

The Crackerbarrel



Elgin History Museum News January 2025

President's Report



Anne LoCascio, President

Each year I am amazed and gratified by how generous our members are, supporting the Museum in so many ways. We start out 2025 in great shape for all that the Museum has planned for the upcoming year. Giving Tuesday was a great success, raising over \$10,000, aided by an anonymous donor's generous matching. Our Amazon Wish list had an over 70% fulfillment rate. The Board Member fundraiser continues to bring in a siz-

able amount and this year we even had a rare book sale that got history into buyers hands and helped to sustain the Museum.

A sizable amount of the Amazon wish list was dedicated to stocking exhibits for educational programming. Rebecca Miller has been working hard to increase our visits from schoolchildren and we are now seeing record numbers of schools participating. As a child that used to haunt the Freeport Historical Society four blocks from where I grew up, it's so exciting to see the Elgin History Museum provide a sense of place and history for our local kids. My hope is that one day one of them will grow up to be President of the Museum Board.

And speaking of knowledge, make sure to put Friday, January 31 on your calendar for the now-annual Trivia Night Fun-raiser. This event typically sells out fast because it is great fun, filled with healthy competition to show off just how much local history you know. My teammates last year, George and Marge Rowe, did all the heavy lifting, but when we bet it all on the last question, I was able to extract a 20-year-old morsel of information about Early Aughts pop powerhouse Jonas Brothers to grab us top prize. Come see if you can best us in 2025!

Welcome New Members

Edward Bates
Rick Burnidge
Van Crandall
Karen Fletcher

Adriana Lopez
Jody Schmeck
Patricia Williams

New Life Members: Art and Nancy Schueneman

Get to Know Your Board Members: Jill Moore



Brand-new board member Jill Moore has been an active volunteer at the Elgin History Museum for the past three years. She greets and docents for general visitors and she also is a docent for school programs.

Jill and her husband, George, have been active in cemetery cleanups at Bluff City Cemetery and at Hilltop Cemetery on the grounds of the old Elgin State Hospital. Jill has taken classes to learn more about headstone cleaning and care. In 2023, Jill and George built a cemetery float for the July 4th parade to promote the Bluff City Cemetery Walk. It was used again in 2024, attracting new visitors to the event.

Jill is a cat lover and volunteers in the community to help her neighbors. Welcome to the Museum Board, Jill!

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President: Anne LoCascio
Vice President: John Devine
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Editor: Rebecca Marco

The Crackerbarrel welcomes reader contributions.
Next deadline February 20, 2025
Visit our website Elginhistory.org

**Jan. 24,
6:30 P.M.**

Art Show at the Cobblestone

Elgin artist Nick Freeman will discuss his techniques for oil painting and display his work.

**Feb. 23
2:00 P.M.**

Caroline Kisiel presents "Did Black Lives Matter in Early Illinois?"

Illinois Humanities Road Scholar program highlighting how close Illinois came to becoming a slave state in the 1820s.

**March 23
2:00 P.M.**

"What's Coming Down the Line: Railroads in the American Mind" a Road Scholar presentation by Mike Matejka

Illinois is the nation's railroad crossroads. The railroads created the economy, opened up communities and assisted industry. They are icons that influenced American culture.

**April 17
12:00 Noon**

Brown Bag Lunch: Mary Hoffman presents the History of Color

(FREE for Members / \$5 for guests. Bring your lunch; soft drinks and dessert provided.

April 24

American Cut Glass presentation at Gail Borden Library by author Don Quant

See article on page page 5.

2025 Events Calendar

Al Walters, Program Chair

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

BACK BY POPULAR DEMAND!

ELGIN TRIVIA NIGHT
FUN-RAISER

FRIDAY, JANUARY 31 AT 7PM
\$20 MEMBERS / \$25 GUESTS

SCAN FOR TICKETS

Museum Gala

Save the Date
April 26, 2025

Featuring
Leslie Goddard
as **Lucille Ball**

Thank You Donors

Amazon Wish List Donors

Terry Gabel and Sue Brigham	Beth Nawara
Mary Kemerling	Steve Rauschenberger
Jill Moore	Alan and Kathy Walters

2024 Giving Tuesday Donations

Abrams, Rachel	Lee, Maureen and Tom
Anderson, James & Sara Ellen	Locascio, Anne
Anonymous	Marco, Rebecca
Armistead, Betsy	Marcus, Ira and Jackie
Barry, Jan and Christopher	Marston, Emma
Bednar, Paul	Marston, Jane
Bosely, Dave	Marston, John and Elizabeth
Bost, Marianne	Marston, William
Briska, Bill and Fran Cella	Marston, William and Kathy
Briska, Luann	McClure, Sandra and Dennis
Burkart, Janet and Gordon	McIntyre, Susan
Butcher, Mark	Moore, Jill and George
Caldrone, Janice	Navin, Mary
Calhamer, Tish	Once Upon A Farm
Christensen, Lisa	Paypal
Coleman, Mark	Rauschenberger, Carol
Corbett, Rita	Renner, Richard
Davies, Laura	Rock, Linda and Jeff White
Dusel, David and Donna	Roxworthy, Dennis & Laurie
Dyer, Maurice (Cust)	Rush, Carrie
Freeman, Nicholas and Sheila	Schmeck, Jody
Gabel, Terry & Sue Brigham	Schroeder, Robert and Judith
Galfi, Lillian	Sekowski, Pat
Galfi, Rudolph	Shull, David
Garza, Laurel	Singleton, Pamela Kay
Gibb, Elizabeth	Sundquist, Christen
Grosser, Kimberly	Swan, Chan and Pam
Grosser, Maureen	Swan, Valerie
Grosser, Patricia and Jeff	Swanson, Jackie
Harkin, Patricia	Turner, James and Linda
Hunter, Rebecca	Turnquist, Jerry
Hyser, Susan	Van Dusen, Judith
Kemerling, Mary and Tom	Vierck, Dana
Klimek, Harry	

2024 Board Fundraiser Donors

Anderson, Sara Ellen	Nish, Don
Bird, M. Catherine	Quintanilla, Kathy
Garza, Laurel	Rauschenberger, Steve
Gregory, Mary	Shaw, Rita
McIntyre, Susan	

General Donations

Rolling Devils Car Club via Scott and Moira Savel
 Dolores Nelson in memory of David J. Nelson
 The Matheans Study Group via Barb Wahl
 George Rowe
 Margaret and Robert Canary

Monthly Donations

Rudolph and Lillian Galfi Patricia Harkin

Clock Repair Grant

The Signal Hill Daughters of the American Revolution is giving the Museum a \$1,000 grant to repair the 1933 World's Fair Master Clock.



Jackie Marcus of DAR presents the grant to Beth Nawara

A History of Elgin's Hills and Hollows

David Siegenthaler, Museum Researcher

When the first settlers arrived in 1835, Elgin's hills and hollows were much more pronounced than they are today. Over the years, there has been a leveling of the terrain, as depressions and gullies have been filled in and street levels (or "grades," as the inclinations are usually referred to) have been altered, either to raise them above flood level, or to lower them to reduce the steepness of hills. Later, new depressions created by gravel mining were eventually abandoned. These have filled with water to the level of the water table and become wildlife habitats.

Though Elgin's hills or bluffs (founder James T. Gifford called them "swells") are not unusually high or steep, they were prominent enough to distinguish Elgin with the nickname "Bluff City." In the late 1800s, Elgin had a newspaper, a baseball team and a hotel named "Bluff City." Today we still have Bluff City Cemetery and Bluff City Blvd. The hills are most evident rising from the west and southeast banks of the Fox River. No part of Elgin was ever flat, as topographical maps will attest.

By about 1850, 15 years after Elgin's founding, the center of Elgin's commercial district was at "Market Square" (now "Fountain Square"), where Chicago St., Grove Ave. and Douglas Ave. all converge. The Fox River periodically flooded as far east as Grove and Douglas avenues and Brook and Spring streets. In order to keep the streets dry, they had

to be raised above the flood waters. This raising of the street levels occurred in increments over many years in Elgin's early history, mostly prior to 1900. One source says that during an excavation just west of Brook St. (which formerly extended south to Division St.), six sidewalks were unearthed, one below the other at six different levels.

Overall, some streets in the east-side business district were raised eight feet or more. In 1888 a newspaper reported that during excavation for the building at 18-20 Douglas Ave., two large black walnut stumps were dug up from about nine feet below the street level. In some cases, the second floor of downtown buildings became the first floor and the former first floor became the basement. Most of these buildings no longer exist and those that do have little exterior evidence of the street raising. A good surviving example that can be viewed from the outside is the Spring St. side of the triangular building at 79 S. Grove Ave. (built in 1889 and once called "Whiskey Point"), where Grove Ave. and Spring St. merge. Here, a stairway leads down to the lower level, which was originally at street level.



Stairway to old first floor, 79 South Grove, 1990

Basements of some other downtown buildings are also said to have evidence of street raising, such as bricked-up doors and windows that are now below grade. The basement of the building at 25-27 N. Grove Ave. ("Hagelow Block"; built 1885) was originally the first floor, as can be seen in a 1978 photo during sidewalk replacement. Jim Turner, a Museum board member, worked at the Ranger store next door (23 N. Grove Ave.; razed 1980s) in the late 1950s. He recalls being puzzled when he saw windows and doors in the basement of that building that exited beneath the sidewalk.



One of the most notorious depressions in early Elgin was the "Geneva Street Hollow." This was a deep gully that extended along Geneva St. from approximately Fulton St. north to E. Highland Ave., crossing DuPage and Chicago streets. Wagons and carriages traveling east or west had to descend into and climb out of the gully. After a rain, it became a huge mud hole and was often impassable.

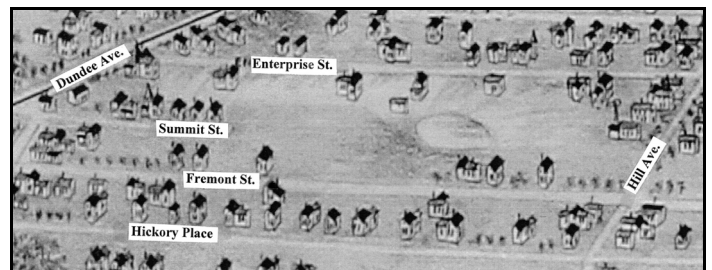
In 1869, Sam Wilder was elected to the city council and successfully pushed for filling in the gully at Geneva, DuPage and Chicago streets. It was an unpopular decision, as taxpayers and adjacent property owners objected, and Wilder was not re-elected. In retrospect, it was a wise decision and a boon to east-side traffic and development.

Though the Geneva, DuPage and Chicago street levels were raised, much of the Geneva Street Hollow remains to this day. The 2nd floor of the apartment building at the southwest corner of DuPage and Geneva, for example, is at street level. The entrance to the house at 62 S. Geneva St. is over a miniature bridge from the sidewalk to the 2nd floor. A depression still exists inside the block bounded by Geneva, Chicago, Chapel and DuPage streets, where, in 1887, a newspaper reported that houses "were in a lake up to the doorways." The installation of storm sewers in the 1890s drained the hollow and relieved the periodic flooding.

Another notorious Elgin depression was the Summit St. dump site that extended from about a block east of Dundee Ave. east for several hundred feet, between Enterprise and Fremont streets. This was a boggy area containing a pond of stagnant, slime-covered water. When Elgin's first Black families arrived during the Civil War, they predominantly settled in the area just south of the dump—along the streets of Gifford, Fremont, Hickory and Ann.

In 1883 a diphtheria outbreak caused the deaths of six residents, all living within a few hundred feet of the noxious pond, the bed of which was on a level with the well water in the area. The city health officer blamed the pond, which he said could not be successfully drained due to its location. He said filling in the pond area was the only way to avoid the menace, but that it would be expensive and property owners were unable to cooperate. The pond was not filled in until 1932, when state highway 58 was extended west to Dundee Ave. The dump itself would not be closed until 1948, along with all other dumps within the Elgin city limits.

Though the Summit St. dump site is long gone, the depression along Summit St. is still noticeable, especially near the long-vacant grocery store at 465 Summit St. The low-lying intersection nearby at Gifford and Fremont streets still floods after heavy rains, evidence that the site is still poorly drained.



Site of Summit Street Dump, near the former Dino's food store

Elgin's west side had its own notorious depression, a pond that covered several acres south of Locust St. and east of Elm St. Known as "Hamlin's Slough" (the Hamlin "Wizard Oil" family owned the property from 1886-1941). This pond was drained around the turn of the century, leaving an unsightly and unhealthy mud hole. In order to fill it in, the neighborhood was allowed to use it as a dumping ground. In 1914 a smoldering peat fire, far beneath the surface, burned for weeks. The odor was unbearable and residents for blocks around were obliged to keep their windows and doors tightly closed. The smoke was followed by an exodus of thousands of rats, running aimlessly about the neighborhood.

The site became known as the Elm St. dump and the problem with odors, rats, "Mormon crickets" and other vermin continued until the dump was closed in 1948. The site was then covered with tons of fill and in 1950 St. Edward High School converted it into an athletic field.

A southeast Elgin neighborhood that has undergone significant topographical alteration is the west side of Raymond St., from Yarwood St. south to Bent St. Formerly known as the "Watch Factory Woods," the site consisted of a 30-foot mound near a deep ravine that had become an unsightly garbage dump. In 1924 a developer improved the former eyesore, turning it into desirable residential lots by cutting down the hill and using it to fill in the ravine. He also cooperated with the city to open Wellington Ave., the formerly unopened street on the west side of the "Watch Factory Woods," from Bent St. north to National St. Incidentally, Wellington Ave. south of Bent St. is actually two separate streets - "Upper Wellington" and "Lower Wellington," due to the steep hill and a former railroad that once ran between the two sides of the street.

Streets were lowered to reduce the steepness of hills, and there are many examples of this, such as Channing St. near Laurel St., St. Charles St. south of Jay St., Division St. east of Channing St. and Cedar Ave. north of River Bluff Rd. Ball St. just west of the railroad viaduct was cut down up to eight feet to accommodate the viaduct, which opened in 1931. Whenever streets are lowered, adjacent homes are left well above street level and their yards may require terracing or retaining walls.

Thousands of years ago, melting glaciers receded from northern Illinois and left a wealth of sand and gravel. The Hammond brothers began mining the sand and gravel locally in the late 1880s, and helped organize the Chicago Gravel Co. Their gravel pits were located south of Bluff City Cemetery and on either side of Gifford Rd. In the 1800s, sand and gravel were used mainly for street filling and railroad track ballast. After the turn of the century, the demand increased rapidly as the uses of concrete increased, such as for road paving, building construction, sidewalks, barn floors, railroad abutments and retaining walls. The remains of the long-abandoned pits still exist as numerous small ponds that are now used as seasonal nesting and breeding areas by migratory birds.

In 1909, A.Y. Reed converted his farm along the west bank of the Fox River opposite Trout Park into a sand and gravel mining operation. He had a railroad spur and bridge built across the Fox to a C&NW Railroad loading area at the north end of Logan Ave. Sand that dropped from the railroad cars washed into the west bank and formed a beach that became a popular place to swim. The Reed pit's busiest days came during the building boom after World War I, but the firm closed during the Great Depression. In 1948, the northern portion was leased by Elgin for use as a city dump. The Northwest Tollway, completed in 1958, bisected the former Reed property and the southern portion became the Willow Lake Estates mobile home park, which opened in 1964. By the early 1970s, the former dump site north of the Tollway was filled in.

Mining operations were planned as part of the financing and development of the 400-acre Elgin Sports Complex in the 1980s. The city received a portion of the royalties from the sale of gravel. As the gravel was removed, the mining company shaped the land for further development, such as the bicycle motocross (BMX) hill, which opened in 1990. By 1993 it was apparent that the gravel yield would fall far short of expectations. However, limestone was discovered beneath the property and the contract was renegotiated to do limestone mining, which required blasting. To get at the limestone, a 40- to 50-foot layer of earth was removed and redistributed elsewhere in the park. It was graded out to form the land contours for other amenities, primarily an 18-hole golf course that includes a large lake, the vestige of the limestone mine.

Acknowledgments: Mike Alft's publications; various newspaper articles; various Internet sources; historic, current and topographical maps; etc.

Who Dusts All This Stuff?

By Maureen Thoren

It's a question often posed to my husband and I as we escort guests who tour our home the Wing Mansion, and view our collections on display. But it's a question that tells us one thing right away: the person who asked the question is not a collector.

Those who collect don't dwell on the inevitable accumulation of dust. Rather, they stand back and admire the results of their innumerable searches, remembering the shop or flea market that revealed yet another precious addition to their groupings. Only occasionally and when absolutely necessary will they run a feathery duster over and around their curated and treasured objects. It's always much more fun to be out adding to the collection than it is to stay home and dust. Besides, dusting sometimes results in chipping or breakage, so best to keep it to a minimum.

So why do people collect, anyway? What is it that spurs a young child to spend hours looking for sparkly rocks to take home and study, or another one to gather up a handful of shells from a sandy beach and admire the many different sizes and shapes? A recent article in an auction house newsletter suggested that collecting comes from certain genes that spur the urge even from a young age. Hmm, sounds like a great excuse to get more stuff.

The Elgin History Museum is a vast collection of many collections, organized in such a way to help educate and entertain visitors and researchers. But if it were not for the collectors who saved and donated the documents and artifacts, those vaulted rooms might be empty.

Collecting is the conscious accumulation of objects that fit the collector's criteria for a particular category. Many people collect several different types of things. And many of us feel that there cannot be too many items in a collection, there just may not be enough room to display it all.

The joys of collecting range from just getting out of the house to peruse a new market or shop, to traveling cross-country to meet with other collectors of what you love, at events such as a convention or educational seminar. Either activity serves to fuel the never-ending search for the next favorite object to add to the stash. The hunt is often the best part of finding new acquisitions. And with the hunt might come a memorable meal with a friend at a lovely outdoor café overlooking an historic farm, or a wonderful glass of wine with dinner somewhere completely new from your usual haunts. Or, if you're trying to make it to the next town before the stores close, it can be lunch in the car while you're eagerly anticipating the next shop.

Collecting often spurs research with books, articles, visits to sites where manufacturing took place, and of course, online browsing. Research, itself, is another facet of the collecting mindset, for research is the collecting of facts pertaining to that which you love.

Some people collect the latest trend. Beanie Babies, Hummel porcelain figurines, beer cans and baseball caps, to name a few. Other people stick with cars, guitars and railroad lanterns. My first collecting love was small pieces of furniture that I could refinish for a future apartment, which began when I was just 14 years old. I shudder when I think of all those fumes. But I felt that I was saving things that otherwise may have been discarded and I ended up with something usable, if not always stylish. When I had taken over part of my parents' garage with my projects, I realized it was time to collect something smaller. Just about that time, I discovered the beauty and creativity of Art Deco era jewelry, mainly made in Czechoslovakia.

It was plentiful and fun to shop for. When I had a respectable number of those pieces, wrapped separately but gathered together in a shoe box, I started collecting jewelry boxes. Beautiful brass and glittery silver boxes, grouped together on a dresser top, served to safely store the jewelry

and decorate the dresser. Score two for that collection! Along the way, I learned about the jewelry designers and metals that went into the construction of the pieces. Czechoslovakia was a Mecca for the era's glass and jewelry designers, but World War II brought much of this kind of work to an end. Some designers were sent away to camps because they were independent types and had too much influence. History, good and bad, is part of collecting in so many ways.

My jewelry was made of glass, not precious stones. Glass has always been a focus since that first discovery of sparkly necklaces, bracelets and rings. Antique art glass, which is colored and is for decoration, not utility, is a small collection of mine. I began collecting lighting fixtures to acquire examples of beautiful art glass from the 1920s and 1930s when I could no longer afford to buy fancy vases by Steuben, Durand or Tiffany. And when I moved into my current home, all those lamps and chandeliers also found a perfect home. Now that all the ceilings have at least two or three light fixtures and many lamps in each room, that collecting focus has slowed down, sort of.

When my mother passed away about 20 years ago, our family discussed what to do with her many collections. Did I mention that the collecting bug can be passed on to sons and daughters? She had a small collection of antique American Brilliant cut glass, which was made from roughly 1876 to about 1920. None of my siblings wanted her cut glass, so I took it all home. Pitchers, vases, tumblers, it was all so pretty, sparkling in the sunlit window she had displayed it in. I packed it up and tried to give it the dignity it had enjoyed at her house. Then I basically forgot about cut glass until years later at an antique show, when I ran across some beautiful wine glasses that were cut in a fanciful design, and they felt so elegant in my hand. They were not cheap, but they caught my fancy and came home with me to Elgin. That was the real start of a true collecting passion.



Collections on Display

Now, my antique American Brilliant cut glass collection fills seven display cabinets as well as the tops of buffets, tables and dressers. Learning about the artists who designed the patterns cut into the glass, the companies they worked for, how the glass formula affected the final appearance, and so

many other facets of this collectible, has enriched my life and led to special friendships with fellow collectors. Several large companies made this glass in the Chicago area, and Elgin had its own firm, the Edward Koch Cut Glass Company, which stood across from the current downtown post office. Department stores and jewelry stores had huge departments for cut glass. It was purchased by embassies, the White House, the wealthy and the wannabe rich.



Very rare American Brilliant cut glass punchbowl

A cut glass bowl was a treasured wedding gift. A cut glass vase made the perfect anniversary keepsake. Many families saved and treasured their cut glass, but now it's a relatively common item to find at an estate sale or flea market. Sorry, you can't put it in the microwave or dishwasher. But that's a small price to pay for the special elegance that cut glass gives to

a dining table or glass of wine.

If you want to learn more about the Chicago area cut glass companies, plan to attend a presentation by researcher and author Don Quant at the Gail Borden Library in partnership with the Elgin History Museum on April 24, 2025. Don Quant's book, *Chicago Cut Glass, 1893-1933*, is for sale at the Elgin History Museum Store. The Elgin cut glass firm is extensively profiled in the book, with numerous photos for more than 25 pages. Throughout April, an exhibit of antique American Brilliant cut glass will be shown in the display case on the second floor of the Library near the stairs. Stop by, it will dazzle your eyes and delight your imagination.

Thank you for coming to the Holiday Tea!

This year was the most successful Holiday Tea in the Museum's history! The event was fully booked months in advance, due to excitement for Leslie Goddard's talk on Mid Century Christmas, and she did not disappoint. Pianist Ellie Lee set a festive tone with holiday favorites during the social hour, generously sponsored by the David Nelson Fund. Thanks also to the many Museum members who volunteered that day to help make it a memorable and very enjoyable event.



Holiday Tea, 2024. Left to right: Marianne Bost, Ricky Harris, Mary Kemerling, Marge Rowe, Laura Stroud



Ann LoCascio (l.) and Linda Rock (r.). Linda was honored at Elgin Chamber of Commerce Thanksgiving

NEW: Used Book Cart

The Museum is looking for donations of gently used history books for the used book cart now located in the orientation space. What a great way to share the love of history with others!

If you find a book on the cart you would like to read, it's yours for a \$5 donation to the Museum. Thanks to Bill Briska and George Rowe for bringing the idea to fruition.

To donate books, drop them off during Museum hours.



Collections Corner

The Museum's Courier-News Negative Collection has negatives of pictures appearing in the *Elgin Courier-News* from 1936 to 1986. Digital copies of the negatives are available for \$10 each for personal use.

To see if a person's picture ever appeared in the paper, you can search the collection's online index at

<https://elginhistory.org/cgi-bin/ehsearch.pl?db=cni.db>

If searching for a person, enter their **last name, first name**. Be sure to insert a space after the comma. You can also search for just the last name. There are also advanced search options available.

While the index does not show the images, it tells you if the person's picture was ever in the newspaper and provides a reference to the negative(s) in which they appear.

At right is a picture from the collection. The Elgin Country Club is in the background. In the foreground Mrs. Willard T. Fedou and Al Schmidt are leading (left to right) Carol Copley, Lois Emmert and Joyce Hofflander on a skiing expedition.



Skiing at Elgin Country Club

If you searched for any of the five names, the results would be the clipping that included this image, its location in the collection, and the date of publication (February 14, 1942). Please provide this information if you wish to order a copy of an image from the collection.