

Joseph Story Fay: The Life of a Modest Man

By Susan Fletcher Witzell

Review by Christine M. Lynch

Susan Fletcher Witzell is an accomplished author whose books span several interesting fields.

Through her work as the Woods Hole Historical Museum Archivist, she has researched and recently written a compact, charming book packed with facts about a businessman and benefactor who, in the 1850s, was Woods Hole's first summer resident. Joseph Story Fay, born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1812, lived a colorful life until his death in 1897. Although many of those years were spent in Savannah, Georgia and Boston, it was in Woods Hole that he made a large difference to that village and also to Falmouth.

As the sub-title of the book indicates Fay didn't broadcast his meaningful contributions. As a businessman his interests spanned the major enterprises of his day: import/export, banking,

textile mills, railroads, and steam ships. His fortunes ebbed and flowed yet whenever his business

failed he repaid his creditors as soon as he was able. Several of his innovations helped forward the progress of the still young America. The author briefly describes Fay's diverse business interests, providing enough information to build his life's story. A generous bibliography is included for readers wishing to learn more detail.

In 1850, Fay and his wife Sarah traveled to the Cape and enjoyed their trip to Woods Hole enough to purchase a summer home and several land parcels. A man of many facets, Fay was a knowledgeable horticulturalist. The

former forests had been used for home and ship building or cleared for farming, so much so that there were hardly any trees at all. Fay was able



Joseph Story Fay. Photo by Baldwin Coolidge.
Courtesy of Woods Hole Historical Collection.

to realize his vision of lush thickets of trees by planting some twenty thousand seedlings. He hired Michael Walsh and together they virtually re-forested Woods Hole. Many of these trees still stand proudly, including the magnificent copper beeches on Challenger Drive.

Joseph Story Fay's legacy lives tangibly today in this area. At least two of his children followed his example by donating land for the benefit of the townspeople and visitors to this part of the Cape. Another of Fay's tangible legacies is a granite block marked "Woods Holl" that has stood in front of the Community Hall since 1913. In Witzell's chapter, "The Vikings," readers will learn its history.

The text is complemented by a fine selection of photos depicting people and venues ingrained with his life, along with a map of Woods Hole circa 1880. The cover photograph invites the

reader to learn about Joseph Story Fay. His soulful face, framed by his signature sideburns and wide-brimmed hat, appears pensive. Taken one year before his death, this photograph, along with others in this book, was by photographer Baldwin Coolidge.

A good book is one that's enjoyable to read while providing new information about a subject and letting the reader see the world in a new way. Susan Fletcher Witzell has written such a book.



Copies are available from the author, Susan F. Witzell.

Email: susan_witzell@hotmail.com. The book is 90 pages long, has a soft cover and costs \$10.