

FITCHBURG YOUR STORY: The Mystery of Our First Black Student - Erumosele Bridgeforth

["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]

[old timey ragtime piano plays over the transition]

Erumosele Bridgeforth: Good afternoon. My name is Sele and I'm going to be the host of this episode. Before I get started, I hope everybody's having a good day.

Today we are going to talk about the mystery of who was the first African American to graduate from Fitchburg State University.

[old timey ragtime piano fades out]

I picked this topic because different times and places always have the first African American that has graduated. For an example, the first African American that graduated in Harvard was Richard Theodore Greener. I thought Fitchburg State would have this information, but in reality, there wasn't anything that tied to who was the potential African American who first graduated.

Based off this topic, I have tried to look through and it caught my eye because that document would be very, very important. It did lead me to the question: what possible reasons why it wasn't documented?

I wanted to say there were lot of dead ends throughout the research, but it still led from one question to another.

[ragtime theme plays over the transition]

The Saxifrage was the Fitchburg State's yearbook. When Fitchburg State was first founded, it was called Fitchburg Normal School. In the 1927 yearbook, the first African-American that we do know is John Stewart Laws, also known as Jack.

Here's a background of John Stewart Laws:

He was an African-American who lived in Worcester on 21 Shelby Street. And he attended Fitchburg Normal School and graduated in the year of 1927. During his years attending Fitchburg Normal School, he was loved by others.

In the *Saxifrage*, in the year 1927, it is written under his name: "Jack is one of many boys from Worcester attending Fitchburg Normal School. Although always a good sport Jack does not let

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Erumosele Bridgeforth (cont'd): “fun interfere with...his achievements. He has been an earnest student in the two year we have known him. Jack will leave Fitchburg Normal School with the sincere wishes for the best luck from his classmates.”

In the yearbook, you could think that John Stewart wasn't the only one to attend Fitchburg Normal School with other African-Americans. But based off the yearbook, John Laws was the only African American that was in the yearbook.

Throughout his years attending Fitchburg Normal School, he played basketball, volleyball, and soccer. This leads me to question what was going on in Fitchburg because of John Stewart Laws being loved during the era that was very heavy segregated and very heavy racial bias during this time.

But while I was trying to figure out more information about John Stewart Laws, there isn't any more evidence or information from John Laws. Different articles have expressed that they were willingly helping slaves to be free. There are meetings about antislavery by the Massachusetts Antislavery Society. This shows that there were people that were against slavery and for what it was wrong.

When he graduated, he took a gap year – and or years – finally came back to attend Fitchburg Normal School in the 1930's. When he came back, he went back to Fitchburg Normal School to get his doctorate to become a teacher.

Years later, he was drafted in World War II.

[ragtime theme plays over the transition]

Based on articles from what I have found, Worcester's monument was brought down and was missing for almost 60 years. The monument was dedicated to the African-Americans that lived here in Massachusetts and the area of Worcester years later.

The government took the monument down and highway which today is called the I-290 highway. That was dedicated for the African American men and women who were in World War II. The monument was built in 1943. Then years later, in 1959, this monument was taken down just for the highway to be made. In my thought process, I would think that the monument would be brought back, but instead they have held it off for almost 60 years.

There was a couple of people that sent out mail to the government and questioned what happened to the monument. But years later, it took them a while to bring it back.

[ragtime theme plays over the transition]

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Erumosele Bridgeforth (cont'd): During the interviews that I have listened to about Fitchburg Normal School, it seemed as if it was more welcoming than I would think.

For an example, Louis Broadsky was an alumni who became a teacher for Fitchburg Normal School and taught English for people who didn't know how to speak fluent English. Louis Broadsky graduated the same year that John Stewart Laws graduated in 1927.

Broadsky would be one of two groups of English-speaking classes. Because there two different levels of language speaking, there was one class for somewhat advanced and beginners. For Louis Broadsky, he would teach his students advanced stuff such as street signs, houses, buildings, cars, areas around Fitchburg, animals such as horses and cows. But there was also a beginners English class.

In the same interview by Louis Broadsky, it said Margaret Kelly didn't know how to spell. She had to draw a picture. And if she drew a cow, she would put "cow." And also had to teach them ABCs like you teach kids in the kindergarten or first grade.

[ragtime theme plays through the end]

There wasn't any information about what happened to John Stewart Laws. There could be the possibility that he attended and got drafted to the war and never came back. Because there were no more documents about John Stewart Laws after the war or any more information about him after 1945, the question is, could the first African-American graduate –

[ragtime theme plays through pregnant pause]

– be John Stewart Laws?

[ragtime theme plays concludes with a flourish]

[Perseverantia Network theme fades in]

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

[Perseverantia Network theme fades out]