The Crackerbarrel

Elgin History Museum News November 2026

President's Report:



Anne LoCascio, President

With my second term as board president ending in December, this is my final President's Report, and I admit that I've had a hard time deciding what to say. I started out with a long list touting everything the Museum has done this year, and – wow! – we've been busy, but an extensive bullet list of programs, events, and accomplishments seemed a little dry for a farewell. What I kept coming back to was gratitude, so I'd like to use this report to say thank you.

Thanks to all the board members who donate their time and effort to steering the Museum toward a bright future. It has been my pleasure to serve with you.

Thanks to all the volunteers who support programs, act as docents, and get schoolchildren interested in history.

Thanks to all the donors who make it possible to keep the light on in the cupola and the doors open between Old Main's Doric columns.

Thanks to Al Walters for chairing the Programming Committee for four years after his tenure as president.

Thanks to John and Ana Devine for running the 37th, 38th, and 39th Annual Cemetery Walks.

Thanks to Mary Kemmerling for chairing this year's successful Gala.

Thanks to our dedicated staff, who have gone above and beyond this year. It has been a year of transition, with Elizabeth Marston taking a well-deserved retirement after 27 years as Museum Director, during which she helped grow the Museum into what it is today. Rebecca Miller was recruited as our new Museum Director, and I could not be more pleased with how she has jumped into her new role. She is an absolute whirlwind of plans, and I'm looking forward to all she will accomplish. Beth Nawara and Trish LaFleur did immense heavy lifting to bring the Hispanic Heritage Project to completion, on top of their daily duties. And we are pleased to have added Cristina Colunga as our Museum Educator, after working extensively with her as the chair of the Hispanic Heritage Project.

Board elections took place on October 17, and I want to thank John Devine for continuing as Vice President, along with all the returning board members. I especially want to welcome Marianne Bost as our incoming president. She is a board member and longtime volunteer with the Museum, and I am looking forward to her tenure.

The Museum stays open to share Elgin's history because of the effort every one of you has put forth this past year. We could not do it without you, and as outgoing president, I extend my heartfelt thanks for your support of the Museum.

Elgin Through the Ages

Rediscover Elgin with the new book *Elgin Through the Ages: A Visual Chronicle*, the most comprehensive visual history of Elgin ever published. Author Philip A. Aleo spent over three years researching, verifying, and restoring hundreds of photographs, many never before published, to bring nearly two centuries of local history to life. Created in partnership with the Museum, 50% of the net proceeds from every copy of this Collector's Edition sold benefit the Museum, supporting historical preservation and educational programming.

Arriving in December, it is the perfect gift for longtime residents, newcomers, and anyone who loves Elgin. Watch for details in the coming weeks on how to order. You won't want to miss it!

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The Crackerbarrel welcomes reader contributions.
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Visit our website Elginhistory.org
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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, visit elginhistory.org/events-calendar

Nov. 5 6:30 P.M. - 7:30 P.M.
Jerry Turnquist presents Elgin and World War II
Gail Borden Library, Meadows Community Room:
Using period photos and newspaper clippings, historian Jerry Turnquist looks at how Elgin citizens and businesses were actively involved in the war effort. Please register. Please register on the library's website.

Nov. 15 2:00 P.M. - 4:00 P.M.
Illinois Brass Band playing the music of the Watch Factory Band at First Methodist Church, 216 Highland Ave., Elgin
History sounds better in brass! Join the Elgin History Museum and the Illinois Brass Band for a special concert at the First Methodist Church. The program features special selections resurrected from the Museum's archives! This performance is a joint fundraiser supporting both organizations. $20 for Members / $25 for Guests. Tickets on sale now.

Nov. 21, 10:00 A.M. - 4:00 P.M. Nov. 22, 10:00 A.M. - 2:30 P.M.
Take Photos with Santa at the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House, 302 W. Chicago St. Elgin
The historic Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House, is the perfect setting for your festive photos! Book a 15-minute time block and bring your own camera to take photos however you like. Santa will be there—he's pet-friendly and sensory-friendly. Bring along your favorite props to make your photos unique! Plus, enjoy a holiday craft activity and light snacks for a little extra cheer. Tickets on sale now.

Dec. 5, 1:00 P.M. - 3:00 P.M.
Holiday Tea: The Legend of St. Nicholas with Terry Lynch
Terry Lynch portrays the Old English Father Christmas, sharing the global origins of St. Nicholas and the history behind our favorite Christmas traditions.
Indulge in a generous spread of sweet and savory treats prepared by our amazing Museum volunteers. This is a holiday tradition you won't want to miss! Tickets on sale now.

Thank You Donors

General Donations

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Carol and Fred Hanley
Dolores Nelson
Leann Rogers

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Monthly Recurring Donation

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Patricia Harkin
Dorothy Turay

The Plank Road Panther: Elusive Predator or Mass Illusion?

Dave Gathman

The most interesting story I covered in my 40 years with The Daily Courier-News began 18 years ago this month. Charles MacArthur, who owned a tree nursery along Plank Road west of Elgin, told me a big cat had been photographed on his land.

MacArthur explained that Pat Crawford, owner of a local ambulance company and a bow-hunting enthusiast, had set up a "trail camera," hoping to find deer on the wooded property. Tuned to operate in low light at night, the camera took photos when it sensed an animal's movement. And late on Nov. 23, 2008, one picture showed what seems to be a large black cat, perhaps the size of a cougar. (Cougar, mountain lion, puma, and panther are all recognized names for the same species of 50- to 200-pound North American wild cat.)



Image of the Plank Road "Panther"

Two months later, MacArthur and his friend Shane Lyon were driving along Plank Road near Muirhead Road when they saw what seemed to be the same large, dark-colored cat bounding across the snowy farmland beside them. It disappeared into some woods. Lyon and MacArthur followed its footprints, each three to four inches in diameter. The trail led to what seemed to be a den, about two feet by three feet, carved out of the snow at the edge of the woods. They scooped up some of the gray fur that lined this apparent sleeping spot.

I wrote a series of stories about their experiences and branded the beast with a clever name: "The Plank Road Panther." Thirteen other sightings followed between then and September 2009. Four other people had called the Courier to report seeing such an animal during the year before that trail cam photo.

Almost all the witnesses reported seeing a large animal—usually described as black—after dark. None were able to take a photo. No people were attacked. The corner of Plank and Muirhead roads was approximately ground zero for the sightings. But other people had seen the cat as far away as Big Timber and McLean, behind Elgin's Target store, along Route 72 in Gilberts, along Hopps Road near South Elgin, at Routes 38 and 47 in Elburn, and even near where the Canadian National Railroad crosses Rte. 59 in Bartlett.

Excitement exploded in the newsroom on March 17, 2009, when I got a call from a reader who said he had seen a dead cougar—"definitely not a deer"—lying near Route 47 on the Goebbert Farm. I sped out there with a photographer, and we found: a dead deer.

But, this may have been evidence of the Plank Roar Panther's existence anyway. Bloody marks in the snow told a grisly story: The adult doe had been hit by a car on the highway and probably died instantly. Then something had come along, dragged the deer's heavy carcass some 50 feet away from the road, and eaten more than half of it. What could be that strong and that hungry? Not a fox. Not a skunk or opossum or raccoon. Maybe a whole pack of coyotes working together.

Or maybe a 100-pound cougar.

The cougar had been officially declared extinct in Illinois since the late 1800s. But several confirmed sightings had occurred recently. In January 2008 one was seen on a farm in Wisconsin, north of Rockford. It had cut its paw and authorities kept a sample of its blood. Four months later, a cougar showed up right in the heart of a residential area on Chicago's North Side. Police went to the scene and shot it dead. DNA testing showed that it was the same animal that had been seen in Wisconsin, 200 miles away, and that it was related to a tribe of cougars in South Dakota. Biologists theorized that overpopulation in the Dakotas was driving male cougars to wander eastward in a hopeless search for a mate.

A photo analyst from Scotland noticed our stories online and tried to analyze the trail cam photo. He said that was hard without knowing the distance from the cat to the cornstalks behind it. But if he had to guesstimate, he said, the

animal pictured was likely not much bigger than a house cat. Yet its legs and body seemed thicker, more muscular than our household Fluffy. And many witnesses said the PRP made loud, high-pitched sounds nothing like a house cat's purr.

I sent some of that gray fur to Jay Petersen, the curator of mammals at Brookfield Zoo. Petersen said he and the zoo staff believed it was rabbit fur. "If that was rabbit fur, it must have come from 200 rabbits!" MacArthur sniffed.

But could that fur sample have come from rabbits that PRP had killed and eaten?

Clay Nielsen, a cougar expert at Southern Illinois University, said the color descriptions ruled out PRP being a cougar. No black cougar has ever been found, he said. "People in the dark see a black Labrador or an especially large black cat, and they think they've seen a cougar." But maybe after dark, a cougar's brown fur just might look black. And in one of the few daytime sightings, at 8:30 A.M. in March 2009, one reader saw a large **brown** cat walking near the Metra tracks along Big Timber Road.

If not a cougar or a housecat, what then? Coyotes were becoming common in our area. But they look dog-like, not catlike. And they don't climb trees, as farmer Beth Gehrke saw a large animal do in her front yard along Route 20 one night after two geese had mysteriously disappeared from her farm. Foxes don't climb either, and are too small to match the descriptions. Bobcats are native to Illinois and could be a possibility, though they are rare and pretty small. One other possibility is that PRP was an illegal exotic pet—a black leopard from Africa or a black jaguar from South America—that had escaped from its owner.

After a year or so, the reports died out. Actually, they moved into DuPage County, where 27 "cougar" sightings were reported over the next year, mostly in forest preserves. Maybe our Plank Road Panther had just moved on down that Plato Center-South Elgin-Bartlett rail line, still looking for love in all the wrong places.

Was the Plank Road Panther real, or was it a case of mass hysteria inspired by a blurry trail cam photo of a housecat? Barring discovery of a carcass or bones or a better photo, this intriguing mystery will never be solved. It may go down as Elgin's equivalent to the search for extraterrestrial flying saucers.

Welcome New Members

Chris Berry & Melissa Meyers
Craig Durgan
Anne Geary
Sylvia Grady
Mark Klocek
George Mohn
Wendy Staats
Armondo Trejo
Scott Wille

A Brief History of the Sears Art Gallery at the Elgin Academy

by Ann Chipman

The Donors: June 14, 2024 marked the 100th anniversary of the dedication of the Sears Art Gallery on the campus of the Elgin Academy. Officially named "The Laura Davidson Sears Academy of Fine Arts," the building and the art collection were gifts from Judge Nathaniel Sears and Laura Davidson Sears for the education and enjoyment of Elgin Academy students and the broader community. Laura and Nathaniel Sears both had strong ties to the Elgin Academy and were major benefactors. In 1924, the Gallery and its collection of art together were valued at $300,000-$350,000.

The official name is inscribed above the portico, but other versions of the name were commonly used, such as "Sears Art Gallery" and "Elgin Academy Art Gallery."

The building honors Laura Davidson Sears, a revered Elgin Academy teacher, EA board member from 1912 to 1930, and the first recipient of an Elgin Academy diploma in 1872. Mrs. Sears was also the granddaughter of Elgin founder James Gifford, whose vision contributed to the establishment of the Elgin Academy. Chartered in 1839, the Academy opened to students in 1856.

Nathaniel Sears was the son of Amos Gould Sears, Headmaster, and Susan Davis Sears, Dean of Women from 1870 to 1881. During their tenure the family lived in Old Main and Nathaniel was a student at the Academy. Nathaniel Sears went on to become a prominent attorney and judge in Chicago. He served as President of the Elgin Academy Board of Trustees from 1920 to 1926, after which he was Chairman until his death in 1934.

The Architect: Most available sources indicate that Harry F. Rich was the architect of the Sears Gallery as well as the advisory architect onsite during construction. Other sources point to a connection with a second architect, Harry F. Robinson. Rich and Robinson both attended the groundbreaking in April 1923, and Robinson's personal design archives included photos of the Sears Gallery. Robinson's role remains unclear. The original architectural blueprints appear to be lost, but there is evidence they existed at the Academy in 1990. Ironically, it was Robinson's son who wrote to the Academy in 1990, "While visiting the campus we saw some plans for the building signed by H.F. Rich, Architect."

The Building: The Art Gallery is built of brick and covered with white Georgia marble. It is distinguished by its Neoclassical symmetrical design, including six marble Doric columns; marble steps leading up to the portico; a marble frieze patterned after the Parthenon in Greece by noted sculptor and art historian Lorado Taft; and large double bronze doors opening into an octagonal entrance hall. The first floor included one large main gallery and four smaller galleries. An office was located on the northeast corner of the building with a spiral staircase leading to a storage area.

In 1946, the small gallery on the southwest corner adjoining the main gallery was converted to a stage. The floor was raised and steps were built to connect the stage and the main gallery. Audience members sat in the main gallery on folding chairs surrounded by the art on the walls. Students and community groups used the stage for plays, recitals, rehearsals, and concerts. Artwork was displayed when the stage was not in use for performances. After the Sears collection was sold in 1967/68, the Academy built a larger stage over the existing one and opened up the small northwest gallery to the main gallery, providing more audience space.

From 1940 until the mid-1960s, the lower level of the building was used for student art classes during the school year and summer art classes for children and adults from the community. A large storage area included a locked vault that housed artworks from the collection that were not on display.

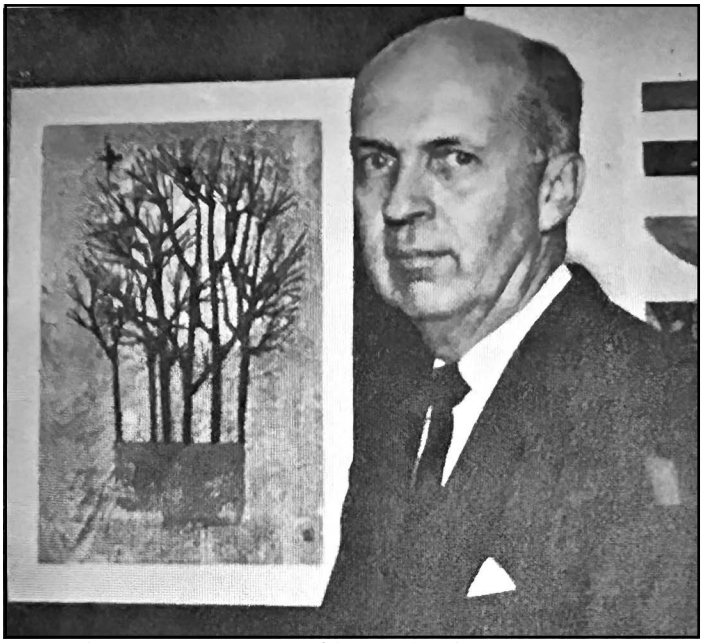
The Art Collection: When the Gallery opened in 1924, the original collection of 125 works was focused entirely on American painters at a time when collecting American artists was not in vogue. Judge Sears had a special interest in works by early American portrait painters and he purchased many examples. The focus on early "Americans," or paintings by American artists, was seen as forward-thinking and the collection was praised by art experts. Many famous artists were represented, including Gilbert Stuart, Winslow Homer, and Mary Cassatt, to name a few. The first catalogue, published circa 1925, listed 125 art works. It was titled "Catalogue of the Laura Davidson Sears Academy of Fine Arts of the Elgin Academy and Junior College, Elgin, Illinois."



Sears Art Gallery, 1949 Associated Press photo

During the next decade (1924-1934), Judge Sears added more paintings to the collection. A second catalogue, "The Laura Davidson Sears Academy of Fine Arts of The Elgin Academy, Elgin, Ill." was published circa 1933-38 by Willson Press. It listed 231 works by American (171) and European artists (60). No other official catalogue was published after that time, but numerous inventories and appraisals of the artworks were conducted over the years.

After the deaths of Laura Sears (1930) and Nathaniel Sears (1934), the growth of the collection slowed significantly but did not stop. Many of the new acquisitions were made with the guidance of Dean Chipman, the director of the Elgin Academy Art Gallery and Fine Arts Programs (art, music, drama) from 1940 to 1963. Academy students in the Mus art Club also participated in the process of identifying new artworks to be displayed. The Sears Art Gallery became a center of artistic activity on campus and a hub for community arts groups such as the Fox Valley Art Association and the Elgin Choral Union, resulting in its recognition as a regional cultural center and recital hall for Elgin and the Fox Valley.



Dean Chipman, Director of Sears Art Gallery and Elgin Academy Fine Arts Programs, 1940-1963

Robbery: The Sears Art Gallery made front page news on July 6, 1958, after eight paintings were reported missing, five of them removed from their frames. Chicago Sunday Tribune headlines included "Thieves Loot Art Gallery!" "Steal 8 Paintings in Elgin; Five Are Cut From Frames."

In an unusual twist of events, state workers found the paintings the next say, in a ditch near Route 25. The paintings were not damaged, and their return within days after the robbery was a cause for great celebration. But the celebration did not last long. The results of an inventory after the robbery indicated at least 58 more works were missing from the vault or other areas of the campus. Over the next several years, police and federal investigators worked to locate and return these works. In May of 1960, Dean Chipman submitted a report to Elgin Academy Board Chair, Lee Ward, that documented the return of 22 stolen works. This list did not include the original group of paintings stolen from the walls and recovered.

Sale of the Collection: In 1967/68, facing increasing financial difficulties, the Elgin Academy made the decision to sell the remaining works of the Sears' collection to private collectors and museums. The Art Institute of Chicago purchased 14 paintings. Sixty-five paintings were offered for sale through the Lenz Gallery of Milwaukee, Wisconsin with a catalogue titled, "American Paintings from The Collection of The Laura Davidson Sears Academy of Fine Arts of The Elgin Academy, Elgin, Illinois (1968)." Hirschl and Adler Galleries Inc. of New York City and Alfred Bader of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, handled most of the remaining paintings. This left a group of about 40 art works, largely acquisitions and gifts made after 1940, which were not included in the sale of 1967/68. They were displayed on a rotating basis in the Art Gallery and various locations on the campus. The Art Gallery continued to be used for student performances, classes, and events until the opening of the Rider Center in October 2008, when more performance and class space became available in the new building.

George Washington: Perhaps the best-known painting in the original collection was the 6-foot by 10-foot "George Washington at Dorchester Heights," purchased by Judge Sears in 1927. This imposing portrait hung from 1928 to 2023 in a prominent position where visitors would see it upon entering the building. When the painting was added to the collection in 1928, it was thought to be an original Gilbert Stuart. After consultations with Stuart experts, the attribution was eventually changed to Jane Stuart, daughter of Gilbert Stuart, a copyist in his studio and a portrait painter in her own right. When sold at auction in November 2023, it was listed as "General George Washington" by Jane Stuart, after "George Washington at Dorchester Heights" by her father, Gilbert Stuart. The original, painted in 1806, is in the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.



Elgin Academy Music Faculty Recital, June 1951. Back to front: Mary Silliman, Constance Kroeger, Goldie Brill, Jane Chipman. "George Washington at Dorchester Heights" painting in background. (CN61136)

Elgin Academy Closure: In the fall of 2023, after 185 years as an independent private school chartered by Elgin's founders, the Elgin Academy announced it would close its doors at the end of the 2023/2024 school year. On November 18, 2023, the remaining art works were sold through Brunk Auctions of Asheville, North Carolina.

At the end of August 2024, the Elgin Academy campus, including the Art Gallery, transitioned to the new owners and is now Burhan Academy*, a private Islamic school. The Sears Art Gallery is now used as a prayer hall.

Reflections on the 39th Cemetery Walk

by John Devine, Vice-President

This year's Bluff City Cemetery Walk is now history. The event on September 26 and 27 brought in just under 500 guests who walked the route of hometown heroes. The earliest born character was William Nichols, whose 200th birthday was in June. He risked his life to protect President Lincoln in the weeks after his inauguration. The most contemporary character, Jesusita Sauceda, was born in 1910. Her parents risked their lives to flee the civil war in Mexico and navigated a difficult but promising future. Those in between on the time line shared in common a commitment to life beyond self.

As our guests walked the route, they stopped briefly at guide stops that helped to encourage further reflection on what it means to be a hometown hero. They got to see up close the Elgin Fire Department's rescue boat; they heard the melodies of Civil War soldier songs played on violin; one brief stop invited guests to give to the Family Services Association after hearing the story of Louise Logan, its founder. To date, over $250 has been given by Cemetery Walk guests to this compassionate organization. Having a chance to participate in the present while learning about historical legacy was meaningful to many.

As the last presentation was wrapped up, Netflix Studios brought in equipment to film a scene in the cemetery for an upcoming production. As they arrived, many commented on the beauty and peacefulness of the surroundings, a unique setting that helps to tell the stories of Elgin.

The Museum's own recording of the 2026 walk will be finished soon. Look for its premiere on elginhistory.org.

The idea of a cemetery walk was brought to the Elgin History Museum by board member Jerry Turnquist in 1987. Many Elgin stories have been told graveside over the years. Many volunteers, including the actors, have helped to develop the walk into a thoughtful experience for a wide audience. Guests have also helped to shape the event by giving feedback and suggestions. These ideas for improvement reflect growing interest in telling a more diverse story of Elgin. The Museum is glad to bring a wide range of historical content to the public and we look forward to a special 40th anniversary walk next year.



2026 Cemetery Walk actors. From left: Ezra, Don Gingold, David Santori, Estela Macias-Bonner, Steve Delaney, Bernadette May, Thea Delaney, and Thomas Rieser. Not shown: Tameron Keeffe.



Steve Delaney portrays artist Trygve Rovelstad

* The website states, "Burhan Academy is a private Islamic school located in Elgin, Illinois, United States. It occupies the historic campus of the former Elgin Academy, a 185-year-old independent school that closed in 2024. Founded by Yasir Nadeem al Wajidi, Burhan Academy has an Islamic style education."

Elgin History Museum
360 Park Street
Elgin, IL 60120

We Won! Nuestras Historias Receives a 2026 Elgin Image Award

We are thrilled to share that Nuestras Historias, our Hispanic Heritage documentary and exhibit, has been named a 2026 Elgin Image Award winner in the Gamechanger Project category!

This honor belongs to everyone who made the project possible. Over three years, museum staff, filmmaker Phil Broxham, community members, and sponsoring organizations came together to conduct oral history interviews, archival research, and community outreach, all to share the stories Elgin's Hispanic community wanted to tell about its own history. The film and exhibit are presented in English and Spanish, and the exhibit features artwork created entirely by local Latino artists.

Thank you to our members for your support, and to every community member who trusted us with their stories.

Catch the exhibit at the main branch of the Gail Borden Public Library through November 4, 2026. This fall, it will also travel to partner sites including St. Edward Catholic Central High School and Judson University.



Pictured from left: Phil Broxham, Rafael Villagomez, Patricia Williams, Rebecca Miller, Rose Martinez, Gil Feliciano, Cristina Colunga, Anne LoCascio and Josie Beecher-Crotty.