

Peru Historical Society: 2025 Annual Report

Executive Summary

The year 2025 marked the foundational year of the Peru Historical Society, a period of growth, strategic planning, and successful community engagement. From its initial organizational meetings, the society has rapidly established itself as a vital institution dedicated to preserving and promoting the rich history of Peru, Illinois. Key accomplishments for the year include establishing a formal leadership structure and meeting schedule and securing a dedicated meeting and collections space within the Peru Municipal Building.



The Society successfully launched several major initiatives:

- A ten-year project to publish a comprehensive bicentennial history book for 2035.
- The development of a highly engaging Facebook page that garnered close to 1,000 followers and hundreds of thousands of views by year-end.
- Participation at the Taste of the Illinois Valley festival and Christmas open house with Society members present to discuss Peru history with attendees.

Through a vibrant series of monthly presentations, the establishment of display cases for public exhibits, and the development of a framework for future growth, the Peru Historical Society has built an exceptionally strong foundation in its inaugural year.

Organizational Development

In 2025, the Peru Historical Society transitioned from a concept into a structured organization, laying the essential groundwork for its long-term mission of dedication to the preservation, research, dissemination, and celebration of the rich history of Peru, Illinois..

Establishing a Formal Structure

- **Non-Profit Status:** A primary and ultimate objective for the organization is to achieve official non-profit status. The Society pursued the 501(c)(3) option, with Scott Schweickert leading the effort to file for tax exemption with the IRS. By June, an Employer Identification Number (EIN) had been obtained, and by July, the articles of incorporation were being developed. As the Society recognizes this is a long-term goal, other intermediate options were also explored.

- **Leadership:** An initial leadership structure was proposed to guide the organization: Mike Sapienza as President, Mike Nieslawski as Vice President, Scott Schweickert as Treasurer, and Pam Broviak as Secretary.
- **Meeting Framework:** The Society established a regular meeting schedule on the last Tuesday of each month at the Peru Municipal Building. The meetings adopted a productive, informal format consisting of business updates, a featured presentation, and open discussion.

Membership Framework

- A tiered membership structure was formalized, set to launch in early 2026. Categories include:
 - **Founding Members:** For the initial organizers and those working to set up the organization.
 - **Charter Members:** For all who attended meetings during the first year (2025).
 - **Members:** For those joining from 2026 onward.
- The annual membership fee was proposed at \$20 per calendar year, the collection of which will be determined at a later date.

Securing Physical Space

- The Society secured a temporary location at Peru City Hall, which serves as both a meeting place and a collections hub.
- A dedicated, elevator-accessible room in the City Hall basement was designated for interim storage and exhibit space. Progress was made to secure this area, with framing of the wall completed by August. Drywall installation is planned in the future.

Collections, Curation, and Displays

A core focus in 2025 was the acquisition, preservation, and exhibition of historical artifacts and materials.

- **Building the Collection:** With the assistance of the city, the Society secured the necessary display cases to exhibit historical items at City Hall. Members Mike Nieslawski, Oliver Schaefer, a local student, and Jeffrey Brylski were among the first to offer artifacts for display, including American Legion materials. The LaSalle Genealogical Society also donated a historic map.

- **Preservation and Archiving:** Alyce Scott, with 25 years of experience at the state library, delivered a presentation on archival best practices. Her guidance covered ideal environmental conditions (62-70°F, 50% humidity), dangers of light and pollutants, and proper handling of paper, photographs, and other materials. The Society is exploring the use of software and other methods for cataloging items.
- **Public Exhibits:** The displays in City Hall are planned to be rotational to keep content fresh for regular visitors. The Society is actively curating these exhibits, with Mike Nieslawski adding numerous historical photos throughout the year.



A photo of the Peru Historical Society's display cases in Peru City Hall.

Major Projects and Research Initiatives

The Society launched several long-term projects designed to document and share Peru's history.

- **The Bicentennial Book (2035):** This cornerstone project aims to publish a new history of Peru in time for the city's bicentennial.
 - A Book Committee was formed, chaired by Pam Broviak.
 - The committee is inventorying previously published histories (1858, 1935, 1985) to identify content gaps.
 - Sub-committees are forming around specific topics of interest, including Veterans (led by Jeffrey Brylski), Westclox (Mike Nieslawski), and Cemeteries and Churches (Bill Johnson).
 - The project plan includes releasing shorter, topic-specific "teaser" books in the years leading up to 2035.
- **Documenting Peru's Heritage:**
 - **Oldest Home Quest:** An ongoing effort to identify and verify the oldest standing homes in Peru, using county tax records and a member-created Google Map of properties from a 1980s historic building survey. Property transaction research is also to be conducted.
 - **Veterans Repository:** A proposal was made for the Society to serve as a central repository for veterans' materials and memorabilia.
 - **Business History:** An initiative began to create a map, potentially digital, pinpointing the locations of past and present Peru businesses.

Community Engagement and Educational Programming

Connecting with the public was a major success in 2025, driven by a strong digital presence, public events, and a compelling speaker series.

Digital and Public Outreach

- **Social Media:** The Society launched a public-facing Facebook page in June, which experienced explosive growth. By the end of December, the page had over 1,000 followers, with post views reaching 278,140 and interactions up 265%.

- **Public Events:**

- The Society hosted a popular booth at the **Taste of the Illinois Valley** festival from July 31 to August 2, engaging residents with historical photo displays and information about the new organization.
- Members attended the city’s **Christmas open house** on December 6 to share stories and displays with the community.

Monthly Presentations The Society's monthly meetings became a forum for sharing deep historical knowledge, featuring presentations from members and guests on a wide range of topics.

Month	Presenter(s)	Topic
February	Pam Broviak, Mike Nieslawski	WWII Memorial Proposal; Westclox & Westclox Museum
March	Christie Pasioka, Scott Schweickert	First Settlers of the Peru Area
April	Jeffrey Brylski	Local Music History & Prominent Residents (William Meyer, Dr. Woods)
May	Bill Johnson	History of Local Cemeteries
June	Rachael Mellen	Civil War Letters of William J. Kennedy (Author Presentation)
August	Jeffrey Brylski	Notable Peru Residents (Geraldine Kreis, the Lenzen Family)
September	Alyce Scott, Scott Schweickert	Archival Preservation; Local Mines and Railroads
October	Bill & Sue Johnson, Pam Broviak	Early Churches of the Area; Women Veterans of Peru
November	Mike Sapienza	Geological History of the Illinois Valley & the Canal (Part 1)
December	Mike Nieslawski	Historic Local Stories by Billy Pettigrew & Rose Rietgraf

Looking Ahead to 2026

Building on the incredible momentum of its inaugural year, the Peru Historical Society is poised for continued success. Key priorities for 2026 include establishing a financial structure for the organization, officially launching the membership drive, expanding the monthly speaker series, and making significant progress on the Bicentennial Book and other research initiatives. The dedication of its members and the enthusiastic response from the community have firmly established the society as a cornerstone of historical preservation in Peru.



The Peru Historical Society booth at the Taste of the Illinois Valley festival.

[Cover photo from collection of Mike Nieslawski]