A HISTORY OF MOUNT GILEAD METHODIST CHURCH

Organized in the fall of 1824, Mount Gilead Methodist Church is claimed by its members to be the oldest Christian Church in Fulton County.

The organizer and first pastor of Mount Gilead Church was the Rev. William J. Parks, a son of the Georgia backwoods. His father is recorded as the first convert to Methodism in the state. In regard to the Rev. Mr. Parks’ early school days, J. M. Baker wrote in his history of the church that "he frequently gave an account of one teacher who was a regular drunkard, and who on one occasion was turned out of the schoolhouse and given a severe beating by the school boys, after which they 'dubbed' him over with mud. The teacher finally surrendered and set the boys up to a gallon of whiskey, which they all drank together." After learning all the old field school had to teach, young Parks attended a Methodist school at Salem, where he studied grammar and was later licensed to preach.

Describing the Rev. Mr. Parks as a young preacher, Mr. Baker wrote, "When he joined the conference he was only 23 years of age and married, and it is said that a more unpolished country lad rarely appeared before the Quarterly Conference for license." At a conference in Savannah in 1823, the Rev. Mr. Parks was assigned to the Gwinnett Mission, which had two small stations at Lawrenceville and Decatur. Mr. Baker says, "On his first appearance at the little mission at Lawrenceville, where the people had assembled for worship in the little log courthouse, the sight of him provoked much laughter among the congregation. He was dressed in the humblest garb. His coat was made of plain jeans.
cut into the old Methodist preacher style, and a very bad fit; copperas dyed pantaloons and vest all too short and small, with a pair of blue yarn socks and heavy brogan shoes to complete his attire. However, before the end of his sermon a smile of complete satisfaction came over the faces of his congregation, for, to use the language of that day, they found they had a 'singed cat' who was far better than he looked."

Early in 1824, John M. Smith, a resident of what is now the Ben Hill area in Fulton County, made the acquaintance of the Rev. Mr. Parks at the little Decatur mission, where the latter held services once a month. On a later visit to the mission, Mr. Smith, who later became a local elder, persuaded the circuit rider to accompany him over the narrow winding Indian trails to his home. Upon their arrival the friends and neighbors were called together and the house was dedicated to the worship of God, the first sermon being preached there on April 23, 1824. Soon after, the Rev. Mr. Parks, acting under orders from the Conference, organized in the Smith home the Mount Gilead Methodist Society, which later that year became Mount Gilead Methodist Church.

The fourteen charter members of the church were John M. Smith and wife, Samuel Sewell and wife, Richmond Barge and wife, John B. Holbrooks and wife, Daniel Ferguson and wife, Nancy Redwine, and a Mr. Tate.

During the first year of the Mount Gilead Methodist Society and Church, the Rev. Mr. Parks had a regular appointment to preach in the Smith home. Mr. Baker wrote that "among his near neighbors was a large band of friendly Indians ... and on many
occasions of his preaching (Rev. Parks), many of these Indians would come to his home and stand outside looking in at the windows and listening to the sermon with apparent great interest and satisfaction."

During the year 1825, the membership of the church had increased to the extent that a house of worship was necessary. The site selected for the building was a one and one-half acre tract of land donated by J. M. Smith, the deed of conveyance being made to trustees Samuel Sewell, John Dorsey, John Holbrooks, 

Newton Randle, and Daniel Childs on January 15, 1826. This deed is now recorded in the public records of Fulton County.

Describing the original church building, Mr. Baker wrote, "The men of the community came together, and within a few days a substantial log house was erected. It had a door in each end, and another in the west side, which faced the narrow road or trail. The pulpit was a quaint box affair of octagon shape, which stood two steps above the floor in the east side of the building, which was lighted by eight windows with board shutters. The church was without much claim to attractiveness then, but was later weatherboarded. It was a heavy log house with logs hewed on both sides. At night services were lighted by tallow candles."

In 1858 a more modern structure was erected a few feet south of the first building, the community by then having become quite populous. A building committee composed of J. M. Smith, J. J. Fain, J. O. Redwine, and P. R. Oliver was named by the church to contract with local sawmill owner Elijah Donahoo to saw lumber and erect the new house of worship. Mr. says of
this second structure, "It was a large house, facing the north, had two doors in the front end and two aisles leading from these doors to the altar. There were doors on each side near the pulpit. When this house was erected, it had a box-up pulpit, but this was destroyed by the army in 1864. The windows were of large size and were of glass; the walls and ceiling were never painted. Nevertheless it was a nicely built house, and the exterior was painted white, making it a very attractive church for its day and time."

Concerning the effect of the War between the States on the church, Mr. Baker continues, "The church stood in the line of Sherman's march to the sea, and was in turn used by both the Southern and Northern armies as a hospital during the terrible fight around Atlanta. The ceiling was torn out and converted into bunks for wounded soldiers, and the pulpit and seats were destroyed." Shortly after the war, J. M. Baker, with the aid of Capt. (J. O.) Redwine and J. J. Fain, repaired the building, using much of the old ceiling which still showed many blood stains from the war. A new pulpit and altar were built in 1875 by J. M. Baker, grandson of J. M. Smith. A contribution for the purpose was raised by Mr. Smith's daughter Isabella. This same pulpit is in use at present.

The present house of worship was erected in 1908, and stands almost exactly upon the site of the original log building. The present building is not so large as its predecessor, the front of the building facing Fairburn Road. It has a vestibule and two doors in front, with two aisles leading from these doors. The building was erected with stained glass windows, high ceiling,
and sloped floor. The structure was built during the pastorate of the Rev. M. M. Walraven. The building was repainted and electric lights installed in 1923. A Sunday School annex extending the width of the church was erected in the rear of the main building in 1924. The building was completely renovated in 1953 during the pastorate of the Rev. Daniel G. Stone. Music for services is supplied by an electric organ purchased during the pastorate of the Rev. Woodrow Jackson. A central heating system was installed during the ministry of the Rev. W. M. Hunton. The hill on which the church is located has been rendered more beautiful by a project of landscaping, completed in 1954.

A history of Mount Gilead Church would not be complete without further mention of John M. Smith, in whose home the first services of the church were held. Born in Franklin County on November 27, 1789, he married Nancy Sultles also of Franklin County on November 27, 1810. They moved to Fulton County on November 27 1822. He was licensed to preach on November 27 1825. The Rev. Mr. Smith was ordained deacon in Madison County by Bishop Headin and ordained elder by Bishop Andrew in Macon in 1835. Though remaining a local preacher, he was well known throughout Fulton County, preaching 700 funerals, performed 116 marriage ceremonies, and gained 1340 converts to Methodism.

Mentioning the eventful career of the Rev. Mr. Smith, Mr. Baker reveals, "...he witnessed in December 1831, the legal execution of the first white man to be hanged in that section of Georgia, and at the request of the condemned man preached his funeral while the prisoner stood on the gallows and just before
the trap was sprung... On another occasion Grandfather Smith, barefoot and with shirt sleeves and pantaloons rolled up, and in mud nearly to his knees, was thinning a piece of bottom corn, when suddenly there appeared a young man of the community, with his blushing bride-elect, who strenuously insisted that they be made man and wife on the spot without delay. The slight objections of the minister, on account of his untidy appearance, was quickly overruled by the eager young couple, and without further ado, the words were spoken which made the twain as one."

In 1823-24 the Rev. Mr. Smith, aided by his neighbors, built the first school house in the community, but the building was destroyed by the armies in 1864. He also served as Tax Collector and Tax Receiver for 15 years. He organized the first temperance society in the community, naming it the Sons of Temperance. He built a small meeting house for the organization which stood on a hill east of the bridge over Utoy Creek on what is now Cascade Road. This building was also destroyed by the encamping armies during the War between the States.

In 1834 the Rev. Mr. Smith donated, for a token consideration, donated 202 acres of land situated on what is now Fairburn Road just north of Ben Hill for the purpose of setting up the Mount Gilead Camp Ground. Through his influence the first arbor at the camp ground was built in that year. To the present day, thousands of persons annually attend the summer meetings at Mount Gilead Camp Ground.

The Rev. Mr. Smith went to his heavenly home on March 23,
1863, at the age of 73. At his own request, his body was laid to rest in Mount Gilead Churchyard in the very spot over which stood the pulpit of the original log church.

In the years 1820-28, there came into existence in the Methodist Episcopal Church what was known as the Mutual Rights Party, which contended for mutual rights of the laity and ministry against the episcopacy. The movement had its dividing effect on the infant Mount Gilead Church. Mr. Baker writes, "It is said that on one occasion, during a meeting at Mount Gilead, an opportunity was given to all members of the church to declare themselves either for or against this new faction, that a line was drawn upon the ground in the church yard across which all dissenters might go over to the new faction, the faithful members of Mount Gilead to remain." The dissenters later formed the nucleus of what became the Owl Rock Methodist Protestant Church.

The Centennial Celebration of Mount Gilead Church was held on August 31 and September 1, 1924.

For many years prior to 1933 Mount Gilead was on the same circuit with the Owl Rock, Ben Hill, and Mount Zion Churches. In that year the circuit was divided, and Mount Gilead and Owl Rock remained on the same charge. In 1948 Mount Gilead became a full time church, and now has a full program of services and activities.

Dear to the hearts of contemporary members of the church was the seven-year pastorate of the Rev. W. M. Hunton from 1940 through 1947. His ministry was the longest of all the pastors who have served Mount Gilead down to the present time.
PASTORS WHO HAVE SERVED MOUNT GILEAD CHURCH

William J. Parks, 1823-24; Wiley Warwick, 1825; Joel Townsend, 1826; John L. Oliver and John Hunter, 1827; W. F. Warwick and W. P. Williams, 1828; William J. Parks and Tillman Douglas, 1829; John L. Oliver and C. A. Brown, 1830; G. W. Carter and Zachariah Brown, 1831; James P. Richardson, 1832; Morgan Bell, 1833; John S. Ford and Appleton Haygood, 1834; Anderson Ray and John F. Dickerson, 1835; Eli Barrett and P. P. Smith, 1836; Brother Singleton, 1837; A. Pennington and J. McCober, 1838; Alfred Bowman, 1839-40; Robert A. Wilson, 1841, David L. Bellah, 1842; Morgan Bell, 1843; Andrew J. Muse, 1844; Ausburn L. Smith, 1845; James L. Jackson and J. G. Whitley, 1846; A. Ray and E. Spear, 1847; John Yarbrough and A. W. Hinton, 1848; John Yarbrough and W. A. Wynn, 1849; N. Smith and A. N. Neese, 1850; Joseph T. Smith and John Sentell, 1851; Richard Lane and J. R. Owen, 1852; L. J. Davis and W. M. Watts, 1853; James R. Irving, 1854; Thomas Boring, 1855; Clayburn Trussel, 1856-57; T. S. Quillian and J. M. Smith, 1858; James L. Lupon, 1859; James R. Ainsworth, 1860; E. J. Harrell, 1861; D. Blalock, 1862; W. A. Leake, 1863-64; W. J. Myers, 1865-66; W. J. Wardlaw, 1867-70; B. J. Johnson, 1871-72; John W. Yarborough, 1873; A. C. Dempsey, 1874-75; C. A. Thrower, 1876-77; W. R. Foote, 1878-79; L. P. Neese and Crumley, 1880-81; W. W. Oslin, 1882; F. A. Gray and Morgan, 1883; W. C. Dunlap, 1884; W. W. Lambkin, 1885-86; T. J. Richardson and Simeon Shaw, 1887; W. D. Siley, 1888; H. L. Embry, 1890-91; C. V. Weathers, 1892; J. M. Tumlin, 1893-94; W. T. Hamilton, 1895; J. A. Reynolds, 1895-96; W. A. Dodge, 1898-1901; O. C. Simmons, 1902-1905; W. M. Walraven, 1906-1909; P. A. Kellett,
1910-12; W. H. Joiner, 1913; M. L. Underwood, 1914-17; W. T. Darnell, 1918; E. L. Hillman, 1919; L. W. Neff, 1920-21;
E. F. Martin, 1940; W. M. Hunton, 1941-47; W. W. Byington, 1948; Woodrow Jackson, 1949-50; John O. Weathers, 1951;