



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green

Scenes from a Lost Hotel: The Cape Codder, 1930-1945

by *Norah Schneider, Collections Manager*

Most people are familiar with the Cape Codder Hotel in West Falmouth. Opened as the Sippewissett Hotel in 1900 by John C. Haynes on the former site of Richard L. Swift's sheep farm, over the years it was also called the Cleveland Hotel and the Mayflower Hotel. In



1930, owners Mr. and Mrs. Percival F. Brine renamed it the Cape Codder. When Captain John R. Peterson leased it in 1936—later buying it in 1940—he kept the name, and so it was known until the hotel was torn down to make room for condos in 1988. Well, if those walls could have talked . . . Fortunately for us, *The Enterprise* served as the social media of the day, so tales of the Cape Codder still remain today.

Police activity at the Cape Codder in July 1936 resulted from two illegal slot machines—one nickel machine and one dime machine. Falmouth police seized the machines and hotel manager Charles Edward pleaded guilty to “possessing gaming implements.”¹

The Cape Codder Hotel and its signs became the center of town and state debates in the summer of 1937. In July, Falmouth selectmen would not allow owner John R. Peterson to maintain three signs measuring eighteen square feet and directing traffic to the hotel. A few weeks later, the state Department of Public Works found three signs illegally on Route 28 in Falmouth—two advertising the Cape Codder and one advertising Charlotte Crest campground.²

The Boston Shamrocks, a team in the American Football League and 1936 champions, trained for their season opener at the Cape Codder in



¹ “Slot Machines Seized,” *Falmouth Enterprise*, Thursday, July 16, 1936, 1.

² “State Names Three Signs as Illegally on Falmouth Roads,” *Falmouth Enterprise*, Tuesday, August 24, 1937, 1.



sprinklers were installed in the off season.⁵)

September 1937. The hotel lawn became a regulation-sized football field. When the grass was deemed too long for the team to practice on, owner Peterson obtained a hay mower. The players did not allow him to get horses to pull it, instead pulling the mower themselves.³

In 1938, a loose chimney flue started a fire that caused \$300 in damage. Due to the large number of guests at the hotel, it was a two-alarm fire.⁴ (Two years later,

September 1938 brought the Great New England Hurricane and widespread damage across the area. John Peterson watched from his hotel as the bathhouses floated out to Buzzards Bay and the waves broke so far up the bluff on which his hotel sat “that the erosion was causing the building to list on one side.” Sippewissett Road to the hotel was completely flooded.⁶

In July 1939, Peterson received a permit from the town to store and sell up to 1000 gallons of gasoline. He encountered no opposition during the required public hearing.⁷ Two months later, World War Two broke out. Coincidence?

Later that year, the Falmouth Fire Department, led by Chief Ray D. Wells, held a fire drill at the Cape Codder that tested the hotel’s reliance on a single hydrant 950 feet away, near the highway. The drill also allowed Wells to test the new pumping engine at West Falmouth’s station and use the deck gun on Ladder One, which at one time poured 540 gallons a minute onto the hotel.⁸ A few weeks after the drill, the Water Department announced it would be laying 600 feet of six inch main from Sippewissett Road in order to provide better fire protection for the Cape Codder and extend water service to new homes in the area. The new pipe would allow for a fire hydrant within 300 feet of the hotel, something the drill had shown to be necessary.⁹



³ “Shamrocks, Pro Football Team, Trains at Cape Codder Hotel,” *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, September 3, 1937, 8.

⁴ “Chimney Fire,” *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, August 12, 1938, 1.

⁵ “Hotel Installs Sprinklers,” *Falmouth Enterprise*, February 23, 1940, 9.

⁶ “Tour of Falmouth Shore Records Ruin From Silver Beach to Waquoit,” *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, September 23, 1938, 2, 5.

⁷ “Gas Permit,” *Falmouth Enterprise*, Tuesday, July 18, 1939, 12.

⁸ “Deck Gun Pours 540 Gallons Per Minute on Cape Codder Hotel,” *Falmouth Enterprise*, September 22, 1939, 1.

⁹ “Around Town Hall,” *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, October 13, 1939, 5.



Bringing the Cape Codder onto the national stage, on May 24, 1940, the hotel held a dance raising money for the Franklin D. Roosevelt library to be built at Hyde Park.¹⁰ Also in 1940, Peterson and the hotel's chef started operating an officer's mess at Camp Edwards.¹¹

Peterson ended 1940 by helping Falmouth police solve a mystery. Visitors to West Falmouth had

discovered a trunk in the woods near the Hilltop Inn. Police had staked out the spot, but the thief never returned for the trunk, which was full of towels and linens. Within days, Peterson caught an intruder, Ernest E. Williams, running out of the Cape Codder Hotel. Williams had a key in his pocket for the Hilltop Inn. Police deduced that the trunk must belong to the Hilltop's operator, Mrs. Jordan, who identified the contents of the trunk as her own. Williams had been living in the kitchen of the Hilltop Inn and had stolen items from there as well as the Cape Codder. He had started a fire in one of the hotel basements and cooked some food.¹²

The Cape Codder held numerous conventions. In June 1942, it hosted the Massachusetts Chapter of the National Associations of Postmasters, while in September 1942, managers and company officials of Howard Johnson restaurants came together for a two-day convention at the hotel.¹³

In 1943 a Cape Codder employee, sent to Falmouth National Bank to get change ahead of the Fourth of July holiday, never returned. \$310 in the hotel's money went missing with him. Police recovered the hotel's beach wagon where the employee abandoned it, outside the motor vehicle registry in Hyannis. Apparently, the employee had jumped the train off Cape.¹⁴

The unlucky beach wagon disappeared again in October 1945, after Peterson left it in Quissett to sail for Cuttyhunk. Police received a report about the missing wagon at the same time that they received a report of a missing Falmouth boy last seen biking to Quissett, where his bike was found. Later Saturday night, the boy arrived home and admitted he had taken the beach wagon and driven it to Wareham, where he left it in a garage before hitchhiking back to Falmouth.¹⁵

¹⁰ "Dance Will Help Build Library: Money is Sought Here for Building to House Roosevelt State Papers," *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, May 17, 1940, 2.

¹¹ "Peterson Runs Officers' Mess: Hotel Man Hires Summer Chef to Cook for Army at Camp Edwards," *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, November 8, 1940, 1.

¹² "Peterson Captures Thief With Key to Trunk Mystery in Pocket," *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, December 6, 1940, 1.

¹³ "Postmasters Meet," *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, June 26, 1942, 5; "Convention at Cape Codder," *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, September 12, 1941, 9.

¹⁴ "Hotel's \$310 Vanishes," *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, July 16, 1943, 1.

¹⁵ "Two Stolen Cars," *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, October 12, 1945, 3.



October 1945 was not all bad for the Cape Codder, which became one of the first Cape hotels to build a modern swimming pool. Peterson had spent years trying to get approval to build jetties to protect the beach near his hotel from erosion caused by hurricanes and winter storms. Failing in these attempts, he hoped the pool would save him money and substitute for the sandy beach expected by his guests.¹⁶

For more fun history on the Cape Codder and other parts of Falmouth tourism between the 1870s and 1930s, come see Falmouth Museums on the Green's current exhibit in the Cultural Center, "What's Fun in Falmouth: The Train to Tourism." Featuring items from our archives and collections, this exhibit will be up through mid-August.

¹⁶ "Hotel Swimming Pool," *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, October 26, 1945, 1.