Black Baptist Lineage Traced
To A Migrant From Virginia

By Billie Cheney Speed
Journal Religion Editor

WHEN THE Rev. Clarence M. Wagner of Gainesville began tracing the black Baptist lineage in Georgia, he discovered it went back to a Virginia-born slave, George Liele.

"Liele was exposed in 1774 to the gospel exhortations of Matthew Moore, a rural white Baptist preacher in Burke County, Ga.," said Wagner. "And when Liele felt the call to preach, his master, Henry Sharp, who had moved to Burke County from Virginia a few years before the Revolutionary War, emancipated him so that he could use his ministerial gifts."

According to Wagner, Liele was the first recorded licensed and ordained black Baptist preacher-missionary in America and is considered the father of black Baptists in America. Liele traveled up and down the Savannah River, preaching to slaves wherever friendly plantation owners would permit.

In his research, Wagner found that the white churches utilized Liele because most of them had black members and in many cases had a larger black membership than white.

Liele, who never actually organized his own church, is one of a long line of black leaders to be found in Wagner's new book, "Profiles of Black Georgia Baptists.

Wagner, 45, is pastor of 142-year-old First Baptist Church of Gainesville, which is affiliated with the predominantly black General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia and the National Baptist Convention USA Inc.

Wagner, also executive secretary of the 110-year-old, 500,000-member General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia Inc., spent more than two years researching the book.

"When I started I really just felt there was a need to write a history of our churches and personalities because we were always getting requests from college libraries and church groups to supply such information," said Wagner.

But as he became more involved in his project and read some of the heart-rending experiences of patriarchs of his denomination, Wagner said he realized that "to conquer the unknown beyond, we must know from whence we have trod and those who preceded us."

Andrew Bryan was the first pastor, builder and developer of the First Colored Baptist Church in 1788, the first organized colored Baptist church in America.

On one occasion, Bryan and about 50 of his members were beaten and thrown in jail "because some whites felt (Bryan) was leading an insurrection."

Jonathan Bryan, Andrew's master, interceded for them and the court found them innocent and released them. For a while the slaves met in a barn on Bryan's plantation, and in 1793 they built a rough wooden building on what is now West Bryan Street.

In 1865, they constructed a new church, which still exists, on this same parcel of land, which is considered the longest known continuously owned property by blacks in America.

Wagner said when freedom was granted and the shackles of slavery were removed, the members were also free to choose another name for their church.

"Although they were rightfully the First Baptist Church in Savannah, 12 years older than the First Baptist (white) Church, 44 years older than the First African Baptist Church, they were not willing to relinquish their firstness or their identity, and so they honored their founder by naming the church the First Bryan Baptist Church."
Famous Baptist Leaders Featured In New Books

Some of Southern Baptists' best-known leaders and personalities are authors or subjects of new books published by Southern Baptists.

Harold C. Bennett compiled *God's Awesome Challenge* (Broadman, $5.95). Dr. Bennett is executive secretary-treasurer of the SBC executive committee. He asked 15 SBC leaders to write messages around the vitality of agape love as a dynamic force in individual lives, homes and churches. Dr. Thompson is pastor of First Baptist Church in Richmond.

JOE ANN SHELTON is subject of a biographical book by Bonnie Ball O'Brien. Title of the book is *So Great the Journey* (Broadman, $5.95) Miss Shelton was music director and soloist for the SBC Radio-Television Commission for many years. Mrs. O'Brien is wife of the executive secretary-treasurer of New Mexico Baptist Convention.

Velma Darbo Brown wrote *After Weeping, A Song* (Broadman, $5.95). She tells people how to work through grief experiences with Christian faith which brings new fulness. Mrs. Brown is a teacher-writer-counselor from Fort Worth.

Jesse C. Fletcher is author of *Practical Discipleship* (Broadman, $4.95). He develops the premise that true discipleship continues through all of life and changes all of life. Dr. Fletcher is president of Hardin-Simmons University.

Hardy R. Denham Jr. wrote *Living Toward A Vision* (Broadman, $2.95). Dr. Denham is pastor of First Baptist Church in Newton, Miss. He writes about Christian living as a victorious, exciting pilgrimage when perspectives are correct.

CRAIG SKINNER wrote *Back Where You Belong* (Broadman, $3.50). He deals with Christians who fall into sin, and how they can restore themselves to spiritual rightness. Dr. Skinner is professor of practical theology at Talbot seminary in California. He is former pastor of Fortified Hills church in Smyrna.

Malcolm Tolbert wrote *Layman's Bible Book Commentary on Philippians, Colossians, I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Broadman, $4.25). It is volume 22 in the commentary series. Dr. Tolbert is professor at Southeastern seminary, former pastor of Gainesville First church.

J. Herbert Gilmore Jr. wrote two volumes, both published by Vantage Press. *The Cross of Love* ($4.95) writes of man's struggle to get help from his church in the modern world. *The Church and The Nation* ($5.95) deals with America's roots in the Christian faith and how they relate to "civil religion" Dr. Gilmore is former pastor of Birmingham First church and Church of the Covenant in Birmingham.

MALCOLM TOLBERT wrote *Layman's Bible Book Commentary on Philippians, Colossians, I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Broadman, $4.25). It is volume 22 in the commentary series. Dr. Tolbert is professor at Southeastern seminary, former pastor of Gainesville First church.

Clarence M. Wagner is author of *Profiles of Black Georgia Baptists*, a history of black Baptists in Georgia since the first recorded black conversion in 1774 in Burke County. Dr. Wagner is pastor of First (Black) Baptist Church in Gainesville and executive secretary of the General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia, Inc. Get the book from Dr. Wagner at P.O. Box 2283, Gainesville 30501.

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Minister's Book Chronicles Black Baptists in State

By LYNN KEADLE
Herald Staff Writer

The first black ever to convert to the Baptist faith was a Virginia slave who came to Georgia with his white master, according to the Rev. Clarence M. Wagner, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Gainesville.

Wagner, a native of Missouri, became interested in the history of black Baptists in the state when he moved to Georgia in 1965.

The story of George Lile, the slave who was baptized by Matthew Moore, a white minister, in 1744 is just one of some little-known facts about the history of blacks in Georgia which are contained in Wagner's book, "Profiles of Black Georgia Baptists."

He said it took him two years to research the 368-page book which he published earlier this year.

According to Wagner, while finding facts and documents on the history of black Baptists in Georgia is not an easy task, it is one which is worthwhile.

"One must be acquainted with the past," Wagner said, "in order to appreciate the present, to reach the future."

"Everything we have in the black community has come from the black church," he continued.

Wagner, who has published 3,000 first editions of the paperback, credits the television movie "Roots" with having stirred interest in this country among blacks and whites in their heritage.

He said many universities and seminaries have expressed interest in his book which traces the 206-year history of the black Baptist in Georgia.

Much of the information for the book, Wagner said, came from the chronicles of the black National Baptist Convention, the oldest and largest black Baptist convention in Georgia.

Other information was obtained from various public and university libraries across the state, he said.

The General Missionary Baptist Convention, established in 1870, has over 500,000 members, according to Wagner, and there are about half that many more blacks in the state who are members of one of the other two black Baptist conventions in Georgia.

Yet the history of all black Baptists not only in Georgia but in all of America and other countries as well can be traced to that first slave who converted and then himself became a minister.

Wagner said Lile is credited with being the "father" of black Baptists both in the United States and Jamaica as well as in Africa.

The first black Baptist Church in Georgia was established in Savannah and was known as the First Colored Baptist Church, he said, adding the church is now known as the First Bryan Baptist Church, named after Andrew Bryan, its founder.

Wagner, who has been pastor of the Gainesville First Baptist Church for the past four years, said he and his wife, Bettye, now feel very much like Georgians. He said they have two children, both born in Georgia.

The history of black Baptists in Georgia is Wagner's second book. Both it and his first book, "Seeds of Faith," were published by the author.

Wagner has been the executive secretary of the General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia for the past five years.

In addition to the two books, he has had several articles published in various magazines including the National Baptist Voice, the Georgia Baptist Paper, the Catholic Digest, the Quiet Hour, and Today's Christian Parent.
The Rev. Clarence M. Wagner believes that the black past must be preserved. And he's done something to back up that belief.

Wagner, executive secretary of the 500,000-member General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia and pastor of the 142-year-old First Baptist Church in Gainesville, has written and published a 268-page book, Profiles of Black Georgia Baptists, which traces more than two centuries of black church history in the state.

Wagner has traced black Baptist lineage back to a Virginia-born slave named George Liele, who he says was converted by the preaching of the Rev. Matthew Moore, a white Baptist pastor, in Burke County, Ga., in 1774 when Liele was about 24 years old. After Liele began preaching, his owner, a Baptist deacon named Henry Sharp, freed him to travel up and down the Savannah River, preaching to slaves wherever plantation owners would permit.

Liele's career in North America proved to be productive but short. It seems that he sympathized with the British during the Revolutionary War, and "for this or because of their love for gold," Wagner writes, Sharp's heirs attempted to re-enslave him. Liele borrowed $700 with which he managed to avoid this, but he apparently decided that his best prospects lay outside the United States. In 1783, he became the indentured servant of a British officer named Colonel Kirkland and sailed for Jamaica, where he continued his preaching for several decades and from which he sent at least 50 missionaries to Africa. Liele never returned to the United States, but shortly before leaving, in July 1783, he had converted and baptized Andrew Bryan, a slave who was to become pastor of the first black Baptist church in North America, which still exists today as First Bryan Missionary Baptist Church in Savannah.

Wagner calls Liele "the sower of the seeds" and Bryan "our patriarch."

These founding fathers are the first of many leaders and churches he describes in the book.

WAGNER, WHO has been a minister 21 years, says a lot of time, work "and prayer" went into the book, for which he has had requests from libraries all over the United States.

The Kansas City, Mo., native majored in history in college, and his affiliation with the church made him interested in its past. Repeated requests for information in his capacity as executive secretary sent him digging through church records for answers, and this led to a number of articles that eventually developed into the book. Wagner says he worked on the book itself for about two years.

"In order to appreciate the present and reach the future, we must know about the past," he says. "Israel is strong because the people have always been aware of what God has done for them in the past, and blacks must be aware of what God has done for them in the past."

"God looks over people, especially people who are totally dependent," he says. Ironically, he says that during the slavery era, the blacks who had been freed were more dependent than the slaves, in the sense that slaves had protection while the free blacks did not. The only protection the latter had came from God and "some very kind white people," he says.

"ALL THAT BLACKS have has come from the black church," he says. As an example, he says, the churches started the first schools for blacks, and those church schools were the forerunners of the black public schools.

Wagner calls history "a fact — the road that we have trod," and he finds some people's ignorance of it "frightening." He says he has encountered some young blacks, including some college students, who don't even know who Martin Luther King was.

On the back cover of his book, Wagner has reproduced a quotation, from L.M. Terrill, that seems to sum up his own outlook: "I firmly believe in desegregation, but not amalgamation."

Persons interested in obtaining copies of the book can get in touch with the author at P.O. Box 2283, Gainesville, Ga. 30501.
Wagner recognized

The Rev. Clarence M. Wagner, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Gainesville, has been chosen by the American Biographical Institute of Raleigh, N.C., Governing Board of Editors to be included in the eleventh edition of "Personalities of the South."

Publishing board names

Rev. Wagner

The Sunday School Publishing Board of the 6.6-million member National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. Inc. has chosen the Rev. Clarence M. Wagner as a member of its curriculum writing staff. His first assignment is for the fourth quarter of 1981 senior Sunday School Quarterly.

For the past four years, Rev. Wagner has pastored the First Baptist Church, 500 Myrtle St., Gainesville.

His third book, "The Same Jesus" was published by Tru-Faith Publishers in January and has been distributed nationally. His literary achievements include "Seeds of Faith" Volume I, a book of meditations and "Profiles of Black Georgia Baptists," a documented historical treatise with pictures, programs, letters and other documents covering 206 years of black Georgia Baptists and 100 years of national Baptist history. The current distribution of his books includes elementary, high school, college, university and seminary, and library institutions nationwide.


For the past five years Rev. Wagner has served as executive secretary of the 500,000-member General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia, Inc.