PROJECT SCROLL RESEARCH NOTE 2026-46

Two buildings, two leases: the county's 99-year lease of the Pioneer Log Cabin grounds (1972) and Michigan State University's offer of the Newton House to the Cass County Pioneer Historical Society

Michael Urbanski ORCID 0009-0006-8183-5828 (https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8183-5828), Project Scroll · Issued 5 November 2026 · Version 1 · doi:10.5281/zenodo.23968728 (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23968728)

SUMMARY

The Cass County Historical Society's two best-known sites, the Pioneer Log Cabin at Cassopolis and the Newton House near Decatur, have long stood on land the Society did not own. Two newspaper items show how each came under its care. In June 1972 the *St. Joseph Herald-Press* reported that the Cass County commissioners had taken a 99-year lease on the cabin from the Village of Cassopolis at $1 a year, "rectifying an apparent oversight of many years": when the Cass County Pioneer and Historical association asked to be covered by the county's liability insurance, "a check revealed the village retained title to the land." The Society's own certificates of 1924 had spoken of a "Lease Deed" from the village. An undated *South Bend Tribune* article, "Offered as Cass Museum," kept in a Decatur scrapbook, reports that Michigan State University had offered the resident forester's house at its Russ Forest, the George Newton House, "to the Cass County Pioneer Historical Society for a museum," on what the forester expected would be "a five-year lease," and that "if someone does not take it, I understand the university plans to raze it." Michigan State's trustees recorded in June 2026 that the university has leased the property to the Society since January 1980 at a nominal rate of $1.00 a year.

THE RECORD

1. **Photograph and caption, "99-Year Lease," *St. Joseph Herald-Press* (St. Joseph, Mich.), 14 June 1972**

   > *"Cass commissioners yesterday took a 99-year lease on Pioneer Log Cabin in Cassopolis, rectifying an apparent oversight of many years. Legal questions arose when the Cass County Pioneer and Historical association, which operates the cabin as a museum under auspices of the county, asked that it be included under the county's liability insurance coverage. A check revealed the village retained title to the land. ... The county will pay the village $1 rent every year for the next 99 years."*

   Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/st-joseph-herald-press-1972-06-14)

2. **Certificate of purchase of a souvenir lot, 1924, in Marcia Gaskin, comp., *1923 Pioneer Log Cabin Museum Searchable Donor List* (Cassopolis, 2012), unpaginated**

   > *The proceeds are "to be used in the payment of all the remaining obligations incurred in the building of the Pioneer Log Cabin; this being according to a Lease Deed from said Village of Cassopolis, conveying to The Cass County Pioneer and Historical Society, the Pioneer Log Cabin Grounds."*

   Pioneer Log Cabin Museum, Cassopolis; scan at the Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/pioneer_log_cabin_museum_text_searchable1a)

3. **Ray McClure, "Offered as Cass Museum," *South Bend Tribune*, undated, in Catherine Howland, comp., *A Scrapbook History of Early Decatur, Michigan, 1829–1976*, part 2**

   > *"The 100-year-old resident forester's home on the grounds of Fred Russ Experimental Forest north of here has been offered to the Cass County Pioneer Historical Society for a museum, a Michigan State University official confirmed Friday."*

   Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/scrapbook-history-of-early-decatur-michigan)

4. **Ibid., the forester, John Bright, quoted**

> *“I believe they would get the house on a five-year lease. During that period it would be determined if they could manage the property.” … “If someone does not take it, I understand the university plans to raze it. The society has first choice.”*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/scrapbook-history-of-early-decatur-michigan)

5. **Michigan State University Board of Trustees, “Sale of Property, 20689 Marcellus Hwy, Decatur, MI,” 12 June 2026**

> *“Since January 1980, MSU has leased the property to the Cass County Historical Society (CCHS) … at a nominal rate of $1.00 per year.”*

Michigan State University, Board of Trustees · See the record (https://edge.sitecorecloud.io/michiganstab57e-msustrategi129d-prod9868-7e5e/media/project/msu/trustees/docs/2026/06-12-26/bf4-sale-of-property-20689-marcellus-hwy-decatur-mi-stamp.pdf)

6. **National Register of Historic Places nomination, George Newton House (NRHP 82002830), 1982, item 8**

> *“In August 1974 the university leased the Newton House and its four acre site to the Cass County Historical Commission, which now operates the home as a county museum.”*

National Archives Catalog, NAID 25339084 · See the record (https://catalog.archives.gov/id/25339084)

7. **Michigan State University, Department of Forestry, letter of 10 February 1982, in the same National Register file**

> *“the Newton House is leased to the Cass County Historical Commission, Cassopolis, Michigan, under a lease dated January 8, 1980, and expiring June 30, 1984.”*

National Archives Catalog, NAID 25339084 · See the record (https://catalog.archives.gov/id/25339084)

WHAT IT CHANGES

The cabin's ground, which the Society's certificates of 1924 described as held by a lease deed from the village, was found in 1972 still to be the village's, and was then leased to the county for 99 years at a dollar a year. The Newton House came to the Society's attention not as a gift but as an offer made under threat of demolition, with a trial lease in view.

LIMITS

The *Tribune* article is undated in the scrapbook; it names the forester, John Bright, and says his transfer ended fourteen years in the post, but gives no year. The 1972 item is a photograph caption, not the lease. The certificates of 1924 speak of a lease deed but do not give its date or terms.

WHAT WE SEARCHED BEFORE CALLING IT NEW

Gaskin (2012), which prints the 1924 certificate; Wikipedia's articles on the cabin and on the George Newton House; the Clio entry for the Newton House; WVPE (12 June 2026); the Cass County Historical Society's pages; the Village of Cassopolis parks page; articles in the *Leader* (Dowagiac), 2003–2021; Michigan State University's trustees' papers of June 2026; the Internet Archive's newspapers and the Decatur scrapbook; web searches for the lease and for the offer of the house. None reports the 1972 lease or the offer of the Newton House as a museum.

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.

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WORKS CITED

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

1. 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/
2. Michael Urbanski, "The cabin a county built," *Project Scroll* (2026), Part 2 of the series on the Cass County Pioneer Society. https://projectscroll.com/news/the-cabin-a-county-built/

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:

- `newton-house-offer` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#newton-house-offer)
- `newton-house-lease-1974` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#newton-house-lease-1974)

HOW TO CITE THIS NOTE

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