

A Brief History – Falmouth Historical Society

The Falmouth Historical Society, oldest on Cape Cod, was established in 1900 by the Reverend Henry Herbert Smythe, rector of St. Barnabas Church. Smythe became President and Robinson Crocker Bodfish, a fellow history enthusiast, Secretary. Part of the motivation was to capture the stories of Falmouth participants in the whaling era, before it became too late. The Society, formally incorporated in 1904, held its meetings in the old town hall and the library. In 1934, the Society obtained its own quarters when Julia Wood bequeathed her home, built in 1790 by Dr. Francis Wicks, to the volunteer organization. The property came subject to a \$10,000 mortgage that was not paid off until 1942. The early 19th c. French wallpaper from the Eldred home in West Falmouth was donated and moved in 1948 to the front hall of the Julia Wood House, now the Wicks House. (Dr. Wicks was an early pioneer in the prevention of small pox and an active contributor to his community.) In 1952, The Society voted to remove the partitions to create the large dining room we see today.

In 1938, admission was 15 cents. The first school class visit came in 1950 with 4th graders from the Village School. In 1951, the “house hostess” reported 605 adults and 105 children visited the historic home. In 1968, President Dudley Hallett established a school program which continues to this day. By the year 1974, over 900 visitors came to the museums. In 1979, the Society began organizing the archives under the supervision of professional archivist Charlotte Price.

Starting as early as the 1930s, the Society has collaborated with the Falmouth Garden Club. The Garden Club created a formal “Colonial” garden, incorporating cuttings of some very old, possibly 18th c., boxwood. The Garden Club has since developed and now maintains three additional gardens on the Society’s grounds: an herb garden, the wooded “memorial park” and a butterfly garden. The Garden Club also helps by decorating the Wicks House at Christmastime. Since 2010, one FHS Board member is specifically selected to serve as a liaison with the Garden Club.

In 1963 the Society was able to acquire, for \$1, land from the town at the rear of the property, off Katharine Lee Bates Road, that ultimately became a parking lot and the memorial park. In 1966, the Society voted to expand further its holdings by purchasing from the Conant family their property next door, now known as the 1730 Conant House. By 1969, the Society decided to take off an addition to the front of the Conant House to bring its appearance along Palmer Avenue back to its Colonial appearance. Over the years, improvements were made to that building to accommodate exhibit space, a library, and a small vault. Exhibit space in Conant was officially opened in 1975. In 1991, a second vault and office area were added to the rear of Conant House.

The Society made another purchase in 1976, this one for the birthplace of Katharine Lee Bates at 16 Main Street. A gift of \$40,000 made by Mrs. Frank Gorman furnished almost all the needed funds. Through the late 1970s and 1980s, the house served as a modest museum with limited

hours about Katharine Lee Bates, author of “America the Beautiful” and her life in Falmouth where she lived until she was 12. Initially there were live-in curators. Later the entire house was rented out to a family. The physical limitations of the property, high maintenance needs and formidable costs to upgrade the house for public access, combined with sustainability issues for house museums generally, led the Society to sell the property in 2008. A condition of the sale was that a sign be permanently maintained designating the property as the birthplace of Katharine Lee Bates. A private owner undertook a comprehensive project, restoring the historic exterior and retaining many of the interior details, while bringing the systems and livability of the house into the 21st century. It remains in private hands, but was open to the public as part of a Falmouth Historical Society house tour in 2016.

By the end of the 20th century, change and growth accelerated. Walking tours began in 1986. A year later saw the start of cooperation with the Woods Hole Collection for the publication and distribution of *Spritsail*, a journal of Falmouth history. By 1993, third graders from all the town’s elementary schools were participating in a program at the Society on Colonial studies and Falmouth history. The Society introduced trolley tours in 1995. In 1996, the Society purchased its first computer, hired (part-time) its first executive director, Ann Sears, and began year-around operations. In 1997, it initiated its first Web pages and opened a gift shop. A curator was hired, part-time, starting in 1999.

The barn, used as a thrift shop from the 1930s until 1982 and then as a display area for farm tools and village life, was named in 1986 for former FHS President Dudley Hallett. After discovering in the barn very extensive damage by powder post beetles, the Society’s Board voted to tear it down and to hire Ben Heywood, a local restorer, to rebuild using the post and beam construction typical of old barns. First, a volunteer corps conducted an archaeological dig, discovering a former pig sty that had become a dumping area for household trash. Added under the barn was a basement for storage and curatorial use. Dedication of the new Hallet Barn took place in June 2003. Its inaugural exhibit, “Artists Look at Historic Falmouth” was mounted in cooperation with the Falmouth Artists Guild, one of many collaborations in recent years with other organizations in the community.

The Society began the 21st century with the start of a new tradition, the Heritage Dinner to honor Falmouth residents who have made significant contributions to our community. Also initiated in 2000, was the now annual Katharine Lee Bates Poetry Fest. Halloween activities of encounters with ghosts in the Old Burying Ground have morphed into Night Watchman tours of a haunted Wicks House and grounds. The Society rebranded its operations as the Museums on the Green to communicate better to the public both its offerings and location.

After years of debating how best to improve our facilities, the Board decided in 2011 to add a new building connected to the rear of the barn with space for lectures and meetings, suitable for event rentals. Now called the Cultural Center, its amenities include accessible restrooms and a kitchen. The lower level provides additional climate-controlled work and storage space, making

it possible for safe consolidation of the Museums' collections which had been scattered. Much of the funding for the construction came with the sale of a South Seas artifact brought back to Falmouth by a whalingman. It could no longer be exhibited, once its value was clear. The Cultural Center, opened in 2012, has made possible a dramatic increase in year-around activity at the Museums, especially with lectures and revenue producing rentals.

By 2016 a complete renovation project was needed to "Restore and Renew" the 1730 Conant House. It officially re-opened in June 2017, with all new systems, greatly improved exhibit and research areas, and brand new fully climate-controlled archives. The building, which also houses the Society's administrative offices, is open to the public year-around.

Today, in accordance with its mission, the Falmouth Historical Society owns and operates the Museums on the Green, located on a two-acre complex in the heart of historic Falmouth village. The Society preserves more than 15,000 artifacts, 60 works of art and well over 100,000 documents from Falmouth's past. The research library contains over 700 volumes and offers access to countless online and digitized resources. The Society and its Museums serve approximately 10,000 people a year as visitors, event and lecture attendees, researchers and students. Outreach now includes a You Tube presence of "Untold Stories" vignettes.

Over the years, the Falmouth Historical Society has thrived because of the generosity of so many donors and volunteers. Founder Rev. H. Herbert Smythe established a foundation that continues to support the Society, among other worthy causes, to this day. The recent building projects have greatly benefitted from the governmental funding sources now available, including the Falmouth Community Preservation Committee (CPC) and Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund (MCFF). For both capital projects and day-to-day operations, the Society is dependent on private grant-making entities, individuals and businesses. Every volunteer and every donor of money or items of historic interest for our collections help the Society and its Museums on the Green to preserve and share Falmouth's history.

Primary Resource:

"Falmouth Historical Society, The First One Hundred Years, 1900 – 2000", edited by Robert Fitzpatrick (2000) (Basically a review of minutes of Board and annual membership meetings; sometimes confusing and occasionally contradictory)

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