

# Worcester's Clock Towers in Danger

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Two of the city's iconic clock towers – the Worcester State Hospital and the Odd Fellows Home – face a fight for their survival. While the progress and new construction around each building – symbolizes good fortune for Worcester's future, the stately structures also serve as emblems of the city's history. If something isn't done to protect the buildings, those emblems could soon turn to dust.



Worcester State Hospital, originally named the Worcester State Lunatic Hospital, was constructed between 1874 and 1877. The creation of architects Weston and Rand of Worcester, the facility marked the first state-owned hospital dedicated to the treatment of the mentally ill in the United States. The hospital reflected the ideas of Dr. Thomas Kirkbride, founder of the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane (which later became the American Psychiatric Association), to promote the “moral treatment” of mentally ill patients.

The Odd Fellows Home was first erected from 1890 through 1892 to serve as one of several charitable homes for the aged built in the outlining sections of Worcester in the 19th Century. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows, a fraternal organization first established in 17th Century England and founded in America in Baltimore, used the home as a place to house and provide care for the elderly. Standing on 11 acres of land donated by Thomas Dodge, a prominent Worcester inventor and patent attorney, the Romanesque structure was built under architects Baker & Nourse.



While both the Worcester State Hospital and Odd Fellows Home are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, both currently face demolition. Much of the campus of the original Worcester State Hospital has already been demolished as part of the construction of a new state psychiatric hospital. The project – totally \$250 million – will bring the first new psychiatric hospital to Massachusetts in 50 years and stands as one of the largest capital projects commissioned by the state. The current project has razed all but two buildings of the original state hospital grounds: the Clock Tower and the Hooper Turret, a freestanding circular building. The Odd Fellows Home, while still standing in full, is quickly falling into disrepair. “It’s not being well cared for – there are open windows right now,” describes Deborah Packard, Executive Director of Preservation Worcester, an advocacy group dedicated to preserving significant structures and sites in Worcester. “There’s a thing we talk about in preservation called demolition by neglect that pertains to both of these properties,” Packard explains. “The property at some point is not maintained for a long period of time, then people say it’s not possible to save it because of all the damage that’s done to it.”

For both structures, financial matters remain the greatest hindrance to their reuse. The Clock Tower currently carries a hefty price tag to stabilize the building. As of 2008 studies estimated a total cost of \$3.38 million to stabilize the structure for reuse. Further complicating matters, the Clock Tower lost an application to qualify for federal tax credits as a historic building. Given the wide-scale demolition of the original state hospital campus, the clock tower is now considered only a remnant rather than an individual structure. “That has changed the whole outlook for the property,” states Packard. “The feeling is that without the availability of the tax credits, no one is going to touch the project.”

The Odd Fellows Home faces a similar financial struggle. The current owner of the building and the land surrounding the property has been granted a permit to build two 80-unit condominium buildings on the land. The property – most recently listed with a price tag of \$1.2 million as of last spring – was granted a demolition delay as of a petition filing date on April 7 of last year. That delay, however, expires after one year, meaning that the Odd Fellows Home is cleared for demolition as of early April this year.

Despite the hardships, Packard and Preservation Worcester remain dedicated to the fight to save these historic buildings. “Our efforts are mainly through advocacy,” says Packard. The Clock Tower has appeared on the Preservation Worcester Most Endangered Structures List for 1995, 2004, and each year since 2006. The Odd Fellows Home was added to the list in 2010, and both properties will appear on the list again for 2011. Reaching beyond Worcester, Preservation Worcester successfully nominated the Clock Tower for Preservation Massachusetts’ 2006 Most Endangered Resources List and are currently petitioning to have the structure added to the National Trust for Historic Preservation 11 Most Endangered List, a distinction that would name the property one of the most endangered in the country. The group will meet with the Division of Capital Asset Management and the Department of Mental Health, among others, on April 1 to complete the reuse study of the Clock Tower. As the talks continue, awareness of the buildings remains Preservation Worcester’s top priority. “We hope to bring greater visibility to these projects,” affirms Packard. “We’re going to try to do some kind of grassroots project to raise a ruckus. We’re going to try to raise some enthusiasm for the project by people raising their voices.”