In the 1860s, Fitchburg lawyers and residents had to travel to Worcester to conduct their courtroom business. This became tiresome and inconvenient, so the lawyers and politicians in town began to clamor for a courthouse in Fitchburg. They suggested breaking off the northern part of Worcester County, adding some of Middlesex County, and naming the new county Lincoln. However, the new split county never materialized.

Fitchburg Town Fathers decided on the Elm Street location. The firm of E. Boyden & Sons of Worcester was commissioned to draw up the plans at a cost of four thousand dollars. The first floor plan had a Grand Jury room, law library, some anterooms and the Probate Courtroom. The Superior Courtroom was designed on the second floor with a jury room, the judge’s quarters and anterooms. The basement drawings showed a courtroom, three holding cells, judges’ chambers and an office for the Clerk of Courts. In 1869, after much delay, the new courthouse was begun.

It was English Victorian Gothic in style and built with iron girders, different stones and bricks, and granite from Rollstone Quarry (located on a hill overlooking the city). Bradley & Hubbard installed the gas-fueled fixtures throughout to light the building at a cost of six hundred and seventy dollars. Its golden oak furniture was purchased from four different companies at a cost of less than four thousand dollars. The new County Courthouse was finished in 1871 at a total cost of one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars.

The first session of Superior Court in the new courthouse, was held on November 16, 1871 and, it was presided over by the Honorable Mr. Scudder. The Police Court that had previously been housed at City Hall moved into the basement of the new courthouse. In 1884, the Police Court moved again into the new police station building further down Elm Street and became known as “District Court”. In that same year, the court petitioned for a branch Registry of Deeds. The petition was granted a few months later.

(Continued on Page 2)
When the Old Courthouse was New (continued...)

In 1892, Mr. David M. Merriam was selected to replace Mr. Rockwell and he would be Registrar for the next forty-seven years, until his retirement in 1939.

The old county courthouse is closed now. Many residents lived in Fitchburg all their lives but never had a reason or occasion to enter its hallowed halls. Oddly enough, it was mostly those by profession or predicament, who had the rare opportunity to witness its grandeur and historic character.

Adapted from the Writings of Ernest Stolba, Second Vice-President of the Fitchburg Historical Society-1954

Written by: Kathleen Flynn

Historical Society Honors the Old Courthouse

On Thursday, April 30th, the Exhibition Hall at the Historical Society, was transformed into “a courtroom” complete with Judge Andre A. Gelinas presiding over the event. The fundraiser (for educational programs), was set up to illustrate the memorable history of the old courthouse on Elm Street, and the functions it served.

Many displays show the furniture entrusted to the Historical Society in a long-term loan from the County Courts, along with books and memorabilia about the courthouse and its neighborhood from the Historical Society collection.

Judge Andre A. Gelinas gave a history of the old courthouse, and he invited a distinguished group of his fellow judges and attorneys to reminisce about some of the funnier, more entertaining, anecdotes that they recalled from their years in the building. The walls and display cases in the Exhibition Hall are filled with the history of the courthouse, beautiful photographs of both the interior and exterior of the building, and stories and pictures from the practice of law in Fitchburg over the last 150 years. There are also law books and Abraham Lincoln’s signature on the document appointing Thornton K. Ware as postmaster in Fitchburg on March 6, 1862.

The exhibit is open to the public until July 15, 2015, and visitors are invited to come by to see it during our regular hours.

Written by: Kathleen Flynn

The Alphabet

Research is currently underway at the Fitchburg Historical Society, and all around town, for the creation of a very unusual art project. The Fitchburg Art Museum, together with the Sentinel & Enterprise and the City of Fitchburg, is hosting visual artist Anna Schuleit Haber as she creates a new work based on a series of twenty-six designs and news stories in the daily newspaper. The project will be titled “The Alphabet” and accompanied by a comprehensive website that chronicles each day’s reporting and challenges, printing and design.

The twenty-six letters of the alphabet, A through Z, will constitute the base of the series of front pages. Each front page will have a large typographic design of a letter commissioned by a guest typographer, around which smaller news stories of the day will be arranged. The typography and the news stories will be created by Anna in collaboration with writers and students from the local high school and college. The timeline of the project is July 13 through August 11.

A variety of stories about Fitchburg, its people, history, and events, from the present day and the past, are being collected. A team of interns and volunteers will assist the artist. Volunteers should have an interest in art design, journalism, printing, media, storytelling, and/or local history. This project is open to everyone — please help spread the word!

Around the country, small newspapers have closed, due to high operating costs and low income. Internet traffic has replaced newspapers everywhere, but especially in small cities and towns. Fitchburg is fortunate to have an active daily paper, the Sentinel & Enterprise, incorporated from the Fitchburg Sentinel (1838) and the Leominster Enterprise (1873). Anna proposes to use the alphabet as a natural and emotional parameter to celebrate the newspaper, the tradition of printing and typography, the uniqueness of Fitchburg and Leominster, and the variety and breadth of local storytelling.

With this project, Fitchburg’s daily newspaper will become the site of a public art project that will reach a much wider audience. Taking over the front page constitutes an exception so unusual that its occurrence might be of interest to viewers and readers beyond Fitchburg. It will be an opportunity to spark regional and national discourse about newspapers, public art, print editions, creative collaboration, and to bring attention to our city.

Says Anna, “I believe in the arts as catalysts for communities, and I can’t imagine this project for any other place than Fitchburg. Working with local students on designing the typography, writing, and reporting these twenty-six pages, on making them as special and unusual and creative as they can possibly be, will be a once-in-a-lifetime task for everyone involved. I think of this project as an extraordinary chance for us, in collaboration, to re-define an ordinary part of city life, to make it specific and special, and to end up with a set of twenty-six prints that are, like all newspapers, affordable in the moment, and yet impossible to get your hands on after the alphabet has ended — it would be a new form of public art.”
Hidden Treasures Weekend Celebration in Fitchburg

Freedom’s Way has invited the cities and towns across the 994-square-mile Freedom’s Way area, to participate in the “Hidden Treasures Weekend,” a two day celebration on May 16th and May 17th 2015. In Fitchburg, two of Fitchburg’s architectural treasures will be open to the public for guided tours as part of this celebration.

From 11:30-12:15 p.m. on May 16th, the Rev. Bennett G. Jones, II, will offer a mini lecture on Gothic Revival Architecture and how Richard Upjohn, the architect for Christ Church, was at the forefront of that movement. Christ Church, located at 569 Main Street, received consecration in 1868 from the Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts. The church was built on land donated by Alvah Crocker, who also chaired the building committee. The church has magnificent stained glass windows, donated by parishioners and designed by the Tiffany Studio, White Friars Studios of London, and Comnick Studios in Boston.

From 2:00-2:45 on May 16th, Zeke Finch will lead tours of the House of Grace and Restoration, also the home of Faith United Parish, at 860 Main Street and the corner of Rollstone. The House of Grace and Restoration was designed by Henry M. Francis in 1896 for the Calvinistic Congregational Church and is one of the best examples of Richardsonian architecture remaining today. For that reason, the building was enrolled on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. The building is home to a rose window that represents an angelic choir, as well as Tiffany stained glass windows.

Tour participants will receive the combined church brochure for the House of Grace and Restoration and Faith United Parish. On Sunday, visitors may also be interested in attending the bilingual service from 11 to 3:30 p.m. or the all English service from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.

Written by: Shirley Wagner

Fitchburg’s New Historic Marker Program

Have you ever wondered about the history of that building around the corner, or maybe your own house? Fitchburg is blessed with an abundance of fine older buildings, but it’s hard to know the rich history they hold. The Fitchburg Historical Commission, in collaboration with the Fitchburg Historical Society, is sponsoring a historic marker program to promote the value of our city’s shared heritage by recognizing structures over fifty years old that still maintain their basic character.

This is an opportunity for both home and other building owners to show pride in their buildings and help us all appreciate their special historic and architectural heritage. The historic markers or plaques are oval shaped and professionally hand-painted on durable wood. They are approximately 11” high and 16” wide with a deep red background and off-white lettering and accents. The cost is $62, delivery included. The first installed marker can be seen at Windmill Florist, 448 Mechanic Street. The Fitchburg Historical Commission will review the applications with assistance from the Historical Society to help identify and verify information. Even though the marker may be awarded, there are no restrictions on the property. There is no obligation to preserve the character of the building, although we obviously hope that its integrity will be maintained. There is no requirement that the building be listed on the State or National Register of Historic Places.

Applications are available at the Fitchburg City Offices at 66 Boulder Drive and the Fitchburg Historical Society.

Written by: Keith Chenot

Slaves Escape to the North

The children of today cannot realize what trying times their grandfathers and grandmothers passed through who belonged to and worked for the anti-slavery party.” Martha Snow remembers telling this to Wendell Phillips, an anti-Slavery activist who was staying at her father’s underground railway station here in Fitchburg, Phillips replied “You must tell them”. So she did. Martha started writing a diary full of stories she heard while living with countless runaway slaves. Many people didn’t write down stories that had to do with slaves by fear of being caught, but Martha couldn’t let these stories just disappear and be forgotten. Today it’s my turn to pass on these stories about community, bravery and perseverance.

The first story hits close to home. It is of Shadrach Minkins, Shadrach was a slave down south who managed to escape andtravel north and settled in Boston to what he thought was his freedom. In 1850 the fugitive slave law was passed as a federal law. This meant that slave owners could travel north to re-capture their runaway slaves who were not free until they made it to Canada.

On February 15th 1851 Shadrach was working in a coffee house and unknowingly waited on two slave catchers. As soon as they saw Shadrach they arrested him, making him the first slave to be captured in New England under the fugitive slave law. Shadrach was brought to the courthouse where he was awaiting trial. A young officer Calvin Hutchin was guarding the doors to the courtroom, trying to keep a crowd of angry people out. Hutchin opened the door just enough for attorney Charles D. Davis to squeeze through. The crowd saw this as an opportunity and rushed the door. Some other men ran to help Davis get the door closed again but it was too late. Some of the men from crowd had already gotten into the courtroom. Shadrach stood inside terrified, he had no idea what was going on. The men who made it into the courtroom knew there was no time to explain. They grabbed Shadrach and carried him down the stairs and out of the court house. Hayden and a man named Robert Morris escorted Shadrach away from the crowd and into the attic of widow, Mrs. Elizabeth Riley. From there he started his journey through the Underground Railroad.

Shadrach went to houses in Cambridge, Concord, the Drake house in Leominster, and finally came to the Crocker house in Fitchburg. Late one night there was a knock on Mr. Samuel Crocker’s door. When he opened it he found Mr. Benjamin Snow (Martha’s father) and a young slave dressed as a woman waiting outside. He quickly let them in. Several men were already at the Crocker house discussing their concerns about the fugitive slave law. While Shadrach was sharing his experiences about being arrested under the fugitive slave law, a hat was passed around for people to put change in to help Shadrach get to Canada. Mr. Crocker set up a carriage to take Shadrach to freedom.

After Shadrach left Fitchburg he traveled to Ashburnham where he fell ill and remained there until he recovered. From Ashburnham Shadrach went on to Canada. The day he crossed the border witnesses say he dropped to his knees. Shadrach started a new life in Canada. He married and had two children a daughter Mary and a son Jacob. He also owned a very successful barber shop. Shadrach’s life had turned around. He never looked back at his days in slavery. Just think how Fitchburg came together to help one man get to his freedom.

Another story told by Martha was of Josiah Henson or “Father Henson” who was the slave that inspired the character of Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s book. He stayed at the Snow house many times when he was in town. While he was there, he would tell stories that would either make you laugh or cry. One story that stood out to Martha was when Josiah was living on the plantation; his slave owner would allow them to keep the heads of pigs they slaughtered, so they could cut as deep into the pigs’ shoulders as possible. This story made me realize how clever slaves were and how they sometimes outsmarted their slave owners.

Shadrach Minkins and Josiah Henson started from nothing as slaves in the south. They found a way to turn their lives around, with the help of everyday people willing to risk everything so that everyone could be treated as equals. I’m glad to have read Martha’s stories and to be able to share them with you.

Written by: Erin Primeau

Written by: Shirley Wagner

Written by: Keith Chenot

Written by: Shirley Wagner
Letter from the Director

As you can see from our articles and “Save the Date” section, the Fitchburg Historical Society is particularly busy with spring activities. In addition to our own history programs and student field trips, we are collaborating with many Fitchburg groups to present creative new types of educational opportunity for local residents. I am excited that we are sharing the Fitchburg Historical Society's extraordinary resources with so many new audiences. Last summer, we had visitors from around the nation and from overseas come to research in our collections, enjoy our exhibitions and participate in our programs. We are looking forward to another lively season of sharing Fitchburg's unique history with visitors from all over.

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.

- Windmill Florists, Mechanic Street
- Rollstone Bank
- Ron Bouchard’s Auto Sales
- Godin Construction
- Rome Insurance Company

Susan Navarre, Executive Director

Help celebrate “Fitchburg Rides” and stop by to see the exhibit and tell us about their relatives who worked for the Iver Johnson firm well into the 1970s. The exhibit will be open from June 20th to July 22nd during Society hours which are 10 to 4 on Monday and Tuesday and 10 to 6 on Wednesday. We will also do special hours for the Block Party on Civic Days, Friday July 3rd from 5 to 8 p.m.

Written by: Shirley Wagner

Fitchburg Rides

On Saturday June 20th (Sunday June 21st as the rain date), the second “Fitchburg Rides” Day will be held. “Fitchburg Rides” features events designed for the entire family. From 10-11:30 a.m., there will be a Kids Bicycle Rodeo behind Old City Hall and Rollstone Bank. The rodeo is a bicycle safety seminar which will be led by the Fitchburg Police and Fitchburg State University Bike Patrols. Every child who attends will receive a free helmet and will be entered in a drawing to win one of the three bicycles that will be given away.

From 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., there will be an exhibition with Wheels in Motion, a BMX Stunt Team. There also will take place behind the Old City Hall and Rollstone Bank. At 1:30 p.m., there will be a steep uphill time trial competition up Prospect Hill. Cheer on the competitors as they race for a one hundred dollar cash award to be presented to the best men’s and women’s times.

At 11:00 a.m., anyone who is interested in taking a walking tour of the proposed Stoddart bicycle and walking trail are invited to gather at the Fitchburg Historical Society to meet their tour guide. The Fitchburg Historical Society is pleased to be a participant in “Fitchburg Rides.”

The annual Iver Johnson Bicycle Exhibit featuring Iver Johnson bicycles made in Fitchburg from 1898 to 1942 and collected by local residents will be on display from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Each year, individuals stop by to see the exhibit and to tell us about their relatives who worked for the Iver Johnson firm well into the 1970s. The exhibit will be open from June 20th to July 22nd during Society hours which are 10 to 4 on Monday and Tuesday and 10 to 6 on Wednesday. We will also do special hours for the Block Party on Civic Days, Friday July 3rd from 5 to 8 p.m.

Help celebrate “Fitchburg Rides” and stop by to see the annual Iver Johnson bicycle exhibit!

Written by: Shirley Wagner

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

Evoking Eleanor: The art, life and legacy of FAM founder Eleanor Norcross
Continuing at Fitchburg Art Museum. Exhibition includes loans from the Fitchburg Historical Society.

Saturday, May 16, 2015
Hidden Treasures of Fitchburg - Tours of Christ Church and the House of Grace and Restoration.
Meet at the churches at the identified times. For more information, visit: www.freedomsway.org and look for Hidden Treasures weekend

• 10:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. - Fitchburg Historical Society is open for visitors at 781 Main Street
• 11:30am -12:45pm Christ Church, 569 Main Street, Rev. Bennett G. Jones, II, will offer a mini lecture on Gothic Revival Architecture and how Richard Upjohn, the architect for Christ Church was at the forefront of that movement.
• 2:00-2:30pm The House of Grace and Restoration, also the home of Faith United Parish, corner of Main Street and Rollstone. Guided architectural and historical tour of this H.M. Francis church led by Zeke Finch.

Saturday June 20, 2015 (Raindate Sunday June 21)
“Fitchburg Rides” - 8:00 a.m. to 4 p.m. Events described in article on page 7.

Check our web calendar at fitchburghistoricalsociety.org for our calendar of events!