This fall and winter, the Historical Society will be exhibiting *Fitchburg Faces*, a selection of its portraits of Fitchburg residents, representing the city’s earliest history through to the early 20th century. These extraordinary paintings show that Fitchburg was in the mainstream of New England culture and art, and that some Fitchburg residents sat for portraits to help assure that their stories were remembered.

The earliest portraits in New England were records of a person that were passed along to the future, according to art historian Robert Hughes, the exact likeness, and the expression of personality, were less important than keeping a documentary visual record of the person and their life. The clothing and surroundings shown in the portrait may have just been symbols of their belongings, not actually painted from life. The style and compositions came from English aristocratic portraiture that was being copied by the painters; in many cases, the artists may have never seen an English painting in person, but were copying print examples on paper that were imported to the American colonies.

The Puritans started out with rigorous limitations on fashionable and decorated clothing. But by the time that Fitchburg was being settled in the 1700's, the colonists were well off and allowed themselves luxuries like ribbons, lace and heavy, expensive cloth that appears in their portraits.

After the American Revolution, cities like Fitchburg knew that they were going to be the economic and social engine for the new country’s growth. Fitchburg’s citizens knew that they were making history, building a new city and creating new industries. Early on, the new companies were based around an agricultural economy, like raising sheep for wool yarn and attempts at raising silkworms for silk. But within a short time, Fitchburg was building factories that used the water power of the Nashua River to make cloth, tools, engines, lumber, paper and far more products. As they gained wealth, Fitchburg’s residents spent more on luxuries like artwork.

The city’s leaders connected themselves with Harvard University and Boston by building railroads and turnpikes, and became as sophisticated as any other city in New England.

*(continued on pg. 2)*
Their portraits reflect this cultural sophistication; and when the art world changed its focus from England to France during the 1800’s, Fitchburg’s artists followed suit. By the end of the century, Fitchburg daughter Eleanor Norcross had moved to Paris and was learning the newest Impressionist painting techniques there. However, she made sure to return home to share her new ideas at her salons in Fitchburg. For that reason, Fitchburg remained a sophisticated market for fine art throughout the 20th century, which helped shape the Historical Society’s collections and the wonderful quality of its art about Fitchburg and its families.

A selection of the Historical Society’s early Fitchburg portraits will be on view from September 14 through February, 2017 in the George R. Wallace, Jr. and Alice G. Wallace exhibition hall. Don’t miss this opportunity to see works that have not been exhibited in recent years.

New Collection about Fitchburg Veterans

The Historical Society takes a great deal of pride in that portion of our collection that tells the story of the role that Fitchburg citizens and businesses have played in our nations’ wars. Among other things, our collection includes written documents, photos, artifacts, uniforms, and other militaria. This spring, the Veteran’s Center donated items relating to Fitchburg citizens in war. Over time, these items have been displayed, some at City Hall, others at the Veteran’s offices. As part of our collection, they will continue to tell the story of Fitchburg at war.

This collection includes photographs of Fitchburg veterans who served in the military, posters from the Second World War and Vietnam War, as well as certificates and photos. There are also several military and civil defense uniforms and accessories. These items have strong visual appeal and promise to enhance future exhibits at the Historical Society.

 Written by: Robert Jones
Frank W. Fenno, Jr. was born on September 11, 1902 and raised in nearby Westminster, Massachusetts. He attended high school in Fitchburg because there wasn’t one in his town. Frank was a great student and an excellent baseball player on Coach Clarence Amiott’s varsity team.

After graduating from Fitchburg High School, he went on to the United States Naval Academy where he continued to excel in baseball. In his senior year at Annapolis, Frank was invited to return to Fitchburg as a “Local All-Star” to play in a benefit game against some of the players from the Cincinnati Reds. The Reds had come to Crocker Field to pay tribute and raise funds for a memorial to honor their friend and former manager “Pat” Moran of West Fitchburg. Thousands came to watch.

After graduating from Annapolis in 1925, Fenno began his distinguished military career.

In 1942, while serving as Commanding Officer of the submarine USS TROUT, Fenno was assigned an unusual and dangerous mission by the War Department. The TROUT had left Pearl Harbor with a heavy load of anti-aircraft ammunition and medicine urgently needed by General McArthur’s forces in the Philippines. On the trip to the islands, the TROUT was chased by enemy vessels and had to maneuver underwater through dangerous mine fields before safely arriving at Corregidor to unload their cargo.

While preparing the submarine to return to Pearl Harbor, Lt. Commander Fenno had requested two extra torpedoes and twenty-five tons of rocks and sand for ballast for his sub. Instead of the supplies he requested, the Filipino and American officials, who were fearful that the Gold Reserve of the Philippines would be confiscated by the Japanese, decided to entrust it all to the TROUT and have them bring their treasure to a safer place. The bounty was gathered and brought at night to an infrequently used port to rendezvous with the sub. The submerged TROUT came into the port earlier in the day, and waited at the bottom until dark. When it surfaced, twenty tons of gold bars and silver coins, securities, diplomatic and U. S. Mail – along with two extra torpedoes – were safely loaded. The USS TROUT, led by Lt. Commander Frank W. Fenno, Jr. successfully moved through Japanese-controlled waters undetected. The TROUT delivered their precious cargo to Pearl Harbor where it was transferred to another Navy vessel and safely brought to the United States. It was guarded here until after the war when it was returned to the Philippine government.

The story of the USS TROUT was considered one of the most extraordinary stories of World War II. For their heroism while getting the ammunition and medical supplies safely to Gen. McArthur’s forces and for successfully removing the Gold Reserves of the Philippines to safety, Lt. Commander Fenno and his crew were highly decorated. The Lt. Commander received the Distinguished Service Cross, the Navy Cross, the Silver Star, and the Legion of Merit.

He was later promoted to the rank of rear admiral. Prior to his retirement, he was also assigned as Base Commander at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. On August 16, 1973, Rear Admiral Frank W. Fenno, Jr. (Ret.) died, and he was buried at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors.

Very often it does not matter how many times an article submitted for this newsletter is proofread. Even after other eyes have checked, and re-checked, something can get by, and a story in the last newsletter is proof of mis-proofing. When I read the printed story about St. Bernard’s Catholic parish and school, and that the church was sold in 2010, I said “Oh no, I could not have written that!” Well, the only way to find out if it was me or the editor, was to go back to the original, and sure enough, I did write that. Nobody else could be blamed but me. So, for the record, St. Bernard’s church was not sold in 2010, but it was closed in 2010, and to the best of my knowledge has not been sold.

Addendum/Correction by Simone Blake
The Story of Henry (Hendrick) E. Becker

The Martin and Caroline Becker family were one of the free black families living in Fitchburg in the 19th century. Their son Henry, also referred to as Hendrick, was born in Fitchburg in 1862 and lived here until his death in 1919. Henry was the youngest of the Becker children and he resided at the same location as his mother while she was alive. For a number of years, this was 15 Grove Street until the city purchased the land to extend Elm Street to Grove Street in 1901. Then she purchased a home at 61 Central Street where Henry resided until his death.

Henry and his mother Caroline were well known in Fitchburg even while he was a child. In 1875, there is notice in the Sentinel that he was granted a license to sell fireworks in the streets (at the age of 13!) the first five days in July.

Around age 10, Henry stepped in a hole in the sidewalk on Main Street opposite the town/city hall. The leg never recovered - no antibiotics at the time - and when he was about twelve, the leg was amputated between the knee and thigh. The amputation was reported in the Sentinel with the note that “His countenance is well-known around the city and those who have hired him to do errands, etc. will hear of his mis-fortune with pain.” His mother sued the city and won a thousand dollars minus lawyer’s fees to her attorney Amasa Norcross.

Henry’s artificial leg prompted another Sentinel article when in 1892, he was trying to catch a train as it was leaving the station. He slipped and fell and his wooden leg landed on the track. The article says his shoe was slightly dented, there was a bolt missing from the ankle but otherwise the leg was undamaged. Henry hired a team so he could travel to Winchendon and take part in his evening engagement at a dramatic performance.

As an adult, Henry was well known in Fitchburg for his musical talents and his gift for teaching music to others. While research has yet to identify how he learned his musical skills, Henry played the piano, the organ, the bass and probably other musical instruments. He was a tenor and performed as a vocalist. Henry rented a studio at various locations on Main Street where he gave lessons.

He also maintained an office in his Main Street studio for the Becker Orchestra, the popular dance band that he directed. According to 1901 ads for Whalom Park, the Becker Orchestra played Wednesday evenings and twice on Saturday. They also hired out for private functions.

Fitchburg Sentinel articles from 1879 (when Henry would have been 17) through 1917 illustrate the versatility of Hendrick’s musical talents. He played in Fitchburg, Gardner, Ayer, East Rindge, and Winchendon. Family legend says he took his band to Canada, too. Many of the events at which he performed were very well attended - a Valentine’s Day dance in 1898 in Gardner had more than 125 people in attendance to hear him play piano selections and then dance to his orchestra’s music. On January 3, 1905 in Ayer, the town hall was described as filled to its limit to celebrate the 41st anniversary of emancipation; the Becker Orchestra provided the music. Events like these give some idea of African-American life in central Massachusetts 100 years ago.

Sometimes Henry directed musical performances; minstrel shows were particularly popular in the early 1900s. In April 1905, he performed piano selections and was the accompanist for several of the soloists who participated in the Reform Club Minstrel Show for the benefit of the Children’s Home. In May of the same year, there is a notice in the Sentinel for a minstrel show to be held in Ayer on June 2nd, saying “Rehearsals have been under the direction of Prof. Hendrick Becker of Fitchburg...the entertainment will be followed by a dance.”

Henry clearly played and taught a wide variety of musical styles, keeping current with the music of the day. In January, 1881, he was tenor and organist in a concert celebrating Jubilee music. He sang “Have Mercy upon Us” as a soloist and “Whispering Hope” in a duet with Madame L.J. Christian of Worcester, who had performed with the Mississippi Jubilee Singers. Henry may also have performed with them. In 1917, the Sentinel reports he performed in another Jubilee quartet in Fitchburg.

(continued on pg. 5)
The Story of Henry (Hendrick) E. Becker (continued from pg. 4)

The relationships between the free blacks of Fitchburg sometimes can be documented through the city directories and newspaper articles. In 1891, a note in Town Talk, entitled “Jottings By the Way”, reported: “The colored male citizens of Fitchburg met Thursday evening at the house of D.G. Oxford on Central Street and formed a club to be known as the Benjamin F. Snow Club...H.E. Becker was chosen President, James Hendon (sic: actually Herndon) Vice President and D.G. Oxford, Secretary. This is the first colored club organized in this city.”

In 1901, there is a story in the personal notes that Henry’s friend, Walter Hazzard, a black tailor and dyer on Main Street in Fitchburg, called Henry to ask him to bring the marriage license he had forgotten. Walter was marrying Hattie Treadwell, a grand-daughter of the first free black family in Fitchburg, the Treadwells. Alfred Treadwell, Hattie’s brother, had been a boarder in Henry’s home for a short period of time.

Hendrick died in 1919. He was buried in Laurel Hill Cemetery, although his obituary mistakenly says Forest Hill. His former home at 61 Central Street is still a residence in the city. We are continuing to dig through newspaper and historical archives at the Historical Society to see what else we can find!

Written by: Shirley Wagner, with thanks to Bill Bourbeau

Time Capsule Display Coming to Historical Society

From September 6 to November 9, the Fitchburg Historical Society will display the contents of a time capsule created in Fitchburg in 1953. This small exhibition will be on view in some of the Society’s display cases during this fall’s Fitchburg Faces exhibition.

The time capsule originated in the Bullock Building, on the Burbank Campus of UMass Memorial – HealthAlliance Hospital in Fitchburg, which was originally constructed in 1953 and named after Richard Bullock, Directing Trustee. It has been taken down due to structural concerns. During the demolition, Northeast Remediation, LLC discovered a time capsule in a capstone that had been placed in the building by Curtin & Riley Architects in 1953. An unveiling of the time capsule occurred this past May at an event held on the Burbank Campus. (Photos of the time capsule event can be seen on the UMass Memorial – HealthAlliance Hospital Facebook page.)

UMass Memorial – HealthAlliance Hospital plans to create a relaxation garden and to build a community space for wellness in the area now vacant. They are developing a new time capsule to place in the new community space and is seeking input on items that should be placed in it. To help plan the new time capsule, please contact Deborah LaPointe, 978-466-2214 or dlapointe@healthalliance.com.

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.

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Letter from the Director

With a beautiful headquarters like our new Phoenix Building, and an extraordinary collection like ours, we are always thinking up new ways to explore the topic of Fitchburg’s history. This has been our passion for 125 years, but there is always something new to be discovered, new connections we can draw. Throughout 2017, we will invite you to join us to celebrate the Fitchburg Historical Society’s 125th anniversary. We are proud to begin by offering you a series of new thought-provoking presentations that will inspire you to keep exploring Fitchburg’s many stories.

Beginning on October 6, we will present talks from a broad cross-section of historians who have been doing original new research at the Fitchburg Historical Society. In October, Darren Barry will discuss the legacy of the Civil War in Fitchburg. That legacy was so well known that Theodore Roosevelt wrote about it, and how it was shaped by Fitchburg’s famous abolitionists. In November, engineering historian Cliff Shexnayder will share some of the discoveries he made about Alvah Crocker and Fitchburg while writing his magisterial new book on the Hoosac Tunnel. Looking ahead to 2017, we will explore the legacies of Fitchburg’s rich and famous with Christine Tree, learn about the 20th century migration from Latin America to Fitchburg from Joana dos Santos, and reminisce about the Fitchburg-Leominster football rivalry with Leominster historian Mark Bodanza.

In this issue, you can read the inspiring story of Admiral Frank Fenno, written by volunteer, researcher and board member Kathleen Flynn. And, right now, I am preparing the next display in our George R. Wallace, Jr. and Alice G. Wallace exhibit hall, which is a selection of some of the beautiful portraits from our collection, and the stories of the Fitchburg residents we find there.

You come to visit a place like the Fitchburg Historical Society in order to learn something new from the people you meet there. The staff, the volunteers, the speakers and your fellow members all offer new ideas, observations and facts. However, you also come because we offer the opportunity to interact directly with the primary sources and historical artifacts.

I love to tell the story of a 7-year-old boy who discovered a book on display here that had belonged to a young soldier from Fitchburg who fought in the Revolutionary War. The young student had learned about Paul Revere and the American Revolution in school, but in our hall, he could see an actual item that was handled and read 240 years ago by a man who experienced the Revolution first hand.

It is essential to me that Fitchburg’s children (and ALL Fitchburg’s residents) have the opportunity to experience their local history in person. When they approach the original objects with fresh eyes and different life experiences, who knows what new discoveries they will make? As a child, I first became interested in history when I realized that artworks, material objects and documents came down through time like clues that help us solve the mystery of the past. Each historian is a Sherlock Holmes who applies observation, logic and analysis to discover the past’s secrets.

You may have read about the 15-year-old from Quebec who discovered a lost Mayan city in 2014. He brought fresh eyes, curiosity and enthusiasm to the subject and solved a puzzle that had stumped professional archeologists. To me, our display of Fitchburg portraits that have not been displayed in many years, along with the stories of their subjects, will offer the opportunity for visitors to bring their own ideas and observations to learn about Fitchburg in a new way: through its people and the artists who interpreted them so many years ago. We hope you will come, and return a few times, to see what new ideas you can discover here.

Susan Navarre
Frans Syrjala, Finnish-American Editor of Raivaaja

Frans Syrjala was born in Turku, Finland where he became a political activist at a young age. Frans was arrested for his outspoken socialist views but was able to escape from Finland to Canada in 1903. Franz was a tailor by trade and found work in Canada while he developed his political views. In 1907, Syrjala moved to Fitchburg where he joined the largest growing community of Finns living in New England. Many people had fled Finland when their country became a Grand Duchy of Russia and, Tsar Nicholas II took over the throne. During this time, the Finnish people of Fitchburg were hungry for news about what was happening in their native county, as well as news about fellow Finns living in America. So great was their desire to read of these events in their native language, that the Finnish newspaper Raivaaja was established and the first issue was printed January 31, 1905.

When Syrjala came to Fitchburg in 1907, his political activism led to his speaking out and writing of his views and he became very influential. In 1911, he was made editor of the Raivaaja Publishing Co.

During the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Finnish people both here and in Finland became split in their support of Russian rule. Franz Syrjala took a strong stand against communism and he convinced the Finnish people of Fitchburg not to be fooled by it. The newspaper used its powerful influence to sway the Finns both here and abroad. In the end, the Finnish people rejected communism over democracy.

Frans’s son Savele later became manager and the editor-in-chief of the Raivaaja, between 1960 and 1980. Another son, Sointu, moved to New York City and became a well-known set designer on Broadway and in television.

Written by: Kathleen Flynn

Annual Meeting Notice

The Annual Meeting is a wonderful opportunity for us to reconnect with our members. As a member, you get a nice overview from the Executive Director about the year just passed, and you can chat with the Board of Directors about upcoming projects at the Fitchburg Historical Society. It’s a wonderful chance to learn something new and reconnect with old friends. We hope you will join us at the Annual Meeting on Wednesday, September 14 at 6 p.m.

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

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The Fitchburg Historical Society is a 501(c)3, tax exempt organization, and all contributions are tax deductible.
Save The Date

• **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.

  • **Friday, September 16, 9:00 a.m. – 2 p.m.**: United Way Day of Caring: Volunteer projects at the Fitchburg Historical Society

  • **September 14 – February 2017:** “Fitchburg Faces: exhibition of portraits from the Fitchburg Historical Society collection”

• **Thursday, October 6, 5:15 p.m.** “Fitchburg’s Unionist and Emancipationist Civil War Collective Memory: 1861 – 1930”, talk by Darren Barry.

• **Thursday, November 3, 2016, 5:15 p.m.** “Alvah Crocker: Spirit Behind the Hoosac Tunnel,” talk by Clifford Schexnayder, author of **Builders of the Hoosac Tunnel**

• **Saturday, December 3, 11 a.m. – 4 p.m.**: Fitchburg Holiday House Tour, tickets: $20