

2018 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

Chautauquas and Tabernacles

Statewide



Credit: Des Plaines History Center

Meeting halls associated with a nationally-significant educational and spiritual movement from the late 19th and early 20th centuries face an uncertain future resulting from damage, disinvestment and deterioration. These structures, often called chautauquas or tabernacles, are typically round or multi-sided structures located in parks or forest preserves, well-suited for gatherings or large crowds. They also feature interesting roofing systems that provide an unobstructed view of the preacher or lecturer. Despite significant cost

estimates for repair, advocates are committed to ensuring the survival of this unique building type.

Initially used during retreat-style camp meetings in the Protestant faith, most frequently Methodist, these gathering halls housed huge crowds for sermons and revivals in the late 19th century. The setting of these buildings was among nature, where people would often camp to get away from their day-to-day activities and hear several high-energy sermons. From these camp meetings emerged the nationally significant Chautauqua movement.

Popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Chautauqua movement originated as a training program for Sunday-school teachers and church workers. While initially religious in nature, the concept later expanded to include recreation, entertainment and adult education of all kinds. With the rise of radio, movies and the automobile, the Chautauqua movement diminished across the country.

These camp meeting halls and Chautauquas spread extensively throughout Illinois, but is becoming increasingly rare. The three properties included in this listing are among the few remaining buildings in the state associated with this movement, each of which is currently under threat.

Waldorf Tabernacle

- **Location:** Des Plaines Methodist Campground, Cook County
- **Built:** 1903
- **Architect:** Joshua Watts
- **Current owner:** Chicago District Campground Association
- **Historic Significance:** Meetings held here greatly influenced growth in Des Plaines during the late 19th, early 20th century. It was also home to an annual meeting of the Chautauqua movement that attracted as many as 15,000 people – the largest of its kind in this part of the country.
- **Why it is endangered:** Des Plaines River flooding has damaged the building, which is also in need of other repairs and mold remediation.



Credit: Cynthia Nielsen-Morgan

Originally named the American Tabernacle, this 16-sided, wood and steel truss building was designed in 1903 by Joshua Watts. It measures roughly 110 feet in diameter and has a seating capacity of 3,000 people. The roofing system, comprised of 16 steel trusses angled toward a clerestory and cupola, allows for an auditorium space that is completely unobstructed.

In 1934, Bishop Ernest Lynn Waldorf, head of the Chicago District of the Methodist Episcopal Church, opened the annual meeting, at which time the American Tabernacle was renamed in his honor. The Des Plaines gathering attracted between 10,000-15,000 people annually and was considered the largest meeting of its kind in this part of the country, according to the Chicago Tribune. Meetings at the Des Plaines Methodist Campground, dating back to 1865, greatly influenced the transformation of Des Plaines from a small farming village into a large community in the Des Plaines River Valley.

The campground has suffered from flooding over the years from the nearby Des Plaines River, and the tabernacle, as well as many of the 129 structures on site, is in need of repair. Current needs include repairs to the roof and beams, windows, floors and benches. The structure also requires mold remediation and structural analysis. The Historic Methodist Campground organization, Chicago District Campground Association, is moving forward with a new vision to turn its historic 158-year-old campground into a modern-day Chautauqua open for all with a focus on environmental stewardship, educational programming and outreach and historic preservation.

Oakdale Tabernacle

- **Location:** Oakdale Nature Preserve, Freeport, Stephenson County
- **Built:** 1915
- **Architect:** Unknown
- **Current owner:** Freeport Park District
- **Historic Significance:** The building has served as a community gathering space since 1895. For more than 100 years, it provided a venue for the community to hold events and activities.
- **Why it is endangered:** The building faces the threat of demolition due to years of vacancy and deferred maintenance, making it inhabitable.



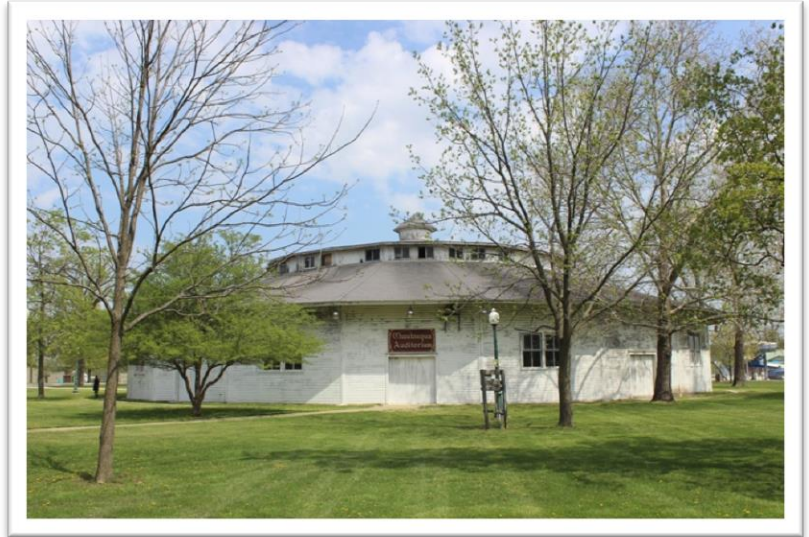
Credit: Karen Wilken

The origins of this tabernacle date back to 1895, when the Oakdale Park Camp Meeting Association held its first 10-day gathering on the site. Festivities included Bible study, religious services and outdoor activities for all ages. At one time, [2,000 people took part in these annual camp meetings](#). In 1915, the original 1895 tabernacle burned, but was replaced with this eight-sided tabernacle before the 1916 August camp meeting. Eventually, the United Methodist Church took over operation of the meetings, with the last annual gathering taking place in 1967. In 1971, the Freeport Park District bought the campground, renting out the Tabernacle for community events.

The building was closed in 2012 due to lack of bookings. Since that time, wildlife has overrun the building and made the structure uninhabitable. Despite threats of demolition, a group of community advocates is pressuring the Freeport Park District to restore it as a low-cost alternative that could be used as a community gathering space.

Chautauqua Auditorium

- **Location:** Forest Park, Shelbyville, Shelby County
- **Built:** 1903
- **Architect:** H.B. Trout
- **Current owner:** City of Shelbyville
- **Historic Significance:** The building features a unique radial roof truss system patented in 1903 by Morrison H. Vail and has hosted notable speakers such as Billy Sunday and former President William Taft.
- **Why it is endangered:** The building is in need of extensive repairs, such as roof replacement and structure stabilization but lacks proper funding.



Credit: Landmarks Illinois

This wood- frame, 20-sided auditorium building, built in 1903 by H.B. Trout, measures 150 feet in diameter and has a seating capacity of 5,000 people. The roofing system, comprised of 20 trusses that meet at a timber king post, support the spoke-and-wheel-like hub suspended high above the concave dirt floor. This radial truss system, patented in 1903 by Morrison H. Vail, allowed for the interior space to provide unobstructed views for those inside. This auditorium building was constructed under the cultural influence of the Chautauqua Movement and served to educate members of the community. Throughout the years, the Chautauqua Auditorium has played host to such notable speakers as William Jennings Bryan, Billy Sunday, Carrie Nation and Former President William Taft. In recent years, the building has suffered greatly due to flooding, lack of maintenance and limited funds.

The Chautauqua Auditorium Preservation Committee has made considerable progress in restoring the auditorium. However, in recent months engineers have found moisture rot where the walls meet the roofing system. Further stabilization and roof replacement is necessary if the building is to be saved. Since the Chautauqua Auditorium was first listed on the 2009 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois, the Preservation Committee has continued to work in partnership with Landmarks Illinois on fundraising and advocacy efforts. In March 2018, the Chautauqua Auditorium was awarded a \$5,000 grant from the Landmarks Illinois Preservation Heritage Grant Fund to assist in assessing and addressing the current threat.

What you can do:

- To learn more and donate to the Shelbyville Chautauqua Auditorium Preservation Committee, visit <http://www.shelbyvillechautauqua.org/> and the [Shelbyville Chautauqua Facebook Page](#).

- To learn more about the Friends of the Freeport Park District's efforts to save the Oakdale Tabernacle, visit:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/294745311043019/about/>
- To learn more and support the Chicago District Campground Association, visit:
<https://www.hmc1860.org/donate>

Additional Links:

- **General:**
 - The Chautauqua Trail: A North American Cultural Renaissance:
<http://www.chautauquatrail.com/>
- **Waldorf Tabernacle (Des Plaines):**
 - Des Plaines Methodist Camp Ground National Register form ([PDF](#))
 - Exhibition on the history of Des Plaines Methodist Camp Ground at the Des Plaines History Center:
<https://www.hmc1860.org/so/fM1SEeMU#/main>
- **Oakdale Tabernacle (Freeport):**
 - "Future of Freeport Park District's Oakdale Tabernacle still unknown," *Journal Standard*, November 8, 2017:
<http://www.journalstandard.com/news/20171108/future-of-freeport-park-districts-oakdale-tabernacle-still-unknown>
 - "Public feedback sought on potential Oakdale tabernacle renovation," *Journal Standard*, April 6, 2018:
<http://www.journalstandard.com/news/20180406/public-feedback-sought-on-potential-oakdale-tabernacle-renovation>
- **Chautauqua Auditorium (Shelbyville):**
 - Chautauqua Auditorium National Register form ([PDF](#))
 - "Shelbyville receives grant for Chautauqua Auditorium restoration," *Journal Gazette & Times Courier*, March 27, 2018:
http://jg-tc.com/lifestyles/announcements/shelbyville-receives-grant-for-chautauqua-auditorium-restoration/article_4f85605e-5cce-506d-be2f-bb431e146f7f.html