



NOVEMBER 2020

With almost a year between the last two newsletters, this newsletter marks what we hope will be a quarterly publication cycle. Our goal is to use the newsletter to highlight current Society activities, make people aware of our resources, and draw from previous newsletters and the Society's archives to help tell the story of Fitchburg's history. We welcome your contributions and story suggestions.

BOARD ELECTION RESULTS

Due to the pandemic, the annual meeting was not held, and the election for Board member positions could not be held in person. Information was provided in the August newsletter about the positions up for election and the candidates. Members were asked to respond via email by September 5, 2020, with the names of any additional candidates. None were received, and the Board unanimously accepted the slate of candidates, Eric Amlie, Adrienne Imilkowski, Carol Kinney, and Barb Tereba. These individuals will serve a three-year term that will end in April 2023. Thank you to these individuals and the other board members for their time and dedication.

DOCUMENTING HISTORY IN THE MAKING

If you ask people their idea of the purpose of a historical society, most of them would probably say it has to do documenting and sharing information about the past – you know, "history." But another role of a historical society is to document the current world so that future generations have a source of information. During the past few months, the Fitchburg Historical Society has begun several projects that highlight that role. Two of these are the Verona Road Project, and the City's response to provide government services during a pandemic.

The *Verona Road project* in Madison and Fitchburg hasn't taken forever. It just seems that way. The Fitchburg Historical Society is seeking the remembrances of residents who lived through it, as well as some of us who lived through the historic traffic jams that the road was famous for. Please email us at woodedarchives@gmail.com or reply to our Facebook page if you are willing to share your experiences. (A poll on how many people unintentionally took a trip to Verona after the McKee Road left-turn option was removed may appear in a future newsletter.)

How is the City of Fitchburg functioning in the pandemic? The Fitchburg Historical Society and FACTv launched an effort to answer that question with a Talking Fitchburg segment. Catherine Schneider, vice-president of FHS,

turned the tables on Jeremy Crosby, community media services manager for Fitchburg, and put him in the role of answering questions instead of asking them. Crosby said Fitchburg was fortunate in having the technology available not only for staff to work from home, but in broadcasting city meetings seamlessly wherever the participants are physically located.

Future segments are planned for other city services, such as the library. A guest article at the end of this newsletter describes how each of the four elections held in 2020 were conducted in the midst of a pandemic.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OPERATIONS

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, city buildings have remained closed to the public since mid-March. The Society's archives and office within the library have not been available, nor have the meeting rooms. The Board has shifted to holding its meetings virtually, using the Zoom platform. Members continue to check and respond to email and voicemail, and mail is forwarded periodically to the President. If you need to contact the Society or a Board member, the best method is to send an email to woodedarchives@gmail.com.



Acquisitions to our collections haven't stopped either. Earlier this year, the estate of Ruth Skelly Trameri and Tom Skelly provided FHS with images of Leo Skelly, who farmed in Syene until the early 1950s. He is shown with his team of horses in the early 1920s, and a decade later, Leo with his fox hunting companions, whose names have been lost to history.



If you have photographs or other materials that you think may be of interest to the Society, send an email with your contact information. Our space is limited, but we may be able to make digital copies of some items, keep physical copies of limited materials, or refer you to another Society that has more storage space available. Digital contributions are especially welcome.

SWAN CREEK SEWING CIRCLE IS 105 YEARS YOUNG

On Wednesday, December 1, 1915, a group of women met at the home of Amanda Culp, or as she would have been known at the time, Mrs. Fred Culp. The purpose was to form a group with the mission of "promoting neighborliness" for the women in the Swan Creek School District. The group is among the oldest women's group in the country, and was featured on a segment of Nancy Zieman's, *Sewing with Nancy*. Due to its popularity at a time when there were few social opportunities for rural women, membership was usually restricted to daughters and daughters-in-law of members. This was waived at times, and periodically, new members were invited. The group continued to meet the first Wednesday of the month, with rare exceptions for special events, such as a local fair.





This year, the Circle intended to celebrate its 105th anniversary with a jubilee event featuring its service activities over the past century. Although the pandemic has limited its in person meetings, meetings have continued via Zoom – a technology that's a far cry from the hand crank telephones that were in the homes

of the lucky few when the Circle was founded. The detailed minutes from the 105 years include the names of many names featured in Fitchburg's history, such as Blaney, Haight, Jones, Kellor, Kinney, Stoneman, and Uphoff.

The photo in the upper right is the Culp farmhouse. The lower left shows several founding members before riding in a parade in Oregon. The lower right is a more recent photo of a service project to make pillows for women recovering from breast cancer surgery. The Circle has adapted to the times with a Facebook page, where visitors often share their memories of a grandmother for whom Swan Creek Sewing Circle was an important part of her life.



Elections 2020 Thorough the Eyes of a Fitchburg Poll Worker

Sonjia Short, a Fitchburg resident, describes this year's elections from her unique perspective as a Chief Election Inspector for District 3.

When my husband Mike and I moved to Fitchburg, Muriel Stoneman encouraged me to volunteer. Around 2005, I finally did, taking a vacation day from work each election to serve. Over the years, I worked at three of the four districts, wherever help was needed. Because I was very comfortable using computers, I usually worked on voter registration. When I retired in 2015, I took the training to become a Chief Elections Inspector. Patti Anderson, the City Clerk at the time, assigned me to be Chief of District 3. I've been serving there ever since.

February 18, 2020 primary: We were excited to use the Badger Book electronic poll book system and software, a replacement for paper poll books, for the first time. The system was developed by the Wisconsin Elections Commission in 2017. It is used to check in and register voters and to process absentee ballots. It speeds these transactions significantly and creates reports for end-of-night processes. The data from Badger Books is downloaded onto a data stick at the end of the night. That data stick is used to upload the data directly to the statewide WisVote system by the City Clerk after the election. The new system reduces human error and makes balancing numbers after the polls close considerably easier.

April 7, 2020 Spring and Presidential Preference election: The COVID-19 pandemic had struck by this time. Most of our regular election workers are retired seniors, considered to be a vulnerable population. Most decided not to risk working, which left us quite short-handed. Fortunately, Governor Evers activated Wisconsin National Guard troops to assist at the polls statewide. Six to eight young men and women were assigned to each Fitchburg polling location. (Sgt. Monica Miggins, a Soldier with the 1158th Transportation Company out of Beloit, Wisconsin, is shown sanitizing a voter's hand before he enters one of Fitchburg's polling stations. Photo credit Spc. Emma Anderson, Wisconsin National Guard.) They were fun to work with, listened carefully to instructions, organized themselves efficiently, and quickly completed the



tasks I assigned. They helped set up the polling locations, helped process absentee ballots, cleaned voting booths, and helped monitor and maintain social distancing among our voters, then assisted with take-down at the end of the night.

This election was the first election for which we implemented social distancing, placing tape on the floor at six-foot intervals and limiting the number of people in the room as needed. All workers wore masks and sneeze guards were used for all check-in, registration, and ballot stations. Workers were assigned to spray and wipe down voting booths and pens with sanitizer after each voter.

Despite our preparations, I was caught off-guard when our first curbside voter told me she was COVID-19 positive. Fortunately, I was wearing a mask, even though she was not. I quickly put on gloves to handle her photo ID and ballot, as well as the pen and clipboard she used. I sprayed everything she touched thoroughly with disinfectant, including her ballot. We allowed it to dry before processing through the tabulator and storing it with the other ballots.

August 11 Partisan Primary: Unlike the April election, enough people volunteered to work the election, and National Guard assistance wasn't needed. COVID-19 safety procedures were refined. We strongly encouraged voters to wear masks. Curbside voting workers were issued face guards and gloves, as well as shields. We requested that voters use their own pens to mark their ballots. Although in-person voting was light, with only 300 people at my polling location in the Wyndham Garden Hotel ballroom, we processed a record number of absentee ballots, about 1200 in my district.

November 3 General Election: We knew that this election November 3, 2020, would involve considerably more interest than the elections earlier in the year. That certainly was the case.

Absentee voting. Concern for voter safety generated a significant increase in absentee ballot requests. Late legal challenges about who qualified to be on the ballot meant that clerks could not mail the absentee ballots until the Wisconsin Supreme Court made a final determination. City clerks had only a few days after the Court's decision to mail the ballots by the state mandated deadline. City Clerk Tracy Oldenburg enlisted the Chief Elections Inspectors' help. Mailing the ballots was not as simple as slapping a label on an envelope. There were four different ballots for District 3, depending on which congressional and school districts people lived in. For each requested ballot, the correct ballot had to be identified based on the address. The mailing and return envelopes had to be labeled, stamped, and initialed. The folded ballot had to be assembled and inserted along with the instruction sheets and return envelopes. There were several ways to return the completed ballots, including by mail or at the dedicated drop box in City Hall.

Despite the encouragement of absentee voting, as the election date grew closer, some people were concerned about mailed absentee ballots. Would they arrive in time to be counted? Would they arrive at all? The City Clerk anticipated a greater use of in-person absentee voting at the Community Center the two weeks leading up to election day. Once again, the Chiefs and other election inspectors were called upon to help City staff with in-person absentee voting, "early voting". Early voting began October 20th and ran through October 30th. The first day there were over 500 voters, with an average of more than 200 voters per day over the next 10 days. Many voters chose to drop off their absentee ballots in the drop box at City Hall during this time.

Curbside voting was also an option, and people with active cases of COVID came. The safety procedures were refined. Voters were asked to call ahead so we could prepare to safely serve them. We donned masks, shields, and gloves. We talked to voters through their car windows and had them show us their photo IDs through the window. We wrote down their name and address on a log sheet and retrieved the proper ballot. Voters were asked to use their own pens and then were given a clipboard with the ballot and the absentee envelope. The voter marked and folded the ballot, placed it into the envelope, which we watched them sign. We wore gloves to take their envelope and the clipboard, sprayed the paper thoroughly with disinfectant and only after it had dried, signed the envelope as witness and put it into the bin with the other envelopes.

Election day. My election day duties started at 6AM when I arrived at the hotel to turn on equipment and prepared to get the new workers started so we could promptly open the polls at 7AM. There were already two voters waiting when I arrived. I delivered my Inspector's Statement to City Hall at 11PM that evening. It was a long and very busy day. I'm proud of my workers who did a great job, many without the advance face-to-face training that they would typically have received except for COVID-19.

We weren't sure what to expect on election day, but we knew it would be busy. We received training on how to handle disruptive behavior. Our police department was ready to respond if needed. We had just the opposite atmosphere. A vendor set up a food cart and someone provided live music in the parking lot for most of the afternoon. While the line of voters reached around the block (mostly because everyone was standing six feet apart), no one seemed to mind the wait, and all were very patient and respectful when they interacted with us. Over 1000 people came to vote in person at the Wyndham.

Our lines were long in part because so many people needed to register before they voted. They were not just young people who were voting for the first time. Many had moved and needed to change their addresses. One 50+ year-old confided to us that he had never voted before. Happily, most of the people brought the necessary documentation to prove where they lived so they could register. We had to turn a small handful of folks away due to not meeting the 28-day residency requirement or missing documents.

Provisional votes. People who were registered and didn't have a valid photo ID could vote Provisionally. They could fill out a ballot and seal it in a special envelope that was held at City Hall until 4 PM on Friday afternoon. If the voter returned to City Hall with a valid ID by that time, their vote would be counted. On the Monday after the election, a Board of Canvas (several of the Chiefs along with the City Clerk) convened at City Hall. The Board members reviewed all provisional (PV) ballots. The PV ballots from voters who have returned to city hall with a valid photo ID were opened and their votes added to the preliminary results. Only then are the election results confirmed and considered official. While several provisional ballots were issued, only three people city-wide returned with the required ID to have their ballots counted after the election.

Absentee ballot processing. My crew of 14, seven in each of two shifts, worked from the time the polls opened at 7AM until late afternoon to process approximately 3,000 absentee ballots. Over 40 ballots had to be re-made so the tabulator could read them. Some ballots were damaged, some people did not follow directions and used colored ink or used checkmarks rather than filling in the circles. If we can determine voter intent, we are allowed by code to remake the ballots so the machine can read them. As with all processes, this needs to be done with two people to assure it is done accurately.

Tabulating results. At the end of the night after the polls closed, I sent the results from each tabulator (the machines that voters feed their ballots and we feed absentee ballots into) by modem to the County and ran reports from both the tabulators and the Badger Books. Any discrepancies in the numbers are reconciled or explained. The ballots are hand sorted by reporting district, absentee ballots separated from regular ballots, remade ballots stacked separately, and write-ins identified and recorded. All ballots are then sealed in bags and kept in the vault at City Hall for no less than 22 months. In the event of a recount, the ballot bags will be taken to a central location in Dane County where the ballots will be recounted.

Throughout the year, City Clerk Tracy and her staff at City Hall were outstanding, providing excellent support for all of us workers with grace and patience, despite working long hours before, during and after each election. All of us are dedicated to making sure that all qualified voters can vote and that their ballots are accurately counted. My father served in the US Army and was a Prisoner of War for 14 months during WWII. Voting in our elections is a privilege that my family has always taken very seriously, and I am proud to do my part to help.