

**George Liele: America’s First Baptist Missionary**

CMBA celebrates the life and legacy of the missionary, pastor, and church planter George Liele. Born into slavery in the early 1750s, Liele was educated, introduced to faith, and encouraged to pursue the ministry by Baptist Loyalists in Virginia and Georgia. His fascinating life story is an important part of the foundations of church planting and international missions. In fact, it could be said he is the first international Baptist missionary, as his service predates William Carey by 10 years.

Liele was born in Burke County Virginia to enslaved parents Liele and Nancy. The family’s master was Henry Sharpe, a British officer who also served as a deacon at Buckhead Creek Baptist Church. Slaves of the Sharpe family joined them in weekly worship services, and Officer Sharpe prioritized educating at least some of these individuals to read and write. Liele apparently knew few details about his parents but was told by both white and black people that his father was “the only black person that knew the Lord.”

The Sharpe family moved to Georgia when Liele was a child. In 1773 he was baptized as a believer, recounting his salvation came “only through the merits of my dying Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” As he grew in faith Liele preached the gospel to other slaves, taught and explained to them the meanings of hymns, and encouraged hymn-singing throughout the plantation. Recognizing Liele’s passion to study Scriptures and share the gospel, Buckhead Creek Baptist Church ordained and licensed him to preach.

“I am most impressed by how many British white people invested in George Liele in that day and time,” says CMBA Pastoral Encouragement Team Leader Andre Rogers of his life story. “His owner taught him how to read and write, and he became a very well-learned man. He was ordained when negroes weren’t ordained, in fact, he was the very first to become ordained.”

This Kingdom investment in Liele was evidenced in 1778 when Officer Sharpe granted Liele’s freedom so that he could preach more widely. For the next two years, Liele preached in plantation slave quarters in Silver Bluff, South Carolina, and planted what is thought to be the first black church in Aiken County. Liele and his family eventually moved to British-occupied Savannah, and there he founded a congregation of free and enslaved black Baptists with the help of two believers Liele led to faith in Silver Bluff.

This body of believers in Savannah eventually grew to 80 members and they constituted First Bryan Baptist Church in 1788. Four years later the congregation had grown to 250 and in 1794 constructed their first building. Eight years later the church had 700 members and was renamed the First African Baptist Church.

Throughout Liele’s lifetime issues of race and politics interrupted his ministry and freedom. Following Officer Sharpe’s death in a Revolutionary War battle, Sharpe’s family tried to re-enslave Liele and even had him jailed for a time. British Officer Moses Kirkland helped Liele produce his freedom papers to the Sharpe family and, for a financial debt to Kirkland, arranged for Liele, his wife Hannah, and their children to go to Jamaica as indentured servants working for the colony’s governor. After two years Liele settled his $700 debt with Officer Kirkland, was granted a certificate of freedom from the governor, and focused on evangelism and church planting while earning wages with a wagon and horses that he owned.

Liele met with regular persecution from the Jamaican government throughout his time there, as preaching to slaves was against the law under British rule. Undeterred, Liele engaged slaves where they lived and preached where they gathered, including at a local public racecourse, and saw many come to faith. In subsequent years Liele planted the Kingston Church on his own land and was imprisoned for three years related to the government’s interference with the church. In 1791 he wrote, “I have baptized 400 in Jamaica. We have nigh 350 members, a few white people among them,” signaling his ability to cross racial barriers as well.

Liele started a school for black children in Kingston, employing a teacher who also taught freed and enslaved parents. Many converts joined Liele in his ministry by helping to plant churches and serving as preachers and church leaders. Liele also sought financial and missionary support from British Baptists, which led to partnerships that brought missionaries into Jamaica and sent missionaries out to the countries of enslaved believers living in Jamaica. This extraordinary period of missions and evangelism resulted in an estimated population of 8,000 Baptists in Jamaica by 1814. Liele’s ministry continued until his death in the mid-1820s.

The fullness of Liele’s Kingdom impact is impossible to trace. Details and numbers vary among the sources that have reported on his life and work. But first-hand stories include two British missionaries who returned home to champion the end of slavery in Jamaica because they knew Liele, and Liele’s own writings confirm he maintained contact with many of his converts who went on to plant and pastor churches across North America and Africa. First African Baptist Church, Liele’s first congregation in Savannah, has planted several churches and is still a healthy and growing congregation today.

“The rich history that exists at First African Baptist can still be felt today. You can tell a lot about a church’s DNA, and this church continues to be missions-driven,” says Rogers, marveling at Liele’s accomplishments and life story. “How many times must he have been beaten and faced persecution and should have given up - but he didn’t. He also kept his family together through many hardships, which is a big deal. George Liele was the first American missionary…not just the first African American missionary.”

**Learn more about Leile through several online resources referenced for this article:**

“[George Liele: America’s First Missionary](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mUPx2CLWxc&t=207s)” video

[“America’s First Missionary”](https://www.thetravelingteam.org/articles/george-liele) - A historical synopsis of Liele from The Traveling Team, a missions education organization committed to reaching university students.

[A Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) educational resource on Liele](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2p49.html)

[Historical reflection of The First African Baptist Church, Savannah, G.A.](https://firstafricanbc.com/history.php)