

## HISTORICAL SKETCH OF GILGAL CHURCH.

We first notice the church as it now is. A commodious brick building, situated on a rising ground, amid a grove of oaks and chestnuts. To the left of the church lies a grave-yard – the city of the dead.

Tradition tell that the first grave in this place was that of a man found dead here, a victim of the red man. The body was interred upon the spot where he was found. Other interments were subsequently made beside it, and this resulted in the cemetery of the present day. Until last fall, the burying ground embraces 2  $\frac{3}{4}$  acres. At that time, however, the purchase of a portion of ground from Mr. James Ayers, increased its size to six acres.

The congregation is small, the membership being about fifty-five, but it can well testify that the prosperity of the church is not measured by the number of names on its roll, but rather by the spirit of its members. A small but deeply interesting sabbath school, attended alike by old and young, is maintained, not merely on the pleasant sabbaths of summer, but also through the storms and snows of winter. The last report of its attendance given at the presbytery, numbered fifty-five scholars.

Glancing over the records of the past, traced by the trembling hand of him who labored so long as the faithful pastor of this people, we find that the Gilgal church was organized by the Redstone Presbytery, in the year 1808. It has its origin and primitive growth among the families of pioneer settlers in the region of country where it is located.

Among the earliest of these settlers was Robert Thompson, who, with his son Hugh Thompson, and his son-in-law, Hugh Cannon, and their families, emigrated from Westmoreland county in the year 1797, and fixed their homes three miles north of Crooked creek. Their improvement was for a number of years, the outmost bound of civilization. Their next neighbors were the wolf, the panther, and the red man of the forest.

About the beginning of the present century, settlers began to locate north of what was then, and is still, known as the “Purchase Line,” in the region technically denominated Mahoning.

Here we find the names of Isaiah Vanhorn, William Work, John Work, John Leasure, Robert Brady, James Thompson, James Irving, John Park, William P. Brady, Matthew Wyncoop, William Hopkins, and Joshua Lewis. Not all of them were church members, but all of Presbyterian proclivities and disposed to favor the enterprise of a Presbyterian church.

During the first few years of the history of these pioneers, their religious privileges were limited. It was not until the year 1806 that regular preaching was obtained. Rev. James Galbreath, the a licentiate of Redstone Presbytery, began to labor as a stated supply a portion of his time at this distant outpost, and this led to the organization of the Gilgal church two years later. It is to be presumed that he was soon after ordained and installed as its pastor, but the exact date is not known.

Before and for sometime after the organization was obtained, public worship was conducted in private homes. On sacramental occasions, recourse was had to the *tent*.

Not earlier than the year 1810, the first church building was commenced. It was not finished until several years later. The site was the same as that on which the present one stands. A member who had prepared logs for a barn sold them to the congregation. Each man purchased his quota of logs for a stipulated quantity of wheat.

The house was forty feet square. The seats were in accordance with individual or family tastes. It was a structure which, when circumstances of the time are taken into consideration, must be pronounced worthy of the purpose to which it was devoted, being then perhaps the best house in all the country.

In the course of years this primitive building became too small for the increasing numbers frequenting it. The people not being yet able to replace it with a new one, removed one entire side and attached to the opening a shed twelve feet wide. Thus enlarged, it served their purpose for some years longer.

In the year 1817, Rev. Galbreath resigned his entire charge, viz: Gilgal and Indiana, and entered another field. In the year 1859 he passed away from earth, being more than fourscore years of age.

In 1818 Rev. John Reed, a licentiate of Washington Presbytery, was ordained and installed in the room of Mr. Galbreath. His time was divided equally between the churches of Gilgal and Indiana.

About this time several families withdrew from Gilgal and obtained a new organization. These constituted the nucleus of the Associate Reform, now the United Presbyterian Church, of Mahoning.

In the summer of 1838, the old log church was taken down to give place to the new brick edifice, fifty feet square, and capable of seating five hundred persons. Frequently has this building been filled to overflowing by the throngs of people who came many miles to hear the preached Word.

In the spring of 1839 Rev. Reed, feeling the labor required by this large charge to be too severe for his strength, resigned his pastorate at Gilgal with a view of employing his whole time at Indiana. This change he afterwards regretted, for being deprived of the healthful exercise to which he had so long been accustomed his health rapidly failed. He died in the fall of 1840, but little past middle life.

The third pastor, Rev. John Carothers, came as a licentiate of Washington Presbytery. He preached his first sermon here on the first Sabbath of August, 1839. In 1842, a Ladies' Missionary Society was organized. Its first contribution amounted to twenty dollars. From this time to the close of the year 1860, its contributions amounted to over three hundred and sixty dollars. Those of the entire church, for the same time, were seventeen hundred dollars.

In 1843, the version of the psalms, commonly known as Rouse's Version, which had been in use here, was superseded by the Psalms and Hymns recommended by the General Assembly. This was unsatisfactory to some, and a few families withdrew and sought a new organization under the Associate Reform Banner. This was the commencement of the Associate Reform, now the United Presbyterian Church of Smyrna.

In 1854, a organization obtained at Mount Pleasant, carried from Gilgal about thirty-five members. In 1860, an organization was felt to be needed in the village of Marion. This being obtained, over twenty families, containing fifty church members, removed from Gilgal to that organization.

After these departures, there remained one hundred and seventy-five members, embraced in about seventy-five families. Sometime during the year 1869, the Rockridge Church was also organized from Gilgal. An organization at Smicksburg, in 1855, and at Plumville in 1865, drew off a few families from the Mother church.

In the winter of 1869-'70 the church building was repaired at the cost of several hundred dollars. While it was under the hands of the workmen, the congregation was kindly favored with the use of the Mahoning Church.

In the fall of 1870, Mr. Carothers resigned his charge at Gilgal. For over thirty years he had labored here as a faithful and beloved pastor. During that time he had baptized over four hundred infants, and about fifty adults, and had received nearly five hundred persons into the church.

Concerning his departure, we quote his own words: "When I came, I felt the hand of Providence pointed me here. Now I feel it is pointing me away."

Fearful indeed was that parting day. A union so sacred and so long sustained could not be severed without pain. The affection between pastor and people had been mutual. Many whom he had baptized in infancy now stood beside him, strong men in the prime of life. Families, whose heads he had united in the sacred bond of husband and wife, clustered around him to bid him farewell; and those whom he had led to the foot of the cross, drew near to clasp for the last time their *pastor's* hand. Impelled by some hidden power, the people lingered around the hallowed place. So many tender associations clustered there, and upon this day it seemed as if the spell had been cruelly broken. When at last the crowd dispersed one thought seemed to echo in every heart. *Mr. Carothers is gone.*

The following winter, the pulpit was vacant. The session maintained a Sabbath prayer meeting. In the spring of 1871, Rev. Carl Moore, was sent by presbytery to labor as a stated supply. During his ministration, the prosperity of the church was at a low ebb. Recent expenses had left it several hundred dollars in debt. The congregation was small and to all appearance still decreasing. Everything looked gloomy. Neighboring organizations said, "Gilgal is going down;" and their words were echoed by many of its members and supporters. But the minister ever spoke hopefully. In its darkest hours, he persisted that *Gilgal was not going down*. His cheerful confidence inspired the dishearted people, and again they rallied to their sacred trust. The dear old church, their life-long sabbath home, *must not* go down. Nerved with a new strength, they united their purposes and each year the debt grew less. The expenses were promptly met and their sky once more brightened.

On the first Sabbath of August, just thirty-five years after his first coming among them, Mr. Carothers revisited his old charge. He wished, he said, to see his people once more, and to preach again to them of the "vicarious atonement."

Feelings of mingled joy and pain, the people gathered in the sanctuary to meet their pastor. However, he was unable to preach. Assisted by his friends he ascended to pulpit stair and stood once more within the hallowed place from which he had so long taught the waiting people from the Word of God. His discourse was simply a succession of brief talks of the years gone by, when they had sustained the sacred relation of the pastor and people. Speaking of the present he said, "There was a time when I feared the old church must go down, but now I see the danger is past. Gilgal's children have been true to her in her time of need.

It was a day never to be forgotten. As he tottered down the aisle, the people pressed around him for one more word of the recognition; and tearful eyes followed him as he passed from the place, perhaps forever.

At the close of Rev. Moore's ministration in the spring of 1877, Gilgal was free from debt. It is but just that he should have the gratitude of the church for having sustained the spirit of its members through a crisis that might have otherwise proved fatal to the organization.

Rev. Wm. F. Gibson, successor of Rev. Moore, preached his first sermon at Gilgal, on the first day of April, 1877. On the twenty-sixth of June, the people, without one dissenting voice, called him to their pastor. A few days after, he was ordained at a meeting of presbytery in Marion. On the seventh of July, he was installed at Gilgal.

The relationship existing between this pastor and his people is most happy. The circumstances attending his coming too plainly indicate the hand of Providence to be ignored, and now pastor and people are united in their work, and with one mind press forward the Master's cause. May he long be spared to labor here is the earnest prayer of many.\*

It will be noticed that every pastor of Gilgal came as a licentiate. During its existence of seventy-two years it has had but one supply, and he was retained for six years.

Thus we see that the old church has stood the test of many changes. Here in the wilderness it lifted up its standard in a time too remote to be remembered by any now living. It has a record in the hearts of all. Its name is ever uttered with sincere respect. All eyes turn with veneration to its sanctuary. Its cemetery is the depository of sacred memories from nearly every family. Its history is identified with the history of the county of its location from its earliest settlement. It stands in close historical relation to all the other churches around it. They are, to a great degree, the off-shoots of its life. The germ of their vitality was first nurtured here. *Gilgal is the mother of them all.*

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\* The present session consists of Samuel Black, Samuel Brady, Thomas Stewart, Samuel Lockard. Mr. Robert Thompson, who died a year ago, was for about fifteen years an elder of Gilgal church.