

The Mayslake Referendum

by Kendra Strubhart, Heritage Interpreter

Mayslake Peabody Estate is celebrating a milestone this year: It's the 25th anniversary of the voter-approved referendum to save the estate. It's a success story rooted in the dedication of the individuals and groups who worked tirelessly to inform residents about a historic gem that was right in their own backyards.

In 1988 Valerie Spale, a natural areas preservationist, Audrey Muschler, a historic preservationist, and Lana Green, an environmentalist and the public relations director for the St. Francis Retreat House at Mayslake, founded the Salt Creek Greenway Association. Dedicated to identifying, preserving and promoting natural, historic and recreational resources along the greenway, the association quickly identified Mayslake as a priority for preservation.



Mayslake Retreat Center Dedication Ceremony. Mar., 1925.

At the time, Mayslake had had only two owners: Francis Stuyvesant Peabody, who built the mansion in 1921, and the Franciscan Order of the Friars Minor, which purchased the property in 1924, two years after Peabody's death. In 1925 the Franciscans converted the property into a religious retreat center, and over the years the order hosted more than 250,000 guests. In fact, when the Salt Creek Greenway Association was formed, it seemed the Franciscans would continue hosting retreats indefinitely.

However, in July 1990 the Franciscans announced they were selling the land and buildings that made up Mayslake. The Salt Creek Greenway Association, the Oak Brook Historical Society, Openlands Project and other organizations mobilized.

First, the groups invited representatives of the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois to visit the property. The council confirmed that the buildings and diverse habitats of the grounds were valuable historical, cultural and natural assets worthy of preservation. They then presented testimony before the Forest Preserve District's land acquisition committee, urging the Forest Preserve District to acquire and preserve the site. They held a forum with preservation experts as key speakers and commissioned a feasibility study, which concluded the buildings could be adapted for public programming and events.

Forest Preserve District commissioners did not overlook these efforts and decided to place the question of purchase on the 1992 primary election ballot. Supporters worked to inform voters about the estate and grounds, but in the limited time available their efforts fell short. The referendum was narrowly defeated 84,218 to 79,111. The group remained determined and in August 1992 District commissioners voted to reintroduce the referendum on the November presidential ballot.

Now formally known as the Mayslake Heritage Foundation, supporters spoke at township meetings and community groups, distributed literature door-to-door, sent out mailings, and spoke with major and local newspapers. They hosted an open house at Mayslake Hall, produced a video called Save Mayslake, hosted a benefit concert promoted by students from the College of DuPage, and held a "Mayslake Fair" at an Oak Brook Park District shelter to raise funds and awareness.



Mayslake Hall during construction, March, 1921. Photograph by Chicago Architectural Photographing Co.

While these efforts were taking place, a developer obtained a contract to purchase the property from the Franciscans. Planning to demolish the mansion and other buildings to make way for homes, he applied to Oak Brook for a variance to allow a greater housing density on the property than the village code allowed. The Mayslake Heritage Foundation organized testimonies from architectural historians, environmental agencies, educators, psychologists and other experts who opposed the development, and the village decided to postpone any action until the outcome of the referendum was decided that fall.

On Nov. 3, 1992, the voters of DuPage County approved the referendum for \$17.5 million to purchase the property, and the Mayslake Heritage Foundation began drafting the nomination for the property to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The foundation submitted its paperwork to the Illinois Historic Sites Advisory Council on April 1, 1993, and the council approved the nomination on June 18, 1993.



**VOTE YES
FOR MAYSLAKE**

"Vote Yes For Mayslake" campaign button, 1992.
By the Mayslake Heritage Foundation.

On July 9, 1993, after several months of negotiations with the developer and the Franciscans, the Forest Preserve District purchased the property for \$16.5 million, and on Feb. 18, 1994, after approval from the U.S. Department of the Interior, Mayslake Peabody Estate — the historic mansion, the entrance gates and roughly 90 acres of land — was officially listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The story of saving Mayslake is a small chapter in the property's history, but it's a big example of what the estate strives for: to be a vital part of a community in which all citizens share a connection with nature and an appreciation for cultural history.