



HISTORICO

Sangamon County Historical Society Newsletter

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 9744, Springfield, IL 62791-9744, Phone: 217-525-1961,
e-mail: schsoffice@gmail.com web: www.sangamonhistory.org, SangamonLink.org

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Two of Sangamon's Great Mysteries Solved By History Sleuths

SangamonLink Key In Tracing Artist's Works

Dennis Williams was a rarity in 1870s-80s Springfield: a successful and acclaimed African American artist and businessman.

HISTORICO
EXCLUSIVE

Williams, however, is almost forgotten today, and only a few examples of his art are known to exist.

That meager number recently increased by one, thanks to the

SCHS's *SangamonLink*, a local researcher, and a North Carolina thrift shop devotee.

(Continued on page 6)

On Screen Debut November 16 A Tell-All On Secret Poet's Life

You may have heard the talk or read about it in the press. And now, thanks to a joint presentation by the Sangamon County Historical Society and the Iles House Foundation on Tuesday, November 16, you can

catch the story of the lost poet of Abraham Lincoln's Springfield on the big screen.

The two organizations will co-host the first public big screen showing of *"The Mysterious Bard"*

(Continued on page 5)

Bad Weather Forces Cancellation Of Society's Annual Cemetery Walk

With a string of lightning strikes and house-rattling thunderstorms booming overhead, Mother Nature had her way on Sunday, October 3, prompting a mid-morning decision to cancel the Society's Oak Ridge Cemetery Walk scheduled to begin at Noon.

This was the second year in a row that the Society had to cancel the event. It was called off last year because of the Corona Virus pandemic.

"We were monitoring the weather for several days in hopes the long range forecast would change," explained event chair Mary Alice Davis who tapped on the expertise of weather professionals who were tracking the storm.

"They told us we really would not know until Sunday morning. By 7:30 a.m. Sunday, the hourly forecast predicted storms moving through the area until around 11 a.m., with a brief break at mid-day before another round of thunderstorms rolling

(Continued on page 4)



TOUGH DECISION: The glum looks on the faces of event chair Mary Alice Davis and Society treasurer Jerry Smith say it all as they get ready to post signs at Oak Ridge cancelling the annual walk after heavy thunder storms hit the area in the early morning with more predicted to come.

Larry Stone photo

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AND A REMINDER: *HISTORICO* IS NOT PUBLISHED IN DECEMBER. HAVE A HAPPY HOLIDAY SEASON. SEE YOU IN 2022!



Efforts Appreciated In So Many Ways

I was disappointed that the rain prevented us from holding the cemetery walk this year, nevertheless the committee did an outstanding job. Thanks to Mary Alice Davis, Jennie Battles, Ruth Slottag and the rest of the cemetery walk committee, volunteers, reenactors who put time into preparing this year's event. Thank you to Oak Ridge Cemetery director LaShonda Fitch and her staff for working with us. We will try it again in October 2022.

* * *

I'm excited that we will be able to host an in-person program again in November. It's extra special that it will be a film that we supported with a grant this year. John Hallwas, who wrote the play and compiled the book *The Poems Of H.: The Lost Poet of Lincoln's Springfield*, also presented in our April online program on Virginia Eifert.

* * *

The article on Dennis Willams in *SangamonLink* highlights the power of the connections that can be made on the blog format. Articles can be edited and expanded as new information is uncovered. The comment section allows people to share stories and ask questions.

SangamonLink is free and accessible to everyone on the internet. Our content is available to researchers and useful to folks as in this example and in ways we don't know.

Through the website, Facebook, Twitter, and the *State Journal-Register* its reach has grown. I'm proud that *SangamonLink* is a resource that the Society can provide. It admirably fulfills the mission of the Society.

Thank you to its editor Mike Kienzler for his hard work. I encourage everyone to check it out.

* * *

I attended the 2021 Springfield Preservation Awards hosted by the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln and the *Springfield Business Journal*.

It was a beautiful night on the Bicentennial Plaza. I enjoyed seeing familiar faces from the local history community.

Congrats to the people and projects recognized this year: Anthony Rubano for his educational efforts, Inner City Mission for renovating the Lincoln-era House at 726 North Seventh Street, the Springfield NAACP and Floyd Mansberger for their work on the race riot site, Seth and Ivy Molen for remodeling a historic retail/residential structure downtown, Route History for renovating 737 East Cook, and the State of Illinois for the rehabilitation work on the former *State Journal-Register*/IHPA building on Sixth Street, the Armory, the Chase/Marine Bank for the Treasurer's Office, and the Old State Capitol.

* * *

Speaking of the Old State Capitol, on the first day it reopened I toured the site as part of the Conference on Illinois History presented by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

Justin Blandford and the guides at the site spoke about the physical renovation and the new exhibit space, video, and interpretive goals.

There is a recent article in the *Illinois Times* about the project. I encourage you to explore the Old State Capitol.



Historico, published 10 times a year (except July & December), is the official bulletin for members of the Sangamon County Historical Society. Springfield, Illinois.

Winner, Certificate of Excellence, Illinois State Historical Society.

You can download back issues of *Historico* in PDF format by going to our website, www.sangamohistory.org or sanchohis.org. Catch us on Facebook and Twitter. Send event announcements to historicoeditor@gmail.com.

Vicky Whitaker, *Historico* Editor.

Cinda Klickna, Mike Kienzler, contributors

Give A Gift of Membership: A Holiday Treat That Lasts!

With December around the corner, it's not too early to be thinking of that special holiday gift for a friend, neighbor, or family member.

Nor is it too late to make your gift-giving easier, simply by giving those on your list a year's membership in the Sangamon County Historical Society.

The offer is good only for new memberships, not renewals and is not available on line.

Use or duplicate the special Holiday Gift form on page 7 and we'll take care of the details, including sending a special card of acknowledgement to the recipient--if you wish--explaining your

only to members until June 1, 2022 when the Society's next fiscal year kicks in (and runs until May 31, 2023).

Depending on the processing, that's four to five extra months of wonderful programs, activities and other activities from the late winter into early spring.

To purchase a Gift of Membership, simply send a check with the order form to the Society at Box 9744, Springfield, Illinois, 62791-9744.

Membership gift forms must be received no later than December 31.

* * *

With tax time approaching and the year wrapping up, you may be thinking in larger terms about gift giving to your favorite organization.

The Sangamon County Historical Society is a 501C3 that welcomes major gifts to further its work supporting historic preservation and history education.

Past major gifts have helped the Society support and sustain the growth of the Sangamon Valley Collection at the City of Springfield's Lincoln Library and have underwritten other special efforts that might normally go unfunded or underfunded.

largest in giving them a gift that will start in early 2022 and run through May 31, 2023.

The offer includes early benefits of full membership including monthly mailings of *Historico* and events open

If you are interested in making such a donation, please contact Society treasurer Jerry Smith at gwsmith147@att.net for additional details. He will be happy to provide you with the information you need.



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Please make note of our official mailing address:

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Springfield, Illinois,
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Mother Nature Puts Damper on Oak Ridge Walk But It Will Be Back in 2022 on Sunday, October 2

(Continued from page 1)

in by early afternoon." Davis and the set-up crew of volunteers met at the Cemetery office at mid-morning, the skies overcast with nary a ray of sun in sight.

Heavy rains the day before had prevented the Walk's volunteer crew from installing signs that direct motorists to the parking area from the cemetery's entrances, something that takes a few hours and is usually completed on the Saturday before the event. They also set up the tents, tables and chairs the morning of the Walk for use by volunteers, reenactors, bus guides, and the information and refreshment tables, all adjacent to the parking area.

"A decision had to be made by 9 a.m. in time to inform the volunteers, reenactors, the bus company and the public that the event was cancelled. At 9:30 a.m. the announcement was posted immediately on the Society's website, and its Facebook page. Society public relations chair Ruth Slottag reached out to local radio and television stations and the State Journal Register, which also acted quickly to announce the cancellation on its Facebook site.

"There was no other option," said Davis. "When it comes to weather, we've been lucky most years, but no matter what time of the year you have an outdoor event, you must keep the safety of everyone a priority, particularly when lightning is threatened and rain slicked roads and slippery grass pose a threat."

"With a lot of outdoor work ahead of us including putting up directional signage and tents next to the grassy parking area that had the potential of becoming a sea of mud, we were left with no option except cancellation by Sunday morning, especially when the latest forecast indicated the return of lightning and thunderstorms by early afternoon."

Of course, a few minutes later, the sun peeked out from behind the clouds, but that was no guarantee the area would not be soaked anew. "In fact, when the sun came out, we learned that just a short distance north of us, it was pouring," said Davis. "The weather maps showed we were in for isolated downpours, something that in addition to our own predicament, might give would-be Walk goers second thoughts about showing up."

It was a tough decision for Davis, a Society past-president, who has chaired the event for several years. A small army of volunteers had spent months working on all aspects of the Walk, including locating the graves of the individuals who would be portrayed by reenactors, to writing scripts and casting, rehearsing, and scheduling the reenactors. The committee charged with coordinating the event also had to plan the route (and usually walk it well in advance) so that it could be covered within a reasonable distance and be accessible by buses capable of maneuvering the cemetery's sometimes winding roads.

"It's not easy to say cancel, but sometimes you have no option," Davis observed. "It's a complicated, time-consuming effort that isn't easily if not impossible to reschedule on a dime. That's why we do not have a rain date. Mother Nature gives no guarantees."

But one thing is certain: the date of next year's Oak Ridge Cemetery Walk, "We've booked it for Sunday, October 2," Davis said, the event providing a look at the figures and gravesites of those who would have been the focus of this year's Walk.

Actor Victor Holstein Home Gets A Starring Role At Home ...



HOLSTEIN

Born in Springfield in 1980, Victor Holstein, who plays poet John Hancock in the new film, *The Mysterious Bard of Springfield*, is a veteran of stage and screen as an actor and producer. His television credits include roles in *Chicago Med*, *Chicago P.D.*, *Other People's Children* and *Good Genes*. The youngest of five children, Holstein graduated from Glenwood High School in 1998. Holstein earned a BA in Theater Arts from Columbia College Chicago in 2004, moving to Los Angeles shortly after, where he worked as a set Production Assistant on the NBC show *Las Vegas* and on many indie films, TV shows and soap operas including a recurring role as a police officer on *Days of Our Lives*. In 2014, he moved back to Chicago. He played Charles Lyon in the hit immersive show *Southern Gothic* and then was in Timeline Theatre's Production of *Oslo* at the Broadway Playhouse downtown. He is understudying Steppenwolf Theatre's critically acclaimed play *Bug* which opens this month in Chicago.



AS THE BARD

Secret Poet From Past Getting Big Screen Now

(Continued from page 1)

of Sangamon," a new film based on the life of talented poet John Hancock, a well-traveled, well-educated Englishman who made his home in Springfield in the 1830s and 1840s, and identified authorship of his work when it was published in the frontier newspaper, *Sangamo Journal* only with the letter "H."

The program, in the Carnegie Room at the City of Springfield's Lincoln Library, is free and open to the public. The presentation begins at 5:30 p.m. Attendees will be required to adhere to state and federal Covid mask and seating regulations.

You can also download and watch the film on-line at <https://vimeo.com/626671152/daae07f0cc>.

As successful as he was locally over 150 years ago, Hancock faded into obscurity until award-winning literary scholar, teacher, historian and author Dr. John E. Hallwas recognized the breadth of his talent and spent decades tracking down his work and identify the elusive poet. The new film is the latest effort to underscore Hancock's literar place in history.

In a book he wrote about Hancock, *The Poems of H., the Lost Poet of Lincoln's Springfield*, published in 1982, Dr. Hallwas noted that the Springfield bard produced "what may be the finest poetic achievement in the Midwest before the twentieth century," speculating that his anonymity was the probable result of his living on the edge of the Illinois frontier instead of "Boston, New York, or Cincinnati."

Now a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Western Illinois University, Dr. Hallwas wrote the play on which the screenplay is based, explained Illinois State Historical So-

ciety Executive Director William Furry, a project that he had been discussing with him over the years. Furry served as producer and director of the film, organizing and hiring the professional cinema team and casting actor Victor Holstein to play Hancock who donned authentic period clothing for the film, loaned by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum.

Working with a miniscule budget (by Hollywood standards) provided by Dr. Hallwas and individual donations and a grant from SCHS through its Special Projects awards program, the film was shot over the summer in and around Sangamon County historic sites including interiors at Iles House.

Springfield cinematographer Brian Crowdson and his assistant, Karen Nickerson handled the production details. Keyboard artist and organist Paula Pugh Romanaux and Wild Columbine, a group that performs traditional music, provided the soundtrack for the hour-long movie.

That there had been a mystery bard afoot during the Lincoln era comes as no surprise to long-time Sangamon County Historical Society members who in 1986 heard Dr. Hallwas talk about his efforts to track down the creator of dozens of poems that proved popular with *Sangamo Journal* readers.

Hancock, who had moved to Springfield from London, England, penned poems that ranged from sonnets about nature and philosophy, satirical and mock-heroic works presented in observations of local citizens, events, and customs, or legendary or mythological themes as well as poems of remembrance. The *Sangamo Journal* often printed his poems on the front page, noted *Historico*, in reporting on the historian's presentation to the Society in 1986.

...And For History Sleuth John E. Hallwas, It's Finally Play Time

Dr. John E. Hallwas, Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Western Illinois University, has written or edited two dozen books related to the Midwest, including the award-winning *Cultures in Conflict: A Documentary History of the Mormon War in Illinois* (with Roger Launius, 1995) and the highly praised true crime narrative *The Bootlegger: A Story of Small-Town America* (1998). His most recent book is *Dime Novel Desperadoes: The Notorious Maxwell Brothers*. He has also written scores of magazine and journal articles and hundreds of newspaper essays. A literary scholar, writing teacher, and historian, Hallwas has two degrees from Western Illinois University and a Ph.D. from the University of Florida. He has spoken in more than 150 communities in several states, on true crime writing, historical writing, the small-town Midwest, noted outlaws, the Roaring Twenties, American nonfiction, Illinois authors, and other topics.



SangamonLink the Key to Finding Artist's Lost Legacy

(Continued from Page 1)

Williams (1851-89), born an enslaved person in Mississippi, was a completely self-taught artist, partly because many teachers refused to accept an African American as a student.

Williams eventually set up a studio on the Springfield square, advertising himself as “the old reliable crayon artist.” He received awards at the county and state fairs and won commissions to do portraits of many prominent residents of Springfield and Illinois, among them U.S. Senator John Logan and Abraham Lincoln’s adviser and friend David Davis.

SangamonLink.org, the Sangamon County Historical Society’s online encyclopedia, published a short entry about Williams in 2013. In 2021, however, Mary Frances, a college instructor, artist, and independent historian in Springfield, contacted **SangamonLink** and offered to write a more complete biography of Williams.

One of Frances’ interests is documenting the untold stories of African-Americans – coincidentally, she received an SCHS grant this year to help pay for a grave marker for Olive Price, the sister of Eva Carroll Monroe, who founded Springfield’s Lincoln Colored Home. Frances first heard of Dennis Williams from a 1987 book, *The Black Struggle for Public Schooling in Nineteenth-Century Illinois* by Robert L. McCaul.

“McCaul used Williams’ biography in the *History of Sangamon County, Illinois* (1881) to illustrate how blacks moved around in search of public schools that would admit their children,” Frances says.

After a 2002 *State Journal-Register* article reported that Williams mysteriously disappeared from Springfield in the late 1880s or early ‘90s, Frances says, “I made a commitment to find out what happened.”

Her research culminated in a greatly expanded **SangamonLink** entry about Williams, which was published this past June. (Frances found that Williams had died, under somewhat mysterious circumstances, while traveling through Texas in December 1889. He is buried near his wife’s hometown of Cairo, Ill.) The entry also included four authenticated examples of Williams’ art – a color drawing of kittens, which Williams used on his business cards, and black-and-white portraits of three men, including David Davis.

Despite his output – 100 of his portraits are documented in newspapers – the three portraits published on **SangamonLink** were the only signed, dated works by Williams known to exist. That changed this September, when Andrew Cook of Durham, North Carolina, read **SangamonLink**’s entry on Williams.

“I think I have a large portrait...of judge Andrew G. Henry, done by Dennis Williams,” Cook wrote as a comment to the entry. “I’d like to get more information about Mr. Williams and the judge as well. ...This piece may be of historical importance.”

Initial indications were positive. Andrew G. Henry (1824-1906) was a judge and legislator from Greenville, Illinois, a Republican and a supporter of Abraham Lincoln. The man depicted in the

pencil drawing looks very much like the one shown on Henry’s *Findagrave* page. And Henry was elected to the Illinois House in both 1872 and 1874, meaning he would have been in Springfield for legislative meetings in 1873, the date on the portrait.

As **SangamonLink** editor, I asked Frances, the expert on Williams, to look into the portrait’s authenticity. Cook and Frances exchanged emails, which included several images of both the front and back of the framed portrait. Frances initially was cautious, because the portrait’s signature and date (“D. Williams ’73”) were atypically prominent.

The frame, however, confirmed Springfield’s Dennis Williams as the artist. Stenciling on the back says, “From C.C. Howorth’s *Picture & Frame Store. No. 14, American House Block.*”

Frances found newspaper documentation that Howorth, a respected framer, was at that address at the time and that Williams employed Howorth to frame some of his other portraits. “The wooden, gilded frame, medium, vignette style, and overall size are consistent with Williams’ three other known portraits,” Frances adds.

Cook, who describes himself as “an art enthusiast and a history enthusiast,” bought the portrait four years ago at a thrift store in Durham, North Carolina. He paid less than \$20 for it. “I can’t afford all the artwork I’d love to buy, so I haunt thrift stores,” Cook says.

Part of the portrait’s attraction was its vintage frame, but the main reason, Cook says, “was the history of what it clearly was. I couldn’t stand to see something that special sit at a thrift store.”

Cook tried to learn more about the portrait when he first bought it but came up empty. Prompted by a friend’s inquiry, he tried again in September. “I got lucky putting in ‘Illinois artist D. Williams’ and found that [**SangamonLink**] article about

Dennis Williams,” he says. “I was thrilled.”

Cook isn’t sure yet what he’ll do with the portrait, although he hopes to find a museum where it can be displayed and appreciated. Finding the portrait and learning about its history and that of Dennis Williams “is what people who do what I do dream of,” Cook says. “But I never thought it would happen.”

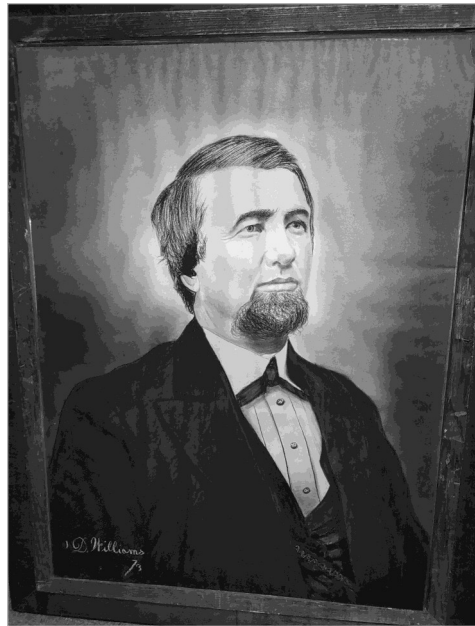
“Dennis Williams fascinated and intrigued people while he was alive and even now after his death,” Frances says. “African American history is sometimes difficult to know and document, yet the effort is worth it. ‘I hope we will continue to tell these unknown and forgotten stories and share them with the world.’”

* * *

The Sangamon County Historical Society founded **SangamonLink** eight years ago to help connect people with the rich history of Sangamon County. The saga of Dennis Williams and his 148-year-old artwork shows the sometimes surprising impact those connections can have.

Mike Kienzler
SangamonLink editor

For more on Dennis Williams, read his entry on **SangamonLink.org**. In addition, Mary Frances’ article, “Dennis Williams: Prominent 19th Century African American Artist in Springfield, Illinois,” appeared in the September-October issue of *Illinois Heritage* magazine. Frances is in the process of placing a bronze plaque at Oak Ridge Cemetery to recognize Williams’ mother, stepfather and two daughters.



FOUND: Dennis Williams’ rendering of Judge Andrew G. Henry. Copyright Andrew Cook. Used by permission.

Miss Something? It's As Close As the "On" Button!

When the Corona Virus prevented the Society from having face-to-face meetings back in early 2020 and through most of 2021, we did the next best thing: videoed our programs and put them on-line.

You can still play catch-up or just sit back, watch and listen to the six programs that we posted on You Tube. So grab that cup of java and a couple of cookies and sit back to watch your computer screen.

Here's how:

:

1. Go to the Society's website. *sangamonhistory.org*.
2. At the top of the page, go to the menu and tap **BOOKS & VIDEOS**
3. On the **BOOKS & VIDEO** page, you will find links-- by month and year: November 2020, January 2021, February 2021, March 2021, April 2021, and May 2021.
4. Hit the iconic "Skip the Ad" button [that's part of the You Tube experience unless you like commercials.]
5. Enjoy!

May 2021: *A Pictorial History of the Construction of the Vachel Lindsay Bridge*. Kansas City-based Lance Warren, Research Librarian/Archivist with Burns McDonnell, provides a pictorial and in-depth look at this iconic Springfield landmark and the story and people behind its

creation and Lake Springfield.

April 2021: *Virginia Eifert: Springfield Native, Prolific Naturalist*. Learn about the life and legacy of Virginia Eifert from researcher John Hallwas and the Illinois State Museum's Tracy Pierceall. Eifert, a naturalist, author, and artist, worked at the Museum where she created, wrote and edited its *The Living Museum* magazine and publications on Illinois flora and fauna, rivers, people, and history. In 2019, Hallwas, who specializes in forgotten voices from Illinois history, provided the cover story on Eifert for *Illinois History Magazine*, whose archives are housed at the Western Illinois University Library.

March 2021: *Lake Springfield In Illinois: Public Works and Community Design in the Mid-Twentieth Century*. The perfect primer for the Society's May meeting, historians Curtis Mann and Robert Mazrim provide details from their new book and the story-behind-the story that motivated them to take a closer look at a public project that helped shape Springfield's future.

February 2021: *Shine A Light Project: Historic Preservation and Interpretation on Springfield's East Side*. Preservationists Sue Massie and Kathryn Harris take a look at efforts to preserve the John Taylor House, the Lincoln Colored Home and Fire House No. 5 and how each site contributed to the lives of African-Americans here.

January 2021: *In The Beginning: A Look at Sangamon County 200 Years Ago*. Using maps, illustrations and a knowledgeable voice-over, Curtis Mann, head of the City of Springfield Lincoln Library's Sangamon Valley Collection, provides an illustrated look at both the people and geography that played into the development of Springfield.

November 2020: *"I Think That We Will Soon Be In Springfield": An Illinois Civil War Soldier's Quotations About Sangamon County from their Personal Letters*. Author Mark Flotow brings the Civil War to its grass roots, in a program that illustrates the letters home by including audio readings of some of these moving stories provided by Sangamon County Historical Society members



Gift of SCHS Membership Holiday Order Form



Please add the following name (names) to the SCHS membership roll as my holiday gift. (Please let us know if you wish us to send a note to the recipient on your behalf). Membership will cover the 2022-2023 fiscal year (running June 1 through May 31) but will make them eligible to receive Historico as soon as your payment is processed. All memberships cover all adults and children 16 and over living at the same address, but we need you to furnish their information. You can provide additional names and information on a separate sheet and mail it with this form and your check to SCHS, Box 9744, Springfield, IL 62791-9744. These Holiday gift orders must be received by December 31, 2021. PLEASE PRINT:

GIFT OF MEMBERSHIP RECIPIENT'S NAME(S) _____

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Please send a note to the recipient(s) on my behalf acknowledging my gift(s) .

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Sangamon County Historical Society 2021-2022 MEMBERSHIP/MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL Form

Mail this form with your check to the Sangamon County Historical Society, Box 9744, Springfield, IL 62791-9744. Our membership year runs from June 1 to May 31. All memberships cover adults and children 16 and over at living at the same address. Be sure to list their names.

Your Full Name _____ Spouse/Significant Other First Name _____

Spouse's maiden name where applicable _____ Your e-mail _____

Your address _____ City, State , Zip _____ Phone _____

Full Names of other family members included in your membership:

Choose Your Level of Membership: Regular (\$30) Pioneer (\$100) Settler (\$250) Trailblazer (\$500)
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This is a GIFT (Name of recipient, mailing and e-mail address):

I am adding a donation to the Society in addition to my membership in the amount of \$ _____

NOVEMBER 2021 NOVEMBER 2021 NOVEMBER 2021 NOVEMBER 2021