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# UNDERGROUND

A PUBLICATION OF *The Mount Observer*  
Mount Wachusett Community College's independent student newspaper



## **HISTORICAL ROOTS**

*Uncovering the role of Fitchburg residents in the local, regional, and national fight against slavery*

## **STUDENT ACTIVISM**

*Students' pivotal contributions to the creation of Fitchburg Abolitionist Park: a story of dedication and advocacy*

## **MURALIST UNVEILED**

*Local artist pays homage to the city's role in movement to abolish slavery*

FITCHBURG ABOLITIONIST PARK: THE VISIONARY CONTINUATION OF A GREAT HISTORY

# WE STAND TOGETHER.



In solidarity with our community and Friends of Fitchburg Abolitionist Park, Mount Wachusett Community College proudly commemorates those who fought for the abolition of slavery.



**Mount Wachusett**  
*Community College*

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

## What the Abolitionist Park Means to Me

By Isabelle Mascary

My journey with the Friends of Fitchburg Abolitionist Park began in 2022, attending a mural unveiling that year as part of my work with the *Observer*, bringing my children with me on a beautiful fall day. As I entered the park wearing my bright yellow sweater, a book on a nearby information table caught my attention. It was called, *She Took a Stand: The Story of Frances Drake and the Underground Railroad*. I inquired about it and learned that it was part of a raffle. I thought to myself, “I want this book.” Must have been something in the air that day because later in the event, I won it.

That was the day I met Simone Blake, a remarkable woman whose passion for Fitchburg’s abolitionist history left me in awe. She spoke with fervor and enthusiasm, and her passion was evident in her voice. This was the first time in my life that I met a person in the flesh who was invested in Fitchburg’s abolitionist history who was not Black. At the time, I did not know that was going to be my last encounter with her, but I was honored to have met her.

I was also blessed with the opportunity to meet the muralist, Digi Chivetta. Able to relate to her speech, I was once the only Black child in a predominantly white community surrounded by faces I could not relate to nor could they relate to me. Looking at Chivetta’s artwork in the park gave me a piece of healing that not many can understand; that little Black girl with the purple puffs she painted looks like me and many others.

It bothered me to learn that like the original abolitionists, those trying to find a space for the Abolitionist Park also encountered resistance, even from the city council itself. This battle reminded me of how we as a group still have to fight a system tooth and nail just to



simply have our voices heard, to be acknowledged and fight for change to occur. Did their opposition have to do with unconscious bias, or like their possible ancestors, even racism? Why uphold one side of history and try to suppress the other?

I do know that commemorating the abolitionists that came long before us is crucial for understanding the historical context of slavery and abolitionism and continued efforts to combat racism. The Abolitionist Park serves as a powerful symbol of the community’s values and the hope for a more equitable future.

Although much of Black history has been whitewashed, the Abolitionist Park provides powerful representation of people of color in a public space. It celebrates Black leaders.

It also calls for unity in working together to achieve social change, even when differences exist. It makes me proud to know that there are individuals working hard to prevent the erasure of Black history, and even more proud of the city where I reside.



Photo by Eclipse Boudoir

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# TAKING A STAND FOR ABOLITION

## Fitchburg Community Has Deep Roots in Movement's History



Benjamin Snow Jr.

BY DAVID-THIBAUT-MUÑOZ

*This summary is based on combined research efforts on the part of Mount Wachusett students and the Friends of Fitchburg Abolitionist Park Historical Accuracy Committee, led by founding Board members Simone Blake and Ruby Hall.*

Fitchburg's involvement in the Abolitionist Movement began in the mid-1830s, with local women organizing anti-slavery fairs to raise funds, awareness, and action to end slavery in the United States. These fairs continued into the 1850s. By 1842, when abolitionist Benjamin Snow Jr. and others formed the Trinitarian Congregational Church and the Worcester North Chapter of William Lloyd Garrison's

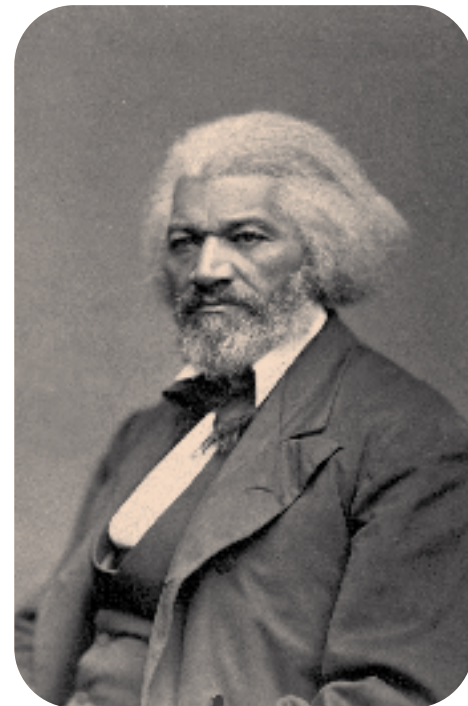
American Anti-Slavery Society after breaking from another church, Fitchburg's women had already established a strong base of anti-slavery activists. Benjamin Snow Jr. later served as Vice President of the Massachusetts chapter of the American Anti-Slavery Society from 1844-1860.

The Trinitarian Church hosted anti-slavery and abolitionist speaking events, which may have included prominent abolitionists as Frederick Douglass, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, William Lloyd Garrison, Lucy Stone, Wendell Phillips, Henry Clarke Wright, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lucy Larcom, George Thompson, Theodore Weld, Ford Douglas, Ezra Harvey Haywood, and the Hutchinson Family singers. Many of these individuals are listed by Benjamin Snow Jr's daughter, Martha, as being guests in their home, formerly located at the intersection of Day and Green streets.

Martha Snow Wallace, in her 1915 memoir "My Father's House," writes that their home, serving as a depot on the Underground Railroad, hosted individuals seeking freedom, including Shadrach Minkins and Josiah Henson. The story of Minkins' escape from being returned to slavery after being arrested under the Fugitive Slave Act in 1851 is also connected to Leominster's history through abolitionist Frances Drake and to Samuel Crocker of West Fitchburg, whose homes also served as depots on the Underground Railroad.

Josiah Henson's 1849 narrative was used to develop the titular character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel Uncle Tom's Cabin, which sold over 1.5 million copies and was one of the primary instruments used to raise national consciousness on slavery's horrors.

In 1850, Fitchburg residents submitted a petition to the Massachusetts Legislature in response to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, stating the following: "We respectfully ask you to declare that any person who engages in arresting, holding or returning a fugitive slave... be forever incapable of acting as a juror in any court of this State, or of holding any State,



Frederick Douglass



A sketch of the original Trinitarian Congregational Church (left), and the Trinitarian Congregational Church bell, now in the steeple of the Ayer Federate Church (right).

County or City or Town office – unless relieved from such merited disgrace by pardon... And we also ask you to pass a law which shall punish with fine and imprisonment any State, County, City, or Town officer who shall, during his continuance in such office, aid in any way in arresting, holding or returning a fugitive slave..."

In 1855, Fitchburg residents traveled to Lawrence, Kansas via train, steamboat, and ox cart to prevent Kansas from entering the Union as a slave state. In 1856, pro-slavery guerrillas attacked Lawrence, killing 55 residents. Soon after, abolitionist John Brown responded to the guerillas with an armed attack. In 1861, the Union admitted Kansas as a free state, and former Fitchburg resident Dr. Charles Robinson, who led the formerly mentioned 1855 anti-slavery Fitchburg contingency, became its first governor. Frances Snow, son of Fitchburg's Benjamin Snow Jr., eventually became the University of Kansas's first chancellor. In 1863, the Confederacy raided

Lawrence, KS, and 180 residents died. Among them were former Fitchburg residents Joseph Lowe, Josiah Trask (son of George Trask, pastor of the Trinitarian Church), and Frederic Kimball.

In 1855, Solomon Northup possibly performed his own play "The Free Slave" at Fitchburg City Hall. His story was later made into the 2013 film "12 Years A Slave." An 1855 advertisement in the Sentinel and Enterprise newspaper promoted the play with admission priced at 15 cents, stating

**"In 1850, Fitchburg residents submitted a petition to the [MA] Legislature in response to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act."**

that he alone is worth 25 cents just to see the "veritable Solomon."

In 1862, Congressman Goldsmith Fox Bailey petitioned Congress on behalf of Fitchburg residents seeking to abolish slavery. That same year Benjamin Snow Jr. purchased a former Mississippi plantation bell at auction in 1862 and vowed that it would not be rung until every person in the United States was free. The bell, previously used to call enslaved individuals to work, had been confiscated by the Confederacy to be melted into cannon fodder, and then by the Union Army upon taking New Orleans. On January 1, 1863, the bell in Trinitarian Church rang for the first time to announce the Emancipation Proclamation. In 1872, it was sold when the Trinitarian Congregational Church disbanded and merged with the Rollstone Congregational Church. Today, the bell is in the steeple of the Ayer Federated Church.

During the 1863 Civil War draft, while riots and attacks against Black citizens occurred in other cities, Fitchburg residents lined up to participate in the armed fight against slavery. Abolitionist leaders like Frederick Douglass rallied abolitionists to join the war effort and played a crucial role in convincing President Lincoln to include abolition alongside the Union's preservation, as a goal of the war. The Emancipation Proclamation not only abolished slavery in the South but also inspired formerly enslaved individuals to fight on behalf of the Union.

In 1873, Fitchburg dedicated its Civil War Monument as a poignant reminder of residents' decades-long activism to end slavery. The monument located at 610 Main street reads: "In honor of her brave and loyal citizens who periled their lives in the great struggle which secured the unity of the republic and the freedom of an oppressed race."

## MOUNT STUDENTS HELPED BRING FITCHBURG ABOLITIONIST PARK TO LIFE



The park's founding cohort from MWCC, including Colby Kazanjian (second from left) and David Thibault-Muñoz (bottom center)

BY ELYSIAN ALDER

The Abolitionist Park in Fitchburg exists to commemorate the abolitionist movement. It was made possible by dedicated community members and Mount Wachusett Community College students. “Change is long-term and it’s hard work. You have to keep the fire alive,” explained David Thibault-Muñoz, co-chair of the Friends of Fitchburg Abolitionist Park board and a professor at Mount Wachusett Community College. “It does help that every semester I had a fresh, new set of students. Almost 100 Mount students have been involved since summer 2017. Without their vision, research, activism, and leadership, there wouldn’t be a Fitchburg Abolitionist Park.”

One such student is Colby Kazanjian, a former student in the 2017 First-Year Experience (FYE) class at Mount Wachusett Community College who played a role in bringing the idea of Abolitionist Park to life. “Our class helped buff up the idea. We did research and created a presentation for the board,” explained Kazanjian. “We researched old city property lines to narrow down a meaningful lot for the park, within the original property lines of Benjamin Snow’s land.”

Kazanjian said, “The most challenging part was digging through documents when we were finding the old property lines. Another hard aspect was the physical work. We

were tasked with clearing up the brush in a few lots. At one point, we went door to door to gauge the interest in a park and relay the intriguing history of the area.”

She reflects on her contributions positively and considers the park a meaningful asset to the community. “I’m glad I was of any help to this park. I hope it becomes a lovely place in the neighborhood and helps people appreciate Fitchburg and the city’s contributions to history,” she said.

Finally, when asked to choose three words to describe the experience of working on the project, Kazanjian said, “Interesting, challenging, and insightful.”

Tristan Soucy, a third-year student at Mount Wachusett Community College, was introduced to the Abolitionist Park project through MWCC’s Gateway to College program. Soucy’s cohort participated in fundraising for the park as part of their class and attended board meetings to learn from board members.

**“We need to address our racist past and present in order to move forward towards an antiracist future.”**

**- Azucena Thibault-Muñoz**

In 2018, Soucy organized the fundraiser for engraved bricks to be placed in the park, resulting in over 100 donations with the help of his advisor, David Thibault-Muñoz. Reflecting on his contributions, Soucy stated, “It’s a small part of the park, but it makes me proud.” The symbolic value of the bricks goes beyond their size, representing the significance of preserving local history, a cause that resonates with Soucy.

Soucy’s involvement didn’t end when his cohort and their fundraising assignment did. “I found myself drawn to the history the project was constructed around,” he explained. “As I’ve been on the board, I’ve found the community growing around the park, in its board, the people involved, and



Azucena Thibault-Muñoz

the residents who come to our events has been a reason to stay.”

The park has hosted multiple celebratory events with hopes to continue to do so.

“I was lucky enough to meet my fellow board members in person at events held at the park,” said Soucy, who co-emceed last year’s Juneteenth celebration and the ribbon-cutting ceremony. “The lot is being repurposed to offer the community a nice place to go outdoors. The community too, as I mentioned before... everyone is just so passionate.” Soucy remains committed to preserving the park and the community around it. “If I could describe it in three words, they would be community, history, and inspiration.”

Azucena Thibault-Muñoz, a Pathways Early College Experience Program student at the Mount, has been involved in the project since her father and his students presented the idea for the park back in 2017. She joined the board at the start of the fall 2021 semester and became its secretary shortly thereafter. She has participated in landscaping and cleanup events organized by supporters of the park and attended discussions surrounding design decisions.

“Our board has faced many obstacles to get to where we are now,” she admitted. “Initially, a few people were not entirely supportive of the park, but after some time and effort, more and more people came out in support.”

Thibault-Muñoz sees Abolitionist Park as a reminder that every voice and action counts in the fight against systemic racial injustices. She emphasizes the need for community solidarity in holding institutions and elected officials accountable and speaking out against inhumane policies.

“The park will be a place where classes can visit for field trips, adding to each lesson on Black, abolitionist, and Underground Railroad history,” Thibault-Muñoz explained. “We need to address our racist past and present in order to move forward towards an antiracist future. The idea of ‘colorblindness’ erases years of trauma, revolution, and progress. The park serves as a resource for people to understand and appreciate these truths, and provides residents of color with a place that recognizes the contributions and achievements of

Black people and all those who fought for a better America.” Thibault-Muñoz is proud and honored to have been a part of the creation of the park. “Working on this park... has in three words been eye-opening, collaborative, and inspiring.”




The journey to create the park was not without challenges. The FYE students of Kazanjian’s class at the Mount, with the help of advisor David Thibault-Muñoz, submitted a petition to the Fitchburg City Council in 2017 to consider the creation of a commemorative park at 116 Day Street, an abandoned property. Dozens of students and community members pushed city officials for an entire year, even volunteering and cleaning up the abandoned lot; the City Council ultimately said no in late 2018, citing reasons such as lack of parking, lack of visibility/lighting, concerns for loitering, and a lack of capacity for the Department of Public Works to maintain the park. “Despite the students’ response to each concern, the city still voted no to allowing us to create the park on Day Street,” commented David Thibault-Muñoz.

Their determination was not in vain. Fitchburg State University offered the use of their land at 42-50 Snow Street, and students and community members came together to create the Friends of Fitchburg Abolitionist Park and raise funds for its development. Finally, in 2020, construction began, and through collective tireless efforts, the park has become a reality. It stands as a testament to the passion and perseverance of every community member and student involved and serves as an inspirational tribute to the abolitionist history of Fitchburg.



The engraved bricks lay in the Abolitionist Park as part of a fundraiser organized by Tristan Soucy

Photos courtesy of David Thibault-Muñoz

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Photos courtesy of David Thibault-Muñoz

# FRIENDS OF FITCHBURG ABOLITIONIST PARK BOARD



## David Thibault-Muñoz

BY ISABELLE MASCARY

David Thibault-Muñoz began his journey towards becoming an activist in 1995. He was a community organizer in the early 2000s in Chicago and now in his hometown of Fitchburg, Massachusetts.

This background has inspired him to bring his First Year Experience students at MWCC into this tradition, and helped forge their role in the project. “I wanted my students to walk away not only having a knowledge of self, their beliefs, and where those beliefs came from but also to challenge them to listen to each other to become more worldly thinkers.”

One of Thibault-Muñoz’s hopes for the park is that it can be used as an educational resource to share the stories of local history that he has also learned over the years. For example, the fact that Fitchburg abolitionists played a role in the escape

of Shadrach Minkins after his arrest in Boston under the Fugitive Slave Act, a law that required individuals to report anyone who had escaped from slavery or face jail time or fines. Minkins was brought to Frances Drake, an important abolitionist woman in Leominster. From there, he was brought to Benjamin Snow’s home, then to Samuel Crocker’s West Fitchburg home, where a meeting was being held for the abolitionist movement. His presence inspired other abolitionists to fight against the Fugitive Slave Act, and funds were raised to help him reach Lake Champagne, where he would escape to safety by crossing the frozen lake on foot. “It’s an important part of local history and also the connection to Fitchburg,” Thibault-Muñoz said enthusiastically, after recounting the story.

In Thibault-Muñoz’s eyes, the park celebrates the legacy of activism in America. “One of the things that makes America great is the consistency of people standing up to the government and fighting for change,” he said. “Democracy doesn’t end at the voting booth. You don’t go in and that’s the end of your duties. You have to hold these individuals accountable.”

## Dr. Danette Day

BY ISABELLE MASCARY

Dr. Danette Day, Co-President of the Friends of Fitchburg Abolitionist Park and associate professor at Fitchburg State University, did not initially aspire to become a teacher despite her extensive educational background. “My first passion was around television production,” she shared, explaining how she was drawn to the power of media for telling and hearing stories and educating people. Her skills in writing scripts, engaging people, and assessments transferred into teaching.

David Thibault-Muñoz and Day became involved in the project in 2017 when Thibault-Munoz invited people to clean a lot alongside his first-year experience (FYE) class, with intentions to create a pocket park. “I wanted to know what this park is,” Day explained. “I didn’t even know what a pocket park was. So that gave me another reason to go.” Day enjoyed the opportunity to reconnect with a friend and contribute her time to support his efforts.

Day felt a strong motivation to be involved in building something that would honor the enslaved African Americans and

freed people who were still facing persecution during the fugitive slave act. “Who wouldn’t want to be a part of a project like that?” said Day. “I lived here for about twenty-two odd years and from my experience there has been contention around racial relations. But if people learn about the past of Fitchburg and take pride in the fact that there were people doing this work, then they can understand it’s part of their history. Why not keep that history alive and continue to do the right thing?”

The Fitchburg Abolitionist Park serves as a place for people to rejuvenate and find solace while being in a place that pays tribute to integral local history. Day described the park as “beautiful and welcoming, with the power to uplift spirits.” She emphasized the importance of history as a reminder that “beauty can emerge from struggle.” Day found inspiration in a quote by Marian Wright Eldeman, who said, “Service is the very purpose of life, it’s the rent we pay for living on the planet.”



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## FRIENDS OF FITCHBURG ABOLITIONIST PARK BOARD

### LaNeia Thomas



BY DEVON GAUGHAN

Committed Board Member LaNeia Thomas, who dedicated herself to helping her community thrive. Originally from New York, Thomas moved to Boston for college, attending and graduating from Northeastern University before relocating to Fitchburg with her husband Carlos around fifteen years ago. “We were really excited about the diversity of the area,” said Thomas.

After settling in, Thomas sought ways to become more engaged in the community. “We contacted the mayor at the time, asking how to get involved. We’re a young couple, we had energy,” she explained.

She met David and Dolores Thibault-Muñoz, at a local neighborhood center and got involved with community and park cleanup projects, which led to a deeper interest. “I just kept getting more involved, until finally I joined the board.”

In addition to her belief that the history is important to share,

Thomas is enthused by “the concept of using Fitchburg’s unutilized spaces and turning it into something more productive.” The park was initially an empty lot filled with discarded trash, located on a congested street lined with multi-family homes, devoid of green spaces. “I’m probably the board member that lives closest to the park...it’s the most incredible thing to see people using the space in different and unexpected ways,” she shared.

Thomas has a personal connection to the park, which features benches with memorials for those who have passed, including her late husband who battled cancer. “Projects like the park excited him in so many different ways. So we thought it was fitting for him to have a plaque. He’s there in a way,” she shared.

Thomas helped select park muralist Digi Chivetta, and even hosted the artist in her house for four months. She’s currently working on a coloring book for children that highlights abolitionists.

The message of the park is what Thomas finds most important, “Elevating the abolitionists, our history, and the whole idea of community development. All kinds of people can get behind it. This is for us all.”

### Bernie Schultz



BY LUKE GUERTIN

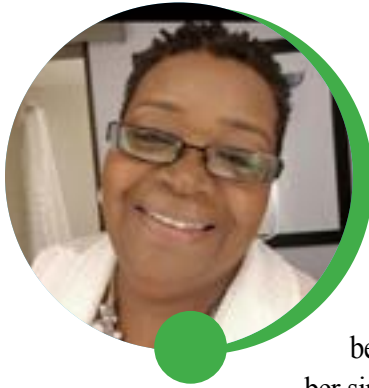
Bernie Schultz, a current Fitchburg City Councilor and MWCC professor, became involved with the park two years ago after meeting the inspiring Simone Blake at a local workshop. Schultz expressed that he was “so grateful” for that experience. Their talk about past abolitionists piqued his interest and he was “happy to learn more about the history of the Abolitionist movement in Fitchburg,” and not just Leominster.

Schultz hopes to raise awareness of the torn-down Trinitarian

Church being the site of a bell-ringing on the day the Emancipation Proclamation passed in 1863 and the bell’s current location in the Federated Church of Ayer. His time on the board has also drawn him to the history of Shadrach Minkins, a fugitive slave who escaped slavery from Virginia to Boston, and eventually Canada. One of Minkins’ stops on his journey was at Benjamin Snow’s home in Fitchburg. Schultz said, “I felt a sense of pride to be living in the City of Fitchburg where once there lived citizens who risked everything to fight slavery.”

Schultz read two books by Doris Kirkpatrick, *City in the River* and *Around the World in Fitchburg*, both published by the Fitchburg Historical Society and researched by fellow board member Simone Blake. “I like that students and adults are learning about the local abolitionists,” Schultz said. For him, the park serves as a bridge for that experience. “It’s about learning and bringing people together.”

# FRIENDS OF FITCHBURG ABOLITIONIST PARK BOARD



## Ruby Hall

BY ANNABELLE KENNEDY

Ruby Hall, a Fitchburg resident and member of the First Church of God in Christ at 82 Snow St., has been a proud community member since the age of two. When Hall learned about the Abolitionist Park, a project created by David Thibault-Muñoz and his students in 2017, she was immediately interested in getting involved. Hall is one of the board members of the Abolitionist Park and hopes to encourage and inspire others to volunteer. “To be proud of the neighborhood you live in, you have to give back to the community,” said Hall.

For Hall, there is a special connection between her church and the Abolitionist Park. “The church tries to do whatever we can to help the park,” she said. The First Church of God is the first black church built from the ground up in Fitchburg, MA., and the Abolitionist Park (also located on Snow Street) was once part of the church property. The Abolitionist Park honors Fitchburg’s history as part of the Underground Railroad and the many abolitionists who called the city home.

Hall hopes the park is a small step in helping to rehabilitate Fitchburg’s reputation. She also hopes that the community embraces it, taking pride in keeping it clean and well-tended.

“I see this as a green space in a community that doesn’t have a lot of them. I see people coming to enjoy the park. I am hoping the community embraces the park as their own. It’s a space they can be proud of,” said Hall.

If you are interested in volunteering or donating to the Abolitionist Park, visit their website at [www.abolitionistpark.org](http://www.abolitionistpark.org).

## Jenna Bos

BY ELYSIAN ALDER

Board member Jenna Bos became involved with the Abolitionist Park project after attending a City Council meeting where a group of David Thibault-Muñoz’s students from the Mount presented their dream for the park. “I was inspired by the students’ efforts and dedication, and I attended the first Park meeting organized by David and volunteered to join the Board,” explained Bos.

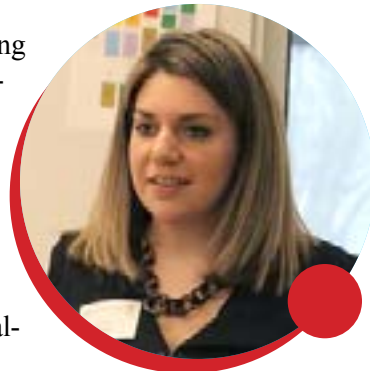
As the VP of a digital agency based in Denver, Colorado, Bos has been able to use her experience setting up digital systems and websites to support the park’s development. She was responsible for building the park’s website and created social media campaigns for fundraising.

Bos moved to Boston after growing up in nearby Leominster, but her connection to Fitchburg has always been a strong one. As a result, she and her husband eventually found themselves back in the area. “We saw the potential for Fitchburg to leverage its historical and cultural roots and the existing infra-

structure to become a thriving destination in central Massachusetts,” she said. “As a community member, I felt it was important to participate in efforts to improve Fitchburg, honor its history, and engage in causes that align with my personal values.”

The Abolitionist Park project fell right in line with all of that, and Bos felt inspired as well as hopeful that the park would be a positive influence on the community in a way that “fosters civic improvements, honors Fitchburg’s abolitionist history, and promotes values of social justice, anti-racism, and equity.”

She continued, stating: “I envision the park as a place where people from Fitchburg and surrounding towns can feel connected to this vital part of our history and feel empowered to continue the story that ‘bends toward justice,’ as Martin Luther King, Jr. said.”



Top Photo By Kai Johnson, Bottom Photo courtesy Jenna Bos



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## FRIENDS OF FITCHBURG ABOLITIONIST PARK BOARD

### Sam Squailia

BY SOPHIA SPIER



Born and raised in Fitchburg, Sam Squailia made the city her permanent home after attending the New England Institute of Technology in Rhode Island and getting her degree in Architectural Design, a path she had been set on since she was around 16 years old.

Squailia and her family run a successful architectural design and woodworking business that sells products all over the world, while she manages her position as a City Councilor. Squailia volunteers in local organizations and different groups, connecting with her community.

She began participating in these groups in 2012 with the Fitchburg Farmers market. “I started volunteering with them, and I met a bunch of people, and they’re like, ‘Oh, Sam, you gotta get involved with this,’ and ‘Sam, you got to get involved in that.’ Next thing you know, I’m involved in everything.”

Squailia started Keep Fitchburg Beautiful as a way to educate the community on spring litter collection and disposal. She also helped design local parks, including the Fitchburg dog park and the Abolitionist Park. “I want to continue improving Fitchburg and make it a place people want to live,” explained Squailia. Aligning with those goals, her involvement in the Abolitionist park started in 2017 when she designed the initial proposal. When Fitchburg State University allowed them to use a lot that they owned, Squailia and the rest of the board got to work to get the park built and running.

“Our history is extremely important, and I also think that in telling Fitchburg’s history, this is something that not just Fitchburg residents will appreciate, this is something that people all around the world can appreciate,” said Squailia.

With such a strong Abolitionist background in Fitchburg, it was the perfect opportunity for her to share something that

commemorated a large part of the city’s local history. “Our community makes the tough decisions, and does the right thing,” Squailia stated. “We should always strive to maintain that, and learn from our history.”

### SPECIAL THANKS

We want to take a moment to thank all of the people who donated to help make the Fitchburg Abolitionist Park a reality. Hundreds of community members donated to the cause of creating this Park, adding up to close to \$50,000.

Our highest donations include:

- \$4000 Jenn and Rodney Weaver
- \$3000 Dr. Charlie Hetzel (bench)
- \$3000 Dr. Susan Roetzer
- \$3000 Family of Carlos Thomas
- \$3000 Family of Adrian Ford
- \$2000 Achla Bahl Madan
- \$2000 Kimberly Ansin
- \$2000 Lacey Kibbort Zars
- \$1000 Primma Latise Murry
- \$1000 Tehesha Collins Stegall

While these ten donations were more than \$1000, most supported by donating \$100 or less. We wouldn’t have made it as far as we have without that support. It truly takes a village.

Photo by Kai Johnson



Photo courtesy of David Thibault-Munoz

# “WE ARE THE MODERN-DAY ABOLITIONISTS”

## Late Simone Blake’s Legacy Continues

BY ISABELLE MASCARY  
AND JOSILYN STRAKA

**T**he late Simone Blake, a Fitchburg native, was a natural fit for the Abolition Park project due to her background in education and activism. She founded an activist group in 2016 and joined the park’s board in 2019, inspiring many with her enthusiasm and deep knowledge of its history. “I got all fired up about it,” said Blake. At the unveiling event in October, while seated on a bench dedicated to Fitchburg civil rights activist Adrian Ford, Blake drew attention to the apple trees planted in honor of Benjamin Snow. “The apple trees represent the apple orchard. There isn’t anything here that is accidental,” she said, pointing out the historic markers and proudly mentioning the four donated benches.

Blake saw the park as being able to continue the modern-day abolition movement, to promote the push for freedom for the oppressed. “To me, it’s a shrine. We have a rich abolitionist history. The abolitionist movement is not over. If I can encourage more people to just become an abolitionist, I will.”

Being chair of the Abolitionist Park Historic Accuracy Committee proved a perfect fit. Blake’s dedication to accuracy led her to track down the descendants of the first three Black families who lived in Fitchburg. “They are the Treadwells,” she shared, continuing to say that she was thrilled when they accepted the opportunity to cut the ribbon on the opening day of the park on what date, and have them attend the Juneteenth event in 2022. She highlighted, “That’s one of the things that we try to do in the research, is find all of the freed and enslaved descendants.”

Blake, along with fellow board member Dr. Danette Day, taught adult classes titled “Before and After Emancipation: An Introduction to Fitchburg Abolitionist History.” Along the way, she made surprising discoveries about various individuals, including white businessmen, Fitchburg women, barbers, stonecutters, musicians, and writers who were known to have lived in what is now the park.

She mentioned, “We wanted our park on Day Street because that is where Benjamin Snow Jr. lived. He was the real abolitionist.” Although they were unable to obtain the property, “The College [Fitchburg State] gave us this property. We were very lucky.” Blake shared, “From Main Street up to Wood Street and all the way through Pearl Street, Benjamin Snow’s estate was in that whole area. His father owned all of this land and more.”

Shirley Wagner, a fellow member of the Historic Accuracy Committee, worked closely with Blake. Wagner remembered, “She had projects galore to last her at least one hundred years.” Wagner added, “She would organize wherever she was, so I suspect she is reorganizing heaven.”

Upon Blake’s passing on October 31st, 2022, fellow park advocates expressed their sadness and highlighted the vitality that Blake brought to the project through her outreach and personality. According to Danette Day, “What she brought... was electrifying.”

One conversation with Blake was enough to envision the impact she had on her former students at Fitchburg State University and patrons at its library. In her speech, she delivered a moving call, stating, “We are the modern-day abolitionists. The work isn’t done.”

THE 87TH REGIONAL EXHIBITION OF ART AND CRAFT  
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**FAWM** FITCHBURG  
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## A POEM BY NASIH THOMAS



"My inspiration came from the task of incorporating the messages of the park and the history it represents to current experiences that African-American men may relate to. Reparations and strength being the focus of the piece, I wanted to speak to the adversity of African-Americans in a neglectful society. I always look to emphasize the ability to think critically and form organic opinions based on self-discovered reliable research. As much as we could choose to focus on the adversity we're faced with in today's world, I wanted to close on gratitude in order to provide perspective to how we should choose to prioritize our thoughts."

OUR MISSION:  
TO PRESERVE, PROTECT AND  
INTERPRET FITCHBURG HISTORY

*An Anti-Slavery Worker Dead.*  
Augustus Murray, who died at Worcester on Tuesday, Jan. 24, resided in Fitchburg, from 1831 to 1853, at 12 Snow street, and was the proprietor of the barber's shop under the American House most of the time. He was an honest, industrious man, and was of much service in strengthening local sentiment against slavery. It will be readily seen that a colored man, formerly a slave, conducting business, rearing a family and educating his children in the public schools, was a good object lesson for the abolitionists to use in instructing and elevating public sentiment on the slavery question. Mr. Murray was very interesting in conversation, especially with young people, and would frequently relate anecdotes of his experience in slavery.



### Honoring Fitchburg's History of Abolition and Civil Rights Activism

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The sky opens up with scattered stars,  
leading the dum da dum scattered footstep  
march of youth that's scarred from  
generational disparities and father's barred

Yet we recover from lack of support building,  
calf muscles burstin, veins acting like  
the weather aint strange as the chickens  
spin around the top of the barn.

Free em from the coop,  
the free thinkers  
eating game like  
it's chicken soup.

Smooth swoop  
out the sky  
to lift another  
from a noose.

Arms locked with family  
that only knows the title  
through similar experiences  
and empathy.

Peace, persistence and power  
I want them to remember me.  
I need a PPP loan full forgiveness.  
Forget this temporary gift.

I need money no strings,  
no questions.  
We all hungry with blessings.  
Reflect,

and take time to mention,  
our current position  
and how appreciative  
we should be for the shoes we step in.

Photo courtesy of David Thibault-Muñoz



**"These Stories Need to be Told"**

BY ISABELLE MASCARY

Northborough, Massachusetts native Digi Chivetta is the multi-talented artist and designer who got the opportunity to share her artistic talents with the Fitchburg community during the Fitchburg Abolitionist Park unveiling of the six-panel mural back in October 2022. Chivetta saw the advertisement on the Worcester Arts Council page on Instagram and applied. Despite thinking an artist with more experience would have been chosen, Chivetta was selected. "That was my first mural," she said. "I've done large paintings before, but I've never done a mural."

The production of the mural took about two months. The biggest takeaway that she wants people to gain from it is a different view of African culture and the roots of Black people. When Chivetta initially read the job description for the mural painting, she didn't want to take it because it was a sensitive subject for her. She explained, "When you're painting something that big, you're living in it, and I did not want to paint depictions of slavery at all. I did not want to live that."

Then Chivetta realized she could create a different vision for the art if she were in creative control. "I would be so mad if someone gets up there and paints chains on that

## MURALIST



# CHIVETTA

wall. Little Black kids do not need to see more of that. That's just the cruelty that was inflicted on our ancestors and has nothing to do with our culture. That's not what we should be relating to. I wanted to give kids something beautiful, rich, and inspiring to relate to."

Chivetta explained that the unveiling was a day filled with excitement and surreal moments. She shared, "When you're working on something that big, you don't step back and see the whole thing. You're focused on getting this section done; when you do step back, you're just checking your composition, your color and balance, but you're not really appreciating it as a piece."

Chivetta went to college in New York and lived there for about ten years before residing in Italy for four years, eventually returning to the United States in 2021. She has had a passion for the arts ever since she was able to hold a pencil. "I can't remember a time when I wasn't into it," she said, also admitting that she wasn't certain how to turn it into a career. "Nobody in my family has a creative career. I didn't even know it was an option."

Prior to shifting her focus to art, she attended Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Massachusetts and worked at a local hospital while she considered being a reconstructive

surgeon. Art, however, was still her passion. "I was taking every art class I could, and my teachers questioned, 'why aren't you in art school?'" Then I was like 'oh, I can do that?'"

Chivetta went on to major in fashion design, supplementing her education with hands-on experience by doing freelance knitwear work for hobbyist books and magazines. "I would create the design and write the pattern so that other people could make the same thing," she explained. One highlight of her subsequent internships was the opportunity to serve as a Fashion Week journalist. "That was pretty cool," said Chivetta.

Chivetta later developed an autoimmune disease which put an end to doing knitwear as she suffered from arthritis. Despite the chronic illness, Chivetta expanded to other mediums. "Switching mediums helps because doing repetitive motion is a recipe for disaster for me. Switching gives each part of my body a break."

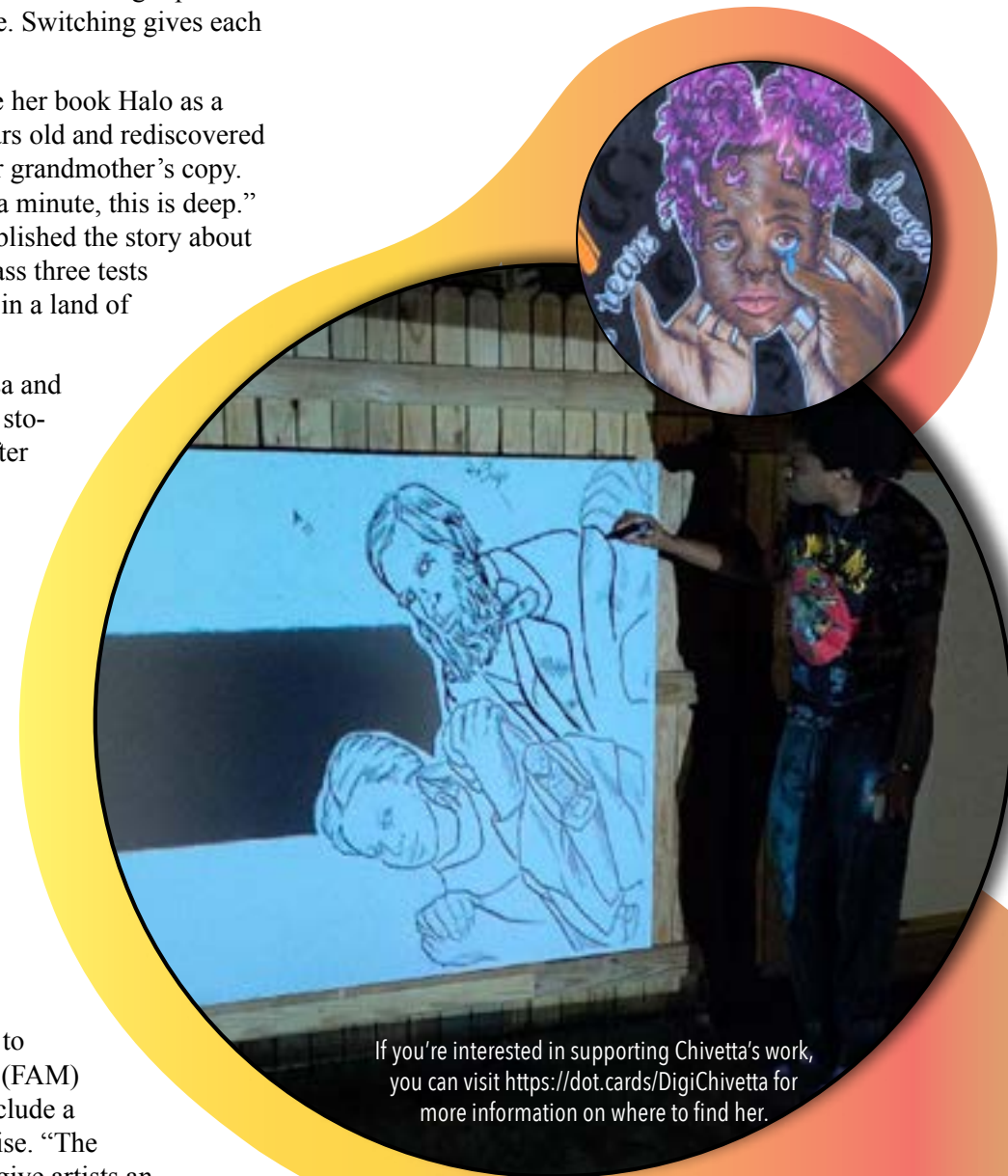
Chivetta is also an author. She wrote her book Halo as a school project when she was ten years old and rediscovered it twenty years later after finding her grandmother's copy. Impressed by it, she thought, "Wait a minute, this is deep." She updated the illustrations and published the story about a boy who dies in a fire but has to pass three tests to get to the afterlife while stranded in a land of candy.

Chivetta is a devotee of Yoruba Orisa and sees a connection between her early storytelling and her current identity. After speaking to her priestess about it, Chivetta learned that she is considered a Griot in her tradition - someone born with stories imprinted in their DNA, who is responsible for sharing these stories to change human consciousness and help people overcome evil. "Looking at the details now and the similarities to my spirituality is wild," she said. "It has to be true. The land of candy, that's heaven. In our tradition, the offering that you give to your heavenly family is candy. There's no way I could have known that when I wrote the story."

Chivetta has a canvas that she plans to reveal at the Fitchburg Art Museum (FAM) on October 21st. The exhibit will include a pop-up shop with custom merchandise. "The idea behind the pop up shop was to give artists another chance to get paid. I'm a big proponent of artists

supporting each other. To be an artist, you have to work multiple jobs, create and sell the product, create your own PR and your brand. I think a lot of people have the wrong idea; they try to do creative work like other forms of work, but it's not. We're not in a competition with each other. It makes sense for us to be supporting each other."

Chivetta is also a brand ambassador for Party City, and she has a website, a blog, a merchandise shop, plus a Patreon where she teaches online art therapy classes. Giving some advice to artists, Chivetta stated, "Date and sign your work. Even if you think you messed up, don't throw things away just because you think it's ugly. Just because it doesn't come out the way you want it doesn't mean it's wrong. No one can see the vision you had in mind, all they see is the finished product, and that can still have value."



If you're interested in supporting Chivetta's work, you can visit <https://dot.cards/DigiChivetta> for more information on where to find her.

Photos courtesy of David Thibault-Muñoz

# DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE

**THANK YOU TO ALL OF OUR VOLUNTEERS AND DONORS. IT TRULY TAKES A VILLAGE!**

Since its inception in 2017, close to 100 Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC) students and dozens of community volunteers have played some role in the project. Hundreds more have donated to the project. Close to 50% of the \$100k raised thus far have come in the form of individual donations! We have been honored to receive support from the North Central Massachusetts Community Foundation, City of Fitchburg, Freedoms Way National Heritage Area, North Central Massachusetts Realtor Association, Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority, the Aubuchon,

Wallace, and Crocker Foundations, Fitchburg Cultural Council, CHNA 9, Mass Development, InTown Fitchburg, and Fitchburg State University (FSU). We want to thank our current and former fiscal agents, New Vue Communities and Three Pyramids Inc. and partners FSU, MWCC, the First Church of God in Christ, and the Fitchburg Art Museum for their continued support. And we would be remised if we didn't give a shout out to our neighbors Bob Wilson and Zaida Martel for letting us use their homes as sources of water and electricity, and the Beaulac Brothers Landscaping and Tree Service for their pro-bono work at the Park.



## 2017

MWCC students and neighborhood volunteers (including board member Dr. Danette Day) cleared and cleaned 17-19 Wood Street, one of the lots being considered for the Fitchburg Abolitionist Park. That summer, they presented their vision for the park at the First Church of God in Christ on Snow Street. Architect Sam Squailia created plans based on student input.

## 2019

Fitchburg State University offered their land on Snow Street after the City of Fitchburg denied previous requests to use the Day Street lot. Friends of Fitchburg Abolitionist Park was formed with Three Pyramids as our fiscal sponsor. Volunteers and Beaulac Brothers Landscaping removed a driveway and trees.

## SPRING 2021

Vandal Excavating LLC was hired to remove tree stumps, granite slabs, and contaminated soil. Gravel was added to prepare for the installation of the brick and cement walkway. Elite Construction was then hired to install a walkway and five benches. Volunteers built and planted garden beds, commemorative apple trees, and installed a flagpole and fence.

## NOVEMBER 2021

Vital Signs installed a historic inscription sign and volunteers installed plaques for bench donors. A bench dedication ceremony was held with around 75 people in attendance.

## MAY 2022

Digi Chivetta was selected by a committee made up of artists and board members to create a mural that would depict abolitionist history and other cultural imagery representing freedom. Board member LaNeia Thomas led the search.

## OCTOBER 2022

Between July and October, Digi Chivetta completed her mural with the help of William Thompson and Shara Osgood, funded by a \$25,000 grant from North Central MA Community Foundation and additional funds from the City and Fitchburg Cultural Council. A mural unveiling event and community celebration was held and was attended by almost 100 neighborhood residents.



## 2018

Colby Kazanjian, an MWCC student, presented a petition to the City Council to allocate 116 Day Street for the park. MWCC students and volunteers (including current and former board members Christina Sanborn, Shannon Beaulieu, LaNeia Thomas, Edwin Encarnacion, and Josiah Richards) cleared the site and proposed adding four parking spaces and motion-sensor lighting.

## 2020

Development of the park was halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but fundraising efforts continued and virtual meetings were held in place of physical ones. Funds were raised from Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority, Crocker and Wallace Foundations, Freedoms Way National Heritage Area, and individual donors.

## JUNE 2021

Over 100 people attended the park's groundbreaking event, coinciding with Juneteenth. In late June, Vandal Excavating added new soil and Lakeview Landscaping sprayed hydroseed. Board members and volunteers watered flowers, trees and grass almost daily, through the summer.

## APRIL 2022

Dr. Danette Day and other professors held co-talks in the Park for MWCC and FSU students, with discussions led by Dr. Day and founding board member Simone Blake, continuing during the summer, through the ALFA program.

## JUNE 2022

Over 300 attendees, including descendants of the first Black residents of Fitchburg, gathered for the Park's ribbon cutting on June 18, 2022. Local students and artists performed, including Longsjo and Frances Drake middle schoolers, showcasing original theatrical pieces.

## 2023 -

The FFAP plans to install a weatherproof board with graphic images, and develop augmented reality technology. The plan is to complete the project, pending funding. Fitchburg DPW also received CDBG funding to install new sidewalks and create parking in front of and across the street from the Park.

Photos courtesy of David Thibault-Muñoz

## INTERESTED IN DONATING?

[www.abolitionistpark.org/donate](http://www.abolitionistpark.org/donate)



# HISTORY COMES TO LIFE

## Park Board Sets Sights on Augmented Reality Exhibit

BY ALONDRA DELEON GUIMARAES

The Friends of Fitchburg Abolitionist Park, in collaboration with the Fitchburg Historical Society, are currently working on adding a new augmented reality feature to the space to enhance current and future educational programming. “This will become an education center,” said board member Simone Blake, while wiping apples to serve during a 2022 open house event.

Augmented reality is a process that involves using audiovisual displays with computer-generated data to create a lifelike experience. Using the park as a backdrop, visitors would scan QR codes at various stations and have

access to a film or recreation. “We will have actual pictures, but of course not their actual voices. We hope to have as many stations as possible,” Blake explained. The feature is set to be housed within an enclosed walkway at the park, covered by a protective kiosk.

The current proposal calls for twelve stations and hopes to include local artists, musicians and speakers in the creation of the accompanying augmented reality stories. The board hopes that these might relay surprising or exciting historical information the public might not know about. For example, the committee learned that the neighborhood surrounding the park was

predominantly inhabited by people of color, something they hope to highlight in the augmented reality exhibit. The process will require research to find credible and entertaining stories that accentuate local history. “This will... bring history to life,” Blake added.

Currently, students from both MWCC and FSU are already holding parts of classes in the park. The exhibit has a hopeful release date of 2023. “It’s a matter of raising the funds,” said Ruby Hall, another board member of the park. “We need about \$30,000 to complete it. I have faith it will be done.” Blake echoed that commitment: “Abolitionism isn’t over, and we want people to recognize that.”

Photo courtesy of David Thibault-Muñoz



## A Proud Partner in Celebrating Fitchburg’s Abolitionist History

Fitchburg State University is proud to support the creation and continued vibrancy of the Abolitionist Park, keeping an important chapter of city history alive and inspiring future generations to embrace their power to change the world.



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SUMMER 2023

# The Mount Observer

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