

# A Brief History of the CLSC

**“Education, once  
the peculiar  
privilege of the  
few, must in  
our best earthly  
estate become  
the valued  
possession of  
the many.”**



**Bishop John Heyl Vincent**

These are the words of Bishop John Heyl Vincent, co-founder with Lewis Miller of Chautauqua Institution. They are from the opening paragraphs of his book, *The Chautauqua Movement*, and represent an ideal he had for Chautauqua. To further this Chautauquan ideal and to disseminate it beyond the physical confines of Chautauqua Institution, Bishop Vincent conceived the idea of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC). He founded it in 1878, four years after the founding of the Institution.

At its inception, the CLSC was a four-year course of required reading. Its original aims were twofold.

**To promote habits of reading and study in nature, art, science, and in secular and sacred literature**

**and**

**To encourage individual study, to open the college world to persons unable to attend higher institutions of learning.**

On August 10, 1878, Dr. Vincent announced the organization of the CLSC to an enthusiastic Chautauqua audience. Over 8,400 people enrolled the first year. Of those original enrollees, 1,718 successfully completed the reading course, the required examinations, and received their diplomas on the first CLSC Recognition Day in 1882.

### **The idea spreads and reading circles form.**

As the summer session closed in 1878, Chautauquans returned to their homes and involved themselves in the CLSC reading program. Many introduced the CLSC idea to their friends and neighbors and, in turn, additional groups were established for the purpose of studying and discussing the CLSC course of instruction. The concept of local CLSC Reading Circles spread and, by the turn of the century, over 10,000 circles had been formed.

Clearly, the rapid and widespread growth of the CLSC filled a deeply felt need for a structured program of reading and learning. As such, its importance both to the Chautauqua Movement and to the spread of education was significant to the history of our country. Arthur E. Bestor Jr., president of the Institution 1915–1944, wrote in his Chautauqua Publications: “Through the home reading courses of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, it (Chautauqua) reached into innumerable towns, especially in the Midwest, and made education a powerful force in American life.”

### **The CLSC becomes a role model.**

With the success of its program of planned reading, book selections and local circles, the CLSC became a prototype for book clubs, study groups, and university extension courses. According to the World Book Encyclopedia, the CLSC was “an example to American universities when they developed their extension programs, and influenced adult education leaders in such countries as England, Japan and South Africa.”

### **Dr. Vincent’s ideal yields nationwide results.**

From 1878 through the 1920s the CLSC maintained a preeminent position in the field of adult education and augmented the general support for learning. This then prompted the spread of libraries in small communities, the extension of adult education, the growth of book clubs, the availability of book review services, the increasing opportunities for enrollment in institutions of higher learning, and the involvement of people in community life and social organizations in general.

### **More nationwide reading opportunities result in a period of decline.**

The accumulated effects of the Great Depression, spread of libraries in small communities, extension of adult education, growth of book clubs, availability of book review services, increasing opportunities for enrollment in institutions of higher learning and involvement of people in community life and social organizations steadily detracted from the influence of the CLSC. By the 1960s and 1970s, participation had declined, and a dedicated group of Chautauqua’s administrators and Alumni Association members united to rebuild it.

### **The CLSC is experiencing a renaissance.**

Presently, the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle is thriving and remains at the heart of the Chautauqua experience. The CLSC is closely identified with Chautauqua itself, and has greater meaning on and off the grounds as Chautauqua proclaims its past and reclaims its future.

Since 2000, class size has averaged 100 each year. The number of books honored each season has increased to at least nine, so that a contemporary author visits the grounds at least once each week. Book choice has become more relevant to the weeks' theme, and a variety of genres are honored throughout the season. Recognition Week, with its traditional banner parade, marching band, golden gates and arches, is the most photographed event in the nine-week season. The Alumni Association of the CLSC has incorporated recognition and honor for advanced levels of reading.

The CLSC has always provided Chautauqua outreach beyond the Chautauqua grounds. Currently, there are CLSC circles in Nagasaki, Japan; Harare, Mutare and Bulawayo, Zimbabwe; and cities and smaller communities throughout the U.S.

If you are interested in forming one in your community, please email [clsc@chq.org](mailto:clsc@chq.org) or call 716-357-6293 June–Aug., 716-357-6310 Sept.–May.

### **The CLSC is a vital program of the Chautauqua Institution.**

Chautauqua Institution is a community on the shores of Chautauqua Lake in southwestern New York state that comes alive each summer with a unique mix of fine and performing arts, lectures, interfaith worship and programs, and recreational activities. As a community, we celebrate, encourage and study the arts, treating them as integral to all of learning. We convene the critical conversations of the day to advance understanding through civil dialogue.

Further literary arts programming at Chautauqua includes summer-long interaction of published and aspiring writers at the Chautauqua Writers' Center, the intensive workshops of Kwame Alexander Writers' Lab & Conference, lectures by prominent authors on the art and craft of writing, the publication of the literary journal *Chautauqua*, and the Chautauqua Janus Prize and the Chautauqua Prize.

# CLSC-related buildings at Chautauqua



**Pioneer Hall** – Originally built as a class building by the 1882 Pioneer Class, the hall is maintained by the Alumni Association as a museum of early Chautauqua memorabilia. During the Summer Assembly, the hall is open to the public for docent tours Mondays and Wednesdays 1:15–2 p.m.



**Octagon Building** – Originally an 1883 class building, it is now used as a Special Studies classroom and the meeting house for the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Since 2019, it has been the home of the CLSC summer office. Its staff provides information about the CLSC, its function, membership, and graduation requirements. All current literary arts books and the historic book lists are featured on display and available for purchase.



**Alumni Hall** – Built in 1892 — when it became clear that if each CLSC class were to build its own class building the Institution would soon be crowded out — Alumni Hall became the home of all CLSC classes. Remodeled in 2007 to preserve its history while enabling a broader expanse of programming, the Literary Arts Center at Alumni Hall now houses Alumni Association memorabilia and meeting spaces on the first floor; a ballroom and classrooms on the second floor; and apartments for the Writers' Center faculty on the third floor.



**Hall of Philosophy** – Modeled after the Parthenon, the Hall of Philosophy is used for CLSC author presentations and Department of Religion lectures. The hall was renovated in 1965.



**The Veranda** – Once home to the CLSC summer office, it is now the Poetry Makerspace, located on the Brick Walk between the Amphitheater and Bestor Plaza. The Veranda was renovated in 2019.