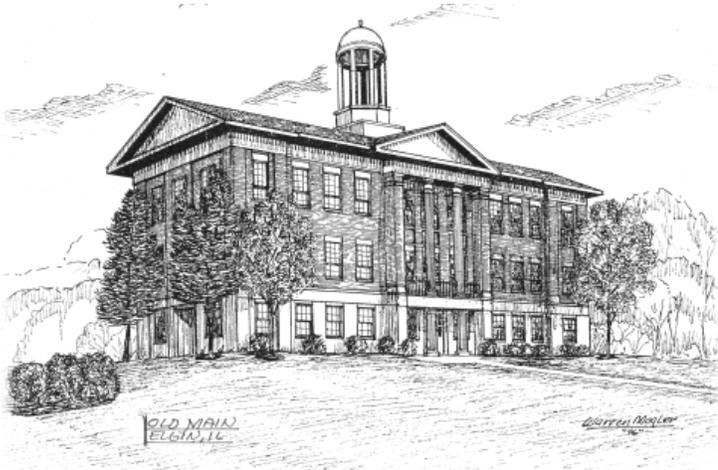


OLD MAIN



Built 1855

This magnificent building nearly met its demise on more than one occasion. Old Main's last escape from the wrecking ball occurred in 1976 and was, in many ways, the beginning of Elgin's present-day preservation movement.

Old Main grew out of an 1839 plan to establish Elgin Academy. It was a visionary scheme. The school's founders chartered a secondary school at a time when that level of education was seldom attained and non-denominational private schools rarely succeeded, let alone ones which were co-ed. However, in 1839 these ambitious plans were more than the small community of 150 residents could support. It was not until 1855 that the money was raised to construct Old Main. The school opened on December 1, 1856.

The building was designed in the Greek Revival style which emulates ancient Greek temples. The style calls for symmetry in the placement of doors and windows. Columns support the front facing, low pitched pediment roof. The main door features side lights and a transom above.

The school had its ups and down, nearly closing in 1865, and the late 1880s. But the Academy's leadership continually re-invented the school by adding new programs and securing new students and donors. A fire in August 1911 nearly destroyed Old Main but once again the Academy managed to resurrect itself.

The 1960s saw hard times return. Old Main was abandoned in 1969 when the Academy could no longer afford to maintain the deteriorating building. The administration proposed razing the old schoolhouse. However, the recently formed (1961) Elgin Area Historical Society was interested in the building. The American Bicentennial celebrations in 1976 inspired an effort to save Old Main and turn it over to city ownership, with the Historical Society as the tenant and museum operator. By a one-vote margin the City Council purchased the building for \$1 but was reluctant to assume the cost of renovation. The Historical Society began fund-raising.

Contributions from individuals, organizations and businesses raised about \$150,000 by 1977. The committee leading the effort obtained an architect's estimate of \$693,093 for rehabilitation costs. The difference was far more than the city would commit and the project appeared stalled. A fire in March 1978 severely damaged the interior. Rather than giving up, the Historical Society and community groups, including the Gifford Park Association, continued to rally public support. Several organizations provided the volunteer manpower, while area businesses contributed cash and in-kind services. A fire insurance settlement added \$72,754 to the coffers.

By 1981, the exterior of the building was in good shape, but the interior renovation remained unfinished. The Society's fund-raising continued, and by April 1984, another \$312,000 was in hand. More funds came from state and federal grants to the City which were specifically earmarked for Old Main. The Society opened the first floor as a museum in 1987. Aided by a large bequest, the second floor was opened in 1991 and the third floor was completed in 1992.

The final costs were more than \$1.4 million dollars. The city's cash contribution to the effort was \$10,000. Since completion, however, the city has provided free rent, utilities and major maintenance for the building. The Historical Society funds all the costs for exhibits, equipment and ongoing operations. The restoration of Old Main as the Elgin Historical Museum is an excellent example of a public and private partnership for the good of the community.