

## Protecting the heart of Indianapolis

By Paige E. Wassel, Staff Writer

Before the towering Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument gave birth to "Monument Circle," Indianapolis's center went by such names as "Governor's Circle," "Circle Park," and even "The Mud Doughnut." While its name has changed over the years, the Circle's standing as Indianapolis's premier public space has never wavered. Now, you can discover the history of the capital city's most famous roundabout on a new walking tour offered by Historic Landmarks.

"Since its creation, the Circle has been where people lived, worked, worshipped, and played," Historic Landmarks' Tourism Marketing Coordinator Kelly Siegert says. "Sometimes you can take iconic places like this for granted, and the threat to the Illinois Building confirmed that we needed to call more

**The distinctive 1930 Circle Tower with Egyptian-themed decoration owes its unusual roofline to a 1905 law that declared no building could cast a shadow on Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. To comply with the law and still create a skyscraper, architects Rubush and Hunter set back the upper stories to create a distinctive ziggurat-like profile.**



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Indiana Historical Society, Bass Photo Collection

attention to Monument Circle and its immediate environs. [The Illinois Building at Market and Illinois, a half-block from the Monument, has appeared on Historic Landmarks' 10 Most Endangered list since 2006.] Our 75-minute tour walks you through the history of the Circle, contrasting the current structures with their historic predecessors. We include stops inside Christ Church Episcopal Cathedral and the members-only Columbia Club," she adds.

The famous circle that gave Indianapolis the nickname "The Circle City" was no fluke of street design. In 1821, city planner Alexander Ralston laid out the city with a grid of streets intersecting and radiating from a circular center, a model he learned working under the famous Pierre L'Enfant, who designed the streets of Washington DC.

A mansion originally occupied the circle's center, intended as the home of Indiana's governor, during the administration of James Brown Ray (1825-1831). According to Hoosier folklore, Mrs. Brown refused the privilege, declaring her lack of enthusiasm for public viewing of her family's laundry on the clothesline. The home was used for various business and social events until it was demolished in 1857. As the area was largely residential, the empty circle became a grazing area for livestock—"The Mud Doughnut."



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**In the early twentieth century the steeple of Christ Church could still provide a lofty vantage point on the Circle (far left in top photo). Today, towering skyscrapers dwarf the 1857 church.**

By the Civil War, the area was firmly established as spiritual and social center, drawing residents to worship at one of the five churches on the circle each week. After services, it became popular to stroll through the center circle (then a park), visiting with other parishioners. Of the original churches, only Christ Church Episcopal Cathedral—on the Circle's northeast quadrant—remains. The Circle's oldest building, the carefully preserved Gothic-style structure, boasts an active congregation of 800. Now by far the smallest structure on the Circle, Christ Church was the largest when it was built in 1857 to replace the church's previous wooden building on the site, which had been sold to the African Methodist Church and moved to

Georgia Street the same year.

The structure that eventually became synonymous with Monument Circle began to take shape in the 1880s, brainchild of Hoosier governor Oliver P. Morton. Construction of the Indiana State Soldiers and Sailors Monument—built as the state’s memorial to Indiana’s Civil War veterans—commenced in 1888 and was completed in 1901. Since then, the monument has become the symbolic heart of the city, dominating the downtown skyline until the arrival of high-rise office buildings.

While people still take in concerts at the 1916 Hilbert Circle Theatre on the southeast quadrant, the lavish English Opera House and Hotel offered the city’s leading entertainment venue at the turn of the twentieth century. Occupying the entire northwest quadrant behind a limestone façade that curved with the Circle, the ornate four-story building housed Indianapolis’s largest stage and some of the most spectacular theater productions of the era, including a version of Ben-Hur that featured a chariot race with real horses running on treadmills on the stage. The opera house was demolished in 1948.

**The grand English Opera House fell to demolition in 1948, replaced by Skidmore Owings & Merrill’s starkly modern J.C. Penney store. When the Penney building was remodeled in 1991 as the headquarters of Anthem (now Wellpoint), Ratio Architects clearly looked to the English Opera House for inspiration, returning to the historic precedent in form and massing.**

Show an image of the English Opera House today to any audience and they decry the cultural loss of such an exuberant, irreplaceable structure. Today, several structures in the proposed district are individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places, which offers limited protection from government-funded actions. However, other landmarks in the area do not possess even that limited protection.

“It is arguably the most visible and widely-visited historic spot in the state of Indiana,” Historic Landmarks’ President Marsh Davis says. “The area contains some of our state’s most important commercial buildings and religious and cultural institutions. It’s high time that we seek a more comprehensive protection for it.”

Historic Landmarks Foundation has the city’s support in exploring the designation of the Circle and its immediate surroundings as a local historic district. Among other benefits, local designation would ensure review of significant changes to historic buildings, including demolition, by the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission (IHPC). Local designation would provide more protection for the district’s historic buildings than they receive under federal law, as well as additional recognition of the area’s cultural and architectural importance to the city.

The IHPC formed a committee to look into local designation of a Circle district that would extend to Pennsylvania and Illinois streets on the east and west, according to IHPC director David

Historic Landmarks offers Monument Circle tours every Friday and Saturday, May through October. The tour departs at 10:30 a.m. from Borders Bookstore, 11 South Meridian Street, one block south of Monument Circle. No reservation required except for groups of 8 or more. \$6.50 for adults, \$5.50 for Historic Landmarks members, senior citizens and children ages 13-18. \$3.50 for children ages 6-12. Children ages 5 and under are free. For more information or to order tickets as gifts, call 317-639-4534 or e-mail [indy tours@historiclandmarks.org](mailto:indy tours@historiclandmarks.org).

Baker. “This isn’t like our other historic districts, which are created with the involvement of neighborhood associations and homeowners. Our established procedures for the designation process don’t really work in this area, so we have to create a special approach,” Baker says. “Our strategy will involve outreach to property owners and the public.” The adjacent Wholesale District, which is both a National Register and local historic district, demonstrates that commerce and development thrive in the environment of certainty created by local designation.

Historic Landmarks is beginning to discuss the idea with people who own properties in the proposed district, says Historic Landmarks’ Davis. “Our job is to cultivate the owners and make sure they understand what this designation means,” Davis says. “It’s an advantage to us and for those that invest in that area that the historic character of our city is protected. It’s good not only for their investments but for the city and state as a whole.”



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