

## 2018 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

### Old Nichols Library

- **Location:** 110 S. Washington St., Naperville, DuPage County
- **Built:** 1898
- **Architect:** M.E. Bell
- **Current owner:** Developer owned
- **Historic significance:** First public library in Naperville, locally landmarked, and the rusticated limestone used to construct the building was quarried locally in Naperville.
- **Why it is endangered:** The building faces demolition to make way for new development.



Credit: Charlie Wilkins

This building, constructed in 1898, was the first public library in west suburban Naperville and represents a period during which the democratization of knowledge was at the forefront of philanthropic efforts nationwide. While a dedicated advocacy group in Naperville succeeded in getting the property locally landmarked, its current owner is working to redevelop the site.

Notable resident, James Lawrence Nichols I, a successful author and professor, bequeathed \$10,000 to the City Of Naperville for the express purpose of purchasing land and constructing a building that, once erected, “must be [perpetually used as a free public library.](#)”

A native of Coburg, Germany, Nichols came to America in 1857 at the age of 6. Two years later, when he was just 8, Nichols’ mother died and his stepfather abandoned him. Despite his misfortunes, Nichols was committed to improving his circumstances through self-education. After years of independent study, Nichols was finally admitted to North-Western College (now North Central College), where he would graduate with honors in 1880. During his time in school, he had compiled a resource guide of business and legal information, which he later published. *The Business Guide* emphasized personal independence, self-determination and above all, the value of education. The book was a major success, selling over four million copies worldwide.



Credit: Barb Hower

Nichols final wish was not only a testament to his belief in education, but also was an example of Gilded Age Philanthropy. M.E. Bell, an architect known nationally for his civic buildings, was selected for the commission. Like many of his other buildings, Bell employed the Richardsonian Romanesque style for the Nichols Library. Such a style was often used for civic institutions, as its use of heavy masonry suggested permanence and stability. Of note is that the building's rusticated limestone was quarried locally in Naperville.

For the last 20 years, the Library functioned as a church, but was purchased in 2017 by a developer looking to build a large-scale, mixed-use development on the site. When the City of Naperville sold the library to the church in 1996, a covenant was created that mandated the façade and vestibule be preserved.

In early 2016 the Old Nichols Library was purchased by a development company, and in September 2017, the building was designated a local landmark through the efforts of a local advocacy organization. The developer unveiled a design proposal in May 2016 would incorporate the library's primary façade, but would demolish the remainder of the historic building. A certificate of appropriateness was granted in January 2018 for the demolition of a 1962 addition and the east wall of the original library. The developer has suggested that other options might be entertained, but has been less than willing to sit down with interested parties.

### What you can do:

- If you are a Naperville resident, please thank the [City Council](#) and the [Historic Preservation Commission](#) for their work in helping preserve Old Nichols Library and encourage them to push for a redevelopment that will reuse the entire building and not allow dismantling, façadisms, or relocation.
- If you would like to support this effort, join <https://www.facebook.com/NicholsHistory/>

### Additional Links:

- "Naperville group seeks solutions before partial teardown of old library," *Daily Herald*, March 9, 2018:  
<http://www.dailyherald.com/news/20180309/naperville-group-seeking-solutions-before-partial-teardown-of-old-library>

- “Preservationists show heart for Naperville’s old Nichols Library,” *Daily Herald*, April 21, 2018:  
<http://www.dailyherald.com/news/20180421/preservationists-show-heart-for-napervilles-old-nichols-library>
- To learn more about the library and the advocacy efforts taking place, visit the Save Old Nichols group’s website:  
<https://justsino.com/nicholslibrary/>
- To stay up to date on the most recent news regarding Old Nichols Library, visit the Save Old Nichols Facebook page:  
<https://www.facebook.com/NicholsHistory/>