



History of Florida Memorial University

Florida Memorial University is a private, coeducational, and Baptist-affiliated institution that has the distinction of being one of the oldest academic centers in the state, and the only Historically Black University in South Florida.

In 1879, members of the Bethlehem Baptist Association founded the school, then called Florida Baptist Institute, in Live Oak to create "a College of instruction for our ministers and children." The Reverend J. L. A. Fish was its first president. Despite a promising start, racial tensions soon cast a shadow over the Institute. In April 1892, after unknown persons fired shots into one of the school's buildings, then-President Rev. Matthew Gilbert and other staff members fled Live Oak for Jacksonville, where he founded the Florida Baptist Academy in the basement of Bethel Baptist Church. They began holding classes in May 1892, with Sarah Ann Blocker as the main instructor. The school in Live Oak, however, continued to operate even after this splintering.

In 1896, Nathan White Collier was appointed president of the Academy, a post he held for 45 years. President Collier recruited renowned composer and Jacksonville native, J. Rosamond Johnson, to teach music at the school. While in the employ of

the Florida Baptist Academy, Rosamond composed music for "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," a poem written by his brother, James Weldon Johnson, creating the song that has since been enshrined as the "Negro National Anthem." It was first performed by a choir that included students from Florida Baptist Academy at a celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birthday in 1900.

The institution numerous graduates who would go on to acclaim within the state and nation, such as Earth M. M. White, the legendary business woman and community servant in Jacksonville; the Rev. Howard Thurman, a renowned figure in American theology, who was recognized in 1952 by Life Magazine as one of the twelve most influential religious leaders in the country; and Harry T. Moore, civil rights advocate and head of the Florida conference of the NAACP.

Because of the dual pressures of a growing student body and not enough space to expand, the Academy took advantage of an offer from the City of St. Augustine to relocate the institution to the 400-acre "Old Hansen Plantation." The school began its third incarnation at its new home in St. Augustine on September 24, 1918, as the Florida Normal and Industrial Institute. Influenced by the educational model popularized by Booker T. Washington at his Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, students were encouraged to be industrious and self-sufficient, constructing many of the campus buildings themselves, as well as growing and preparing their own food. The students received hands-on training in the practical fields which would allow them to support themselves and their families.

In 1942, the Baptist General State Convention voted to merge its two schools, closing down the Florida Institute at Live Oak and combining it with what would become Florida Normal Industrial and Memorial College in St. Augustine. Florida native and writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston, served as an instructor for the school during this time.

The advent of civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s brought about a whirlwind of challenges and change to St. Augustine. When local African Americans decided to protest and resist segregation in the city, students from Florida Memorial joined the effort, participating in sit-ins, wade-ins, and swim-ins, orchestrated by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The events in St. Augustine significantly influenced federal legislation resulting in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson.

Activism by FMC students, however, threatened to upset the delicate relationship between the City of St. Augustine and Florida Memorial, as well as provoking the resentment and animosity of whites in the area. Given this vulnerable financial and social situation, Dr. Royal W. Puryear oversaw the relocation of the school when, in 1965, the trustees purchased a 48-acre former air strip near Opa-locka in Dade County. On November 11, 1968, the new campus opened as Florida Memorial College. In December 2004, the institution's charter was amended, and the name Florida Memorial University was adopted.

The FMU legacy is firmly rooted in steadfast dedication and commitment to pursue its mission "to instill in our students the values of leadership, character, and service to enhance their lives and the lives of others."

Prepared by Dr. Tameka Bradley Hobbs, Assistant Professor of History and University Historian.