

FITCHBURG YOUR STORY: A City Reborn - Jordan Cummings

[“Saxifrage” choral music plays, performed by the Fitchburg State University Choirs]

Prof. Kisha Tracy (intro): Welcome to the Fitchburg State University Perseverantia Podcast network. This is the Fitchburg Your Story series in which Fitchburg State students tell the stories that make our city and university unique.

[“Saxifrage” fades out]

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Jordan Cummings: In this episode, I tell a tale of a city with a history of industrial strength, and today, inspiring tale of rebirth. This is the City of Fitchburg: From Industrial Giant to Rebirth. How does the city reinvent itself? Back in the day, it was peaking as a manufacturing powerhouse and had a lot of struggles that led to that decline. Fitchburg's story is one of highs and lows, survival, reinvention. And I'm just gonna dive deep into how the this city is embracing its past while looking forward to the future with a high head.

Fitchburg was once the beating heart of New England's industrial revolution. It was home to a lot of factories that produced furniture, machinery, and textiles. The city was in proximity to major railroads, which means that raw materials could flow in and out with ease, which propelled Fitchburg to the heights of their prosperity.

And then a little bit later, by the late 1800s, the Fitchburg Railroad had become a critical component in New England's transportation network, helping the city stand out as a manufacturing powerhouse.

Industry played a real good role in Fitchburg's rise, coming from the production of high quality became a defining feature of Fitchburg's identity. According to Peter Foster, a source from when I was researching in a book, *From Steam to Silicon: The Legacy of Industrialization in New England*, he said industry in Fitchburg was a driving force that not only shaped the city's economy, but also influenced its social structure as well. It created thousands of jobs and brought families from all over, different types of ethnicities, races, all of that. That industry was so important because Fitchburg's identity became synonymous with quality craftsmanship,

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industrial innovation, and also just like a good working mindset, sense of grit, I should say.

But as with many industrial sectors, industry faced decline. The rise of automation, automobiles, the relocation of manufacturing and lower cost areas and the changing nature of those consumer goods played all role in the downturn. Fitchburg's once thriving factories became silent and the city faced a bunch of economic challenges. Yet this period of decline also

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Jordan Cummings (cont'd): became like a backdrop for Fitchburg's transformation, one that I and others see around unfolding today.

It was a devastating period. It was a devastating period of time for the people in Fitchburg. But, you know, just like many post-industrial cities, the resilience of the community began to show through.

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Today, fast forward, Fitchburg's story is no longer one of decline. In fact, it's a story of transformation. The city once defined by its factories and not even just that, its railroads, now embracing opportunities. A critical player in this revival, maybe? Fitchburg State University. The university's influence on the city's rejuvenation cannot be overstated.

The city's educational hub, Fitchburg State is not just a place of learning. It's now becoming a driving force of change. The university, I feel like it attracted me especially, but not even just me, students all over. Not even just in this country, outside of the country, which is awesome to see. Many who stay in the area, maybe for work, after graduation or just because they like Massachusetts.

Fitchburg's growing sectors of technology, arts and education was also declining but now it's vibrant. It's home. It's home to a bunch of young creative minds I see around me. It's not even just education that is driving Fitchburg's revival. The arts, like I said, became a major player.

The city broke ground on a brand new theater recently, a space that will offer more than just performances. It'll offer a place, a sense of community to gather, reflect, and create. It will offer a new home. It will offer new passions, new dreams.

Yeah, just a new outlook of life people that are into the theater.

And while those arts are thriving, there's other more surprising trends happening on Fitchburg's Main Street. Especially for me, I love food. The food scene is awesome. I love Mexican food. So Mexican cuisine, like Tacos Tequila and El Borrillo. I've been there since freshman year. I feel like family there almost, like I go there so much. When I went there at first, I was asking around for food, and the locals and tour guides, they always told me Tacos Tequila is the spot. You know, it just feels like home.

The rise of restaurants like that is more than about food though. It's about, like I said, the community coming together. It's a reflection of Fitchburg's reinvention.

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Jordan Cummings (cont'd): It's a place where new flavors, faces, and ideas are blending seamlessly with its legacy.

Fitchburg's revival it's not even just about the physical transformation or what we see in like buildings and stuff. Like I said, it's a city, it's about the people.

One of the key figures in my research is talking to my cousin, Jermaine. Jermaine Patterson, he was a former football player and he's a FSU alum as well. He's a perfect example of local leadership. He works in Leominster now. He's working with kids from Fitchburg and Leominster area and having played for the football team, he understands just the power of community and leadership.

When he moved, he didn't just see a place. He didn't see decline. He didn't see what other people may see driving on the Main Street. He saw potential. He saw that Fitchburg always had that grit and heart. He always tells me that's what I see. And it's about just showing up, being making it better every day for the children that he works for. His story is one of many. He represents the spirit of Fitchburg and the area surrounding. One where individuals go, learn and maybe one day come back and try to mentor the young ones, which is really cool.

I can relate to that for me, I was a captain of the Fitchburg State football team, and that was an incredible honor. It wasn't just about leading my teammates on the field. It was about representing a community that was fighting for its future.

The responsibility led to personal beliefs. Just because I wasn't representing a team, was representing a city, was representing a culture.

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I was representing a city trying to build themselves back up.

Fitchburg's transformation is real. It's happening now. I mean, the city's no longer defined by its industrial past, but by its ability to reinvent itself and move forward. The theater under construction, rising food scene, the growing influence of Fitchburg State, and most importantly, the new president, Donna Hodge. Awesome. I could probably talk another eight minutes about her. She is so awesome.

But, yeah, Fitchburg's story is still unfolding. Just not done yet. And I'm glad to say that when I come back five, ten, fifteen years from now, it's gonna be something better than from where I left it. Thank you for listening to my podcast. Yeah, thank you so much.

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[Perseverantia Network theme fades in]

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Matt Baier: You're listening to Perseverantia, the Fitchburg State Podcast Network.

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