

# The Crackerbarrel



Elgin History Museum News May 2025

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## President's Report



*Anne LoCascio, President*

On April 29, I attended the Mayor's Awards for Preservation, held at the newly renovated Hemmens Center.

Museum board member **Tricia Grosser** was awarded for her dedication to volunteer service to the Museum. She's been instrumental in driving the STEPS evaluation pro-

gram from the American Association for State and Local History. She also helps run programming for schoolchildren. Before the awards ceremony, she was at the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone, tidying up the native plantings, along with 17 other volunteers. Tricia manages board fundraising and policy training, while also finding time to head up the Gratitude Committee.

The Elgin History Museum was awarded for the new Echoes of Elgin podcast, created by Rebecca Miller, Museum Educator. Recording 90-plus episodes so far at the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House, Rebecca is bringing Elgin history to the masses with the popular podcast format.

The evening of the Mayor's Awards was perfect spring weather. From the new balcony added in the renovation, we could look out over the river, the Gail Borden Library and the redbuds and crabapples decorating the water's edge. Standing up there, it was possible to see Elgin from an entirely new vantage point.

Mayor Kaptain explained that the discussion on whether to renovate or replace the Hemmens building started 20 years ago. While I am not a fan of Brutalist architecture, I also understand that contemporary opinions don't always hold up. I'd have loved it if more Victorian architecture had been salvaged, rather than replaced in the 1960s and 1970s. On that beautiful spring evening, I found myself appreciating the Hemmens Center in a way I never had and found myself glad that the decision was to renovate rather than destroy.

We at the Elgin History Museum are here to document and preserve history, rather than erase it, so that future citizens can learn and decide for themselves. Our city has a rich and varied history that should be celebrated.

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## Welcome New Members

Jerry Campagna  
George Kolak  
Adrian LaBoy  
Pam Meixner

Tom and Sue Sorenson  
Gina Tunar  
Eric Zabelny

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## Get to Know Your Board: Ricky Harris

Ricky started helping at the Museum in 2003 and quickly progressed to serving on the Museum Board in 2004. Ricky has volunteered for many different projects including archive indexing, to make use of her genealogical skills. She has been the Corresponding Secretary for 18 years, and has written thousands of thank you notes to Museum donors as well as providing other correspondence.



Ricky is a member of the Collections Committee, Program Committee, and Nominating Committee, and previously served on the Strategic Planning and Executive Committee. Ricky served as the Chair of the Gala Committee for years and continues to help plan and implement the fundraising event for the Museum. She is also a member of the Travel Class and the Elgin Garden Club,

bringing both groups into closer partnership with the Museum. Ricky's interest in history, nature and Elgin have been a perfect match with the Elgin History Museum for over 20 years! Thank you, Ricky!

## The Crackerbarrel

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The Crackerbarrel welcomes reader contributions.  
Next deadline June 20, 2025  
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# 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-calendar](http://elginhistory.org/events-calendar)

Month of May	<b>Architectural Scavenger Hunt!</b> Gifford Park Association is hosting a self-guided scavenger hunt of the Elgin historic district. Pick up the clues at the Elgin History Museum, 360 Park St., or download from <a href="http://gpaelgin.org">gpaelgin.org</a> . After you complete the hunt, visit <a href="http://gpaelgin.org">gpaelgin.org</a> to see how to enter the prize drawing!
May 6 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.	<b>Elgin Genealogical Society Research Assistance</b> Gail Borden Public Library, 2nd floor Receive one-on-one genealogy assistance from Elgin Genealogical Society volunteers. For more information: <a href="https://attend.gailborden.info/event/12754552">https://attend.gailborden.info/event/12754552</a>
May 7 7:00-8:15 p.m.	<b>Historic Neighborhood Forum</b> <b>Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House, 302 W. Chicago St.</b> Representatives from Elgin's historic neighborhoods will discuss past, present and future events/projects that define their district, with Q & A after. For more info: <a href="mailto:jemarston1@gmail.com">jemarston1@gmail.com</a>
May 8 6:30-7:30 p.m.	<b>Historic Architectural Styles in Elgin</b> <b>Gail Borden Public Library, Elgin Room</b> Elgin's historic preservation planner, Christen Sundquist, provides an overview of historic architectural styles covering every era. Using Elgin homes as examples, she will provide pointers on how to determine a particular architectural style and the approximate age. Please register: <a href="https://attend.gailborden.info/event/13029946">https://attend.gailborden.info/event/13029946</a>
May 10 10:00-11:00 a.m.	<b>Hillside Cemetery Tour with Historian Bill Briska: Meet at Highlands Golf Course east parking lot, Elgin Sports Complex, 875 Sports Way</b> Tucked into the Elgin Sports Complex is the burial ground for the old Elgin State Hospital. Tour the cemetery with Bill to discover this little known site, and hear some stories it has to tell. Contact: <a href="http://elginhistory.org">elginhistory.org</a> .
May 13 7:00-8:00 p.m.	<b>Building Elgin: The Architectural Legacy of David Postle with Dan Miller</b> Learn about this prominent Elgin architect, active from 1892 to 1921, and explore his enduring impact on the city's architectural landscape. Postle's notable works include the Lords Park Pavilion, the Elgin Public Museum, and the old Elgin High School.
May 15 7:00 -8:00 p.m.	<b>Gail Borden Public Library, Elgin Room: Rebecca Hunter presents Aberrations in American Architecture</b> Take a look at the odd, the unusual, the unfortunate, and the fantastic! Learn about the impact of style on existing neighborhoods and communities. Please register: <a href="https://attend.gailborden.info/event/13021620">https://attend.gailborden.info/event/13021620</a>
May 21 Doors open at 4:00 p.m. Shows at 4:30 p.m. & 6:30 p.m.	<b>Planetarium Family Sky Shows, History of Elgin National Watch Co. U-46 Planetarium, 312 Watch St.</b> 2 one-hour sessions each include a brief history of the Elgin National Watch Company, its connection to the planetarium, and a look at the night sky under the dome. A self-guided building tour is available before both shows, so come early! Free admission, but donations are appreciated. No reservations: first come first serve. Free parking at Raymond St & National St., drop off available in front. Contact: Joe Kellenberger 847-888-5019
May 21 6:30-7:30 p.m.	<b>Gail Borden Public Library, Elgin Room From Farm to Food Cooperative: A history of the grocery business in Elgin with Rebecca Hunter</b> Sponsored by Shared Harvest food cooperative. Learn about the evolution of food marketing in Elgin, from growing food at home to today's large enterprises located on the periphery of Elgin. Please register: <a href="https://attend.gailborden.info/event/13085215">https://attend.gailborden.info/event/13085215</a>
May 22 12:00 Noon	<b>Brown Bag Lunch: The History of Color with Mary Hoffman, Color and Design Training Specialist At Benjamin Moore &amp; Co.</b> Explore the world of color from its general impact to the evolution of home color trends. FREE for Members, \$5 for guests. Bring your lunch; soft drinks and dessert provided. Please register: <a href="http://elginhistory.org/events-calendar/">elginhistory.org/events-calendar/</a>
May 26 11:00 A.M.	<b>Memorial Day at Bluff City Cemetery</b> Co-sponsored by the Elgin Patriotic Memorial Association and the City of Elgin Bluff City Cemetery, 945 Bluff City Blvd. Live broadcast on WRMN, 1410 AM <a href="http://www.elginmemorialday.org">www.elginmemorialday.org</a>
June 19 12:00 Noon	<b>Brown Bag Lunch: Museum Educator Rebecca Miller discusses the origin of Elgin street names.</b> FREE for Members, \$5 for guests. Bring your lunch; soft drinks and dessert provided.
July 12 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 P.M.	<b>Museum Car Show</b> Rain Date Sunday, July 13

# Thank You Donors

## General Donations

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## The Fox River in Elgin: A History, Part 1

*David Siegenthaler, Museum Researcher*

In 1835 Elgin's founder James T. Gifford chose the site of his town along the Fox River due to its potential for water power and for its strategic location. As he wrote in a letter to his wife that spring, "I have on my claim the best place for water power which I have found on the river from its source to some distance below this ... The Fox is the finest stream I ever saw ... its current uniform and gentle, its waters pure, and is abundantly supplied with fine fish." Being on a direct line between the busy lake port of Chicago and the thriving lead mines of Galena, it was a logical river crossing site and thus had the potential for much traffic and commerce.



The Fox River was not named for the animal but for an 18th Century Native American tribe the French called the Renards (Fox) because they believed them to be sly and crafty like a fox. The river is 202 miles long, from its source about 12 miles north of Waukesha, Wisconsin, to its mouth where it empties into the Illinois River, at Ottawa, Illinois. As it flows through Elgin, the Fox has two main tributaries. Tyler Creek empties into the Fox on the northwest side of the city, and Poplar Creek empties into the Fox on the southeast side.

When Mr. Gifford arrived in 1835, the Fox River was wider and more shallow than it is today. Under normal weather conditions it was a simple matter to wade across. The flats along the river were low and swampy and often submerged during the river's seasonal flows. This included much of Elgin's east-side commercial district, where much fill (earth and gravel) was added to elevate the land, which narrowed and deepened the river.

In 1859, the motto chosen for Elgin's official seal was "Urbs Fluminis," Latin for "City by the River." Histories often say that the early settlers "harnessed," "saddled" or "tamed" the Fox River, using a workhorse metaphor to describe how the pioneers adapted the river to serve their needs. Over the years, the Fox River has served as a power source for early industries; a water supply for drinking, washing, watering and industrial uses; a sewer outlet to accept waste products; a source of ice (important before the coming of mechanical

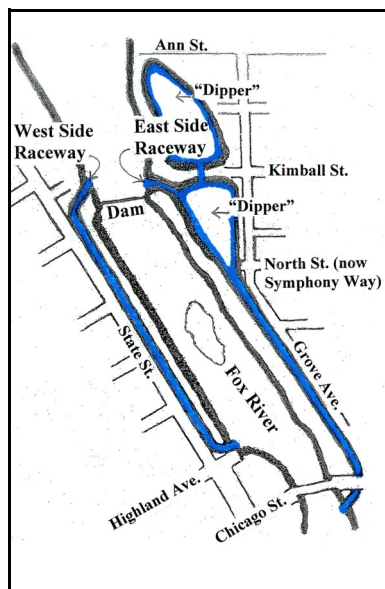


refrigeration); a recreational source (fishing, boating, ice skating, etc.); and more recently, a revenue source for the city, which sells water to neighboring communities.

One of the first tasks for a pioneer town along the Fox River was to use the energy of its flowing water to turn waterwheels and turbines. This energy generated mechanical power for sawmills to cut timber for buildings, and for gristmills to process grain into flour and meal. A mill dam was built as part of a mill race system that diverted water into raceways on both sides of the river. The dam served as an obstacle to the flow of the river and caused the water to back up, creating a deep, broad pool of water for at least two miles upstream. The water entered the raceways through head gates, which were located on the upstream side of the dam, and flowed south (downstream) through the raceways for several city blocks before emptying again into the river. Mills and factories were built directly over the raceways, into which their waterwheels and turbines were installed.

The Fox River enabled Elgin to develop as a “mill town,” where farming communities transported produce for processing and trade. Elgin's earliest industries were all located over the raceways on both sides of the river to take advantage of the water power. Factory workers tended to live within walking distance of their work, so Elgin's residential areas developed just outside the industrial area.

Elgin's first dam, a crude log structure built in 1836-37, was washed out in the flood of 1849. Because the dam's east-side abutment was on low, swampy ground, a dike was built from the foot of Ann St. south to just below North St. (now Symphony Way). This provided a sturdier and more stable abutment, narrowed the channel of the river and necessitated a shorter dam. As the water entered the east-side headgate, it not only flowed south through the raceway but also pooled up in the low-lying area between the dike and Grove Ave., creating a millpond, or a reservoir of water that became known as the “Dipper,” possibly because it was at one time shaped somewhat like a drinking dipper.



The Dipper, which extended north to Ann St., was bisected by Kimball St., creating an “Upper Dipper” and a “Lower Dipper.” The Upper Dipper became an early swimming hole, an ice skating pond and finally, a notorious garbage dump. By the early 1910s the entire Dipper was filled in. The Lower Dipper (south of Kimball St.) was formerly occupied by the Rinehimer Bros. Mfg. Co. (1910-66) and the Gail Borden Public Library (1968-

2006). The Upper Dipper (north of Kimball St.) was formerly occupied by W.R. Meadows Inc. (1926-98) and currently by the Gail Borden Public Library (since 2003).

The 1884 photo below includes good views of the dike, the Upper Dipper and the dam. The ice house on the dike was located at what was then the west end of Kimball St. In 1885 the Kimball St. bridge was built.



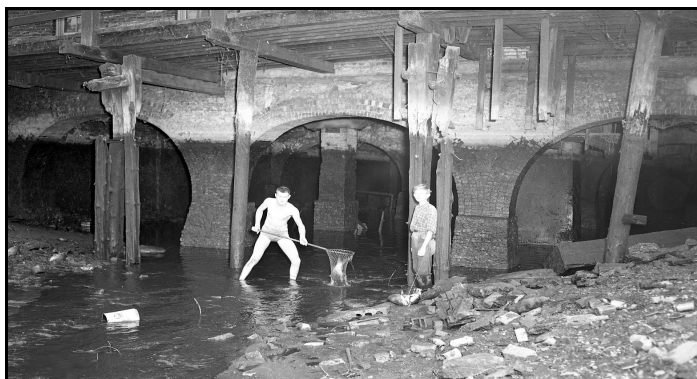
*Dam, 1884*

In 1867 the state legislature chartered the Elgin Hydraulic Co. to maintain the dam and regulate the water level. The firm was owned by property owners along the raceways. When the dam was again washed out by the flood of 1881, there was some question about whether it should be rebuilt. By that time some industries along the raceways had converted to more dependable steam power. Pushed by the ice harvesters, who required the deep water upstream, the Hydraulic Co. decided to rebuild.

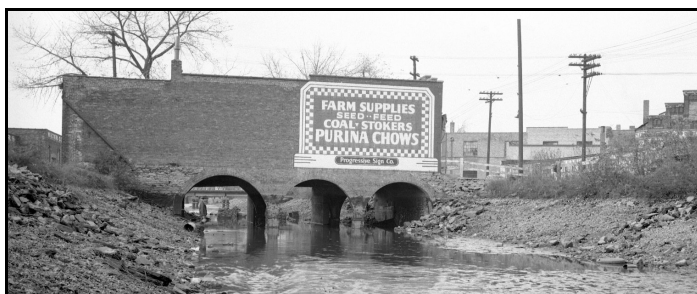
In 1881-82 the dam was reconstructed and is, except for the concrete facing and abutments which were added in 1901, the same dam that exists today. It was constructed with a framework of timber belted together with iron rods and spiked by cross pieces. This was buttressed with dirt and stone. A solid wall of oak ran from the foundation to the crest. A floor of 3-inch oak planks was spiked on top of the timber frame. The upstream side of the dam was slightly inclined and began about 25 yards from the crest. The dam is about 325 feet across and 13 feet high.

Elgin Hydraulic Co.'s interest in power led to disputes with those who wanted to use the river for other purposes. Fishermen, boaters and conservationists complained that the amount of water diverted for power purposes during dry periods hindered fishing and navigation and exposed unsightly and unhealthy riverbanks. At times the river level would drop several inches below the crest of the dam and the power users were pressured to close their headgates for varying periods of time, depriving the factories of their power source. By the late 1800s, many factories had converted to steam or electrical power, sources which were more dependable than water power. The power users also quarreled with the ice harvesters, who benefited from the dam, about their contributions toward its maintenance.

The photo below shows two boys netting carp while the east-side raceway's headgates were closed to repair a turbine under the Elgin Flour & Feed Co., which was located just north of the current Post Office. Note the three water tunnels (triples the number of possible turbines) and the usual water level indicated by the high water mark.



*Raceway, drained for turbine repair, 1949*



*Another view of the drained raceway, 1949*

The Flour & Feed Co. was the last user of the east-side raceway before their factory was razed in 1957. The raceway was buried in the mid-1960s when the site was cleared for the Civic Center urban renewal project. The west-side raceway was last used by the Woodruff & Edwards foundry, no later than the early 1960s. It was buried, as well, but not until 1990 when the foundry was razed.

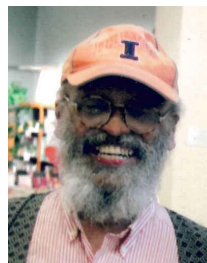
The City of Elgin first acquired a share of the Elgin Hydraulic Co. in 1940 when it bought east-side raceway property for its approach to the new Highland Ave. bridge. By 1965 Elgin had acquired the entire east-side raceway and Woodruff & Edwards owned the entire west-side raceway. That year, these last two shareholders voted to dissolve the hydraulic corporation. When Woodruff & Edwards subsequently deeded its property to Elgin, the City became the sole owner of the dam.

Though Elgin's Kimball St. dam has not been used for its original purpose, to provide water power, for over 60 years, the issue of whether or not to remove it remains controversial. Environmentalists want the dam removed to improve water quality and the ecological health of the fish and aquatic plants. The main counter-argument is that the Elgin water treatment plant's river water intake structure would be adversely affected by the lowered water level.

*To be continued ...*

## In Memoriam: Benjamin Downs

*Rebecca Marco, Editor*

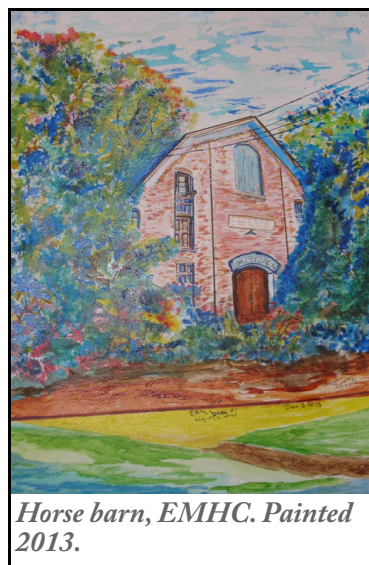


Artist and longtime friend of the Museum Benjamin Downs passed away on February 28, age 92. Ben was born in Elgin on Dec. 2, 1932 and was the fifth of Jacob and Ruby Downs' nine children. He grew up on Hickory St. and attended Sheridan School, and graduated from St. Edwards High School in 1949.

In the Navy from 1952 to 1958, Ben worked as a clinical lab technician at Bethesda Naval Hospital. He attended Elgin Community College, then went to University of Illinois in Urbana and also worked at the College of Veterinary Medicine there as a histology research assistant.

After earning his Bachelors in Education, Ben went to Eugene, Oregon and completed his MS degree. He also worked at the White Bird Clinic, a community clinic and crisis center still in operation.

In 1978, Ben moved to Alaska when a friend from the University of Oregon offered him a job at the McCarthy Lodge, an inn near the Kennecott Mines. He was their chef until 1986. He also led guests on Kennecott Mines tours and mountain hikes. He painted many Alaskan scenes and created artwork for the Valdez tourism bureau. His time in Alaska was the highlight of his life and he spoke of it often. Some of his artwork from that period is on display at the McCarthy-Kennicott Historic Museum.



*Horse barn, EMHC. Painted 2013.*

Ben returned to the family home in Elgin in 1986 and soon started work at Elgin Mental Health Center as an activity therapy associate and remained there until 2000. He later worked at the Martini Room. In 2010 he moved to the west side of Elgin. He continued to draw and paint until his passing.

Benjamin donated many old photos to the Museum. He was a good friend and I am grateful he shared his stories with me.



# Fabulous 50's Fundraiser

APRIL 26, 2025



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The greasers, preps, and even the squares all had a rockin' time at the Museum's **Fabulous 50's Fundraiser!** Leslie Goddard entertained with a living history portrayal of Lucille Ball. The food was 50's perfect - including the ambrosia salad and beef stroganoff. Auctioneer Steve Thoren led an exciting live auction. People won theater tickets, trips, and golf outings. The Museum is grateful to every person who attended, donated, or sponsored the gala. We rely on supporters like you to continue to preserve and share Elgin's heritage.



Visit [elginhistory.org/thank-you-gala-2025/](http://elginhistory.org/thank-you-gala-2025/) to see all of the photos, supporters, and paddle raise donors.





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## Collections Corner: Violet Moore Higgins

by historian Edward L. Bates

A recent find in the Museum archives was a collection of Christmas cards made by Violet Moore Higgins. She graduated from Elgin High School in 1905 and attended the Art Institute of Chicago. Then she moved to New York City.

These cards are intended for her friends and family and are personalized, they are not commercial designs. They are good representation of current events in the United States. For example, cards she made during the Depression use less color and are printed on lighter weight paper. In one World War II era card, her son is holding a gun and in another he is firing a cannon.

Ms. Higgins worked as an illustrator, a cartoonist, book illustrator, and painted a cover for the Saturday Evening Post that focused on the women's suffrage movement.



*Violet Moore Higgins Christmas Card Designs*