Area grade-schoolers have long shared the tradition of traipsing through Lincoln’s New Salem State Historic Site.

Theatre goers come in the thousands each year to see the latest stage productions. Families have used it as a reunion spot for decades.

Trips to New Salem are part of our shared community fabric. The New Salem Lincoln League is focused on keeping those traditions alive and flourishing by maintaining the viability of the site. As government funding shrinks, the League is embarking on new efforts to secure its future. A historic move in that direction is the establishment of the New Salem Lincoln League Endowment Fund through the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln.

“The Fund is important, because people understand that it ensures there will be long-term funding,” New Salem Lincoln League President Al Grosboll said. “The Endowment Fund will provide funding in perpetuity for education programs and cultural activities at New Salem.”

The Fund is an endowment, and the League plans to utilize only the interest earned from the endowment. The Foundation’s long history of smart financial investment decisions drew the League to create the Fund with an initial $125,000 gift. The first use of the earnings from the Fund will be in 2016. The League hopes it will enable another $5,000 - $6,000 in interest to be used on park events or projects.

“Several League members were familiar with the good work of the Community Foundation,” Grosboll said. “The Community Foundation provides substantial financial expertise that a small organization does not normally possess. The Community Foundation’s expertise and energy will help us to grow financially. As the Endowment Fund grows, it will allow the New Salem Lincoln League to offer more programs, fund more weekend events and expand our support for theatrical performance.”

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The League was founded in 1982 to support the site’s educational and cultural activities. It has donated more than one million dollars to support New Salem, and community members have donated thousands of volunteer hours. Among its activities, the League provides educational camps for youth; partners on an internship program with Illinois College; sponsors the Traditional Music Festival; and supports the popular Theatre in the Park. Last year, approximately 10,000 people came to watch shows at Theatre in the Park.

“There are many people in Menard County and elsewhere who support New Salem,” League Vice President Dick Moss said. “Now people will have a way to make a donation or consider providing a gift in their estate to ensure long-term preservation of Lincoln’s New Salem.”

The Fund’s creation comes at a critical time in funding for the site. State funding cuts have led to a dramatic drop in staff numbers. In the 1990s, Lincoln’s New Salem employed up to 30 workers, and today that number is down to 12 full-time workers. The funding cuts have also limited the number of capital improvements, creating a wait list for projects throughout the site.

“We see the establishment of this Fund as great news for historic preservation in our community and especially for Menard County,” said Community Foundation President and CEO John Stremsterfer. “Local folks have so many fond memories of enjoying New Salem, and we want the next generation to understand its importance.”

The Fund’s creation is another example of Menard County residents taking the lead for the site’s betterment. New Salem, where Lincoln served as a lawyer and member of the Illinois legislature, had been abandoned in the 1840s. Local residents drove the effort for restoration in the 1930s and have continued to guide development of the site.

“There is strong support for New Salem in Menard County,” Grosboll said. “This Endowment Fund will provide a way for the community to provide long-term support for protecting the important legacy of New Salem, where Abraham Lincoln lived for six critical years.”