

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE AMOS FORTUNE FORUM

The Amos Fortune Forum is uniquely a Jaffrey institution, as unique as the Jaffrey citizen whose memory it perpetuates and honors. (See Chapter XLI, "Amos Fortune, Citizen," Vol. I.) It took nearly a century and a half after the death of Amos Fortune in 1801 for the town to become fully aware of the significance of his lifetime, which epitomized the plateaus of human progress and civilization from savagery on the Guinea coast of Africa, through bondage and servitude in a strange land, ultimately to free citizenship, home ownership, and husbandry. Amos Fortune had learned the trade of a tanner and brought his skill and business to the foothills of Monadnock in 1781. Neither the color of his skin, nor the origin of his birth, kept his fellowmen from acknowledging and seeking his services as a tanner, and hides were brought to him in Jaffrey from miles around. In 1789 he established his home on the banks of Tyler Brook, in which two adjacent basins for soaking the hides and excavated by him are still evident. Here he plied his trade, and built his house, barn, and currier's shop. The house and barn are still standing on Amos Fortune Road leading from Old Peterborough Road to Lincoln Corner Road.

When he realized that time in its exorable march was catching up, he made arrangements for the final distribution of his worldly goods. After making provision for his own, for "handsome gravestones" for himself and his wife, Violet, and leaving to the church that had accepted him into fellowship the sum of one hundred dollars for the purchase of a Communion service, he remembered the little school house in his district, District Number Eight. His bequest to the school district, at first amounting to two hundred and thirty-three dollars, was by vote of the town in 1928 "not to be touched until the principal had reached a thousand dollars." It has grown, through accumulation of dividends through the years, to the tidy sum of \$2,383.46, as of 1970.

When the present system of schools was adopted in Jaffrey, this fund became the possession of the town by Special Act of Legislature, and its income was designated by the town to be used annually for spelling contests among the grade school children and for prize speaking contests for high school students. The latter was carried on for several years, but, unfortunately, since 1967 the teachers have

not been able to instill enough interest among the student body in prize speaking and none have been held for several years. It has been suggested that these prize speaking contests be made a compulsory part of the school curriculum in the future.

These introductory paragraphs on Amos Fortune, the man, are here presented for readers who do not have access to the longer account in Volume I of *The History of Jaffrey, New Hampshire*, so that the account of the Amos Fortune Forum by Professor Norman L. Torrey, which follows, will be appreciated in its entire meaningfulness.

Since 1947, the Amos Fortune Forum has been one of Jaffrey's many attractions during the summer months. An average of two hundred and thirty people have gathered in the Old Meeting-house on the Common on Friday evenings to hear the lectures and discussions.

The printed annual programs clearly define its purpose:

"The Amos Fortune Forum was organized to take advantage of the fact that the Monadnock region contains many widely known speakers on subjects of public interest and importance. It was felt that most of them would welcome the opportunity to cooperate in this forum, each speaking on whatever subject he himself considered most interesting and timely. Thus this small community might make a substantial contribution to the intellectual and cultural life of our nation. These discussions of current problems carry on in important ways the discussions held almost two centuries ago in this same Meeting-house, when the foundations of our republic were being established by men who fought for freedom and for human dignity. The prompt and generous response of the individuals to whom an invitation has thus far been tendered to participate in the forum bespeaks a similar spirit."

There is no charge for admission, no collections are taken, no speaker is paid. The Forum, classified as a non-profit educational institution, is financed by a large number of voluntary small contributions.

The program reminds us, too, of the story of Amos Fortune:

"The Forum bears the name of a negro slave, born c. 1710, belonging to a tanner in Woburn, Massachusetts. By labor and loyalty he succeeded in gaining his freedom at the age of

fifty-nine. In 1781 Amos came to Jaffrey where he established a tannery of his own, not only becoming a respected citizen, but gaining the reputation of being the best tanner in the Monadnock region. When he died he left the Jaffrey church one hundred dollars for the purchase of a silver communion service. To the town he left for the benefit of the public school a sum which now amounts to about one thousand dollars. The story of Amos Fortune's life cannot be told more effectively than it appears on two grave stones guarded by a big pine tree in the cemetery just north of the Meeting-house built in 1775, where the Forum is held. The first reads:

'Sacred to the memory of Amos Fortune, who was born free in Africa, a slave in America, he purchased liberty, professed Christianity, lived respectably, and died hopefully, Nov. 17, 1801, AEt. 91'

The second reads;

'Sacred to the memory of Violate, by sale the slave of Amos Fortune, by marriage his wife, by her fidelity his friend and solace, she died his widow Sept. 13, 1802, AEt. 73'

Such is the monument to the slave in whose honor these free lectures are given; each lecture the gratuitous contribution of a permanent or summer resident of Amos Fortune's chosen region."

The history of the foundation and first twenty years of the Forum has been told by Professor F. Alexander Magoun and Graham B. Blaine, original members of the committee in charge during that period. The idea was originated by Reverend Anders G. Lund, who was then pastor of the Jaffrey Center church. It was enthusiastically seconded by Magoun, Blaine, and Drs. Ernest Bernbaum and William T. Foster, retired first president of Reed College. It was Dr. Foster who had the happy idea of naming the Forum after Amos Fortune, Jaffrey's most celebrated citizen. It was Dr. Foster's idea, too, to decorate each side of the platform with flowers, which have long been tastefully contributed by our ladies. Fair young daughters have served as ushers.

Early in 1947, Dr. Foster wrote to a dozen distinguished summer residents of the region, ten of whom agreed to speak. The Forum was launched. In late August a formal organization was set up and by-laws adopted. The committee since then has consisted of six or seven members, including a secretary, a treasurer (Graham B. Blaine

served twenty years in that capacity), and a chairman, upon whom the chief responsibility falls of preparing the summer program. After Dr. Foster, F. Alexander Magoun, G. Ernest Wright, Norman L. Torrey, Ralph C. Williams, J. Seelye Bixler, B. Leonard Krause, Theodore P. Greene, and Charles H. Taylor, have served as chairmen.

It was originally agreed that if the Forum attracted an average attendance of a hundred, the effort would be worth while. The actual count exceeded all expectations. The maximum attendance occurred in 1953, when Thornton Wilder spoke. The Meeting-house was crowded to capacity and uncounted numbers gathered outside the windows to catch a glimpse of the popular author. In 1966, Edwin H. Land, president of American Optical, drew an overflow audience of 477, and Sherman Adams, assistant to President Eisenhower, spoke to an assembly of 425.

From the business world too, came Roy W. Johnson, former executive vice president of General Electric. The roster of men of national prominence includes, among others, Grenville Clark, Senator Cotton and Congressman James C. Cleveland. Other prominent speakers have been biographer Catherine Drinker Bowen, poet and novelist May Sarton, author Elizabeth Yates McGreal; astronomer Harlow Shapley (four years), historians James H. Robinson and Henry S. Commager, and many another. One panel discussion was held on the activities of the United Nations, and another, on current national problems. The fine arts and medical sciences have been well presented; one concert has been given.

It is natural that educators should dominate the list. Four college presidents (J. Seelye Bixler has been called on five times, setting the record), professors of literature, history, political science and educational theory, and experts in many other fields of knowledge have contributed to the lively interest that the Forum meetings have aroused. Questions from the floor have been searching and meaningful.

After twenty-three years of successful growth, there is every reason to believe that the Amos Fortune Forum will continue to flourish.