

Building the Stage: A Brief Look at Indiana's Historic Bandstands

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Bandstands were staples in many late 19th and early 20th century American communities, providing a dedicated venue for local bands and orchestras to publicly perform. While many have since been demolished, remaining examples of these small historic structures can still be spotted in some of Indiana's community parks and public spaces, reminding us of how outdoor environments were transformed into concert venues with relatively simple methods of structural intervention.

Beginning around the 1850s, the formation of small brass and cornet bands in America was a common practice, echoing trends occurring around the same time in the United Kingdom and western Europe and partially influenced by advances in musical instrument manufacturing. In 1874, Indiana's ties to the band instrument manufacturing industry were established when C.G. Conn, of Elkhart, developed and patented the rubber mouthpiece for use on brass instruments, later forming the C.G. Conn Company. The local availability of band instruments was certainly not hampered by the success of this development, as it paved the way for many instrument manufacturers to be established in the City of Elkhart, known as "The Band Industry Capital of the World."

During the latter half of the 19th century and early 20th century in Indiana, hundreds of bands were formed. Some were comprised of local community members while others grew out of larger political, institutional, religious, fraternal, civic, or military organizations. Still others were comprised of all female instrumentalists, like the 14-member Andrews Cornet Band in Huntington County, at one time advertised as "the largest and most successful female band in the state." With a surplus of bands established, some communities opted to construct temporary or permanent bandstands in their public spaces. However, all bandstands were not designed equally.

Portable or temporary roofless bandstands were used in some cases where permanent, ornamented structures were not practical. However, with only an elevated floor surface for the band to perform on, these structures had no ability to control sound and were thus considered undesirable by some musicians. A roofless platform serving as a bandstand could be found at one early 20th century celebration in Syracuse (Kosciusko County) (figure 1). With its placement in the middle of the street and rudimentary wood structure, it is likely that this bandstand was assembled specifically for this event and taken down not long afterward for reuse at a later time.



Figure 1: A platform in Downtown Syracuse acts as a bandstand during an early 20th century celebration.
Indiana Memory, Photo from the collection of Garry Ringler.

Basic platforms like these accomplished the general purpose of separating a band from a crowd. However, when we think of a bandstand today, we typically picture a more permanent polygonal, round, or rectangular structure with columns and a roof. Structural variations of this type can be found in places like Monterey, Michigan City, Frankfort, Monticello, Fort Wayne, Cynthiana, Evansville, Elkhart, and Newtown, among other places.

In the case of the Washington Park Bandstand (1911) in Michigan City (LaPorte County), a round, domed roof with a flat ceiling is supported by thin columns on a wood platform (figure 2).

Monterey's (Pulaski County) Kleckner Park bandstand (1912), on the other hand, contains a hipped roof and open ceiling. Its lattice backwall recalls characteristics of a bandshell, which typically includes reflecting surfaces on the sides, back, and top of the structure (Figure 3). However, unlike a bandshell, this structure's shape is more rectangular than it is shell-like, and its backwall contains a large diamond cutout. While the Washington Park and Kleckner Park Bandstands differ in shape, form, and architectural style, both structures sit on relatively flat terrain and are raised several feet off the ground, allowing an ensemble to be elevated the audience.

Taking on a much greater height, the TPA Park Bandstand in Frankfort (Clinton County), constructed circa 1913, is an octagonal structure containing two full stories. The upper story wooden platform serves as a location for performance, while space is left on the masonry-clad first level for a separate use, now acting as storage (figure 4). Unlike the above examples, this structure contains a concave-shaped ceiling and overlooks a large hill.

Of similar height, a bandstand that once stood in downtown South Whitley (Whitley County) left space for pedestrians to pass underneath, the platform elevated by a central trunk-like column



Figure 2: Washington Park Bandstand, Michigan City. *Photo from SHAARD.*



Figure 3: Kleckner Park Bandstand, Monterey. *Photo from SHAARD.*



Figure 4: TPA Park Bandstand, Frankfort. *Photo taken by Caitlin Lehman.*

one full story above the ground (figure 5). While some might wonder how performers reached this platform without sustaining significant injuries, the South Whitley bandstand's footprint minimized the amount of ground-level square footage necessary for its function.

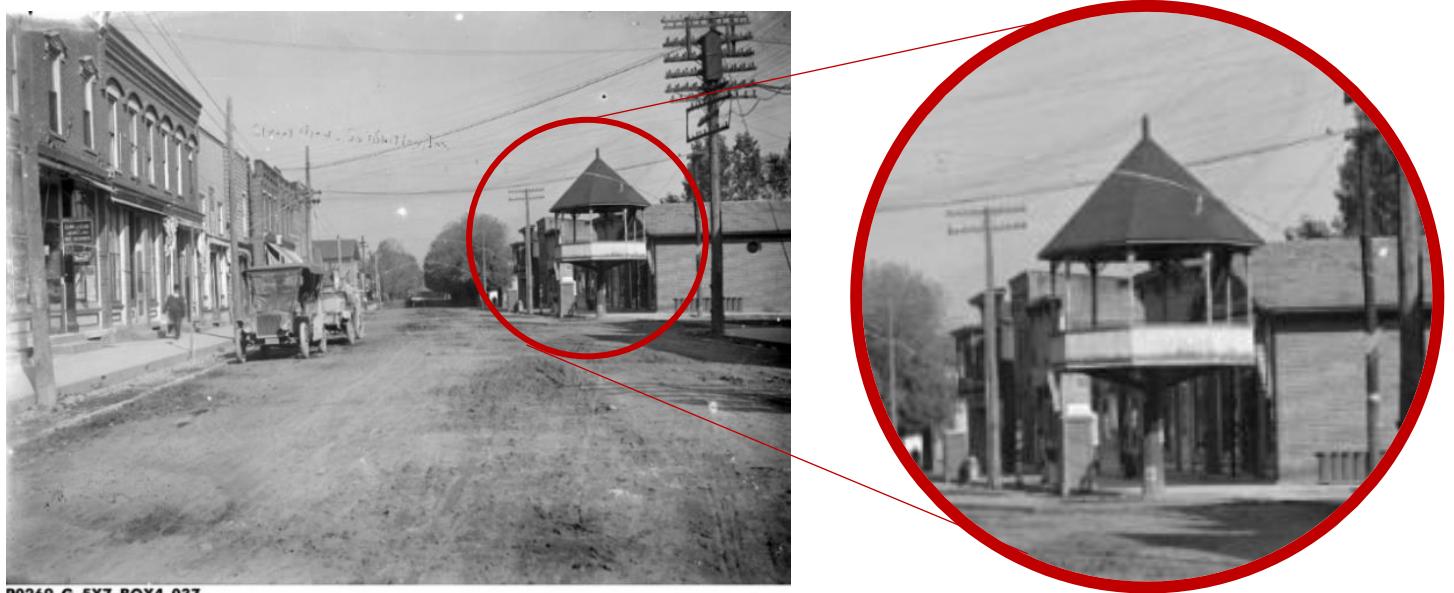


Figure 5: Street View in South Whitley, Indiana.

Indiana Historical Society, Oliver Frank Kelly Glass Plate Collection 1911-1912.

In considering the factors that influenced these differences in design, one begins to recognize that experimentation with scale, height, materials, and form was not only influenced by aesthetics but also related to the goal of obtaining a better-quality sound experience for the listener, the latter being of primary importance. As one 1934 acoustic design handbook outlined, to maximize the distribution of sound toward the audience, an ideal open-air bandstand contained a resonant stressed timber platform, a hard ceiling surface shaped to reflect sound down and away from the musicians, a paved reflecting surface immediately around the platform, and as few obstructions as possible. Its design also considered the existing acoustic properties of its site. This meant that, while some characteristics of a bandstand's design were universal, each bandstand had its own set of unique design considerations according to its location.

Several of these considerations can be found in the structures noted above, representing that a bandstand's architectural composition was, in many cases, directly related to its ability to transmit sound. It becomes clear that the design and construction of a bandstand included a complex set of design factors, the resulting structure serving as an extension of the acoustics produced within and becoming its own type of musical instrument.

Want to find more bandstands in our state? Many have been surveyed as a part of the Indiana Historic Sites and Structures Inventory (IHSSI / County Survey Program) and can be found within the Indiana State Historic Architectural and Archaeological Research Database (SHAARD) at <https://www.in.gov/dnr/historic-preservation/help-for-owners/national-and-state-registers/shaard-database/>.