

2019 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

St. Mary's School

QUICK STATS

- **Location:** 401 Elk Street, Galena, Jo Davies County
- **Built:** 1865
- **Architect:** unknown
- **Current owner:** Private
- **Historic significance:** A contributing structure to the Galena National Register Historic District, this beautiful 19th-century school educated the community's youth for over 100 years.
- **Why it is endangered:** Having been allowed to deteriorate under private ownership, the former school is at risk for demolition by neglect.
- **Take Action:** Contact the Galena City Council and the mayor to let them know you support the City of Galena's efforts to save its historic buildings, including new tools such as Demolition by Neglect ordinance. (see links below)



Credit: Landmarks Illinois

BACKGROUND

The City of Galena is well known for its historic charm and architectural beauty, boasting a wealth of mid-19th century buildings. Built in 1865 and in operation for over a century, St. Mary's School is an integral part of this historic landscape. Unfortunately, St. Mary's has suffered from years of neglect and deterioration, risking a significant loss within Galena's iconic historic district. Local advocates and the Historic Preservation Commission has worked for several years to pass a "demolition by neglect" ordinance to prevent a growing number of buildings like St. Mary's from reaching endangered status, but the legislation has failed to pass.

St. Mary's Catholic Church was built in 1856 according to the plans of missionary Father Samuel Mazzuchelli. Around 10 years later, the parish built a brick parochial school for their parishioners

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on the hillside behind the church. St. Mary's Catholic Parish operated the school for over a century from its opening in 1865. Originally a two-story brick building with basement, the school was later increased in size with a brick addition, bringing the structure to 14,000 square feet over three floors. This addition included an ornate stone entrance on the left side of the façade featuring an elegant archway and ornate carved details.

In 1965, Galena was one of the first cities in Illinois to pass a historic preservation ordinance. Four years later, Galena Historic District was added to the National Register of Historic Places. For its architectural and historical value, St. Mary's School was recognized as a contributing structure to this district.



Credit: Landmarks Illinois

CURRENT THREAT

In the 1970s, St. Mary's Parish closed the school and sold the property to a private individual. Subsequently, the new owner removed most of the internal millwork and fixtures. In the past 10 years, the building has suffered from extreme neglect and continues to deteriorate to a dangerous degree, although the exterior remains much the same in appearance. While the current owners are willing to sell the property, no potential purchasers have surfaced to date. In the meantime, the building continues to deteriorate. The City of Galena has placed St. Mary's School on its list of

substandard properties and has followed up with the current owner to no avail. If left as is, the historic school will continue to worsen and will soon place its structural integrity in jeopardy.

St. Mary's is just one example of a larger problem in Galena, which is home to a wealth of mid-nineteenth century buildings. Given their age, these historic buildings require regular upkeep and repair. Several buildings in private ownership, however, have been allowed to deteriorate, putting them at risk for demolition. This problem was most recently brought before the City Council in August 2018 by [The Galena Foundation](#), a local preservation nonprofit. While the Galena Foundation has partnered with the city on the restoration of several publicly owned buildings and sites, the rapid deterioration of privately owned buildings has been a challenge to combat. The Galena Foundation proposed a new ordinance to ensure that all structures located in the Historic



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District or other designated Landmark areas would be preserved by their owner against decay, rot and deterioration in order to prevent demolition or partial demolition caused by neglect. This proposed “demolition by neglect” legislation would have given the Galena City Council a toolkit of options for dealing with buildings in disrepair, helping to ensure that historic structures would not deteriorate past the point of no return. Unfortunately, the City Council felt this ordinance was not needed at this time and voted not to enact this legislation.

Local advocates in Galena continue to work on strategies to combat demolition by neglect. In the meantime, The Galena Foundation is hoping to find a buyer interested in purchasing and restoring St. Mary's School. The size and location of the building make it a good candidate for reuse as apartments, condominiums or vacation rentals in the tourist-oriented City of Galena. Other large properties in the city have successfully undergone similar transformations, including the Old High School (built in 1905) on Prospect Street, which was converted into condominiums and Freehan Hall Annunciation School, another parochial school structure built in 1886, which is currently being renovated into vacation rentals.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Know of a potential buyer for St. Mary's School? Please contact [the Galena Foundation](#) and [Landmarks Illinois' Springfield Office](#).
- [Contact the mayor and city council](#) to let them know that you support the City of Galena's efforts to save its historic buildings, including new tools such as Demolition by Neglect ordinance.
- Have experience passing a Demolition by Neglect ordinance or enacting similar tools/programs? Contact [Landmarks Illinois' Springfield Office](#).

FURTHER READING

- [Visit the Galena Foundation's website](#)