

## ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: Elmhurst History Museum's Own Story

In the early 1950s, the City of Elmhurst was a rapidly growing community. Benefitting from the post-war boom, the once quiet suburb found itself to be one of the fastest growing municipalities in the state. In the face of such sudden change, civic leaders began to see the importance of an organized effort to preserve the existing character and fabric of the community through the keeping of its history. The Elmhurst History Museum finds its origins in the creation of the Elmhurst Historical Commission in April 1952. The commission, created by the Elmhurst City Council, was founded to “collect, preserve, and exhibit materials and information concerning the history of Elmhurst.” That a local history museum would be founded by a city government is a unique circumstance, and one that would benefit Elmhurst history for years to come.



*Elmhurst Historical Museum on the third floor of Elmhurst City Hall in the Glos Mansion, 1964. M2017.1.6*

Originally a group of five volunteers, the fledgling historical organization set out to gather the history of the community. Starting from scratch, they put out calls to the residents of Elmhurst for artifacts and manuscripts of note and dug into their own ancestry to build a collection from the ground up. Many of the early commissioners were from families that had been in Elmhurst for several generations and were also involved in entrenched local organizations such as the Elmhurst Woman's Club, Elmhurst College, Elmhurst Public Library, and the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. The historical commission was granted a single room on the third floor of Elmhurst City Hall, located then in the [Glos Mansion](#), and it would be several years before enough was gathered for public display. In January 1957, the Elmhurst Historical Museum opened its doors for the first time, open to the public on Thursday mornings and afternoons.

The museum's collection grew steadily throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and city council expanded the historical commission and granted the museum a second room in city hall for additional display space. An opportunity arose for expansion when the Elmhurst Public Library, then located in the [Wilder Mansion](#), opened an addition in 1965. By this time, Elmhurst was the largest city in DuPage County, and both the museum and local government needed more room to grow. With more space available at the



Elmhurst Historical Museum dedication ceremony at the Glos Mansion, May 18, 1975, M2019.1.23

library, the Elmhurst Historical Museum moved to the new location on the second floor of the Wilder Mansion.

The Historical Commission and the Elmhurst Public Library had worked closely with each other since the formation of the museum. The two organizations had signed a collections agreement stipulating that the former body would collect historical artifacts while the latter would be in charge of collecting and keeping archives and photographs. With the move to the Wilder Mansion, both of these collections were finally accessible at a single location. In the late 1960s, the City of Elmhurst hired the first paid museum staff members, which allowed for expanded business hours and public programming.

In 1970, the City of Elmhurst's government moved from the Glos Mansion to a building on Schiller Street, leaving the Glos Mansion vacant and creating an opportunity for the Elmhurst Historical Museum. Elmhurst had only grown larger in the five years since the museum moved into the Wilder Mansion, and the library had filled the additional space provided by their 1965 expansion. If the museum could move back to the Glos Mansion, both the museum and the library would have more space to grow. The Historical Commission worked to secure a return to the Glos Mansion and modernize the former city hall building to accommodate exhibitions and public programming. After several years of renovation, the Elmhurst Historical Museum opened at the Glos Mansion in 1975.

After the American bicentennial celebration in 1976 sparked a renewed interest in local history nationwide, the museum field as a whole underwent a period of professionalization. While professional curators had long been fixtures at large institutions, local historical societies were generally managed by volunteers. In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this dynamic slowly began to change. The Elmhurst Historical Museum was no exception to this trend, and the Historical Commission hired its first professionally trained staff members in the early 1980s. As the city hired more trained staff to handle the various tasks of a modern history museum throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Historical Commission's role in the day-to-day management of the organization was gradually reduced. The

commission eventually disbanded in 2007 making way for the newly-formed Elmhurst Heritage Foundation, a non-profit support organization for the museum and Churchville Schoolhouse.

The Elmhurst Historical Museum continued to expand to meet the needs of its community. The organization played an outsized role in Elmhurst's sesquicentennial celebrations in 1986, developing a core local history exhibition that would occupy the second floor of the Glos Mansion for decades. In the late 1990s, the city acquired a building just south



*Elmhurst History Museum Grounds, October 2020, M2020.2.337*

of the Glos Mansion, which became the Education Center annex and greatly increased the organization's ability to host public programs. In 2001, the City of Elmhurst purchased the [Churchville Schoolhouse](#), a historic landmark in Addison Township, for programming use by the museum. After several years of renovation, the schoolhouse was opened for programming 2010. A complete renovation of the second-floor gallery in the Glos Mansion paved the way for the opening of a new core history exhibit in 2015. And in early 2016, the museum rebranded itself as the Elmhurst History Museum, a small but meaningful name change to reflect a forward-thinking organization.

At present, the Elmhurst History Museum continues to provide programs, exhibits, and research assistance in service of its mission: *to engage people with history through thoughtful collection, enlightening exhibits, and diverse educational experience*. The museum continues to be supported by the City of Elmhurst as well as by the Elmhurst Heritage Foundation, and today more than 15,000 visitors experience the museum's exhibits and programs annually.

*By Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, Updated November 2021*