

Falmouth Historical Society Annual Meeting

FHS Presents! — Your Town's Attic

Highlights from Acquisitions in 2021

Online via Zoom—January 18, 2022

The accompanying slides are posted on the Society website at:

<https://thefhs.org/FHS-2022-Annual-Meeting>.

Betsy Jo Whitcomb and Sally Farneth shared highlights from the artifacts and documents donated to the Society during 2021.

During most years, the Society adds two or three items to its collections.

Last year was a bonanza—we acquired a dozen items or collections. A few are still in the barn waiting to be accessioned. This presentation looks at just a sample of the treasures we received, more or less in chronological order based on the age of the artifact.

Maine's First Newspaper. William Wooldridge of Suffolk, Virginia donated an issue of The Falmouth Gazette for March 5, 1785.

The entire issue is two sheets of paper—each about the size of a page from the Maine Sunday Telegram—printed on both sides. It was published by Benjamin Titcomb, son of a prominent Maine family, and Thomas Wait, a newly-arrived printer from Boston who had set up his business on Middle Street in Portland (then still part of Falmouth).

The Gazette was a sign of the times. The Revolutionary War ended just two years earlier. Falmouth had borne the heaviest burden of any town in Maine during the struggle for independence. The central market and seaport—today's Portland's Old Port—were destroyed in a British attack eight months before the colonies declared independence. The threat of another attack by British ships in the Gulf of Maine caused many families to move away from the coast, and rebuilding did not begin in earnest until the war was over. Falmouth endured more hardship by sending men, supplies, and ships to support the fight. By 1785, Falmouth was rebounding from the war. People were returning and a building boom was underway. The establishment of a newspaper was a symbol of a town on the rise.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of this paper on Maine's frontier. People in small towns would join together to purchase a subscription. Each issue—filled with news of the outside world—would be passed from family to family and then saved.

You can view our copy of The Falmouth Gazette on the Society website under "Retrospective."

Found in the Attic. Deena Ball of Falmouth donated items found in the attic of her home.

The "Old Parsonage" was built in the early 1800s, just a stone's throw from the new meetinghouse for what was then Third Parish and later became First Congregational Church. For many of the 210+ years the house has stood on Falmouth Road, it served as the residence for the pastor.

The items discovered in the attic include three shoes, a bonnet, a gin bottle, and a perfume bottle. They date to the mid-19th century.

In 1842, Giles Merrill, a housewright, purchased the Parsonage from a former minister. Giles died in 1849, and the house was purchased from his estate in 1856. It underwent a major renovation before being put back into service as a parsonage. Some of the artifacts may be from the Merrill family.

Concealing old shoes in a home to ward off evil spirits—especially witches—was common practice in England. Immigrants brought this practice to America where it continued until the early 20th century.

Farm Tools. Emma Anderson of Falmouth donated farm tools and other items belonging to John Williams, her great-grandfather.

Reverend Ebenezer Williams came to "New Casco" around 1765 to serve as the minister at Third Parish on what is now Lunt Road. "New Casco" was the name for the part of Ancient Falmouth now called Falmouth Foreside. Portland's Old Port was "Old Casco."

Rev. Ebenezer's descendants lived in a farm on what is now the parking lot in front of Ricetta's restaurant until 1945. US Route One had been Foreside Road, the present-day Route 88. When the "new" Route One was built at the end of

WWII, it bisected the farm and Roger Williams, John's son, sold it and moved to a new home a few hundred yards up the road.

The donated artifacts included another yoke for our collection plus two different kinds of tools we didn't have: haying and smithing.

These serve as examples of self-sufficiency in a late 19th century farming community.

The Schoolmaster. William and Joan Moulton of Falmouth donated a pair of framed portraits of William's great-great grandparents: David and Mehitable Moulton.

David Moulton was schoolmaster at Falmouth Corners School (District 3) during the latter part of the 19th century. The building is now a private garage at 14 Middle Road, but the more recognizable front of the old schoolhouse faces Falmouth Road (it is the lot with all the lobster traps).

Falmouth was then a farming community of about 1,600 souls. As a teacher and supervisor of schools who was also a selectman and active in town affairs, David Moulton was a prominent member of the community who left an enduring mark on Falmouth.

His stern visage in the photo is reflected in the tone of his reports to the town on the state of the schools. He was clearly a man of strong convictions and one of the first educators in Falmouth to undergo formal training as a schoolteacher.

His son and granddaughter also made significant contributions to the town.

The Schoolhouse Bell. The estate of the late Beverley Knudsen, a member of the Society, donated the bell from the Graves School.

Prior to 1880, the Presumpscot Fall School (District 5), in what is now known as the Pleasant Hill neighborhood, was a small brick building on Pleasant Hill Road.

Crispus Graves was an elderly and eccentric man who lived in East Deering. He was impressed by the deportment of the students at Schoolhouse # 3. He died in 1879 and left his estate to the school.

A new and larger single-story wooden schoolhouse was built in 1880 and named after its benefactor. A second story was soon added. For a while, the second

floor was used as a high school but later housed the “grammar school” for grades five through eight, while the “primary school” for grades one through four were on the first floor.

There was one problem. The schoolhouse didn’t have a bell. Students took up a collection and, around 1911, Miss Anna Colley, the schoolmistress, ordered a bell from the Sears Roebuck catalog.

The school district was consolidated in 1945 and the building ceased being used as a schoolhouse. The building was sold in 1975 and is now a private residence.

Athletic Plaques. Jeff Scher of Falmouth donated nine athletic plaques that had been mounted in his home.

The plaques were awarded to Falmouth High School teams for victories in championship matches for a variety of sports during the 1930s. At the time, teams from area high schools would compete in the “Triple-C,” the Cumberland County Conference. Champions would go on to compete in the state matches.

One of the previous owners of the house had worked for Falmouth Schools around the time the high school moved from Middle Road to Woodville and may have rescued the plaques from the dumpster

We’re checking with the school to see if they want to display any of the plaques. They are too large (more than 2 feet tall) to fit in a display case.

Town Maps. Emma Anderson of Falmouth donated old maps that had belonged to her father, Roger Williams, a former director of public works and fire chief.

If there is one topic even more boring than financial reports, it is infrastructure: bridges, roads, and utilities. However, where infrastructure goes, homes and people soon follow. The buildout of infrastructure—starting with the first bridges over the Presumpscot and early county roads—is the story of Falmouth.

That is why your town’s historical society is so excited to receive documents our public works department no longer needs. Their maps and surveys are a time machine with detailed snapshots of Falmouth in bygone years.

Roger Williams had been Falmouth’s director of Public Works in the 1950s, a period when Falmouth was making the transition from farming community to

suburb of Portland. His files included old maps that would otherwise have gone into the wastebin.

In one example, we compared an excerpt from a town plat from about 1957 to the current town plat. The 1857 plat shows the layout of lots before development took off and many lots were subdivided or combined. We recently received a query about a historic home on a stretch of Falmouth Road. The older plat helped us make sense of the old deeds so we could reconstruct the story of that old home.

Graveyard Maps. The estate of Ralph Bonville, late of Falmouth, donated a large collection of artifacts and documents.

Ralph—who lived to the age of 102—was a veteran of WW II. He belonged to veterans' organizations and was a founding member of the Caldwell Post of the American Legion in Falmouth. For many years, he was instrumental in efforts to place an American flag on the grave of every veteran in Falmouth graveyards for Memorial Day. To this end, he maintained a set of cemetery maps showing the locations and occupants of every grave.

Town historical societies are often contacted by families seeking information about where their ancestors are buried. Ralph's records contain details not found in Town of Falmouth reports, Ancestry's Find-A-Grave database, and Maine Old Cemeteries Association files. These maps give us another tool to respond to one of the simplest, but often most challenging, categories of requests from the community: Where are my people buried?

We didn't take everything that was offered.

Artifacts and documents acquired for the collections must have a direct connection to Ancient or present-day Falmouth.

Recent, commonplace items can often fill gaps in our records. For example, we are looking for old telephone directories. Households would receive a new phone book every year and toss out the old one. Those books contain a wealth of information not found elsewhere such as addresses for renters including businesses. We are constantly referring to a phone book from the 1960s. Historical societies discover gold in the most mundane objects.

Borrowing the line from the credit card commercials, what's in your attic?