



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

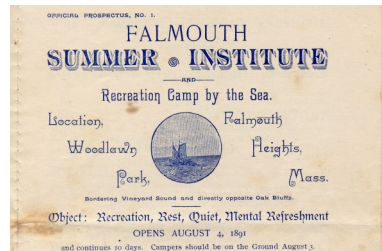
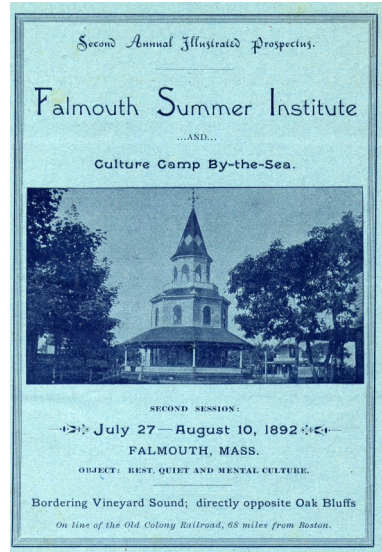
from the archives of Museums on the Green

Culture Camp By-the-Sea

The year: 1891. The place: Falmouth Heights. The objectives: Rest, quiet, and mental culture, in a campground setting. All these were promised by the Falmouth Summer Institute, organized by Rev. Charles Henry Washburn, pastor of the town's First Congregational Church.

Culture camping was already a familiar concept. In 1873, famous biologist and geologist, Louis Agassiz, held a "Course of Instruction in Natural History" on the island of Penikese designed to help school teachers introduce the subject into their classrooms. Five years later, Homer Sprague, headmaster of the Girls High School in Boston, founded the Martha's Vineyard Summer Institute in Cottage City. On a bluff overlooking Vineyard Sound in what is today Oak Bluffs, this institution was very successful, growing to 700 participants by the end of the century.

Falmouth Heights, meanwhile, had been undergoing development as a summer resort by a group of Worcester investors. Perhaps not by coincidence, the architectural plan for their new community reflected another island institution, the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting. With its central circle—anchored by a chapel—and concentric circles of cottages, the Falmouth Heights development resembled the tents and later cottages of the camp meeting site. This resemblance was largely superficial, as the Heights summer residents did not see themselves as bearing a spiritual mission to those beyond their community.



The Falmouth Summer Institute was an affordable vacation option for those interested in thinkers such as Louis Agassiz and Lucy Stone.

Rev. Washburn, however, saw an opportunity for a Summer Institute that would allow workers of modest means to enjoy a seaside vacation, while improving their minds at the same time. Undoubtedly inspired by the camp meeting setting, he arranged for tents to accommodate attendees, and two central settings, the coliseum and the tabernacle, for lectures and concerts. Most of the activity took place on “Woodlawn Park,” now the Heights ballfield. Registrants averse to sleeping in tents could book a room in one of the nearby hotels, for a little more money. Town residents could sign up for day sessions, and sleep in their own homes. The course ran for two weeks.



This rare photo shows the “Girls’ Camp” at the 1891 session of the Summer Institute.

Washburn’s program offered a number of options, incorporating both the religious atmosphere of the camp grounds and the educational spirit of the Penikese and Martha’s Vineyard institutes. “The aim of the Institute,” according to the prospectus, was “to establish a Christian Culture Camp after the German pattern—which may in time . . . be able to offer . . . recreation and culture free of expense to the well-to-do but needy classes of our great New England cities.” The program continues: “How many tired brain and hand workers might be thus benefitted. Is it not a practical way of reaching the masses?”

Among the options were the Boys’ Military Camp and the Girls’ Camp, both with a “Christian tone and uplifting atmosphere.” The boys were under “strict obedience,” expected to show “gentlemanly conduct and a willingness to perform their duties.” The military tone included daily drill, conducted in accordance with the Standing Orders of the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia.

Another section of the program was for teachers and pastors. This option offered “something every brain worker has long desired—a quiet and inexpensive place for a summer outing, combined with a chance for physical recuperation and mental refreshment.” Activities included a geological tramp, biological talks and excursions, and botanical tramps. For teachers there was a course in English literature and for the pastors, early morning lessons in Bible reading. Recreation included lawn tennis, boating, fishing, and even clam bakes. Cultural activities were offered for all, and included concerts and a



The culture campers were allowed to use the Heights chapel for some of their events. It stood in the center of Crown Circle until it was demolished in 1929.

course in the history and theory of church music.

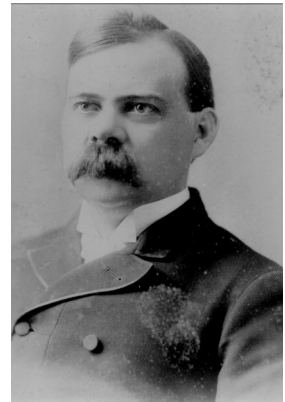
Faculty for the camp came from institutions as far away as Illinois, New York City, Minneapolis, Washington, D. C., and Pennsylvania. Students' homes were not as widely dispersed. Of the over sixty "graduates" of the class of 1891, Falmouth was home to 39, and only 10 were from outside Massachusetts. Boston-based Lucy Stone, a renowned suffragist, was scheduled to speak, but may not have attended due to ill health.

Finally, there appears to have been a family camp option, with tents of various sizes available. The prospectus read: "It is hoped many families not feeling financially able to secure a vacation by the seashore may avail themselves of this camping arrangement. . . Total expense of campers from abroad need not exceed \$20."

One of the special events was Children's Day, a summer carnival of Falmouth public school children. This included "illustrations of grammar and primary work." The day concluded with a Mother Goose's March with all the characters in costume.

The Falmouth Summer Institute lasted only two seasons, 1891-1892. Perhaps it simply couldn't compete with the more established Martha's Vineyard institute. Rev. Washburn was not discouraged. A rare combination of visionary and master organizer, he threw himself into several other projects, including the 1896 Marine and Industrial Exhibition, the Paul Revere bell centennial (for which he asked Katharine Lee Bates to write a poem), and the 1907 dedication of the Mariners' Memorial on Locust Street. He also supervised the publication of two books: *Falmouth by the Sea* in 1896 and *Residential Falmouth* in 1897. These are still frequently consulted for their insights into town life in the 1890s.

In a February 13, 1948 *Enterprise* column reflecting on the history of Falmouth, it was said of Washburn that "no man ever worked so hard for the interests of the town, and derived so little benefit himself as Mr. Washburn." Only such a hard worker could truly appreciate the value of a vacation. Only such a selfless man would try to share that gift with so many others.



Rev. Charles Washburn
1890-1898

Photo courtesy of First Congregational Church archives.

Terry White
& Meg Costello

Go to our [archives page](#) to view more materials from the Summer Institute. (Limited time only.)