PROJECT SCROLL RESEARCH NOTE 2026-18

A society founded anew: the Cass County Historical Society in the directories of 1959–1974 ("f. 1952"), and George R. Fox as its president, 1955–1963

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SUMMARY

The Cass County Historical Society of Michigan tells the story of the Cass County Pioneer Society of 1873 as its own, and the Society revived around the Pioneer Log Cabin in 1923 was already called the "Cass County Historical society" in print. The national and state directories of historical societies, however, give today's Society a founding of its own. In 1959 the American Association for State and Local History listed the "CASS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Dowagiac. Mrs. Bernice Vanderberg; secretary"; its directory of 1963 gives the Society as "Mail % Berenice E. Vanderburg, sec., 101 James St., Dowagiac. f. 1952"; and the Historical Society of Michigan's directories of 1973 and 1974 both say "founded in 1953." The Society's president in those years was the museum man and archaeologist George R. Fox, named as president by the winter of 1955–56 and until his death in 1963. In that winter *The Beaver*, the Hudson's Bay Company's magazine, printed his article "Was This La Salle's Griffin?", on a wreck on Manitoulin Island that he thought might be the *Griffon* of 1679, and introduced him as "president of the Cass County Historical Society, Michigan."

THE RECORD

1. **American Association for State and Local History, *Directory of Historical Societies and Agencies in the United States and Canada* (1959)**

   > *"CASS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Dowagiac. Mrs. Bernice Vanderberg; secretary."*

   Google Books · See the record (https://books.google.com/books?id=GWTjAAAAMAAJ)

2. **Ibid. (1963), under Cassopolis**

   > *"Mail % Berenice E. Vanderburg, sec., 101 James St., Dowagiac. f. 1952."*

   Google Books · See the record (https://books.google.com/books?id=GWTjAAAAMAAJ)

3. **Historical Society of Michigan, *Directory of Historical Collections and Societies in Michigan* (1973) and *Directory of Historical Societies and Agencies in Michigan* (1974)**

   > *The Cass County Historical Society, 101 James Street, Dowagiac, "founded in 1953."*

   Google Books · See the record (https://books.google.com/books?id=C1niAAAAMAAJ)

4. **George R. Fox, "Was This La Salle's Griffin?", *The Beaver* (winter 1955–56), with the note on the author**

   > *Fox is introduced as "president of the Cass County Historical Society, Michigan," whose investigations of the wreck "have been spread over seventeen years."*

   Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/sim_canadas-history_winter-1955-1956)

5. ***Michigan History* 40:4 (December 1956): the Historical Society of Michigan's meeting at Niles**

> *The Saturday tour was "directed by George Fox, president of the Cass County Historical Society."*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/sim_michigan-history_1956-12_40_4)

WHAT IT CHANGES

The Cass County Historical Society is usually presented as the direct heir of the Pioneer Society of 1873, and the Dowagiac historian Everett Claspy wrote that it was "revived in 1958." The directories show a society founded, or founded anew, in 1952 or 1953, with its seat at Dowagiac and its secretary there, and with George R. Fox as president by 1955–56. Read together, they date the present Society's organization to the early 1950s, explain why a notice of 1976 could call its long-serving secretary "one of the founders," and make it the likeliest candidate for the "local historical society" that Fox is said to have founded.

LIMITS

The directories disagree by a year (1952 in 1963; 1953 in 1973 and 1974), and none says what was founded: a new body, or a reorganization of the society of the 1920s and 1930s, whose name it shares. The Society's minutes are said to begin in 1954 and have not been seen. The Library of Michigan dates Fox's founding of a local historical society to about 1933, twenty years earlier. Fox's *Griffon* article is already known to Great Lakes historians; what is set out here is only its link to the Society.

WHAT WE SEARCHED BEFORE CALLING IT NEW

The Society's website and its accounts of its history; Claspy (1970); *Michigan History*, 1924–61, and its indexes for 1962–89; the Bentley Historical Library's finding aid for the George R. Fox papers; the Library of Michigan's note on Fox; the AASLH and Historical Society of Michigan directories we could reach; Chronicling America; the Internet Archive's full text; web searches for the Society's founding date and for Fox with the Society and the *Griffon*. None of the modern accounts gives a founding date in the 1950s.

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. Everett Claspy, *The Dowagiac–Sister Lakes Resort Area* (Dowagiac, 1970), on George R. Fox and the Society. https://archive.org/details/bwb_P8-AAF-786
2. George R. Fox papers, 1915–1973, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, finding aid. https://findingaids.lib.umich.edu/catalog/umich-bhl-0383
3. Michael Urbanski, "Keepers of the county," *Project Scroll* (2026), Part 3 of the series on the Cass County Pioneer Society. https://projectscroll.com/news/keepers-of-the-county/

THE FULL STORY

The finding is set out in context, with the rest of its sources, in Keepers of the county (projectscroll.com/news/keepers-of-the-county/). In the discoveries register:

- `society-founded-1952` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#society-founded-1952)
- `fox-griffon` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#fox-griffon)

HOW TO CITE THIS NOTE

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