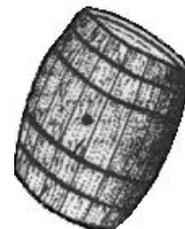


# The Crackerbarrel



Elgin History Museum News September 2025

## President's Report



*Anne LoCascio, President*

I think that as members of the Museum, we all agree that we love history and we love all the treasures packed within the walls of Old Main.

The Museum is very excited to announce that through the sleuthing abilities of Jeff White, another treasure has been added to the collection:

The personal watch of W. H. Samelius, director of the Elgin Watchmakers College from 1921-1954. It is a 1927 Lord Elgin, solid gold, 21 jewels, with his name engraved on the custom dial.

This is the perfect acquisition for expanding the Museum's treasure trove of Elgin watches. W. H. Samelius is an important part of Elgin's history, having taught over 4,500 watchmakers during his tenure at the College.



Preserving this piece of local history—so that it can be enjoyed by many—was made possible through the generosity of the following Museum members: Jeff White and Linda Rock, Al and Kathy Walters, Terry Gabel and Sue Brigham, Laurel Garza, George and Marge Rowe, and Bill Briska and Fran Cella.

Thank you to these donors for bringing this watch home to Elgin. The continued enthusiasm of members to support the Museum through time, effort, and treasure is what makes it possible to keep the Museum's doors open and grow the historical collections.



*Not only did Jeff White find the Samelius watch online, he also found this intact Elgin National Watch Company advertising bridal display! Sharry Blazier, director of the Elgin Public Museum, was selling this item and Jeff purchased it for the Elgin History Museum. The display, which lights up, has never been out of its shipping container, marked Elgin National Watch Company, USA. It will be exhibited at the Museum with the appropriate Lord and Lady Elgin watches soon. Thank you, Jeff!*



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## 2025 Cemetery Walk

### John and Ana Devine, Cemetery Walk Co-Chairs

The 38th annual Bluff City Cemetery Walk is on the road again! This fall marks the 100th anniversary of Congress forming the Joint Board on Highways, whose role was to bring order to the chaotic construction of new roads across the country. By 1926, the board had linked various state highways together to form US Route 20, which ran from Boston, Massachusetts to the entrance of Yellowstone National Park. The route ran right through Elgin, and not by chance. Several motorcar enthusiasts and civic leaders in Elgin were determined to put Elgin on the map.

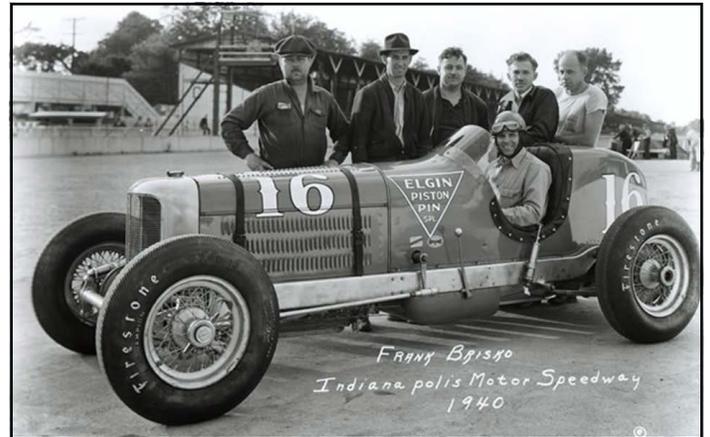
When US 20 was extended to the Pacific in Newport, Oregon, Route 20 became America's longest road. In commemoration, the 2025 Cemetery Walk features Elginites who shaped innovations in transportation. This year's characters tell stories of racing, cross-country excursions, giving up the automobile for the airplane, the business of selling cars, and road improvements.

Speaking of road improvements, did you know that over 100 years ago, Elgin was the first city to apply yellow paint to mark the centerline of roads? Known as the "Illinois Line," it was quickly adopted across the country and the world! Theodore Schmitz will tell his story on the Walk.

Epic road trips are a part of the American imagination. Learn about Alice Byrd Potter's extraordinary adventure in 1908 that made newspaper headlines across the country.

Ready to buy a new car? Elgin car dealers helped shape the industry. You'll meet David McBride, Elgin's first Buick dealer, and Leo McGrath, who purchased and expanded McBride's business into a family of modern dealerships.

Along the walk, you'll also see a rare 1927 Buick sedan, a modern Elgin Sweeper, and a cutout of the Elgin Piston Pin Special car entered in the 1940 Indy 500.



### Elgin-sponsored car in the 1940 Indy 500

Put the Cemetery Walk on your map for an interesting and memorable road trip on Sept. 27 or 28. Tickets are on sale now at the Museum. Happy travels until then!

You can also scan the QR code below or buy tickets online at [elginhistory.org/events-calendar](http://elginhistory.org/events-calendar)

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## When History Connects: Elgin's Cemetery Walk Inspires Pittsburgh

*By Rudy Galfi, Museum Board Member*

An inquiry from Pennsylvania led to a collaboration between two cities. It also created a shared approach to preserving local history through live storytelling. Three years ago, Rudy Galfi, longtime volunteer and board member at the Elgin History Museum, advised Marcia Walsh and her sister, Sueanne Zoratto, on creating a Cemetery Walk-style event in Pittsburgh.

The connection began when Marcia and her husband attended Elgin's Cemetery Walk virtually. They had always wanted to go in person but were unable to travel. Her husband is the great-grandson of Ora Pelton, a historic Elgin resident. Rudy sent them the virtual recording so they could watch from home. "We are members of the Elgin History Museum," Marcia wrote at the time. "My husband's great-grandfather was Ora Pelton, and we've always wanted to attend the Cemetery Walk. This year, we finally could—virtually—and we enjoyed it."

Marcia contacted Rudy to learn more about the event's origins, structure, and community partnerships. She also shared that Sueanne, a board member of a Pittsburgh theater company, saw potential for bringing a similar program to their city. Rudy agreed to help. He offered guidance on selecting characters, writing scripts, casting actors, designing costumes, and presenting accurate historical narratives. He also explained how Elgin's Cemetery Walk relies on collaboration between the Elgin History Museum, volunteer actors and helpers, and local historians.

That advice became the foundation for Pittsburgh's first Cemetery Walk-style event. Sueanne led the organization. They chose a historic local cemetery as the venue and recruited local actors. They used authentic stories from the community's past. On the day of the event, visitors walked between gravesites, hearing first-person portrayals of people who had once lived in Pittsburgh.

Afterward, Marcia sent Rudy a note of thanks. "Sueanne arranged and orchestrated the event here in Pittsburgh, and it was a perfect day. Thank you again for all of your advice."

Over the 38 years of the Elgin Cemetery Walk, many communities have asked Elgin for help starting their own event. Today, Elgin and Pittsburgh continue to use live historical interpretation to keep community memory alive.

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## The Fox River in Elgin: A History, Part 3

*David Siegenthaler, Museum Researcher*

### Islands

Historically, islands in the Fox River have come and gone. Early Elgin maps show islands in various places in the river. They would all disappear during high water and, over time, change shape and location. There were only two Fox River islands in Elgin that became semi-permanent and these were largely man-made: Goff Island and Walton Island.

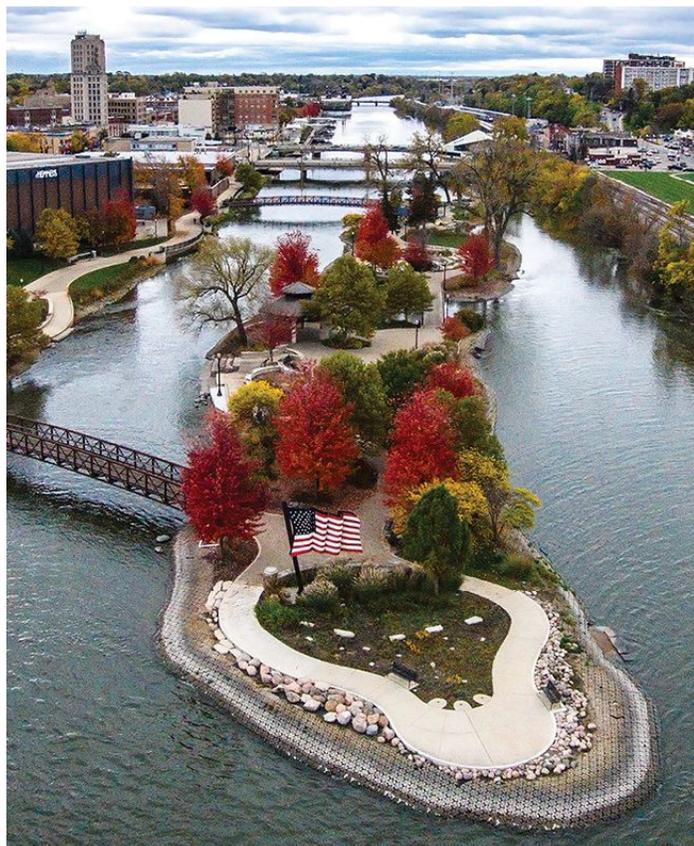
In 1870 the National St. bridge was built near the watch factory, crossing a tiny island. In 1873 the island was occupied by a squatter named David Goff, who hauled in hundreds of wagon loads of fill, built a home and barn and dug a well. He planted trees, had a big garden, and established a small farm, raising chickens and pigs. The U.S. government, which owned islands in navigable streams, put the property up for sale in 1888. The watch factory bought the island that year (possibly to remove the smell of the pigs) and generously compensated Goff for his improvements to the island. The Goff home and outbuildings were relocated to the west bank. The island sat vacant until 1901, when the channel between the island and the east bank was filled in to accommodate a new National St. bridge.

Prior to the 1930s, Walton Island was a nameless pair of mud patches with scrub brush located between the Kimball St. dam and Chicago St. In 1931 the Elgin chapter of the Izaak Walton League conceived the idea of enlarging these two patches of land for use as a park. Permission was obtained and the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA), a Depression-era jobs program, paid for most of the labor. From 1933-1937 the land was built up and expanded to roughly four acres, using gravel dredged from the river bed. A footbridge linked the islands, which, since 1938, have been referred to as a single island, "Walton Island." Access was by way of a footbridge to the east bank and a steel stairway to the Chicago St. bridge. A painted concrete American flag, designed by sculptor Trygve Rovellstad, was placed on the north end in 1936.

After World War II, the island was neglected and vandalized. Vagrants became a problem and the island was often submerged in times of high water. The park was closed to the public from about 1951-1962, when it was rehabilitated. Three years later it was closed again. Strong currents caused by water rushing over the dam, as well as heavy rain and snow melt, were gradually eroding and shrinking the island park. The concrete flag monument was washed out by high water in 1970.

The extension of the Fox River Trail bike path along the east bank in 1992 made the island more accessible and renewed interest in Walton Island's preservation and beautification. The first steps were to stabilize its shoreline to stop erosion

and to install new footbridges. These were completed in the late 1990s. Other improvements, unveiled in 2002, included a fishing pond, lighting, new landscaping and walkways, a 23-foot-tall American flag sculpture, and a gazebo. Today, Walton Island enhances the beauty of the riverfront.



*Walton Island, looking south*

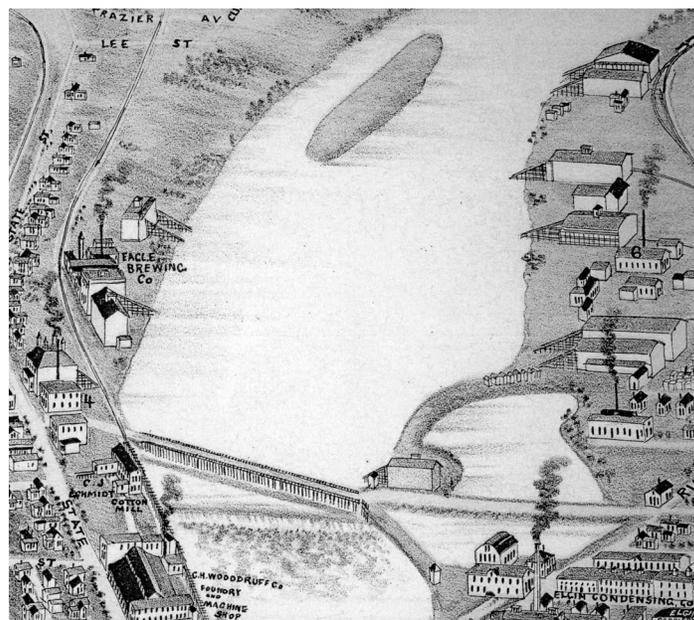
### **Ice Harvesting**

Today we take electric refrigerators and air conditioners for granted. However, 100 years ago they were just being developed and generally unavailable. Back then, businesses and residents relied on blocks of ice cut, or harvested, from frozen rivers and lakes to extend the life of perishable foods or to cool indoor air. Businesses like meat packing plants, dairies and breweries needed ice to preserve their products. In homes, an icebox was common: a freestanding, upright cabinet that used an ice block to keep its contents cool.

Ice was once an important “crop” produced by the Fox River. A colder than normal winter produced a good crop and a warmer than normal winter produced a bad crop. A bad crop might result in an “ice famine” the following summer when the ice supply was exhausted. Each winter, when the river ice became at least six inches thick, hundreds of men were busy cutting, shipping and storing ice for summer use.

Finla McClure built the first ice house in Elgin in 1850. By about 1890, before the businesses were consolidated, more than a dozen ice firms were active along both sides of the river north of the dam. Well over 100,000 tons of ice were harvested annually from the Fox River in Elgin. The ice houses were large well-insulated (double-walled), wooden

structures, three- or four-stories tall, with long wooden racks sloping down to the water, on which blocks of ice were hauled into the ice house for storage. Their location next to rail lines provided convenient shipping access, and much ice was cut for immediate shipment to Chicago, where meat processors and breweries were major customers. Local users included the cold storage warehouse for dairy products, the Elgin Eagle Brewery, the watch factory's National House, and the state hospital. On warm summer days, retail wagons delivered to household iceboxes two or three times a week.



*Fox River Ice Houses in 1895*

By 1910, with the growing contamination of the Fox River by untreated sewage and by sediment from gravel mining just upstream, only one major ice cutter was operating in Elgin. The Chicago Board of Health had condemned ice taken from the Fox except for packing purposes, and harvesting had shifted to northern lakes. In the 1910s and 1920s, mechanical refrigeration, producing “artificial ice,” began supplementing and eventually replacing natural ice, thus ending the era of ice harvesting in Elgin.

### **Fishing**

Fishing has been a popular form of recreation along the river since the pioneer days. In the mid-1900s, over 5,000 fishing licenses were issued annually, which made fishing Elgin's top participatory sport. Increasing river pollution combined with a lack of game laws had depleted the population of game fish in the river by the early 1900s. In the 1930s and later, conservation-minded organizations like the Izaak Walton League and the Elgin Sportsman's League began stocking the Fox River with game fish and lobbying for stricter laws and regulations to improve water quality. With passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972, increasing attention has been paid to water quality and game fish are thriving again. As Fox River dams are being removed, the river's ecosystem is improving, which will further benefit the fish and other aquatic life.

## Boating

Excursion boats carrying passenger traffic from Elgin north to Trout Park and south to picnic grounds near South Elgin were popular from the late 1880s to about the 1910s. Shirley Harris had a boat livery at the east end of the Kimball St. bridge in the early 1900s. He rented rowboats and canoes and they were in near constant use all summer.



### *Shirley Harris' Boat Livery*

From 1936 through 1948, except for two years during the war, the Elgin Marine Club hosted a speedboat regatta that attracted boat racers from all parts of the country. Up to 15,000 spectators attended these Labor Day events, which took place north of the Kimball St. bridge. Bleachers were erected on the bridge, which was closed to traffic.

## Ice Skating

Up until the early 1900s, the Fox River in Elgin froze solid each winter from about December through February. The thick ice attracted hundreds of ice skaters, with clamp-on skates, to the river above the Kimball St. bridge or below the National St. bridge. Often, however, the ice surface on the river was rough and snow-covered, which made skating difficult or impossible. River skating always posed a danger as ice conditions were constantly changing and thin ice or cracked ice were often unexpectedly encountered. In the last few decades of the 1800s, the ice was so thick there were even horse races on the river just below the National St. bridge.

## Swimming

Swimming in the Fox River was once a popular activity above the dam, especially before the river became more polluted and safer places to swim became available at Wing Park, the YMCA, and the YWCA. The former Reed's gravel pit just north of Elgin on the west side of the river was a favorite swimming spot from the 1910s through the 1930s. Swimming in the river was dangerous. Deep holes and undertows often took swimmers by surprise and many didn't venture far from the shore.

## Fox River Bridges

There are currently six bridges across the Fox in Elgin, not counting the two railroad bridges.

The first bridge, at Chicago St., was built in 1837-38. It was washed out in the flood of 1849 and rebuilt. In 1866 it was replaced by an attractive iron bridge designed by Lucius Truesdell. In 1868 this bridge collapsed under the weight of 50-60 tons of cattle. Only a few months later, in 1869, a rebuilt Truesdell bridge collapsed as spectators crowded onto it to watch a tub race. This was replaced by a third Truesdell bridge which was washed out in the flood of Spring 1881 and led to a ferry boat disaster, which killed seven people. In 1873 in Dixon, Illinois, a Truesdell bridge collapsed, killing 46 people. Elgin finally had enough of the ill-fated Truesdell bridge and in 1881 it was replaced by an inexpensive but sturdy wooden bridge. The Chicago St. bridge has been replaced twice since then, in 1900 and 1939.



### *Chicago St, Truesdell Bridge, circa 1870*

The National St. bridge was originally built in 1870 to accommodate watch factory workers and other south-end residents. This bridge was replaced in 1902 and in 1949.

The Kimball St. bridge was built in 1885 to accommodate north-end residents. It has been replaced in 1905, 1917 and 1978, and was substantially widened in 1998.

The Highland Ave. bridge was built in 1941 to relieve downtown traffic congestion and the original bridge is still in use.

The Interstate 90 Northwest Tollway bridge was originally built in 1958 and was replaced in 2015.

The U.S. 20 bypass bridge was originally built in 1960 and was replaced in 1988.

*Acknowledgments: Mike Alft's publications; newspapers; "Elgin and Surroundings," (1891); Elgin Water Dept. website; Fox River Water Reclamation District website; etc.*

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# What is Old is New Again

*By Ira Marcus*

A couple times per month my wife Jackie and I set up our portable photo studio in the Museum meeting room to photograph Museum artifacts. Often visitors view exhibits in the room while we are working. The Elgin Road Race Exhibit is always a draw, especially with children who like to put on the leather helmet and goggles and “drive” the replica car. Kids and adults like having their picture taken with race car driver “Smiling” Ralph Mulford.

The three road race posters have deteriorated over their 100+ year existence, with pieces missing, faded areas, and stains. The posters tell the story of the road race and are great exemplars of poster art of the early 20th century. When the Museum decided to update the exhibit, staff decided to move the posters to collections storage.

As an alternate to conservator restoration, I was asked if I could make photo reproductions of the posters and digitally edit them to restore their appearance.

The first challenge was photographing the posters with the right color balance and no linear distortion. Because a camera lens is round and convex, vertical lines will have a slight bend. I needed to line up the camera perfectly, choose the best focal length, and shoot from a distance to minimize distortion. To do this, I laid the posters flat on the floor and mounted my camera atop an eight-foot ladder. For correct color balance and even lighting, I placed three studio lights around the posters.

It was a challenge to envision what the posters looked like when they were new, over 100 years ago. Then the hard work began. My first step was to digitally remove stained or discolored areas and replace those parts of the image to match the background. Next, I added missing parts by digitally drawing or “cloning” from other parts of the image. Finally, I adjusted colors to even out faded areas and get to a color that I thought was used in the original. This was done very meticulously, working on areas sometimes as small as eight pixels. (The total image is made up of 24,000 pixels.) Each poster took several hours to complete.

One of the things I enjoy about my Museum work is that there are always opportunities for an old dog like me to learn new tricks! I am quite pleased with the outcome of this project. Please stop by the Museum to see the entire refreshed Elgin Road Race exhibit.



*Ira and Jacqueline Marcus recently photographed their 5,000th artifact, a plate commemorating the Elgin Sweeper Company, shown in their portable studio. Ira's photos are viewable at <https://elginhistory.org/museum-collections/>*

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## 2025 Summer Interns

The Elgin History Museum was fortunate to have two wonderful interns this summer: Emily Matson, who attends University of Arkansas in Fayetteville; and Ellie McBride from Western Illinois University in McComb. Both students developed new exhibit ideas in the Made in Elgin space, digitized collections, and opened the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House on Wednesday afternoons for visitors.



*Summer Interns Ellie McBride (l.) and Emily Matson (r.)*

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## Hispanic Heritage Project



*Some members of the Hispanic Heritage Project Committee at Cobblestone House*

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*Erasing Borders/Borrando Fronteras* had such a good reception at the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House that the Museum will host the art exhibit at Old Main!

The Project Committee organized four different open houses for the Cobblestone show. Many thanks to the Committee, including Cristina Colunga (Chair), Gil Feliciano, Patricia Williams, Phil Broxham, Jo Ann Armenta, Martha Martinez, Rose Martinez, Jaime Garcia, Anne LoCascio, Alan Walters, Bill Briska, Kim Alvarado, and Elizabeth Marston.

Many thanks also to the Hispanic Heritage Project sponsors!