

The Crackerbarrel

Elgin History Museum News March 2026

President's Report



Anne LoCascio, President

America's history, from the beginning, is a history of immigration. Coming from different parts of the world over the centuries, groups have come here seeking opportunity, refuge and a chance to flourish. Elgin's history is the same, from the first wave of settlers arriving in the 1830s to today.

The Elgin History Museum seeks to detail this national story on a local scale. Following projects such as the *Jewish Experience in Elgin* and *Project 2-3-1*, the *Hispanic Heritage Project: Culture and Community* has been in development for the past three years. Working with partners in the Hispanic community, the Museum developed a traveling exhibit and feature length documentary set to premiere later this year.

Save the Date: On June 28, the Museum will be debuting the feature-length documentary and exhibit at the Elgin Community College Blizzard Theatre. Phil Broxham of Grindstone Productions has interviewed over 28 community leaders and amassed a treasure trove of over 48 hours of oral history. The exhibit is drawn from personal histories, scholarly work and museum archives. The planning committee has been hard at work to fundraiser, document, and publicize.

I am so excited to see the hours of planning and community outreach taking shape as we prepare for June 28. We are almost at our fundraising goal. If you haven't done so yet, please consider making an individual donation to this important community project. You can find details at: <https://elginhistory.org/hispanic-heritage-project/>

Welcome New Members

Gary Crouse	Patrick McMahon
Tricia Dieringer	Fran Mitchell
Jamie Hermann	Donna Zoellner
Hans Klemmer and Beth Cywin	

Thank You Donors

General Donations

Dave Bosely	Richard Renner in honor of Bill Briska
Meredith Strohm Gunter	Jim and Susan Wingfield
Patty Harkin	Peggy and Steve Youngren
Diane and Dan Neal	

In Memory of Len Govednik

Phoebe Brumbeloe	Gary Govednik
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Board Fundraiser

Mary Ellen Barbezat	Rita Corbett
Wayne Heinmiller	

Monthly Recurring Donations

Evan Fry	Patricia Harkin
Rudolph and Lillian Galfi	Dorothy Turay



The Museum is bringing the heat of the tournament season with Museum Artifact Madness. Some of the Museum's most fascinating artifacts will finally get their chance to compete with artifacts on exhibit. In a bracket-style battle, eight artifacts on exhibit will go up against hidden gems tucked away in storage. Each week the Museum will post matchups on our Facebook page, sometimes with a "scouting report." Place your votes, and the winners will advance until only the champion artifact remains. The winning artifact will receive a special spotlight on exhibit this summer.

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The Crackerbarrel welcomes reader contributions.
 Next deadline April 20, 2026
 Visit our website Elginhistory.org
 Opinions expressed herein are not necessarily those of the Society's Board of Directors.
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2026 Events Calendar

Al Walters, Program Chair

Check the website for current information. Events take place at the Elgin History Museum unless otherwise noted. To buy tickets, you can scan the QR codes or buy online at elginhistory.org/events-calendar

**March 8
2:00 P.M.** **AAUW Presentation Celebrating Women's Month**
 In person event / Museum Members Only FREE
 The AAUW Elgin Area Branch has invited members of the Elgin History Museum to a portrayal of Jane Austen by Debra Ann Miller. Donations appreciated
 Please RSVP

**March 14,
March 28
12:00
Noon -
4:00 P.M.** **Kiln-Formed Glass:** Hans Klemmer will have two open houses featuring his kiln-formed glass artwork at the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House.

**March 20
6:30 P.M.** **Historic Route 20: A Journey Through America's Heartland.** Local artist Hans Klemmer will present his photos of Route 20 and speak on the towns along America's longest highway.

**March 29
2:00 P.M.** **Abigail Adams: From Colony to Constitution presented by Megan Wells**
 In person event / FREE for Members / \$5 Guests
 Storyteller Megan Wells brings Abigail Adams to life. Adams' own words and experiences provide a powerful glimpse into the intellect, humor, and resilience of one of America's most influential First Ladies.



**April 25
5:30 P.M.**
Holiday Inn, Elgin

America 250 Milestone Gala Fundraiser
 \$75 for members, \$90 for guests.
 See article for details. Tickets:
<https://elginhistory.org/event/museum-gala-2026/>

**May 14
12:00
Noon**

Brown Bag Lunch: Museum Curator Beth Nawara presents Entertaining Elgin. Objects and images from the Museum's collection showing events that entertained Elginites in the 1800s and 1900s. Members FREE / Guests \$5 [RSVP](#)

Museum to Host America 250 Milestone Gala

The Elgin History Museum invites the community to celebrate a once-in-a-generation milestone at its 2026 gala, "Elgin Celebration for America 250," on Saturday, April 25, 2026. Held at the Holiday Inn at 495 Airport Road from 5:30 to 10:00 P.M., friends of the Museum will enjoy a spirited night of patriotism, entertainment, and fundraising in support of local history.

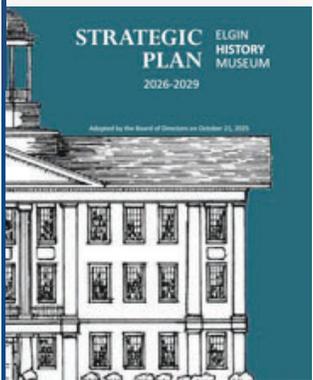
The Illinois Brass Band will perform, setting the perfect tone for an all-American celebration. Attendees are encouraged to dress in festive red, white, and blue attire to help bring the America 250 theme to life.

Guests will have an exciting lineup of live and silent auction opportunities, including "All-American" trip packages to destinations such as New Orleans, Myrtle Beach, and Las Vegas or Tahoe; and unique Elgin experiences, including a tour of the historic Wing Mansion, golf packages, and other local favorites. There will also be mystery wine bags, and dinner-theater packages for the Paramount Theatre in Aurora and the Fireside Theatre in Fort Atkinson, WI.

Tickets are \$75 for Museum members and \$90 for non-members. There are three levels of sponsorship: Stars and Stripes (\$1,000), Liberty (\$500), and Heritage (\$250). All proceeds will support the Elgin History Museum. Tickets and sponsorships must be secured by April 15, 2026. For details, visit elginhistory.org/museum-gala-2026, email Liz Marston at museum@elginhistory.org, or call 847-742-4248.



2025 ANNUAL REPORT



PUBLIC PROGRAMS

ALAN WALTERS, Program Chair

The Elgin History Museum offered 36 programs in 2025. Everything from art openings with local artists to a trolley ride through the John Duerr Forest Preserve.

- **4** Local Artist Exhibit Openings at both the Museum and the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House
- **3** big events including the Museum Gala, the Cemetery Walk and the Classic Car Show
- **6** Brown Bag Lunch Lectures on the History of Color, Elgin Place Names, Elgin Road Races, History of Neon, Elgin History Revisited, and Architect David Postle.
- **2** Illinois Humanities Council supported lectures on African American history and Railroads.
- **7** partnership programs with Side Street Studio Arts, AAUW and Friends of Lords Park Zoo.
- **2** membership programs including the Annual Meeting with Phyllis Diller and the Holiday Tea with Kathleen Monson, soprano, in memory of David J. Nelson.

ADVANCING ELGIN'S LEGACY

The Elgin History Museum developed an active Strategic Plan for 2026-2029 with dynamic timelines for project completions.

In partnership with the Elgin Heritage Commission, the Museum submitted Elgin's nomination to the National Park Service's World War II Heritage City program for the state of Illinois. Although federal review has been delayed, researching and documenting Elgin's wartime manufacturing and homefront support efforts has deepened our understanding of the city's role from 1940 to 1945.

MEMBERSHIP 396

MEMBER HOUSEHOLDS

35 new Members and 3 new Life Members.



VOLUNTEER HOURS 3,457

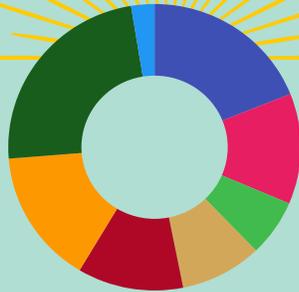


MUSEUM STORE



The biggest sellers in 2025 continue to be unique items that highlight exhibit theme. The “squishy stick of Elgin butter” and souvenir pocket watches were very popular. Other interesting items include stickers, artisan-made jewelry using Elgin National Watch Co spare parts, baseball hats featuring a leather “Old Main” patch, posters and note cards featuring artwork by Chuck Cassell. The Museum Store highlighted over a dozen items from the Museum’s collection with a series of new postcards and a bookmark in 2025.

ATTENDANCE



12,200 TOTAL

- 2,310 Museum Visitors
- 1,523 Event Attendees
- 780 Cobblestone Even Participants
- 1,104 Speakers Bureau Attendees
- 1,428 Meeting Room Guests
- 1,850 Traveling Exhibit Attendees
- 2,890 Partnership Event Guests
- 315 Research Requests

EXHIBITS

ELIZABETH MARSTON,
Museum Director

The Elgin Road Races was updated with new graphics and a scoreboard!

Erasing Borders / Borrando Fronteras, the Hispanic Heritage Art Exhibit organized by Cristina Colunga, featured local Latino artists from Mexico, Bolivia, and Puerto Rico. The exhibit opened in the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House and moved to Old Main for maximum viewing opportunity.



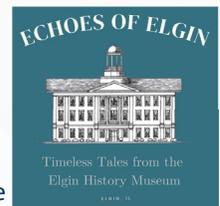
Nick Freeman’s art exhibit at the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone include three open houses to view Capturing the Moment: Paintings by Nick Freeman.

In December Hans Klemmer opened Kiln-Formed Glass: An Artist’s Medium at the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House.

Exhibit updates were made in the Elgin Manufacturing exhibit and new exhibits include the Ground Observers, Safety-Kleen, Simpson Electric, and small games.

PODCAST

Echoes of Elgin reached 11,100 downloads in January 2026. There are 175 episodes published, with endless topics still to cover. The most popular episodes in 2025 discussed Woodruff & Edwards, Channing Cemetery, the Grove Theater and the home at 620 Highland Ave. The podcast releases new episodes each Tuesday and Friday and can be found on all the major streamers, as well as the Museum website.



ELGIN 100 YEARS AGO AUDIO PROGRAM

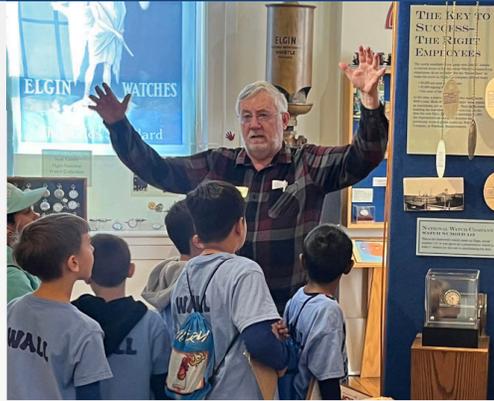
EHM volunteers created over 250 Elgin 100 Years Ago radio program episodes in 2025. The segments air each weekday on WRMN, and beginning in 2026, WEPS. Volunteers Alan Walters, Nick Freeman, Linda Rock, Tricia Grosser and David Siegenthaler research and present these histories and volunteer Jim Swick performs the editing and sound production.



EDUCATION

REBECCA MILLER,
Museum Educator

2025 was another great year for learning at the Museum. Many teachers bring their classes year after year, but there are also new schools and first-year teachers each month. Teachers continue to praise the content of the Museum’s educational programs and the expertise and enthusiasm of the volunteers. There is more and more usage of The Story of Our Towns in local classrooms which leads to some great questions from the kids when they visit the Museum. School District U-46 officially licensed the use of the supplemental resource making it available on thousands of elementary students Chromebook laptop. All teachers have access to Story of Our Towns, too.



"I ♥ the Museum."
Written on a postcard while learning about "old-fashioned" communication

52
PROGRAMS
WERE PRESENTED

2,034
ADULT & YOUTH
LEARNERS

\$8,873
IN REVENUE

SPEAKERS BUREAU

The EHM Speakers Bureau gave 27 presentations to private groups in 2025 creating \$4,000 in Museum revenue. A team of six volunteers and staff have developed a long list of local history programs. Popular topics included Elgin Christmas Memories and the Elgin National Watch Company. The audiences at each presentation enjoy in-depth discussions supported by ample photographs and historical analysis. The Museum welcomed the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors during their conference in Chicago in 2025, the Bartlett Historical Society, Del Webb Edgewater and Elgin Township.

MEDIA

TRISH LAFLEUR, Media Coordinator



Top Podcast:
620 W Highland Ave.
and it's prominent
family members.
163 Downloads

YOUTUBE 18.9K Views

PODCAST 8.5K Downloads

Top FB Post:
The U-46 Planetarium and
Elgin National Watch Factory
117K Views



EMAIL 58% Average Open Rate

WEBSITE 7.7K Visits: Up 15% from LY

SOCIAL MEDIA Online Community Grew 25%

GRANTS & FUNDRAISING

- Signal Hill Chapter, NSDAR for collections storage refinement and preservation, \$2,000
- U-46 Licensing Fee for *Stories of Our Towns*, \$50,428 for two years.
- Raised \$10,000 in sponsorships and general support for the Hispanic Heritage Project.
- Mini fundraisers brought in \$3,500 to support the Museum. Larger events like the Museum Gala, Cemetery Walk and the Classic Car Show raised \$65,630.
- The Board Fundraiser and Giving Tuesday helped the Museum with another \$20,282.

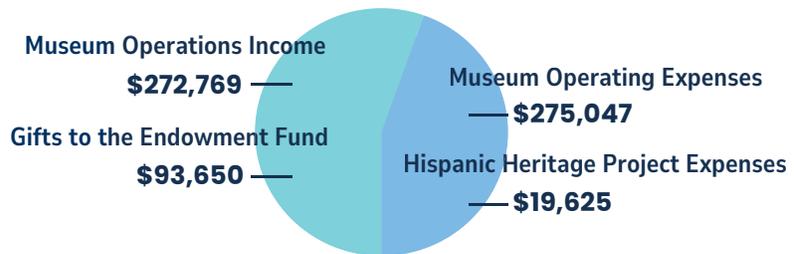


TREASURER'S REPORT

BILL BRISKA, Treasurer

The year 2025 was a successful one and helped position the Museum for 2026 and beyond. Donations to the Endowment Fund were \$93,625, the second highest since the fund was created in the year 2000. The importance of the Endowment Fund cannot be overstated. In the last four years, earnings from investments generated \$147,000 that supported Museum operations. Additional earnings were reinvested to help the fund grow. All your donations will never be withdrawn, only the earnings are used to keep the Museum financially strong.

FINANCIALS AT A GLANCE



COLLECTIONS

BETH NAWARA, Curator of Collections

The Collection Committee met 9 times in 2025. Donations from 74 donors were accepted and 720 items were added to the collection. Important donations connected to Elgin's history include a pocket watch that belonged to the Elgin Watchmaker's College director W.H. Samelius, "The Bride" an Elgin National Watch Company watch display, and a collection of objects related to Safety-Kleen. Staff and volunteers scanned and added 295 negatives to Illinois Digital Archives from the Courier-News Negative Collection. Over 700 objects from the collection were photographed for documentation and accessibility purposes. Twenty-eight individuals and companies ordered over 100 photograph reproductions from the Museum's photograph collection.



From Immigrant to Immigrant: 170 Years Of An Elgin Church: Part 1

Dave Gathman, Local Historian

Not long after the first white settlers came to our area, immigrants from Germany began farming much of the land between Chicago and Elgin. In the summer of 1855, 11 of these immigrants gathered in a log cabin in an area then known as Hoosier Grove, about six miles east of downtown Elgin near what is now North Bartlett Road. They decided to start a German-speaking Protestant church that they named Erste Kirche der Evangelische Verein (First Church of the Evangelical Association).

Their action began the story of a congregation that would continue for 170 years, though under several different names because of various mergers (First Evangelical, First Evangelical United Brethren, Faith United Methodist, Cornerstone United Methodist and soon Journey of Hope United Methodist). Its buildings would leave a legacy tied to the successive waves of immigration that have made Elgin what it is.

In cold weather, this founding group met in various farm homes. Their pastor, Rev. Schnache, would ride in on horseback, probably serving several congregations “circuit rider” style. In summer the group met in a forest clearing named Gellerman's Grove. Soon the Gellerman family donated two acres, and the worshipers erected a building. It cost \$600 to build. It was still standing in 1951 but had been converted into a home for pigs.



Original building in 1951

After a few years, the group joined with Evangelical-minded, city-dwelling German-Americans and built a more elaborate church in downtown Elgin. The congregation

grew rapidly and built a yet bigger building. Finally, in 1893 they built a three-story red-brick-and-stone church at 19 Center Street at Milwaukee Street (now East Highland Ave). It was designed by architect Gilbert Turnbull and echoed the look of the Turnbull-designed City Hall that opened just a year before, a block to the west.

Mayor William Grote, a businessman whom historian Mike Alft later would describe as “the personification of Elgin prosperity” in the 1890s, donated one-third of the \$30,000 cost. Grote's father had been one of those 11 church founders.

As the immigrants integrated into American life, the church added English-language services. In 1917, German services were discontinued due of World War I. “At work or school, you never mentioned that your grandparents had come from Germany, the enemy country,” church historian Leonara Hannah recalled. “Some members changed their name to an English equivalent. The Schwartzes family became the Black family.” Sauerkraut became “liberty cabbage.”

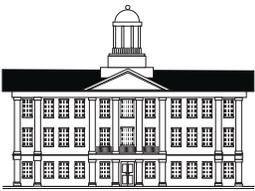
What parishioners would remember as “the Palm Sunday Miracle”—one of two purported miracles in congregational legend—happened on March 28, 1920. As Pastor F. F. Jordan was about to begin his sermon, he suddenly stopped, then said the Holy Spirit had given him the feeling that they should end the service and go home immediately. A half hour later, a tornado ripped through Elgin, killing four people at the adjoining First Congregational and First Baptist churches (plus three people elsewhere in Elgin). The wind blew beams from First Congregational through Erste Evangelische's sanctuary windows, landing in the pews where scores of worshipers normally would have been sitting.



The church officially changed its name to the English “First Evangelical” in 1922. In 1946, the parent denomination merged with the United Brethren in Christ. The church at 19

Center St. became “First Evangelical United Brethren Church” (EUB).

In 1968 the EUB denomination merged with the Methodist Church to form the United Methodist Church. This created an awkward situation, because Elgin already had a First Methodist Church, kitty-corner from First EUB, at the



northwest corner of Center and Highland. As a result, the First EUB members voted to take the name “Faith United Methodist Church.”

For decades the congregation was one of the biggest and most influential in Elgin. By 1955, when much American social life centered around church, Sunday attendance averaged 463 and there were 1,027 members. In 1963 the sanctuary was modernized, and spectacular blue and red stained-glass windows depicting Bible scenes, designed by Fred A. Hilgart, were added.



In 1994 Faith United Methodist celebrated its 101st anniversary by opening the time capsule. Clay Jordan, a descendant of the Palm Sunday Miracle pastor, chiseled open the cornerstone and then cut into the soldered-shut copper box. Inside were copies of seven Fox Valley newspapers: five in English and two in German. There was an 1892 Elgin City Directory, listing the 2-digit phone numbers of the few residents who had telephones;

a German “gesangbuch,” or hymnal, with lyrics but no musical notes; an aluminum coin issued by the city to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus's voyage; and a blue “Die Biibel,” with scriptural cross-references. A handwritten roll of 304 church members included such names as Ackemann, Runge, Geister, Getzelman, Bode and Boehning.

But there was trouble ahead. Beginning in the 1960s, attendance for almost all Protestant churches dropped nationwide. In Elgin, fewer people came downtown, in some cases out of fear. Instead of walking or taking a streetcar like their forebears in the 1800s, everyone now drove to church, and parking had become a problem, especially after the nearby St. Joseph Catholic Church started growing with a new wave of Mexican immigrants.

To attract new people, Faith United Methodist handed out fliers door to door, hired an “outreach coordinator,” co-hosted a bilingual preschool, and aired a WRMN radio show. The efforts all flopped. By 1995 average attendance was down to just 137. Pastor Don Keck and the lay leadership decided that unless they did something drastic, their historic church would soon be nothing but history.