

UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

Archives on the Move! Everything Must Go . . .

. . . into storage, that is! Two weeks ago, the contents of both vaults in Conant House were removed and carried across the campus to temporary quarters under the Cultural Center. They will share space with the spinning wheels, quilts, and other items from our museum collection, until the restoration of Conant House is complete.

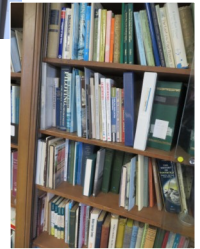
The Historical Society was founded in 1900 to preserve artifacts from Falmouth's past, and even before we had a building of our own, our earliest members were collecting documents and thinking about the best ways to protect them. At a meeting held in the Old Town Hall on August 7, 1900, Secretary Bodfish noted a donation of Swift family papers. Member Seba Holton had the foresight to suggest that "whenever such documents were received that they be placed between paraffin silk for preservation, as being more suitable than glass." At the next meeting, held September 5, Bodfish was "instructed to hire a box in the bank vault and to place therein the 'Paul Revere' bill of bell hanging in the tower of the 1st Congl Church and other documents as may be necessary . . ."

Whaling families with names like Lawrence, Jones, and Davis donated ship's logs (over 40 of them), hundreds of maps and navigational charts, and precious daguerreotypes. Rev. H.H. Smythe, the Society's first president, undertook painstaking fieldwork in Falmouth's cemeteries. His 1903 transcript of the epitaphs found in the Old Burying Ground is still a definitive source, and includes



Above and left: The two old vaults in Conant House will be merged into a single, efficient space.

Our 1300 volumes of history, genealogy, and reference works will be shelved in a comfortable, quiet new library.

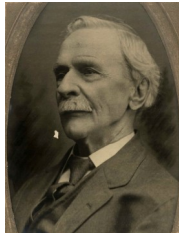


View from the second floor of Conant House, showing Wicks House, Congregational manse (Bodfish House), and church steeple.

information that is no longer visible in the cemetery one hundred years later. Smythe was aided by Lawrence High School teachers Grace Lane and Anna Gardner, who alphabetized the epitaphs by surname and cross-indexed them to plot locations. Smythe's hand-drawn map of the burying ground is now lodged in the archives, and, though fragile, is occasionally still consulted by researchers.

From this auspicious beginning, the Society has built upon its foundation as the premier depository for Falmouth history. We have always been mindful that our artifacts deserve the best possible environment for their preservation. To that end, concrete vaults with standalone dehumidifiers were added to Conant House in 1980 and 1991. After Conant's current restoration is complete, the archives will be housed in a single, state of the art vault, with built-in climate control and a space that maximizes efficiency.

Life in the archives is never static. We are still busily upgrading the old card catalogue system to a computer database, and we don't have an exact number of how many items the archives hold. In 2008, one very reasonable estimate was 100,000 items. This number has certainly grown since then. In addition to the family papers, maritime documents, and town government records that have been the core of our collection from the days of Bodfish and Smythe, we now have thousands of papers and photos related to Falmouth's villages, social organizations, and businesses. Recently, we've received extensive donations of theater and tourism memorabilia. As the 21st century advances, ever more of our holdings will be stored and searchable in digital format.



The archives could be back in their renovated Conant House quarters as early as Labor Day, 2016. Until then, the research department will continue to operate in the "summer kitchen" addition behind the Wicks House at 55 Palmer Avenue. Researchers are asked to be patient and to understand that some materials may not be available, or may be subject to a waiting period for retrieval. Because of the restrictions on our operations, research will be by appointment only, and will resume after the first of the year.

Our series of "Untold Tales" will continue. Whether on the shelf or in storage, Falmouth's history refuses to stay hidden, so please keep checking our website for updates!

Clockwise from top left: Rev. H.H. Smythe, Grace Lane, R.C. Bodfish, and founding member Julia Wood.

Meg Costello