



The Crackerbarrel

VOLUME 51 NUMBER 5
SEPTEMBER 2014



President's Report



President George Rowe

Elgin has a long history in automobiles and auto racing. Even so, when Board Member Dennis Roxworthy suggested a car show for the museum a couple of years ago I thought it might be a bit of a stretch. But the third car show at Old Main in July was the biggest and maybe the best. Dennis and the Chicagoland Thunderbirds are already planning great things for the 2015 show.

I saw a number of new faces wandering through the Museum. Many more visitors never bothered to come inside-because there were just too many great cars to see. Besides the Thunderbirds, Dennis was able to include cars from Chris Ingrassia of Mustang Restorations. Ken Barnhart had one of the matching pair of Camaros on site for the day, right alongside his '39 Lasalle.

In late July some of us were recruited to help with the making of our documentary about the African-American story in Elgin, Project 2-3-1. Documentarian Phil Broxham of Grindstone Productions worked with the Illinois Railway Museum in Union after obtaining permission to film in one of their old boxcars. Ernie Broadnax recruited a group of actors, many of them children, from local African American churches to portray the contrabands coming north to freedom in 1862. This project depicts that trip and tells what happened to the people who made it, right up to their present-day descendants.

It was amazing to see Phil and his team work with the young actors. Phil spent two days setting the site up plus a full day of shooting. He had a cameraman do the filming so he could concentrate on directing. His

wife Sue kept things organized and kept the schedule on track. The three days of work may translate into just a few minutes of final edited footage.

Project 2-3-1 is the focus project for this year as I mentioned in the fundraiser letter. In the short letter I was not able to mention that the money raised by the annual board fundraiser goes to basic museum operations. Most of the money for Project 2-3-1 will come from designated donations. The Seigle Family Foundation generously started off fundraising for project 2-3-1 with an \$8,000.00 grant. We have received other grants for this project and some individual donations, but we still have a long way to go to reach our goal. School district U-46 and Elgin Community College have endorsed the project. Judson University, the Palmer Foundation, the City of Elgin Heritage Commission and the Arts Commission have also provided funding. This is one of the most important projects we have undertaken and we are still looking for funding as we strive to make this the best production we can offer. We appreciate your generosity.

Sept. 6 is the annual Gifford Park Association house walk, featuring homes on the Northeast side.

September 28 is our 27th Annual Cemetery Walk. Steve and Laura Stroud have once again prepared an interesting tour of Bluff City Cemetery.

November 8 is the annual Benefit Gala. You will be treated to an evening with President and Mrs Lincoln. David Nelson and the program committee work throughout the year to make this event a success. Ricky Harris is gathering items for the auction. This year's event will be held at the held at the Heritage Ballroom in the Centre of Elgin. See you at Old Main.

Project 2-3-1 Documentary Donations

- Marge Fox and Phyllis Krueger
- \$2,000 from Judson University
- \$2,500 from Hope Fair Housing Center

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The Crackerbarrel welcomes reader contributions.
Next deadline **October 20, 2014**

 Visit our website www.elginhistory.org

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Program Schedule for 2014

David Nelson, Program Chair

Check the website for the latest details.
<http://www.elginhistory.org/events.html>

September 10, 7 P.M.: Docent training at the Museum.

September 11, 12 Noon: Brown Bag Lunch: History of St. Joseph's Hospital in Elgin

Presence/St. Joseph Hospital CEO Mike Brown will discuss the history of the 110-year-old hospital in conjunction with the Museum's exhibit on Elgin hospitals: Elgin Health Care: Healing Mind, Body, and Spirit Since 1872. The hospital has a long history in Elgin from its start in a Prospect Street house on the east side in 1902 to its current modern campus on the west side.

September 28, 11 A.M. TO 3 P.M.:

27th Annual Cemetery Walk, Bluff City Cemetery

October 12, 2 P.M.

Anti-Slavery in Black and White
Jeanne Schultz Angel

The state of Illinois played a prominent role during the anti-slavery movement in the mid-19th Century. But were all Illinoisans who were against slavery also supportive of the Underground Railroad, or even racial equality? Understanding the differences between those who were "anti-slavery" and those who were "radical abolitionists" is important to both understanding how the Underground Railroad was viewed in Illinois, and also determining which of its sites are

verifiable. Explore the history behind the anti-slavery movement in Northern Illinois and examine the criteria historians use to separate fact from fiction.

**November 8, 6:00 P.M.: Annual Benefit/Silent Auction/General Meeting,
Heritage Ballroom at the Centre of Elgin
"Mr & Mrs Lincoln"**

\$40 Members/\$50 Non-Members, advance tickets required. The Benefit will feature Max and Donna Daniels as Abraham and Mary Lincoln discussing their lives before and during the Civil War. The Daniels' have been performing as the Lincolns since 1988, researching and writing their own original scripts. Appetizer refreshments, silent auction and cash bar.

December 6, 1:00-3:00 P.M.: Holiday Tea, featuring Elgin Opera singers

Welcome New Members

- Frances Arroyo
- Rita Irons
- Jerry Saunders
- Pat Shodeen
- David Shull

Thank You: Board Fundraiser Donors

- Alft, Mike and Fran
- Anderson, James and Sara Ellen
- Armistead, Dwight and Betsy
- Barnhart, Jerri and Ken
- Bendick, Joseph & Lois
- Blizzard, Harry and Phyllis
- Briska, Bill
- Buck, David
- Burkart, Janet and Gordon
- Burke, Christopher and Susan
- Chevalier, Carol
- Childs, Helen
- Clark, Howard
- Clossman, Richard
- Crinigan, Linda
- Dunning, Terry
- Eder, Linda
- Elbert, Marvin and Donna
- Elliott, Lucy and Mark
- Epping, Hugh
- Felicetti, Richard and Sharon
- Flaks, Carl
- Fuqua, Herbert and Yaneth
- Gabel, Terry and Sue Brigham

- Gerberding, Phyllis
- Greenwald, Barbara
- Grimm, Richard
- Grosser, Patricia and Jeff
- Handrock, Carole
- Hempstead, Jean
- Hoeft, Elizabeth
- Irons, Rita
- Jocius, Patricia
- Jones, Richard
- Kostlevy, William
- Lawrence, John
- Lytle, Miriam
- Maki, Daniel and Karen
- Marston, John and Elizabeth
- Miller, Dan and Patricia
- Nauman, Roberta
- Nelson, David J. and Dolores
- Ollayos, Clare
- Pellicore, Joyce
- Pendery, Rosemary
- Peradovic, Mark
- Pielin, Don
- Plagge, Carol
- Redeker, Carol
- Reid, Elaine
- Reinert, Coral
- Rock, Linda
- Rowe, George and Marge
- Roxworthy, Dennis
- Schroeder, Kathleen
- Shales, John and Marlene
- Siegenthaler, David
- Smith, H. Jane
- Stroud, Steven and Laura
- Swan, Chandler
- Turner, James and Linda
- Turnquist, Jerry and Kathleen
- Utt, Norma
- Walters, Alan and Kathleen
- Werst, Ruth and Bill
- Whitcomb, Edward
- Wojciechowski, Mirosława
- Ziegler, Phyllis

Docent Training Sept. 10

It's time for the annual Docent Training seminar, to be held at the Museum Wednesday, September 10, 2014 at 7 p.m.

If you have been through docent training before, please bring your guidebook so we can provide some new information sheets for it. New docent will receive a Guide Book and a name tag.

We will be going over basics, giving out touring tips and pointing out new artifacts. Bill Briska will present some background on the Elgin Health Care exhibit in terms of the Elgin Mental Health Center history. Plus, we'll have treats to munch on!

Elgin Trophy Featured at Concours d'Elegance Car Show

Maurice Dyer, Vice President

With great pride, the Elgin Area Historical Society and the Fox Valley Chapter of the Model T Clubs International, combined efforts to increase awareness and educate the public about the Elgin Road Races. These races, held on public roads on the west side of Elgin, featured cars and drivers of world fame from 1910 to 1933.

The Geneva Concours d'Elegance, an invitation-only car show, invited the Museum to display the 1912 trophy that was found and acquired this year, along with the 1933 winning Ford from the Mecum collection. This beautifully restored race car was enjoyed by hundreds of spectators, and learning of Elgin Road Race was enlightening to many. We welcome opportunities to teach and learn about the incredible history of the city of Elgin.



1912 Trophy and 1933 Elgin Road Race winning Ford on display at Concours d'Elegance Car Show, Geneva IL

The Geisters of Elgin – Part 1

by David Siegenthaler

No other family in Elgin can boast a 97-year family business as well as two nationally-recognized experts in their respective professions. The Geister family also produced a two-time alderman, a 60-year practicing attorney and the last surviving area World War One veteran.

Christian Henry Geister, known as Henry, was born in Germany on August 24, 1831, where he learned the trade of vessel building. At age 24 he immigrated to America and came directly to Cook County, where he settled in Plum Grove, working as a farmhand. There he married Fredericka Schroeder in 1857. In 1868 the couple moved to Elgin where Henry opened a general store at the southeast corner of Douglas and Highland avenues.

Henry sold his store around 1872 and joined Henry Bierman and others in building a 3-story brick factory building on North Grove Avenue, where the post office is now located. The factory manufactured agricultural implements, including reapers, mowers, corn shellers, engines and dairy equipment. By the late 1870s Henry had bought out the other partners. In 1883 a Batavia windmill manufacturer named William D. Nichols signed a 5-year lease on Henry's building, with the intent to buy it. On July 6, 1883, while Henry was closing out his business to make room for Nichols, a fire so hot that it crumbled the brick walls destroyed the building. Henry's insurance covered less than half of his loss. Soon afterward Henry rebuilt the factory and became a partner of William Nichols and John Murphy in their windmill manufacturing firm. By 1887, however, the firm was in receivership and was taken over by the newly-organized Elgin Wind Power and Pump Company.

Henry became superintendent of the Elgin Wind Power & Pump Company, a position he held until the fall of 1895 when he bought the lumber company of Simon Kiltz at the northwest corner of Lawrence Avenue and State Street. Within a couple of years he expanded his lumberyard to include several acres across the street near the northeast corner of Lawrence and State.



C. H. GEISTER

Henry's three oldest sons, G. Henry, William and Walter, were all working at the lumberyard at the turn of the century. In 1908, the year before Henry passed away, his three sons took over. Walter left about 1912 and Henry's youngest son, Ray, joined the firm in 1926. Edward, who became an attorney, was the only one of Henry's five sons who did not become a partner in the family business. By 1943, William's son, William Jr., became a 3rd-generation partner, and a few years later another son, Edward J. ("Jim"), also became a partner. Ray remained a partner until retiring in 1980 and William Jr. died in 1983, leaving Edward ("Jim") as the sole owner until the firm closed in May 1992.

By 1912 the Geister Brothers firm owned 960 feet of river frontage, on which stood 19 boathouses or "clubhouses," which operated year around. They had a notorious reputation as being "dens of vice" where late-night drinking, gambling and debauchery often took place. They were "squatters," as none of them had a lease or any legal right to be there. The Geisters tolerated the clubhouses, which typically were unsightly shacks, as they seemed harmless to the business. However, in February 1912 one of the clubhouses



Northeast Corner of State St. and Kimball Ave

burned down, endangering nearby buildings. The Geisters' insurance company refused to renew their policy unless all of the clubhouses were removed. The Geisters issued orders for each of the clubhouses to vacate the premises within 30 days, a move that many viewed as a victory for the moral and aesthetic betterment of Elgin.

In 1917-18 a new Kimball Street bridge was built, resulting in the re-alignment of the intersection at Lawrence Avenue and State Street. The former city electric light plant at the northeast corner of Lawrence and State was removed, allowing Lawrence Avenue east of State Street to be moved about 60 feet to the north to align with Lawrence Avenue west of State Street. The former cold storage warehouse just north of the light plant had been bought by Henry Geister in the late 1890s and now became the building nearest the northeast corner of Lawrence and State. In 1922, however, the Geisters bought from the city the remaining space between Lawrence Avenue and the ware-

house and built an office building, replacing their former office at the northwest corner of Lawrence and State.

In addition to building materials, the firm also sold coal, flour and feed in the early years and outboard motors in later years. Major fires occurred at the lumberyard in 1949 and 1988. By 1991 the firm's closing was inevitable due to a combination of factors: The number of small, independent builders, their main customer base, was diminishing while big development firms were becoming dominant; their location was too confining and there was no room for expansion; and the city wanted to buy and raze the buildings to expose a 300-foot stretch of the river and to widen the roadways and bridge, which were often jammed with heavy traffic.

In the early 1870s Henry bought land along the east side of North State Street just north of the distillery. Here he built his homestead on the top of the hill at 411 North State Street. The property sloped downhill to the west bank of the Fox River and afforded a scenic view. Soon after he bought the property, however, the

newly-organized Chicago & Pacific Railroad (which became the "Milwaukee Road") made plans to lay tracks through Elgin along the west bank of the river. The railroad, by right of eminent domain, took much of his land and by the end of 1873 trains were traversing what used to be his backyard.

From 1876-78 Henry Geister served two terms as alderman on the city council. In September 1877 Henry's wife Fredericka drowned in a tragic accident at their home. She accidentally stepped on the cover of the cistern, which broke, causing her to fall through into the deep water. Fredericka was 51 and the couple had no children. In October 1878 Henry married Sophie Witte, a 25-year-old German immigrant who had lived in Chicago for the previous nine years.

The Geister family was active in the First Evangelical Church and hosted many church parties and gatherings. By 1895 there were ten Geister children 16 years of age or younger. Each of them had daily chores but Henry provided for their recreational needs as well. He built an elaborate playground that attracted children from throughout the neighborhood. The highlight of the playground was a huge merry-go-round that ran on ball bearings ("it was no toy," one of the children later recalled). It was easy for even a child to get it moving too fast for safety. However, the thrill of the ride outweighed the risk of bumps, bruises and the occasional broken bones. The homestead became known locally as "Geisterville," a sort of informal neighborhood amusement park.

To be continued...

Acknowledgements: Mike Alft's references; Mick Zawislak's Courier-News article on March 1, 1992; Edward A. Geister's "Reminiscences" (typewritten manuscript dated 1979); other newspaper articles.

Fundraiser for Lords Park Zoo

From 4 P.M. to 7 P. M. Sunday, September 21, 2014, a fundraiser will be held to benefit Lords Park Zoo. Tickets are \$25.00 and the party will take place at **Imago**, 216 Prairie Street Elgin, IL. There is convenient parking just north of Imago. Come enjoy hors d'oeuvres, wine, beer, soda, music, silent auction, & raffles.

Send a check (\$25.00 per person) payable to:

Friends of Lords Park Zoo

P.O. Box 1187 Elgin, IL 60121-1187

Tickets will be held at the door the day of the event.

Cemetery Walk Preview

Laura Stroud, Secretary

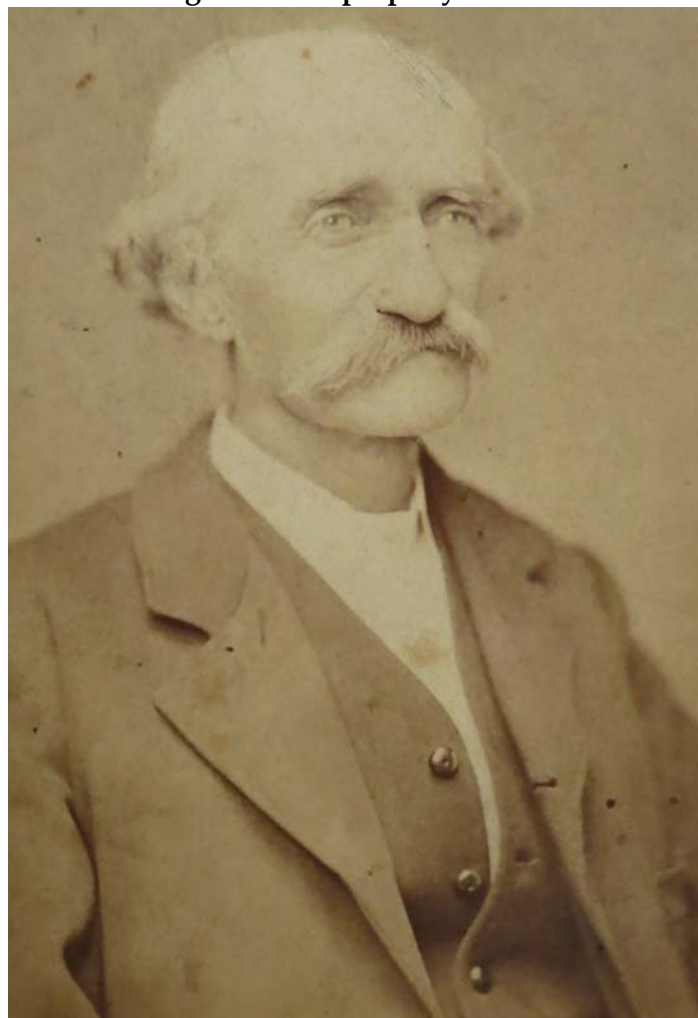
Just a reminder that the 27th Annual Cemetery Walk is coming up Sunday, September 28, 2014 at Bluff City Cemetery. Six former Elginites will be portrayed and two vignettes will be presented. This year we have a new addition as well: Marge Edwards of the Dundee Historical Society will play several Victorian-era funeral songs on the dulcimer.

Portrayals this year will be of Jonathan Force, Emil Barth, August Scheele, Lydia Keys Becker, Caroline Chamberlain and Jane Peterson.

If you have ever wondered about the strange blue-green monuments, we'll explain those to you on the walk. We'll also talk about the high infant mortality in the early days of the 20th century and how this has been reduced through modern medicine and inoculations to prevent the diseases of yesteryear.

Here's some tidbits about each character:

- **Jonathan Force didn't trust banks and may have buried his gold on his property.**



Jonathan Force

- Emil Barth was a young Elgin fireman who met a tragic end while on duty.
- August Scheele was progressive grocer in Elgin.
- Lydia Keys Becker was a teacher and she wrote a history of Elgin Academy.
- Caroline Chamberlain was a world traveler and she founded the Elgin Travel Club.
- Jane Peterson was world-renowned artist whose works hang in the Art Institute of Chicago and other places.

Tours will begin at 11:00 AM and leave about every 15 minutes. The route will take about one hour to complete.

Cost of the walk:

- \$8 for EAHS members and advance purchased tickets
- \$10 day of event, at the gate
- Children 14 and under – free admission

Put on your walking shoes and join us for an afternoon of history coming to life in Elgin.

Bungalow Boomtown

Elizabeth Marston, Museum Director

Don Pielin's bungalow clock, shown below, is part of the new temporary exhibit on Bungalow architecture completed by the Museum's summer intern, Katie Narayan and volunteers. Board member Dennis Roxworthy and Dave O'Donnell will be finishing the exhibit with a roofline similar to the bungalow clock. The two side columns are already in place. They were donated to the collection by the Camacho Family as remnants from the Bosworth House on Channing St. The home was demolished in the 1960s to make way for the YMCA formerly located at Channing and Division.

Katie worked with Board Member Steve Stroud on the content of the Bungalow exhibit, identifying classic bungalow style elements using Elgin's many examples to illustrate the concepts. The exhibit also highlights the idea of a Bungalow Historic District in Elgin that would be city-wide, not just one neighborhood. Bungalow owners could apply to be in the district and be eligible to receive City grants.



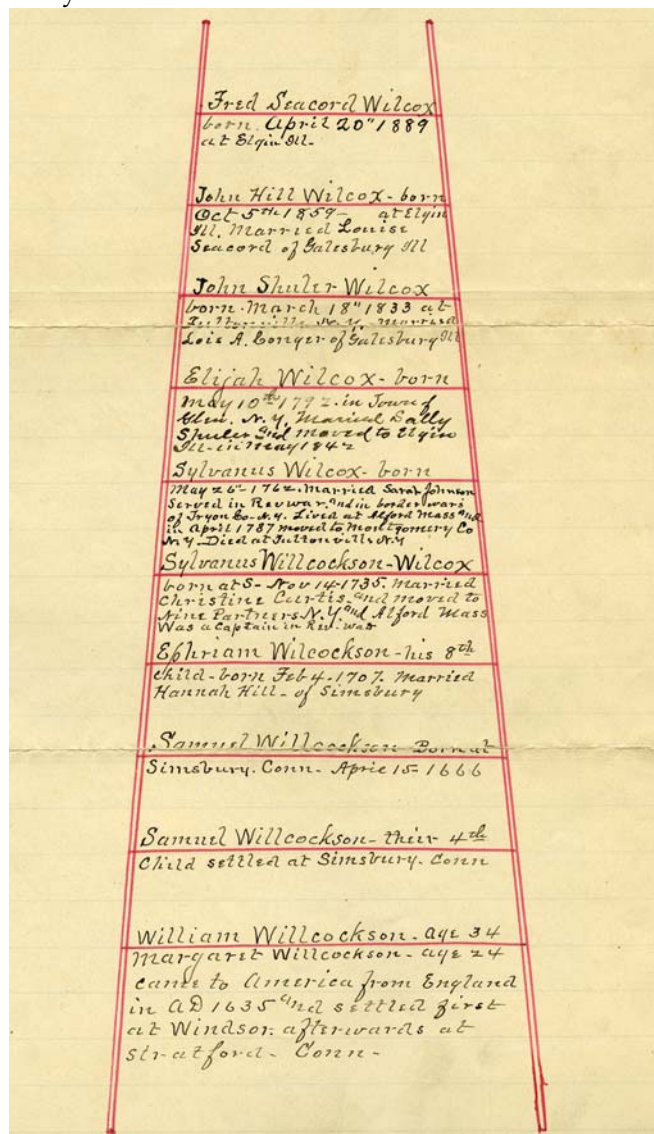
Museum Groupon Deals

There are three deals on Groupon.com for the Elgin History Museum. You can buy 4 adult general admission tickets for \$8, instead of \$12. Two membership deals for new members only: \$15 for an Individual Level or \$22 for a Family. If you know anyone who has been interested in visiting the Museum or becoming a member of the Society, let them know about these Groupons available for a limited time.

Collectors Corner: Wilcox Family Collection

Elizabeth Marston, Museum Director

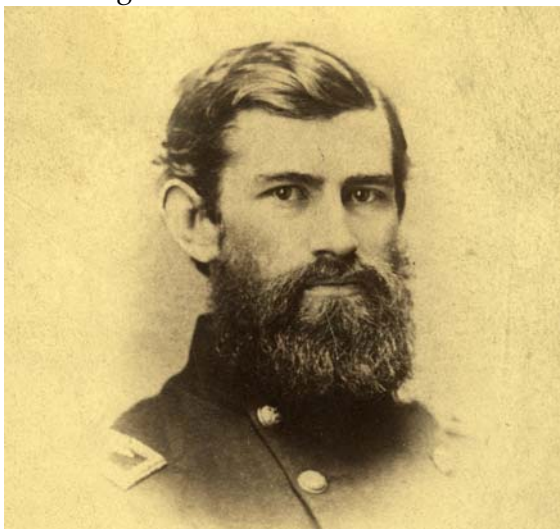
Susan Hyser donated many items from the Wilcox Family in Elgin, including the unusual handwritten family tree shown below.



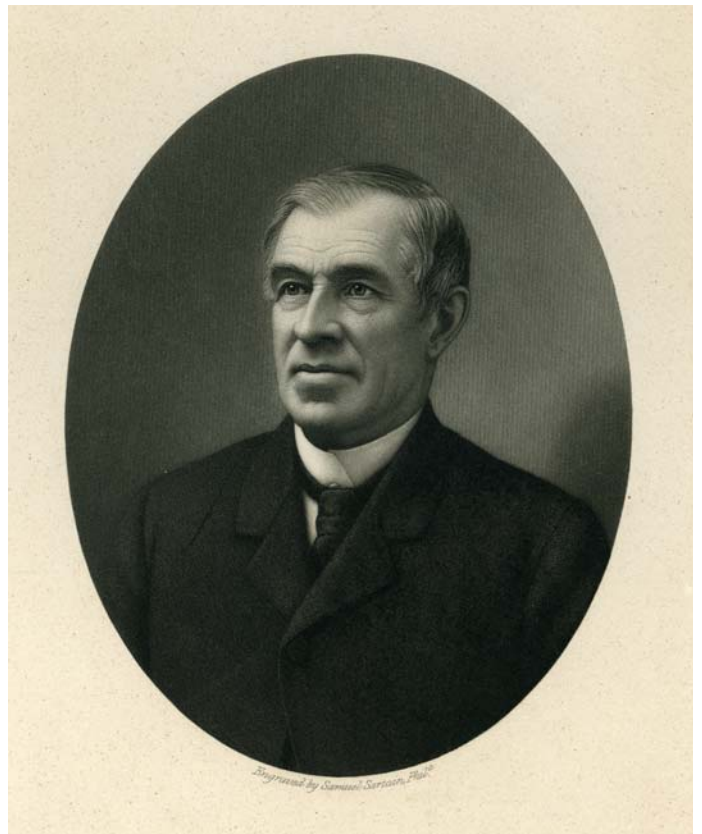
Wilcox family tree



Sylvanus Wilcox was the first Wilcox to live in Elgin. He was a well known Elgin lawyer before the Civil War. His son, John Wilcox, was an officer in the Civil War and came back to Elgin afterward. Other family members include Nick Goedert, an Elgin saloon-keeper and supporter of the Elgin Road Race Association; and Frank Urie, who married into the family after he came to Elgin to work at the Elgin National Watch Company Observatory. The Museum thanks Ms. Hyser for her generous donation to our collection.



John Wilcox



Sylvanus Wilcox