
Jack Fitzpatrick, Berkshires senator and arts patron, 88

By J.M. Lawrence

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Former state senator John “Jack” Fitzpatrick of Stockbridge and his wife, Jane, founded the nation’s first mail-order curtain company on their dining room table in the 1950s.

With the help of ruffled unbleached cotton muslin, they built Country Curtains into a small empire of Berkshires companies, including the Red Lion Inn on Main Street in Stockbridge. It was slated to make way for a gas station when the Fitzpatricks bought it in 1968. They later became renowned supporters of the arts and education in Western Massachusetts.

Mr. Fitzpatrick, a Republican who served four terms on Beacon Hill in the 1970s, died Saturday at his home in Stockbridge after a year of failing health, his family said. He was 88.

“He could play pool with the guys at the American Legion and then put on his petit point slippers and tuxedo that night and hobnob with the glitterati,” said his daughter Nancy, who lives in Stockbridge and operates the Red Lion.

In state politics, Mr. Fitzpatrick helped mentor the next generation of Republican leaders. “I was a new, young legislator, and I remember how helpful he was and what a good person he was,” said former governor Paul Cellucci, who served with him in the 1970s.

“Without the support, friendship and wisdom which Senator Fitzpatrick provided to me from my first run for office in 1990, I would not have entered nor succeeded in politics,” former governor Jane Swift said in a statement. “His impact on the Republican Party and the Berkshires will be felt for years to come. I will miss his humor and friendship most of all.”

In Western Massachusetts, Mr. Fitzpatrick brought a trifecta of influence to the table. He was a leader in politics, business, and culture. A gifted raconteur who could weave tales about the days of US representatives Silvio Conte and Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill Jr., Mr. Fitzpatrick enjoyed a good steak and a glass of cognac, and didn’t care much for some modern art.

His daughter recalled he became angry after viewing a painting at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The stark image was of white paint on a white canvas. Mr. Fitzpatrick far preferred the works of his friend Norman Rockwell. He and his wife served as models for one of the artist’s paintings in 1964.

Their name appeared in many arts programs as patrons. The Fitzpatrick Foyer marks the entrance to Seiji Ozawa Hall at the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s summer home at Tanglewood. Stockbridge recently named the town green next to the Red Lion in honor of the Fitzpatricks. And on Monday night, the lights were dimmed above the Fitzpatrick Stage at the Berkshires Theatre Festival in honor of Jack, who was remembered by the festival as “a true friend of the arts.”

“He and Jane were the driving forces in making Tanglewood what it is today,” said the BSO’s managing director, Mark Volpe.

Mr. Fitzpatrick was a great resource for advice, Volpe said. “It wasn’t just his generosity. Jack was a really wise guy.”

Born in Quincy, Mr. Fitzpatrick was a baby when his father, Clarence, who owned a department store, died. His mother, Clara, took her children to Rome, where she studied opera and debuted as Azucena in “Il Trovatore.” The family later moved to Vermont, where Clara remarried.

Mr. Fitzpatrick’s early childhood in Europe gave him “a core of sophistication he tried to mask,” his daughter Nancy

said. She didn't see his worldly side until he took his daughters to Europe as youngsters. "All of a sudden, my father started speaking fluent French," she said.

Mr. Fitzpatrick met the woman he would marry, Jane Hayes, when they were teenagers in Vermont. She was 15 when they had their first date. He graduated from the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey in 1942, and went off to World War II with the Army. They were married in 1944 while he was on a 12-hour leave.

He was awarded the Bronze Star in February 1945 for heroism during battle in Germany.

Mr. Fitzpatrick earned a law degree from Boston University in 1951 but did not pass the Vermont bar, and went to work for Quincy-based Lincoln Stores. He noticed the curtain department was a key profit center, and suggested mail order to his employer. The chain wasn't interested, he told his family.

He launched Country Curtains in 1956 via newspaper ads while he and his wife were living in Whitman. He wrote the advertising copy and Jane drew the illustrations. Four years later, Mr. Fitzpatrick was earning enough to resign from Lincoln.

"He and my mother were a great team. He was the visionary, and she was the dogged partner who worked away and made it happen," Nancy said.

They initially bought the Red Lion in part as a new home for Country Curtains.

Mr. Fitzpatrick later opened a curtain factory in Housatonic, and purchased Blantyre Castle, a Lenox estate, in 1980. Another daughter, Ann Brown, now owns and operates the luxury hotel.

A week ago, Mr. Fitzpatrick had dinner under the crystal chandeliers in the Red Lion dining room, daughter Nancy said. He had his favorite meal amid the candlelight tables, red velvet curtains, and teapot collections. "I love this place," he said.

In addition to his wife and two daughters, Mr. Fitzpatrick leaves two grandsons, three stepgrandchildren, and many nieces and nephews.

A memorial service will be held Aug. 8 in Stockbridge, with the location to be announced. Burial will be private.

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