

The Crackerbarrel



Elgin History Museum News July 2023

President's Report

Ann LoCascio, President



The Museum's Program Committee has been busy planning events all over the city, with mini-FUN-raisers sprinkled throughout the year.

The annual gala is moving to spring 2024, so the Museum is hosting a variety of smaller niche events this year, to give everyone their fill of fun and history. There was Trivia Night in January and June's landmarks scavenger hunt in

downtown Elgin. These event sold out and everyone had a great time competing. Manning the Condensing Plant landmark sign allowed me to watch everything going on in Elgin the evening of June 10—from a wedding at The Centre to a dance recital at Hemmens Center. The winning team did it in just 37 minutes! It's great to see Elgin so alive and bustling.

On July 9 the Museum is hosting the Classic Car Show. Expect all types of cars from Model T's to Teslas. There will be live music by Flat Creek HWY, and Rick Lindy and the Wild Ones Band. Neighborhood restaurant Taqueria El Cokito will be offering their delicious tacos. This show gets bigger each year – the street in front of the Museum will be closed to make room for all the cars. Be on the lookout for more events coming up!

Thank You Donors!

Your generous donations ensure the financial health of the Museum. Much of the budget comes from fund-raising and memberships. Thank you!

General Donations

Samuel Freeze
Terry Gable and Sue Brigham for youth programming
Leslie Goddard
Rose Martinez and Siobhan Cottone for the
Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House

2023 Board Fundraiser

Armistead, Dwight and Betsy	Locascio, Anne
Barnhart, Jerri and Ken	McClure, Sandra and Dennis
Barry, Christopher and Jan	McIntyre, Susan
Bartholomew, Steven	McLeod, George and Janet
Bendick, Joseph & Lois	Moore, Jill and George
Blohm, Carol	O'Haire, John and Claudia
Bosely, Dave	Olson, Cliff
Briska, Bill and Fran Cella	Rebecca Hunter
Burkart, Janet and Gordon	Regan, John
Busche, Leon	Reinert, Coral
Chevalier, Jim	Reinert, Coral
Cook, Bruce	Renard, Candy and Rein, Mike
Devine, John and Ana	Roxworthy, Dennis
Dieringer, Roger	Rush, Carrie
Drommerhausen, Judith	Russell, Wayne and Jeanette
Ford, Jennifer	Schroeder, Kathleen
Freeman, Nicholas and Sheila	Schueneman, Nancy
Gabel, Terry and Sue Brigham	Siegenthaler, David
Galfi, Rudolph and Lillian	Strohmaier, Gayle
Garza, Laurel and Ivo	Tepe, Judi and Vern
Heise, Georgeann and Ted	Turner, James and Linda
Jocius, Patricia and James	Vossler, Jackie
Jones, Richard	Walters, Alan and Kathy
Kemerling, Mary	Wingfield, Jim and Sue
Larson, Paul R.	Zoller, Pam

In Memory of Helen Childs (see page 8)

Bill Briska	Ed Szula
Eric Bohne	Alan and Kathy Walters
Nancy Calderwood	Linda and Tom Youngren

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The Crackerbarrel welcomes reader contributions.
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 Visit our website Elginhistory.org

Opinions expressed herein are not necessarily those of the
Society's Board of Directors.

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July 9, 10:00 A.M. – 3:00 P.M.: Classic Car Show and Museum Store SALE! Rain date July 16
All years and makes, open show.

\$15 registration, 9:00 A.M. to noon.

Top 40 JUDGED awards by 3:30 P.M. Chicagoland TBird club will present their own separate awards.

Live music by Flat Creek HWY, and Rick Lindy and the Wild Ones Band. Neighborhood restaurant Taqueria El Cokito will have tacos available for purchase. FREE entry to Museum and car show. Note: Park St. in front of the Museum will be closed to make room for more show cars!

July 15, 1:00 P.M. – 3:00 P.M.: You Butter Believe It-Elgin's Dairy History at Lords Park Zoo / FREE

Join us to learn why Elgin was once the Butter Capital of the Midwest and how a man from Texas got a library named after him in Elgin. Join us at the Tefft Farm inside Lords Park Zoo and we'll churn butter and see what kind of farmer you'd make.

July 20, 12:00 noon: Brown Bag Lunch: History of Meadowdale Race Track with Linda Daro
FREE for Members / \$5 for Guests

Linda Daro will tell the history of Meadowdale Raceways in Carpentersville, IL, and its importance in American motorsports culture. Please register.

August 6, 10:00 A.M. – 3:00 P.M.

NEW for 2023: Downtown Elgin Car Show
S. Grove St. just north of Festival Park

Spectators FREE/\$10 to register and display a vehicle

Open to all years and makes. Vehicle registration 10:00 a.m. til noon. Over 25 awards will be given around 3:00 p.m. pm. Presented by Elgin Heritage Commission, with partners Roxworthy Enterprises, Elgin History Museum, and Rolling Devils Car Club.

September 9 & 10, Historic Elgin House Tour
9:00 A.M. – 4:00 P.M. both days.

Tour homes in the historic Northeast Neighborhood on Elgin's east side.

September 23 & 24: Bluff City Cemetery Walk

Saturday, September 23 tours at 2:00 P.M. & 5:30 P.M.

Sunday, September 24 tours at 11:00 A.M. & 1:30 P.M.

Welcome New Members

Jay Busse

Doreen Christiani & Jim Swick

Andrea Chwee

John Coombs

Elena Ecklund

John and Theresa Hauserman

Susan Johnson

Andrea McAvoy

Erik Melchers

Judy Robnett

Joachim Schweickart

Nancy Tamashunas

Vern and Judith Tepe

Steven Wasilowski

Andrew Zielonka

Upcoming Events

Al Walters, Program Chair

Check the website for current information. Events take place at the Elgin History Museum unless otherwise noted. elginhistory.org/events

July 1 to August 15, Gail Borden Public Library
***Jewish Experience in Elgin* exhibit on display**

The Museum's exhibit is on display at the Gail Borden Public Library. Jewish Experience in Elgin Exhibit at the Library

In conjunction with Violins of Hope, the Jewish Experience in Elgin exhibit highlights the accomplishments of the Jewish community in Elgin before and after World War II and the Holocaust. Be sure to see it on the second floor of the Library!

Member Support Matters

By now, members have received their annual fundraising appeal letter. Thanks to the generosity of members like you, the huge effort to restore the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House is at last complete. We did it, and we are going to keep doing it thanks to the support of our membership.

On May 6, the beloved building was officially dedicated as a neighborhood center for meetings, educational programming, exhibitions and community gatherings! Many members devoted time, money and other resources to saving this architecturally and historically significant 1846 building. The Kimball House is a landmark gateway to Elgin's historic west side. We couldn't have done it without you!

Your ongoing support means we can keep educating local schoolchildren on their local history; providing informative and entertaining programs on Elgin history throughout the year; and preserving local history through the Reber Research Library and an ever-expanding collection of artifacts. To donate, send a check to Elgin History Museum, 360 Park St., Elgin, IL 60120 or online at <https://elginhistory.org/donate/>

The Chisholm Family of Elgin – Part Two

David Siegenthaler, Researcher

As told in Part One, one of Elgin's wealthiest 19th century families made their money from mining interests in the West. Robert Bruce Chisholm was born October 20, 1812, in Delaware County, New York, to William Wallace Chisholm (1764-1829) and Frances Oswell (nee Grant) (1777-1831). William, son of Kenneth, was born in Scotland and emigrated to New York with his family in 1785. In 1819 William emigrated to Canada, settling in Elgin County, Ontario, near St. Thomas, where Robert spent his youth.

Robert was one of nine children, seven of whom emigrated to Canada in 1819 with their parents. The oldest daughter got married in New York and remained there, and one of the boys died in early childhood. Between the years 1828 and 1835, his six remaining siblings and both of his parents died. The causes of their deaths is not known—possibly tuberculosis, typhoid fever or cholera. With his family all gone, Robert, now 23 years old, decided to start a new life elsewhere. He moved to Chicago in October 1836 where he was involved in the lumber trade and also manufactured bricks. In 1840 he returned to Ontario, sold his interests there, and married Sarah Van Valken-

burgh (1819-78). The couple then returned to Illinois and settled in the lead mining town of Galena. Thus began Robert's mining career.

33 years later, in 1873, Robert returned to St. Thomas, Ontario, briefly and had a large, impressive monument erected in memory of his family. The cost, according to a newspaper at the time, was estimated at \$5,000, a huge amount but easily affordable to Robert, who had just cashed in on his Emma Mine bonanza. This elaborate monument to a family who lost eight of its members in a seven-year period aroused curiosity as to the cause. Lack of facts concerning the family led to imaginative speculation. Between 1925 and 1954, three newspaper articles were published which blamed the "Curse of Ireland," which was put upon the family by a poor, grieving Irish widow, who was endowed with supernatural powers.

Robert and Sarah had six children: William Wallace (1842-1909); Oliver Perry (1843-1912); George Stewart (1845-1910); Frances ("Fannie"; 1846-50); Robert Bruce Jr. (1849-1911); and Mary Emma (1858-1911). The first two children were born in Hazel Green, WI, just across the border from Galena, IL. The next two were born in Menomonie, WI. Robert Jr. was born in Benton, WI, near Galena, and Mary Emma was born in Winona, MN.

By 1851, tales of the Gold Rush out West attracted Robert's attention. Prospecting for gold and silver was more exciting and potentially more lucrative than lead mining. Leaving his family in southern Wisconsin, Robert, in 1851, began to spend most of his time prospecting in the western states with varying success. The family moved to Winona, MN, in 1855 and, finally, to Elgin in 1863. The Emma Mine discovery in 1869, described in Part One, was the high point of his 50-year mining career. Robert passed away on June 30, 1891, at age 78 at his son Robert Jr.'s home in Oakland, CA. He is buried in Elgin's Bluff City Cemetery.

William Wallace Chisholm, the eldest child, was born in Hazel Green, WI, in 1842. He learned the printer's trade in the late 1850s, while the family was living in Winona, MN. Coming to Elgin in 1863 with his family, he attended Elgin Academy for a year. In 1864 he and his dad trekked out West and located some mining claims before returning to Elgin in 1865. In 1866 William moved to Chicago, where he was employed as a printer at the "Post" for three years. In 1869, as told in Part One, he was one of the Emma Mine discoverers. In 1876 William married Nancy Jeannette Kendall (1843-1913) and her brother, J.D., became his most intimate business associate. They successfully managed the Centennial Eureka Mine, among others. He left Elgin about 1880 and lived in Salt Lake City, UT, where he is buried, from 1889 until his death in 1909. He and his wife had no children.

Oliver Perry Chisholm was born in Hazel Green, WI, in 1843. Like his brother William, Oliver also learned the printer's trade at Winona, MN, and was once

employed as a printer for a local newspaper. He attended Elgin Academy and served in the Civil War in 1865 as a second lieutenant in Company C, 153rd Illinois Infantry. He married Sarah Jane Bishop (1846-1905) in 1870 and the couple had seven children, three of whom died young. In 1871, Oliver had a home built for his family that still stands at 402 N. Spring St. in Elgin, an outstanding example of the Gothic Revival style of architecture. In the early 1870s he attended the University of Michigan law department and was admitted to the Illinois bar in 1876. His law firm was Crosby & Chisholm. Oliver served as city attorney for one term (1878-79). In 1880 his plat of "Chisholm's Addition" was approved by the City Council. From 1881-83 Oliver served in the State House of Representatives. He left Elgin in the mid-1880s for Bozeman, Montana, where he spent the rest of his life. In Montana in the mid-1890s he was the Democratic nominee for governor and barely lost in a strongly Republican state. He owned many mining claims scattered throughout the West and made several fortunes out of mining. Oliver died in Bozeman in 1912 and is buried in Bluff City Cemetery.



Oliver Chisholm Home, 402 N. Spring St.

George Stewart Chisholm was born in Menomonie, WI, in 1845. At age ten his family moved to Winona, MN, and at age 18 they moved to Elgin. George completed his education at Elgin Academy and at one time owned a grocery store in Elgin. He then engaged in farming in DuPage County, dealing in fine stock. Since about 1887 he devoted his attention to real estate and his extensive mining investments. In 1875 George married Angeline Kidder Hatch (1852-1919) and the couple had seven children, two of whom died young. In 1886 George bought the home that still stands at 306 N. Spring St. and lived there the rest of his life. Like his brother Oliver's home, two blocks to the north, it is an excellent example of Gothic Revival architecture

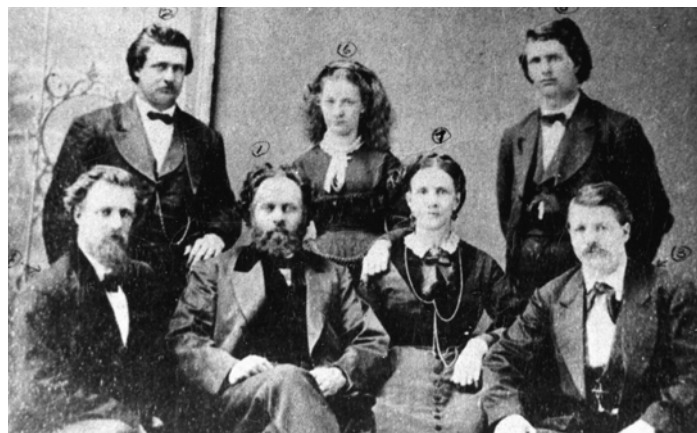
and was probably built circa 1850 for James Truesdell, a dentist. George died in 1910 and is buried in Bluff City Cemetery.

Robert Bruce Chisholm, Jr., was born in Benton, WI, near Galena, in 1849. With his family he moved to Winona, MN, in 1855, and Elgin in 1863. He attended Elgin Academy and was employed in brick manufacturing in Elgin. With his share of the Emma Mine fortune, Robert engaged in the importation of Percheron horses. In 1875 he married Helen Blish (1856-78), who died of peritonitis in 1878. In the early 1880s Robert moved out West, where he was active in mining enterprises for the rest of his life. In 1885 he married Ida May Lynch in Oakland, CA, and they had at least five children. Robert died and was buried in Banning, CA, in 1911.



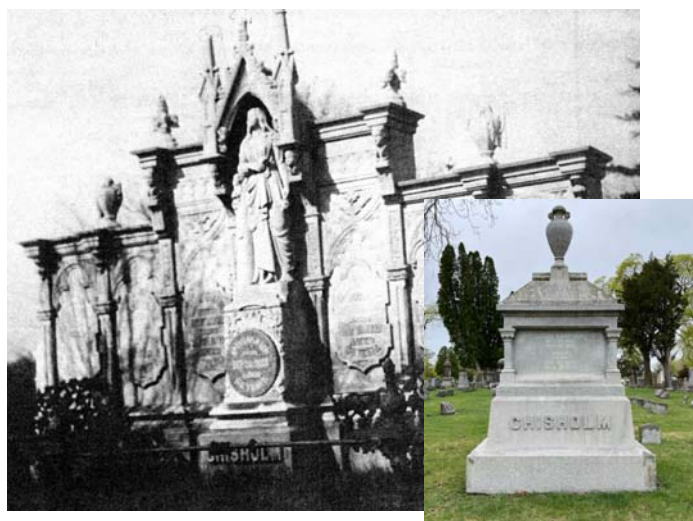
George Chisholm Home, 306 N. Spring St.

Mary Emma Chisholm, for whom the Emma Mine was named, was born in Winona, MN, in 1858 and moved to Elgin with her family in 1863. In 1884 she married George Bennett of Geneva and the couple had nine children, two of whom died young. They lived for a time in Elgin and Chicago before settling in Geneva, where Mary Emma died and was buried in 1911.



Chisholm Family, 1874. Front row, L to R: Robert Bruce, Jr., Robert Bruce, Sarah and George. Back row, L to R: William, Mary Emma and Oliver Perry

Some members of another branch of the Chisholm family, including Eliza Chisholm and her daughters Cecil and Frances ("Fannie"), also lived in Elgin beginning in the early 1880s. Eliza, who died in 1917, was the widow of Robert Bruce Sr.'s nephew Hiram, who died in 1873 in Canada. Neither Cecil nor Frances ever married and they died in 1924 and 1944, respectively.



Chisholm Family Monuments in Canada and in Bluff City Cemetery, (on the right)

Acknowledgments: Mike Alt's publications; obituaries and newspaper articles; Kane County histories; city directories; Ancestry.com; probate files; "Myth & Reality: The Chisholm Family in Elgin County [Canada], 1819-1835" by George Thorman, 1992; Kane County Recorder; Elgin monument photo and the photo of the home at 306 N. Spring St. by Judy Van Dusen; Chisholm family photo and Alta, UT, drawing from the Utah State Historical Society; Historicegin.com; etc.

Houses that Came On The Train: Elgin's Kit Homes

Rebecca Hunter with Rebecca Miller

In 1919, a train pulls into the station and leaves two boxcars on a landing. Inside are some 12,000 pieces, all the materials needed to construct an entire house. The framing boards are cut to size at the mill to facilitate rapid and accurate construction. The purchaser has chosen the model, selected door and window styles, specified the desired types of wood, decided on the exterior cladding and even selected the paint colors. These well-designed, practical homes were made of top-quality materials. This is a mail order kit home.

Approximately 70,000 Sears homes were sold throughout the United States and many are still proudly occupied.

Many Kit Homes in Elgin

As of February 2022, a total of 337 kit homes, representing 72 different models, have been authenticated in Elgin. Sears, Roebuck & Co. was not the only, or the first, or the longest-lasting provider of kit homes. Yet, the Sears home remains the most storied. Kit homes in Elgin were sold by firms such as Sears, Aladdin, Lewis, Sterling and Gordon-Van Tine.

The Elginites who first purchased these homes between 1913 and 1942 came from many walks of life. Fifty were Elgin Watch factory employees, another 27 were themselves in the building trades. Three were Elgin firemen. One worked at the Elgin Casket Co. Others gave their occupation as millwright, farmer and railroad employee. They would have their kit homes built all around town, from the eight models built on Hamilton Ave. to the side by side Vallonia models at 1019 and 1021 Hill Ave. What the buyers had in common was their desire to save time and money. A kit homeowner was likely to save 30% over the cost of a standard construction home at that time. A new kit homeowner could also expect to move in after an average of 352 hours of construction, compared to 583.5 hours needed to build a standard construction home.

Buildings manufactured by Sears were mostly one, one and a half or two-story single family dwellings, but also included duplexes, four-flat buildings, barns, agricultural outbuildings, and garages. Architectural styles included Craftsman, Colonial Revival, Dutch Colonial, English Tudor Revival, Victorian, Mission, Spanish Revival and Prairie. Thousands of these "Modern Homes" were sold throughout the country to individuals as well as to corporations such as the Standard Oil Company in Carlinville, Illinois, which purchased 192 homes to provide housing for their mine workers.

Everyone Had a Sears Catalog

Costs listed in the catalogs ranged from \$146.25 for a two room vacation cottage (no bath) in 1911 to \$5,927 for a 2.5 story, 8 room, 2.5 bath 1921 copy of George Washington's Cambridge, MA residence. The catalog price included only the building materials; the actual cost of a catalog home was approximately double that to cover the price of the lot, the foundation, and the labor to assemble the house. Plumbing, lighting, heating fixtures, storm windows and screens were available at additional cost. Many upgrade options were available, such as cherry woodwork, built-in cabinetry, oak flooring, crown moldings, and asphalt roof shingles (cedar was standard and less costly at that time).

To help kit purchasers decorate their new homes, some Sears advertisements and catalog pages included floor plans with dotted lines to suggest the perfect place for a davenport, rocking chair, lamp or dresser, coincidentally available on other pages in the Sears catalog.



A typical home catalog page.

Easy to Buy

A mere \$1 deposit was needed to start a sale. Sears also offered financing to buyers, requiring only a steady job and a clear title to a lot valued at over \$500. In 1924, the Easy Payment Plan was \$30 a month, including interest, equivalent to just under \$500 in 2022. Sears home sales peaked in 1928, declining throughout the Great Depression. Sears lost over eight million dollars in unpaid mortgages, so in 1933 Sears considered closing its Modern Homes Division, but instead revamped the program, discontinuing financing, simplifying designs, reducing the number of designs offered each year, and using less costly construction materials. These strategies proved unsuccessful and in 1940 Sears closed its Modern Homes Division. No sales records are still in existence at Sears Roebuck and Co.

Why Elgin?

Three factors might explain why a town has many kit homes. First, most kit homes are located within a mile of a railway. The buyer had to load the contents of their delivered boxcars on a wagon and haul them to their lot, so it was much more common for kit homes to be built in town by 1920. Towns with a rail line were bound to see more willing customers. Daily rail service had come to Elgin in 1850.

Second, potential kit homeowners could handle the entire transaction by mail, and many did. Yet, for the nervous or those wanting to make several customizations, it was convenient to visit a Sears store to speak to an employee. Elgin had a Sears store on Dupage St. and later Spring St. from 1928 to 1980. A Modern Homes Sales Office was located here from 1927-1930. Lastly, towns with a large number of kit homes are those that saw a boom of housing and growth in middle class wealth during this same time period. Elgin was a local hub for manufacturing and retail in the early 20th century. The Elgin National Watch Co., the Illinois Watch Case Co., David C. Cook Publishing Co. and the Borden Co. were all large employers in town.

Their vast employee base led to growth in other industries and services throughout town and a booming middle class.

How to recognize a Kit Home

Most of Elgin's mail order homes were built after 1915. The easiest way to see if your home is a kit home might be to check the mortgage records at the Kane County Recorder's website and see if a kit company held its original mortgage.

Homeowners can also look for precut part numbers stamped in ink on structural boards such as joists, rafters, stair treads and risers, and wall studs. Some homeowners may still have original blueprints, order forms and other correspondence from Sears. If part numbers are not visible, either because they are not precut or because the numbers were obscured by paint or the finishing of basements or attics, a homeowner can analyze interior details compared against original Sears building materials catalogs. These details include room layout, room dimensions, hardware, doors and windows, built-in cabinets, Sears shipping labels on trim boards and original light fixtures.



An example of Sears' "Clyde" model in Elgin

Rebecca Hunter's book, *Mail Order Homes: Sears Homes and Other Kit Houses* is available in the Museum Store <https://elginhistory.org/product/putting-sears-homes-on-the-map/>. This wonderfully informative book includes numerous images from period catalogs and describes the customers who bought and built mail order homes, the various styles, and the boom and bust of the industry. Readers may also enjoy Ms. Hunter's books *Putting Sears Homes on the Map* and *Sears, Roebuck Book of Barns: 1919*. These are available on Amazon and from the author directly at www.kithouse.org.

A list of kit homes in Elgin, complete with photo, model, year of construction and original owner, is available at the Museum.

Thanks for Coming!



Nancy Kimball
Cobblestone House
Ribbon Cutting
May 6, 2023



SCAVENGER HUNT FUN Raiser!

June 10, 2023



ELGIN HISTORY MUSEUM
360 PARK STREET
ELGIN, IL 60120



Volunteer Helen Childs Dies at age 102

Elizabeth Marston, Museum Director

Helen Childs was a longtime member and supporter of the Society. She served as a docent for many years greeting visitors to the Museum. Her husband, George, who died years ago, was part of a multi-generational Elgin Watch Factory family. Helen and George were a warm and gracious couple with deep ties to Elgin. They valued local history and connections to the community. They will be missed.



Helen Childs and her son Steve

Collections Corner

Beth Nawara, Collections Curator

Garfield Elementary School on May Street closed at the end of the 2022-2023 school year. Principal Barbie Chisholm contacted the Museum about making a donation, and the Museum was very excited to accept class photographs, a jacket, artwork of the building, a commemorative brick, and signs.



Garfield School 4th grade class, 1985-1986 included Chicago mayor Brandon Johnson.