HISTORY OF
MOUNT GILEAD CAMP GROUND

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Mount Gilead Camp Ground is located in the Ben Hill neighborhood of Southwest Atlanta at Camp Ground and Austin Road. This area is also a part of Neighborhood Planning Unit P. The camp grounds and structures have been virtually neglected since the 1960's when this area experienced its greatest racial transition period. The racial composition of the population changed from nine percent black in 1960 to sixty-six percent black in 1974.

Despite the fact that the tabernacle at Mount Gilead Camp Ground is currently being used each summer for a week of religious worship, the adjacent dilapidated structures and non-maintained grounds have presented an eyesore and problems for residents living in the immediate vicinity. Vandalistic attacks on the property have accelerated the deterioration of the hotel living quarters.

Residents at the NPU meeting cited the absence of security personnel at the camp ground and its limited usage (one week per year) as the primary reasons for its present condition. Additionally, residents indicated their need for recreation space in the community. It was suggested that NPC-P explore the possibility of acquiring permission from the Methodist Church to use the camp grounds for recreation activities. However, another group of residents, at the meeting, recommended that the camp ground site be preserved as a sacred place for meditation. The NPC adopted this recommendation on a majority vote and recorded its support for Mount Gilead Camp Ground to be designated and preserved as a historic site for religious activities.

The Neighborhood Planner was requested to initiate the necessary mechanisms that would result in Mount Gilead Camp Ground being designated an historic site. Such a designation might insure the availability of funds to renovate the tabernacle and adjacent structures as well as provide regular security and maintenance of the grounds.

A history of Mount Gilead was researched by the neighborhood planner with the assistance of the Atlanta Urban Design Commission, Mr. Joe Suttles, a resident and worshipper at Mount Gilead for the past 35 year, and Mr. D.B. Shelnutt, former Superintendent of Southwest District of United Methodist Church.

As a result of these interviews, collaborations, and examining written documents which cited the deep religious impact Mount Gilead Camp Ground has had on thousands of persons during the past century and today as well, the Atlanta Urban Design Commission is currently seeking to have Mount Gilead designated as a historic site as requested by the residents of NPU-P.
History of Mount Gilead

In the year 1823 several families moved from Franklin County, Georgia, to Fayette, now Fulton County, locating in the southwest corner of old Fulton County in what is now known as the Ben Hill section. They were deeply religious people and one of their first ideas was to establish a church, there being no church nearer than Decatur. (Atlanta did not then exist.) Among these people was the Reverend John M. Smith who quickly got in touch with the Reverend William J. Parks, then a missionary serving a number of churches in northeast Georgia, inviting him to come to the Smith home to establish a meeting place where those pioneers might worship God.

Mount Gilead church was born and shortly thereafter, in 1824, the oldest church in Fulton County was established. Some of the worshippers at Mount Gilead heard of religious camp grounds in Georgia and, desiring to further the influence of the church, they decided to establish a camp ground.

The Reverend Smith, having obtained by grant from the State several lots of land, donated 202½ acres for the camp ground site. A very crude tabernacle was built with pine slabs for seats and brush for a covering, using pine wood for lighting. Soon a more permanent covering was placed on the crude structure and families built temporary living quarters, then called "tents", in a circle about the tabernacle.

Here they lived each summer for a week or ten days during the sacred season thereafter known as "Camp Meeting Time". Fires were lighted in the rear of the tents for cooking purposes...and from that day to this, Camp Meeting has been a place of feasting as well as praying.

This place had a phenomenal growth and became a mecca for religious worship for Georgians for miles around. Its influence extended to other counties.

Came the 1860's and every man and boy able to bear arms joined the Confederate Army to battle for the Southland. Some came back; some did not. But those who did took up where they left off and again Mount Gilead Camp Ground became a great force for righteousness in this area.

Reconstruction days meant hardships for Mount Gilead's people, but their religious ardor burned all the more brightly in time of trouble. In the period 1870 to 1880 there were 60 families encamped about the tabernacle at one time. They came by oxcart, wagon, horseback. They came to hear the gospel proclaimed by the greatest preachers of their day.
Boring, Pierce and a host of other eminent ministers were at their best preaching a camp meeting sermon. Often times when a preacher, caught up by the fervor of his own oratory, threatened to run over the time allotted for the noon-day service, he was drowned out by a sudden cacophony of braying and whinnying by the hungry horses and mules whose stomachs told them the time.

During the severe winter of 1880 a heavy snowfall crushed the tabernacle but before another camp meeting time, a sawmill was moved in and timber for a new building was cut and lumber sawed. Under the supervision of James Barrett, the men of the community rushed to completion the building which is still used, although it has been enlarged and re-roofed since that time.

The year 1900 was indeed an eventful one for it was at the turn of the century that the Reverend W.A. Dodge directed what was perhaps the greatest revival held at Mount Gilead Camp Ground. A service started at 3:00 P.M. and lasted until midnight. Many services were going simultaneously in various sections of the grounds.

Great meetings continued for the next 20 years. The congregation had the opportunity during this era to listen to the very best ministers the Methodist church ever produced in this area. Sometimes a dozen preachers would participate in the services, a different minister preaching at each service. This naturally led to competition and each one tried to excel his brother in proclaiming the gospel. Mount Gilead's ancient rafters rang with the best oratory of the day from such soul-stirring preachers as Bishop Warren Candler, S.R. Belk, James E. Dickey and others.

Special trains were operated from Atlanta, bringing throngs of people to the Sunday services. From 1920 to 1940, mules and horses gave way to automobiles but the crowds continued. Many a matrimonial match was made on these sacred grounds. Walking to the spring arm-in-arm, favorite pastime with the boys and girls, led to engagements and marriages.

But the 1940's found that Georgians' enthusiasm for camp meeting had fallen off. The friendly community gathering at the camp ground was out of style. Families no longer assembled for a summer session of feasting and worshippng together. The young folks had found other places than the well-worn path to the spring for their courting.

Mount Gilead had kept pace with the spiritual needs of Georgians for more than a century. Was this ancient stronghold of spirituality to pass away?

The answer came back from the countless worshippers of all denominations who had looked to Mount Gilead for inspiration in the past. In 1946 representatives from a number of churches of the Atlanta districts were elected to the Board of Trustees. The old tabernacle was modernized, a water and sewerage system was installed and a hotel built.
Since that time many socio-economic changes have occurred in the area which encompasses Mount Gilead Camp Ground. Consequently, efforts must be made to protect the peculiar charm Mount Gilead has had on people for generations.

A new religious spirit is currently at work in this area to renew the old favor on Mount Gilead Camp Ground as a result of the interest generated by the NPU process. The commitment of residents in NPU-P to have Mount Gilead designated as a historic site is the first step toward the continuous preservation of this historically rich site.