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CAMPBELLTONIANS SAY: "WE'RE THE OLDEST!"

By HAMPTON DUNN

CAMPBELLTON --- The oldest chartered Missionary Baptist Church in Florida is located in Campbellton. It started out with 19 charter members on March 13, 1825, just a short time after Florida became a territory of the United States in 1821.

The pretty white frame church is about a block from the main intersection of the town, which is where U.S. 231 and State Road 2 cross. Campbellton, by the way, is in Jackson County, about five miles from the Florida-Alabama border. The small agricultural community has 309 inhabitants and the village is located within 20 miles of the busy Alabama town of Dothan.

Throughout the three centuries the Spanish ruled Florida there was little or no Protestant activity in the pioneer state. But as soon as Florida was sold to the U.S. by Spain (for $5 million), the various Protestant denominations got active. And that's how the church here got started. It first was known as Bethlehem Baptist Church. For the first two years, the congregation had no meeting hall and the members got together in one another's homes.

The first building, made of logs, had two front doors and partitions down the center --- to separate the sexes. The pews, still existing but not in use, were put together with heavy straight-backed seats held together by hand-forged iron nails, show every evidence of antiquity.

Church rules were very strict: A record of three successive absences was grounds for dismissal. In 1827, came the first exclusion of a member for intemperance. The first slave was taken into membership in April 1832. The slaves were registered under their given names and as property of their owners.

In 1851, the congregation bought 10 acres of land at $10 an acre and erected the present central building. It also had two doors and a partition to separate the sexes, and a balcony for slaves. The name of the church was changed to Campbellton Baptist in 1859. And in 1948, the church was remodeled on the inside and block Sunday School rooms added.