

The Little White School Museum: An Oswego Treasure

The evolution of an Oswego landmark...

The Little White School Museum began life as the Oswego Methodist-Episcopal Church, with the building completed 11 years before the Civil War began. The congregation traced its origin to the first Methodist meeting held at Daniel Pearce's cabin by circuit rider Stephen R. Beggs in 1833. The extended Pearce family had only just arrived in the area that would become Oswego from their homes in Ohio, becoming the community's first settlers.

Methodist meetings were held in the Pearce cabin until the congregation became large enough to warrant building a meeting house. Construction at the intersection of Polk and Jackson streets in Oswego reportedly began in 1848 and was completed in 1850. The church was formally dedicated in 1854. Evidence uncovered during restoration provided strong circumstantial evidence the building had originally been built elsewhere, and was then dismantled and moved to the site in Oswego. As built, the church had one large room where the congregation met, plus a small entry vestibule.

It was originally believed the building was built without a bell tower or steeple. However, a news note in the "Oswego" column of the *Kendall County Record* on March 17, 1897 suggests the building had a bell tower prior to 1901. According to the Record's Oswego correspondent: "The Methodist church steeple, which a few years ago was curtailed, is now being removed altogether. The said organization and the steeple of their church seemingly have a corresponding conformity to each other; when they were as strong as any, if not the strongest in town, their church steeple was as tall, if not the tallest of any; when they had become somewhat diminished, the peaked part of the steeple



Oswego Methodist-Episcopal Church, 1901

was taken down and now that they have become still more reduced the steeple will disappear altogether. Causing the church to leak, however, is why it has to go."

In 1901, the building underwent a series of renovations and improvements. New patterned window glass replaced the old clear glass panes and a variety of decorative improvements, probably including new, more elaborate interior window and door trim, were completed. On Aug. 21, 1901, the *Record's* Oswego correspondent reported that: The M.E. church has been furnished with new embellished windows, and is now a very neat place of worship."

In addition, a new bell tower was added that same year, 1901, when Tirzah Minard, widow of the Rev. Henry Minard, one of the church's former pastors, donated a bell to the congregation.



Little White School, ca 1936

According to a note in the Sept. 18 *Record*: "The Methodist church is now undergoing outside renovation, having been painted and is being provided with a steeple again...A bell is also to be procured for it."

By Nov. 27, the *Record's* correspondent could report that: "The Methodist church has undergone more improvements by paint, etc. Its new bell is a splendid ringer"

Sometime between 1901 and 1912, the building's wooden front porch and steps were replaced by a concrete porch and steps.

In 1913, the congregation of the Oswego Methodist Episcopal Church applied for dissolution and was allowed to close down by the Rock River Conference of the Methodist Church. The building stood empty for two years before the Oswego Grade School District purchased it in 1915 for use as primary student classroom space.

In 1930, the building's single large room was divided into two classrooms for first through third graders. First grade and half of second were taught in one of the classrooms and the balance of second and all of third grade in the other room.

The exterior of the building remained relatively unchanged for the next 19 years. Then in 1934, the building was raised and a basement was dug beneath it to provide room for a furnace and for student activity space. Two years later, a major expansion was made on the east side of the building, with the addition of a third classroom and a main entrance hallway. Wood shingle siding was added to tie the new addition into the existing building, and the building was painted gray. Shortly afterwards, the building's bell and bell tower were removed.

In the 1940s, the building received its distinctive coat of white paint. The building had been known as "The Little School" from the time it was purchased to differentiate it from the larger Red Brick School a block away. But with its new coat of white paint, it soon became known in the community as the Little White School.

From the time it was purchased, the building housed first, second and third grade classes for several decades before enrollment growth led to it housing only first grade classes. With the opening of East View School in 1958 the building was used for storage. However, with growth in the school district still exploding, starting in the fall of 1962, the building was reopened to house junior high classes after renovation work. Junior high English classes were held at the Little White School, while other junior high classes were held at the nearby Red Brick School.

In the fall of 1964, the new Oswego High School opened for 10th, 11th, and 12th



Little White School, 1958

graders, while seventh, eighth, and ninth grade junior high students were moved to the old high school, which was renamed Oswego Junior High School. With that, the Little White School was closed for good.

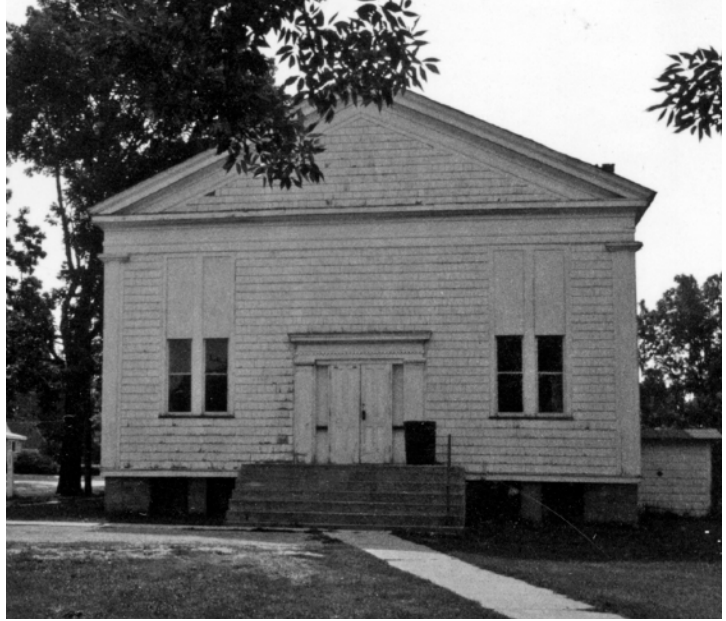
Starting in the fall of 1964, the building was used as storage space for the Oswego School District and was largely allowed to deteriorate. In 1970, the district obtained appraisals on the building, with the intent to sell it.

In 1976, when the school board's intent to sell the building became public knowledge, a non-profit group, the Oswegoland Heritage Association, was established to "Save Our School." In addition to saving and restoring the building, the group's mission also called for opening a community museum and archives in the Little White School concentrating on the history of the 68 square miles encompassed by the Oswego School District.

In a unique cooperative agreement, the not-for-profit heritage association pledged to guide the accurate restoration of the building, while the Oswego School District agreed to retain ownership of the school and site. The Oswegoland Park District agreed to take over normal maintenance of the building and grounds—renamed Heritage Park—and to assist with regular building repairs and operations.

Restoration, under the heritage association's guidance, which also raised the funds to pay for it, began in 1977, and continued for the next 25 years before final completion in 2002. During restoration, most community organizations in the Oswego area participated in one way or another, and several thousand dollars in cash and in-kind contributions were raised and expended on the community project.

The Little White School Museum's gallery opened in May 1983. For the next several years, the museum was open two Sunday afternoons each month, staffed by heritage association board members. In 2003, the Oswegoland Park District proposed opening the museum more hours per week, and starting that September the building was open five days a week for a total of 23 hours. Gradually, the museum's hours were expanded to the



Little White School, 1970



Little White School Museum Gallery, 2019

current total.

In 2014, the heritage association board began working on a strategic plan for the association and the museum. That led to a formal museum assessment conducted by Pat Miller, the president of the Illinois Heritage Association, that recommended a number of changes and upgrades. The assessment led, in turn, to hiring museum consultant Lance Tawzer to redesign the museum gallery and install completely new exhibits. The new gallery opened in March 2019.

Today, the Little White School Museum houses a state-of-the-art the community museum, overseen by the Oswegoland Heritage Association, that tells the story of Oswegoland's history and development. The museum's archives and artifact collections, also maintained by the heritage association, that was envisioned more than 30 years ago contains nearly 40,000 items from photographs to documents to three-dimensional artifacts.

As the oldest public building still in use in Oswego Township, the Little White School Museum is a monument to an extremely successful public-private partnership. It is also a living, direct link with Oswego's pioneer past as well as providing a valuable repository for the history of one of the fastest growing areas in the United States.

An architectural gem of a forgotten era...

The Little White School Museum is a classic example of Greek Revival architecture of the 1840s and 1850s. The front pediment is supported with columns at the corners of the building, a treatment repeated at the rear of the building.

Evidence uncovered during restoration led to the theory that the building may have been located elsewhere when originally built, and then dismantled, moved to it's current site, and rebuilt.

It is believed the building's original windows were eight-over-eight glazed double-hung sashes. About 1901, these were replaced by sashes with single diamond-patterned glue-chipped panes. As these panes broke, the sashes were divided in two with mullions and the diamond-patterned panes were replaced with clear glass. The building's restoration resulted in replacing the clear glass in the building's windows with diamond-patterned glass almost identical to the 1901 panes. The patterned glass was recreated by volunteer Glenn Young and was then installed in the building's original window sashes, which had been restored by other volunteers.



Little White School Museum 2009

Ownership anchored in Oswegoland...

The lot on which the Little White Museum sits was owned by the Oswego Methodist-Episcopal Congregation until 1915, when it was sold to the Oswego Grade School District. In 1961, Oswego Grade School District 8 and Oswego High School District 300 were consolidated into Oswego Community Unit District 308. When restoration efforts began, District 308 retained title to the Little White School Museum, although the Oswegoland Park District had a long term lease for the building and grounds.

In the summer of 2010, the long-planned-for transfer of Heritage Park and the Little White School Museum from the school district to the Oswegoland Park District began. On Nov. 22, 2010, the Oswego School District Board approved an intergovernmental agreement transferring ownership of the Little White School Museum and Heritage Park to the Oswegoland Park District. At their meeting on Dec. 16, 2010, the park district board of commissioners approved the agreement, passing the building to its third owner since it was completed in 1850.

An Oswego architectural and historical treasure...

The Little White School Museum is the oldest public building in Oswego Township, and one of the oldest public buildings still in use for public purposes in Kendall County. After being literally saved from the wrecking ball, a stunningly successful community effort was mounted starting in 1976 to save and restore the building and create a community museum and archives that would protect, preserve, and interpret the history of the 68 square miles encompassed by the Oswego School District. Restoration was completed in 2002 after the expenditure of thousands of hours of volunteer labor and tens of thousands of dollars in cash and in-kind donations, along with more funds provided by the Oswegoland Park District. The museum's gallery opened in 1983, and was completely reimagined in 2019, opening in March of that year with state-of-the-art exhibits that tell the fascinating story of the Oswegoland area. Today, the building offers a direct connection between the present day and the Oswegoland community's rich religious, educational, and social history and heritage.

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Little White School Museum
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