

# West Milford Church of Christ: A History

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Perhaps you've heard the expression whenever a person, team, or organization is making steady progress: "Man, they are really going to town!" It's the perfect expression to describe the activity of West Milford Church of Christ, a country church that has for more than a century occupied a place on Casebeer-Miller Road in the northwest corner of Defiance County, Ohio.

The West Milford Church of Christ has been following Jesus for more than a century. In 1890, a group of farm families wanted a place to meet one another and to worship God together. Many rural places of worship began in this manner, but many have faded from sight. West Milford Church is an exception to this pattern and is thriving, going, and growing at this time.



The following history has been collected from old church roll books, board meeting notes, oral history, newspaper articles, personal notes, memorabilia, and various other sources of information.

## West Milford Church of Christ Through the Years:

In 1890, this area was still a horse and wagon society. Even short trips to Hicksville or Edgerton would have been an all-day trip on good days and practically impossible on bad ones. Despite the time required, some people made trips across the St. Joseph River to worship at Newville.

But the early settlers of Milford Township wanted a closer place of worship. They came together with an idea to build a new church. They began meeting together in a hall near the Van Immons District #5 Schoolhouse.



As time passed, it became apparent that there were insurmountable practical and doctrinal differences among the people. At first, they agreed to meet on alternate Sundays. Sadly, this plan became untenable, and part of the group moved over one mile south and first met in the Thompson Schoolhouse. They began making plans to construct a new church building.

In April 1891, the church met and elected their first officers. They were as follows: J. A. Hootman was selected to serve as minister and as an elder alongside Christopher Hootman. Albert Gerry, H.C. Hootman, and Jefferson Green were set aside as deacons. A building committee was also selected: Simon Shank, Jacob Christoffle, J.A. Hootman, and G.G. Wilson.

John and Mary Hootman graciously donated ground from the northwest corner of their farm for the new church building. More than a century later, the building still occupies this land. The church was built and dedicated to the glory of God on November 20, 1892. Bro. J.W. Taylor and J.A. Hootman, the local minister, led in this service. The people chose to call the church "West Milford Chapel."

One month later, on December 28, 1892, the congregation elected her first officers. J.A. Hootman and George G. Wilson were chosen as elders. Jacob Christoffle, Jefferson Green, Hiram Hootman, Paul B. Hootman, and E.D. Summers were selected as deacons. Simon Shank, Henry Amaden, Peter Countryman, Jacob Christoffle, and Jefferson Green were set aside as trustees. Mrs. Rose Wilson was appointed the first Sunday School superintendent.

And so, after only two years, this young congregation of 25 charter members had built a building, chosen able leaders, and had grown to grown to almost 100 (94 names were listed in the register).

Many people who have achieved much in life got a solid start learning about God on the "Little Red Chars" at this country church. In fact, the church still uses some of them! More than 600 names have been found in the church's old roll books. But only God knows the names of all the faithful ones who have worshipped here over the years and have now gone on their reward in heaven. Bro. Lloyd Turnbull, the longtime faithful minister of West Milford, often referred to them as those whose names are written in the "Lamb's Book of Life."



### Time Line of Interest:

Following is a brief summary of events through the years at West Milford:

- 1890** Residents of the area desire to have church building.
- 1892** Local church chooses first minister, Bro. J.A. Hootman.
- 1892** First building erected and dedicated.
- 1905** Church needs repairs. People meet in Thompson School during the renovation.
- 1910** About this time the church building was turned half way around. An annex was added on the east side. This made room for a baptistry and a Sunday School room. Dedicated on October 2, 1910. Pledges covered total cost for this.
- 1929** Delco lighting system installed. Cost: \$300.
- 1930's** The National Union Fraternity built a lodge hall about one mile north of the church. The fraternity gave the hall to The Gleaners organization. This was a rural organization, and at that time all the Gleaners except one belonged to the West Milford Church. The hall was moved to the church property on December 8, 1934. For many years, it was used like a church basement and was known as The Church Hall. This hall was used until a basement was built in 1955. The hall was sold and moved again.
- 1939** A wonderful event happened on July 16, 1939. 14 people wanted to be baptized. At the time, the church did not have a regular minister. Arrangements were made with Bro. Harold Dunson who was the minister at Garrett. Almost the whole church traveled to Lake James Christian Camp, and Bro. Dunson baptized this wonderful group of new believers on a glorious Sunday afternoon.

- 1951** Utility room and heating plant completed. Prior to this, two stoves in the front corners of auditorium provided warmth in winter.
- 1952** New electric light fixtures were installed, and curtains were hung on the stage. New communion service and offering plates purchased.
- 1955** A big year at West Milford. After much discussion, a basement was dug, and the church was placed on it. An entrance on south side was constructed. A nursery was added. A baptistry was built in the northeast corner where it remains to this. Prior to this time, the baptistry was in the floor under the stage.
- 1960** The tile floor was laid in the auditorium by the men of the church.
- 1962** The carpeting on stage and aisles was installed.
- 1963** Interior restrooms added.
- 1965** Pews were resurfaced with vinyl covering and painted white. Old varnished pews had caused problems especially in hot weather.
- 1971** Piano purchased.
- 1975** Organ purchased.
- 1988** Vinyl siding placed on exterior of church building.
- 1989** Church was re-roofed, and bell was removed from belfry and placed on ground level on south side of building.
- 1999** Much beloved, faithful minister for 42 years (1957-1999) Bro. Lloyd Turnbull retires.
- 2005** New roof, thanks to a generous, anonymous gift.
- 2017** New carpeting through entire church.



### Significant Changes over the Years:

Though the church still meets at the same location, there have been significant changes. One notable change involves the church name. Originally, the church was dedicated as the “West Milford Chapel.” Over the years, it became known as the “West Milford Church of Christ,” the name by which it is known today.



Over the years, the shape of the church-yard has also undergone several changes. As noted above, John and Mary Hootman donated the original plot of land for the church. In 1910, John McHendershot generously made more land available. Then in 1955, more land was secured; and in 2002, an additional section was purchased. Altogether, the church property is now 1.111 acres. At first, the property was shaped like a big “T”. Today, the church property has 220 feet road frontage, and is 190 feet deep.

We thank God for those who donated or sold us property, for those who led the church in the necessary acquisition, and for the members who donated finances over the years to make this growth possible.

## Ministers at West Milford Church:

Altogether, 28 ministers have served West Milford Church. Some served only a short time, others longer. By far, the longest-serving minister was Bro. Lloyd Turnbull, 1957-1999.

Following is a list of those who served as minister of the church. This list has been compiled from various sources: old church record books, handwritten notes of church clerks, newspaper articles, and word of mouth.

NOTE: The following list indicates when minister *began*; during many of the years, the church did not have a resident minister.

1892	J.A. Hootman	1941	Charles Phipps
1898	Charles Oakley	1943	Russell Handy
1907	S. Metzler	1945	J. Franklin Baxter
1908	Leon H. Couch	1947	Thomas Martin
1910	James Hawes	1950	Richard McDole
1914	R.M. Phillips	1955	Everett Reynolds
1917	Bro. Strobridge	1957	Lloyd Turnbull
1918	W.W. Denham	2000	James McPeak
1925	Claude Small	2003	Andrew Filkins
1926	Burl Candler	2005	Lloyd Mealer
1927	J. Evard Smith	2007	Larry Weller
1932	Walter Coburn	2010	Ron Collins
1937	Russell Handy	2012	Dan Grant

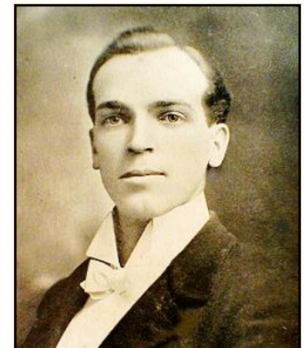
No service dates are recorded for the following who also ministered at West Milford Church:

Fred Thomas  
Bro. Amazon  
Sterling Weis

## Interesting Highlights:

**From 1945 to 1957, Farmer Church of Christ and West Milford shared a minister.** On May 3, 1945, the Farmer Church of Christ and West Milford Church of Christ began a joint ministry by hiring J. Franklin Baxter of Waldron, Michigan. On January 20, 1947, Newville Church of Christ proposed to have a dual ministry with West Milford. This proposition was unanimously rejected by the church board. Later that year on March 30, 1947, Bro. Thomas Martin was called to be the minister. On January 25, 1950, Farmer Church of Christ and West Milford Church of Christ met in joint session to call a new minister. Bro. Richard McDole served these neighboring churches until 1953 when he left to become minister at Metz. The two churches next called Bro. Everett Reynolds of Ligonier, Indiana, as the next minister. Bro. Reynolds served until February 24, 1957. The venture of sharing a minister with the Farmer Church of Christ ended on May 4, 1957, when Bro. Lloyd Turnbull became the minister. He faithfully served for the next 42 years!

**Many notable preachers came to West Milford to preach.** One of these men was Br. Charles Scoville. In the early 1900's, this evangelist was known all over the nation and even in foreign countries. He was perhaps the most effective mass-evangelist among the Churches of Christ and Christian Churches in the last two centuries.



**West Milford Church of Christ has also sent out many "Timothy's."** These include Monroe Hootman, Douglass Serrill, Donald Faust, Owen Emanuel, LaVon Koerner, and others. One important gift to the larger ministry of the Word was Mrs. Kathy (Beerbower) Reese, wife of Gareth Reese. Together, they helped to organize Central Christian College of the Bible in Moberly, Missouri.

## **A Window into the Past:**

In 1955, the current basement was a topic of intense study and even controversy. Committees had worked diligently on the project and had finally come to the board with a bid. The total cost would be \$3,960. Board Secretary Donald Miller wrote the following account of the special congregational meeting on April 4, 1955, called to decide whether the project would move forward or not:

*The special meeting of the entire congregation convened as planned on Monday evening, April 4<sup>th</sup>.*

*The meeting was called to order by the chairman of the board, Clyde Killian. After a song led by Diann Benninghoff, the meeting was turned over to Darla Fusselman to lead devotions. The devotions were ably handled with exhortation to work hard with reading from the account of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem by the children of Israel under Nehemiah and with prayer.*

*After the devotions, portion of all board meeting which had to do with the building program were read that the entire congregation might know of the developments.*

*Then a period for remarks was allowed.*

*After this, papers were passed out on which the pledges for the work were to be written. These pledges were not to have any names on them but were to be known only to God. The pledges were to be payable in one year.*

*After the pledges were collected, they were turned over to the building committee for tabulation. A prize was offered to the person who could guess the closest as to the amount pledged. The prize was to be a free ticket for a coming supper.*

*A blackboard was arranged behind the curtains on the platform and the total of the pledges was to be placed on it.*

*As the announcement came to draw the curtains, there a hushed silence and then a loud applause for the amount written on the board was \$5,490.*

*The Ladies Aid then held a meeting and the board likewise held a meeting during which Ira Beerbower made a motion that we proceed with the work as outlined, which carried.*

*After these meetings, the entire group sang "All Praise Thee, My God." This night we were dismissed by Arthur Blacker.*

*This meeting was one of the high points of the year for it portrayed our faith in each other and faith in our God. It also brought a unified action on the building program which for years had been a controversial issue.*

*Donald Miller, Board*

*Secretary*

## **Conclusion:**

More than 60 years later, and this spirit continues at West Milford. In this age, when so many wonderful country churches are closing, West Milford continues to be a vital ministry. May God always find the church as faithful as it was in the past!

Through the years so many people have been so faithful to the work at West Milford, offering time, love, sacrifice, and care. They are truly the ones that make the expression come alive at West Milford Church of Christ: "Man, that is a church that is really going to town!"

To God be the glory!