First organized in 1830 as a primitive Baptist church, Mt Gilead Church and School located west of Kearney, Missouri, endured decades of change on the Missouri frontier. Services were held in the homes of its members until 1835 when the first rustic log school was built on land donated by Benjamin Riley. It became the Mt. Gilead Christian Church in 1841 with the first building constructed in 1844. That structure burned in 1862. The present brick church was built in 1873. Brick was made on the site and the pews were made from trees on the property. The pulpit was fashioned more than a century ago by John Ingram from an old cherry wood rope bed donated by Matt Wilkerson, who at one time, lived across the road. Services were held regularly for many decades until 1930 when the church closed. Four years later, it opened as a Community Church with Reverend Forrest Taylor as pastor. It became inactive again in 1937. Services were renewed in 1951 and continued until the early 1980s.

Adjacent to the church is the cemetery, which was also founded in 1830 with simple headstones dating back to the 1840s. A cousin of Abraham Lincoln, Archibald Lincoln, is buried here, as well as founding church members, and soldiers, including James M. Burgess, a young boy of 23 years who died at the Battle of Vicksburg. A community member, Matt Smith, maintained the church and cemetery for nearly 50 years before his death in 1969. After that, his wife Marian Smith and his sister Ina looked after the church and school complex.

Mt. Gilead School operated for over 100 years until consolidation in 1946 caused the school to close. The first Mt. Gilead School was built of logs in 1835. Students of the first school used seats and desks of half logs, supported with pegs for legs. The early school had coal oil lamps and a wood-burning stove. The school was rebuilt in 1844 after the first building was destroyed by fire. The present two-story schoolhouse, built in 1879, is the third building on the site and functioned as an academy offering courses in Latin, Greek, and music. At that time, tuition was $10 for primary and $20 for secondary level courses, including Latin and Greek.

Most of the students in the earlier years were children of families that migrated from Kentucky and Tennessee after Missouri became a state in 1821. After 1840, immigrants from Germany and Switzerland settled in the surrounding community and in the bluffs southeast of Liberty. Perhaps the first Mt. Gilead school pupil of German descent was Conrad Hartel, eight years old in 1861, whose parents lived nearby. He came to Mt. Gilead School because the Arley School closed during the Civil War. Historians believe that Mt. Gilead School was the only school west of the Mississippi River to continuously hold classes during the Civil War. During that time, the teacher would dismiss classes so the students could salute the soldiers marching by on the road in front of the schoolhouse. Sometimes there were so many it took an hour for them to all pass. By the time of the First World War, one-fourth of the Mt. Gilead pupils came from German speaking families. Perhaps the 1915-1916 school year was typical of that time. Forty-one students were enrolled in nine grades with twenty-three of them in grades one thru five in classes held on the second floor. The remaining eighteen pupils in grades six through nine were on the first floor. Ninth grade was dropped in 1917. The two-story schoolhouse had two teachers until the 1920s when the upstairs room was closed as attendance declined.
The school and church served as a community center for those that lived in the surrounding rural areas. Funerals, funeral dinners, church suppers, pie suppers, community get-togethers, school programs, Decoration Day picnics – all of these events were where the community members met and gathered.

In August of 1930, Mt. Gilead observed its 100th anniversary with a special program lasting through the morning session, a basket dinner under the trees at noon, and an afternoon program. A photograph was taken to commemorate the founding of that pioneer and historic organization.

In the fall of 2000, Mt. Gilead School hosted a class reunion for students that attended the one-room school. A total of twenty-six former students along with many family members attended the event including two teachers, Miss Logan and Miss Britt. At the age of 94, Jennie Logan Milster came all the way from Alexandria, Virginia, to attend the reunion. Miss Jennie Logan taught at Mt. Gilead school from 1925-1928 and Miss Eleanor Britt taught in 1940 and 1941. One of Miss Logan’s students, Mildred Hartel Neth attended from 1923-1928. The teacher and student were thrilled to see one another and reminisce about their school days.

The Clay County Department of Parks, Recreation & Historic Sites acquired the Mt. Gilead property in 1984. The three-acre property includes the historic church, school, and cemetery. Today the Mt. Gilead site offers the public a unique setting for a variety of events. The church can accommodate weddings, reunions, showers, meetings, parties and performances. The school offers a unique four-hour field trip opportunity to experience living-history in a one-room schoolhouse setting. A teacher in period costume instructs the class in late 1880s style with scholars practicing penmanship and ciphering arithmetic on slates, reading from McGuffey readers, and participating in a spelling bee. The site is open for tours upon request.

Mt. Gilead is located at 15918 Plattsburg Road, Kearney, Missouri.
In memory of
ELDER JAMES MORRIS,
Born August 4, 1839,
Departed this life
June 17, 1861,
AGED 21 yrs, 10 mos, 17 dys.

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again for us also; therefore we call on him, saying, "Thou art in the Lord, even Jesus Christ, the Son of God." 1 Cor. 15:22

Mt. Gilgal
School & Church
Benton, AR
City/State/Zip: 72015
For Access & Hours Call
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