



Chelsea Resilient: Call and Response Through the Ages



Chelsea Resilient: Call and Response Through the Ages

Created by/*Creado por* David Fichter, 2021

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Chelsea Resilient traces the rich history of this Massachusetts city from its beginnings as Winnisimmet, when Native American peoples fished and dug mussels on the banks of Chelsea Creek, to the urban, diverse city we know today. Across four centuries this community has repeatedly risen to overcome challenges and tragedies, responding with energy, heartfelt mutual concern, and an unquenchable drive to rebuild. The struggles and successes of each generation of Chelsea residents echo across history with a message of courage, determination, and optimism. Our past, present and future are linked in a continuous call to action and grassroots response, the defining character of Chelsea and its people.

Chelsea Resilient rastrea la rica historia de esta ciudad de Massachusetts desde sus inicios como Winnisimmet, cuando los pueblos nativos americanos pescaban y colectaban mejillones en las orillas del arroyo Chelsea Creek, hasta la ciudad urbana y diversa que conocemos hoy. A lo largo de cuatro siglos, esta comunidad se ha levantado repetidamente para superar desafíos y tragedias, respondiendo con energía, sincera preocupación mutua y un impulso insaciable para reconstruir. Las luchas y los éxitos de cada generación de residentes de Chelsea resuenan a lo largo de la historia con un mensaje de coraje, determinación y optimismo. Nuestro pasado, presente y futuro están vinculados en un llamado continuo a la acción y una respuesta de base, el carácter definitorio de Chelsea y su gente.

Cambridge-based artist David Fichter is known for a distinctive, realistic style that features the people, architecture and other details reflective of the mural location. For over 30 years David has created community murals and mosaics, taking him all over the United States and internationally, including Nicaragua, Armenia, and Georgia. Working with residents of all ages, he's completed more than 200 permanent murals that have become beloved local landmarks that communicate the story of each neighborhood.

El artista David Fichter, con base en Cambridge, es conocido por un estilo distintivo y realista que presenta a la gente, la arquitectura y otros detalles que reflejan la ubicación del mural. Durante más de 30 años, David ha creado murales comunitarios y mosaicos que lo han llevado por todo Estados Unidos e internacionalmente, incluyendo Nicaragua, Armenia y Georgia. Trabajando con residentes de todas las edades, ha completado más de 200 murales permanentes que se han convertido en puntos de referencia locales que comunican la historia de cada vecindario.

Mural Art Team:

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Assisted by Megan Barnes, Xerxes Butt, Bianca Oppedisano, and Eliseo Fuentes

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Mimi Graney for the City of Chelsea

Project Assistance:

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Tom Ambrosino, City Manager

Eastern Minerals and Kaitie Butler

Traggorth Properties

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We are grateful for the participation of:

Chelsea Black Community, Joan Cromwell and Jayde Umemba

Chelsea Public Library

Chelsea Youth Commission, Branden Garcia

Community Enhancement Team

Hondurenos Unidos, Margarita Franco

GreenRoots

La Colaborativa

Lewis Latimer Society, Leo and Ron Robinson

Revival Church, Rev. Elaine Mendes

St Luke’s Episcopal Church, Father Edgar A. Gutiérrez-Duarte

Walk Wednesdays, Ron Fishman and Carmen Villalta

Walnut St Synagogue, Ellen Rovner and Ed Medros

Steering Committee:

Tom Ambrosino

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Amanda Arsenault

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Lee Farrington

Matt Frank

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Dinanyili Paulino

Sylvia Ramirez

Mimi Rancatore

Ron Robinson

Alex Rodriguez

Ellen Rovner

Lisa Santagate

Dave Traggorth

Melinda Vega Maldonado

INTRODUCTION

The one thing everyone in Chelsea holds in common – across differences of culture and language, income and politics, even across time – is public space, that is, our public parks and parking lots, our sidewalks and streets. While we don't own them, we collectively experience and interact with other areas everyday too like storefronts, front yards, billboards, fences. The fancy term is the public realm and the city's social fabric is woven here. The work of Chelsea Prospers, the City of Chelsea's neighborhood initiative, is to support the ways the public realm weaves positive social connections and can foster a healthier, happier and more prosperous city.

This mural, nearly two years in the making, is an example of a big change in the public realm for Bellingham Square, the power of public art and the purpose of civic design.

The pandemic hadn't yet arrived when the idea for a landmark mural in Bellingham Square was hatched. City Manager Tom Ambrosino had a vision for something colorful and awesome on this very wall. Property owner Dave Traggorth was a willing host who set out no restrictions. Mimi Graney, the City of Chelsea's Civic Design and Engagement Strategist, approached David Fichter because she knew he would bring to this space more than a beautiful design. David's approach to mural making is as much about people as it is about painting. David has created more than 200 permanent murals and mosaics across the US and internationally and each of his pieces is unique to the specific place where it resides. He digs in deeply, learning all he can about the community and the result is a piece of art that could not exist anywhere else.

With funding provided through the Chelsea Cultural Council's Heritage Celebrations Grant in the spring of 2020, David began his work. A Steering Committee of two dozen community representatives met virtually throughout the process. They suggested themes, shared stories of the city, and recommended other people for David to meet. David spent days in the archives of the Chelsea Library. He read books. He looked at lots of pictures -- all he could find of Chelsea past and present. He met with community groups, nonprofits, local leaders and regular folks. Some meetings were formal, like the virtual meeting with Chelsea youth and others were casual on-the-street conversations. He attended local happenings from strolls on Walk Wednesdays to the march for Black Lives Matter. David wasn't just ticking off a task marked "local research." He was making real connections, breathing and moving within the spirit of Chelsea.

By the autumn of 2020 David's ideas had synthesized into a concept and then into a pencil sketch. He listened to feedback, incorporating everything. Into the winter, reference photos were gathered. David seeks to be as accurate in his representations as possible, detailing each window in the architecture, the right shape for the firefighter's helmet, each face recognizable. Last spring, in David's studio, the painting on the 40 large aluminum panels began. The community followed the progress via social media as the colors bloomed.

The panels began to arrive in the autumn of 2021. Much thanks to Eastern Minerals and Kaitie Butler who provided warehouse space for the varnishing and undisturbed time for the protective coating to cure. We're grateful for the ongoing partnership with the capable team from Chelsea's Department of Public Works under the direction of Mario Cimino who installed them with David, paying careful attention to every detail.

The beauty of this mural extends beyond the vibrant colors and skillful painting. It holds a mirror up to our community. It is a mural about Chelsea, by Chelsea and for Chelsea in all its diversity. David fills the design with countless details because, he says, it is for those people who will pass it every day. Years from now, they will still be able to discover some new detail or layer to the story.

MURAL DESCRIPTION

COLONIAL ERA

On the far right side of the mural are images of the famous “Battle of Chelsea Creek”, the first naval battle of the American Revolution. In May of 1775, just before the Battle of Bunker Hill in nearby Charlestown, the revolutionaries managed to disable a British warship, The Diana, remove its canons and other valuables, and set it on fire. Revolutionary War General Israel Putnam waded into the water of Chelsea Creek to call out to the British to surrender, which they refused to do. The mural begins with Putnam calling out across the ages, standing in the water of Chelsea Creek, next to one of the American canons that were used in the battle, while The Diana burns.

In the smoke of the burning Diana, you see a map of the town in the 18th century with locations for the naval battle. To the left of the ship is a scene of Native American women digging for mussels on the shores of Chelsea Creek.

Just above Putnam’s canon is a portrait of Fanny Fairweather. Fanny was a woman enslaved by the Carys, a prominent Chelsea family. She recounted her memories of being captured by slave hunters at age seven in West Africa and auctioned in St Kitts to Samuel and Sarah Cary. The Cary family made riches through their sugar plantations in Grenada and Fanny spent most of the early years of her life there where she cared for the Cary children. After eighteen years in the Caribbean the Cary family returned to Chelsea permanently, bringing Fanny and two other enslaved people, Pompeii and Charlotte, with them. She married David Fairweather, a freed slave, and lived in a home owned by the Cary family at 32 John Street in Chelsea. Her inclusion in the mural is important to tell the full story of slavery here in New England. While no portrait of Fanny survives, a lot is known about her character and life. She is depicted in her older years with a favorite cat on her lap; a book, since she could read; and her parrot perched on the cannon. She is smoking a pipe. She died in 1844 and is buried in Rumney Marsh Burial ground in Revere.

Above her is a representation of the Bellingham-Cary House, the oldest surviving 18th century building in the city. The Bellingham-Cary House was constructed in 1724 and may incorporate remains of the 1659 hunting lodge of colonial governor, Richard Bellingham. An Englishman, Bellingham was involved in the formation of the Massachusetts Bay Company which formally established Boston in 1630. After Bellingham’s death, the house passed on to the Cary family and was enlarged several times by them until 1914, when the Governor Bellingham-Cary House Association, a local non-profit organization, was established to preserve it. The house is on the National Register of Historic Places.

To the left of Fanny is a standing portrait of Helen Louise Gilson. Helen was the niece of the first mayor of Chelsea, Mayor Francis B. Fay, who was elected shortly after Chelsea became a city. Helen lived with Mayor Fay and, during the Civil War, answered the call for nurses to serve the Union side. After the war she returned to Chelsea and married, but unfortunately died in childbirth.

Behind Gilson is an image of 19th century Chelsea Square during the trolley era. You can see the Chelsea Courthouse on the left, as well as the Stebbins Fountain. In accordance with city landscapes of the period, Chelsea Square was planned to include open space, in this case, two teardrop-shaped areas of grass with curbs that defined the space. The Stebbins Fountain was constructed in 1897 and named for banker and Mayor of Chelsea, Isaac Stebbins, who bequeathed the funds for its construction to the city. He was also responsible for the Stebbins Block of buildings constructed nearby. The Fountain was deliberately positioned in the Square so that, as dictated by the conditions of Stebbins' will, "both man and beast might drink from it." Though the 1908 fire destroyed many significant buildings in the city, it stopped short of Chelsea Square, preserving many historic properties here.

In the far background, beyond Chelsea Square, is depicted the Chelsea Ferry crossing Chelsea Creek, and a view of Admirals Hill in the mid-19th century with both the Naval and Marine Hospitals. The Chelsea Naval Hospital was constructed of Vermont granite and commissioned in 1836. The hospital served naval personnel and others through four wars. When it was decommissioned in 1974 it was the oldest naval hospital in service in the US. Notable patients included Presidents John Quincy Adams and John F. Kennedy.

To the left of Helen Gilson is a portrait of Lewis Howard Latimer, a mid 19th century African-American inventor who grew up in Chelsea. Latimer was the youngest of four children born to escaped slave George and Rebecca Latimer. At 16, during the Civil War, Latimer enlisted in the US Navy. After the war Latimer returned to Boston and accepted a menial position at the Crosby and Gould patent law office. Here he was able to teach himself mechanical drawing and drafting and eventually moved to New York. An important Black inventor in history, Latimer's most notable patent was for the carbon filament used in the incandescent lightbulb. Latimer worked closely with Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison.

INDUSTRIAL ERA

To the left of Latimer the start of the Industrial Era in Chelsea is noted with images of the Chelsea Clock building, as well as the large Chelsea clock in Bellingham Square. Founded in 1895 as Boston Clock Company, and renamed Chelsea Clock in 1897 by Charles Pearson, Chelsea Clock is America's oldest clockmaker and clock repair shop. To this day, Chelsea Clock remains a foremost name in the industry, famous for its Ship's Bell model with 12-hour chime movement.

There are other manufacturing plants in the background including the Forbes Lithograph Manufacturing Co., which was located on Chelsea Creek. Founded in 1862 in Boston, Forbes moved to Chelsea in 1884 where its factory complex spread over 18 buildings. Forbes Lithograph grew into one of the largest lithograph companies in the United States with branches in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Detroit. Their wide-ranging work included posters, tickets, tags, embossing and more, even producing banknotes for the Free French government during World War II. The company was sold in the 1960s and the Chelsea plant was closed.

Two French Canadian workers stand in front of the Forbes building. From 1840 through 1930 thousands of French Canadians immigrated to communities across New England to escape poverty in Canada, many of them to Chelsea. They were devoted to their religion, their new homeland, and their community.

Below the Chelsea Clock building in the foreground are two young Polish American girls from the Chelsea Polaski festival in Chelsea Square. Beside them is pictured the founder of Kayem, Polish immigrant Kazimierz Monkiewicz, driving the horse drawn wagon. Between 1870 and 1914 thousands of Polish immigrants settled in Chelsea, contributing to the community and to the industrial growth of the city. Kazimierz Monkiewicz and his wife Helena founded Kayem Foods, a premier brand of meats, in 1900. For over 100 years Kayem has been family-owned and operated in Chelsea, employs many of its residents, and is the home of the “Fenway Frank” and other quality prepared meats.

An elderly Italian-American street vendor is pictured selling tomatoes in front of the Chelsea Clock, representing Italian immigrants who made their living in Chelsea during this period selling ice, milk, vegetables and fruit. As the vendors made their way down the streets pushing their carts, they called out their products in Italian and English.

THE GREAT FIRES

To the left of these scenes of our industrial past is a large-scale image of an early 20th century newsboy hawking newspapers.

On one hand he holds an April 13, 1908 edition with headlines about the first Great Chelsea Fire that devastated the city. The fire started in the Boston Blacking Company, on the Everett line. A forty mile an hour wind sparked flames in nearby wood-framed houses. Only when the flames came up to the edge of Chelsea Creek did the devastation stop. In this tragedy, 350 acres were burned, 15,000 were left homeless and 19 people were killed. Community institutions including City Hall, schools, and churches were demolished. The community rallied to care for one another as residents opened their homes to their displaced neighbors. Pictured here are images of Chelsea people lining up for assistance, as well as images showing the destruction of churches such as St. Rose and St. Stanislaus.

On the other hand, the newsboy holds up a Chelsea Record newspaper from October 1973 when a second devastating fire destroyed much of Chelsea. The fire started less than 200 yards from the 1908 fire in an area of machine shops and wooden buildings. Accelerated by dry, high winds, within two hours of its inception the fire engulfed eighteen city blocks. Chelsea’s firefighters were joined by 111 other fire departments. In the aftermath of the fire, residents, businesses and the city itself needed to rebuild once more.

Behind the shoulder of the newsboy, there is a scene of a trio of heroic Chelsea firefighters. The reference photo for this drawing was taken by Arnie Jarmak during a fire in 1978. On the right,

wearing the #1 helmet is James (Jimmy) Grafon. He was a Lieutenant on Group 4 E2 and went on to serve as a Captain on ladder #1. He was also a training officer for the department. Harry Ells worked Engine #4. Many years later his son, Edward, followed in his footsteps and became a Chelsea firefighter. Holding the flashlight is George Ostler, who worked as a firefighter until September 1983. In retirement he devoted many years to the care of the archives at the Chelsea Public Library. His daughter, Mary Bourque, served the city as Superintendent of Schools.

JEWISH HISTORY

To the left of the newsboy, there are images representing the Chelsea Jewish community through the early twentieth century, when Chelsea was predominantly Jewish. The “call and response theme” is illustrated by a Jewish woman with a Shofar, a ram’s horn blown at the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. Above the woman blowing the Shofar is an image of a man carrying the Torah. Two people who grew up in Chelsea’s Jewish community and remain active in it today posed for these depictions. Through research, advocacy and walking tours, Ellen Rovner tells the history of Chelsea’s Jewish past and continuing outreach for those fleeing persecution. Ed Medros is a long time member of the Walnut Street synagogue. He grew up just steps from this mural in Veterans Park, in housing that was once near Fifth Street and Walnut. Today, the site is beneath Route 1. The synagogue depicted in the lower section is the Walnut Street Synagogue, rebuilt after the 1908 fire. It is known as the “Queen of Synagogues” because of its majestic sanctuary and elaborate, hand-painted ceilings and walls. It is home to a Torah Ark built by Sam Katz and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Within the curl of the Shofar is a representation of Katz Bagels, one of the still thriving Jewish businesses in Chelsea. Richard Katz (who carries on the 70 year tradition of his father) is shown making the Pizza bagel, which his father invented in the 1970’s.

Below is an image of the beloved Jewish delicatessen, Murray and Eddy’s, which was a political and social meeting place for Chelsea’s leaders until its closing in 1979. Two of the brothers are pictured standing in front of their eccentric menu board. A corn beef sandwich and matzo ball soup are displayed on the counter.

NEIGHBORS COMING TOGETHER

To their right, in front of the Walnut Street Synagogue, is a group of Chelsea Puerto Rican children eating ice cream they got from a neighborhood truck. In the 1970s new residents from Puerto Rico built a Spanish speaking community here. The 1980s photo used as a reference for the mural was taken by Arnie Jarmak, the photographer for the Chelsea Record through much of the 80s and 90s. The ice cream truck was parked just outside the offices of the Chelsea Record on Fourth Street at Cherry. Arnie reports that he saw these children all the time because they lived just on the other

side of Broadway at Fourth and Division Streets. For him, “young kids getting an ice cream from a truck in summer is a timeless image”.

Chelsea-born Armando Anthony “Chick” Correa, of Italian descent, is shown playing keyboard in front of the Walnut Street Synagogue. A world renown jazz pianist and winner of 23 Grammy Awards, Correa was introduced to the piano by his Dad at the age of 4. He went on to perfect his percussion-style use of the piano with famed musicians Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock. To the left of the Murray and Eddy’s Deli scene is a large-scale image of a Central American child being raised up by many different hands, to symbolize the community coming together. For generations immigrants have made a home in Chelsea with the hope of making a better life for themselves and their families.

Above the baby is a woman making pupusas, a typical Salvadoran dish made from cornmeal dough and filled with a variety of beans, cheeses and meats. Pupusas are a central part of the Salvadoran menu. The woman depicted here is Yenis Hernandez.

Behind the woman making pupusas are members of the Chelsea Somali community in traditional clothing. Maryan Hassan holds her niece with her sister, Hoden, beside her and Yahya Noor in the back. The reference photo used here was from a day when they volunteered at the Chelsea Community Garden with other members of the Healthy Chelsea Coalition. They represent the promise of the growing Somali community in Chelsea. Maryan’s family moved here from Kenya in 2004 and is studying Healthcare Management at Bay State College. Hodan graduated from Chelsea High School and will attend Salem State College with the goal of becoming a teacher. Yahya Noor works for Healthy Chelsea and owns the award-winning Tawakal Halal Cafe in East Boston that serves Somalian dishes.

GROWING OUR FUTURE

An array of images are captured in the shape and folds of a Salvadoran traditional dancer, Carmen Villalta. Carmen is dressed in a traditional costume of blue and white, the colors of the flag of El Salvador. Carmen and members of her family emigrated to America to escape the violence in her homeland. She is an engaged member of the Chelsea community, studying on-line to complete her Master’s degree, raising her daughter, and continuing her interest in the traditional dances of El Salvador.

Out of the folds of Carmen’s dress come images of the Chelsea community today. On the far left is a scene of kayakers from GreenRoots on the Chelsea Creek with the Tobin Bridge in the background. GreenRoots is an environmental justice organization that engages residents to improve public health. Projects include caring for natural areas, expanding greenspace and advocating for climate resiliency. At the bow of the kayak is Sarah Levy, a Transit Justice Organizer with Maria Belen Powers, Co-Director of the organization, at the stern.

At the bottom of the swirl of Carmen's dress are gardeners from several Chelsea Community Garden. Founded in 1996, Chelsea Community Garden gives residents of densely populated Chelsea the opportunity to grow their own vegetables and flowers while interacting with other gardeners and cultures from around the world. Enesa Skopjak, an immigrant from Bosnia, is shown with a gourd curling around her shoulders. A particularly active member at the garden, especially in caring for the raspberries, she has a strong interest in nature and shares her knowledge generously.

To the right, coming out of the inner swirl of the dress are images of Chelsea groups and organizations responding to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic with food distribution to the residents of Chelsea. The image represents how the community rose up to meet the immense need in 2020. Among the groups that responded were La Colaborativa that provides a range of support programs for Latinx immigrants related to social and economic health. Faith-based groups cared for all without discrimination, most notably the Salvation Army, St Luke's (San Lucas) Episcopal Church and the SELAH center at Nuestra Iglesia La Luz de Cristo.

In the distance, Chelsea residents are at play at Mary O'Malley State Park. Formerly part of the Chelsea Naval Hospital grounds, the Park was dedicated in 1984 to teacher and long time advocate for Chelsea Mary O'Malley for the enjoyment of all residents. The park has spectacular views of the Tobin Bridge and beyond to Charlestown.

Above the shoulder of the dancer is an image of the signature water tower beside the Chelsea Soldiers' Home. The Soldiers' Home opened its doors to Massachusetts veterans of the Civil War in 1882 and continues to care for those who served in the American military. The iconic water tower, for so long a Chelsea landmark, was taken down in 2019 to make room for new and expanded facilities.

A Quetzal bird, native to Central America and the national bird of Guatemala, flies up and over the scene. The bird alludes to the arrival of recent Latino immigrants to Chelsea, but also to the Phoenix rising from the ashes to represent the revival and reinvention of the city. The bird is symbolic of rebirth, hope, renewal, progress, and the end of oppression.

The far left represents youth in the present, focused on the future and the desire for social change, an aspiration strongly communicated by the Chelsea high school students who participated in the community meetings for this mural.

Jayde Umemba, the young woman on the megaphone, was one of the organizers of the Chelsea rally for Black Lives Matter in the summer of 2020. Jayde grew up in Chelsea, the daughter of Joan Cromwell (a long time advocate for the people of Chelsea, and President of Chelsea Black Community, an organization dedicated to outreach and service). Jayde is a graduate of Boston University with a degree in Communications and African Studies. After the peaceful rally, and in order to hold the city of Chelsea accountable for meaningful change, Jayde and the organizers of the rally drew up a series of resolutions to address systemic inequities in the city and presented

them to the City Council. In this mural, Jayde represents a new generation of activists, dedicated to thoughtful action and pursuing the goal of equality and justice to benefit all in the community. On the left is Luis Pehna, a young Honduran American man blowing a conch shell. The shell is a traditional musical instrument found throughout Central and South America, as well as in Asia. He performed in a community festival in Chelsea Square. The sound of his horn echoes across the city with a spirit of joy and harmony.

ABOUT ARTIST DAVID FICHTER

David Fichter is known for a distinctive, realistic style that features the people, architecture and other details reflective of the mural location. For over 30 years David has created community murals and mosaics, taking him all over the United States and internationally, including Nicaragua, Armenia, and Georgia. Working with residents of all ages, he's completed more than 200 permanent murals that have become beloved local landmarks that communicate the story of each neighborhood.



CHELSEA PROSPERS

This mural is part of the City of Chelsea's Chelsea Prospers initiative for neighborhood vitality. Since 2017, Chelsea Prospers facilitates events, public art and human-centered infrastructure projects in the City of Chelsea, with the goal of weaving community connections and healthier, happier and more prosperous City.

www.chelseaprospers.org

