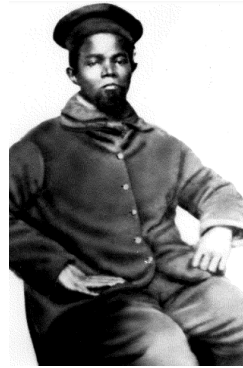


FITCHBURG HISTORICAL SOCIETY 125 years



Special Issue



2023

Fitchburg's Early Residents of Color

Every once in a while, we run across brief mentions of Fitchburg's African-American population in the late 1700's and early 1800's. We are trying to keep track of them, for any future historians working on BIPOC history of those early days.

In an article from the Sentinel, May 17, 1910, there is a report on a history talk given at the Historical Society, and a quick note is made about "The Lord's Barn" (a church that stood in Fitchburg near Westminster from 1788 until 1825.) It was torn down in 1825 or 26 "by Voldostine Johnson, a mulatto from Vermont" who "used a part of the lumber for a wood-choppers' cabin for himself."

Presumably, Johnson was building in Fitchburg or nearby, over the town line. ("Mulatto" is an outdated term, common in the 19th century, for a person who is of mixed ancestry, generally of African ancestry on one side and European ancestry on the other. Today, such a person would generally be referred to as "bi-racial.") We will keep an eye out for more information about him in our records, along with the stories of other people of color in Fitchburg's early years.

There are many references to enslaved people and freed people in our book, *The City and the River*. For example, a man named Edom London has been recorded in central Massachusetts (including Fitchburg) and historians are gathering his records, which sometimes list him as Eden Londen or Edom Lonnen. After escaping servitude and enlisting in the Continental Army in 1775, he secured his freedom after almost four years in the Army. Another Fitchburg man, Cesar Carter, who was a free Black man, enlisted in the Army in 1781.

Jacob Upton, Senior, who owned the Dean Hill Tavern, purchased two baby boys in Boston who grew up in his tavern. (He named them Charlestown and Boston Upton, after the border he was on when receiving them.) A man named Mevus was owned by tavern owner Thomas Cowdin. He was a veteran of the Seven Years' War in America (the so-called "French and Indian War") and a popular violin player. After abolition in Massachusetts, Mevus stayed on with Cowdin for pay.

By 1845, the Treadwell family came to Fitchburg and father Charles J. Treadwell and son Charles H. Treadwell worked in the quarries on Rollstone hill. The elder Charles is reputed to be the first free Black man to take up permanent residence in Fitchburg. He and his wife Sophia T. Treadwell lived in a little house off in the woods on the left-hand side of Rollstone Street just above the junction with Laurel. He worked for the Dean S.A. Wheeler Company at the quarries and was a devout Baptist. The Historical Society has a photo of a presumed descendant, Everett Treadwell, in uniform as part of the Edgerly Elementary School Baseball team of 1927. Later, as an adult, Everett refereed baseball games in Fitchburg.



Was John Crocker Biracial?

We have transcribed a letter that was written by the genealogist Anson Titus (of Tufts College) in 1904 to a Mr. Crocker, about his research into whether the original John Crocker was partially Barbadian, Bermudan or West Indian. John Crocker an ancestor of Fitchburg's Crocker family. According to family

One of the Crocker family wrote a note describing John Crocker this way:

The first Crockers in Fitchburg descended from Captain John Crocker who sailed from England to Boston in the 1720's. His family home was in Newburyport where he and his wife, Mary Savage Crocker, are buried in the churchyard of St. Paul's Church. According to his obituary, "John Crocker was remarkable for his fine form and [manly] beauty, as well as for great moral purity of life and character. He was nimble and blithe as a child and up to the time of his death without the stoop of age; everybody loved him."

We know from other Crocker letters that some of his descendants were intrigued by the idea of a multiracial past. With DNA testing more than a century in the future,

Prof. Titus tried to answer the question back in 1904:

"Recalling our investigation in your behalf – concerning Capt. John Crocker, Boston, Newburyport, concerning whose ancestry we hoped to gain information – will say – that recently in Newburyport, we met Mr. Curries – the historian of the place – who told me that by interviewing ancient people had learned the tradition – that John Crocker was not a full-blooded Englishman but that he had a half mixture of Bermuda – Barbados or West Indian blood in him. Now if this be so you ought to be able to judge from the features of your varied kinsmen – near and distant – whether there is ground for this tradition."

He went on to argue that Crocker might not have been allowed into the "families of quality and culture in Boston" if he were partially Black. As a result, he did not think John Crocker's mother was a woman of color, but rather "of a higher caste." However, he suggested that the best method of knowing was to analyze the family's color and features...and perhaps to look at records that exist only in London, England.



Pictured: Alvah Crocker, the most famous Fitchburg Crocker

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 and traveled 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 the 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 would 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*
Freshman, Fitchburg High School

Abraham Freeman Jr, one of Fitchburg's early African-American residents

Recently, our Facebook followers engaged in a lively discussion about a wintertime photo of a gray-haired black man cutting wood from the Historical Society's collection. The photo is marked "Mr. Freeman cutting wood" and everyone jumped in to help find out who he was. He was identified as Abraham Freeman, Jr. (also known as Abram) by Don Lassila, and researcher Eunice Halbedel took up the challenge to find more in his military records.

He was born 1835 in Shirley, MA, son of Abraham Sr. and Olive (Mitchell) Freeman. When he was 15 years old in 1850, he was living in Groton, MA with Timothy Blood (a farmer) and family. He married twice and had four children: wife Lucy Hazard, in Shirley, and daughter Mary Jane Freeman; and second wife Ellen E. Lee, with three children: Sarah Julia, William Earl and Ulysses S. Grant (Freeman.)

During the Civil war, he served in the U.S. Navy. He enlisted in the Union Navy January 4, 1862, at which time he was promoted to Full Landsman. He served on the U.S.S. New Hampshire, from then until January 21, 1865. This ship had been built decades before, in 1819, and then sat in drydock for 40 years. It was built the year that Alabama was admitted to the union, but when it was finally used for the Civil War, the name was changed to a more suitable northern name.

It was used as a "storeship and depot ship" and was expected to form part of the blockade of southern ports

that President Lincoln had ordered. While on the New Hampshire at Bay Point, S.C., Abraham Freedman was moving a large load of ammunition onto the deck, when it "slipped out of the grapple onto his right foot and cut off his big toe and the one next to it." Because of the injury, he mustered out of the Navy in 1865 at Charleston, South Carolina.

A month later, he was back in Boston and enlisting into the 55th Mass Infantry Regiment. By Feb 20, 1865, he was on their roll at 'Galloup's Island, Boston Harbor, Mass." Some records imply he may have joined from the "Regiment Recruiting Depot at James Island, S.C."

The Massachusetts 55th Infantry

The 55th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment was the sister regiment of the renowned Massachusetts 54th Volunteers during the latter half of the American Civil War. The enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation by United States President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863 had opened the way for the enlistment of free men of color and newly liberated slaves to fight for their freedom within the Union Army. As the ranks of the 54th Massachusetts quickly reached its full complement of recruits, an overflow of Black volunteers continued to pour in from several other states outside Massachusetts — and another regiment of "colored" soldiers was sponsored by the Commonwealth — the Massachusetts 55th.

At the time of formation, the colored troops of Massachusetts were promised a pay rate of \$13.00 per month, which meant it was equal to that of all other active recruits throughout the Union Army. The U.S. Congress lagged on meeting that promise, and the Black soldiers refused to accept less, until the War Department took action to assure they would get their pay. . On principle, these men almost unanimously chose to forgo their pay altogether until this discrepancy was fully rectified. The matter was finally settled through action taken by the War Department.

(continued on pg. 5)



Abraham Freeman Jr, one of Fitchburg's early African-American residents (continued from pg. 4)

In her 1995 article 'History of 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry', Civil War historian Katherine Dhallé stated: "The brave men of the regiment, both black and white, who fought side by side, and lived through the inequities of a discriminatory government, deserve to be remembered as the heroes they are. Nothing less would be acceptable."

Freeman's Post-war life

By 1880, Abraham Freeman was living in Hudson with wife, Ellen, daughter Sarah, stepsons Walter and Ellsworth Burgison, and a boarder, Lucinda Evans (Housekeeper). (It is not known whether Lucinda Evans was also Black.) Abraham's occupation was listed as a Laborer in the census and Ellen listed as a washwoman. By 1893,

he is mentioned in a city directory as having moved to Fitchburg, and about two years later, he bought a two-story house at 62 Phelps Street from Noah Jackson, in the new "Jacksonville" neighborhood of Fitchburg.

A few years later, on July 5, 1899 the Fitchburg Sentinel reported that his youngest son, U. Grant Freeman died at their home, 62 Phelps St., of brain fever at 3 a.m. today. Even though he was only eight, they said, "he was a bright little fellow and well known for one so young."

After dying on May 22, 1902 in Fitchburg, he was buried in Forest Hill Cemetery, on Orange Path. In their report, the Fitchburg Sentinel reported characterized him as "a well-known colored citizen."

Touring Fitchburg's Abolitionist History

With the development of Abolitionist Park in Fitchburg, residents and visitors are looking for traces of the city's abolitionist history. Though the Historical Society has not created an official tour yet, here are some historical places linked with Abolition and Fitchburg's role in the Civil War:

Visiting Abolitionists, at rest in Fitchburg's Cemeteries

In the West Street burying ground (also known as the Marshall Burying Yard) at 1370 Main Street, across the street from the Greek Orthodox Church at the corner of West Street and Ashburnham Road is the grave of Thomas Eaton, an anti-slavery activist who died in 1864 without knowing that the cause for which he had fought had been successful. His son Abel is also buried here. Abel joined up for the Civil War as a drummer at age 56 and served while he was 56 and 57, doing his own part to further his father's cause. The soldiers with whom he served affectionately called him "drummer boy." Abel died in 1894 when he was 88. He was still working as a railroad repair man at that time.

By 1800, Laurel Hill Cemetery was established under the name Mount Laurel with its spectacular view overlooking the city (150 Franklin Street.) Among those buried there are Josiah Trask and Joseph Kimball, two of the anti-slavery activists who had gone to Kansas with about 40 others from Fitchburg to keep Kansas from becoming a slave state. Both men were killed during Quantrill's raid

on Lawrence, Kansas—Quantrill's men were confederates. Both bodies were returned to Fitchburg for burial.

There are interesting shields on the gravestones in Laurel Hill that identify those who served in the Civil War and those who served in the Ladies Aid Society which was the group of women who helped provide uniforms and other supplies to Civil War soldiers. Often the graves also identify those who took part in the Gold Rush.

(continued on pg. 6)



Touring Fitchburg's Abolitionist History *(continued from pg. 5)*

=Abolitionist Park at 50 Snow Street has opened and offers educational murals and signage about the many important abolitionists who gathered on and around the Snow family properties.. The park was developed following a project by local students to recognize the region's Abolitionist past.

Fitchburg's Monument Park was developed by the city in the 1870's, and its central sculpture, by Boston artist Martin Milmore (famous for the Roxbury Soldiers' Monument) contains a memorial plaque that makes explicit reference to the city's abolitionist past. Local teacher and Fitchburg native Darren Barry has written extensively on the monument as part of his research on Fitchburg and the Civil War. Today, 150 years after it was created, Fitchburg's Monument Park remains a beautiful and moving public space.



This newsletter on African-American History in Fitchburg is one of four thematic newsletters being created by the Fitchburg Historical Society for distribution to new residents of Fitchburg; students, teachers and professors; senior citizens; churches and clubs; in addition to the membership of the Historical Society. These extra issues were funded by a grant from the Fitchburg Cultural Council, which is funded by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency. The FCC is part of a network of 329 Local Cultural Councils (LCCs) serving all 351 cities and towns in the Commonwealth.

Festus Currier and Richmond

A Visit to Richmond, Virginia in 1866

Festus Currier relays the Civil War memories of a freed African-American in Richmond, Virginia

This text was written by someone who was alive during the Civil War, and contains some outdated usages and words, that were more common in the 1800's.

After a substantial breakfast, we decided to spend the day in a trip to the fortifications on the James River, and as far down as Butler's famous canal or ditch, and notwithstanding the chilly atmosphere and storm indications an open barouche was secured, with a colored driver. This team was a good one, and the driver an expert at his business, and with all, intelligent, and proved a remarkable good man for us on this occasion, as he appeared able and willing to give us considerable information about matters in and out of the city. In answer to an inquiry he said he was born a slave, and had always lived in and about Richmond. When he ascertained we came from Massachusetts, he appeared to increase his attentions to us, so we had started out under most favorable circumstances.

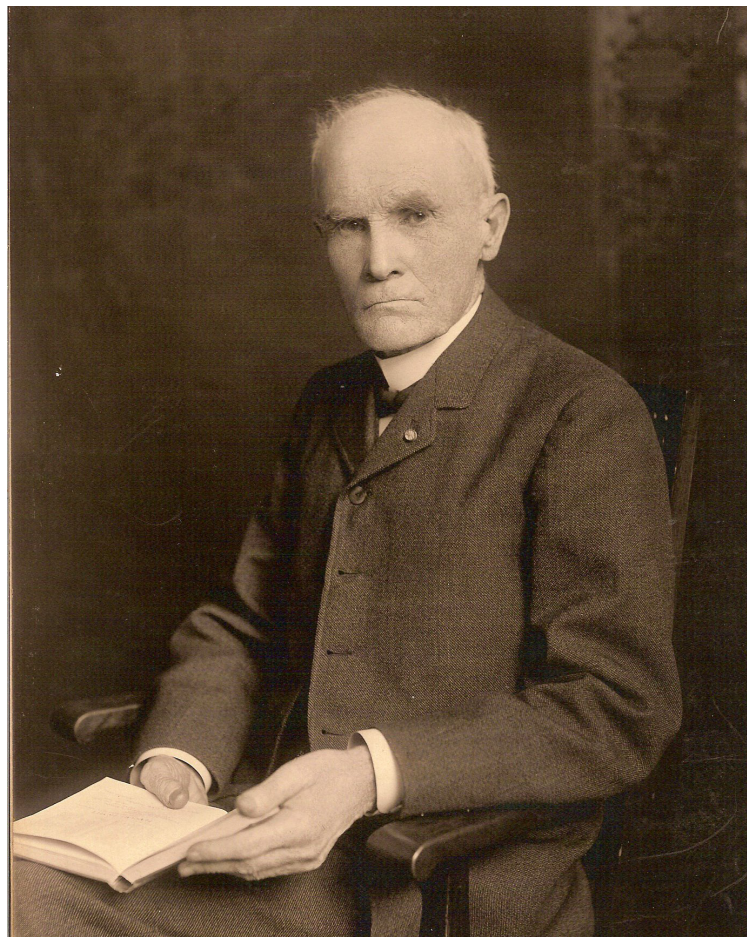
...The Confederate fortifications were before us...Our driver took considerable pains to describe the position and condition of the Confederates in these defenses, and in answer to an inquiry what his business was during the war he said he was employed by an undertaker to drive his ambulances and horses; and while this army lay here, it was his duty to drive an ambulance, every morning, down to take up to the city for burial, bodies soldiers of others, who had died the night or day before, whether through disease or the bullet. Some days it required more trips. This he said he did every day they lay there. This gave him a good opportunity to go into all parts of the encampment, and observe the condition of the men and hear them talk among themselves, They were not, as he remarked, in a very comfortable situation, much grumbling was heard, and many desertions reported, and the feeling prevailed, that if not largely reinforced they could not hold out much longer.

...We decided to turn about and return to the city. On our return, we were reminded, by our faithful driver, that we were going over the same road that our army triumphantly marched toward the beleaguered city, a year and a half ago, with the Confederates in full retreat before them, running to save capture. I asked

him where he was on that momentous day; he said he was in the city when the report came that the Federals had broken the Confederate Lines, and were on the way to the city, and that the Confederate army was retreating before them. This was late in the afternoon of Sunday. This report he stated created tremendous excitement, and the populace were wild with fear, not knowing what was going to happen; in fact, all was chaos, and no one appeared to have any control over anybody or anything. The streets were full of flying Confederates and frightened people to get away from the Federals. Everybody appeared to be looking out for themselves. The colored people were less disturbed than the whites, and hundreds of them went out to see the Union forces come in.

No obstruction was put in the way of their coming. He said he went down with the crowd and felt no fear or harm to himself. It was an exciting time, when the first advance put in an appearance, with the scattering rebels running in all directions.

(continued on pg. 8)



Festus Currier and Richmond (continued from pg. 7)

When the Union soldiers came along, with the stars and stripes flying, and the bands playing, it made a fine sight, one long enough to be remembered. They were well equipped, and the officers elegantly mounted. The whole presented a neat and solid appearance, showing quite a contrast between them and the Confederate soldiers that had been seen about there during the last two of three years. The appearance of this army and their general conduct made a favorable impression on the great crowd of onlookers, and removed the fears of many; but they did not come any too quickly to save the city from destruction, fires were raging in many places, and not much effort was made to put them out. When the situation was seen, the soldiers were ordered to extinguish them, which they did, after considerable labour and loss of property.

Soon the commanding General issued a proclamation, guaranteeing the protection to all persons and their property, who retired to their homes and kept the peace,

and obeyed the laws. When soldiers guarded every part of the city, and nobody was harmed by them, quiet took the place of confusion, and those who had sought hiding places of went out of the city, began to return, and in a few days business began to resume its regular routine in a limited way, and when the old flag [the Stars and Stripes] was seen floating from every flagstaff, including state and city buildings, the people began to realize that the old government was in control, and when the greenback and federal money began to circulate and bring relief to the suffering masses, then the Union sentiment began to appear in day light, and confidence took the place of doubt.

This excerpt written by Festus C. Currier of Fitchburg, in a manuscript entitled, A Visit to Richmond, Va. at the Close of the Rebellion. Fitchburg Historical Society collection, 2000.400.2110

Racism in the 54th Massachusetts

Each year the Boston Duck Boat Tours and the Bostonian Society sponsor an essay contest about an important event in Massachusetts' history. When the topic was the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, eighth grade students at Memorial Middle School were struck by the amount of racism was evident in the regiment's story: This student essay from Enrique Marquez, Jr. examines the issue:

African-American soldiers faced racism while serving in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment in 1863. The 54th was the first black regiment; earlier General John Fremont had enlisted black soldiers, but he was fired for doing so. Even the Northern states and their citizens were racist. Free blacks could not go to all the public places that whites could, and only low-paying jobs were open to them. Getting an education was difficult. Slaves who ran away to the Union Army were called contraband, which means illegal goods or things. In 1863 President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves, and many enlisted at least.

Some dignitaries at the time were not racist, however. President Abraham Lincoln at first said that slavery was not allowed in new states but was allowed in states where it already existed. Frederick Douglass said, "Liberty won by white men would lack its luster (shine)", acted

as a recruiter. His two sons, Lewis and Charles, signed up. Lastly, Governor Andrew of Massachusetts was a famous abolitionist. He did not like the fact that blacks could only be laborers like ditch diggers or wagon drivers. The governor wanted all African-Americans to form a regiment, but he had to wait for Lincoln to give him permission.

When a thousand African American men enlisted, they were faced with racism. African American people got paid less than what white people got paid. In the army black people got paid seven dollars because they had to spend three dollars on clothes. That equaled seven dollars. The African-Americans refused their pay and put it up for a protest to get paid extra. Many soldiers wrote to President Lincoln saying that they needed better pay to get extra materials. The African-Americans had to wait eighteen months to be paid equally what to the white people had gotten paid. In conclusion, the African-American people were not paid equally to the whites.

Even after the war, racism continued. First of all, Colonel Robert Shaw was buried in a mass grave, a big pit where all the African-Americans were buried after they had died.

(continued on pg. 9)

Racism in the 54th Massachusetts (continued from pg 8)

When Colonel Shaw died, the Southerners dishonored him because he fought with the African-Americans. After he was buried, his father had the choice to bring him home, but he said that his son should stay in his grave with his men that had also died in the war. Sergeant William Carney had earned the Medal of Honor because he picked up the flag during the Battle of Fort Wagner. It took thirty-seven years for Sergeant William Carney to get his medal, and the medal came in the mail instead of having a ceremony. Some soldiers didn't want William Carney to get the medal. Twenty-seven years later, a sculpture was made for Shaw. On the side of the monument were the white people's names who had fought at Fort Wagner. It

wasn't until 1981 that the black names were put on the monument. In Leominster, Massachusetts, they put a monument dedicated to Oliver Hazard, one hundred and thirty-five years after he fought in the war. In conclusion, you can see that racism against the 54th has stopped.

Finally, it is clear that the 54th Massachusetts Regiment faced racism. Some celebrities helped African-Americans enlist in the army, so they were not racist. However, in the army blacks were paid less than what whites were for eighteen months.

❧ *Written by Enrique Marquez Jr.*

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.

(continued on pg. 10)

The Story of Henry (Hendrick) E. Becker

(continued from pg 9)

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.

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 granddaughter of the first free black family in Fitchburg, the Treadwells. Alfred Treadwell, Hattie's brother, was also a boarder in Henry's home for a short period of time. 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*



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Football Star Aaron Herndon

Aaron Herndon was known as Fitchburg High School's first great African-American athlete. He played for Clarence Amriott's first football teams, and was one of the first players in school history to take part in four football seasons, as well as a portion of a fifth. Entering the first team in 1912 under coach James Chalmers as a 15-year-old eighth grader, Herndon made great strides as a player who played all over the line and earned his letters under Amriott, who first coached the Red and Gray in 1913. In fact, Herndon's blocked punt against Leominster on Thanksgiving morning 1914 instantly endeared himself as a freshman, as he sparked a 13-0 FHS win.

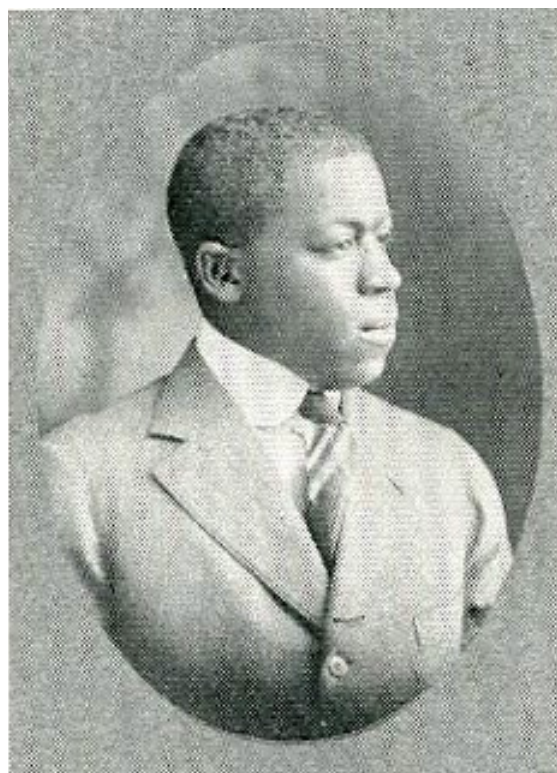
In addition, that period of Fitchburg High football saw tackle-eligible runs as a key weapon in the high-powered Amriott arsenal, and Herndon, as a tackle, took advantage of that as he ended up scoring 12 career touchdowns, including a career-high three in a game against the Mechanic Arts of Boston on October 31, 1914. That 1914 season saw him cross the goal line nine times, which at the time of his graduation had only been surpassed four other times; he was tied for fourth all-time when he turned his tassel. He also made fabulous touchdown-saving tackles to keep opposing offenses honest, and he registered a safety against Winthrop in 1915 to round out his football point total at 74, good for sixth best through his high school days.

In 1916, he played in two games before a mysterious injury forced him from the lineup. Herndon also suited up six times for Amriott's basketball team in 1914, and 10 times in 1915, where he scored 12 times as a right back.

Herndon was a popular student on Academy Street, and he answered his country's call in the weeks leading up to

his graduation, serving with Company L out of Boston in World War I. When he returned to Fitchburg after the war, he would speak at the Main Street YMCA about the horrors and injustices he faced as a soldier and would eventually leave the Fitchburg area to settle in segregated Georgia, where he spent time in prison.

Written by Sean Sweeney



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Anti-Poverty Activist Adrian Ford



Since his death in January 2021, Fitchburg's civil rights activist Adrian Ford has been remembered with a mural in downtown Fitchburg and the renaming and renovation of the Cleghorn Neighborhood Center into the Youth Innovation Center Adrian L. Ford Center for Change.

At 23 years old, Ford was the president of Three Pyramids, a statewide organization founded by three Cape Verdeans in Duxbury in 1971 that relocated to 66 Day Street in Fitchburg a year later. In 1973, Adrian Ford recalled in a news article by Andrienne Clark that "Fitchburg at the time was in turmoil and it exploded. Fitchburg was the place to begin. There was a need."

Now, Three Pyramids is allying with the Montachusett Opportunity council to create the Youth Innovation Center. It was also a driving force behind one of Fitchburg's new murals, along with the City of Fitchburg and InTown Fitchburg.

The mural "Adrian Ford" was unveiled in Fitchburg in June 26, 2022. The lead artists were William Thompson and Melissa Stratton Pandina. It towers over the park that was created on Main Street when the Johnsonia building was demolished, preserving Ford's memory on Main Street.