

2018 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

State Fairgrounds

Springfield and Du Quoin, Sangamon and Perry Counties

State fairs have played a pivotal role, not only in our nation's history, but also in the history of Illinois. Illinois is unique in that it has two state fairs, [one in Springfield and the other in Du Quoin](#). Lack of funding for capital projects has created a substantial maintenance backlog for both fairgrounds, resulting in building closures and emergency repairs. As Illinois commemorates its bicentennial year, both a capital bill and private fundraising are needed to save the fairgrounds as places where we gather to celebrate the history and industry of Illinois.

Illinois State Fairgrounds

- **Location:** Springfield, Sangamon County
- **Built:** Late 19th and early 20th centuries
- **Architect:** Several, including Reeves & Baillie, Loebel & Schlossman
- **Current owner:** State of Illinois
- **Historic significance:** The fairgrounds and buildings located on site host thousands of visitors each year to celebrate Illinois' agriculture and history.
- **Why it is endangered:** Deferred maintenance due to lack of state funding has impacted many of the buildings on site. More than a dozen alone need new roofs.



Coliseum Building. Credit: Landmarks Illinois

The Illinois State Fair was founded in the mid-19th century to help promote and improve agricultural education in the state. The Industrial Revolution changed the scale and speed of agricultural production, initiating the shift from small substantive farming practices to highly productive endeavors that contributed to the commercial market.

The agricultural fair was one medium through which the changes in farming methods and technologies could be spread. The formation of agricultural societies began in the late 1840s, with Illinois establishing its own in 1853. The society's aim was to educate those farmers who did not have the opportunity to attend one of the newly founded land-grant agricultural schools, such as the Illinois Industrial University (now University of Illinois at Urbana, Champaign).



Barn 13. Credit: Landmarks Illinois

The first fair was held on the Sangamon County Fairgrounds in the fall of 1853. According to Patricia Henry, an Illinois State Fair historian, festivities included exhibitions of the state's finest "yokes of oxen, dairy products, fruit, grain, field crops, garden produce, flowers, needlework, butter, baked goods, wines, artwork and hair wreaths." Farm machinery, household products, and manufactured items were also on display. In its first year, between 15,000 and 20,000 people visited the fair.

Over the next 40 years, the fair traveled around the state until permanently settling in Springfield in 1894. After Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, it was decided that, going forward, the State Fair would no longer be primarily identified with agricultural pursuits. Like the World's Fair, it would promote the interests of a modern, increasingly urban society. This was helped by the site's proximity to railway lines, making it accessible to visitors from all over the state.

The largest building on the Springfield fairgrounds is the Coliseum, which was designed by W. H. Reeves of the Peoria architectural firm Reeves and Baille in 1901. After inspectors deemed the building unsafe for use, it was closed in the fall of 2016. While it is identified as a top priority for repairs, it is estimated that the work will take at least two years and cost several million dollars.

Adjacent to the Coliseum is Barn 13, which in January was identified as needing emergency repairs to stabilize the deteriorating roof structure. Repair costs to the 1909 barn have been added to the growing list of maintenance needs, which includes new roofs for over a dozen structures. The current estimate for maintenance and repairs of the Springfield and Du Quoin state fair sites is \$180 million.

Du Quoin Fairgrounds

- **Location:** Du Quoin, Perry County
- **Built:** 1947
- **Architect:** Unknown
- **Current owner:** State of Illinois
- **Historic significance:** Architecture, yearly celebration of southern Illinois' history, industry and culture
- **Why it is endangered:** The largest and most significant building on site needs roof repairs. However, state funding is limited.

Entertainment, primarily harness horse racing, quickly became an integral part of the State Fair. However, gambling and the corrupt practices associated with it led to stricter regulations by the 1890s. In the pre-WWI era in which larger moral reform movements, such as prohibition, were taking place, laws were enacted to prohibit gambling, including horse racing. By 1911, racing was legal in only six states. While illegal, enforcement of such regulations was not common.

The quasi-public nature of state and county fairs made them targets for crackdowns on gambling activities. As a result, private establishments carried out much of the racing business, filling the gap in the racing market. A 1923 resolution by the Illinois County Fair Association banned gambling at fairs, leading to the establishment of separate fair associations.

While some racing activities were still being conducted in Springfield, a 1942 war-time suspension of racing at the Illinois State Fair allowed the Du Quoin Fair to finally capture the Grand Circuit for harness racing. Over the coming years, Du Quoin was able to attract some of the biggest races in the country. In 1947, W.R. Hayes constructed the current grandstand, a 7,500-seat Art Deco treasure.

In 1957, the Du Quoin State Fairgrounds Racetrack became the new official location of the Hambletonian, sometimes referred to as the “Kentucky Derby of harness racing.” The Hambletonian continued to be held at Du Quoin until the 1980s, when the privately held grounds were acquired by the State of Illinois. Today, the historic grandstand is primarily used for auto racing and concerts during the annual fair in September, but the largest and most significant building at the Du Quoin fair is in need of significant roof repairs.



Du Quoin Grandstand. Credit: Michael Allen

What you can do:

- Donate to the [Illinois Fairgrounds Foundation](#)
- [Contact your legislator](#) to support a capital bill which funds repairs to the State Fairgrounds.

Additional Links:

- Historic Fairgrounds in Illinois, National Register Multiple Property Listing: ([PDF](#))
- “Another Illinois State Fair building needs emergency repairs,” *The State Journal Register*, January 9, 2018:
<http://www.sj-r.com/news/20180109/another-illinois-state-fair-building-needs-emergency-repairs>
- “Rauner maintains ag program funding, adds money for state fair repairs,” *Farm Week Now*, February 15, 2018:
<http://farmweeknow.com/story-rauner-maintains-ag-program-funding-adds-money-state-fair-repairs-3-171794>
- “No easy fix: State Fairgrounds needs \$180 million in repairs,” *Agrinews*, March 19, 2018:
http://www.agrinews-pubs.com/news/no-easy-fix-state-fairgrounds-needs-million-in-repairs/article_ab9b1805-5311-5468-a07d-58f9591e7795.html