

Empire Ford of New Bedford's "Veteran of the Month": George Church, WWII Veteran, Benefactor

During the month of July, the 58th Lights for Peace flag to fly at the Fort Taber – Fort Rodman Military Museum honors the memory of George E. Church of Rochester, a veteran of the United States Army Air Corps who served during WWII. The month of July is the 10th anniversary of his passing.

Mr. Church was born in Rochester in 1924, son of the late George F. and Martha (Smith) Church. He served as a Corporal in the U. S. Army Air Corps from April 1943 to October 12, 1945, as an airplane and engine mechanic. Church participated in many campaigns including the Battle of Normandy, Northern France, Ardennes, Rhineland, Central Europe and the Air Offensive in Europe.

According to Church's nephew, Greenwood "Woody" Hartley III, his uncle George "was proud of his service in the Eighth Air Force." Commonly known as the "Mighty Eight," the Eighth Air Force earned an impressive war record. According to the 8af.af.mil website, "From May 1942 to July 1945, the Eighth planned and precisely executed America's daylight strategic bombing campaign against Nazi-occupied Europe." However, they also suffered dearly with more than 26,000 men killed.

Church was honorably discharged on October 12, 1945, in Fort Bliss Texas, and received the European African Middle Eastern Ribbon and the Good Conduct Medal for his service.

Hartley mentioned that his uncle attended many military reunions, both in the United States and in England. "One of my

favorite pastimes, when visiting with him, was looking through several photo albums filled with photos he took while serving as a mechanic on B-24 heavy bombers flying out of England during WWII.”

George Church comes from a long line of descendants who settled in Rochester back in 1726. According to a Standard-Times article in 2007, ten generations of Church family members have occupied land in Rochester since then. George was born on the homestead property on Mattapoissett Road in Rochester and lived there all his life.

George, along with his late wife, Katherine (Hartley) Church, were very involved in the town of Rochester. Two of the oldest families in town, the Church’s who owned Church’s sawmill and the Hartley’s, who owned Hartley’s sawmill, were very influential families in the town of Rochester.

Both George and Katherine were most known for their philanthropic endeavors. According to Joan Pierce of the Massachusetts Dept. of Fish and Game, “In 2000, they sold 125 acres of the Church homestead to the Mass. Dept. of Fish and Game to be permanent conservation land and added to the Haskell Swamp Wildlife Management Area. Part of these 125 acres had been in the Church family continuously for over 300 years.”

Joan Pierce went on to explain, “In 2005, Mr. Church conveyed 163 acres of the Church homestead, on the west side of the Mattapoissett River, to the Mass. Dept. of Fish and Game for permanent conservation to become the Mattapoissett River Wildlife Management Area. These 163 acres included over 4,000 feet of frontage on the Mattapoissett River and the site of the first sawmill on the Mattapoissett River, in the early 1700’s.”

In 2007 an additional 20-acre parcel, known as the “Church Wildlife Conservation Area,” was sold to the Rochester Land Trust and is located on Rte. 105. According to Russell Keeler,

of the Rochester Land Trust, "this is the site of a new native plants garden built around an old sunken stone foundation."

Mr. Keeler explained, "In 2010 Mr. Church sold an additional 32 acres of land to the Rochester Land Trust at a bargain price. This property, known as 'Church's Field', is adjacent to his homestead and features a long forest trail ending at the Mattapoissett River."

In 2014, Halima Tiffany, former Land Trust President, was quoted in Sippican Weekly. "What really impressed me is that he and his wife felt so strongly about protecting the rural nature of Rochester that they gave their land for future generations to enjoy."

Both George and Katherine dedicated their lives to the town of Rochester. George was named the Standard-Times "Man of the Year" in 2007, while Katherine was named the Standard-Times "Woman of the Year," ten years earlier, in 1997.

George served on the Rochester Board of Assessors for 23 years as well as the Appeals Board and Cemetery Board and was a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Benjamin D. Cushing Post 2425. He also established a scholarship fund with the Community Foundation of Southeastern Mass to provide scholarships to students pursuing a nursing degree, in memory of his wife.

Katherine, who served as a nurse in the Army Cadet Corps during WWII, worked for 43 years as the public health and school nurse for the Town of Acushnet. She was also a member and past President of the Rochester Women's Club, a member of the Rochester Grange, Trustee of the Rochester Library and Secretary of the Rochester Center Cemetery Corporation.

Although he and his wife never had any children, they spent time with their several nieces and nephews. Woody Hartley recalls, "I remember my first airplane ride was in the 1960's, out of New Bedford, when they (George and Katherine) took me,

as well as some of their other nieces and nephews, to the New York World's Fair. They would also gather us up to help with 'haying' each spring and summer. They would also take us for pony rides and sleigh rides down snow covered roads."

George E. Church, who was a self-taught mechanical genius, died on July 31, 2014, at the age of 90. He was survived by two nieces, Barbara Pasquarello and her husband James of Lakeville, and Janet Estes of Maine; two nephews, George Mercier of Westport and James Mercier of Taunton; his brother-in-law, Henry Hartley and his wife Bonnie of Rochester. He was predeceased by his sister, Hazel Mercier and her husband Joseph; his sister-in-law, Shirley Hartley of Rochester and her husband, Greenwood "Sonny" Hartley, as well as his brother-in-law Robert Hartley and his wife Rose.

Linda Ferreira, of Empire Ford, researches the life histories of area residents. American flags are provided by Empire Ford. Flags are raised by the staff at Fort Taber – Fort Rodman Military Museum. Those who would like to honor a local veteran in the future can contact Ferreira at lferreira@empirefordinc.com.

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