The Fitchburg Historical Society was saddened to learn recently that Joy Contois, its education coordinator from 1995 to 2004, had passed away on Tuesday, April 5, 2016. Educated in Biblical Archaeology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, her enthusiasm for the field never waned. One of her favorite programs at the Historical Society was the Thurston Dig, where Fitchburg school students participated in archaeology by helping find artifacts at the ruins of one of Fitchburg’s oldest house sites.

One of Joy’s “Ed” Ventures columns for the Historical Society newsletter began with typical enthusiasm. “We have had one of the most fantastic ‘dig’ seasons I have ever experienced! About 600 school children came to the Thurston farmstead’s classroom in the woods during September and October,” Joy wrote in December 2003.

During the school year, these programs lasted one day, but Joy’s summer programs for the children led to an entire week for excavating and recording artifacts during school vacation. The children found remnants of Fitchburg’s early agricultural history, like hand-cut nails, old door hinges, parts of an old lock and an early eyeglass lens. Later, they would return to the classroom to reflect on today’s culture, setting up “shoe-box” digs that showed the artifacts that the 21st century would leave to the future. The archaeology program that Joy, the Fitchburg schools and the Historical Society created was shared with curriculum designers across the country via the Fitchburg schools’ Director of Arts, Jennifer Jones.

In October 2004, the Thurston Dig was featured as one of the sites for Archaeology Month in Massachusetts, sponsored by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. The Historical Society offered a public dig as part of the month’s celebrations.
At another time, she helped lead an after school program on Family Genealogy. By offering three weeks of afterschool classes for middle-schoolers, the Historical Society provided students with a rare opportunity to study the topic in depth, from the use of original sources to creating family trees and family charts for themselves.

Joy’s enthusiasm helped students to connect historical stories with their own lives and the city around them.

Even adults were enchanted. Local photographer Charles Sternainolo loves to tell the story of his daylong one-on-one historic tour of Fitchburg with Joy. It was so fascinating, that they couldn’t imagine stopping: they forgot to eat lunch, he recollects.

She also shared her love of television; she created a number of series for Fitchburg Access TV on Fitchburg’s history. (The Historical Society has a collection of DVD recordings of those shows in its collection.)

In 2006, she also served as local history expert for a segment on Fitchburg in the Civil War for the “Chronicle” television show. As she did for so many others, she took the journalists up to Laurel Hill Cemetery, through the stacks of the Fitchburg Historical Society library, and into the galleries of the Art Museum, in order to spread her enthusiasm about local history.

In recent years, despite being slowed by illness, Joy Contois continued to teach Fitchburg’s history to enthusiastic and crowded classrooms, through the ALFA program, at the Senior Center, and at the Fitchburg Historical Society. Fitchburg is richer for her dedication to the city and its people.

Healing Hands Exhibit: What the Doctor Ordered

The Wallace Exhibition Hall at the Historical Society has been busy during the months of April and May as people have come to see Healing Hands: The History of Medicine in Fitchburg. This exhibit took visitors back to Revolutionary and Civil War times, when deadly epidemics were a constant in town and the knowledge of medical treatment was still quite primitive.

The displays took people along timelines that focused on the needs of the sick and how hospitals and the nursing school in Fitchburg were able to evolve in a progressive way to meet their changing needs. Patrons, as they read the doctor profiles in the exhibit, were amazed by their extraordinary acts of dedication, along with their professional and medical accomplishments. The viewers became familiar with the nurses, doctors, staff and civic leaders whose contributions to medicine brought Burbank Hospital, the Lucy Helen Hospital and the Burbank Hospital School of Nursing into great prominence.

Also on view were many medical artifacts from our collection that were shown for the first time in over fifty years. In addition, many outstanding items were loaned to the exhibition by members of the community. Particularly striking were the portraits of Gardner and Sarah Burbank (founders of Burbank Hospital) by Frank W. Benson that were loaned by UMASS HealthAlliance Burbank Campus.

The Fitchburg Historical Society was honored to bring the history of medicine to the public. We would like to thank researcher and curator Kathleen Flynn for her inspired work, as well as everyone who offered their ideas, items, time and assistance to make this George R. Wallace Foundation exhibit such a success.
When one thinks of the notable industries in Fitchburg that helped shape the city’s character, it’s not surprising that our thoughts turn immediately to our great paper mills, machine shops, and the wool and cotton mills that occupied much of our landscape. However, the industries of Fitchburg were much more diverse than that. Working soundly, steadily, yet in some ways covertly, was the expansive and impressive complex of the Iver Johnson Arms and Cycle Works. Employing nearly 800 skilled craftsman and machinists, this factory turned out thousands upon thousands of firearms and bicycles each year, never realizing that its products would be sought by collectors worldwide.

Relocating to Fitchburg from Worcester in 1891, Iver Johnson, a Swedish immigrant and gunsmith, proceeded to build one of the most powerful and dominating industries of its type in the entire country. On its River Street site, and with his additions, Iver Johnson constructed one of the largest industrial institutions ever seen by the city. With a floor space of some two hundred thousand square feet, equipped with the most modern appliances and machinery, staffed with skilled mechanics and metallurgists, and containing laboratories for chemical and mechanical testing, this manufacturing facility was the largest of its type in the world!

It was claimed at one time, and never disputed, that the output of small firearms and shotguns made in Fitchburg, was greater in volume than that of all other firearm companies in the country combined. At another point in time, one of its divisions, The Iver Johnson Sporting Goods Company, laid claim to being the largest supplier of sporting goods in the world. Surprising as it is today, the enormity of all this activity went forward on a daily basis with very little notice from the community or fanfare from the company.

Masters of advertising and promotion, the Iver Johnson Company was quick to capitalize on its powers. Using relentless advertising and promotional campaigns, they overwhelmed much of the competition, creating new influence and prosperity for the steadily growing company. One such success was the invention of the “Safety Automatic Revolver,” which eliminated the risk of an accidental discharge. The company patented this feature along with the slogan “Hammer the Hammer” for their firearms. This slogan proved to be an effective marketing tool for the company; for decades, the gun-buying public would identify safe firearms with the Iver Johnson Company.

At the turn of the century, there were thousands of bicycle manufacturers throughout the country; most used the very familiar, and very similar, “diamond” frame. That all changed instantly in 1901, when the Iver Johnson Company introduced and patented a new and original design, the “Truss Bridge Frame”. The truss frame was basically a standard diamond frame with the addition of an arched bar mounted directly below the top tube: it gave the bicycle a startling new look and instant appeal. The company flooded the market worldwide with its catchy new slogan, “Trust the Truss,” touting the frame’s unique benefits of strength, rigidity, and total power transfer. While holding the exclusive patent for this new feature, the company saturated the market with advertising, and soon the Iver Johnson bicycles with the truss bridge frame became the envy of manufacturers, and the desire of cyclists.

Another promotional innovation by the Iver Johnson company was its relationship with Major Taylor, a black athlete from Worcester, and one of the most important bicycle racers active at the turn of the century. In the late 1800’s, when cycling was generally a white man’s sport, racers were not pleased with the prospect of a black athlete not only competing with them, but winning many of the events! To combat this, racers... (continued on pg. 4)
This year marks the 55th edition of the Longsjo Classic, one of the most elite cycling races held in the United States each summer. It is named after a real Fitchburg legend who accomplished more in his short life than most people do over many years. Born in Fitchburg in 1931, Art spent his childhood speed skating on the frozen ponds in town. Eager to have something to fill his summer days the way skating did in the winters, Art took up cycling when he was twenty-one and won the first race he competed in: the 1953 Massachusetts State Championship. The next year, he won the 170 mile race from Quebec to Montreal and was named Canadian Cyclist of the Year.

Cycling and speed skating were his passions. From 1954 to 1955, Longsjo won 9 out of 11 national speed skating events to qualify for the 1956 Winter Olympics in Cortina, Italy. That summer he competed in Melbourne, Australia for the American Olympic Cycling Team, making him the first American athlete to participate in both the Summer and Winter Olympics in the same year.

Arthur spent 1957 recovering from a broken leg, but he came roaring back in 1958 .... by winning nearly all the races he competed in. He was 27 years old, and at the peak of his abilities, when tragedy struck in September. On his way home from Canada after winning the 170 mile Quebec to Montreal race once again, Arthur was killed in a car accident in Vermont.

His wife and friends would organize a bike race to honor him in 1960, and many of his Olympic-bound fellow cyclists participated. It was called the Arthur Longsjo Memorial Race, the first of many that evolved into the Longsjo Classic. Arthur was inducted in the National Speed Skating Hall of Fame in 1970, and in the United States Bicycling Hall of Fame in 1988. This year’s three-day Longsjo Classic will be held June 24th in Leominster, June 25th in Worcester and June 26th in Fitchburg. The Fitchburg Historical Society’s Iver Johnson Bicycle exhibit and a tribute to Arthur M. Longsjo, Jr. will be open to the public June 20th through August 17.

Written by: Kathleen Flynn

Pioneering Bicycle Designs from Fitchburg (continued from pg.3)

and promoters conspired to get Major Taylor banned from racing in America. In 1898, using trumped up charges, the National Cycling Association fined Taylor $500, an insurmountable amount for the day. Taylor refused to pay on principle and was prepared to retire to prove the point. Sympathetic to Taylor’s plight, the Iver Johnson Arms and Cycle Company of Fitchburg stepped in: they first paid the fine, and then agreed to sponsor him. Taylor resumed competition in 1898, on an Iver Johnson racer. He broke multiple world records, won the National Championship, and won the 1899 World Championship. In tandem with his success, the Iver Johnson racing cycle became known as the “speediest of wheels,” the winners bicycle, and sales skyrocketed.

Today, the Iver Johnson cycles are considered to be “classics” among vintage bicycle collectors throughout the world, and are also valued for their attractive design. Even when new, they were considered very graceful, extremely well built, and engineered for performance. Scores of different models were offered to the public; styles ranged from children’s velocipedes to the extreme top of the line “Chater Lea” Special Racers. In total, slightly more than 600,000 bicycles left their factory for anxiously waiting customers throughout the world, a relatively conservative number that only adds to their rarity, mystique, and appeal.

This summer, the Fitchburg Historical Society will present the largest collection of Iver Johnson bicycles and memorabilia ever assembled in one location. “Pioneering Bicycle Designs” on display in the Wallace Exhibition Hall from June 20th – August 19th.

Some of these bicycles will be shown in “as found” condition, as they looked when they were dragged out of barns, cellars, and garages where they were hiding for decades and waiting to be discovered. Others are meticulously restored roadsters that appear as they did on the floor of a dealer’s showroom. Practically every model manufactured by the company will be on display, not only from the collection of the Fitchburg Historical Society, but from the private collections of Fitchburg-based collectors Scott Kinsman, Joel Kaddy, and Peter Capodagli.

Written by: Peter Capodagli
New Faces at the Historical Society

A new staff member has joined the Fitchburg Historical Society. Daniel Fish is the new Membership and Special Programs Assistant, replacing Katrina Brown. Dan first came to the Historical Society in 2013, when he was an intern during his senior year studying History at Fitchburg State University. During that time, he wrote articles for the member newsletter on the *Burned Books, Banned Books* Fahrenheit 451 program, and an article on Fitchburg artist Stella Forrest and her educational theories. He also created an online blog about his learning experience here.

After graduation, Dan completed a Master’s Degree in Public History at Southern New Hampshire University, while volunteering as an archivist at the Beverly Historical Society. Dan’s Master’s thesis centered on the United Shoe Machinery Corporation during World War II, which has led to some lively discussions with our Wednesday volunteer, Dr. Joe Addante (trained as a podiatrist.)

In addition to his training in history research, Dan has studied many aspects of grant writing, collections administration and archives management. He is also an excellent photographer, and you can see examples of his photos on our Facebook and Instagram pages, and in our newsletters. Dan grew up in Beverly, Massachusetts, but now he’s firmly at home in Fitchburg: he is also attending Fitchburg Cultural Alliance and Reimagine North of Main neighborhood meetings as an Historical Society representative.

Dan’s predecessor Katrina Brown left the Historical Society in early February to begin a full-time position as a teacher’s aide in Special Education at the Lowell Community Charter Public School. She has reported back to us that she loving the work, and feels that in her first months she found an old adage to be true: that she learned even more from the kids than they learned from her. She is planning to pursue a Master’s degree in Education at Fitchburg State: her goal is to become a middle school teacher in Special Education. In the meantime, she is faculty advisor for the yearbook, and has accompanied students on Boston’s Freedom Trail. We miss her smiling face and friendly and unflappable demeanor, but are happy that she is working in a field that means so much to her.

Exciting Grant News: Fitchburg’s Immigrant Experience Online

The Fitchburg Historical Society is excited to announce that it has received a new grant from Mass Humanities. Funding for the Fitchburg Immigrant Experience Online program will allow us to add interns who will help catalog new gifts to the collection in our computer database. Their work will culminate in a new exhibition about Fitchburg’s immigrant history that is scheduled for 2017.

Here’s the context for this exciting new project: The Fitchburg Historical Society has a very large collection of documents, books, photos and artifacts that has been amassed over 125 years, since it was founded in 1892. At first, all the records of the collection were handwritten; in 2000, the Historical Society began to record the collection by computer, with software created for museums. The software records make it possible for the public to search the collections by visiting the “collections” page on our website.

Since the Historical Society opened the new Phoenix Building in 2012, its increased visibility has inspired new gifts to the collection. Many of these artifacts date from the 20th century and come from Fitchburg’s numerous immigrant communities. The rush of new gifts challenges us to enter everything in the computer, so that they will be available for our researchers and exhibitions. So far, a wonderful team of volunteers, led by retired librarian and long-time volunteer Simone Blake and including John Johnson, Tina Nordstrand, Bruce Lucier, Shirley Wagner and Laurie Casey, have been entering these new gifts into the database.

This grant will allow us to train even more people to catalog the collections, and work with some of our educator volunteers to learn more about researching the objects and integrating them into a new exhibition. We will continue to report on this project in upcoming newsletters. If you know someone who might be interested in developing their computer skills and expanding their knowledge of Fitchburg history by participating in the program, please email or call our office at 978-345-1157 or welcome@fitchburghistoricalsociety.com.

Written by: Susan Navarre
Many Thanks!

Our business and corporate members help the Historical Society provide historical and educational programming about Fitchburg to local students, families and visitors. We all work together to highlight and preserve Fitchburg’s vibrant history: please stop in and thank them for all they do.

- Research Results
- Ron Bouchard’s Auto Sales
- Rebecca Rice, Dance
- Workers Credit Union
- Slattery’s Restaurant
- Foster Insurance Agency
- Rollstone Bank
- Rome Insurance Company
- Dillon Boiler Works
- PJ. Egan Plumbing Company
- WPKZ 105.3FM AND AM 1280
- IC Federal Credit Union
- Godin Construction
- Windmill Florists, Mechanic Street
- Minuteman International / Achla Design
- Simonds International Corporation
- Megan Provencial, Graphic Design

Come visit us!

Fitchburg Historical Society

Hours of Operation

Monday & Tuesday: 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.
Wednesday: 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.

781 Main Street
P.O. Box 953
Fitchburg, MA. 01420
978-345-1157

Email: welcome@fitchburghistoricalsociety.com
Website: fitchburghistoricalsociety.org

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The Fitchburg Historical Society is a 501(c)3, tax exempt organization, and all contributions are tax deductible.
In 1642, Massachusetts Bay Colony passed the first law in the New World requiring that children be taught to read and write. Thus began the drive to build schools and offer public education. Later, as various religious groups populated the colonies, schools offering religious education with the basic reading, writing and arithmetic were established. The pioneer of Catholic elementary education in Fitchburg was St. Bernard’s parish. The school has gone through several iterations and locations until the parish opened the current building on Summer Street in 1966 near the site of the old “graveyard” purchased by the first pastor, Rev. Matthew W. Gibson “on the other side of the river [St. Bernard’s Cemetery].”

Though the first official school was opened in 1886, education was offered to the children of the parish prior to that time. The first church was built using wood from the structures called shanties which had been built for the Irish who were encouraged by Alvah Crocker to move here to help build the railroad. Thus, the various St. Bernard’s churches were described as the “Shanty Cathedral.” The school is first mentioned when the second shanty cathedral was built on Middle Street. (The first was believed to be on Water Street and used only a few months.) The cornerstone of this Middle Street building was laid in 1848, the first Catholic church to add its spire to the city scape. It was supposed to be built of granite but, according to Father Gibson’s notes, “money ran out so we covered the basement and used it for a church and a school [staffed by lay people]; afterward I built a church upon it of wood.” That latter was completed in 1852.

When Rev. Cornelius M. Foley became Pastor in 1886, he purchased land for $3000 from Alvah Crocker, William Murnane and James O’Rourke to build a new church, the current edifice (sold in 2010) at the corner of Water and First Streets. The cornerstone was laid in August 1869.

Pastor Rev. Philip J. Garrigan came in 1875. In the fall of 1886 he brought 13 Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary PBVM to St. Bernard’s. This was a new wooden structure built on the foundation of the old church which had been razed. This later became the boys’ school after the brick school for girls was built on the corner of Middle and Second Streets in 1891. Each served grades one through eight. A high school opened in 1927 on Harvard Street but a three year commercial high school had already graduated its first class in 1923. (That program had been located in the basement of the girls’ school.)

As of April 2016, there are 165 students registered in Pre-K through eighth grades at the Elementary school located on Summer Street. There are 22 faculty and staff members overseen by principal Deborah W. Wright. Some of the staff are graduates of the school, and some -- like Kindergarten teacher, Sister Irene Goguen -- have devoted many years to the education of St. Bernard’s students. They wear uniforms of navy, plaid, or grey with white blouses or light blue shirts; according to the school website, the school requires uniforms “to assure each student a structured and noncompetitive environment.”

Principal Wright’s message on the informative website [http://www.stbernardselementary.org] affirms: “St. Bernard’s Elementary is a welcoming and dynamic community that provides exceptional education in a faith-filled environment. We are committed to the development of the whole child – intellect and spirituality, social and physical. We know this multiple focus prepares students who are ready to meet the academic challenges of high school and beyond. Most importantly, the experience of faith and service leads our students to a greater love for God and an appreciation for the value of others.”

Written by: Simone Blake
Save The Date

• Now, through May 25 – Healing Hands: Medicine in Fitchburg:
  A new exhibition on doctors, nurses, hospitals and medicine in Fitchburg

• Saturday, May 14, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.: Freedom’s Way Hidden Treasures Program
  “Fitchburg in the Civil War: A Living History”: presented in collaboration with Fitchburg Public Library
  and 15th Massachusetts Re-enactors, at Monument Park (Note: new date)

• Saturday, May 14, starting 2 p.m.: Fitchburg Porchfest,
  including music on the lawn at 50 Grove Street (weather permitting) between 5 and 6 p.m.

• Saturday, May 21, 10 a.m.: Freedom’s Way Hidden Treasures Program,
  “Rock Walk.”: Start at Boulder Art Gallery, 960 Main Street, Fitchburg

• June 20 – August 17, 2016: Iver Johnson: Pioneering Bicycle Design exhibition

• Sunday, June 26, 8 a.m. – 4 p.m.: Longsjo Race and FITchburg Rides

• Wednesday, June 29, 9:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.: Educators’ Workshop: Eleanor Norcross: Daughter of
  Fitchburg and Her Times, presented by Laura Howick and Susan L. Navarre. Register at Fitchburg Art
  Museum. ($20 members, $25 nonmembers)

• Saturday, July 2: 6:00 – 9:00 p.m.: Extra exhibition hours during Civic Days Block Party

• Tuesday, September 6 – Wednesday, November 9 (dates tentative):
  “A Time Capsule Reappears”: an exhibition of items removed from a 1950’s time capsule at HealthAlliance
  Hospital

• Wednesday, September 14, 6:00 p.m. Annual Meeting of the Fitchburg Historical Society

• Beginning September 2016 (dates TBD):
  “Fitchburg Faces: exhibition of portraits from the Fitchburg Historical Society collection”