

Treasures from the Sherman Room

An Introduction to Brimfield History from the Library's Historical Collections

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Converse Memorial Fountain



The Marquis Converse Memorial Fountain sits on the east end of the Brimfield Common. It was presented to the Town in a simple ceremony on December 11, 1895. Known for his generosity, enterprise and public spirit, Mr. Converse's activities in town included building a carriage factory, dressing and selling meat, serving as postmaster and operating the Brimfield Hotel. He also served as selectman, town treasurer and town representative to the General Court.

(The article below is transcribed from the Springfield Weekly Republican, dated December 15, 1895)

Converse Memorial Fountain

Given the Town of Brimfield

Honorable Life of the Man Whom Memory is Thus Honored

The most significant event in the history of Brimfield for a good many years is the recent erection of the Marquis Converse memorial drinking fountain on the public square. The need of a water supply in the center of town had long been felt, and there is especial fitness in a monument of this nature to perpetuate the memory of a citizen of former days who was distinguished by his generosity and public spirit. Like many other old New England towns Brimfield, by the reason of the accident of location and changes in industrial conditions, has suffered a gradual decrease of population and a decline of material prosperity since the days when it was the leading town in its section. But the town possesses an honorable record for patriotism and public spirit, and it is rich in associations and the affectionate loyalty of its sons and daughters. The Converse family may be regarded as a representative one, both in its connection with the history of the town for the past century and in its loyalty to the old home. Marquis Converse, the first of that name in Brimfield, was descended from Edward and Allen Converse who came from England with the Winthrop fleet in 1630. Allen Converse took a grant of land in Salem the year following and Edward ran the first ferry between Boston and Charleston. The name of Edward Converse often appears in the records of the colony of Massachusetts Bay. He is mentioned as deacon of the church, often as juror and as appraiser of land and road commissioner. Later in life he was representative to the General Court from Woburn. Marquis Converse was a native of Thompson, Ct., going to Brimfield in 1805 or 1806. He was married in 1808 to Sophia Lyon of Brimfield, who is described as a woman of lovely disposition and much strength of character.

Mr. Converse was a man of unusual enterprise and public spirit. He established several industries in town and there are a number of buildings still standing which he put up. He was a large landowner, owning at one time most of what is known as "the square," beside large outlying tracts. These interests enabled him to give employment to many a poor man to whom he was a warm friend. Marquis Converse was the second postmaster in Brimfield, following Stephen Pynchon in that office and holding it from 1823 to 1842, the date of his death. These were the days before the general erection of post-office buildings, and the older inhabitants recall going for the mails to the house now owned by Amos Munroe, which was built by Mr. Converse and occupied by him at the time of his death. Mr. Converse was the second proprietor of the Brimfield hotel, which stood on the site of the one destroyed by fire a few years ago. He was selectman for several years and was representative to the General Court in 1834, when Brimfield was entitled to two representatives, his colleague being Julius Burt. He was one of the promoters of the plan of setting apart a home for the town's poor, to supersede the then prevailing custom of contracting for their support with the lowest bidders. Mr. Converse was a member of the church and is described as a deeply religious man. He is also remembered by the older inhabitants for his hospitality and genial disposition. Says one of the leading citizens of Brimfield who is past three-score years and ten: "No one of the men whom I looked up to as a boy would I rather see honored by a memorial than Marquis Converse. He always had a pleasant word for us boys, and the boys all liked him." It was certainly a blessed life about which such vivid and gracious memories are called up by a visible memorial erected after more than 50 years have passed away.

Of the eight children of Marquis Converse and Sophia Lyon, all except one, who died in infancy, reached middle life, and there are children and grandchildren of each living. Fifty three names, representing the descendants of Marquis Converse, in three generations, are placed on the paper beneath the capstone of the monument which honors his memory. Of his children only two survive, Mrs. William N. Flynt of Monson and Alfred L. Converse of Warren. The eldest son bore his father's name. His two sons, Horatio Lyon and John Foster Converse, have made Brimfield their home. Each has held the office of postmaster, and the former carries on business in the store formerly owned by James T. Brown. The little son of John Converse, the youngest of the descendants of Marquis Converse in Brimfield, is honored with his great-grandfather's name. The eldest daughter of Marquis Converse who became the wife of John W. Foster, died soon after placing her name upon the roll of the givers of her father's memorial. Her two daughters, Mrs. Sophie Foster Symes and Mrs. Alice Foster Cheesman, live in Denver, Col. A son of Charles E. Converse, also named Charles, lives in New York. The children of Mrs. Flynt are Rufus Flynt of Palmer, Lyman and George Flynt of Monson, Mrs. William Dewey, Mrs., Henry King and Mrs. William Lincoln, all of this city. Alfred Converse has one son, Charles L., of Warren. George A. Converse was a prominent citizen of Somers, Ct. Two of his sons, Fred B. and George M., live in this city, a son, Cyrus, is a student in Monson academy, and a daughter, Anna B. Converse, is in Mount Holyoke college. Mrs. Cyrus Holmes of Monson was the youngest of the family of Marquis Converse. The people of Monson, where two of his daughters have lived for so many years, will bear

abundant witness of the perpetuation in them of the spirit of doing good expressed in private benevolence and in public benefits.

Although Alfred Converse, who, in behalf of the givers, presented the memorial of his father to the town of Brimfield, has lived in Warren for the past 15 years, his life previous to that time was spent in his native town. There he took up the work that his father laid down, and he is counted in the ranks of those citizens who, 25 years ago and more, were the leading spirits of the town in faithful service of its interests. For over 30 years "Col" Converse served the town gratuitously as its treasurer. His efforts promoted the establishment of the Hitchcock free high school, and he held the office of treasurer of that institution as long as he remained in Brimfield. The people of that town have never relinquished their claim upon Alfred Converse as one of their number, and his absence has not diminished their affectionate esteem for him.



It was impracticable at this time of the year to have any elaborate exercises at the presentation of the fountain, which took place Wednesday. But the occasion was none the less impressive on account of its simplicity. The scene was one long to be remembered, as Mr. Converse, surrounded by his old townspeople and the pupils of the Hitchcock and town schools, intrusted to their keeping the memorial of his father. Mrs. Flynt was also present. Mr. Converse said, "We present this fountain not only as a monument to the memory of our father, but also as a token of our loyalty to and esteem for our native town, desiring that its beauty may be an added attraction to the town, and that it may prove a lasting source of blessing to both man and beast. We only ask in return that the town will show its appreciation of this gift by bestowing upon it such care that its beauty and usefulness shall remain unimpaired when it is handed down to the succeeding generations as a tribute of the loyal sons and daughters of the Converse family to the memory of their father and their native town."

Newton S. Hubbard, chairman of the town's committee, accepted the fountain on behalf of Brimfield. Dea Hubbard gave some reminiscences of Marquis Converse and of the town. He made appropriate reference to the indebtedness of the inhabitants of Brimfield for its beautiful park to John W. Foster, whose name is associated with the Converse family through his marriage to the daughter of Marquis Converse. Thomas J. Morgan gave pleasant memories of the one whom the monument honors. Remarks were made by Rev Mr. Peirce and Rev Mr Kyle, and Principal Earle assured the givers that the pupils of the Hitchcock school would enjoy the crystal blessing of the fountain.

The active share of Brimfield in the new fountain has consisted in furnishing the water supply and putting in the foundation. Besides the appropriation made by the town for this purpose much gratuitous labor has been performed by

individuals. A number of citizens' "bees" have been held to dig the trench for the pipe, and upon one of these occasions the women of the town furnished a collation at the town hall. Even the school boys gave their share of service. Much credit is due to the committee to whom the town intrusted this work for its successful conduct and completion. The source of the water supply is about a mile south of the village on Hayne's hill. There is a fall of about 50 feet. The plan of the village, with its central square and radiating streets, affords unusual opportunity for any structure of an ornamental nature. The fountain has an admirable location, being in line with the main entrance of the park and the soldiers' monument, and having the park for an effective background. The monument is of of Monson granite and is the work of the Flynt granite company. This monument was an object of deep personal interest to the late William Flynt, who had looked forward eagerly to the day when it should be presented to the people of Brimfield. He conceived the idea of representing in stone an old-fashioned covered well and its "oaken bucket," and the company's designer, Mr. Parsons, has carried out this idea as nearly as practicable.

Two kinds of granite, light and dark, appear in pleasing contrast in the fountain. The roof or large cap overhead is supported by four turned polished pillars of the dark granite and it is surmounted by a polished ball of the same material. The "old oaken bucket" is represented in dark unpolished granite. This is supported on the "curb" between the two columns on the side toward the park. From the flow of water out of the bucket into the bowl beneath the thirsty may be refreshed. The large drinking bowl for horses is approached on the other three sides of the fountain. Its capacity is 65 gallons. On the side opposite the bucket is a tub-shaped bowl placed conveniently for the use of oxen.

The name of Marquis Converse appears in relief on the east face of the monument just beneath the large cap. The capstone was set November 25, and in a cavity designed for that purpose was placed the paper bearing the signatures of the givers of the memorial with that date affixed. Beside this paper, a town report, Hitchcock school catalog and a small collection of coins were placed in the receptacle.

Visible expressions of interest and loyalty presented to the ancestral town have a value that cannot be estimated. While they enrich the lives of those who have stayed among the old scenes and preserved the old homes, these tokens bless in turn the lives of the givers. They serve to foster in their children and children's children the sentiment of ancestral regard, and a spirit of loyalty toward the old home whose influences are the best legacy. The people of Brimfield rejoice in the possession of the Marquis Converse memorial drinking fountain.

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(100 years after the dedication ceremony, the Converse Memorial Fountain was showing its age. The article below, copied from the August 4, 1995 Springfield Union-New, tells the story of its restoration.)

Brimfield restores early monument

by Susan E. Bosman, Staff writer

A century ago the town helped out when the members of a prominent family gave a granite drinking fountain to the town in memory of their father, an early settler.

This week, townspeople and town officials are repeating the generosity as the restoration of the Marquis Converse Memorial Fountain begins.

The fountain, which was a watering place for horses, oxen and people, has sat on the east end of the town common in the same spot where it was installed.

The conservation and restoration work proceeded yesterday as Fannin and Lehner Preservation Consultants, a Concord firm hired by the Historical Commission, began repointing and cleaning the structure's granite surfaces.

Marcia Starkey, chairwoman of the Historical Commission, said that repointing of the stone involves mixing the mortar to make a good match to the original mortar. The idea, she said, is to keep it as watertight as possible.

The copper lantern which sits atop a finial on the roof of the fountain is also to be repaired and restored. It will have a kerosene lamp burner so that it can be lighted on occasion.

At this time, the foundation will not have water piped to it, but Starkey said people who stopped by the site yesterday have expressed interest in having it made operational.

Starkey said that as part of the \$4,730 fountain restoration, the stone barrel on the west side – which has been in storage for 20 years – will be replaced and secured so that it cannot be removed. She said the conservators have examined the space underneath the fountain and have found no structural problems.

Starkey said the Historical Commission will rededicate the fountain later this year.

Funding for the restoration project came from donations and from an appropriation at town meeting. "It was a town project then (100 years ago) and it still is a town project now," Starkey said. "It takes money and effort."

She said the unusual structure says a lot about a family that cared about the town they grew up in and that its restoration today says a lot about Brimfield's current residents.

"It's what communities are all about, coming together to achieve things that will not be achieved without a lot of individuals contributing money and time."

She said the town highway Department has accepted responsibility for the care of the common and will be involved in landscaping around the fountain.

Marquis Converse was a harness maker, ran a carriage shop in town, and served as postmaster for 20 years in the early 1800s. He and his wife operated the Brimfield Hotel; over three decades he served as selectman, treasurer, and town representative to the General Court. He died in 1842.



In August, 1985, Fannin Lehner Preservation Consultants submitted a report to the town on restoration efforts. Let's look specifically at the problems and resolution with the lantern.

ISSUE:

The copper lantern surmounting the roof was in very poor condition with the top element partially gone. Originally, the lantern had beveled glass; only two pieces remained, with the other openings either plain window glass or empty.

RESOLUTION:

The copper lantern was conserved by Ned James, a metal conservator from Ashfield, MA. Substantial rebuilding of the unit was needed as repairs made earlier had included iron elements which interacted with the copper in a galvanic reaction, causing deterioration of both metals. The copper was augmented and strengthened wherever necessary and the heavily damaged top element rebuilt, using new material. Ned James patinated the new metal in order to match the older material. All plain glass in the lantern was replaced with special beveled glass to match the original conformation.

The mounting system was replaced with an all-copper segment and a removable oil lamp built into the lantern. (The oil lamp was given to Marcia Starkey at the time of the lantern mounting.) The conserved lantern was secured by placing a stainless steel pin through its shaft where it exits the bottom of the granite ball. The whole area at the base of the ball was then sealed with silicone to provide further security.

