

# **Black Americans and Africa: Some Highlights from Black Baptists and African Missions, 1815-1915**

*Sandy Dwayne Martin*

Professor of Religion and former Head of the Department,  
University of Georgia, USA

## **Abstract**

This article is an overview of Black United States Baptists' missionary interest in Africa during the 1815-1915 years, focusing on West Africa. A central thesis of this article and a summary of the entire missionary enterprise among Black Baptists and other Christians during the 1815-1915 years is that these Black Americans saw their participation in the spread of Christianity to Africans as a means to save souls and to uplift politically and economically the Black race globally. This missionary movement covered in these pages includes the work of the Richmond African Baptist Missionary Society, founded in 1815; activities of Baptists in the states of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina beginning in the 1860s; the Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, established in 1880; the Baptist General Association of Western States and Territories that emerged in the 1870s; and the National Baptist Convention and its daughter organizations, formed from the year 1895 to 1915. In addition to these historical and religious connections in the African homeland, there are ongoing interactions between Africa and African America. Since 1965, in large part because of crucial change in American immigration law, the population of native born Africans emigrating to the United States has increased. Occasionally, we also learn of individual American-born Blacks who have relocated to African nations. Therefore, this study has theological, historical, and contemporary cultural relevance.

**Keywords:** Black Americans, Missionary interest in Africa, Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, National Baptist Convention

## **I. Introduction/Purpose**

The purpose of this article is to provide a synopsis or overview of Black American Baptists' missionary interest in Africa, especially West Africa between 1815-1915.<sup>1</sup> In particular, this article treats the

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<sup>1</sup> For a book length book of treatment of African American Baptists' African mission movement, see Sandy D. Martin, *Black Baptists and African Missions: The Origins of a Movement, 1880-1915* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989/1998).

Richmond African Baptist Missionary Society, the activities of Baptists in three American Southern states, the Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, the Baptist General Association of Western States and Territories, and the National Baptist Convention and its daughter organizations. This endeavor is essentially a case study of African Americans' missionary and racial interest in their continental African kinspeople. It is a case study because there were Black Baptists from various denominations in addition to Baptists, whether those denominations were mainly Black or mainly White, who during this era earnestly sought to engage in the mission of spreading Christianity to their African kin. In addition, this study constitutes a case study because the missionary enterprise is but one expression of the interest and connection that African Americans exhibited toward the African homeland. Indeed, this Black American-African interest is highly significant area for exploration because it continues to the present day. Since 1965, in large part because of crucial change in American immigration law, the population of native born Africans emigrating to the United States has increased. Occasionally, we also learn of individual American-born Blacks who have relocated to nations in Africa. A central thesis of this article and a summary of the entire missionary enterprise among Black Baptists and other Christians between 1815-1915 is that these Black Americans saw their participation in the spread of Christianity to Africans as a means to save souls and uplift the Black race globally politically and economically.

## **II. Background and Context**

It is not surprising that as early as 1815 there emerges an organization of Black Baptists engaging in missions, with special focus on the

African continent. This missionary interest in the motherland arose – and more precisely we should say this interest was continuing — for a number of reasons. First, the kinship tie that African Americans felt toward their homeland had not been extinguished by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade or by the chattel slavery into which they were plunged. Consistent with all humanity, Black Americans retained affections, memories, traditions, and cultures from the peoples and lands from which they were forcibly disconnected. In other words, while they were taken out of Africa, Africa was not totally taken out of them – to paraphrase an old American saying. We can see this continuing identification with Africa, for example, in their referencing themselves as Africans (though were also other nomenclatures such as Negro, Colored). Hence, some of the earliest established Black congregations carried names such as the First *African* Baptist Church (Savannah, Georgia, in the 1780s); and some of the first denominations established had titles such as the *African* Methodist Episcopal Church (headquartered in Pennsylvania in the early 1800s).<sup>2</sup>

Second, even had they otherwise so desired, all persons coming from Africa faced the reality of being classed together as one people while collectively set apart as a racially distinct group of people from the majority White populace. In the Americas, persons of African descent, more than any other group, faced lifelong hereditary slavery. Even those fortunate enough to secure freedom nonetheless lived with the social reality, the political fact, and the economic results of compulsory identity with their enslaved racial kin. In certain areas, there were limited opportunities for persons to “negotiate” better treatment at the hands of Whites based on mixed heritage with non-

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<sup>2</sup> For an account of Blacks in early USA, particularly involving enslavement and including a discussion of African connections, see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). See especially pp. 1-92 regarding African Americans and their African heritage.

Africans, and especially if the mixed heritage included Whites. But the United States was one of those places with a “one drop rule,” so to speak; that is, any discernible physical and ancestral ties to African peoples classified one as Black. Therefore, very early African Americans in varying degrees adopted what we might call a pan-African perspective: a belief that all persons of African descent wherever they reside in the world face profound prejudice, conscription, and rejection because of their race and they, without exception, must struggle in solidarity to eliminate said racism. That is, all blacks in the world – regardless of geography, nationality or ethnic connections, socio-economic status, or religion — are inseparably linked, facing the same problem and the same fate, whether that fate was freedom or continued oppression.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, by way of background, it should be noted that, by 1815, a substantial number of African Americans had embraced Christianity with especially-strong membership among groups such as the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists. While Black Americans had been converting to Christianity since the 1600s, evangelicalism, represented by the colonial and nation-wide revivals known as the First Great Awakening (ca. 1730s – 1760s) and the Second Great Awakening (ca. 1790s – 1830s), appears to have been the major means by which the great majority of African Americans were entering the churches.<sup>4</sup>

### **III. Richmond African Missionary Baptist Society and Liberia, 1815-1830**

The earliest organized Black missionary efforts in Africa involved three organizations: one black group, the Richmond African Baptist

<sup>3</sup> A very solid treatment of the history of African Americans is John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, Tenth Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 95-150.

Missionary Society, and two mainly white organizations, the American Colonization Society and the Baptist Triennial Convention. In 1815 in the slave state of Virginia, at the First Baptist Church in the city of Richmond, a White deacon, William Crane, and two black ministers, Lott Carey and Colin Teague, cooperated in the founding of the Richmond African Baptist Missionary Society (RABMS).<sup>5</sup> This Richmond organization cooperated in the pursuit of African missions with the mainly White group, the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions, which had been formed in 1814.<sup>6</sup> Known as the Baptist Triennial Convention, it was arguably the first truly-national organization of Baptists in the United States in both intent and geographical scope. For the most part, Whites in the Triennial Convention, following the lead of William Carey, mainly focused on missions in India, China, and other portions of Asia. Black Baptists (along with some White Baptists), however, concentrated on their ancestral continent.

Another partner or avenue of African missions for the Richmond Society was the American Colonization Society, formed in the winter of 1816-1817 by the Presbyterian minister Robert Finley.<sup>7</sup> A somewhat controversial group, the Colonization Society sought to place free and emancipated Blacks on the west coast of Africa, most specifically in the area known as the colony of Liberia, which became a republic in 1847. For some anti-slavery Whites, the Colonization Society was envisioned as a compromise institution between those

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<sup>5</sup> For information regarding the Richmond Society, Carey, Teague, and Crane, see, e.g., the following: Leroy Fitts, *Lott Carey: First Black Missionary to Africa* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1978); Miles Mark Fisher, "Lott Carey, the Colonizing Missionary," *Journal of Negro History* 7 (October 1922): 380-418; William A. Poe, "Lott Carey: Man of Purchased Freedom," *Church History* 39 (March 1970): 49-61; and Martin, *Black Baptists*, 12-39.

<sup>6</sup> Information about SBC foreign mission work may be found in Baker J. Cauthen, ed., *Advance: A History of Southern Baptist Missions in Foreign Lands* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> P. J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

holding an antislavery position, on one hand, and those supporting the system of slavery, on the other hand. If slaveholders and the general White populace understood that all emancipated Blacks would be returned to Africa, they would, as the theory went, be more willing to abolish slavery. For some pro-slavery Whites, however, being confident of the possible removal of free and freed Blacks from the US to Africa was in actuality not an incentive to end slavery but an assurance that the elimination of free Black communities would erase concrete examples of Blacks exercising independence, which ran contrary to a pro-slavery argument that slavery did Blacks a favor because they were unable to take care of themselves. Also, free Black communities were havens for those refugees or escapees from slavery. Regarding the society as an instrument upholding enslavement, most of the Black leadership in the country and many anti-slavery Whites opposed the Society. Yet, many enslaved Blacks cherished personal and familial connections to the homeland and/or held the belief that the US would never be a land in which Blacks, enslaved or emancipated, could ever be fully free persons and equal citizens. For these reasons and because of their commitment to the spread of the Christian faith, many Blacks, when they had the opportunity, gladly exchanged enslavement for the opportunity to “return” to Africa in the company of their families, friends and, in some instances, other Black church members. Of course, freedom from slavery was often disconnected from the idea of emigrating or not emigrating to Africa; some persons regardless of the reasons for their acquisition of freedom or the length of their freedom simply chose to emigrate to Africa for their own reasons.

Lott Carey and Colin Teague, co-founders of the Richmond Society, were two important leaders and participants in the exodus of

Blacks from the enslaved South to Liberia via the American Colonization Society and with the support of Baptists in the Triennial Convention. Departing in 1820, these two ministers played major roles in promoting the Christian faith and helping to establish the colony and later Republic of Liberia. It would, perhaps, be more precise to designate Carey, Teague, and many others like them as “missionary emigrants,” “missionary colonists” or “colonizing missionaries.” Generally, we think of missionaries as individuals who venture to a foreign land or area with expectations of returning to their homeland someday. Or, even should they never elect to return, there is continued strong identification with their erstwhile homes. Many of these early Baptist Americo-Liberian settlers, like many other Black and White supporters of the American Colonization Society, were clearly establishing on the west coast of Africa a new home for themselves and other Blacks from the Americas and creating a Black Christian republic they envisioned as a means of uplifting the entire continent politically and economically.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most-frequently-used biblical passages for those advocating the advancement of the Black race — both racially and religiously, and before, during, and after the 1815-1915 period — is Psalm 68:31. The King James Version of that verse reads thus: “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” More contemporary translations of this passage suggest the meaning that powerful nations would bring tribute to Israel and render worship to Israel’s God, who was the only Deity. During the era under study, however, advocates of Black advancement read this psalm as a prophecy that Africans, represented in the passage as the ancient empires of Egypt and Ethiopia, would convert to Christianity

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<sup>8</sup> Leroy Fitts, *Lott Carey*, 10-78; and Martin, *Black Baptists*, 15-19.

and become mighty political power. More specifically for our purposes here, this verse was interpreted as a prophecy of the future greatness of African peoples and, for many readers, the prophesied future would be a return to former African glory. In other words, Blacks, despite the fact that many were now enslaved and/or non-Christians, would become a mighty people on the world stage, returning to the glories of ancient Ethiopia and Egypt. Lott Carey, Colin Teague, many of the American Colonization Society, and supporters of African missions in the Baptist Triennial Convention subscribed to this interpretation and believed their efforts were contributing to the fulfillment of this biblical prophecy.<sup>9</sup>

#### **IV. Black Baptists, Southern Baptist Convention, and Other Activities, 1845-1880**

In 1845, the Baptist Triennial Convention, split roughly into two major geographically-centered divisions over the issue of slavery. The White-controlled southern group, by and large, included those who actively supported slavery and those who believed enslavement should not be a bar or be disadvantageous regarding Baptist fellowship. They formed the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which in time became and remains the largest Baptist and Protestant denomination in the United States. The mainly-White-controlled northern groups were composed of anti-slavery advocates or those who were generally anti-slavery in sentiment. They were represented in three northern-based societies, including the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU), which focused on foreign missions, until they united into a single body in the early 1900s as the Northern Baptist Convention, but today are the

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<sup>9</sup> Regarding Black religious and social thought during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1973).



American Baptist Churches, USA. It should be noted that there were African Americans affiliated with the White-controlled groups in both the north and the south. In addition, other denominations also split over slavery and/or over allegiance to the White Southern independence movement centred on slavery, all such separations signalling the divide that would engulf the nation with the advent of the American Civil War (1861-1865). In the coming decades Blacks in both geographically-based organizations, the SBC and the ABMU, would engage in African missions sometimes as representatives of, and sometimes in collaboration, with these groups.<sup>10</sup>

In 1846, two black missionaries, A. L. Jones and John Day, received appointment as missionaries in Africa, specifically Liberia, from the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1847, two years after the independence of Liberia, two Blacks, Harvey Goodale and Robert F. Hill, accompanied a White Southern Baptist Convention missionary, Thomas J. Bowen, to Nigeria. After the Civil War and during the Reconstruction Period, in 1875, the Southern Baptist Convention commissioned two missionaries to Nigeria, a White Mississippian W. J. David, who was in charge of the mission station, and a Black Virginian William W. Colley. Apparently, David's tenure in Nigeria was far rockier than Bowen's had been in terms of his relationship with indigenous Africans. Reading the accounts of Bowen, one might detect, notwithstanding some racial and cultural bias, a great sensitivity to the local peoples and their cultures. With David, on the other hand, we have accounts of less kind interactions, even floggings, taking place on the mission site. At any rate, Colley, the Black Virginian, returned to the U.S. in 1879 determined to his fellow Black

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<sup>10</sup> Martin, *Black Baptists*, 25-37.

Baptists to conduct their own African missions.

Let us make some additional notations regarding the service of American Black missionaries during the pre-1880 period. The year 1849 is noteworthy for Black and SBC involvement in western Africa. By this date, all 26 SBC personnel were Black, including 13 missionaries, working at a total of eight mission stations. That year witnessed the appointment of the White Baptist Thomas J. Bowen, which signals a return of White Southern personnel to the African mission field and the transition of SBC's focus from Liberia to Nigeria. Joseph Harden, a Black missionary, was among those shifting to Nigeria. Declining health and death among the missionary personnel took heavy tolls, and Mrs Sarah M. Harden, widow of Joseph Harden, had, by 1869, assumed major responsibility for the Nigerian mission.

Returning to the Liberian focus, it should be noted that Lott Carey played a major role in the civic affairs of the colony of Liberia, actually having become vice-governor in the late 1820s and later dying in battle against indigenous Africans in defense of an Americo-Liberian settlement. Colin Teague, Carey's associate, moved to Sierra Leone, a British colony in West Africa. His son, Hilary Teague, however, played a major role in Liberia as minister, participant in civic affairs, and as editor of a newspaper. John Day, one of the two Black American missionaries appointed by the SBC in 1845, ventured to Liberia as a missionary colonist. In his correspondence with Blacks in the U.S, Day strongly supported the spiritual, political, and economic value of Liberia as a lever for the advancement of Blacks in Africa and elsewhere.

It is obvious that, for the first four or five decades of their presence in Liberia, Baptist colonists (and probably Christian colonists generally) and their descendants concentrated missionary efforts on

their fellow Americo-Liberians, not the original peoples. The year 1868, however, reflected a clear shift toward a more activist evangelistic outreach regarding indigenous Liberians when the Liberia Baptist Missionary Union emerged as a cooperative endeavor initially involving 10 congregations. The corresponding secretary of that newly organized Union was J.T. Richardson, also served as a denominational agent for the northern-based ABMU. Also strongly advocating greater missionary outreach to indigenous Africans were the native-born Jacob W. Vonbrunn, who raised funds for missions in the US; the Virginia native, Robert F. Hill, who had traveled to Liberia with Thomas J. Bowen, but unlike the latter, chose to remain in Liberia; and Beverly Page Yates, another Black emigrant from the South who represented the SBC in missions for at least 20 years. Yates's correspondence to American Blacks in 1873 clearly reflected his admiration and identification with the Lott Carey-Colin Teague Tradition of uniting racial and religious reasons for Black American involvement in Africa. Blacks, said Yates, were under obligation to support African missions because American Blacks, Liberians, and indigenous Africans were all connected by a commonality of "origin," "interest," and "worldly destiny."<sup>11</sup>

#### **V. Black Baptists and Mission Endeavors: The Carolinas and the State of Virginia, 1865-1880**

Regarding pre-Civil War or Antebellum Black Baptists in the United States, many independently-formed Black congregations, associations, and conventions expressed missionary and political interest in Black lands of the Caribbean and Africa, as did Blacks in other non-Baptist denominations. Aforementioned points regarding

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<sup>11</sup> Yates's letter appears in *The African Repository* 49 (August 1873): 251-53. The partial quotes are found on page 252. Also see Martin, *Black Baptists*, 25-37.

the missiology or theology of missions of the RABMS and Black Baptists associated with the SBC or the ABMU, also apply to Black groups such as the American Baptist Missionary Convention, the Wood River Baptist Association, the Northwest and Southern Baptist Convention, and the Consolidated American Baptist Convention, all appearing in the decades 1830-1870. Cognizant of limited space, let us focus on Black Baptist activities in three southern states: North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.

By way of preface, we must remember the profound significance the American Civil War had for the nation in general and Black Americans in particular, and thereby we might better appreciate its relevance for African missions. For the nation in general, the war was a fierce internal conflict that produced much death, hurt, and destruction, and often sharply-divided families, communities, and the country. For Black people, the conflict was a definitive achievement of physical freedom and the advent of an opportunity to seek fuller civic equality and liberation. Theologically, for Blacks and White sympathizers of Black freedom, the conflict and the results were the acting of God in human history to show God's will in favor of freedom and equality, a modern-day Exodus paralleling the ancient biblical event. For 10 to 15 years in the aftermath of the war and with the coming of Reconstruction, African Americans enjoyed a level and scale of civil freedom the race had not experienced in the US that included constitutional guarantees of physical freedom, citizenship, and voting rights. Of course, there was still a large amount of racial discrimination and suffering; yet the race made great advancement from lowly conditions of chattel slavery and racial proscription, including acquiring greater opportunities to consolidate family ties, establish free churches, found schools, own property, set up

businesses, move more freely, vote, serve on juries, occupy elected and appointed offices in government at all levels in society, and many other rights and privileges of which they were formerly denied or greatly circumscribed. By the late 1870s, there was erosion of those achievements and opportunities, a cascading of those losses in the 1890s, and by the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a firm enthrone-ment of racial segregation and proliferation of physical and economic terrorism.

These and other societal events cast light upon African mission movement among Black Americans in the Civil War and post-War decades. As the Civil War drew to a conclusion in the middle 1860s, there was greater Black Baptist organizational independence from White church control in the South where 90 per cent of African Americans reside and about 90 per cent of them are enslaved. As these new churches emerged (alongside older Antebellum ones) and as they formed intrastate and interstate associations and conventions, there was continued and increasing interest in African missions and racial connection with continental Africans. In South Carolina in 1866, one year after the conclusion of the Civil War, Black Baptists organize perhaps their first state-wide group, the Baptist Educational, Missionary, and Sunday-School Convention (BEMC). By 1878 the BEMC expresses strong interest in African missions, noting that need for Black Baptists in the U.S. to become more actively involved in African missions since most White Baptists were directing their missions to other parts of the world. Recognising that about 25 per cent of all Baptist Americans were Black and that a significantly large portion of that population resided in South Carolina, Blacks were obliged to embrace their obligation to support the uplift of their African kin. The BEMC supported Harrison N. Bouey, who was

emigrating to Liberia from Augusta, Georgia, as a convention-appointed missionary, with funding for his mission activities. The congregation that emigrated with him from South Carolina settled in two places; therefore, he pastored two congregations, which very soon became members of the Liberian Baptist Association. Bouey, immediately and warmly embraced by Liberian Baptists, played key roles in Baptist activities in the republic, including the newly-formed Liberian Baptist Missionary Convention which sought to evangelise the indigenous Liberian population.<sup>12</sup>

The concrete missionary endeavours by the South Carolina convention were followed the next year, in 1879, by their counterparts in North Carolina. The Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (BCNC) commissioned James O. Hayes for mission work in Liberia. Hayes emigrated to Liberia with a group including his parents seeking permanent residence in the tradition of Lott Carey, Colin Teague, and his South Carolina émigré predecessor Harrison N. Bouey. His move reflected a larger interest in African missions among North Carolina Black Baptists, as the BCNC corresponding secretary, J. O. Crosby, noted the following year.<sup>13</sup>

Interest in African missions was strong among Black Baptists in several states, but the Baptists of Virginia appear to have taken the lead among all Black Baptists regarding African missions, both in terms of chronology and collective dedication. We have already mentioned the key roles played by persons such as the Virginians Lott Carey, Hilary Teague, and W. W. Colley. In 1878, the same year the South Carolinians appointed Bouey as a missionary, the Virginians commissioned Solomon Cosby as a missionary of the Virginia Baptist

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<sup>12</sup> Annual Minutes, Baptist Educational, Missionary, and Sunday-School Convention (BCSC), 1878, p. 17, Appendix, p. vi; Minutes, BCSC, 1880, p. 3-4; Minutes of the founding session of the Liberia Baptist Missionary Convention, 1880, pp. 3-4, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Minutes, Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, 1880, p. 13; *African Repository* 55 (July 1897): 81.

State Convention (VBSC) with joint support of the SBC. Now the state Baptists had two American-born missionaries in Nigeria. As the new missionary Cosby travelled to Lagos, the veteran Colley, who had been to Nigeria earlier with the White missionary W. J. David, transferred from Lagos to the mission site in Abeokuta. In 1879, Colley returned to the States and soon, thereafter, successfully campaigned for the formation of a national organization among African American Baptists to conduct missions in Africa. There was a strong belief among many African Americans at the time that the Black race needed to make their own particular contributions to the world. This required advancement in the spiritual, political, and economic conditions of Blacks and racial unity across national (and some would say religious) lines. Today some people would call this concept Black or African nationalism. Also, there was the sense among both Blacks and many Whites that in terms of culture Black Americans were better equipped for mission work among their African kin than Whites. Furthermore, there was the reality that Blacks on the mission field often felt that neither they nor the indigenous Africans were always treated with the respect due them, and they saw little that the Southern Baptist Convention, as in the case of W. J. David, was doing to correct these the unfair treatment. Hence, there existed the need for a more-effective, nationally-organised effort to missionize Africa was paramount.<sup>14</sup>

## **VI. Black Baptists and Mission Endeavors: The BFMC and BGAWS, 1880-1995**

One nationally organized African mission effort came to fruition in 1880 with the establishment of the Baptist Foreign Mission Convention (BFMC) in Montgomery, Alabama. As indicated earlier in

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<sup>14</sup> Minutes, Virginia Baptist State Convention, 1878, p. 3; Ibid, 1880, p. 37; Minutes, Southern Baptist Convention, 1876, pp. 35-6; Ibid., 1878, p. 38; 1881, p. 45; 1882, p. 70; Martin, *Black Baptists*, 48-53.

this article, the BFMC stood in a line of other attempts by Black Baptists to form a national organization. Indeed, this convention was national in aspiration but more regional in actual participation. Baptists in America generally faced some obstacles when attempting to establish national bodies. In part, and true to their adherence to the principle and practice of congregational governance, Baptists, Black and White, were often distrustful of national ecclesial organizations that many worried would take away authority and decision making from local congregations and associations. For Blacks, gathering frequently to conduct business, especially in general conventions, often proved financially challenging in the post-Civil War decades since they had left their former condition of servitude with few material resources; and free Blacks were also quite poor because of the fierce and unrelenting racial prejudice and exclusion directed toward them, even in the Northern free states.

Yet the formation of the BFMC proved to be was a very significant development for Blacks in the United States and for the promotion of African missions. Indeed, the convention was mainly a southern regional organization in terms of participation, but we must bear in mind that 90% of all Blacks at this time resided in the South. Therefore, a strongly organized Black Southern organization was in many ways a de facto national organization. Second, the BFMC was one of the three major conventions that merged in 1895 to form the National Baptist Convention (NBC), playing an instrumental role in creating an undeniably national organization of Baptists. While the NBC over the decades has experienced some schisms or secessions, the original organization continues continued – though there might be differences among Black Baptists as to which convention is actually the original. Third, the BFMC, considering the paucity of resources



and other circumstances, made a great contribution in organizing African missions among Blacks, placing missionaries on the field, especially in West Africa, and laying a foundation upon which the NBC and its daughter would build and expand.

The BFMC was particularly strong in placing missionaries in Africa during the 1883-1893 period. During the 1883-1884 years, the convention commissioned six missionaries: Joseph H. and Hattie Pressley, William W. Colley and Mrs. Colley, John J. Coles, and Henderson McKinney. In 1886 six missionaries were commissioned, or, in at least one case, recommissioned to the field two married couples from Mississippi, J. J. Diggs and Mrs Diggs, E. B. and Mattie Topp, and John J. and the recent Mrs Lucy Coles. Poor health, death on the field, and lack of financial resources took their toll on the missionary personnel so that, by 1893, there were no Black American missionaries representing the BFMC.

One means that African American Baptists employed to deal with the financial and other challenges facing their mission efforts was to merge their organizations, thereby consolidating their resources. For example, the BFMC and the Baptist General Association of Western States and Territories (BGAWST) agreed to do just that in the middle 1880s. The BGAWST appears to have roots that go back to one of the earliest Black Baptist regional associations, the Wood River Baptist Association, that emerged in Illinois in the 1830s. At some point, we see references to a Western Baptist Colored Convention, which appears to have been an extension in some sense of the Wood River Association. At any rate, the BGAWST was conducting mission work in Central Africa during the 1880s in cooperation with the mainly White Northern group, the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU). Just as the case with Black Baptists in the south and the

SBC, these western Baptists were also experiencing some difficulties in their cooperative relationship with White counterparts in the north.<sup>15</sup>

### **VII. Black Baptists and Mission Endeavors: The NBC, LCC, and NBCA, 1895-1915**

Yet it was in 1895 that Black Baptists achieved their greatest and permanent objective of founding a truly-national Baptist organization. In that year, the BFMC, the American National Baptist Convention (ANBC), and the Baptist National Educational Convention (BNEC) in Atlanta, Georgia, merged to form the National Baptist Convention. In this organization they succeeded in bringing together the particular emphases of each of the groups—foreign missions, domestic missions, and educational concerns. To be sure, this new organization continued and improved upon Black Baptists’ African mission efforts. The original NBC body suffered some divisions. In 1897, a group of Baptists, mainly among the mid-Atlantic seaboard states formed what would later be called the Lott Carey Home and Foreign Mission Convention (LCC), in large part because many Baptists in these states, especially Virginia and North Carolina, believed that mission efforts could be realized much more effectively through the LCC than the NBC. In 1915-16 there was a more powerful split over the ownership of the Publishing House that resulted in the formation of the National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA); and there were changes made in the original body that now modified its name to National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated (NBCI).<sup>16</sup>

The central point for our purposes here is that mission interest in Africa continued and increased substantially, accompanied by greater

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<sup>15</sup> Martin, *African Missions*, 53-106

<sup>16</sup> Martin, *African Missions*, pp. 137-85. For solid historical accounts on Black American Baptist churches and conventions, see Leroy Fitts, *A History of Black Baptists* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1985) and James M. Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986); Wayne E. Croft, Sr., *A History of the Black Baptist Church: I Don't Feel No Ways Tired* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2020).

organizational efficiency. The original NBC sent out a number of missionaries, including Emma B. Delaney, a graduate of what is now known as Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. Delaney defied her father's wishes and journeyed as a single or unmarried woman missionary to South Africa in the early 1900s. One might understand her father's opposition to her plans, for, indeed, such a move of unmarried women to a foreign mission field in those days was rather rare. To be sure, women accompanied their husbands to the mission field where they, in their own right, played crucial roles in advancing the mission cause and they often remained on the mission field after a husband had transited. But usually, they did not venture out as single women to foreign mission fields. After some years in South Africa, Delaney returned to the U.S. but moved again, this time, to Liberia in West Africa where she pioneered a new mission site in that nation.<sup>17</sup>

### **VIII. Conclusion**

This presentation of Black Baptist missionary interest in Africa in 1815-1915, particularly the western portion of the homeland, is certainly not exhaustive. It is only a case study or reflection of Black American Christian missionary, political, and economic interest in Africa; a look at only one denominational family, the Baptists and a brief and limited survey of that denomination family's activities. In addition to outlining missions over a longer chronology, more could be said pertaining to the 1815-1915 years about other aspects of missions among Black American Baptists, including the mission movement in other American states; mission endeavors in other Black Baptist congregations, local and regional associations, smaller missionary

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<sup>17</sup> Sandy Dwayne Martin, "Spelman's Emma B. Delaney and the African Mission," *Journal of Religious Thought* 41 (Spring-Summer 1984): 22-37.

societies, and other conventions and national associations; missionary efforts in Central, Southern, and Eastern Africa; and the responses of indigenous Africans to these efforts by Black Americans. Certainly, some discussion concerning an evaluation of the role of the foreign mission movement in Africa, the extent to which it was beneficial and in what ways it was detrimental to the interests of Africans, would have been quite appropriate. Hopefully, the reader has nonetheless found this article a sufficient illustration of the core thesis: Black Baptists have had a long history of missionary interests and involvement with African missions that incorporating both racial and religious concerns, that they linked the spread of Christianity with the worldwide advancement of African peoples. This fact should say something positive about what are, and should be, enduring ties between continental and diasporic African peoples.

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