PROJECT SCROLL RESEARCH NOTE 2026-07

A museum before the museum: the Cass County Pioneer Society's collection, 1874–1899

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SUMMARY

The Pioneer Log Cabin at Cassopolis, Michigan, is usually described as the home of a pioneer collection begun in 1923–24, when relics from the lobby of the county court house were moved into it. The records of the Cass County Pioneer Society show a museum some fifty years older. The Society's by-laws, adopted on 21 January 1874, made the secretary receipt "books, documents, relics, or other articles contributed or deposited in the museum of the society" and publish a catalogue twice a year; in 1876 a committee was appointed to "take proper care of the specimens in the museum"; in June 1880 the secretary reported that over the past year the museum had been "continued under charge of Mr. I. V. Sherman, at his store"; and on 17 May 1882 the Society "removed the relics" into a room in the court house set apart by the county supervisors. The earliest dated gift, a bass drum, was promised by its giver in a letter of 1 June 1875: taken by a foraging squad of the Eleventh Michigan on the Nashville pike in 1862, and marked inside "Richard Bicknell, Dundee, March 23, 1640." A newspaper of 1887, which dates the gift to 1874, credited the drum with a record in Scottish regiments back to Culloden, and reported it lost. A directory of 1899 still speaks of "the pioneer museum." The courthouse collection moved into the cabin in 1924 was very probably the same museum.

THE RECORD

1. **Alfred Mathews, *History of Cass County, Michigan* (Chicago: Waterman, Watkins & Co., 1882), p. 141: by-laws of the Society adopted 21 January 1874, Art. 2–3**

   > *"The Secretary or his assistant shall give receipts for all books, documents, relics, or other articles contributed or deposited in the museum of the society. ... and make out semi-annually, a catalogue of the same for publication." Art. 3 charges the township members with "collecting books, maps, pictures, relics, and all articles or things of interest for the museum."*

   Library of Congress; scan at the Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/historyofcasscou00wate)

2. **Howard S. Rogers, *History of Cass County, from 1825 to 1875* (Cassopolis: W. H. Mansfield, Vigilant Book and Job Print, 1875), preface, p. iii**

   > *The book was undertaken "upon the urgent and repeated requests of many old settlers and those who were interested in establishing the Cass County Pioneer Association and Museum."*

   University of Michigan; scan at the Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/bad0871.0001.001.umich.edu)

3. **"A Venerable Relic," Cassopolis *National Democrat*, 3 June 1875: A. S. Russey's letter from Vandalia, 1 June 1875, to G. B. Turner; sent by the paper's publisher, C. C. Allison, to the *Nashville Union and American*, and copied from it in the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, 12 June 1875, p. 2**

   > *"It was captured by a squad of the Eleventh Michigan regiment while out foraging on the Nashville pike road, about seven miles from Nashville, Tennessee, in the year 1862. I belonged to the regimental band at the time, and when I was musterd out of service I traded my band drum for it. ... By looking in one of the air-holes, you can see the man's name who made it, 'Richard Bicknell, Dundee, March 23, 1640.' I will send it to you the first chance I get; you will please take care of it."*

   Library of Congress, Chronicling America · See the record (https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83045160/1875-06-12/ed-1/?sp=2)

4. ***Pioneer Collections*** **(Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections), vol. 1, p. 133 in the Internet Archive scan: "The Pioneers' Picnic, Cassopolis, June 21, 1876"**

> *"The following committee was appointed to collect money to defray expenses, and take proper care of the specimens in the museum: John Haines, Eli Green, Wm. Baldwin, and Hon. John Struble."*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/michiganhistoric01mich)

5. ***Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*****, vol. 4, p. 225: the secretary's report to the Cass County Pioneer Society's seventh annual reunion, 16 June 1880**

> *"The museum has been continued under charge of Mr. I. V. Sherman, at his store, and has been carefully cared for by him as assistant secretary."*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/michiganhistoric04mich)

6. ***Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*****, vol. 29, p. 206: the secretary's report of 21 June 1882, signed L. H. Glover**

> *"The time having expired for which C. W. Clisbee had rented the room set apart for the society in the court house by the board of supervisors, on the 17th day of May, we took possession of the room and removed the relics to that place. As soon as it can be done suitable show cases will be procured, the relics labeled, and otherwise cared for."*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/michiganhistoric29mich)

7. ***The Ypsilantian*** **(Ypsilanti, Michigan), 2 June 1887, p. 6, state news**

> *"In 1874 Sidney Russey presented to the Cass County Pioneer Society a bass drum which he had captured on a southern battle field. It was of more than moderate size, and bore inscriptions ... representing its age to be more than two centuries with a record in Scotch regiments, which included service in the battle of Culloden. The drum is a valuable relic, but for the last few years all trace of it has been lost, and the society is anxiously looking for it."*

Ypsilanti District Library; scan at the Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/ypsilantian-1887.06.02-8.387)

8. **W. A. Norton's directory of Dowagiac, Cassopolis and nearby townships (1899), p. 233, "Historical Sketch of Cassopolis"**

   > *Of the lock of the county's first log jail: it "is now a relic in the pioneer museum."*

   University of Michigan; scan at the Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/3256376.0001.001.umich.edu)

9. **Marcia Gaskin, comp., *1923 Pioneer Log Cabin Museum Searchable Donor List* (Cassopolis, 2012), p. 21 of the scan**

   > *"A museum collection located in the lobby of the court house was moved to the log cabin and incorporated into the display there. The museum opened on Pioneer Day June 18, 1924."*

   Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/pioneer_log_cabin_museum_text_searchable1a)

WHAT IT CHANGES

Modern accounts of the Pioneer Log Cabin, including the cabin's own booklet of 2012, mention an undated "museum collection located in the lobby of the court house" that was moved into the cabin in 1924, and say nothing of where it came from. The Pioneer Society's own records, printed in Mathews's county history and in the state Pioneer Collections, show that the Society planned a museum in its by-laws of January 1874, had a committee caring for its "specimens" by June 1876, kept the collection at a member's store in 1879–80, and moved it into a court-house room on 17 May 1882. A directory of 1899 still refers to "the pioneer museum." Taken together, the cabin's collection very probably descends from a museum the county's pioneers kept from the 1870s, and the Society was running a museum roughly fifty years before the cabin was built.

LIMITS

No catalogue of the museum has been found, although the by-laws required one twice a year; if any were printed they should be in the Cassopolis newspapers, which for these years are not online. The Cass District Library's microfilm of the *Cassopolis Vigilant* runs from 1872 but lacks May 1874 to January 1876; its film of the *National Democrat* holds October 1873 to April 1876 and only scattered issues after. Only about five issues of the *Cass County Republican* of Dowagiac for 1874–1880 are online, at Chronicling America; they report the 1878 reunion but print no catalogue. No record yet found traces the collection from the court-house room of 1882 to the court-house lobby of the 1920s, through the move of the old court house off the square in 1898–99 and the building of the stone court house; the identity of the two collections is a reading, not a documented fact. The drum is known only from newspapers, its giver's letter of 1875 and a paragraph of 1887. The 1887 paper dates the gift to 1874, but the giver's letter of 1 June 1875 shows the drum still in his hands, so the gift was probably made later in 1875; the maker's mark of 1640 and the claim of service at Culloden are unverified, and the drum has not been found. The page numbers for the Pioneer Collections are those of the Internet Archive scans; later reprints are paged differently.

WHAT WE SEARCHED BEFORE CALLING IT NEW

The cabin's booklet of 2012 (Gaskin); the Cass County Historical Society's and the cabin museum's pages; the Village of Cassopolis parks page; Wikipedia; *Leader* articles of 2003, 2007, 2012 and 2013; Glover's county history of 1906; the *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, vols. 1–40, every Cass County section; *Michigan History* magazine, 1917–1960; Chronicling America and the Internet Archive's newspapers for "pioneer museum," "Pioneer Society" with Cassopolis, and the drum; web searches for the Society's museum, I. V. Sherman, Sidney Russey, and Richard Bicknell of Dundee. Each modern account mentions only the undated court-house collection; none mentions the museum of 1874–1882 or the drum.

Our standard for calling a finding new is set out in How we research (projectscroll.com/how-we-research/), and how we weigh each kind of record in Scrollsigns (projectscroll.com/scrollsigns/).

“New” means new to print as far as we can tell. If you know of an earlier publication, tell us and we will credit it here and raise the note’s version.

WORKS CITED

Earlier work, catalogues and databases named in this note, besides the records quoted above.

1. L. H. Glover, ed., *A Twentieth Century History of Cass County, Michigan* (Chicago: Lewis, 1906): the Pioneer Society chapter; “now in the museum at Cassopolis” (p. 698); the Pioneer Room of the court house (p. 244). Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/twentiethcentury00glov
2. Cass District Library, Local History Branch (Cassopolis), *Research Guide: Index to the Microfilm Reels of the Cassopolis Vigilant* (2021), accessed October 2026. https://www.cassdistrictlibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Research-Guide-Index-to-the-Microfilm-Reels-of-the-Cassopolis-Vigilant.pdf
3. Cass District Library, Local History Branch (Cassopolis), *Research Guide: National Democrat on Microfilm* (2021), accessed October 2026. https://www.cassdistrictlibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Reseach-Guide-National-Democrat-on-Microfilm.pdf
4. *The Cass County Republican* (Dowagiac, Mich.), 1858–1880, Library of Congress, Chronicling America: the issues online for 1874–1880, searched October 2026. https://www.loc.gov/item/sn85033611/
5. Michael Urbanski, “A museum before there was a museum,” *Project Scroll* (2026), Part 1 of the series on the Cass County Pioneer Society. https://projectscroll.com/news/a-museum-before-there-was-a-museum/

THE FULL STORY

The finding is set out in context, with the rest of its sources, in A museum before there was a museum (projectscroll.com/news/a-museum-before-there-was-a-museum/). In the discoveries register:

- `pioneer-museum-1874` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#pioneer-museum-1874)
- `drum-nashville-pike` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#drum-nashville-pike)
- `culloden-drum-1887` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#culloden-drum-1887)

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