

FITCHBURG  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY



125  
years



Special Issue



2023

## Women from the Crocker Family Transforming their City

The wives and daughters in the Crocker family have contributed to the family's reputation for community service and philanthropy. Minerva (1824 - 1921), who lived for fifty-seven years after the death of her husband Alvah Crocker, supported Christ's Church, donating money for the Parish House and Rectory, and Tiffany window for the church. Minerva supported the Old Ladies' Home and Children's Home as well as the Fitchburg Historical Society. She was also a quiet supporter of women's suffrage.

Fay Bigelow Crocker (1869 – 1956), who married C.T. Crocker II, also embraced her role as a civic leader. The couple opened their home as an emergency hospital during the 1918 influenza epidemic. Fay founded the Lucy Helen Memorial Hospital on Main Street to provide modern maternity care. Fay was the first woman to sit on the board at Burbank Hospital and also contributed to the arts in Fitchburg, co-founding the Stratton Theater with Helen



Stratton. She was partly inspired by the example of a repertory theater in Cape Cod, where she had seen a young Bette Davis perform, long before she became a star in Hollywood.

Charlotte Crocker, wife of Alvah Crocker II, is best remembered for her suggestion to her husband that he build a safe place for the children of Fitchburg to play.

She had seen her son come home with cut knees from playing on paved streets. As a result, he took the lead on funding Crocker Field, which was built during World War I from a design by the famous Olmstead Landscape Design firm. Meanwhile, Charlotte and the other Crocker women from Fitchburg served with the Red Cross during the war.



In the next generation, Barbara Cushing Crocker (1897 – 1981), wife of Bigelow Crocker, opened their home to English children during World War II and befriended three Japanese families in internment camps. She was a Girl Scout Troop leader, donated land and a swimming pool for their summer camp. Barbara loved Fitchburg history and was very involved in the Fitchburg Historical Society, writing plays and vignettes about the city's past. She was chair of the city's huge Bicentennial celebrations in 1964.

Jeanne (Jay) Crocker and her husband Bigelow Crocker II continued the legacy of Crocker philanthropy. They donated two acres of their land for the Lunenburg town library. Later, they led the Capital Campaign that raised money for the Fitchburg Historical Society to purchase, renovate and move to the historic Phoenix Building on Main Street, now also known as the Crocker Center for Fitchburg history.

~ Written by Cynthia Jones

## *The Higher Life: Another look at Fitchburg writer Mary Lowe Dickinson*

Mary Caroline Underwood was born in Fitchburg in 1839. She started out learning – and then teaching - in the Fitchburg elementary schools, but before she died in her Park Avenue apartment in New York City, her essays, poems and lectures were heard around the world. She ultimately became a published writer under her married name, Mary Lowe Dickinson.

Mary studied in the Fitchburg Public Schools, and it appears that, at that time, students only received eight weeks of school in the summer and eight weeks in the winter. She had been such a good student that one of her teachers accused her of copying her an assignment out of a book, when it was the young girl’s own polished prose. Mary Caroline remembered that story of precocious talent and injustice for the rest of her life.

Mary Caroline started teaching in Fitchburg when she was 15, in the 1850’s. You had to pass an oral and written exam to teach in the public schools, and she was essentially still a young girl when she passed the exams and began teaching 70 elementary school children.

She turned down an offer to teach at Vassar College (a new school at the time), and soon left to travel and study in Europe, where she worked as the European correspondent for the National Baptist, the national newspaper of the American Baptist church. After coming back to the U.S. and marrying, being widowed and losing all her money,

she moved out to Denver, Colorado to teach literature and begin writing poetry. While in the West, she became interested in Native American rights, and she lobbied for them for the rest of her life.

She came east again and wrote poetry, essays and novels that revolved around culture, travel, literature and sophistication. They were especially popular because they always included a moral or religious lesson. In fact, she also became an editor of a widely read religious magazine and when she died, she left her estate to the educational organization who published it, The Order of the King’s Daughters and Sons.

Late in life, she wrote about Fitchburg:

“...the brisk New England village and the country town of yore,

To memory’s tear-dimmed vision is found, alas, no more”

...“The heart of this new city holds the heart of that old place,

And the whirling wheels of business that control the river’s course,

That wrest from wind and lightning their mighty secret force.”

## *Eliza Trask: Social Activist and Reformer*

Eliza Trask Hill was the daughter of Fitchburg’s Temperance reformer, George Trask. When she first married in 1866, she was a homemaker and raised three children, before becoming interested in the temperance movement and social reform. Like Mary Lowe Dickinson, she was active in “The King’s Daughters.”

Her old friend Helen Vickery wrote this about her work to improve society. She became widely known as an earnest worker for the WCTU [Women’s Christian Temperance Union].... She was State Superintendent for their work in prisons and jails. She went for many years the second Sunday in every month to visit the House of Correction and hold 9 o’clock service. She experienced a great

influence over the inmates, by her Christian womanliness, sympathy, and words of encouragement. She was always most kindly welcomed.

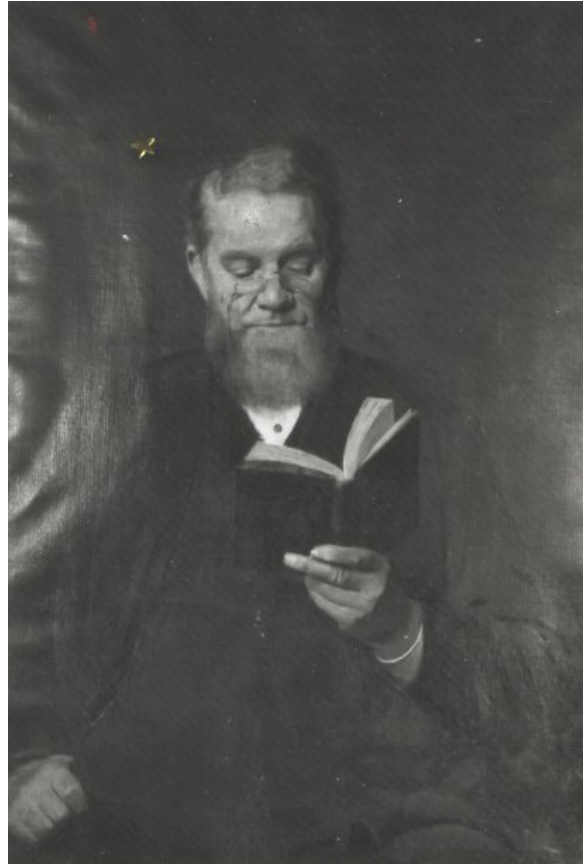
I had the pleasure of accompanying her to this Service on Sunday morning and it was to me a revelation. I saw my friend in a new light – she seemed like a being from another sphere and the faces of those men upturned to her I shall never forget. She helped them, encouraged them, and after their sentence was served, they would find their way to her door for a word of hope and for help if it was possible for her to give it in the way of work of some kind.

## *Artist and Museum Founder Eleanor Norcross*

An unusual woman for her times, Fitchburg-born Eleanor Norcross (1854 – 1923) pursued an artistic career, mostly while an expatriate in Paris. Supported by her father, the first mayor of Fitchburg, she studied art in New York and Paris, under some of the most highly regarded teachers of the day.

Her paintings are sophisticated works in the American Impressionist style and were highly regarded in Paris, where she exhibited in the annual art salons. She was also one of the founders of the more modern Salon d'Automne, which continues today. That Salon mounted a special retrospective of her work after her death in 1923. A decade before that, she was also slated to have a one-woman show at the Palais de Luxumburg art museum, a very rare honor for an American artist, but it was cancelled by the outbreak of World War I.

Her late series of the galleries and collection of Paris's museum of decorative arts (now part of the Louvre) shows that she was increasingly interested in museums and collections. She left her own collection of ceramics, tapestries, and paintings, along with a \$90,000 gift, to establish an art museum in Fitchburg. As a result, the Fitchburg Art Museum is one of the few museums in the United States to have been founded by a woman.



*Amasa Norcross, as painted by his daughter Eleanor Norcross*

## *Architect Josephine Wright Chapman*

This building – Worcester's 1903 Women's Club, now called Tuckerman Hall — was designed by the Fitchburg native and architect Josephine Wright Chapman. Born in 1867, she began work as an architect at the age of 30. Her largest local commission was St. Mark's Episcopal Church, in Leominster, which was paid for by Minerva C. Crocker, a wealthy woman from Fitchburg (also featured on page one.) In 1897, Chapman received her first commission, for the Craigie Arms building, at 4 University Road in Cambridge and now listed on the National Historic Register.



## *Modern Dancer Pioneers*

### *Marion Rice and Carolyn Rice Brown*

Marion Rice (1904 – 1995) was an American modern dance choreographer, dance teacher and producer. Rice was born in Hingham, Massachusetts, settled in Fitchburg, Massachusetts and founded the "Marion Rice Studio of the Dance" where she taught and performed Denishawn technique for over 60 years.

She produced both work by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn and her own choreography. She trained many dancers in Fitchburg, including her daughter Carolyn Rice Brown, principal dancer of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, her daughter-in-law Mona Irvine Rice, and her granddaughters Robin Rice and Rebecca Rice.

She also operated her own dance company, the Marion Rice Denishawn Dancers, and in 1980 staged her version of "Soaring," for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in Montreal. Marion Rice Denishawn performed at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in 1972, the Marymount Manhattan Theater (New York) in 1976 and City College (New York) in 1986 at the "Roots: Foundations of American Modern Dance Festival".



*Dancers Valerie Farias, Genevive Nass,  
Margie Lavin, Wendy Laakso, Elise Leger.*

#### **Carolyn Rice Brown**

Carolyn Rice Brown began studying dance with her mother, Marion Rice Brown. After graduating from Wheaton College and studying at the Denishawn School, she encountered Merce Cunningham and moved to New York to study at Julliard School with him. She soon became one of the founding members of his company,

in 1953 and his principal female dancer. She originated 40 of his works, frequently collaborating with Cunningham and John Cage in their creation..

Known as a dancer of great purity and virtuosity, she created a role in Cage's Theatre Piece of 1960 and danced on pointe in Robert Rauschenberg's first dance work Pelican. She is also a choreographer and an artistic consultant for the Cunningham Company. She has been awarded the Dance Magazine Award, five National Endowment for the Arts grants, and a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. In 2007, she published a memoir called *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham*.



*"Rehearsing" Left to right: Robin Rice, Carolyn Rice Brown and Marion Rice*

## *The Talented Janet Cragin*

Janet Mirijanian Cragin (1934-2014) loved and celebrated the history of Fitchburg, her hometown. She grew up in the Fitchburg Armenian community: the Mirijanian family owned a large dry cleaning company with outlets all over the city. She discovered the theatre as a student at Fitchburg High School and moved to New York City to attend the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and perform on and off-Broadway. When she came back to Fitchburg, she earned advanced degrees from Fitchburg State College and began to teach at Richardson and Applewild Schools.

But she was always on the stage: shaping decades of original work at Stratton Players theater and being honored with two New England Theatre Conference awards during her career there. When the Stratton Playhouse burned to the ground in 2011, Janet and her daughter Sally started the Riverfront Children's Theatre. After her death in 2014, the Fitchburg Cultural Alliance instituted an annual arts award for Fitchburg's students in her honor. Each year, young creatives are celebrated by the community both for their achievement and their future promise.



*Janet Cragin, in Fitchburg Bicentennial pageant in 1964*

## *Stella Forrest*

Artist and teacher Stella Forrest (maiden name Stockwell) grew up in a family of 12 children at 128 Marshall Road. After receiving a teaching certificate at the State Normal School of Fitchburg in 1904, she taught until her marriage 20 years later to Bert Lee Forrest, who worked at Union Screen Plate in Fitchburg.

When Bert lost a finger at work and had to stop working, Stella supported them, first through the WPA and then by starting a nursery school for children 3 to 5. She implemented a reward system, taught manners, better sleeping habits and willingness to try new food. She taught them about nature by wandering together at Marshall Farm and neighboring woods. The class foraged for wild plants that

she sold to pharmacists: she felt that this was a valuable moneymaking skill for working class children. After retiring, she exhibited her artworks in the region, including a show at the brand-new Wallace Civic Center in 1971. She died in 1982 at the age of 98.



## *Sister Susan*

### *An Artist and Religious Contemplative from Fitchburg*



Susan Mangam's family had moved to Fitchburg from Fall River in 1942, when she was four and her father was hired as Executive of the local Boy Scouts. They lived on Rindge Road, near a steep hillside known as Mayflower Woods. Susan skied through Mayflower Woods to the slopes at Burbank Hospital and skated by torchlight on Putt's pond.

students might be required to buy a box of silk-screened papers of three hundred different colors and be asked to produce four designs with the same four colors, none of which could resemble the other. Every effort was subject to detailed scrutiny, and the criticism could sometimes be very sharp. She felt the pain but believes in retrospect that the critiques were very good for her artistic development, a process which continues today, more than sixty years later.

In the early sixties, she participated in Martin Luther King's March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. As the marchers set off for the capitol building, the hatred of whites along the route was palpable. Susan and a friend marched with a fourteen-year-old black girl shielded between them. In this final stage of the march other whites from around the country had joined the procession, and the estimated number of participants grew to 25,000. The march ended at the capitol steps where Martin Luther King addressed the gathering. Less than five months later Lyndon Johnson signed the voting rights act into law. In the decades since, Susan has become a religious contemplative (in the Episcopalian church, only the third in the U.S.) who leads retreats for priests and others, in addition to continuing her painting. Her artwork is represented by Turtle Gallery of Deer Isle, Maine; she has also illustrated books on spirituality and prayer.

In high school, she started creating cover designs for "The Red and Gray" (the high school's literary magazine), and her artwork was coming to the attention of her teachers. Anna Nason, the art instructor, praised her work, and Lillian Taylor, who taught English to college-bound seniors, was particularly impressed. Susan feels that she and Lillian had a real meeting of minds. Lillian Taylor encouraged not only her artistic and musical talents, but her religious life as well.

She studied art and continued playing the cello as a student at the University of New Hampshire. She was then accepted for graduate study at Yale University School of Art and Architecture, a famously demanding school with a heavy course load and challenging projects. The

## *Agnes Fitzgibbon*



There were many teaching nuns in Fitchburg, they taught in the parochial schools set up by Catholic immigrants. Agnes Fitzgibbon was a girl who grew up in Fitchburg and decided to become a nun after her graduation from Fitchburg High School in 1917. Her career as a teacher took her to China from 1933 to 1951. Ultimately, she was thrown into prison by Mao's Communist Forces (who did not believe in religion.) When she returned to the United States in 1952, she said, "A strange

U.S.A. greeted me on my return, a country that had gone through a depression and a world war without me."



*Agnes' students in China*

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## The “Hello Girls” from Fitchburg

In November 1917, General John J. Pershing posted ads in newspapers throughout the country recruiting women who were bilingual in French and English to become switchboard operators for the American Expeditionary Force. While men were initially tried as switchboard operators, women were better able to work with switchboards, operating multiple lines at a time. Over 200 women joined the Signal Corps Female Telephone Operators Unit -- dubbed the “Hello Girls.”

Marie L. Ford was the first woman to join from Fitchburg: she had been an operator for New England Telegraph and Telephone. Marie was in the first contingent of telephone operators sent from Massachusetts to France, and she became one of the supervisors in the program.

On May 11, 1918, she wrote a letter that got published in the Fitchburg Sentinel; she described Paris as the most beautiful city in the world. Her letter talked about the air raid that occurred the first night she was there. She empathized with the French residents who looked forward to rainy weather since the Germans didn’t bomb in bad weather. She also described the women’s clothing – “The styles and jewelry are gorgeous. Clothes are very reasonable. Satin is the material most worn. I have not seen an American girl that could compete with the beauties of France.”

A. Maude McMullen left a stenographer job at J. Cushing and Company to serve overseas. She wrote from France: “We occupy four rooms in a typical old French house and live in the midst of a huge collection of antiques.” She did secretarial work with the peace commissioners after the armistice.

Estella (Stella) Viau had five brothers, all of whom were serving in the war, too. All three of the operators received their training in Lowell, learning switchboard operation, French and French geography. Stella remained in France several months after the war – in a letter published in January 1919, she described the telephone operators as busier than before the Armistice was signed.

Despite having taken an oath to the U.S. Army when they began their service, the women were denied Army veteran status after the war. They had been sworn in, issued uniforms, subject to army discipline, under fire at the front, and were decorated. However, at the end of the war, they were told they could not have been sworn into the Army

because US Army regulations state that “males” are sworn into the Army and said nothing about “persons” as the US Navy regulations did. It wasn’t until Jimmy Carter was President (in the 1970’s) that he signed an Executive Order granting the Hello Girls full veteran status. By that time, the youngest of them was almost eighty years old.



*Hello Girl Anna Maude McMullen*

## *Cora Coolidge during World War I*

Cora Helen Coolidge was born in Westminster, Massachusetts, in 1866. During her life, she would ascend to leadership role in education that no one would have imagined in the 1860's, even for a woman raised in a prominent family. Her father Frederick S. Coolidge was the first democratic congressman from Massachusetts and her brother, Marcus A. Coolidge, was mayor of Fitchburg, Massachusetts and a U.S. Senator. They were a learned family: the Coolidges frequently discussed the works and philosophies of Thoreau, Emerson, and other transcendentalists during supper, and Cora was made to read the Bible, English literature, history, and politics.

After graduating Cushing Academy and Smith College, Coolidge took classes at the University of Chicago and the University of Gottingen in Germany. She was recruited to serve as dean of Pennsylvania College for Women in 1906. In 1917, she left for wartime service as President of

the National Committee of the Bureau of Occupations, a war-time governmental committee engaged in finding jobs for women. In addition to her wartime work with the Bureau of Occupations, Coolidge was the highly active executive secretary of a Red Cross branch that included Fitchburg, Massachusetts and ten other towns.

Before the war, Coolidge was awarded a Doctor of Literature by the college and in 1922, she was named President of the Pennsylvania College for Women (now known as Chatham University.) Her impact on the school cannot be overstated. At the school, she created the country's first college program on social work; she also raised funds needed to shepherd them through the Great Depression. As a result, the university still plays an important role in throughout the Pittsburg region.

## *Globe-Trotting World War II Nurse*

Fitchburg native Isabel Demmon (b. 1917) was a 1940 graduate of the Burbank Hospital School of Nursing, where she served as Vice President and Secretary of her class.

After enlisting in the Army Nurse Corps, Lt. Demmon was initially stationed at Lovell General Hospital at Ft. Devens. After four months on base, she was transferred to India. By 1944, Isabel had been promoted to First Lieutenant. She served in India for a total of two and a half years.



*“Zammy” (Ann Zambon) on left and Isabel Demmon (“Demmy”) on right, in India*

She explained her motivation for enlisting to the *Worcester Telegram*: “I wanted to join because there was a war and I was a nurse. It was that simple; I wouldn't have done anything else.” After her discharge, she attended Boston University where she received a B.S. in Nursing in 1950, then served as assistant chief of nursing at the VA Hospital in

Manchester, NH.

She returned to Fitchburg frequently to visit family and march in the Memorial Day Parade, where she was often joined by her twin sister, Priscilla, who served in the Coast Guard (SPARS). (They also had a brother, Phillip, who served in the Air Force, and another sister, Arlene, who was a pharmacist's mate in the WAVES and was stationed in Hawaii).



*First Lieutenant Isabel Demmon photographed by Holland-McFall Studios Rantoul, Illinois*

Her memoir of her time in the military, entitled *The Face is the Same*, was included in the nursing collection at Boston University Library. She also published a book of poetry entitled *A Sheath of Light*. One of her poems, “Child of the Sea”, was inscribed in braille as part of Martin Eichinger's multisensory sculpture “Aqueous”, which was installed on the grounds of the Michigan School for the Blind.



## *Fitchburg's "Unco-operative Women"*

Fitchburg has always been a very giving and caring community as is evidenced by the records and old city registers (City of Fitchburg 1892 through 1896). While researching an entirely different subject, I came across a register listing the money given to the poor and insane being housed in The Almshouse, a community farm.

While many good citizens donated food and clothing to the poor families, others paid for things such as shoes and hats for children of the widows and widowers. Many widows and their children actually lived in the Almshouse, also called the Poor Farm. The doctors who treated the residents were given produce and meat, along with a small salary as compensation for their medical services. The farm was located on a plot of land adjacent to what is now Wanoosnoc Road. The farm not only provided shelter for the poor and indigent of the city, it was also used as a home for the so-called "mentally insane."

In the late 1800's and early 1900's there was a sudden increase in what was being called "insane women". While trying to research the cause it became evident that as medicine became more advanced, and fewer women were dying during childbirth, the population of older women was on the increase. This in turn was resulting in more and more women reaching menopause. It seems that women were "talking back to their husbands, becoming uncooperative, crying for no reason and experiencing bouts of melancholy." This terrible malady was filling the Almshouse and resulted in many women being sent miles away to the Worcester Lunatic Hospital. Menopausal women were considered mentally ill. Those sent there spent many months being treated for what we now know is a normal phase of aging.

*Written by Judith Normandin*

## *Margaret Kielty*

Margaret Kielty was the daughter of a pharmacist who established an Americanization program for the City of Fitchburg and created new English language classes for immigrant adults in the Fitchburg Public Schools. She also published two books on the subject and was known nationwide for her expertise.

In 1939, she was asked to work with the American State Department on English language learning. As a result,

she lectured all over America, teaching educators how to use her method for teaching English as a Foreign Language. People from around the United States came to visit Fitchburg to learn about her experimental programs as early as the 1930's, when Kielty was still in her early thirties. Over the decades, she created close relationships with many generations of new Americans and had friends and admirers in every neighborhood of Fitchburg.



## The Controversy over Women's Suffrage

On August 18, 2020 the United States quietly celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the U.S. Constitution's 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. Before the United States was established, women had the right to vote in several colonies, but within twenty years of the Constitution's signing male-only voting was mandated nationwide. Over the years, some states and territories allowed women to vote, but there was no national right to do so.

Today we take it for granted that women can vote, but there was considerable opposition to the idea from men and women alike. In February 1918, the Massachusetts

Suffrage League discussed the fight during their winter business meeting in Fitchburg. They would allocate \$600 to Oklahoma to counter the financial assistance that had been sent by Massachusetts anti-suffrage groups to defeat the Amendment vote in the state.

It wasn't all about money, either. Twenty-five suffragettes, as they were called, were jailed in February 1919 for protesting President Woodrow Wilson's visit to Boston, many refusing to give their names or pay the \$5 fine assessed them. In fact, some were jailed repeatedly, including 30-day sentences meted out for a 1917 Washington D.C. protest.



This newsletter on Women's History 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.

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 781 Main Street,  
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## *Laurelwood Garden Club*

The Laurelwood Garden Club of Fitchburg will soon celebrate its 60th anniversary: it was formed in 1965. In the years since, it has transformed many of Fitchburg's public spaces by planning trees, shrubs and flowers in the Upper Common, Monument Park, around the Fitchburg Public Library, and bordering many Fitchburg roads. Since the renovation of City Hall, they have cultivated the

historic horse trough of summer flowers that forms the centerpiece of Renaissance Park, next to the City Hall. That garden is dedicated to their longtime president, Julia Casey.

One of their past programs was spearheaded by Casey and Heide Fandreyer, a club member and native of Germany who grew her first plants from seeds in 1951. That's the year her family fled from East Germany to West Germany. Later, as a member of Fitchburg's garden club, Fandreyer volunteered to teach gardening to inmates at the MCI Center in Lancaster. This successful program provided both therapy and practical job skills for women leaving incarceration.



The Fitchburg Historical Society has a large collection of records from the Laurelwood Garden Club available to researchers. The club is still an active presence in Fitchburg, helping organize Art in Bloom, among other projects.