

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-0703010288mar01,1,4411326.story?coll=chi-newslocal-hed>

City's Viking ship on rocky path

Organization names 1893 vessel among state's most decrepit historic objects

By Josh Noel
Tribune staff reporter

March 1, 2007

For having had such a great first year, Chicago's Viking ship has had a pretty rough hundred years since.

The majestic handmade vessel departed Norway in 1893 with a nation's pride onboard, survived a stormy Atlantic crossing, and was met with great fanfare, including a cannon salute, as it glided along the Lake Michigan shore, arriving for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

A replica of a 9th Century Viking longship, the boat was appreciated for 6 months as an example of medieval innovation, becoming one of the fair's top exhibits.

It then became one of the city's most enduring headaches.

At 76 feet long, 17 feet wide and 7 feet tall, the ship has been fought over, passed back and forth, vandalized, forgotten about and copiously pooped upon--almost 6 inches of bird dung covered it by the early 1990s.

Above all, it has never really had a home.

Now moored and falling apart in a west suburban park, the ship was named Wednesday as one of the state's 10 most endangered historic objects. It is the first time a ship has made the annual list compiled by Landmarks Illinois, a non-profit historic preservation group.

During the last 12 years, Landmarks Illinois has listed 121 endangered sites, 12 of which have been demolished. Buildings are most commonly cited, but an elevated-train station, a Native American trail and a bridge have been listed.

"We've never really had anything quite like the ship," Landmarks Illinois President David Bahlman said.

Advertisement



"It's an important part of Chicago history and the fear is that it only has a year or two left if restoration isn't done."

Many are frustrated that such a unique piece of Chicago history has become a decaying afterthought for the Chicago Park District.

"I think they see it more as a liability than an asset as evidenced by the fact that they don't know how to deal with it," said Gunny Harboe, a preservation architect and longtime supporter of restoring the ship. "It's sad that a city as rich and great as this can't find a place to house this artifact."

Park District spokeswoman Jessica Maxey-Faulkner said the Park District has agreed to pay the cost of moving the ship to a new home and has been working with the Norwegian National League to find a destination. But--as has been the case for much of the last century--the search hasn't gone very far.

"We've contacted a number of places," Maxey-Faulkner said. "There are no candidates yet."

Construction on the ship began in Norway in 1892, modeled on a vessel that had been excavated from a Viking warrior's grave two years earlier. That ship, called the Gokstad and estimated to have been built around 890, sits in an Oslo museum.

The replica, made of black oak, left Bergen, Norway, in April 1893 and made stops in Newfoundland and New York before arriving in Chicago in mid-July. It was a hit of the exhibition, but, left moored in Jackson Park Lagoon, quickly became an afterthought and fell into disrepair. The Park District took possession of the ship in 1920 from a women's group that raised \$20,000 to repair it and move it to Lincoln Park Zoo. It sat for decades in an open-sided shed, attracting few visitors and becoming layered with pigeon droppings.

A non-profit group calling itself the Viking Ship Restoration Committee spent years raising money and trying to find the ship a suitable home, said former chairman Carl Hansen. About \$40,000 still sits in a bank account, earmarked for restoration, he said.

But in 1994, the Park District sold co-ownership rights for \$1 to another group, the American-Scandinavian Council, which promised to restore the vessel and find a suitable home. The council managed to fight off attempts from two other groups--one in Iowa, one in Schaumburg--that wanted to restore and display the ship, but didn't get too far otherwise.

The American-Scandinavian Council disbanded not long after its founding president, William Carlson, whose passion was the ship, died in 2000.

A year earlier, Harboe, who was on the council's board, said a Danish architect estimated that rehabilitation would cost about \$300,000.

The difficulty never has been getting donation commitments, but finding a place to put the big boat, said Ralph Rydholm, who headed the American-Scandinavian Council after Carlson died.

"In effect we gave up," Rydholm said. "After I took over, I realized, 'I'm not sure this is going anywhere.' We couldn't get anything done. It was extremely frustrating."

After a brief stop at a warehouse in West Chicago, the ship was moved to Geneva's Good Templar Park in 1996.

Its wood now faded to a brittle gray-brown, the ship sits raised a foot off the ground, and a short metal staircase allows visitors to peer inside.

A white plastic tarp, donated by a concerned citizen, keeps the elements from directly hammering the ship, but the sides are exposed.

The ship gets few visitors, though Pat Hanson, a retired Geneva elementary school teacher and member of the Good Templar Park board, gives occasional tours to students and Boy Scouts.

She knew nothing of Viking ships before this one landed in Geneva but said she has grown fond of it. Her frustration is evident as she describes the escalating deterioration, like cracks in the hull wide enough for light to pass through and an ever-warping keel.

"It just needs attention," she said. "I'm not sure how interested Chicago is. It was there for 100 years and never had a permanent shelter."

Hanson said she knows the Chicago Park District has checked on the ship at least once since it arrived 11 years ago. She said she has called the Park District several times to discuss the ship's future but hasn't had much of a conversation.

"I don't want to say we get the runaround, but every time we call we talk to someone else," she said. "We can't get them to commit to anything."

- - -

Structures on the endangered list

On Wednesday, Landmarks Illinois released a list of the 10 most endangered historic places in the state. They are:

- Lakeshore Athletic Club, Chicago
- Lathrop Homes, a 30-building public housing complex, Chicago
- A replica of a Viking ship, built in Norway and sailed to Chicago for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition.
- Barat College Sacred Heart Chapel, Lake Forest
- Broadwell Tavern, Pleasant Plains.
- Cedar Court, Park Ridge.
- Duncan Manor, Towanda.
- Germania Hall, Freeport.
- Longfellow Elementary School, Rock Island.

- Robinson Auditorium-Gymnasium, Robinson.

jbnoel@tribune.com

Copyright © 2007, [Chicago Tribune](#)