



Iron County Historical Society Newsletter

Visit Us At: IronCountyHistory.org

Spring
2026



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Museum Address

Arcadia Valley Chamber of
Commerce Visitor's Center
Arcadia, MO

April Meeting Information

2 p.m., Sunday, April 19, 2026, at the First Presbyterian Church of Ironton,
Corner of Reynolds & Knob Streets in Ironton

Program: History of Mining at Pilot Knob presented by David Dillard

Refreshments Provided By: Wilma Cofer and Nancy Komar

April's Program: History of Mining at Pilot Knob



Lithograph of Pilot Knob from 2
August 1873 edition of Frank
Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

Iron County takes its very name from the resource that shaped its identity. The story of mining at Pilot Knob is inseparable from the story of the county itself. From its earliest days, iron drawn from both the mountain's surface and its deep underground veins fueled the region's economic growth. Its impact stretched far beyond the miners and the workers who smelted and forged the ore. The charcoal-fired furnaces demanded enormous quantities of wood,

creating steady work for colliers and woodcutters. Those workers needed food, so farmers arrived. Merchants followed to supply the growing population, and soon towns took root. To transport the smelted iron, the longest plank road in United States history was constructed to connect Iron Mountain and Pilot Knob with Ste Genevieve on the Mississippi River. That same industrial momentum brought the railroad to Pilot Knob in April 1858, further transforming the region.

Before our Annual Meeting begins, we invite you to join local author and historian, David Dillard, for an engaging overview of this remarkable history. He will trace the story from iron deposits formed hundreds of millions of years ago to the beginning of large-scale mining on Pilot Knob Mountain with the incorporation of the Missouri Iron Company in December 1836. Mr. Dillard will explore the cycles of boom and bust that defined mining there from the 1830s through the 1920s. And the story doesn't end there. Long after the early operations ceased, mining returned to Pilot Knob in 1968 when the Pilot Knob Pellet Company began underground extraction and operated an iron-ore pelletizing plant until 1980.

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IT'S APRIL, HAVE YOU PAID YOUR DUES?

Preserving & Sharing Iron County's Rich History Since 1974

Iron County Historical Society

The Iron County Historical Society is a registered 501 (c)(3) charitable organization.

Contributions can be made at our museum or mailed to the Iron County Historical Society at P.O. Box 183, Ironton, MO 63650. THANK YOU!

President's Message: Jeremy Medley

Hello everyone! I hope all our members are having a good spring so far. With this really warm start to spring, which has felt more like summer for the most part, I'd like to send out my yearly reminder for spring cleaning. While doing your spring cleaning and you come across something that might be of interest to discuss at a historical society meeting, please feel free to bring it any time we have a quarterly meeting. You don't have to wait until the Members' Show n Tell event each January. If you're like me and wait too long, you might misplace the item until it's your next spring cleaning.

I hope everyone reading this can make it to our next meeting on Sunday 4-19. We'll have our annual officer elections and David Dillard is returning with a new program on the history of iron mining in Pilot Knob.

If you have any interest in an open officer or board position, just let me know. Don't be shy, we really need to have more people involved to ensure the historical society is able to function for years and decades still to come. Same goes for the museum and having volunteers step up to fill some of the void left by a few of our very active members that have passed away.

If you have any questions, have interest in getting more involved or would like to present and program at a future meeting, you can email me at: Medleyj@yahoo.com.



Joanie Acquisto (1939 – 2026) Memorial

It's with a sense of great sadness that we share the news of the passing of Joanie Acquisto on March 21, 2026. Besides being a dedicated, long-time volunteer at the historical society's museum, Joanie was simply one of the nicest people you could ever have the good fortune to meet. Quoting one of the remembrances posted after her passing, Joanie had, "A great big loving heart, sense of humor, and there was no stranger to her. Everyone fell in love with her." That was Joanie.

Joan F. Acquisto nee Wilkes was born in St. Louis, Missouri on December 2, 1939. She was the daughter of Charles B. Wilkes and Frances R. (Vondera) Wilkes. She was preceded in death by her parents and her husband, Vincent M. Acquisto, and she is survived by many loving family members and friends. Joanie spent her summers at her home outside of Ironton and her winters at her home in St. Louis. She was an active parishioner of Ste. Marie du Lac Parish in Ironton and St. Gabriel the Archangel in St. Louis.

May her generous spirit, her warmth, and the kindness she shared so freely continue to shine in the lives of all who were blessed to know her. Godspeed Joanie.

A New Newsletter for a New Time: Embracing the Digital Age by John Abney

The winds of change are blowing through the Iron County Historical Society. As we start a new membership year, this will be the Society's last printed / mailed newsletter. We are excited to announce a significant and necessary evolution in how we communicate with our valued members and the broader community: we are officially transitioning our newsletter from a beloved, but time-consuming and costly, printed and mailed format to a dynamic, accessible, and timely **online publication** beginning with the **Summer 2026 edition**.

From Print to Pixels: Our Digital Transition

Since the Society's creation in 1974, the arrival of our paper newsletter in your mailbox was a welcome connection point. However, the reality of ever-increasing postage costs—have made us reevaluate this method of sharing the newsletter with our members.

This change will usher in several key improvements:

- **Timeliness:** News and event reminders will reach you *faster*. No more waiting on the mail for the next issue of your newsletter.
- **Cost-Effectiveness:** By eliminating printing and mailing expenses, we can dedicate more of your membership dues directly to preserving and sharing our local history. Just a reminder, *we have not* raised our dues in 25 years, yet a first-class stamp that cost 34 cents in 2001 (the last year we raised our membership dues) now costs 78 cents. Recent news stories reported this may soon rise from 78 cents to close to one dollar.
- **Quality:** By going online, the newsletter will appear in full color instead of black and white associated with the printed copies. We will also no longer have to worry about print quality issues that sometimes raises its ugly head during the printing process.
- **Accessibility:** The online format means you can read the newsletter on any device, anytime, anywhere. We understand that some members will miss the physical copy, and we commit to making the online version easy to access and print from home for those who prefer a paper record. To this end, the current edition of the newsletter will be available in the public area of our new website (see the accompanying article for more details). You will not have to log in to view it (or download it or print it). Archived copies of previous newsletters will remain in the Members Only area of the website as a member benefit. **If you absolutely require a printed copy of the newsletter and CANNOT print your own, email me at webmaster@ironcountyhistory.org or call / text me at (573) 330-8098.**

Bringing Our History Home: Expanded Coverage for Non-Local Members

One of the most exciting aspects of our digital move is the ability to better serve our members who live outside of the local area and can't attend our meetings. You are an essential part of our society, and we recognize the challenge you face in staying connected to our day-to-day activities.

Expect these upcoming format changes designed just for you:

- **Meeting Minute Highlights:** We will include recaps of our quarterly meetings, including membership and financial information as well as the topics under discussion at the meetings.

- **Behind-the-Scenes Access:** Look for features on new acquisitions, research in progress, and the work being done to preserve our collection—giving you a virtual look into your historical society’s museum and its archives.

Membership Year 2027 and Beyond

One of the things that will be discussed at our Annual Meeting on April 19th is a proposed increase in dues for those that wish to keep receiving a printed copy of the newsletter. Final details will be published in our Summer 2026 Newsletter, but as it stands now, the proposal that has been made is to charge an extra \$5.00 per year, **beginning with the 2027-28 membership year**, for anyone wanting a printed copy of the newsletter. Those satisfied with viewing the newsletter online would see no dues increase under the proposal that was brought to the floor at our January meeting. The \$5.00 charge would also be applicable to Lifetime members wanting a printed copy of the newsletter.

Other than the operating costs associated with the operation of the museum, currently, our second highest expenditure is the printing and mailing of the newsletter. Members are again reminded that our dues have not increased since 2001, that’s now 25 years and counting!

Summing it All Up

The **Iron County Historical Society** is moving forward, and we invite you to join us on this new, exciting journey. ***Don’t forget that your annual dues are now due and please include your email address with your renewal.*** The inaugural edition of digital newsletter will be available in early July. Those with email addresses on file will be notified by email when it is available. For everyone else, please consider following our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/IronCountyHistoricalSocietyMO>) where I will also post about the availability of the newsletter. **Again, if you absolutely require a printed copy of the newsletter and CANNOT print your own, email me at webmaster@ironcountyhistory.org or call / text me at (573) 330-8098.**

Keep an eye on your inbox for the inaugural digital edition in early July!

A New Website for a New Day by John Abney

Fingers crossed, by the time that you receive this newsletter, our new “responsive” website will either be nearly ready to go live or will be up and running. One of the things that I hate about these so-called “responsive” websites is endless scrolling to get from the top of a webpage to its bottom. With the exception of our new homepage, I promise you won’t have to do this with the new website (www.ironcountyhistory.com).

There are going to be many of you out there that will question why we did this at all. In the end, we didn’t have a choice, it was either move to a responsive website or go dark (meaning that we wouldn’t have a website at all). Now, you all know that I have been trying to shed my webmaster role for years (and am still looking for a volunteer), but I couldn’t just let the website go away.

It was with some degree of reluctance and skepticism that I took on the task of building the new website when I started the project back this past January. I tried to keep everyone updated using the current website’s Blog page. There you will find my early rants and frustrations with the new format.

I'm not going to say that I changed my mind, but as time went on, I became more accepting of the new format. I tried to keep it simple, but with a responsive format there are some major differences. Because it is a responsive format, the new website will fit whatever type of screen you choose to access it, e.g., PC, laptop, tablet or phone.

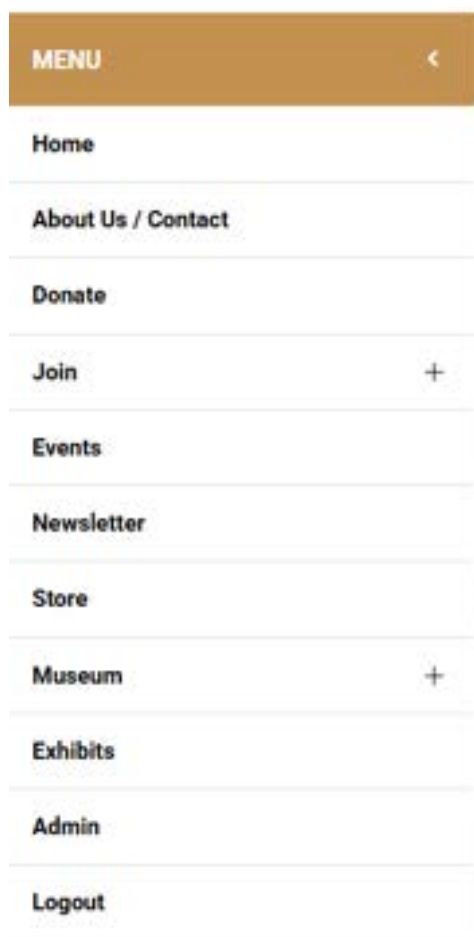
Now, instead of one menu on your homepage you will find two. At top of the homepage is our Header Menu. On a PC, laptop, or tablet it will look like this:

[Home](#) [About Us / Contact](#) [Donate](#) [Join](#) [Events](#) [Newsletter](#) [Store](#) [Museum](#) [Exhibits](#) [Admin](#) [Logout](#)

On a smartphone, the Header Menu will be replaced with the Hamburger symbol shown below.



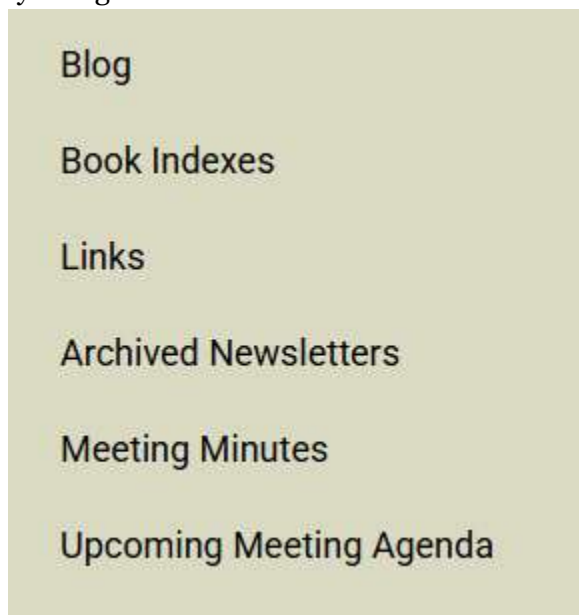
When you click on the symbol, the Header Menu will appear as vertical list of choices:



One of the problems with a responsive website is that, with your Header Menu appearing across the top of your homepage on larger screens, you can only have so many items in that menu before you run out of room.

To fix that problem, responsive websites also use a Footer Menu at the bottom of the webpage. The one shown below contains all the menu items that you will see when you log in to the website.

You will be able to access the Society's current newsletter without logging in from the Header Menu. You will also be able to access the Blog, Book Indexes (for some of the books sold in our Store and the Links area without the need to log in. Archived newsletters along with meeting minutes and upcoming meeting agendas will require you to log in.



The best way to get comfortable with the new website is by using it. Keep an eye on the Blog where I will be making more posts about the website. Of course, if you have any questions or problems you can email me at askus@ironcountyhistory.org and I will do my best to assist you.

America's 250 Years: The Beautiful, Messy Truth by John Abney

As we approach America's 250th birthday in July of this year, we're going to see a lot of flags, fireworks, and feel-good montages. And while there is so much to celebrate, there's a growing temptation to tell a "sanitized" version of our story—one that smooths over the rough edges, skips the dark chapters, and presents our history as a flawless upward climb.

But here's the thing: Sanitizing our history isn't an act of patriotism; it's a betrayal of the American spirit. The real "Promise of America" isn't found in a pretend perfection. It's found in the friction. It's found in the radical, uncomfortable, and often painful process of trying to live up to the words: "All men are created equal."

Why the "Unfiltered" Story Matters:

- * Growth Requires Honesty: You can't measure how far you've come if you lie about where you started. Our progress on civil rights, labor laws, and equality only looks like the miracle it is when you acknowledge the immense systemic barriers we had to break through.
- * The Founders Weren't Statues: They were brilliant, flawed, visionary, and deeply complicated human beings. When we "deify" them, we actually lose the most important lesson: that ordinary, imperfect people can spark extraordinary change.
- * Respect for the Struggle: To ignore the "messy" parts of our history is to erase the sacrifices of those who fought, bled, and died to make the country better. You can't celebrate the victory without acknowledging the battlefield.

The "Spirit of 1776" is a Verb, Not a Noun:

The true American spirit isn't a finished product sitting in a museum; it's the constant, restless work of "forming a more perfect union." That word "more" is doing a lot of heavy lifting. It implies that we aren't there yet. It implies we have work to do.

If we only teach a version of history that makes us feel comfortable, we lose the tools we need to fix the problems of today. True love for a country—like true love for a person—means seeing them for exactly who they are, scars and all, and choosing to work for their best version anyway.

Let's head into our 250th year with our eyes wide open. Let's celebrate our triumphs, own our failures, and honor the grit it takes to keep this experiment going. That's the true strength of our nation.

Playing our Role:

Every historical society local, county, state, etc., has a role to play by objectively presenting the history associated with their community. Our history is a complex topic made up of multiple levels and viewpoints all coming together to create our story. When we present that story with honesty and balance, we help our communities understand not only *what* happened, but *why* it mattered and *how* it shaped the people and places we know today. That responsibility includes acknowledging achievements and hardships, celebrating progress while also confronting difficult truths, and ensuring that no single perspective overshadows the broader historical record.

The Life of Dr. George William Gay by John Abney

Editor's Note: For those that don't know or may have forgotten, I write a weekly column for the historical society's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/IronCountyHistoricalSocietyMO>) called, "Where is it Wednesday". I never know from week to week what I will use in the column, it may be about a person, place or thing, but in all cases it's about our shared history. If you have never been to our Facebook page, I would invite you to give it a look. The article below appeared in the 7 January 2026 edition of Where is it Wednesday.

This week's Where is it Wednesday looks back on the life of Dr. George W. Gay (1896 – 1964). To say that Dr. Gay led a life of service to his community and nation would be an understatement and this week's column will tell the story of an American who clearly put service before self. One could argue that he was following in the footsteps of his father, Dr. Roger William Gay who, along with St. Louis businessman and Arcadia Valley resident, A. B. Pierce, were instrumental in establishing a hospital in Ironton.



Left: Dr. Roger W. Gay (1873 – 1930), father of Dr. George W. Gay (1896 – 1964, pictured at the right when he was a college student.



George Gay grew up in Ironton, attending grade school there. From an article published in the Iron County Register after his death in 1964, we pick up the rest of this remarkable story:

[He] Graduated from university high school in Columbia MO, 1914, and with "Sergeant" of the Senior Class. Attended University of Missouri 1914 - 1917. Volunteered for the United States Army 1917. Commissioned Second Lieutenant, Cavalry. Rose to rank of Captain. Was said to be the youngest captain on the roster of United States Army. [He] Was a machine gunner in MacArthur's "Rainbow Division". Major battles in which he participated included: the Argonne Forest, Chateau Thierry and Belleau Wood. Was twice wounded in action - once by shrapnel and once bayoneted in trenches. [He] Was decorated with the Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster.

[He] Return[ed] to finish one year of medical school at the University of Missouri and three years of medical school at Washington University. [He] graduated in 1926. Served an internship in surgery under Dr. Everts Graham, Barnes Hospital in Saint Louis. [He] Served a two-year fellowship at the Cleveland Clinic where he served as chief resident physician 1928-1929. [He] Was at the Cleveland Clinic during the tragic fire of 1929, at which time he was injured in helping with rescue operations. Served as Chief Resident Physician at the Gallagher municipal hospital in Washington DC, 1929 - 1930.

[He] Return[ed] to Ironton upon the death of his father, Doctor Roger William Gay in 1930. He was married in 1928 to Eugenia Smith of Saint Louis. [He] sold the hospital which his father founded to the Sisters of



Grand Reopening of St. Mary's of the Ozarks Hospital in 1934. Photo from the St. Louis Post Dispatch newspaper.

Saint Mary's for the sum of \$1.00. {He} Served as Chief of Staff of Saint Mary's of the Ozarks Hospital from the time of the death of his father thereafter [until his death in 1964]. [He was] Appointed to the Missouri State Board of Health in 1939.

With the advent of World War II, he again volunteered for active duty and was commissioned a Major in the Medical Corps in 1942. With Eliot Cutler and Dwight Harkin, he formed the First Auxiliary Surgical Unit. Participated in the Normandy invasion and was with the Liberation Forces through France, Belgium and Germany. Was decorated with the

French Croix deGuerre and the Belgium Croix deGuerre.

[He] Received a personal Presidential Citation from President Roosevelt. Upon returning to civilian life, Dr. Gay served the people of southeast Missouri as surgeon and general physician until the time of his death on September 1, 1964, he was buried with military honors.

After his death his contribution to the community was summed up as follows, “Dr. George William Gay, probably the most respected and revered man in Iron County, died on September 1 after more than three decades of service to the sick, wounded and troubled of his native county. He gave freely of his time and skill to thousands over the years. But his most lasting gift was the St. Mary’s Hospital in Ironton.”



Dr. George W. Gay (1896 - 1964) in later life.

Dr. George William Gay led a life of quiet strength and total devotion—a gift shared equally between the people he loved and the country he defended. He was born 130 years ago this week on January 9, 1896. If you would like to learn more about Dr. George Gay and his ancestors, I invite you to watch a program that I presented at a meeting of the historical society in 2020. Here’s the link to that program: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=do4QHusZPY&t=34s>.

Editor’s Note: After the post was made, numerous comments were received recounting their recollections and encounters with Dr. George Gay. From being delivered by Dr. Gay to being treated by him. All were positive. Among the comments was one by historical society member, Ed Moses, who shed even more light on Dr. Gay’s life and experiences in World War II. Part of that comment is shared here:

My dad said he (Dr. Gay) was in a glider at the Normandy invasion. When it landed the stakes the Germans put in the ground as a defense damaged the glider and injured Dr. Gay's leg. Dad told me he operated on the wounded for days on crutches and taking pain medicine. He also told me the IRS treated him unfairly, so Dr. Gay from that point on had no receptionist or nurse. A person would sit in the office and Dr. Gay would open the door and ask, who was next. There was a cigar box on the desk if you wanted to pay something but not required. In Dr. Gay's will it was said that he willed the IRS agent a bar of soap and a roll of toilet paper. Dad also told me doctors in St. Louis would call him and he performed (advised) surgeries over the phone....

From the Collection



Lester Keathley Rock & Mineral Collection

By John Abney

When our museum opened in 1984, one of the very first donations was the remarkable rock and mineral collection donated by Miss Lester Keathley. Today, her gift remains one of the true cornerstones of the museum and continues to be among our most popular exhibits. While we can't display every specimen here, the full collection is available for viewing at the museum and will eventually be added to the growing set of online exhibits on our new website. A selection of highlights appears below, followed by a brief biography of Lester Keathley.



Left to Right: Prismatic Calcite with Galena, Dolomite & Sphalerite; Actinolite with Pink Dolomite & Smokey Quartz; Quartz & Hematite; and Calcite Crystals on Marcasite.

Lester Keathley was born on 1 September 1901 in Des Arc, Missouri and was the sixth of thirteen children of William Tyler and Martha Evaline [Lewis] Keathley. She attended Ironton Public Schools and graduated in 1921. Pursuing a career in education, she received her AA Degree from Stephens College in 1921, her bachelor's degree from the University of Missouri in 1928, and her master's degree from the University of Missouri in 1931.



Lester Keathley

She taught at the Cove School in Iron County during the 1921-22 school year. She then taught at the Ironton School during the 1923-24 school year and the Arcadia School from 1925 to 1927. She taught at the Sikeston School during the 1929-30 school year and then taught in the Webster Groves School from 1930 – 1966. An amazing career as a teacher spanning over 40 years and touching the lives of many, many students.

Shortly after her death, her brother, Clarence Keathley, wrote of her, "Lester was one of a kind! She lived a full life with wide experience and a consuming interest in all phases of life. Being a member of a large family, she was the "pivotal" point and a magnet to all." He also noted that while teaching in the St. Louis suburb of Webster Groves, that Lester would travel home by train to Ironton on weekends to take care of her parents and sister. She moved back to Ironton after her retirement and after her parents died, she and her sister moved to a house on Reynolds Street in Ironton. Lester remained active in the First Baptist Church in Ironton and was involved in a number of civil organizations. She moved to the Baptist Home on 13 March 1984 and remained there until her death on 19 February 1988. She was buried in the Arcadia Valley Memorial Park Cemetery in Ironton.

Iron County Historical Society
Membership Application



Date _____ New _____ Renewal _____

Name _____ Spouse _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Phone _____ Email _____

Signature _____ Received by _____

Membership Year begins on April 1st of one year and ends on March 31st of the following year.

Please complete the form and return with membership dues of \$10.00 to: Iron County Historical Society, P.O. Box 183, Ironton, MO 63650. For information please call (573) 546-3513 and leave a message.

Alternatively, you can also renew your membership online by clicking on the "Join / Renew" tab at

www.ironcountyhistory.org