

Watch Tower Amusement Park

Watch Tower Amusement Park occupied the area that would become Black Hawk State Historic Site from 1882 to 1927. Local businessman Bailey Davenport, president and superintendent of the Rock Island and Milan Steam Railway, developed the Watch Tower as a destination for his rail line.

In the 1890s, horse-drawn cars were phased out in favor of electric cars and people (often as many as 15,000 a day) took the streetcar to Watch Tower Park concerts, operas, vaudeville, open-air theater, fireworks, bowling, target shooting, balloon ascensions, amusement rides, and outdoor movies projected on a canvas screen.

The Watch Tower boasted a figure-eight roller coaster (the four loops made it the first of its kind west of Chicago) and the memorable Shoot the Chutes toboggan slide, which was invented in Rock Island. Beginning in 1898, the "Chutes" (flat boats with side runners that slid on a greased track) carried riders down the bluff at speeds of up to 80 miles per hour. After shooting down the slope, the boat bounced across the waters of the Rock River. Then the "conductor" poled the boat back to the slide and an electric cable hauled it back to the top.

A summer pavilion was built in the 1880s, followed by a series of inns built where the present Watch Tower Lodge stands today. Dining and dancing were popular at the old inns. After a visit to Black Hawk's Watch Tower, former Union General William Sherman remarked that in his extensive travels he had never met its equal. However, the park's popularity waned in the 1920s, and in 1927 the State of Illinois purchased the site, renaming it Black Hawk State Park. It was made a State Historic Site in 1987.