Fitchburg has a rich and proud history in the purview of industry and manufacturing. A lesser known, but equally significant historical contribution has been its integral role in the performing arts. For example, there have been a considerable number of eminent playhouse venues since its founding. To our good fortune, several theatrical companies are still functioning and available to the public. Sadly, some are no longer with us. One such hidden, yet not forgotten, jewel was the High Tor Repertory Summer Theater.

What began as a seemingly impossible dream of Eugene S. Casassa, came to fruition in the Summer of 1962... hidden deep in the woods atop a hill on Ashby West Road. His wife, Francine Hannon Casassa, initially expressed her dismay, thinking that there was no way to transform a run-down, 200 year old barn full of hay, rusty tools, and debris into a viable theater. But transform they did.

Mr. Casassa sought the guidance and services of a number of contractors, who told him that the structure he envisioned would involve removing vital supporting beams from the center stage area and would result in the building collapsing. Not to be deterred, he eventually found an enterprising contractor who was willing to give it a go. After considerable trepidation, and ten days of around the clock, hard, diligent labor...that dilapidated old barn turned into a charming theater in a delightfully bucolic setting. The stage was built, a lighting booth erected, wiring inserted, lights mounted, and seating installed. That once seemingly impossible dream became a reality. Theater in the round! No small accomplishment even for a determined man with a dream, passion for his craft, and only $200 seed money he had in the bank.

Following five years of hard work (often operating in the red), during which High Tor established itself as a professional theater with high standards and tasteful productions, the non-profit High Tor Foundation, Inc. was created by local businessmen and included patrons of the theater arts from much of Worcester County and southern New Hampshire. Its primary objective was to sustain and increase High Tor’s facilities and operations and to afford students and practicing artists the opportunity to work and learn under the most auspicious conditions.

(continued on pg. 2)
A professor of drama and speech at Fitchburg State College, Mr. Casassa wanted High Tor to be a training theater where young men and women could learn the serious craft of acting. He was highly critical of typical summer acting schools, where students were charged high admission fees for the privilege of doing little more than picking up the stars’ costumes from the dressing room floor. Also, he shunned staging plays merely for their commercial value, instead opting for productions which offered high standards of taste and performance that would instill valuable skills in student performers.

High Tor offered an aggressive program of ten different plays every season, each production running for one week. The students and staff were involved in every aspect of each production, including acting, building and striking sets, setting up lighting, costuming, and greeting patrons. A typical day began at 9 AM and continued until 1 AM the next morning. A show would close on Saturday evening, and by the following Tuesday, another set and the company were ready and rehearsed for a new play. There was no “star system.” One week’s lead actor may sell tickets the following week. The roster included such timeless masterpieces as Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, Moliere’s *Tartuffe*, Lillian Hellman’s *The Little Foxes*, Agatha Christie’s *Ten Little Indians*, Anton Chekhov’s *The Marriage Proposal*, and Neil Simon’s *Barefoot in the Park*, to mention just a few. In addition to these classics, Mr. Cassasa collaborated with Nunzio Nano, a resident member of the company, who is also a local musician and composer, to present a well-received original musical comedy, *April Schemers, Sunday Dreamers* to close out the ninth season in 1971.

Mrs. Casassa, a gifted and indefatigable woman, played a critical role in all functions at the theater. In addition to administrative work, acting, costuming, and co-directing in various productions, she was also responsible for the care and feeding of the young company. Her untimely passing in 1980 was an insurmountable loss. For over two decades, High Tor delighted community audiences with many outstanding productions until its final closing in 1985.

Written by: Nunzio Nano

Music of the Gaslight Era

Amherst musician John Root is coming to the Fitchburg Historical Society, to present the popular music from our great-grandparents’ day in a program called Music of the Gaslight Era. The concert is scheduled for Thursday, October 26, 6:30 p.m., at the Fitchburg Historical Society. He looks back to the 1890’s through 1920….when the Victorian buildings were being built on Main Street, when young children of immigrants were running through Fitchburg’s hills, and the demand for workers led to new economic well-being for factory hands from all over the world. Modern conveniences brought new night-time radiance to the city with gaslights and new multicultural diversity created a uniquely American music that is still familiar today.

Root discusses the lyrics of these 100-year old songs that are still well-loved and well-known: the discussion will give valuable insights into the music and the meanings of songs. Root has a lovely tenor voice, and the audience will enjoy joining in with him for a few rousing singalongs, as well. This will be a wonderful way to explore the history of music with your family, or a group of friends. The concert is free, but a donation of $5.00 is suggested.
The Fitchburg Armory Building at 125 years

The Fitchburg Armory was built in 1891 by architects Robert Wait and Olin Cutter, and prolific Fitchburg contractor J. Dudley Littlehale. The original part of the building cost $41,400; it was conceived as an important facility to provide defense by training locally-based military. With Civil War memories still fresh, and the drumbeat of recurrent wars in Europe, the government invested America’s newly-created industrial wealth in the people’s protection.

The building looks like a castle, with a castle’s thick walls and turrets, narrow windows to shoot out of, and blocky stone decorative shapes: the building’s language assures the public that it holds weapons and soldiers, and keeps the community safe. The majestic Drill Shed in the back was built later by Fitchburg architect H.M. Francis and his firm, in 1914. When the new addition opened, a journalist raved, “There is one thing sure, and that is that the armory is the banner place in this city for an affair which requires a good floor space and good ventilation.”

The Armory building became the home of the Fitchburg Military Band, which was famous for its quality, and traveled across the U.S. to compete in contests. The Fitchburg Military Band predated the building: it had been founded in 1868 to accompany local military companies. Once the drill shed was built, it hosted regular performances by the Fitchburg Military Band on its bandstand.

The band hired Gustav Patz as its director. Renowned as an arranger, Patz led the Fitchburg Military Band for 27 years. His arrangements are still played to this day, and he left a large library of his original orchestrations that were used for decades by the band. The quality of his new musical arrangements were central to its success. At the turn of the 20th century, there was a wealth of classical music training available in Fitchburg, with many, many musicians actively performing. Patz was followed by another famously good bandleader and arranger, E.E. Bagley, who is still remembered for writing the National Emblem march. The two bandleaders had connections to nationally-known musicians, whom they persuaded to visit Fitchburg in order to accompany the Fitchburg Military Band.

The first World War started soon after the Armory building was completed, and America entered the war. The Armory building was a center for the volunteers that were helping with the war effort and for three companies of civilian soldiers known as the “Home Guard.” These men were a little too old to serve, but they drilled here in the armory during the war, to be ready on the home front if necessary. Soon, the military training moved to Ft. Devens, and Fitchburg residents today think of the Armory building more for its auto shows, dances and athletic competitions, and as the home of the Fitchburg Senior Center, than as a center for military activity.

This article is adapted from a speech given by Director Susan Navarre at a celebration of the 125th Anniversary on December 21, 2016 of the dedication of the Fitchburg Armory Building, sponsored by the Fitchburg Council on Aging. A talk on the military history of the building was presented the same night by Lt. Col. Jeffrey Love. A manuscript of his talk is available in the Fitchburg Historical Society archives.

Written by: Susan Navarre
**New activities and Curriculum for Traveling History Trunks**

You may recall several years ago the Historical Society developed Traveling Trunk for educators to use for hands-on activities about different time periods in American history, focusing on events in the history of Fitchburg. We have been working on revamping some of the trunks to make them more teacher- and student-friendly. The first trunk we revisited was the Colonial Settlement Trunk. Fifth graders at Memorial Middle School were the first to use the trunk with their teachers Karen Cuddahy, Marybeth Donlan, Cami Hoffmann, Carrie Boyden and Kris Callahan.

The trunk now contains eight activities designed for four students each that can be set up as stations in a classroom or library. Each station has an instruction card for students to read as they get to that station. The stations are clothing, stenciling, weaving, pick-up sticks, solve a rebus, explore an artifact, maps, and beads. The society has many clothing pieces for students to try on, such as bonnets, straw hats, spectacles, knickers, shirts and dresses. Students enjoy seeing themselves dressed as settlers and having their pictures taken. Students stencil their names on unbleached muslin using fabric markers instead of paint, keeping their station neat. Each student can keep their stenciling piece. Weaving is done on potholder looms, which help children understand how onerous it was for families to clothe themselves. Pick up sticks, an inexpensive colonial game that goes back to ancient times, is played in pairs. Rebus were popular during colonial times, with books of rebus all the rage. Several artifacts are in the trunk: an inkwell, a candle mold and a tin lantern are the most interesting. A worksheet from the National Archives helps students try to determine what each artifact was used for. The City and the River tells us which French and Indian War battles that Fitchburg men fought in, so the map activity has students using the key or legend to find out which battles were won and lost, how far away the battles were from Fitchburg, and which battles would have been reached by ship or by land. Students make strings of beads to keep, imagining that they would always have them handy to trade with Native Americans who often were raiding homes, as they did to the John Fitch family, who were marched to Canada to be ransomed. The activities in each station can be completed in twenty minutes, so three hours in total are needed for a class to complete all of the stations.

Teachers need to provide copies of worksheets, but other than that, a teacher can just set up the activities and proceed. It helps to have a parent volunteer to answer questions about the activities, if possible. These new activities allow students to interact with the local history curriculum using language skills, participatory and creative projects, data observation, and map reading. The projects reinforce many of the goals of the middle school curriculum.

The next trunk we will revamp is the Revolutionary War one. Students and teachers at Memorial Middle School are looking forward to being the first to test the new activities for the society.

*Written by: Cindy Jones*
New Public Programs Coming to the Historical Society

History of the Uruguayan Community
One of Fitchburg’s exciting new young leaders is Joana Dos Santos, who is the executive director of the United Neighbors of Fitchburg/Cleghorn Neighborhood Center. The Historical Society is pleased to present a talk on Thursday, June 1 by Dos Santos, looking at a very recent period in Fitchburg's history: the growth of Fitchburg’s Spanish-speaking citizens. A daughter of immigrants from Uruguay, she has been interviewing people who represent three separate waves of immigrants from that small South American country, who are now based in Fitchburg and Leominster. Her talk will focus on the Uruguayan experience as part of Fitchburg’s recent history.

The Twin Cities are now one of the most important populations centers for Uruguayans in the United States. In the 1990’s, they sought economic opportunity, but soon afterwards, a coup and political upheaval created a rush of middleclass families fleeing violence to seek refuge and safety in the United States. More recent emigres come to join the vibrant Uruguayan community already established in North Central Massachusetts.

Dos Santos has conducted oral histories with these new Fitchburg residents, to learn what happens when you take on a new identity. Originally part of a relatively homogeneous traditional culture, three generations of immigrants have to adjust to a new identity in the United States, as a more marginal group that needs to negotiate a new language and new culture.

Annual Iver Johnson Summer Celebration
A family-favorite tradition will return this summer, with an exhibition of Fitchburg-made Iver Johnson bicycles, in one of the largest displays ever. The “Iver Johnson: Designed to Last” Annual Exhibition displays bikes within one mile of the factory where they were created.

The Iver Johnson company made some of the most highly regarded racing and pleasure bikes in America, from the 1890’s till World War II. They were shipped from Fitchburg to Iver Johnson sporting goods stores all over the world. These historic bikes have been loaned by local collectors and restoration experts for the exhibition, which will run June 17 to July 12.

The exhibition will be open extra weekend hours to welcome visitors from Fitchburg Rides on June 17, the Longsjo Classic on Sunday, June 25, and the Civic Days Block Party on Monday, July 3. Photos, trophies and other artifacts of Fitchburg’s Olympian bicyclist, Arthur Longsjo, Jr. will also be on display.

Revisiting the Declaration of Independence
July 4 isn’t just a long weekend or kick off to summer vacation. When you remember that it’s Independence Day, and read Thomas Jefferson’s immortal text, the Declaration of Independence, it’s easy to become inspired again by the events of 1776.

This year, the Fitchburg Historical Society is joining with the Fitchburg Public Library to celebrate the Declaration of Independence with a theatre piece called Declaring Independence – Then and Now, at the First Parish Church of Fitchburg on Saturday, July 1 at 6:30 p.m. It’s very fitting: the First Parish Church was where the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence was held in Fitchburg (in an earlier building that predated the present 1837 church.)

In Declaring Independence, six costumed re-enactors render the stirring words of the Declaration line by line, and the narrator – Fitchburg State University professor Kelly Morgan - sets the historic context for the struggle and the dramatic declaration. There will be a chance afterwards for the audience to discuss the challenged that this living document poses for us today. The introduction and discussion afterwards will be led by historian Jayne Gordon and the performers will include Allan D. Van Wert, Brendan Hart, Dan Lacroix, Joe Brown, and John Barrett. This program by the Public Library and the Historical Society is part of a joint effort by Freedom’s Way National Heritage Area and the American Antiquarian Society to engage citizens in the ideas that are part of our American heritage and civic identity.

Written by: Susan Navarre
Earlier this spring, I chatted with Cynthia Jones (an educator who recently retired from serving as Secretary/Clerk on our board) about a project she was preparing for the Fitchburg Public Schools. Every year, the public schools sponsor a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) event for local families. Cynthia has been creating exhibits and activities for the fair that integrate local history with these STEM subjects.

Last year, she featured B.F. Brown, and his bagging machine. After learning the history of Brown’s invention, kids filled and sealed envelopes with rice for one minute, and then compared their production to the speed of the automated Brown Filling Machine.

This year, Jones wanted to find another local inventor, and was hoping for a woman to coincide with Women’s History month in March. We started some research in the database and the files, and discovered two different Fitchburg women: inventors Frances E. Boutelle and Lydia O’Leary. O’Leary studied chemistry at Fitchburg Normal School (now Fitchburg State University) and went on to invent a new line of cosmetics after her graduation in 1921. She moved to New York City, and her Covermark cosmetics still exist.

Fitchburg’s Frances Boutelle invented the half-teaspoon (allowing cooks to use exact measurements when they followed recipes.) She patented it in 1905 and it was manufactured locally. Students at the STEM fair saw her patent and advertisements for her product. Then, they participated in a math activity and contest: after estimating the amount of sugar in a glass jar, they converted their estimate into half-teaspoons. “After lots of math,” says Jones, “several students calculated correctly and one lucky winner won a math cookbook called *The Math Chef: Over 60 Math Activities and Recipes for Kids*.”

This is just one of the many ways in which the Historical Society works with local educators to share Fitchburg’s history with a new generation. With Cynthia’s ideas and research, we have been able to expand our knowledge of Fitchburg’s inventions and inventors. Our collections are filled with primary sources, and opportunities for exciting new research.

We also share opportunities for lifelong learning: it’s central to our services for our membership. We love to offer lectures, newsletter articles, author appearances, concerts, films, and lots more. In early April, I was thrilled to be invited to speak about Fitchburg history to the Lunenburg Women’s Club. Last December, I spoke at the 125th anniversary celebration of the Fitchburg Armory: an article based on that talk is included in this newsletter.

And on Monday, June 12, I will speak at the MassHumanities’ annual history conference, *Igniting a Passion for History*, discussing our MassHumanities-funded Fitchburg Immigrant Experience Online internships and our upcoming exhibition on Fitchburg’s immigrant neighborhoods. Each talk is a chance to share our excitement about Fitchburg’s surprising and unique history with a new audience. I hope that you will attend the conference, or some of our other educational programs, to learn what’s new in Fitchburg history.

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.
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.

Gala Patron:
If These Walls Could Talk:
• Research Results
• Resource Management, Inc.

Business Sponsors:
• Resource Management, Inc.
• Research Results
• Workers Credit Union
• IC Federal Credit Union
• Rollstone Bank and Trust

Business Patron
• Fitchburg State University
• Elite Construction and Design
• Can-Am Machinery
• Rome Insurance Company

Foundation Support
• George R. Wallace, Jr. Foundation
• George A. Ramlose Foundation
• Douglas and Isabelle Crocker Foundation
• Rollstone Foundation
• MassHumanities
• Massachusetts Cultural Council
• Historic New England
• Fitchburg Cultural Council

Presenting Sponsors:
If These Walls Could Talk:
• Marc Babineau, Babineau Insurance
• Allen Rome, HUB Insurance Agency
• Ruel Electric
• HUB International
• Applewild School
• Fitchburg State University
• Rollstone Bank & Trust

Business Members
• ALLMac Home Inspections
• The Highlands
• Slattery’s Restaurant
• Simonds International Corporation
• HealthAlliance Hospital
• Duvarney Jewelers
• Rick Ruberti Auto Sales
• Homestead Primitives
• J.P. Electric / Ruel Electric
• W.S. Beauty Supply
• Minuteman International / Achla Design
• Wachusett Mountain Associates

Gala Supporter:
If These Walls Could Talk
• Enterprise Bank
• Fitchburg Firefighters
• Select Engineering
• Bosk Funeral Home
• WS Beauty
• Can-Am Machinery

Gala Patron:
If These Walls Could Talk:
• Research Results
• Resource Management, Inc.

Business Sponsors:
• Resource Management, Inc.
• Research Results
• Workers Credit Union
• IC Federal Credit Union
• Rollstone Bank and Trust

Business Patron
• Fitchburg State University
• Elite Construction and Design
• Can-Am Machinery
• Rome Insurance Company

Foundation Support
• George R. Wallace, Jr. Foundation
• George A. Ramlose Foundation
• Douglas and Isabelle Crocker Foundation
• Rollstone Foundation
• MassHumanities
• Massachusetts Cultural Council
• Historic New England
• Fitchburg Cultural Council

Presenting Sponsors:
If These Walls Could Talk:
• Marc Babineau, Babineau Insurance
• Allen Rome, HUB Insurance Agency
• Ruel Electric
• HUB International
• Applewild School
• Fitchburg State University
• Rollstone Bank & Trust

Business Members
• ALLMac Home Inspections
• The Highlands
• Slattery’s Restaurant
• Simonds International Corporation
• HealthAlliance Hospital
• Duvarney Jewelers
• Rick Ruberti Auto Sales
• Homestead Primitives
• J.P. Electric / Ruel Electric
• W.S. Beauty Supply
• Minuteman International / Achla Design
• Wachusett Mountain Associates

Gala Supporter:
If These Walls Could Talk
• Enterprise Bank
• Fitchburg Firefighters
• Select Engineering
• Bosk Funeral Home
• WS Beauty
• Can-Am Machinery

FITCHBURG HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL APPEAL

Yes, I am pleased to contribute to the Annual Appeal of the Fitchburg Historical Society. Please accept my contribution of $______ to be used for your general operations.

Name: ____________________________________________
Address: ____________________________________________
____________________________________________________
Email: ____________________________________________

☐ I have included a check payable to the Fitchburg Historical Society
☐ Please charge the credit card I have listed below: ☐ Visa ☐ Mastercard

Card #: ____________________________________________ Exp. Date: _____ CVC: _____

$25.00 provides free research for local students
$50.00 assures clean archival collections storage
$100.00 supports a free local history presentation
$250.00 funds an issue of our newsletter
Save The Date

• Exhibition: “Wallace Exhibition: If These Walls Could Talk: History of the Fitchburg Fire Department” On view through Wednesday, June 7, 2017.

• Saturday, May 13, 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. “Hidden Treasures” Open House at Fitchburg Historical Society and central Fire Station, 33 North Street, and 781 Main Street, Fitchburg.

• Thursday, June 1, 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.

• Saturday, June 10, Time TBD. Fitchburg Porchfest, featuring a live, local band on the lawn at 50 Grove Street. Bring your lawn chair!

  • Saturday, June 17, 8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. FITchtburg Rides. Iver Johnson exhibition open to public.

  • Sunday, June 25, 1:00 – 5:00 p.m. Longsjo Classic Race. Extra exhibition hours

• Saturday, July 1, 6:30 p.m. Declaring Independence – Then and Now, presentation at First Parish Church, Fitchburg

  • Monday, July 3, 6:00-9:00 p.m. Civic Days Block Party: Extra exhibition hours

• Friday, August 18, noon – 4 p.m. Open House, coffee and snacks in honor of Finnish centennial celebration in Fitchburg and Leominster.