Man has always had a love-hate relationship with fire. We love it for the warmth and light it provides, but we hate it when it yields its deadly and destructive force.

In 1764 when Fitchburg was incorporated as a town, its population of 250 folks was made up of 44 families. Each family was expected to keep a leather water bucket, a canvas bag and a ladder by their front door to use when word of a fire spread through the village. The buckets were filled with water and ladders were climbed to douse the flames. Women would run in with the canvas bags and remove precious or useful items while the men would try to take apart the beds and carry them out. The rest of the folks would form “a bucket brigade” to fill and pass their buckets from a water source to the fire. So, the whole town became “Fitchburg’s first fire department.” And, this was just the beginning...

The exhibit will feature the stories of the fire chiefs who served our city with professionalism, dedication and pride. It honors all of our firefighters who place their lives on the line at each call, and it honors those who gave their lives in the line of duty. (continued on pg. 2)
Combating Fitchburg’s Fires (continued from pg. 1)

Its history will be told by featuring the fire houses and equipment that were in operation throughout its timeline from 1820 to the present. The exhibit will illustrate and tell about some of the tragic and memorable fires that have rocked Fitchburg through the years.

As you peruse the exhibit, you will see how the Fitchburg Fire Department evolved over the years and how it has implemented the tremendous advancements made in fire science, fire safety, training, technology and equipment. All of their progress and training has led to fewer large fires, and less loss of life and property that were so prevalent in our city years ago. Fitchburg can sleep well at night knowing that it’s Fire Department is on duty.

The exhibit opens Monday March 20, 2017. It will be open every Monday 10:00-4:00, Tuesday 10:00-5:00 and Wednesday 10:00-6:00 in the Exhibition Hall at 781 Main Street across from the Sentinel building. Admission is free. Contact the Fitchburg Historical Society at 978-345-1157 or on-line at director@fitchburghistoricalsociety.com for more information.

Written by: Kathleen Flynn

The Founding Of The Fitchburg Historical Society

February 3, 1892 was the 128th anniversary of the founding of the town of Fitchburg. It was also the day that eight Fitchburg men – Henry A. Willis, Ebenezer Bailey, Atherton P. Mason, Frederick F. Woodward, John H. Daniels, John W. Kimball, Frederick A. Currier and J.F.D. Garfield - met to establish the Fitchburg Historical Society. While the records don’t indicate that the men chose the founding date for its historical significance, it seems likely. The group was clearly ready to work. They reviewed a draft constitution, made some changes and adopted the constitution at this first meeting chaired by Henry A. Willis. J.F.D. Garfield not only opened his home at 81 Grove Street for the meeting, he was also the secretary.

Thirteen days later, the second meeting of the Historical Society was held and E. Foster Bailey, Henry A. Goodrich, Dr. George Jewett, Rodney Wallace, George T. Daniels, Dr. Charles Rice, and Joseph P. Edgerly were also elected as members. Then, officers for the year were chosen – Henry A. Willis became President, Henry A. Goodrich was First Vice President, Frederick F. Woodward was Second Vice President, Atherton P. Mason was the Treasurer and Librarian, and James F.D. Garfield was the Secretary.

At each of the meetings of the Society in the first two and a half years, additional members who resided in Fitchburg were chosen as new members. Corresponding membership was created for individuals who had a keen interest in Fitchburg history but lived in other cities or states.

The first corresponding members elected in March 1892 were the Honorable Ivers Phillips of Boulder, Colorado; Charles Robinson (former Governor of Kansas); Ray Greene Huling of New Bedford; George E. Towne of Brookline; and Thomas C. Caldwell and Dr. James S. Greene of Boston.

The first women members of the Historical Society were elected at the March 20, 1893 meeting. By May, 1894, the women members included: Mrs. Ardelia C. Smith; Mrs. Louise H. Wellman; Miss Adelaide Z. McIntire; Mrs. Margaret P. Snow; Miss Mary Jacquith; Mrs. Harriet F. H. Thompson; Miss Georgiana A. Boutwell of Groton (a corresponding member); Mrs. Louise C. Upton; Mrs. Martha E. Crocker; Mrs. Sarah C. Brown and Mrs. Mary L. Fosdick.

The concerns of the Fitchburg Historical Society were similar to those of today. The Constitution, renamed the Bylaws in 1894, identifies the Objects – what we call the objectives or mission – in the following way: “The objects of this society shall be to encourage among its members a love of antiquarian research, and to collect and preserve the materials for local history and genealogy – particularly as pertain to Fitchburg and the towns of northern Worcester county; also the collection of books, coins and relics.” (continued on pg. 3)
The Founding Of The Fitchburg Historical Society (continued from pg. 2)

One of the ways the founding members encouraged research on the history of Fitchburg was to have papers read during its monthly meetings. The first paper, was entitled “The Early History of the Fitchburg Fire Department” and was read by J.F.D. Garfield on March 21, 1892, which was the third monthly meeting of the Society. In April, two papers were presented, one on Fitchburg’s Response to the Lexington Alarm and the second on the Early Days of the Railroads in Fitchburg. The papers presented between 1892 and 1912 were printed and bound, and remain important references for modern researchers of Fitchburg history.

The Society Proceedings also document that the founders wanted to preserve important artifacts of Fitchburg history. On December 19, 1892, Garfield presented 36 bound volumes of the Fitchburg Daily Sentinel from its beginning in 1873 to July 1, 1892. Our members and researchers consider our bound collection to be one of the Society’s most important assets. On June 19, 1893, the proceedings mentioned the receipt of a portion of the old communion service of the First Parish Church.

To memorialize the early history of Fitchburg, the Society proposed and supervised the erection of three monuments with monetary support from the City Council. The Pearl Street monument was erected near the spot where David Page, the first settler of Fitchburg, built his garrison house in 1730. In 1761, Samuel Hunt opened the first public house (tavern), which also was the site of the first town meeting, public religious services and the first public school. The second monument was placed on Laurel Street near the site of the Ephraim Kimball store. The store was the gathering place for the Fitchburg minutemen who marched to Concord. The first two monuments were in place by December 1893. A third was erected in Ashby near the spot were John Fitch had his garrison home. The dedication ceremony for this monument was held on the fourth of July in 1894.

The founders of the Fitchburg Historical Society were active historical preservationists. They accomplished a great deal in their first two years and left the structure for an organization that 125 years later proudly, if humbly, continues their efforts.

Written by: Shirley Wagner
Firefighters Host Celebration of Irish Culture

As the Historical Society has been preparing its exhibition on local firefighting, we have been reaching out to local firefighters…and one group has an event coming up that will benefit many charities.

The Worcester county Firefighters’ Emerald Society and Fitchburg Firefighters’ Relief Association are organizing the 8th annual Irish Night at the Fitchburg Armory (Senior Center, 14 Wallace Avenue) on the evening of Saturday, March 4, from 5 to 10 p.m. The $10 ticket price will benefit the Fitchburg Firefighters’ Relief Association, the Worcester County Firefighters’ Emerald Society, and a very special local charity that will be announced at the event.

Guests will enjoy performances by the Green Rovers, Westford Firefighters Pipes and Drums and Anne O’Connell's Irish Step Dancers, along with traditional Irish food and drink, exhibits, local vendors, raffles and prizes. To make the event particularly family friendly, admission is free for children 12 and under. For more information, email Emerald Society at wcffes@gmail.com.

New Grants Will Help the Fitchburg Historical Society Improve the Phoenix Building and Care for Its Collection

The Fitchburg Historical Society has been honored to receive new grant support in recent months that will help it update its building and care for the collection.

The Massachusetts Cultural Council’s Cultural Facilities Fund awarded a $24,250 planning grant to the Historical Society for the continued development of its headquarters in the historic Phoenix Building, at 781 Main Street. The funding will be used to create concept plans for the future development of the building for collections storage, program facilities and exhibition spaces.

The MCC funding requires the Historical Society to raise matching funds, and the Historical Society just received the news in January that the Douglas and Isabelle Crocker Foundation and Rollstone Foundation will donate $24,000 in matching funding. In addition to this local support, Historic New England has given a gift of $1,000 to support the project.

Recently, the George A. Ramlose Foundation has given a gift of $2,000 to provide secure display cases for the Historical Society Wallace Exhibition Hall.

“Since we opened on Main Street three and a half years ago, we have been able to offer more programs and marquee exhibitions that are attracting large new audiences to the Historical Society,” says Historical Society Past President William McSheehy. “We are proud to serve as one of Main Street’s most important institutions, enlivening the Upper Common area and attracting tourists and other visitors to Fitchburg.”

This support joins the generous multi-year gift from the George R. Wallace, Jr. Foundation that makes it possible for the Fitchburg Historical Society to offer public exhibitions, educational programs for children, and open doors three days per week.

Margaret Truman Sang in Fitchburg!

In April 2016, the Collections Committee accepted a program from a Fitchburg concert by Margaret Truman, daughter of President Harry S. Truman and First Lady Bess Truman. The performance took place on Friday evening, November 3, 1950 and was sponsored by the Burbank Hospital Nurses’ Alumnae Association. It was held in the Fitchburg High School Auditorium at 8:30 p.m. Tickets were $2.50; student tickets were $1.20.

A lovely photograph of Margaret in an evening gown graced the front page of the November 4th Sentinel article on her performance. The reporter was, at best, lukewarm about her. He acknowledged that “she was more attractive in person than her pictures would indicate.” Her brocaded gold lame gown was reported to have been admired by the women in the audience. However, the audience of 750 was said to have given only polite applause and her voice was described as inadequate. This critique reflected what some others were beginning to say about her singing ability although the harshest critique would appear in the Washington Post in December 1950. Paul Hume reported that she could not sing very well and was often flat. Harry Truman sent him a fatherly, but un-presidential, note saying, “Someday I hope to meet you. When that happens, you’ll need a new nose, a lot of beefsteak for black eyes, and perhaps a supporter below.”

Some of the audience must have surprised that Margaret did not cancel her concert in Fitchburg. On November 1, only two days earlier, there... (continued on pg. 5)
Margaret Truman Sang in Fitchburg! (continued from pg. 4)

had been an assassination attempt on President Truman. Margaret took the stage that evening in Portland, Maine and she did not cancel any of her tour engagements. Instead, the security traveling with her as the President’s daughter was beefed up to protect against possible attacks. In Fitchburg, forces were augmented by Chief Carlisle F. Taylor and eleven members of the Fitchburg police force. The security personnel lined the auditorium throughout the concert.

One man who traveled by taxi from Saugus to see Margaret sing was questioned by the security force and allowed to return home without attending the concert. He said he was a fan. The Saugus taxi driver engaged to drive him round trip and to wait while he attended the concert found his behavior suspicious and reported the man to the security forces. He was questioned and let go. The name of the man and his ethnicity were not released to the news.

Margaret’s career as a concert singer was short-lived; she endured additional criticism for her voice and retired soon after her Fitchburg concert in 1950. By 1956, she married New York Times reporter Clifton Daniel and published the memoir Souvenir, Margaret Truman’s Own Story. Though she wrote biographies of both her parents, it was her series of mystery novels set in Washington, D.C. that brought her renown. The first was Murder in the White House published in 1980. She published 23 mysteries before her death in 2008.

Share Your Story About Entertainment on Main Street!

Professor Laura Baker and the students of Fitchburg State’s Fall 2017 Oral History course are looking for individuals to interview about The Fitchburg and other downtown theaters. She writes, “Our goal is to record, collect, and share personal and historical memories of what it was like to go out for an afternoon or evening of fun at one of the city’s theaters. If you would like to be interviewed for this oral history, or know someone we should interview, please let us know”. Send contact information (name, phone number, email) to Dr. Baker at lebaker@fitchburgstate.edu or call her at 978-665-3379.
Letter from the Director

As this newsletter goes to print, we are happily anticipating Friday, February 3, the exact date of our 125th anniversary. Those of you who are history trivia geeks know that this date wasn’t chosen by chance: February third is the date that Fitchburg was formed as a town in 1764. Our founders knew that their new society would always have its identity tied to the culture of their booming city. Sure enough, the city continued to grow and change in the 1890’s and throughout the 20th century.

We are proud that our collection reflects the city’s heterogenous past and Fitchburg’s unique identity. Fitchburg has not only been a traditional New England town, it’s been an industrial powerhouse, a commercial crossroads, a transportation hub, a cultural mecca and a regional capital for education. Our collection reflects those broad interests. It inspires new directions for research and speculation by our members and by the researchers who use our resources and visit our exhibitions.

In order to care for our collections for the next 125 years, the Historical Society is thrilled to announce that it has received a Cultural Facilities Fund grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council to continue the development of the historic Phoenix Building. This building, designed by one of Fitchburg’s most important architects – H. M. Francis – now attracts visitors to Fitchburg’s Main Street for the Historical Society’s exhibitions, research collections and special events. The new MCC funding will be used to create concept plans for the further development of the Phoenix building for collections storage, program facilities and exhibition spaces.

Central to the MCC’s funding is their mandate to raise matching funds, and the Historical Society is honored and humbled by the support received from area foundations and professional colleagues. The Douglas and Isabelle Crocker Foundation has taken the lead with a major gift of $15,000 in support of the Phoenix Building improvements; the Rollstone Foundation has made an important $9,000 contribution, and Historic New England has honored the Historical Society with an additional $1,000 towards the project.

But this is just the start of this major project to protect our collections and develop our building. Just as the children of Fitchburg collected pennies for the Youth Library and 1930’s Fitchburg residents pooled their change to install the Rollstone Boulder on the Common, we now have an opportunity to shape a vibrant future for Fitchburg’s downtown, through a donation to the Historical Society’s 125th Anniversary fund for the Phoenix Building. You can find more information on our website and on the giving slip included in this newsletter.

It’s the value of thinking ahead. We are proud that our founders did it 125 years ago and that our Board of Directors continued to do it throughout the 20th century. Now we are investing our dollars to preserve and protect Fitchburg’s historical legacy…and share it with future generations.

Susan Navarre

Come visit us!
Fitchburg Historical Society
Hours of Operation
Monday & Tuesday: 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.
Wednesday: 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.
Also open by appointment: call 978-345-1157 to reserve a time.
Please remember the Fitchburg Historical Society in your will or estate plan

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

• **Ongoing, through February 15, 2017:** “Fitchburg Faces: exhibition of portraits from the Fitchburg Historical Society collection”

• Lecture: “Where Did It Go? Tracing the Wealth of Fitchburg’s Industrial Families” led by Fitchburg attorney, Christine Tree. Thursday, February 16, 2017 5:30 p.m.


• Lecture: “A New Look at the Famed Fitchburg-Leominster Football Rivalry” led by author and historian Mark Bodanza. Thursday, March 30, 5:30 p.m.

• Lecture: “From Uruguay to Fitchburg: Oral Histories and New Research Shed Light on Three Generations of Immigrants” by Joana Dos Santos. Date TBD.

• “Hidden Treasures” Open House at Fitchburg Fire Department and Fitchburg Historical Society, May 2017, date and time TBD.

• “Annual Iver Johnson Exhibition of Fitchburg-Made Bicycles” June – July 2017, Dates TBD.