

2019 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

Chancery and Piety Hill Properties

QUICK STATS

- **Location:** 1229 N. Court Street (Convent), 1231 N. Court Street (St. Peter School), and 1245 N. Church Street (Chancery Office & Bishop's Residence), Rockford, Winnebago County
- **Built:** 1922-1929
- **Architect:** Wybe J. van der Meer
- **Current owner:** Rockford Diocese
- **Historic significance:** The historic buildings are architecturally significant and sit in a prominent location in the Signal Hill community.
- **Why it is endangered:** The Rockford Diocese vacated the chancery in 2009 and is now seeking to demolish the property despite vocal public opposition. The convent is vacant, and the school is planned for closure by fall of 2019.
- **Take Action:** Reach out to Rockford Aldermen to voice your support for landmark designation of the buildings, and reach out to Bishop Malloy of the Rockford Diocese to urge him to sell the buildings for reuse, rather than demolishing them.



Credit: Don Bissell

BACKGROUND

The Chancery Office and Bishop Residence is an excellent example of Beaux Arts architecture and stands grandly at the crest of a natural rise within Rockford's Signal Hill neighborhood. This gray Indiana limestone building at 1245 N. Church Street serves as the focal point of a campus that also includes the red brick, Renaissance Revival-style buildings the Cathedral of St. Peter School (1231 N. Court Street) and Convent (1229 N. Court Street). The chancery, with its columns, articulated corner quoins, balustrade and mansard roof with circular dormers, among

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other ornamentation, was described by the [Rockford Register Star](#) as “a beautiful building that looks as if it were airlifted from Europe.”

The school was first dedicated in 1922, and construction of the chancery and convent was completed in 1929. All three buildings were designed by Wybe J. van der Meer, the architect behind numerous diocesan buildings. Known as Piety Hill, the campus was reported to be the highest land elevation within the city’s boundaries at the time of construction. Today, they stand as aesthetically and culturally significant structures for their Signal Hill neighbors. The chancery is one of the few Beaux Arts structures remaining in Rockford and is considered to be the most notable by far.



Credit: Landmarks Illinois

CURRENT THREAT

In 2002, the Catholic Diocese of Rockford moved its headquarters to a new office space along Interstate 90, vacating the chancery entirely after the retirement of the then-sitting bishop in 2009. Despite being shuttered for a decade, the chancery’s limestone exterior remained in near-pristine condition until late 2018, when the Diocese began demolition. Despite the lack of permit approval, a private firm hired by the Diocese began removing fixtures—everything

from chandeliers to wrought-iron gates—and placing them for sale on Facebook. For several days following the removal of the more decorative doors and windows, the chancery’s interior was left exposed to the harsh winter weather. Fortunately, the City of Rockford issued a stop-work order to protect the property while the Diocese’s request for a demolition permit was under review, alongside an application for local landmark status for all three buildings submitted by a group of concerned citizens.

Soon after, the Diocese disclosed its plans to close the school at the end of the academic year and raze the chancery, replacing it with additional surface parking. Rockford Mayor Tom McNamara requested that Bishop David Malloy hold off 60-90 days so that city staff could help them find a developer to repurpose the properties. “I don’t think a parking lot is the highest and best use of that space,” McNamara told the [Rockford Register Star](#). “I like seeing older structures

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brought back to life and being productive. I think that's better for our neighborhoods, I think it's better for our tax base and, quite honestly, I think it's better for the church, too." His request for a delay was denied.

In response, the community has mobilized to fight the demolition. Former Rockford Mayor Larry Morrissey started a petition on Change.org that [has gathered over 3,400 signatures](#) in support of landmark status and preservation of the chancery. Local preservation advocates have also organized a grassroots political effort called "Fighting for the Chancery" to save it and the school and convent.

The buildings present wonderful opportunities for reuse and several developers have already expressed their willingness to purchase and rehabilitate the chancery. Only one block away, the historic and long-vacant Garrison School was transformed into market-rate lofts and townhouses and community residents want investment in their neighborhood.



Early this year, local advocates submitted nominations to grant the buildings protected landmark status, which were approved by the local Historic Preservation Commission (HPC). However, the Rockford City Council has expressed reluctance to accept the HPC's recommendations for landmarking the properties over the objection of the Rockford Diocese for fear of a threatened lawsuit. The council has until May 6, 2019, to make a final decision. After that time, the HPC's recommendations would fail if the council does not act. Landmarks Illinois and local preservation supporters have maintained that the council's role is to recognize that the buildings meet the needed criteria for landmark designation, are viable candidates for reuse and that there is a process outlined in the historic preservation ordinance by which the Rockford Diocese can appeal a designation through the filing of economic hardship.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Rockford residents are urged to [reach out to their alderman](#) to support landmark designation of these important historic buildings so they may remain important neighborhood anchors and have the option to be rehabilitated and reused in the future.



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- Rockford residents and anyone concerned about the future of these buildings are asked to [reach out to Bishop Malloy of the Rockford Diocese](#) and urge him to reconsider demolition.
- Follow the [“Fighting for the Chancery” Facebook’s page @savepietyhill](#) to stay up to date on local advocacy efforts to save these irreplaceable historic properties.

FURTHER READING

- [Vote delayed for Landmark status Rockford Diocese Buildings](#)
WIFR, April 22, 2019
- [Rockford City Council vote on Landmark Status for Former Chancery Delayed](#)
Rockford Register Star, April 15, 2019
- [Landmarks Illinois Letter to the Editor - Letter: Chancery, school, convent should have landmark designation](#)
Rockford Register Star, April 12, 2019
- [Letter: Don’t let the threat of lawsuit derail landmarking By Adam Kingsley](#)
Rockford Register Star, April 12, 2019
- [Chancery Building vote laid over by Rockford City Council](#)
WIFR, April 1, 2019
- [Rockford city council committee votes down landmark status for Diocese of Rockford buildings](#)
WREX, March 25, 2019
- CitySmiths Blog: <https://www.citysmiths.org/blog/chancery-support>