

2018 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

Central Congregational Church

- **Location:** 60 Public Square, Galesburg, Knox County
- **Built:** 1898
- **Architect:** C.E. Gottschalk and Beadle Architects
- **Current owner:** Central Congregational Church congregation
- **Historic significance:** Local Landmark, listed on National Register of Historic Places (statewide significance), site where Galesburg native, writer and poet, Carl Sandburg, celebrated 75th Birthday and release of his autobiography.
- **Why it is endangered:** Lack of funding and maintenance has led to need for extensive repairs



Credit: Thomas Foley / Foley Photo Studio

Central Congregational Church has been an anchor, both physically and spiritually, in the Galesburg community for well over a century, and played host to many important figures. Due to declining membership, the congregation is struggling to take care of the building. However, the Central Congregational Church advocacy group has formed, with the support of the Galesburg Landmark Commission and the City of Galesburg, to help find a feasible path forward for this important church.

Galesburg, originally founded to serve as the home of Knox College (the brainchild of George Washington Gale for a Christian college on the prairie), was incorporated as a village in 1841. A site was given by Knox College for the sole purposes of a church, on which the “Old First Church” was built in 1842.

In 1854, the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad made its way to Galesburg, bringing people and industry to the quiet rural community. The effects were almost immediate; population grew from 882 in 1850 to 4,000 in 1856 and over 9,000 in 1867. The success of Galesburg prompted other lines to begin running through the community. This made Galesburg an influential force in the region, eventually leading to the relocation of the county seat in 1873.

The growth of Galesburg corresponded with the growth of religious institutions. In 1895, the congregation, after having amicably split over abolitionist activities, reunited to construct a new house of worship. The firm of C.E. Gottschalk and Beadle Architects was awarded the commission. It was decided that the new church would be modeled after the much-admired H.H. Richardson designed Trinity Church in Boston. The church was completed in 1898.

Echoing Richardson's style, Central Congregational Church incorporates rounded arches, high roof ridges and heavy rusticated stones. Its soaring tower, rising 137 feet above the ground, anchors the town square, filling nearly all of its quarter-block lot. According to Harvey Safford, the church's historian, "In many county seats the most imposing building on the town square is the courthouse. In Galesburg, it is Central Congregational Church."

The interior of Central Congregational is as striking as its exterior, having 75 stained glass windows, the largest of which, located on the north wall, measures 1,080 square feet. A massive rose window, 22 feet in diameter, floats above the balcony along the east wall. The sanctuary's design, known as an "Akron Plan," reflects the faith's emphasis on music and sermons. The sanctuary space itself resembles a theater, with a sloping floor and pews that encircle the pulpit.



Credit: Special Collections and Archives, Knox College Library, Galesburg, Illinois

While Central Congregational has played host to many notable figures, including Billy Sunday, perhaps its most honored guest was the most famous son of Galesburg: Carl Sandburg. Sandburg returned to his hometown to celebrate his 75th birthday, as well as the release of his autobiography, *Always the Young Strangers*, which chronicled his years growing up in Galesburg. Guests packed the 880-seat sanctuary and listened to Sandburg speak and play his guitar.

Central Congregational Church was listed on the National Register of Historic Places both individually and as part of the Galesburg

Historic District in 1976. It was also made a local landmark in 1977.

Central Congregational Church is the last remaining icon of Galesburg's architectural history on the once charming public square. The church's dwindling congregation recognizes that their ability to properly care for the building is [coming to an end](#). Deferred maintenance has led to the need for extensive roof repairs, restoration of sagging stained glass windows and a new boiler. The future of Central Congregational Church rests upon partnering with other organizations or institutions to expand its current use, or determining a new use and ownership structure.

What you can do:

- Visit the Galesburg Community Foundation's website to donate to the [Central Congregational Preservation Fund](#)
- Ideas for partnerships or contacts to share? Contact Springfield Office Director Frank Butterfield at fbutterfield@landmarks.org.

Additional Links:

- Read more about the history of Central Congregational Church: <https://galesburgchurch.org/home/history/our-historic-building/>
- Central Congregational Church National Register form: ([PDF](#))
- Galesburg Historic District National Register form: ([PDF](#))