

*Protecting, Promoting, and Enhancing America's Unique Spiritualist History through Official Designation, Documentation, and Brick and Mortar Preservation: A Case Study of Historic Camp Chesterfield — a Purpose-Built Spiritualist Camp in the United States Listed in the National Register of Historic Places*

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#### **Abstract**

Current efforts to preserve the past through the historic preservation of historic resources are fundamental in understanding the heritage of a people and their cultural identity. If the study of history offers a window into the soul of a nation, historic preservation then provides a glimpse through this window into the past by sustaining a means to convey this understanding to future generations by promoting the revitalization and restoration of historically significant frameworks that serve to tell a decisive story.

Camp Chesterfield is a very distinctive historic resource. As a destination for Spiritualists for over a century, the design of Camp Chesterfield evolved in tandem with the changing architectural tastes in America during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The planning, platting, and evolution of Camp Chesterfield occurred sporadically, and at times in leaps and bounds, and these manifestations of physical changes in the landscape and buildings coincide with the ebb and flow of Spiritualism as a legitimate form of religious practice. This expression in the brick and mortar form of its structures and landscapes is a microcosm of the Spiritualist movement in general. For this reason, Camp Chesterfield is one of the most important historic resources associated with the practice of Spiritualism in America.

#### **Introduction**

This paper outlines briefly the history of Spiritualism, Camp Chesterfield, and its historical significance, and current preservation efforts underway to preserve one of the most important, oldest, and still-operating Spiritualist communities in the United States. Efforts include the process of historical designation; the efforts to document its history through the archival digitization of historical documents

and photographs, oral history testimonials, and written and technical documentation; and the physical preservation of its structures and cultural landscapes through the stabilization, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction of essential resources.

The research area of historical preservation consists of many varied facets of expertise — including history, planning, architecture, landscape architecture, and community development — that when combined together in a meaningful way fulfill the intended goal of bringing the past alive, and ultimately improving communities. Through the preservation of historical structures and landscapes, future generations are provided an opportunity to learn about the heritage of these landmarks and the people who built them.

Historic preservation provides humanity with a tangible connection with the past and the people who have come before us. Camp Chesterfield is a perfect case study of how the complexities of historic preservation are amplified when dealing with religious properties. Under normal historical preservation-related circumstances, these can be quite daunting and complicated — and even more so when they exist within a planned religious community. However, because of its long and colorful history, historically significant grounds and structures, and its prominence as being listed in the “National Register of Historic Places” by the *National Park Service*, Camp Chesterfield is a culturally and religiously cogent jewel in the crown of planned Spiritualist communities from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and its listing in the “National Register of Historic Places” qualifies it to be preserved and revitalized as a living testament to the history and culture of the religion of Spiritualism in America.

### The Roots of Spiritualism

Modern Spiritualism has its roots in upstate New York where in 1848, two sisters — Maggie and Katie Fox — realized that they could communicate with a disincarnate spirit that was haunting their home. Through a series of “raps,” they ascertained his name, how he died, and who murdered him. This revelation started a religious revival that was unprecedented in the history of the United States.<sup>1</sup> Literally overnight, these country girls became national celebrities, and equally as fast, their new movement — Spiritualism — spread across the country. Notable writers,<sup>2</sup> famous politicians, well-known doctors and fabulously wealthy magnates all were drawn to this new religion — one of three American-made religions (Mormonism, Spiritualism, and Christian Science) that developed in the 1800s in New York.

As a testament to how pervasive the Spiritualist movement became in the United States, séances were held in living rooms across America, even in the White House.<sup>3</sup> Spiritualism changed how the

<sup>1</sup> In his book, *The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth-Century Religious Experience*, John Buescher found the Spiritualist movement boasted millions of followers in the 1850s — just a few years after the Fox Sisters initial revelation. “...the New England Spiritualists Association estimated the number of spiritualists in the United States as 2 million, and the *North American Review* gave its opinion that the figure was reasonable. The *Spiritual Register*, a popular annual serial compiled by spiritualists, estimated the number of spiritualists in 1860 as 1,600,000 but suggested that the number of nominal believers was 5 million.” (x)

<sup>2</sup> Mark Twain attended a séance in San Francisco in 1866, which he wrote about in several humorous short stories, including “Among the Spiritualists” (in *Territorial Enterprise*, January 1866); “Mark Twain a Committee Man” and “Spiritual Insanity” (*Territorial Enterprise*, February 1866). In addition, Sir Conan Doyle, creator of the world’s most rational fictional detective, *Sherlock Holmes*, was a devout Spiritualist. “He worked tirelessly, setting aside all other literary endeavors to prove the validity of Spiritualism to the world. The most definitive work on early Spiritualism, *The History of Spiritualism*, was written by Doyle.” (Leonard, T., 30)

<sup>3</sup> In addition to purported séances in the Lincoln White House hosted by Mary Todd Lincoln, and attended by the President himself, it was revealed well after Lincoln had been assassinated that perhaps the President used at least one medium in decisions of national interest: “It is believed by some Spiritualists that the Emancipation Proclamation, which brought freedom to slaves and over which Lincoln presided, was expedited by spirit intervention. This is explained by medium Nettie Colman Maynard in her book *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist? Or Curious Revelations from the Life of a Trance Medium*. Nettie first met the President when she was 19, in December of 1862, in the Red Parlor of the White House, and she kept the confidentiality of that meeting for thirty years before revealing all. By that time, Lincoln was long dead and she a sick woman, confined to her bed.” (Leonard, M. 141; Horowitz, 61)

average American during the time viewed life...and ultimately death. Especially during and after major wars (Hazelgrove, 13), Spiritualism flourished. People wanted to make contact with loved ones who had passed over to the other side.

Spiritualism, as a religion, is really no different than most other religions except that its adherents believe that people do not die — bodies do — and after death, kin and acquaintances are able to communicate with those left behind through a sensitive called a “medium.” Spiritualist church services feature mediums who offer “messages” from loved ones on the other side to those in attendance. This is in addition to a sermon and songs that most people raised in a Christian tradition would readily recognize.

Initially, when Spiritualism began to draw huge numbers of members from other more mainstream churches, it was unfairly labeled as being a form of witchcraft or satanic worship by those who felt threatened by its claims (and those who had a vested interest in keeping memberships in their own churches high).<sup>4</sup> The reality is: Spiritualism is a God-centered religion, accepting the sacred truths from all religious traditions, including Christianity,<sup>5</sup> and is in no way connected to black magic or devil worship. This, however, does not mean that Spiritualism is welcomed with open arms within the larger religious community.

Even with religious freedom and diversity being a hallmark of American ideals and values, many mainstream religions look at Spiritualism askance, often regarding it disdainfully — similar to the way a wayward relative who does not fit the social norm is outcast as a black sheep within a family. The fact remains, however, that the Spiritualist movement (and later religion) has survived for well over a century-and-a-half and is still continuing despite the negative reception it has traditionally received by mainstream denominations (outlasting other religious movements, some of which are long defunct).

### **The Founding of Historic Camp Chesterfield**

Since 1886, Spiritualism has been a visible part of Indiana's rich and varied religious historical landscape through the auspices of the *Indiana Association of Spiritualists* (IAOS), settling permanently on the banks of the White River in the small town of Chesterfield, Indiana officially in 1891.

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<sup>4</sup> In 1854, a petition with 15,000 signatures was presented to the U.S. Congress demanding a scientific committee be formed to investigate Spiritualism and its otherworldly phenomena. “Lawmakers ultimately tabled the petition, even as a new debate raged among the nation's clergy. Many clergymen became alarmed on June 10 [1854] when former Wisconsin governor Nathaniel P. Tallmadge became a charter member of the Society for the Diffusion of Spiritual Knowledge. ‘Your pulpits — and we speak kindly when we speak of them, for they have holy office...have launched forth invectives. The cry of delusion and chicanery has been heard all over the land.... Policy was adopted...not only from the pulpits, but by the religious press of this country, namely that evil spirits have visited the earth still further to delude deluded mortals. What pity! ...It is very strange, if they believe this thing — that evil spirits can come to do evil on their earth — that good spirits will not be permitted by the good God also to come upon this earth to effect good purposes.’” (Stuart, 176-177) Also, Tallmadge was a dear and old friend of Maggie Fox, a founder of Spiritualism, who was constantly being accused of everything from humbuggery to satanic witchcraft.

<sup>5</sup> Spiritualist ministers and mediums often use scripture from the *Holy Bible* in sermons for worship services. An often quoted scripture which refers to “spirit gifts” comes from 1 Corinthians 12 (the following is from the *Good News Bible version*) verses 4-11: “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served. There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to everyone for their particular service. The Spirit's presence is shown in some way to each person for the good of all. The Spirit gives one person a message full of wisdom while to another the same Spirit gives a message full of knowledge. One and the same Spirit gives faith to one person, while to another person he gives the power to heal. The Spirit gives one person the power to work miracles, to another, the gift of speaking God's message; and to yet another, the ability to tell the difference between gifts, which come from the Spirit and those that do not. To one person he gives the ability to speak in strange tongues, and to another he gives the ability to explain what is said. But is the one and the same Spirit who does all this; as he wishes, he gives a different gift to each person.”

Affectionately called “Camp Chesterfield” by its members, this association has been a “spiritual center of light” for generations of Hoosiers.

A number of religious groups during the 19<sup>th</sup> century took advantage of Indiana’s frontier spirit by choosing to settle there.

In the 1830s, most religious organizations in Indiana were imported units filled with new arrivals from somewhere else. Furthermore, probably more churches were founded by the influence of missionaries than grew up spontaneously from woodland cabins. For the year 1836, there were 319 congregations throughout an eighteen county area of Indiana. Most of these met in private homes, barns, schools, or outside; less than half had regular church buildings for worship. Of the 319 churches, 118 were Methodist groups which evolved from a larger number of informal classes. Baptists had organized 75 congregations, the Disciples of Christ 42, Presbyterians 39, Friends 24, and United Brethren 11; there were 10 other miscellaneous groups. (Vanderstel, 2009)

These congregations set the stage, in essence, for what was about to occur on Indiana’s religious vista. After the Spiritualist movement first began, it was not long until the movement spread far and wide, including its arrival to the borders of Indiana. For a number of years, there was no specific association in the state devoted to the religion of Spiritualism. Hoosier adherents were forced to travel to Ohio, Michigan or Illinois to attend “camp” meetings modeled on those made popular earlier by Methodist preachers who would travel as itinerant ministers to different parts of the country to preach, convert, marry, baptize, and even bury those in need of “ministering.”

Similarly to mainstream denominations, in the beginning years of the Spiritualist movement, regular church meetings were conducted in people’s homes, in public spaces, outdoors and eventually centered on a revival-type of tent meeting where people would go to hear messages, receive readings, and attend séances. Gradually, these tent services began to take the form of “camps” where people could go for several days or weeks to “camp out” in order to attend the services. Eventually, these tents began to take the form of rustic cottages where mediums would reside during the “high” season, from May through September.

This is exactly how Camp Chesterfield began. After attending a Spiritualist camp at Frazier’s Grove in Michigan, Hoosiers John and Mary Ellen Bussel-Westerfield of Anderson felt that Indiana needed its very own Spiritualist camp, so they organized the first meeting of the *Indiana Association of Spiritualists* in 1886. Interest in this newfangled religion spread quickly, and in 1890, a church picnic was held on the grounds of what is now Camp Chesterfield, with a permanent home being made after the association purchased a sizeable parcel of wooded land on the banks of the White River in Chesterfield, Indiana in 1891. Indiana’s own Camp Chesterfield is one of three of the most historically significant centers for Spiritualism in the United States (the other two being Camp Lily Dale in New York and Camp Cassadaga in Florida).

Today, Camp Chesterfield is a thriving Spiritualist community that supports a number of buildings that are historically significant.<sup>6</sup> From its earliest beginnings, Hoosier Spiritualists began constructing buildings to facilitate the religion which included a boarding house, hotels, a cafeteria, medium cottages that began as two-room, seasonal shanties which eventually evolved into year-round residences that are still used today. Throughout its long history, Camp Chesterfield has razed a number of the original structures, replacing them with mid-twentieth century buildings which include a cathedral, art gallery

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<sup>6</sup> The Western Hotel, on the grounds of Camp Chesterfield, is officially recognized as an historic landmark, listed on the U.S. Park Service’s *National Register of Historic Places* [Listed July 26, 2002] ([www.nps.gov/history/nr/listings/20020726.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/listings/20020726.htm))

and museum, a cafeteria, and more recently an administration building, academic resource center, and bookstore.

Upon entering its gates, the visitor to Camp Chesterfield is greeted by a nostalgic old hotel called “The Sunflower.” Another hotel on the grounds, “The Western,” built in the style of a 1940s roadhouse, is unique because of its authentic exterior and charming interior. Both of these historic hotels offer visitors an opportunity to go back in time, imagining how guests would have sat idly on the shaded porches — most likely escaping the hot Indiana summer sun — chatting to one another about the messages they received from their loved ones through one of the well-known resident mediums who lived in one of the many historic cottages around the perimeter of the camp.<sup>7</sup>

Early Hoosier Spiritualists were quite forward thinking and were involved in the free and progressive thought movements of the day. These people were very attracted to the idea of Spiritualism which advocated equality for women, Abolition, and the general negation of firmly held concepts of mainstream religion such as original sin, hell and damnation of wayward souls,<sup>8</sup> vicarious atonement<sup>9</sup> and the absolute divinity of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Dr. J.W. Westerfield, and his wife Mary, of Anderson, Indiana were two such people who actively sought out alternative ideas regarding politics and religion. In 1883, Dr. Westerfield offered a second floor room in the hall he owned (which also housed his drugstore on the first floor) in downtown Anderson to act as a general meeting place for the intellectuals who resided in the area.

According to the book, *Chesterfield Lives — 1886-1986 — Our First Hundred Years*, Dr. Westerfield was instrumental in the formation of the “Indiana Association of Spiritualists” and subsequently, Camp Chesterfield. It was during a trip to Michigan that he and his wife came up with the idea of forming an association in Indiana. At that time, Michigan had three functioning Spiritualist camps, but the journey to Michigan was long and arduous. Dr. Westerfield purportedly suggested (while attending Frazier’s Grove Spiritualist Camp, near Vicksburg, Michigan) that Indiana should have its own camp. Other Hoosiers who had also travelled to Michigan agreed with his proposal and the seeds that would later become the *Indiana Association of Spiritualists* were sown.

It was further decided that Dr. Westerfield was the only one in their number in a position to enter into the preliminaries of the plan, as he had already retired from business and had the necessary means, ability and time to carry through on the matter. In the next three years, he contacted Spiritualists in all parts of the state, reporting his progress concerning an Indiana Camp and also progress within the movement itself, and in the early fall of 1886 he called a mass meeting in his Hall in Anderson.

When all had assembled, and Dr. Westerfield had rapped his gavel for order, there

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<sup>7</sup> A portion of this text has been adapted from an earlier paper entitled “A “Spiritual Center of Light” since 1886 — The Spiritualist Community that Talks to the Dead — Historic Camp Chesterfield,” published in the annual proceedings of the *Association for the Scientific Study of Religion (ASSR)*.

<sup>8</sup> Spiritualists believe strongly in the concept that all souls are redeemable, no matter how wickedly they behaved during their earthly incarnation. Also, the idea of “heaven” and “hell” being locations is not a belief of Spiritualists; instead, Spiritualists view the concept of “heaven” and “hell” as conditions, with humans creating their own earthly “heavens” and “hells” according to how they live their lives during this particular incarnation.

<sup>9</sup> The Christian belief that Jesus Christ died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins of humankind is contrary to Spiritualist teachings which focus on inculcating the ideology that each person is morally responsible for his or her own transgressions on earth and must make amends for those when on the other side.

<sup>10</sup> Spiritualists view the historical Jesus as a wonderfully gifted Master-Teacher, healer and psychic, who attained the “Christed” state as a result of his good works and teachings while on the earth plane. He is no more divine, however, than any other person before, during or after his earthly existence — all humans equally have the divine spark of God within them.



were about two hundred men and women in attendance, many of whom manifested deep interest and took an active part in the deliberations. Dr. George Hilligoss was elected president; his wife, Caroline, secretary; and Carroll Bronnenberg, treasurer. (Harrison, *et al*, 10)

For three years, the association met at Dr. Westerfield's hall in Anderson. "During that time, on November 5, 1887, they drew up the Constitution and By Laws making the society an incorporated body, legally qualified to transact all business pertaining to the organization and the religion of Spiritualism." (Harrison, *et al*, 14) The next order of business was to find a permanent home for the association. Dr. Westerfield, in the meantime, was elected president of the association. He served one term and was succeeded by Dr. L.M. Blackledge, the association's third president.

The annual convention of 1890 saw Dr. Westerfield again elected as the fourth president of the association. The convention was held at a church picnic on the Carroll and Emily Bronnenberg riverside property at Chesterfield. This was an amicable and generous gesture on their part, and was an outgrowth of the original membership of Carroll, Henry and Fred Bronnenberg in 1886. (Harrison, *et al*, 14)

The grounds — with rolling hills and valleys, fresh spring water, and ample forest — were previously revered by the Native Americans who had once inhabited the area. In fact, not far from this acreage are ten distinct "earthworks" built by a group of prehistoric Indians known as the Adena-Hopewell people. (Werner, 121) Spiritualism, since its earliest beginnings, has had an affinity with Native American culture. Many Spiritualist adherents have a Native American guide within their band of Spirit Guides.<sup>11</sup> The rich Native American history connected to the Bronnenberg property on the banks of the White River made it all the more appropriate and appealing to the membership at the time.

Dr. and Mary Westerfield were greatly instrumental in the ongoing negotiations for the grounds, and on August 12, 1892, the 34 acres of land was purchased from Carroll and Emily Bronnenberg for \$3,325.00. The Westerfields and Carroll Bronnenberg each gave large donations to the association enabling this purchase. (Harrison, *et al*, 18)

The *Indiana Association of Spiritualists* (IAOS) rapidly grew and expanded after finding its permanent home on the grounds of "Camp Chesterfield." Soon, however, problems arose as more and more people began to gravitate to the grounds in search of mediums to receive readings and attend séances, and to seek their own spiritual truth with likeminded people. To counteract this huge influx of spiritual seekers wanting to attend services and séances on the grounds, those early leaders began expanding the facilities to accommodate the masses of people coming through the gates.

Initially, a large tent was erected in 1891 with a dirt floor to shelter people from the unpredictable Indiana summers which ran the gamut from heavy rain to unforgiving heat and humidity from the sun. This tent gradually had a wooden floor and platform for messages added, and eventually walls were built to make it an actual structure. This early auditorium, built circa 1903, would have two more restorations and upgrades over its tenure until it was replaced completely in 1954 with what is now the "Cathedral of the Woods." A boarding house was constructed early on, along with a full-service dining hall<sup>12</sup> in 1918,

<sup>11</sup> Spiritualists generally have five primary spirit guides who assist them: 1) a Doctor-Teacher who maintains a presence on the person's right side; 2) a Master-Teacher who is behind the person; 3) a Chemist (often Asian or Middle-Eastern) who is on the person's left side; 4) a Native American or Indian Protector who stands directly in front of the person; and 5) a Joy Guide (usually a child) who moves around the person but generally stays around the person's legs. (Leonard, T, 321)

<sup>12</sup> The original dining hall was razed to make way for the "Maxon Cafeteria" in 1955.

and eventual hotels — The Sunflower (1914) and The Lily<sup>13</sup> in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and then the Western Hotel in 1945. The efforts to modernize and construct cinder block buildings to replace the old wooden structures was headed by the stalwart and uncompromising Rev. Mable Riffle who made it her life's mission to not only bolster the status of Spiritualism in Indiana, but also to expand and improve the grounds during her tenure as Secretary of the *Indiana Association of Spiritualists* (IAOS).

### **The Preservation of Camp Chesterfield**

As an historic resource, Camp Chesterfield is presented with a multitude of challenges related to its specific form of worship and to its aging infrastructure. The current challenges that religious institutions (of varying denominations face) are often times magnified when those same institutions need to focus or redirect attention and resources towards an aging and historic infrastructure. Camp Chesterfield, which has survived assaults against its belief system (sometimes warranted — many times not) within the context of Protestant and conservative Indiana, is an incredibly important historic resource that provides an extraordinary opportunity to understand the complex history of Spiritualism in Indiana and the United States as a whole. When asking locals (non-Spiritualists) about Camp Chesterfield, the common response is, “oh the spook camp?” This misguided belief, which has been passed down from generation to generation by nonbelievers, has negatively influenced people's understanding of the importance of this place.

### **Regional and Historic Context**

East Central Indiana has the distinction of being the location of a late nineteenth century gas boom. The Trenton Gas Field birthed dozens of boom towns in the region and was instrumental in the development of Madison County and the Chesterfield area. This boom increased the population tremendously and indirectly “fueled” the influence and indoctrination of Spiritualism in the region. As the natural gas quickly ran out (lasting for around 30 years), the spark of Spiritualism — that it perhaps ignited — was by then too entrenched to dissipate and has survived for over 130 years. This longevity is even more important as a result of many camp meetings around the country failing or disappearing altogether. For this reason, Camp Chesterfield embodies one of the most intact and important places associated with Spiritualism in the United States.

As an historic district, the site consists of 40 contributing historic buildings, 9 structures, and 2 objects.<sup>14</sup> Camp Chesterfield is very distinctive, especially when placed in the context of existing and remaining vestiges of Spiritualist Camps and towns around the country. As a destination for Spiritualists for over a century — initially as a seasonal offering and later as a year round community, the constructed environment and landscape of Camp has evolved in tandem with the changes in American architectural tastes — including vernacular cottages, to Art Deco Civic buildings, and at its apex, mid-century modern. In addition, Camp is sprinkled with iconic spiritual statuary ranging from all the world's major religions with an emphasis on Christian and Native American representations. It is truly a distinct type of historic resource whose importance is only beginning to be understood beyond the practitioners of Spiritualism. The planning, platting, and evolution of Camp occurred sporadically, and at times in leaps, and these changes in the landscape and architectural styles coincide with the intermittent practice of Spiritualism

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<sup>13</sup> The Lily, sadly, was lost to a catastrophic fire set by arsonists in 1996. The Sunflower still exists but is not currently in use due to dilapidation and deterioration, but plans are currently in progress to renovate and restore it to its original grandeur by repurposing it for modern use and function. The *Friends of Camp Chesterfield Foundation* (FCCF) is instrumental in finding funds and grants to preserve and restore this historical structure.

<sup>14</sup> *National Register of Historic Places*, Chesterfield Spiritualist Camp District, Chesterfield, Madison County, Indiana National Register #095-409-51001.

in America.

As a boomtown (both spiritually and materially) and located in the context of a postindustrial conservative region of Indiana, Camp Chesterfield has had to deal with adversity during its entire existence. Additionally, like other auto industry regions, Madison County saw a steady decline in population during the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, many of the communities (including Chesterfield) servicing the industrial center of the county — Anderson, Indiana — have been faced with the negative consequences of shrinking populations, aging and failing infrastructure, a shift away from labor intensive manufacturing, and an overall brain drain. On top of dealing with shrinking populations and a postindustrial decline, the IAOS is navigating a changing spiritual landscape. Residents of Camp, members of the IAOS, and members of the preservation community, have come together in order to strategize about how to counteract the trends of the last few decades.

### Grass Roots Advocacy

Following the grass roots formula that has often times become the genesis of saving and protecting important historic resources, conversations during the 2013 season revealed that Camp Chesterfield needed a volunteer driven group (working in conjunction with the IAOS) solely dedicated towards the preservation of its important historic resources. It was agreed upon that this organization should include members of the IAOS, residents of Camp, preservation professionals, and anyone interested in preserving this unique place. The *Friends of Camp Chesterfield Foundation, Inc.* (FCCF) was incorporated in Indiana in November 2013 (incorporated as a 501c3 in spring of 2014). Their stated purpose is:

To facilitate and promote the historical and traditional preservation and protection of the grounds, structures, and facilities of Historic Camp Chesterfield, including the areas of commercial, civic and religious enterprises, structures, public buildings and private residences. To take remedial actions to eliminate the physical, and economic and social deterioration of Historic Camp Chesterfield's historic and traditional areas and contribute to its betterment. To disseminate information about, and promote interest in, the preservation, history, culture, architecture and public use of Historic Camp Chesterfield.<sup>15</sup>

### Documentation and Promotion

The FCCF, with assistance from *Indiana Landmarks* and the IAOS, organized and strategized on how they could be effective advocates for historic preservation within the confines of an aging religious institution.<sup>16</sup> Focusing first on attainable projects, the FCCF started with vigor to promote the importance of Camp as an historic resource. Although many residents at Camp already intuitively understood the significance of this place, the FCCF felt it was important to promote this concept in a meaningful and visible way outside the confines of Camp. Many regional residents never heard of Camp, and if they did, they did not understand its important placement in the timeline of American Spiritualism.

In May of 2013, in conjunction with the IAOS, the FCCF applied and received a "Historic Preservation Education Grant" from the *National Endowment for the Humanities* in conjunction with *Indiana Humanities* and *Indiana Landmarks* to produce a narrated video highlighting the history of

<sup>15</sup> *Friends of Camp Chesterfield Foundation Articles of Incorporation.*

<sup>16</sup> *Indiana Landmarks* is the largest statewide historic preservation organization in the country. With nine regional offices around the state, the organization assists communities, nonprofit organizations, and individuals with historic preservation endeavors. Representatives of the "Eastern Regional Office" and "Heritage Education & Information of Indiana Landmarks" assisted with the formation of the FCCF.



Camp and its grounds. Additionally, the grant allowed them to produce and print a historic walking tour brochure.<sup>17</sup> This grant also provided seed money for the FCCF to spearhead an interpretive signage program that strategically placed signage at important resources around the grounds. These signs detail the history of significant buildings, public art, and important people in the history of Camp.

Additionally in 2013, the FCCF worked with the IAOS and applied for a *U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services Grant* to digitize a portion of the collection in the *Dr. J. E. Hett Art Gallery and Museum* located on the grounds of Camp Chesterfield.<sup>18</sup> This included important documents, such as IAOS board minutes, early hotel registers, precipitated paintings, and historic photographs.<sup>19</sup> This collection is currently available to the public through the digital library website at Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis (IUPUI).

Additionally, since Camp was listed in the *National Register of Historic Places*, the group worked towards recognizing this important designation by installing a bronze plaque at the gate entrance to Camp. With IAOS approval, the FCCF raised the necessary capital to purchase and install the plaque for all to see. Now, one of the first things that visitors and residents see when they drive through the front gates, is a material recognition by the Federal Government of Camp's historical importance.

Continuing with its promotional priorities, the FCCF worked to list Camp Chesterfield on "Indiana Landmark's 10 Most Endangered Properties" list in 2015 and 2016.<sup>20</sup> This endeavor was seen as an important way to highlight the need for preserving Camp. In an interview in the *Herald Bulletin* (2015) S. L. Miley reported that IAOS President Rev. Vicki Corkell saw this as an opportunity. Corkell states:

From the outset, it might seem like a negative. I don't see it as a negative thing at all," she said. The board really, as a whole, sees this as a wonderful opportunity," she said. "Landmarks historically has been so instrumental in helping Indiana historic structures to find solutions, look at things outside the box, and create avenues for resources that we might not have access to.

### **Brick and Mortar Preservation**

In addition to promoting the historic significance of Camp, the FCCF is interested in advocating for the preservation and rehabilitation of specific buildings, as well. For a young organization, operating within budgetary constraints, this is often times a challenge, but with the assistance of the IAOS and *Indiana Landmarks*, the group set their sights on protecting and rehabilitating the "Lizzie Koch Cottage," an early 20<sup>th</sup> century structure. In 2014, the Lizzie Koch Cottage, a Contributing Structure to the National Register District, had sat vacant for almost a decade and deferred maintenance had taken its toll. A large hole in the roof of the structure had developed to the point that it was accelerating exponentially every year. Since it was a Contributing Structure, and the only remaining original two story cottage, the FCCF felt it necessary to attempt to save it, or at least stem any further deterioration.

The FCCF worked with the IAOS (the owners of the cottage) and convinced the board to allow the group to mothball the building. Mothballing, a term often used in preservation parlance, is the

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<sup>17</sup> Both the video and walking tour brochure are available online at [www.campchesterfield.net](http://www.campchesterfield.net)

<sup>18</sup> Dedicated in 1954, the Dr. J. E. Hett Art Gallery and Museum is a contributing resource to the *National Register* which listed Chesterfield Spiritualist Camp as a district. The museum displays artifacts from Camp Chesterfield's and Spiritualism's history. The ashlar faced limestone façade is typical of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century construction boom that occurred at Camp following WWII.

<sup>19</sup> The Dr. J.E. Hett Gallery is one of the largest collections of precipitated paintings in the world. Popularized by the Bangs sisters, these paintings are pieces of art — typically portraits — that were precipitated during séances.

<sup>20</sup> Indiana Landmarks is the largest statewide historic preservation organization in the country and they market an annual list of the most important threatened properties statewide.

initial and sometimes modest buttoning up of a building in anticipation of further resources becoming available in the future. This was the approach that FCCF has taken with the Koch Cottage. With the generous assistance from the *Efroymsen Family Fund*, the FCCF received a grant — first to stabilize the deteriorated roof, then to replace it entirely.<sup>21</sup> This one act essentially saved the Lizzie Koch Cottage from tipping towards a point of no return. Also, the group used funds from the *Efroymsen Family Fund* to restore the cottage's original double-hung wood windows. As of this writing, the group has removed later-applied asphalt siding, in hopes to paint the cottage's original lap siding. The FCCF, with an eye towards appropriate restoration, was guided in their efforts by the Secretary of Interior's "Standards for the Rehabilitation of Historic Properties."<sup>22</sup>

Further buildings and structures need attention at Camp Chesterfield. A few cottages currently lay vacant, and some buildings are not being utilized or are being underutilized. One building's future, which has continued to be a topic of local conversation, is the long vacant (c. 1914) Sunflower Hotel. The Sunflower, which stands at the front gates of Camp, and was originally one of a twin-pair of hotel structures (the Lily Hotel was destroyed by arson in 1996) flanking the front gates, is currently at a crossroads. The future use of this structure is in question. During the summer of 2017, the IAOS applied for an "Efroymsen Family Endangered Places Grant" from *Indiana Landmarks* to look at the needs, future use, and associated costs of rehabilitating the Sunflower Hotel. The board has discussed potential uses of at least part of the building for overnight accommodations and meeting spaces; however, the board is open to alternative compatible uses that may provide additional revenue-generating opportunities, or affordable senior housing. The feasibility study is the first step in a multi-year investigation on how to repurpose appropriately the Sunflower for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Designation

Lastly, advocates for Camp believe that there is a strong case to be made that Camp Chesterfield is eligible for "National Historic Landmark" status.<sup>23</sup> When nominated to the *National Register* in 2002, Camp Chesterfield was designated as being only locally significant. The board of the FCCF believes that Camp Chesterfield represents an important national phenomenon and its historic contexts need to be reevaluated. Camp Chesterfield physically embodies the history, evolution, and peak of the Spiritualist movement in the United States. The Camp's buildings, landscapes, public art features, circulatory patterns, and evolution of architectural styles, all embody this nationally important religious movement.

Although several Spiritualist camps still exist around the United States, only one other is listed in the *National Register of Historic Places— Southern Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp Meeting Association* in Florida — and none, except for perhaps the *Lily Dale Assembly* (a Spiritualist Camp in New York State), are as expansive, have as high a level of integrity, and retain as much physical material fabric as Camp Chesterfield. Additionally, the district was nominated to the *National Register* only under Criterion A (associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history) and a reevaluation should be considered so that Camp is also eligible under Criterion C — as the embodiment of a distinctive type and as whose components may lack individual distinction.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *The Efroymsen Family Fund*, a fund of the *Central Indiana Community Foundation*, supports a variety of causes inside and outside of Indiana. The fund works closely with *Indiana Landmarks* to fund historic preservation projects around the state.

<sup>22</sup> The Secretary of Interior's "Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties," codified in 36 CFR 67 and recently updated in 2017, provide advice and guidance on the treatment of historic properties. The FCCF utilize the Secretary of Interior's "Standards for the Rehabilitation" to guide all preservation actions.

<sup>23</sup> *National Historic Landmarks* are resources that the U. S. Department of the Interior deem to be of national significance. At present, Camp is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as only being locally significant.

<sup>24</sup> The National Register Criteria for Evaluation are found in the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 36, Part 60.

As a designed landscape — that has retained its historic design, topography, association with the river, grading, architectural and public art features, and original circulation/pedestrian system — Camp Chesterfield should be eligible under Criterion C as a designed landscape in addition to being a district. Current discussions are underway with the *Division of Historic Preservation and Archeology* (DHPA) — Indiana's State Historic Preservation Office — about upgrading Camp's level of significance and the potentiality of the sites eligibility as a National Historic Landmark.

### Conclusion

Today, Camp Chesterfield continues to exist due in large part to the original vision of its founding members and the commitment of its longtime secretary, Rev. Mable Riffle, who nearly singlehandedly expanded the camp's structures and facilities by tapping benefactors to donate large sums of money to ensure that the association would continue well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The current dilemma of budgetary concerns facing the IAOS and Camp Chesterfield, coupled with its varied and numerous preservation needs, too will pass. Historically, Spiritualism has regularly endured times of great prosperity and times of near extinction. Like many other organizations who are charged with being the custodians of historical structures, archives, and folk art displays, Camp Chesterfield is at a crossroads regarding its preservation needs and concerns. In order to address proactively these critical needs, the IAOS, in association with the non-profit group "Friends of Camp Chesterfield Foundation" (FCCF), are actively pursuing a variety of avenues in the form of donations, grants, and fundraising to procure the needed funds to preserve and protect the historical structures and displays that are an integral part of Camp Chesterfield's legacy, which in turn, is a part of Indiana's religious history.

Camp Chesterfield, as it modernizes its appeal to a new generation of spiritual seekers, will continue to offer confirmation of life after death to those who come through its gates. Although the number of visitors and members may not be the same as in its heyday, as interest in the paranormal and communication with the so-called dead heightens, as well as interest in historical preservation, so will interest in this "Old Age" religion and its distinctive historical appeal. For nearly one-hundred and thirty years, Camp Chesterfield has been a "spiritual center of light" to many generations of Hoosiers, offering comfort and healing to all those who enter upon its grounds. Preserving its historically unique and significant structures and displays is an important mission for those today to make sure Camp Chesterfield and its historical edifices continue into the next century.

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