home on the south prong of the Alafia, joining the small number of early circuit riding preachers who traveled many miles on horseback or by horse and buggy, assisting in the organization of many early churches in south and central Florida.

Rev. W. P. McEwen, a Methodist minister, and Rev. John W. Hendry, often traveled together over the same roads, preached from the same pulpits and shared the same perils and hardships, thereby developing not only a close friendship, but also a mutual respect for the other's dedication and devotion to "God's call." 

Rev. Ezekiel Josiah Hull, Baptist circuit riding preacher, rode his horse to the remotest areas in the central Florida wilderness from his home on the Alafia Riverbanks. Rev. Hull was born in Burke County, Georgia on July 4, 1827, and married Mary Miller (probably in Georgia) in 1851. The Hull family, which would eventually include nine children, settled in eastern Hillsborough County in the 1860s. On October 29, 1869, Rev. Hull represented Beulah Church in Polk County as a delegate to the third annual South Florida Baptist Association meeting held at Shiloh in Hillsborough County. In 1877, Rev. Hull was shown as pastor of four churches, Alafia, Mt. Pleasant, Mt. Moriah, and the Friendship church. The Hull family moved to the Pine Level area of Manatee County where he continued his ministry and in 1893 he was shown as pastor of Mt. Ephraim, New Hope and Wauchula churches. Rev. Ezekiel Josiah Hull died on April 20, 1897 and was buried in the Wauchula Cemetery.

Among the list of names of dedicated men of God who served as early circuit riding preachers, laying the groundwork for some of Hillsborough County's oldest churches in existence today, men whose names are now recorded in central Florida history, none is mentioned more often than Rev. Walter Malanthon McDonald, one of the county's most respected ministers.

Rev. McDonald was born in Morgan County, Alabama on August 5, 1856, the son of John Robert and Sallie Orr (Gibson) McDonald.

His father had been a farmer and a merchant in Alabama, and when the Civil War broke out John Robert McDonald served in the Confederate States army, receiving a lieutenant's commission. He served in General Nathan Bedford Forrest's Cavalry throughout the war, and although never wounded, on one occasion his horse was shot from under him. When his horse fell dead, McDonald removed his saddle from the dead horse, resaddled another horse, and rode on.

The beautiful meadowlands, tall stands of thick yellow pines interspersed with huge clusters of thorny palmettoes, had appealed
to the McDonald family, who came to the area from the red clay country of Alabama.

In 1870, the year John Robert McDonald moved from northern Alabama to the community of Hopewell, then known as Callsville, the population in the state of Florida was 187,748 (96,057 white, 91,691 nonwhite).

The elder McDonald is credited with renaming the area Hopewell after his native town in Alabama, also donating two acres of land for the site of the Hopewell Baptist Church.

The family had moved to what was then called the "Turner Plantation," the earliest known settlement in the Hopewell area of eastern Hillsborough County. Little information is available regarding the origin of the antebellum plantation, but it is believed that following the Civil War and the freeing of slaves, this large farm was divided into smaller homesteads. The Hopewell community is located some six miles south of the present site of Plant City.

In addition to hauling merchandise from Tampa to the interior areas of Hillsborough County, the McDonald family planted some of the first citrus groves in the county.

Rev. Walter Malanthon McDonald, who was fourteen years of age when the McDonald family moved to Florida, was attracted to the ministry and completed his higher education through his own efforts and personal study. At the age of thirty-three, he devoted himself fully to the "calling" of the ministry.

Hopewell Baptist Church had been organized informally in 1870, the year the McDonald family settled near the Turner Plantation. A small log schoolhouse which was ten feet wide by twelve feet in length and located in the proximity of the present church building on south Highway 39, served as the small membership's first church building.

The church was formally organized in 1873, by Rev. L.J. Simmons and Elder N.C. Tatum, that date being recorded with the Florida Baptist Association as the church's organization date. Charter members included members of some of the county's earliest settling families: Mrs. L.W Weeks, S.W. Weeks, W.M. McDonald, Mrs. L.O. McDonald, J.R. McDonald, George Wells, Fannie Evers, Olive Mooney, May J. Wells and N.C. Tatum.

On October 1, 1876, in Hillsborough County, Rev. Walter Malanthon McDonald married Texas Missouri Howell, daughter of Joseph and Sarah (Turner) Howell. The couple's son, John Robert was born on February 9, 1880.

Joseph Howell, who was born in 1803, became an early settler in what is now known as Springhead. Together with his family and slaves, Joseph settled on old Seminole Indian fields which were located in the rich hammocks on what became known as Howell Creek in the Springhead section. He first build a double pen loghouse with a detached kitchen about forty feet away which was connected by a covered walkway. At the center, on the side away from the well, was a wash shelf with a cedar bucket hanging at one end. A well with a draw bucket was some thirty feet distant. Joseph Howell had also built a log barn, slave quarters, and a smokehouse, under a large oak. Chickens were kept for eggs and were discouraged from coming into the garden by very long pickets, with other fences being made of split rails. Rich pastureland for the cattle to graze upon was
found nearby with hogs feeding on vegetation and acorns. Neighbors were few and lived as much as ten miles distant.  

A tragic event involving the family of Rev. McDonald’s wife, Texas Missouri Howell McDonald, occurred during the days when the Indians and the white man shared central Florida.

During the Seminole War, the Howell home was attacked by Indians, with Joseph arriving home late in the afternoon to find his wife and baby murdered. He quickly sounded the alarm to his neighbors, not knowing that two of his children had survived and had been hidden in the swamp by two of his slaves.

Joseph Howell was overjoyed upon learning that his daughter, Martha, and son, George, had been hidden by his slaves. George would be killed several years later in a battle near Ft. Meade, in what was known as the Billy Bowlegs War.

Rev. McDonald was known throughout southwestern Florida as a devoted preacher of the Christian faith. He brought the message from the "Good Book" to people in all areas of central and southwestern Florida. In 1888, he became pastor of the Hopewell Baptist Church with Rev. Tom Jaudon, who rode his mule throughout southeastern Hillsborough County establishing churches, serving as pastor of the church from 1879-85.

For forty-five years, Rev. McDonald served as pastor of the Hopewell Church, also serving as a circuit riding preacher during this period and preaching at churches throughout many areas of southwestern Florida. He traveled by horseback, train, or horse and buggy and also served as part-time pastor to a number of early churches. Rather than permit an interruption in his schedule of services, on several occasions he swam across streams and rivers including Howell Creek and the Alafia River, when they were flooded and the bridges were unusable or washed out.

Rev. McDonald spent much time in counseling those in difficulty and in visiting the sick, turning no one away who came to him for help. He was truly a pioneer preacher, and it has often been said that he baptized more people, performed more marriages, and presided over more funeral services, than any other man in central Florida.

Rev. McDonald died at Hopewell on July 23, 1933.

While an accurate historical account of the lives and experiences of the early circuit riding preachers must include the hardships, discouragements, loneliness and dangers they often faced, humorous tales regarding their experiences have also been recorded. In his *Pioneer Florida*, D. B. McKay told of one such experience:

The circuit riders wore leather trousers, the only kind that would withstand the continuous horseback riding. One of them was fortunate enough to have two pairs and left a pair hanging on the back porch of a parishioner’s home. Some weeks later on Sunday morning, he got them down and put them on, walked over to the little log church, up into the pulpit, faced the congregation and said, ‘Brethren and visitors, I am so happy this morning.’ At that same time something in his trousers started giving him fits. He grabbed the seat of his trousers, ran out of the church into the woods yelling, ‘my trousers
are full of yaller jackets.’ A number of the men ran and caught him, carried him to the parishioner’s home where he was treated for his wounds. In those days most of the men chewed tobacco so they saturated the minister’s wounds with tobacco juice which quickly drew the poison from his system. Within a few hours he was feeling much better, but there was no preaching that day.”

ENDNOTES

1 John C. Ley. Fifty-two Years in Florida (Nashville, 1899), 26-27.
2 Sidney W Martin, Florida During the Territorial Days (Athens, GA, 1944), 205-209.
3 Ibid., 205-206.
4 Ibid., 206-207, 209.
5 Ibid., 210.
6 Ibid., 211-212.
7 Ibid., 212-213.
9 Ibid., 425.
11 Ley, Fifty-two Years in Florida, 78-79.
12 Ibid., 55.
13 McKay, Pioneer Florida, 1, 205.
14 Ley, Fifty-two Years in Florida, 127428.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 4-5.
18 Ibid., 5.
19 Ibid., 8.
20 Ibid., 9
21 Ibid., 11.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 26.
27 Ibid., 1, 100.
28 Ibid., 101.
29 Ibid.
30 McKay, Pioneer Florida, 1, 209.