

2019 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

Rock Island County Courthouse

QUICK STATS

- **Location:** 210 15th Street, Rock Island, Rock Island County
- **Built:** 1895-97
- **Architect:** Fredrick C. Gunn and Louis S. Curtis
- **Current owner:** Rock Island County
- **Historic significance:** Excellent example of Spanish Renaissance or Roman-style architecture, and eligible for the National Register of Historic Places in 2017. The courthouse also served as the seat of Rock Island County Court for 122 years.
- **Why it is endangered:** The Rock Island County Board and Public Building Commission are seeking to demolish the courthouse, despite not being in compliance with state preservation laws.
- **Take Action:** Tell the Rock Island County Board know that you support a private reuse of the courthouse. You can also support LI and other preservation organizations involved in a lawsuit to prevent unlawful demolition.



Credit: Landmarks Illinois

BACKGROUND

The historic Rock Island County Courthouse is threatened by demolition by the Rock Island County Board and the Rock Island Public Building Commission (PBC) following the completion of a new Justice Center Annex in late 2018. The county and PBC have refused to explore reuse options or comply with state preservation laws, [leading Landmarks Illinois to file a lawsuit](#) with other preservation organizations and plaintiffs seeking to prevent the unlawful demolition of the historic courthouse.

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In 1833, when the city of Stephenson (now known as Rock Island) was established, an area was set aside for what would become Courthouse Square. Three years later, the first courthouse was built on the square, but was soon expanded to meet the needs of a growing industrial city.

By the 1890s, the railway had brought industry to Rock Island along with prosperity. As the county's population grew due to work in the lumber, pottery and farm manufacturing industries, it became apparent that a larger building was needed for governmental operations. In 1895, the building committee approved the designs submitted by the Kansas City firm of Fredrick C. Gunn and Louis S. Curtis for a new four-story courthouse adjacent to the outdated structure.



Inside the courthouse. Credit: Landmarks Illinois

Designed in the Spanish Renaissance, or Roman style, and completed in 1897, this courthouse closely resembles the Tarrant County Courthouse in Fort Worth, Texas, also constructed by Gunn and Curtis around the same time. Constructed at a cost of over \$100,000, the building is of both blue and buff-toned Bedford limestone. The building exhibits a variety of forms, including rounded arch windows and door recesses, balconies and a standing-seam metal roof. The original six domes on the courthouse were removed in 1958, a decision stemming from deterioration of the domes' copper roofing.

After plans for a new Justice Center Annex were unveiled, the Rock Island County Board turned to the public for feedback on what to do with the historic courthouse, which was determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places in 2017. The public overwhelmingly supported retention and reuse of the courthouse.

Despite this, Chief Judge Walter Braud issued a letter proposing the use of bond funds from the Justice Center Annex project to fund the demolition of the historic courthouse and clear the site for green space.

In a December 2017 letter published in the Dispatch-Argus, then County Board Vice-Chairman (now current chairman) Richard Brunk wrote, "Could private redevelopment be an option? Could the building be repurposed for county use? Some have said the county board should vote this month to raze the building. The truth is, the board has yet to thoroughly explore options for the



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old courthouse, and there is nearly a year before the annex will be completed.” In April of 2018, Landmarks Illinois named the building to its list annual Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois.

Despite having not sought private redevelopment proposals, in July of 2018, the Rock Island County Board voted to enter into an agreement with the PBC to demolish the courthouse. To demonstrate the redevelopment potential, local advocates were able to secure several letters of interest in the courthouse from private developers. A reuse of the courthouse by a private developer could benefit from the use of the Federal Historic Tax Credit and a new State Historic Tax Credit.

CURRENT THREAT

In November 2018, the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) at the Illinois Department of Natural Resources notified Rock Island County and the PBC that demolition plans for the historic courthouse would need to be submitted for review as part of Illinois State Agency Historic Resources Preservation Act. In response, attorneys for the County and PBC stated that the state preservation law should not apply to the courthouse project.

In February, as demolition appeared imminent in violation of the state preservation law, Landmarks Illinois joined five other plaintiffs in [filing a lawsuit against Rock Island County and the Public Building Commission](#). Joining as plaintiffs are the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Rock Island Preservation Society, Moline Preservation Society, bondholder Fred Shaw and Rock Island resident Diane Oestreich. Jenner & Block is providing pro-bono legal representation to the plaintiffs.



The new annex under construction with the historic courthouse (left) next door. Credit: Landmarks Illinois

The suit contends the county is not in compliance with state preservation law as it proceeds with efforts to tear down the historic courthouse. The suit also points out the PBC's possible illegal reallocation of publicly funded bonds and calls on the county to make a good-faith effort to find a reuse for the historically and architecturally significant courthouse.



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In the circuit court, Landmarks Illinois and co-plaintiffs were [initially granted a temporary restraining order \(TRO\)](#), which halted demolition activities while the case was heard. On [March 19, the case was dismissed](#) in the circuit court, but three days later the Illinois Third District Appellate Court [granted a petition](#) to keep the TRO in place. On April 1, the [appellate court issued a notice](#) that it would hear the case, preventing demolition until the court reaches its decision.

Landmarks Illinois continues to urge the Rock Island County Board and Public Building Commission to seek proposals from developers for reuse of the historic courthouse. With interest in the building and its eligibility for Federal and State Historic Tax Credits, the Rock Island County Courthouse project could create jobs, generate new tax revenue and provide an economic benefit to residents of Rock Island County.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- [Contact the Rock Island County Board](#) and state your support for a process to seek private investment to reuse the historic courthouse.
- Support the non-profit organizations defending the historic Rock Island County Courthouse in court:
 - [Landmarks Illinois](#)
 - [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#)
 - [Rock Island Preservation Society](#)
 - [Moline Preservation Society](#)

FURTHER READING

- [Bond paid to keep courthouse from being demolished](#)
Dispatch-Argus, April 12, 2019
- [Suit filed against Rock Island County to stop courthouse demolition](#)
Dispatch-Argus, April 12, 2019
- [History of Rock Island Courthouse](#)
Rock Island Preservation Society