

Lanesfield School (1869, altered 1904)

18745 South Dillie Road – Edgerton

National Register of Historic Places

The image of the solitary one-room country school stirs feelings of whimsy and nostalgia for many people. It is a symbol of the pioneer spirit, of childhood mischief, and of moral lessons. For rural communities, the one-room schoolhouse was often the community center where families met to celebrate holidays, hold elections, and host pie suppers or ice cream socials. At one time, Johnson County had approximately one hundred one-room schools. Many of those buildings no longer exist, through closures or demolition. Lanesfield School is one of the few remaining one-room schools in Johnson County.

Towns and rural areas across Kansas saw an early need for public education for their local children. It was typical for young communities to build a temporary school structure before

raising the funds to build a permanent school. Lanesfield, Kansas was no exception. The first school in the community convened in 1863 at a house owned by William Gans. By 1867, eighteen pupils attended class in a log schoolhouse on the Burton Dillie farm. As the town grew, it became clear that a more substantial school was needed to accommodate the community children. In May 1869, nine townsmen met to vote on issuing \$1,000 worth of school bonds at a fixed discount rate. In November 1869, the district paid William Humbert \$200 in exchange for land to build the school.

Lanesfield School was built in a vernacular style, meaning that the schoolhouse is typical of the region and time it was built. The school board did not employ an architect to design the school. A common practice at the time was to use school plans, which had been available since the 1830s. William A. Alcott, a schoolmaster, published his *Essay on the Construction of Schoolhouses* in 1832. Alcott's work suggested new floorplans for schools and suggested improvements such as backs on desk chairs. In some instances, schools were built based on



Students in one-room schools could range in age from kindergarteners to high schoolers. These girls attended Lanesfield School in the mid-1930s. *Johnson County Museum Collection.*

the idea of what a traditional one-room school should look like: one room, rectangular or square, and sporting a cupola on the rooftop.

Local builders used local materials to build vernacular schoolhouses. Sod, wood, and stone were common materials for Kansas schoolhouses. In Lanesfield's case, builders used native fieldstone with natural texture for the exterior. The school was rectangular in shape with a single entrance on the south wall.

The Lanesfield School was a welcome addition to the community. In the spring of 1870, sixty-nine pupils enrolled at Lanesfield. The daily average attendance was fifty-one students. However, Lanesfield School's life as a town school was short lived. In 1870, the town of Lanesfield moved two miles to the west to be closer to the newly constructed depot along the Santa Fe Railroad. The stone school's solid construction did not lend itself to easy removal. As the town disappeared, Lanesfield School made the transformation to a rural school.

Lanesfield experienced a number of changes and modifications over the years to meet the needs of the teachers and students. In 1883, the school board approved an anteroom to be added to the south end of the schoolhouse. The anteroom included two interior bays and two doors that opened into the classroom. A bell cupola was installed on the roof in the early 1900s.



The interior of Lanesfield School in the mid-1980s. *Photograph courtesy of Sun Publications.*

Further changes to the structure occurred because of an event in 1903. In May of that year, lightning struck the schoolhouse and ignited a fire. No reliable accounts of the damage exist, but much can be ascertained from the school's treasurer's reports. It shows a total expenditure of \$866.26 for labor, building materials, and school supplies in late 1903 and early 1904. The 1869 cost of building the school was \$1,000, so to build an entirely new school thirty-four years later would have undoubtedly been more costly. Thus, the relatively small cost suggests that the school was not completely destroyed in the fire.

Exterior changes continued to be made well into the 1900s. Sometime between 1910 and 1915, a concrete slab was constructed as a porch at the doorway. In the 1920s, a gable roof was built over the porch.

As the twentieth century progressed, the landscape of Johnson County changed. Towns and cities expanded and, one by one, one-room schools began to close their doors. A growing number of families moved to town and larger town schools could serve the needs of the rural community. By the late 1950s, enrollment at Lanesfield began to decline. Schools in Gardner and Edgerton attracted more and more rural school children. In 1963, the Kansas state legislature passed the School District Unification Act with the intent of reducing the unmanageable number of school districts in operation. This act effectively closed a large number of one-room schools in Johnson County and across Kansas. Lanesfield merged with District 81 in Edgerton and closed its doors after 93 years of operation.

The fate of closed one-room schools was uncertain. Some found new life as converted homes. Some became storage for grain or animals on nearby farms. Others deteriorated and were torn down.

Lanesfield School was fortunate to be preserved soon after it closed. The McCamish Township Board, made up of Robert McIntyre, Clarence Gillespie, and Philip Lefmen, contacted the Edgerton School District about saving the school for its historic value. The district agreed to sell the school to Johnson County for one dollar. The community quickly became involved. The Dizzy Doers Extension club made preliminary plans for the school's transformation into a museum. In 1966, the 125-member Lanesfield School Historical Society formed with the purpose of opening the Lanesfield School Museum. After collecting donations of items relating to the school and early Johnson County, the Lanesfield School opened as a museum in 1967. Over the next twenty years, Lanesfield School operated as a museum.

By 1987, there was a general feeling among county officials that Johnson County history needed a boost. They hired professional museum staff to undertake the tasks of reviving the county-owned museums. One of the first projects to be undertaken was the restoration of Lanesfield School. The 118 year-old building was falling apart and needed structural repair.

In March 1987, the Board of County Commissioner (BOCC) approved funds for the repair of Lanesfield School. Rather than deciding to restore the building to its 1869 appearance, the Museum staff chose the year 1904. The 1903 fire in the school and its subsequent reconstruction provided the basis for the decision. An interpretive center would be built on the site and would house exhibits and public restrooms.

On October 13, 1988, the Lanesfield School was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. After painstaking restoration, Lanesfield School Historic Site opened its doors once again on April 1, 1989. 133 years after its construction, Lanesfield School continues to serve the needs of area schoolchildren. Approximately 3,000 schoolchildren visit Lanesfield each year to experience a 1904 school day in our Living History program for fourth and fifth graders.

The preservation of Lanesfield School is ongoing. Just as the school evolved from 1869 to 1963, it continues to do the same today. In the years since its restoration, Lanesfield School has been a place where memories have been made and shared. The continuous preservation and upkeep of Lanesfield School Historic Site is needed to make new memories for years to come.

**Excerpted from the Johnson County Museum's ALBUM newsletter, Vol. XV #2, Spring 2002. www.jocomuseum.org*

