

## Conant House Has a Knack for Survival

Although it is the oldest house left near the Village Green, Conant House has never been strongly identified with an old Falmouth family, like the Swifts, or with any pioneering individual, like Dr. Wicks. It has always reflected prevailing trends: when the sea trade was uppermost, its owner was a captain. When tourism became the town's lifeblood, Conant was used as an inn. This versatility has been its most enduring feature, along with its tendency to be linked in some way to its next door neighbor.

The sign on the front of the house reads "ca. 1730." Church records show that "Conant House was built in 1724 for the Rev. Josiah Marshall, then was purchased by the town in 1730 for the new minister's use, the Rev. Samuel Palmer, for whom Palmer Ave. is named." Some have disputed this claim, citing interior details that date from 1775 at the earliest. However, the typical Colonial framing and spare, half-Cape layout point to the style favored by the early settlers. One unusual touch is the full-height second story.

Assuming that Conant was the ministers' home, the first family to live there was a very unhappy one. Rev. Marshall and his wife lost a child and then traded accusations of abuse and disobedience. Denied a divorce, Marshall left the colony. The next minister, Samuel Palmer, was a beloved spiritual guide for 45 years, and as the town's only medical man, undoubtedly mentored the young Francis Wicks, growing up next door. Between 1775 and around 1805 we assume the house remained with Palmer's heirs.

The first owner we are sure of was Davis Hatch, who married Rev. Palmer's granddaughter Sarah in 1805. Through the mariner Hatch, Conant can rightly claim to be a captain's house. Wicks chose Hatch as his executor, a task he so adroitly managed that the debt-ridden doctor's estate nearly broke

even. Hatch fondly called his neighbor "somewhat pugnaciously inclined and blunt, but a skillful family physician." Hatch left no children and died in 1872. His nephew, Joseph Starbuck, occupied the house briefly.

By 1880, N.H. Emmons, Esq., a member of the Beebe-Fay circle, was summering at Conant. Apparently not impressed with its rustic charms, he soon decamped for a new estate off Mill Road. By 1898, the house boasted a two-story addition and front porch, and was home to Annie Fraser Davis's "Elm Arch Inn" (not to be confused with the later Elm Arch Inn off Main St.).

By 1910, James Wood had purchased #65 Palmer so that his wife, Julia, could be near her mother and sister in #55. After her husband and mother died, Julia moved into #55, and later bequeathed it to the Historical Society.

By 1924, William and Margaret Conant were operating a boarding house at #65, catering to tourists of modest means who arrived via railroad. Their daughter, Eleanor Conant Yeager, would recall visits to the house by Franklin Beebe, Katharine Lee Bates, and the Ladies' Temperance Society.

In 1966, the Conant heirs sold the house to the Historical Society. Inspectors pronounced it to be in overall good shape, although they decreed the heating system to be "helpless and hopeless." A caretaker-tenant called "George the Norwegian" was probably the last person to live in the house, in 1970. Soon after, it was being used for exhibits, library, and offices. The 19<sup>th</sup> century additions and porch were removed to restore the colonial look. Two fireproof vaults were added in 1980 and 1991, for storage of log-books and other precious documents.

Conant House has been a barometer of how the town has grown, changed, and evolved over the past 300 years.

*Meg Costello*



**This weatherbeaten workhorse now shelters Falmouth history.**



**Showing its age.**

WITH OUR  
NOSES PRESSED  
TO THE WINDOW,  
WE COULD SEE  
THE CIRCUS  
ELEPHANTS  
MARCHING TO  
THE DEPOT.

*ELEANOR  
CONANT YEAGER*



**Julia Wood owned both Wicks and Conant at one time.**