

The Muse

Newsletter of the Slater Memorial Museum
Summer 2007



The Mysterious “Colonel” Charles Augustus Converse

By Vivian F. Zoë

Charles A. Converse was a founder of Hopkins & Allen, maker of the derringer, an early cousin of the Saturday night special. “Colonel Converse” was the benefactor of the Converse Art Building which opened to great fanfare 100 years ago, June 6.

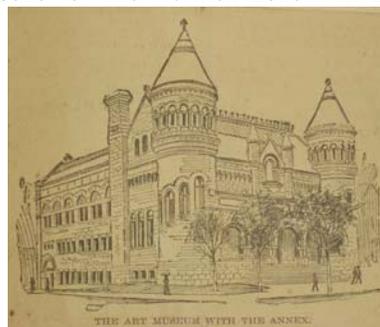
In 1865, Charles Converse built a factory building for cork cutting. The cork cutting process, coincidentally, used machinery originally patented to William R. Crocker and then to his brother, Norwich artist John Denison Crocker whose work hangs prominently in the Slater Museum. By 1888, the year the Slater Memorial Museum opened, Hopkins & Allen was third in the nation in pistol making after Colt in Hartford and Winchester in New Haven.



Charles Augustus Converse by John Denison Crocker

Converse had sold his shares in the company in 1874 at a huge gain.

Sources assert that dissatisfaction with the company’s management led Converse to divest. Writing a letter to the editor of *The Norwich Bulletin* in December 1898, Converse



The Detroit Museum of Art with its then new 1895 addition

himself recalled that his absence from the company while traveling in Europe “impaired [his] usefulness as a manager of the company, causing [his] resignation.”

But what, or who, inspired Colonel Converse leave more than \$25,000 to the “Free Academy” for a second art building?

According to *The Norwich Bulletin*, the new building was constructed of “brownstone, water struck brick and granite”. Essentially a square footprint of 62 by 65 feet, the structure’s design was intended to mimic the Romanesque Revival style of the Slater Memorial building. In the Slater Museum’s archives, one finds among the clippings from newspapers of other, much larger cities, an unattributed article about an addition to the Detroit Museum of Art built in 1895. In this case, an illustration accompanying the article, reveals an addition attached to the rear of the original, Romanesque Revival museum. The “annex” is similar in design, though more regular and classical than its towered, Victorian parent. The illustration is striking in its similarity to the image of Slater and Converse. One cannot help but wonder if the Detroit Museum served as a model for the Slater addition, a vision kept by the Slater’s first curator, Henry Watson Kent in in an article the Museum’s archives for nearly a decade before the Converse Art Building was constructed.

While Kent had moved on to the Grolier Club by 1900, surely some credit for the planning and fund raising for the new building belongs to him. In his memoir, *What I am Pleased to Call My Education*, Kent reports that Charles Converse visited the Slater during an exhibition of chairs loaned by George S. Palmer of New London. According to Kent, "his interest [was] largely in the values of such things". Apparently, Henry Kent broke a cardinal rule of curators and "told him as well as [he] could" the relative monetary values of the chairs. Broken rule or not, this act may have impressed Converse enough to understand the "value" of art in the community and to begin contemplating a major gift to add space to the museum.

At that time, the director of the Norwich Art School was Ozias Dodge. A talented artist and inventor, Dodge brought with him

to Norwich and the Academy community his sophisticated and patrician wife Hannah. Raised in New York, Hannah Sprague Dodge was accustomed to elegant parties and fancy dress affairs. She and Ozias were soon hosting costume and theme parties, creating their own arts circle, and she was presiding at the refreshment tables of both the art school **and the Slater Museum.**



A very young Ozias Dodge with his class of "Gibson Girls" in the bridge between Slater and Converse, c. 1907

The Norwich Art School's studios were then scattered throughout the basement and attic of the Slater building. Ozias felt the school deserved a building of its own. According to former history teacher and NFA archivist Dorothy (Toddy) Agranovitch, Hannah and Ozias Dodge saw a mark in Colonel Converse, whom they successfully solicited to contribute the funds to build the addition to be named for him. Ms. Agranovitch in her memoir *Hannah and Ozias Dodge: An Effect on Education?* Describes a "conspiracy" of which the winning strategy was the young "Gibson Girl," Hannah Dodge flirting with the much older Converse by sitting on his lap. Together they must have been a formidable force. Who could refuse a talent as brilliant as Ozias' and the charm of his aristocratic wife? Later, Mrs. Dodge's singular efforts to build the Slater's collection beyond the original casts and paintings contributed by Colonel Converse, would prove to be unconventional by today's professional standards.

According to the *Norwich Bulletin*, when the Converse Art Building opened to the public on June 6, 1907, the "main" gallery was installed with sixteen pieces from Converse's collection and a portrait of the donor. That portrait, by John Denison Crocker, still hangs in the gallery. At the time of the building's opening, one of the side galleries was installed with an exhibition of work by Norwich Art School alumni. Another of the side galleries displayed the museum's collection of Native American artifacts which, according to the *Bulletin*, had been installed in the basement of the Slater Building. We are now certain that this collection, much of which remains in the permanent collection of the Slater was a gift from William A.

Slater, an amateur archaeologist. Earlier, when the Slater Building first opened, in 1888, Charles Converse had donated a portrait of Reverend John Putnam Gulliver, founder of the Academy.

The inaugural exhibition was an eclectic affair, which combined the annual displays of work by Norwich Art School students as well as those of the Saturday Morning Art Classes. Also exhibited was work by alumni which included an array of fine and decorative art. The exhibition coupled oil paintings, watercolors, pen and ink drawings and "bas reliefs" with architectural drawings, book cover and wallpaper designs and "embroidered center pieces." The *Bulletin* goes on to report of a display of "illuminated texts... designs in baked clay ... a copper lantern ... embroidered burlaps, carved leather and baskets." Indeed, "Miss Wattles shows the greatest variety of handicraft... [with] ... carved wood and leather, book binding, china painting, hammered copper, repousse brass, ... and a hand painted fan." Also displayed were "... enamels, hammered silver, block printing on fabrics and a screen in appliqué work."

Most exciting were objects loaned for the inaugural exhibition by Colonel Converse. The *Bulletin* reported that the Converse collection included " Spanish Peasants Singing, by Ortego [sic]; Ruined Abbey, by Crocker; Cathedral, Norwich, England; Titian's Flora, a copy; On the fence, by W.S. Mount; Spanish Priest and Flower Girl, by Ortego [sic]; A Patriotic Toast, by Mendos; Queenstown by Moonlight, by Demorney [sic]; Coming From Mass, [and] by Pinello; Priest and Flower Girl at Lunch, by Ortego [sic]."



Titian's Flora, oil on canvas c.1515-1520. Oil on canvas. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy

While the *Bulletin* lists only one in the Converse collection as a copy, it is more than likely that all, except the Crocker were

copies. Artists and art students honed their skills while creating brilliant copies of "Great Master" paintings with the permission and encouragement of the great museums such as the Uffizzi in Florence, the Prado in Madrid and the Louvre in Paris.

It was the custom of the day for tourists to bring back facsimile paintings of the originals. In this sense, Converse's collection was like Slater's cast collections – copies of originals.

American tourists traveling in the great urban art centers of Europe bought these works and brought them back by the hundreds. The Slater Museum holds a significant collection of highly credible copies by un-named but highly skilled, probably young artists. There are some choice, important paintings listed in this inventory, including the "On the Fence" by William Sydney Mount (1807-1868). Mount was born in Setauket, Long Island and was an artist, musician, and inventor.



William Sidney Mount's *Dance of the Haymakers*, 1845, oil on canvas, The Museums at Stony Brook, NY.

The opening of the new building was accompanied by public programs including a lecture by Professor Waldo Selden Pratt (1857-1939) of Trinity College, a music historian and author of *The History of Music: A Handbook and Guide for Students*. The *Bulletin* of June 8, 1907, indicates that Ozias Dodge advised that the first floor rooms be

"...so arranged that they will open into each other and allow a circulation during an exhibition." These have been closed off from one another to accommodate an ever-increasing need for classrooms.

Charles Augustus Converse (1814 -1901), one of six children born in Salem, Massachusetts, to Augustus Converse and Amy Hyde Mansfield, arrived in Norwich at the age of fifteen. He began his business career as a bookkeeper in a file-making factory. When it closed, though very young, he started his own manufacture of files, augers and bits and built a structure at Yantic Falls known as "Falls Commonwealth Works." The "Works" was large enough to house a grist mill, cork-cutting factory, Flour mill, woolen mill, nail factory, foundry, dye works and the pistol factories of Ethan Allen & Thurber, Norwich Falls Pistol, T & K Bacon, Norwich File, Chelsea File and Hopkins & Allen. Converse described the product of Hopkins & Allen in his late life letter to the *Norwich Bulletin*, as "the best and simplest form of a cylinder for a revolver. It swung out and could be loaded with cartridges and discharge shots as rapidly as the comparable Smith & Wesson without so much machinery or expense." The company might have also been successful because it was an early adherent to the notion of diversification... manufacturing roller skates in addition to revolvers and derringers!

Converse is credited with the first industrial development at the Falls and with capturing the power of the Falls for manufacturing purposes. An 1868 map of Norwich shows the

Colonel's holdings straddling both sides of the Yantic River, including a rocky island in the middle of the river, and extending from the Sherman Street Bridge to the Falls. Many sources noted that Colonel Converse

owned a painting by Crocker of Yantic Falls.



The Grist Mill at Yantic Falls Built by Charles Converse Courtesy of Edward J. Rogalski

The Slater Museum has in its collection a painting of the Falls, but it is on permanent loan from James Bussey, great great grandson of Crocker and the painting descended through Mr.

Bussey's grandfather, directly from the painter as a wedding gift the year the artist died. Crocker and Converse were essentially of the same era and with his love of the city and of art, it is no surprise that Converse owned several Crockers.

Together with John Fox Slater, Henry B. Norton and several other prominent men of the city, Colonel Converse formed a committee to declare Norwich "stand by the flag of the Union." To encourage men to enlist in the fight, they offered a bounty to be added to the Federal government's allocation. Notwithstanding this apparent hawkish inclination, there appears to be no basis for the title "colonel" which was applied to Charles Augustus Converse after his death. It is possible that he acquired the moniker as a result of confusing him with a distant cousin, Colonel Charles Allen Converse of Vermont, who fought at the Battle of Bull Run in the war between the states.



John Denison Crocker's *Falls*, oil on Canvas, collection of the Slater Museum

More appropriate might have been "Captain Converse" because he served as the captain of the Norwich Rifle Guards in 1840.

A desire to glorify Converse after his death may have played a role in awarding the title of Colonel, but this desire would have been gilding the lily because, it seems, he was a thoughtful, generous and caring man. In addition to the evidence in his gift to NFA for the art building, he left \$500 each to his niece and nephews and the widow of his brother, \$250 to his great-nieces and \$3,000 to his live-in housekeeper, "for her long and faithful service." He was equally careful in considering the future, leaving funds to the City of Norwich to ensure that his burial plot was well maintained. The *Norwich Bulletin* reported on February 26, 1895, upon the Golden Wedding anniversary of Charles A. Converse and Caroline Frances Balcom Converse, three years before her death. The article noted that Mrs. Converse's ill health contributed to the "quiet way" in which the event was celebrated. Nevertheless, 150 people visited and the house was decked out in flowers to mark the



An early advertisement for one of Converse's interests, Courtesy of Edward J. Rogalski

accession. The house, located at 185 Washington Street, was built by Converse after he acquired the 108 foot by 220 foot lot for \$5,000 from General William Williams circa 1866. William Williams' wife was Harriet Peck Williams, sister of Eleanor Peck Slater and the benefactor of the Peck library in the Slater Memorial Building. Harriet Peck Williams is also credited with founding the Williams School in New London. The Converse house has recently undergone an accurate, loving restoration including new copper flashing and a spectacular standing seam copper roof on its protruding octagonal front porch.

Caroline Converse predeceased Charles by three years though she was nearly ten years his junior. An obituary in the *Norwich Bulletin* recorded that her "keen observation of places and persons resulted in a fund of information and a ripeness of judgment which made her companionship a delight to all who knew her.

"She was a devout communicant of Christ church and a liberal contributor to religious work, as well as



**The Converse Homestead at
185 Washington St. today**

to private charities. ... She was refined and cultivated in her tastes and took much comfort in her home and her family...." Within the three years between his wife's death and his own, Charles Converse lost virtually his entire immediate family. His daughter died the same year as his wife, and his son died three months before Charles. His generosity was expressed through his bequest to his grand daughter Elizabeth Austin.

It is easy to hypothesize that Mr. Converse was a modest and private man. A widower at the time of his death, he had amassed a great fortune through business acumen. Despite this success, news articles in the media of 19th century Norwich are maddeningly non-existent. Even the 1894 commemorative **NORWICH the Rose of New England**, published by the *Norwich Evening Record*, which includes portraits, biographies and descriptions of businesses, occupations and interests of Norwich's most prominent citizens, includes Mr. Converse's house at 185 Washington Street, but nothing more about the man himself. No search of

contemporary news outlets reveals Mr. Converse's travels or leisure activities.

However, the occasion of Converse's eighty-fourth birthday, merited sizeable notice in the *Norwich Bulletin*. An article published in 1900, notes that "He reads the papers daily and manifests a keen interest in the events transpiring at Manila...."

The reference to the events in Manila refers to the Spanish American War which was triggered by the sinking of the USS Maine in Havana harbor during Cuba's war for independence in 1898. Theodore Roosevelt declared war on Spain and ordered Secretary of the Navy George Dewey to attack the Spanish fleet in the Philippines leading to the first hostile engagement of the Spanish-American War, The Battle of Manila Bay. Before dawn on May 1, 1898, Commodore Dewey's ships passed under the siege guns on the island of Corregidor at the entrance to Manila Bay and by noon had destroyed the Spanish fleet.

The Philippine War of Independence began on February 4, 1899, and continued for two years. The United States needed 126,000 soldiers to subdue the Philippines. The war took the lives of 4,234 Americans and 16,000 Filipinos. As usually happens in guerrilla campaigns, the civilian population suffers the worst. As many as 200,000 civilians may have died from famine and disease. The United States declared an end to military rule on July 4, 1901, but sporadic guerrilla resistance continued until 1903.

The 84th Birthday news article continues to glow that "His tastes have been markedly in the line of art, and he has been interested in painting, architecture, sculpture, landscape gardening and ceramics. He has visited London, Paris and Berlin, where he has secured many art treasures which now adorn his home. He has also a very valuable library of biography, science, history, and works on travel."

The article most certainly was astute in reporting Converse's wide travels. In order to have collected the material listed in the probate inventory at his death, he must have covered, at a minimum, the European continent. In life, Converse's interests were broad, reflecting the model of the typical 19th century community leader. He was a member of the Norwich Rifle Guards, the Odd Fellows, the State Militia, the City's Board of Education and Central District and the board of Aldermen. Converse was a member of the Sons of the American Revolution, and at the time of his death, the "oldest living member of Christ Episcopal Church, according to the *Norwich Record*.

The *Record* opined, "he was a brilliant conversationalist, his wide reading in addition to the fund of information gained from frequent travel in this country and abroad making him thoroughly conversant with many topics, especially history and art.

"He had a very valuable collection of pictures and other art treasures of which he was justly proud and which he was very fond of showing his friends. He took a deep interest in education and was always solicitous for the welfare of the Free academy...."

“Colonel Converse was well versed in the history of his adopted town and frequently contributed to The Bulletin, and other newspapers, articles of an historical nature and reminiscent nature. His excellent power of expression combined with his keen sense of humor made these papers very interesting and they were widely read. “He was naturally cheery of disposition and despite the many afflictions which came upon him in his later years was invariably genial and affable. He was always glad to receive callers and they were sure of a hearty and cordial welcome.”

According to his will, Converse left a wealth of rare books to the Peck Library, then housed in the Slater Building. These included “The volume bound in red silk giving history of Japanese blade Murasima”; Art Gems from the Gray Collection of Pictures, bound; and ... The Art Treasures of England, thirty parts.....”

After ensuring that family members and his housekeeper were well cared for, Converse’s will divided the remainder into five parts. Two of these went to NFA to construct the Converse Art Building. He left one part of his estate each to the United Workers of Norwich, and to Christ Church. United Workers of Norwich was founded by the wives of protestant ministers as a temperance society and evolved into today’s United Community Services. According to Arthur Lathrop in his *Victorian Norwich*, in 1877... “the United Workers rented a house at 612 Thames Street, which they named ‘Sheltering Arms,’ and which was quickly put into service as a temporary shelter for the sick and homeless.” Like so many of the institutions in Norwich ... the Slater Museum, Backus Hospital, and Otis Library, the United Community Services has its roots firmly planted in the 19th century pinnacle that Norwich achieved because of people who recognized that in sharing their wealth, they made the community better for their neighbors and themselves.



The Converse gravesite today; top portion, with his name, is missing

Colonel Converse’s Wednesday death was noted on the front page of that day’s *Norwich Bulletin*. His funeral the following Saturday was reported in the *Bulletin* to have “included many representative business and professional men of the city. The flowers were many in number and were very elegant. The body lay in a massive mahogany casket with a metallic lining. The Rev. J. Eldred Brown, rector of Trinity Episcopal church, read the impressive Episcopal service. Mrs. G. T. Lord and Mrs. M. E. Jensen sang ‘I Know That My Redeemer Liveth.’ The body was borne by undertaker’s assistants, followed by the pallbearers, who were Arthur H. Brewer, General William A. Aiken, Burrell W. Hyde and Henry Ruggles. Burial was in Yantic Cemetery.” Though Mr. Converse had “ensured” the upkeep of his family gravesite, it is today in sad disrepair.

Sources :

Very special thanks to Edward J. Rogalski for his indispensable research assistance with this piece.

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The archives of the Slater Memorial Museum

Friends of Slater Activities Notes from the President by Patricia Reardon Flahive



I am thrilled and honored to assume the presidency of the Friends of Slater. My acquaintance with the museum began on a faraway Sunday when my parents brought us there. I can still remember the squeaky floors, the statuary bathed in a kind of dim yellow light, the kind of musty smell, the stillness and, the silence, oh, the SILENCE...

It would be the first of many visits over the years.

Fast forward to 1983... Having taught in public and parochial schools in Connecticut and Harlem, NYC, I'm teaching first year English at the Academy (as NFA was always referred to in our family). The curriculum includes an introduction to Greek mythology and Homer's *Odyssey*. The Slater, now, thanks to the loving dedication and artistic sensitivity of Joseph Gualtieri, has become the gem that it once was and is now my "workshop". Under the tutelage of Mary Ann Hall, I become familiar with everything Slater, as do my students.

Now, the silence and awe gives way to projects and papers and, most fun of all, re-enactments from Greek plays along with a respect for antiquity and art. As a proud member of the Friends of Slater, I hope to help the marvelous work continued by Vivian Zoë and her staff change it from being Norwich’s best kept secret to a national destination.



Introducing Leigh Smead

Many of you are already aware that after seven years at the Slater Museum, Collections Manager Sue Frankenbach left the museum in March. It was a loss to us, but we are so delighted to welcome Leigh Smead as the museum's new Assistant Director. The position was changed after a careful examination of the museum's needs and the progress that was made in the past five years. We all stand on the shoulders of Sue Frankenbach who improved our collections operations to the point where an Assistant Director can focus more on overall museum operations, while continuing the quest to have collections 100% catalogued and inventoried.

Leigh is a graduate of the University of Connecticut, where she earned a bachelor's degree in English, and of New York University, where she earned a master's degree in Museum Studies.

She has worked, in a variety of capacities and as an intern at the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York, Mystic Aquarium, in the archives of the University of Connecticut and at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum.

An interesting fact about Leigh is that she lived with her family on Governor's Island off Manhattan during the time that it was a Coast Guard base. She attended school in Brooklyn at that time, requiring a daily ferry ride.

Leigh has already had a positive impact. The new and exciting website of the Slater Museum was completely designed and implemented by Leigh within her first month. The Slater and

NFA are so fortunate to have found Leigh, living in Salem, CT, after a national search.

Recent Acquisition Showcases Local and Women's Art

A watercolor entitled "*Shadow*" by Margaret Triplett was recently acquired, showcasing NFA's long history of support for local artists, and in particular, for women artists. In 1912 Charlotte Fuller Eastman, a Norwich Free Academy and Norwich Art School alumna herself, became head of the art school after three years as a teacher. She retired in 1943 and her replacement was Margaret L. Triplett, who had taught at the Art School for fourteen years before being appointed Director. Triplett was Director of the Art School from 1944 – 1970, her career here spanning over forty years.

The Slater Museum owns a number of works by women with deep roots at the Academy, including Eastman, Triplett and Edith Becker. There were a few works by Triplett in the collection, but not nearly a representative group. When she died, Triplett left many works on paper that were to be sold to benefit art scholarships at NFA. The recently acquired watercolor depicts a scene in Norwich near the NFA campus, adding to its significance to the Slater's collection.



Dry Dock Rescue for Boat Model

Well over a year ago, the Slater's 18th c. wooden model of an ancient Egyptian boat was damaged when a truck went over a speed bump. The vibration caused a glass shelf to tumble, injuring the fragile model. Slater friend and cabinetmaker Michael Vegiard to the rescue! He's seen above at work on the model.

Many thanks, Michael!



A Message from the Director



Chip, chip, crunch, crunch ... bang! Those are the sounds outside my office window on this breezy June day. Masons are hard at work restoring the exquisite Slater Memorial Building ... long overdue and much appreciated. As difficult as it may seem to imagine, a little over a century ago, similar sounds were heard on the NFA campus as masons put the finishing touches on the new Converse Art Building. The building has provided much needed art classroom space, and, more recently, math and English classroom space. The latter was the partial result of the opening of the new Sidney Frank Center for the Arts. But for one hundred years, the Converse Art Gallery has been providing an airy, well-lit, open space in which the Slater Museum is able to present changing exhibitions. Converse Art Gallery remains one of the most desirable and well-suited spaces available within a museum setting for the exhibition of contemporary art by Connecticut Artists. Each of my predecessor directors has realized the value of the asset to the arts community and to the general public made possible by Colonel Charles A. Converse's spectacular gift a century ago. In this issue, we examine what might have motivated him to take such generous action.

Upcoming Exhibitions, Programs and Events

Sunday, September 16, 2007; 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. Exhibition Opening Reception
The Classicist: Remembering John Zito
Exhibition continues through November 25

Saturday, October 27, 2007; 5:30 to 9:00 p.m. **A Centennial of Art: Converse Art Gallery at 100**
Dinner and Auction to benefit the Slater Museum's efforts to build an elevator

The Muse is published up to four times yearly for the members of The Friends of the Slater Memorial Museum. The museum is located at 108 Crescent Street, Norwich, CT 06360. It is part of The Norwich Free Academy, 305 Broadway, Norwich, CT 06360. Museum main telephone number: (860) 887-2506. The museum's Website is linked to that of NFA: www.norwichfreeacademy.com

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Coming soon!

The Classicist: Remembering John Zito

Opening with a reception Sunday, September 16, this exhibition will feature the work of the late John Zito, Jr., highlighting 45 years of painting and drawing. His true passion was painting in oil on canvas in the tradition of the old masters. His work reveals his love of Titian, Rembrandt, Leonardo DaVinci, Michelangelo, Rubens, Picasso, and Renoir. Zito's canvases center around themes inspired by classic tales of mythology and operatic narratives. The exhibition will continue through November 25, 2007

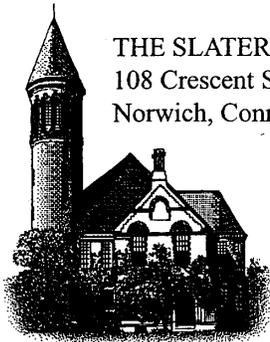
At left, John Zito's *Dancer in the Clouds*, nd, oil on canvas

Slater Memorial Museum Hours: Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Saturday and Sunday 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.
Closed to the public on Mondays and holidays

Visitors may park in designated visitor parking spaces or any empty parking place on campus. Parking is difficult between 1:30 and 2:15 p.m. during school days due to the school buses.

The museum's main telephone number is (860) 887-2506. A recording will provide information on current exhibitions, days of operation, directions, admission fees and access to staff voice mailboxes. Our Webpage is linked to the NFA Website.

www.norwichfreeacademy.com.



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