

Crystal Lake takes steps to protect 170-year-old historic building

The Academy Building was the first school built in Crystal Lake



A wrought iron fence built in 1883 surrounds St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Crystal Lake.
Michelle Meyer

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Crystal Lake residents are pushing to get landmark protection for a building that served as the city's first school in the late 1800s, but restoration costs could cost nearly seven figures.

The Crystal Lake Academy Building, also known as the former Gates House or the Tarpley House, is located on the property of St. Mary's

Episcopal Church at 210 McHenry Ave.

For decades, the building has been degrading, resulting in toxic mold, asbestos, a deteriorating foundation, a leaky roof, faulty electric wiring and outdated plumbing, said Jeffrey Hymen, the attorney representing the church.

In 2010, the church got an estimate of \$500,000 to \$625,000 to repair it.

“We could easily be talking about a \$1 million project at this point,” Hymen said. “Put simply, it’s a danger to the public and the property.”

But, Crystal Lake Historical Society President Diana Kenney and honorary board member Jim Heisler say that with the help of community fundraising, the building is worth saving.

Kenney and Heisler, who spoke at a recent meeting as residents and not in representing the historical society, petitioned to landmark the building along with the wrought iron fence that was built in 1883.

The Crystal Lake Historic Preservation Commission unanimously recommended their petition be approved last week. The City Council is expected to consider the matter on Dec. 3.

Similarly, McHenry’s Landmark Commission took steps to protect the 130-year-old Landmark Elementary School after the District 15 school board voted to close the school at the end of this school year.

Built around 1853 by stonemason Andrew Jackson Simons, the Crystal Lake Academy Building features “rare” Greek revival and Federalist architecture and cobblestones from Lake Michigan, Kenney said.

Simons built nine iconic buildings in Crystal Lake and five remain standing: the Palmer House off Route 176 and Terra Cotta Avenue, the Walkup House off Walkup Road across Veteran Acres Park, the Ellsworth House off Route 176 and Ellsworth Street, and the Wallace House off Route 14 and Crystal Lake Avenue.

Four buildings have been demolished over the years, including Simons' own home at the corner of Virginia Street and Crystal Lake Avenue, which was torn down in 2005.

“Once it’s gone, it’s gone,” Kenney said.

The Crystal Lake Academy Building was created as the town’s first school. It educated high school-aged students from “prominent Crystal Lake families,” including Beardsley, Walkup and Pierson, as well as Indiana governor Ira Joy Chase’s, Kenney said.

Once free public schooling was established in 1855, the school closed soon after.

From there, the building was owned by other prominent Crystal Lake residents, including William Day Gates, who founded the American Terra Cotta & Ceramic Co. factory which manufactured terra cotta tiles, bricks and TECO pottery, Kenney said. It ended up in the hands of the church in 1947.

“What we want is a win-win solution for both St. Mary’s and the community. What we don’t want is a bulldozed rubble pile filled with old bricks and cobblestones,” Kenney said. “Demolition of this building would be a travesty based on its architectural and historical significance.

We owe it to future generations to work together and preserve this building as a lasting legacy.”

The small church, consisting of 53 member families, usually is strapped for cash to cover its core mission of providing services and programs, said St. Mary’s priest, the Rev. Scott Zaucha. St. Mary’s closed the building in October of last year because of safety concerns and hefty electricity bills.

Insurance costs have dramatically increased each year because of the liability of the deteriorating building. The church paid \$20,000 for insurance last year, a 30% increase from the year before.

The building has been in poor condition for decades. Zaucha said he found church board meeting minutes from the 1950s where “significant disrepair” was cited, even when the church was at its strongest financially. The church estimates demolition would cost \$60,000, which would be covered by a donor, Zaucha said.

Supporters cite how Crystal Lake’s Dole Mansion was saved even when it seemed to be financially impossible to do so.

The community banded together to create the nonprofit Lakeside Legacy Foundation in 2002 and fundraising continues to this day to cover restoration projects at the mansion.

Heisler also is spearheading efforts to save the 140-year-old Barlina barn in Crystal Lake, which historic preservation architects estimate could cost more than \$200,000 to restore.

“Let us get up to bat and help carry the load with you church folks,” Heisler said. “I feel your pain. Together we’re going to save this building. I bet you we could really make it happen. Give us a chance.”