


ARTICLE

Lessons from Chautauqua: The Evolution of the American Education Movement at 150

Karen Sieber 

Independent Scholar, Saint Paul, MN, USA
Email: karenlynnsieber@gmail.com

(Received 26 July 2024; revised 08 October 2024; accepted 14 February 2025)

Abstract

President Theodore Roosevelt once called the Chautauqua movement “typical of America at its best.” Arguably, no public humanities effort in the United States has been as popular or influential as the Chautauqua movement. Those seeking educational, religious, and cultural fulfillment have flocked to the lakeside retreat in western New York since 1874. From lectures and book clubs to theater and debates, Chautauqua has provided visitors with endless opportunities to engage with the arts, humanities, and cultural studies to help them better understand their world, themselves, and each other. Efforts to expand the experience beyond the summer include the adult education movement the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, one of the nation’s longest-running book clubs. Shrewd businessmen, and communities who did not see themselves represented in the Mother Chautauqua, also opened their own copycat offshoots across the country. As the pillar of “edutainment” and tourist destination wraps its 150th season, are the utopian visions of the founders enough to sustain it for another 150 or is a new model needed for a nationwide public humanities movement?

Keywords: adult education; Chautauqua; literature; public humanities; travel

President Theodore Roosevelt once called the public humanities movement Chautauqua “typical of America at its best.”¹ The pillar of “edutainment” and popular Victorian tourist destination wrapped its 150th season last summer, managing to stay afloat in the face of evolving audiences, competition from copycats, economic depressions, changing travel trends, technological advances, COVID-19, and other hurdles. While the average person today might not consider Chautauqua when listing things that are “typical of America at its best,” in their heyday, it was a key part of the American experience and a huge driver of social and political change in the country.²

The “Mother Chautauqua,” as she is known, is a utopian lakeside community in western New York that began in 1874 and continues to operate to this day. The institution gained

¹ Cooper 2015.

² Due to space limitations, the primary focus of this paper will be on the height of the movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the competing visions of Chautauqua that the founders had that laid the groundwork for Chautauqua in the present.

popularity in the Victorian era by offering Americans the opportunity to combine their vacations with education and self-betterment. The retreat was limited to Sunday School educators in the first years but quickly expanded its offerings and audiences by adding lectures, recreation, and performance in between the classes and sermons. Readings in literature, art, history, language, and the sciences were added to supplement the religious curriculum.

In the early years, crowds swarmed the Chautauqua Institution grounds to hear speakers like William Jennings Bryan, Helen Keller, Frances Willard, or Ralph Waldo Emerson talk about social reform, religion, politics, education, and culture. Attendance numbers grew from 700 during the first season to as many as 100,000 per season in the 1880s.³ While the lyceum movement and similar public humanities efforts gained momentum in the preceding years, none saw the success or longevity that Chautauqua did.

The founders, businessman and inventor Lewis Miller, and minister John Heyl Vincent, had differing visions for how Chautauqua should grow in those early years. Miller made a considerable fortune as the creator of the Buckeye Mower, which revolutionized farming and helped fund his pet projects related to Sunday School education. At Chautauqua, he focused his efforts on constructing a utopian planned community and overseeing the business side of things like staffing and ticket sales. Under Miller's direction, the wilderness camp turned into ordered streets and lots. Well-appointed cottages replaced the early tents. In *City in the Woods*, author Ellen Weiss noted, "They took the pervasive American event, the camp-meeting revival in the woods, and brought it to a spectacular conclusion in a form which has something to do with that pervasive American residential habit, the suburb."⁴ Chautauqua was electrified years before many surrounding communities would have power and had a state-of-the-art sewage system. Soon after a post office, library, theater, community spaces, and stores were added. To be able to accommodate larger crowds, Miller spent \$40,000 of his own money to build the Hotel Athenaeum.⁵ Those who traveled to Chautauqua tended toward the middle class and "nouveau riche" like Miller who were seeking a classed-up version of the tent revival experience. Historian Cindy S. Aron noted that vacationers "could, even while at leisure, reaffirm their commitment to the important middle-class values of sobriety and discipline."⁶

While Chautauqua's audience and speakers were mostly white in those early years, it was integrated from the start. Noted African American activist and educator Hallie Q. Brown was an attendee and a participant in the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC) in the late nineteenth century. Religious scholar Dr. John W.E. Bowen and his wife Ariel, a leader among Black women in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), were also attendees during the same period. Booker T. Washington also came to speak, and African American performers like the Fisk Jubilee singers also made regular appearances.⁷ Yet as historian Andrew C. Reiser notes in his book about Chautauqua, the facade of inclusivity was easy to see through, as much of the lectures, publications, and marketing in the early years often upheld racist stereotypes and "romanticized and depoliticized" the South.⁸ The progressive social reform movement, and the WCTU in particular, espoused ideas that

³ Vincent 1893.

⁴ Weiss 1987, xiii–iv.

⁵ *Christian Advocate* 1891.

⁶ Aron 1999, 102.

⁷ *The African American Experience at Chautauqua 1874–1899*.

⁸ Reiser 2003, 148.

paralleled those in the eugenics movement. African American visitors, performers, and staff often still had difficulty finding accommodations though.

During the same time that Lewis Miller was expanding the gated community, his co-founder Rev. John Heyl Vincent was perfecting what he called the “greater Chautauqua” or the “Chautauqua idea” to reach broader audiences. This lofty plan for a nationwide educational movement expanded Chautauqua not just into communities across the United States but into the American home, workplace, and church, blurring the lines of each in the process. Vincent called this Chautauqua “the more important notion suggested by the word,” placing the outreach and educational efforts of the Greater Chautauqua above the vacation destination.⁹ Chautauqua was not a summer fling or ticketed attraction, but lifelong habits to be continued at home throughout the year and celebrated like the gospel. Vincent’s Chautauqua toned down the middle-class exclusivity and moral superiority that defined the planned community, noting: “The full-orbed Chautauqua idea must awaken in *all* genuine souls a fresh enthusiasm in true living, and bring the rich and poor, learned and unlearned, into neighborhood and comradeship.”¹⁰

Vincent was no doubt inspired by his own past. He grew up in a devoutly religious household of voracious readers who were curious about the world around them. As a skilled orator, Vincent began his career as a circuit rider bringing religion and knowledge on horseback to frontier communities, which he continued doing for troops during the Civil War, including General Ulysses S. Grant. His travels made him keenly aware of the need for adult education. Andrew Carnegie had not yet started his campaign to open public libraries across the United States and many working adults had never received education past primary school.

Vincent envisioned “an all-the-year-round school, for all classes of people – rich, poor, uneducated, college-graduated, people of leisure, and people ‘crowded to death’ with work.”¹¹ Thankfully, others at the institution, including Miller, saw the value in Vincent’s vision of a Chautauqua for all. The Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC), a nationwide adult reading program, was formed in 1876. Participants took self-guided classes in history, literature, religion, art, science, and other topics using books that were printed in-house and sold to participants to sustain the endeavor. Chautauqua’s newspaper, *The Assembly Herald*, printed lectures and sermons from some of the top speakers each summer so that those attending Chautauqua from their homes could enjoy the same insight. During the rest of the year, the *Chautauquan* news magazine offered short articles to accompany the readings. Although it was possible to study independently, most people took the courses with others in a “circle.” In the first twenty years of the CLSC, over 10,000 circles of assorted sizes were formed. While the CLSC provided a suggested curriculum to complete the courses in a certain timeframe, there was no obligation to follow that guide. Participants could start at any time that was convenient for them and study at their own pace, as most books were not on particularly timely topics in the early years. Those who registered with the CLSC received added benefits and became part of an annual class with in-person graduation ceremonies. Industrious Chautauquans started community libraries with old CLSC books, allowing one purchased set to educate dozens of students.¹²

⁹ Vincent 1895, 3; John Heyl Vincent Papers.

¹⁰ Vincent 1886, 14.

¹¹ Vincent n.d.a, 4.

¹² See Reiser 2003, 161–206.

A new Chautauqua message emerged that with hard work and a desire to learn, one could obtain a world-class education that was previously only available to elites. Vincent reiterated that “a college is possible in everyday life if one chooses to use it; a college in house, shop, street, farm, market, for rich or poor, the curriculum of which runs through the whole of life; a college that trains men and women everywhere to read and think and talk and do.”¹³ In one pamphlet, a train conductor explains that he and his brakeman have organized their own little circle on the freight train, taking turns reading and working.¹⁴ This act thus merges work, leisure, and education into one and blurs the line between those spaces and relationships.

Students could, as Vincent put it, turn “home into a schoolhouse, and all of life into a school term,” whether one lived in a palace or boarding house.¹⁵ Chautauqua was religious and secular in its lessons, making the home the schoolhouse and a site of religious study. As women made up the majority of CLSC participants, running a circle gave women a level of authority in the home that was previously only given to males. While limitations remained, many women went on to become active in the temperance and suffrage movements.¹⁶

CLSC reading circles also helped lay the groundwork for future prison education programs during “a time when almost any aid to prisoners was seen as coddling” according to scholar Frank Buckley.¹⁷ In his research about a long-running CLSC circle in Stillwater Prison in Minnesota, Buckley discovered that the circle was established at the urging of the prisoners themselves. It also operated longer than many, from 1890 through the Great Depression. The inmate-run newspaper *Prison Mirror* printed lectures and articles, some written by inmates and others reprinted from Chautauqua’s *Assembly Herald*. Inmates working in the different prison departments, like the farm, kitchen, and machine shops, noted being united in camaraderie by their shared goal of self-betterment. In addition to staying up-to-date on the structured readings from the Chautauqua texts and publications, the men wrote papers, gave lectures, performed recitations and skits, and held lively debates across the humanities.¹⁸ Inmates in Massachusetts and Nebraska operated similar Chautauqua programs there, partnering with professors from the state university system to aid in the coursework. As with circles elsewhere, these inmates created their own personal Chautauqua and adapted it to fit their needs and resources.

Not everyone felt included in this expansion of Chautauqua though, especially people of color. In response, some African American communities built their own version of Chautauqua, with their own circuit of remarkable speakers, educators, and performers. In Kentucky, the Madison County Colored Chautauqua and the Owensboro Negro Chautauqua brought in speakers like Dr. W. E. B. DuBois or former head of Wilberforce University Bishop Benjamin F. Lee. In Durham, North Carolina, the “Negro Chautauqua” eventually evolved into the HBCU North Carolina Central University.¹⁹

As with the development of African American run Chautauqua circuits, some CLSC circles were composed entirely of Black members, especially in the Jim Crow South. The Chautauqua Circle

¹³ Vincent n.d.b, 6–7; *John Heyl Vincent Papers*.

¹⁴ Vincent 1895, 11.

¹⁵ Vincent 1895, 4.

¹⁶ Nelson 1996, 653.

¹⁷ Buckley 1948, 322.

¹⁸ Buckley 1948, 330.

¹⁹ *Notable Kentucky African Americans Database* n.d.

of Atlanta celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2012, possibly the longest continually running circle outside of the historic campus.²⁰

The institution's rise in popularity sparked additional copycat Chautauqua across the country. It provided the public with a more respectable entertainment option than vaudeville or the circus. Many did not realize these copycats were not affiliated or did not mind as it allowed them to have the Chautauqua experience on a budget, closer to home, and often over just a week or long weekend. Some Chautauqua were traveling circuits that brought tents and a lineup of orators and performers to small communities throughout the Heartland. Other locations evolved into more permanent establishments with amphitheaters, classrooms, meeting spaces, and small cottages that emulated the original community. While unsanctioned and loathed by Miller and Vincent, the wannabes that spread across the country made the original Chautauqua a household name and contributed to a larger movement. Over 12,000 different communities hosted Chautauqua over the years.²¹

Chautauqua fever eventually died down but by no means disappeared. Larger traveling Chautauqua circuits like Redpath Chautauqua closed their doors during the Great Depression when their largest audience base could no longer afford the luxury. Other smaller homegrown Chautauqua struggled to compete with the automobile, talking movies, the interstate highway, the television, and other changes in a modernizing society over the years. Improvements to educational access at all levels also provided new opportunities for self-betterment.

However, a few of the more established permanent communities continue to exist to this day like the Colorado Chautauqua in Boulder, Lakeside Chautauqua in Ohio, Monteagle Sunday School Assembly in Tennessee, and the New Pisa Chautauqua in southern Illinois. Other smaller camp meeting associations in New Jersey, Martha's Vineyard, and elsewhere also claim long histories.²² In recent decades, many state humanities councils, including North Dakota, New Mexico, Nebraska, Kentucky, Ohio, and Maryland, have now put on their own Chautauqua, however in a different format than the original. Most of these revival efforts feature costumed actors playing historical figures like Rachel Carson, Frederick Douglass, or Mark Twain as well as local heroes in each state's history.

Mother Chautauqua continues to be a popular destination for middle-class vacationers in search of education, recreation, and culture. While the original faced many of the same hurdles that the copycats did, nearly forfeiting their expansion loans during the Great Depression, they were able to survive thanks to a reordering of their business dealings and the establishment of the Chautauqua Foundation. The institution continues to survive by catering to legacy visitors and donors who have been coming to Chautauqua for generations, although efforts to expand its audience and modernize can also be seen. The historic amphitheater was recently rebuilt, and other historic buildings have also been newly restored. Although the opera company is barely staying above water, the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra continues to be a mainstay. To improve ticket sales and bring in new audiences, Chautauqua has also invited more well-known modern acts to the stage like Wilco, Rhiannon Giddens, and Lake Street Drive. While lectures on history, politics, religion, literature, and other topics are still available, additional offerings in yoga, crafting, culinary arts, and other recreational topics have been added. Audiences can also join remotely for some lectures and sermons or watch later on YouTube.²³

²⁰ *Atlanta Daily World* 2013; see also Reiser 2003, 177–8.

²¹ See Schultz 2002, 1–55.

²² *The Chautauqua Trail* n.d.

²³ Things to Do n.d.; Chautauqua YouTube n.d.

Although still grounded in religion and the humanities with daily worship and lectures, the variety of voices and topics has improved with more interfaith lectures, support for emerging voices, and a better commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. There have been some positive changes in leadership in recent years, too, like the addition of author and poet Kwame Alexander to lead Chautauqua's Literary Arts program, although the appointment of Rafia Khader as director of interfaith religion programs was short-lived after pushback from Jewish stakeholders at the institution. An African American Heritage House has also been established, joining dozens of other "houses" on campus meant to create and support communities within Chautauqua, from various religious denominations to a women's club and an LGBTQ+ group. A historic marker has also been added on the site of the Phyllis Wheatley cottage, where Black staff and visitors found lodging when other guest houses would not accommodate them.²⁴

The CLSC also still exists. It is now considered one of America's oldest book clubs, although they no longer create their own curriculum or print their own texts like they once did. The new format designates a curated list of books each year that combines religious-focused texts with literature, history, philosophy, the sciences, and other genres. The authors then come to campus to give a lecture and sign books during the summer season. While not the behemoth of a nationwide educational movement that it once was, the new CLSC readings provide more diverse viewpoints and opportunities for critical thinking and engagement than the original CLSC did. The 2024 reading list included *How Far the Light Reaches: A Life in Ten Sea Creatures* by Sabrina Imbler, *Mexican White Boy* by Matt de la Peña, *Future Tense: How We Made Artificial Intelligence – and How It Will Change Everything* by Marth Brockenbrough, and *Dances: A Novel* by Nicole Cuffy, among others.²⁵

Despite efforts to diversify the Chautauqua experience, most of the leadership and audience are still largely white, middle class, and over 50 years old. The prices also still make attending Chautauqua just as prohibitive for the average American today as it was in the early years.²⁶ Outside of those who grew up going to Chautauqua, live in the corridor between Cleveland and Buffalo, or saw news of the 2022 attack on author Salman Rushdie, few today are familiar with the institution or the larger movement. The 150th anniversary was all but absent from the national media.

It is hard to truly know how many took part in Chautauqua or its offshoots over the years, or the greater impact of the tens of thousands of personal Chautauquas that were created in farm fields, kitchens, churches, meeting halls, places of work, and jail cells across the nation. The movement paved the way for other public humanities initiatives of the present, from Little Free Libraries and Oprah's Book Club to TEDx talks and remote learning. Historian Joseph E. Gould, writing about Chautauqua in 1961, made the argument that Chautauqua laid the groundwork for university extension programs nationwide.²⁷ The political and cultural influence of Chautauqua at its height was also remarkable and helped drive several social reform movements, from women's suffrage to prohibition.²⁸

²⁴ "Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility at Chautauqua" n.d.

²⁵ "Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle" n.d.

²⁶ "Rates and Fees for Passes, Tickets and Registrations" n.d.

²⁷ Gould 1961.

²⁸ For further reading on Chautauqua's influence on the greater social reform movements, including women's suffrage and the temperance movement, see Reiser 2003, 180–4.

While Chautauqua was not the first public humanities movement to sweep the nation, it was the most influential and long-lasting. As the institution continues to evolve amid changing audiences and expectations, will the competing utopian visions of the founders be enough to sustain Chautauqua for another 150? Given the shortcomings of the original, perhaps it is time for a new public humanities model and deeper conversations about what a movement “typical of America at its best” could look like.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: K.S.; Data curation: K.S.; Formal analysis: K.S.; Writing – original draft: K.S.; Writing – review & editing: K.S.

Acknowledgments. A special thank you to Timothy S. Brinkley, former archivist at Southern Methodist University where Rev. John Heyl Vincent’s papers are housed. An additional thank you to Dr. Elijah Gaddis, Dr. Rachel Kirby, and Dr. Elliot Gorn for their thoughtful feedback on earlier iterations of this piece.

References

- “Chautauqua Circle Celebrates 100 Years.” 2013. *Atlanta Daily World*. <https://atlantadailyworld.com/2013/09/20/chautauqua-circle-celebrates-100-years/>.
- “Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle.” n.d. *Chautauqua Institution*. <https://www.chq.org/things-to-do/resident-programs/literary-arts/clsc/>.
- “Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility at Chautauqua.” n.d. *Chautauqua Institution*. <https://www.chq.org/about/idea>.
- “Rates and Fees for Passes, Tickets and Registrations.” n.d. *Chautauqua Institution*. <https://www.chq.org/visit/plan-your-visit/ticket-information/rates-and-fees/>.
- African American Heritage House. 1874–1899. “The African American Experience at Chautauqua.” <https://www.aaheritagehouse.org/african-americans-chautauqua>.
- Aron, Cindy. 1999. *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States*. Oxford University Press, p. 102.
- Buckley, Frank. 1948. “Chautauqua in the Minnesota State Prison.” *Minnesota History* 29 (4): 322. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20175416>.
- Chautauqua YouTube. n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/@chautauquinstitution>.
- Chautauqua: Its Aims and Influences. Forum 19 (March–August 1895), p. 691. https://archive.org/details/sim_forum-and-century_1895-08_19_6/page/688/mode/
- Christian Advocate. 1891. Letter on the Original Chautauqua: Remarkable Recent Changes (1866–1905).
- Cooper, George. 2015. “Roosevelt Lauds Chautauqua as ‘Typical of America at its Best’.” *The Daily Chautauquan*. <https://chqdaily.wordpress.com/2015/07/25/the-daily-record-roosevelt-lauds-chautauqua-as-typical-of-america-at-its-best/>.
- Gould, Joseph Edward. 1961. *The Chautauqua Movement: An Episode in the Continuing American Revolution*. SUNY Press.
- John Heyl Vincent Papers. Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University.
- Nelson, Julie R. 1996. “A Subtle Revolution: The Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle in Rural Midwestern Towns, 1878–1900.” *Agricultural History* 70 (4): 653–671.
- Owensboro (KY) Negro Chautauqua. n.d. *Notable Kentucky African Americans Database*. <https://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/3086>.
- Reiser, Andrew C. 2003. “From Parlor to Politics: Chautauqua and the Institutionalization of Middle-Class Womanhood.” In *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism, 1874–1920*. Columbia University Press, pp. 161–206.
- Schultz, James R. 2002. *The Romance of Small Town Chautauqs*. University of Missouri Press, pp. 1–55.
- The Chautauqua Trail*. n.d. <https://chautauquatrail.com/>.
- “Things to Do.” n.d. *Chautauqua Institution*. <https://www.chq.org/things-to-do/>.
- Vincent, John H. 1886. *The Chautauqua Movement*. Chautauqua Press, p. 14.
- Vincent, John H. 1893. “Chautauqua Then and Now.” *The Chautauqua Collegian*, Vol. 1, no. 2.
- Vincent, John H. n.p., n.d.a. *The Meaning of Chautauqua*. p. 4.
- Vincent, John H. n.p., n.d.b. *The Story of Chautauqua*, pamphlet. Southern Methodist University, pp. 6–7.
- Weiss, Ellie. 1887. *City in the Woods: The Life and Design of an American Camp Meeting on Martha’s Vineyard*. Oxford University Press, pp. xiii–iv.

Cite this article: Sieber, Karen. 2025. “Lessons from Chautauqua: The Evolution of the American Education Movement at 150.” *Public Humanities*, 1, e76, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.16>