

UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

Who Needs Sewers?

Wrangling over sewers is a time-honored tradition in Falmouth. The topic first came to the attention of Town Meeting more than one hundred years ago and has been raised nearly every decade since. For all the talk, there has been surprisingly little action. Even in the face of dire warnings from public health experts, sewer opponents have usually won the day. Village rivalries and a mistrust of Town Hall have often factored into these disputes.

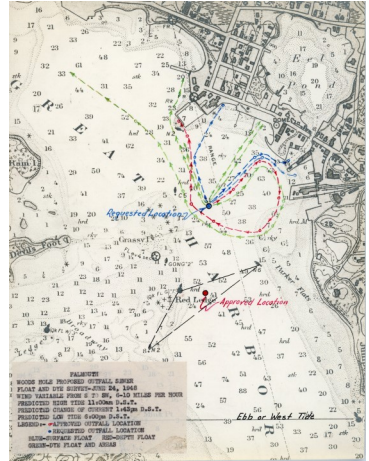
In March 1904, the Board of Health first recommended to Town Meeting that Falmouth Heights should be sewerred. In addition to health concerns, Russell S. Nye saw the system as important to the development of the town:

It is a question of vital importance to the prosperity and welfare of this town that a system of sewerage be established very soon at Falmouth Heights. The conditions there now are already driving away a great many wealthy people, and we are liable at any time, in my opinion, to have a serious outbreak of epidemic disease there. [1904 Town Meeting report]

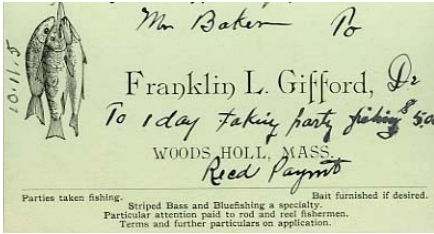
The recommendation was not accepted, opposition arising because of the cost and lack of a sense of need.

The issue would not die, however, and in 1927 arose again, this time focused on Woods Hole and the pollution of Eel and Mill ponds. Boston consulting engineer Frank A. Barbour recommended sewerred Woods Hole village with an outfall (discharge) into the Great Harbor 400 feet from the sea wall at a cost of \$55,000. At town meeting in 1929, Franklin L. Gifford, noted artist and charter boat fishing guide, led the anti-sewer faction. “Nearing 80, but vigorous still,” he proclaimed:

The water in Woods Hole harbor is as pure as any place on the United States coast. No one has been sick of typhoid in Woods Hole for 50 years . . .



A 1948 experiment by WHOI scientists used dye markers to predict sewage dispersal patterns in Great Harbor. This chart is in the Museums' archives.



Business card, ca. 1890. Artist Franklin Gifford moonlighted as a charter fishing captain, and held strong views regarding the purity of local waters.

... There is a petition protesting against a sewer signed by every person in Woods Hole. The Finance Committee and Board of Health have never consulted Woods Hole—they promised us hearings, and never came to hold them. They sit like Mussolinis in their office and do nothing. Let a committee of Woods Hole men be appointed to examine the sewage situation. [*Falmouth Enterprise*, Feb. 14, 1929, p. 1]

Gifford’s comparison of town leadership to a fascist dictator was met with “prolonged bursts of applause.”

After Woods Hole had bared its teeth and growled this warning to keep away, Barbour next called for a system of sufficient capacity to serve all of Falmouth village and the Heights until 1960 or 1970. Options were for either an outflow designed to discharge 2000 feet out into Vineyard Sound, or a treatment plant at the old race track. The estimated cost of the system was now \$130,539 for an outflow system and \$150,894 for a treatment facility, more than double the earlier cost estimate. As if the prospect of sewage being discharged into the Sound wasn’t bad enough, Barbour’s plan also located a pumping station close to the harbor entrance. Heights property owners were “bitterly opposed.” Belvidere Plain residents chimed in, saying the expense of a sewer “is a burden of which they do not now feel the necessity. They are not opposed to installation on Main Street or any district that needs such facilities.” [*Falmouth Enterprise*, Jan. 29, 1931, p. 1] In other words, who needs a sewer when our cesspools are working just fine? Let that other village get a sewer first.

As the issue dragged on, a stench in the Falmouth village center, identified with Shivericks Pond, raised further concerns, especially for business owners. For the first time, the carrot of federal money was dangled before the selectmen, who were told that the Works Projects Administration (WPA) might cover 45% of the sewer’s installation costs. Unimpressed, a special town meeting in September 1938 voted down yet another sewer plan. A letter breaking this news to the WPA crossed in the mail with a congratulatory notice that the town had indeed been awarded \$77,334. Of course, now there was no project to spend it on. Far from being a gang



Shivericks Pond, postcard, ca. 1910. The old Methodist Church tower can be seen in the center, about where the French bakery stands today.



Top: Postcard, ca. 1910, Long Pond.

Bottom: Photo, 1908, Main St.

Residents were proud of their municipal water system, and commemorated it with postcards and photos like these. We have yet to find any photos of 20th or 21st century sewer installation in the Museums' archives.

of Mussolinis, town officials seemed to have more in common with the Keystone Kops.

By this time, Mill and Eel ponds in Woods Hole had become so polluted that shell fishing there was no longer permitted, and fears were growing about epidemics, especially polio. Not much was done, or could be, during the war, but in 1946, the commonwealth flexed its new statutory power to mandate the cleanup of tidal waters. With the state department of public health looking over its shoulder, town meeting finally approved a sewer for Woods Hole in June, 1947. WHOI scientists Alfred Redfield and Bostwick Ketchum advised project engineers on drift currents and desirable outfall locations. By 1948, Woods Hole had been sewered at a cost of \$168,625. The business district in the center of town, and Falmouth Heights, with its dense housing, remained without improvement.

Throughout the 1950s, town meeting was up to its old tricks, delaying and defeating more sewer plans. In 1971, even with federal and state governments pledging to cover 80% of the cost, a referendum again stopped action. Not until 1986 did Falmouth Village finally receive sewer service. New Silver Beach was approved for a system in 1997, and in 2017 the Heights finally has its sewer—a mere 113 years after health officials warned that it must have one “very soon.”

Mrs. Phillips, a longtime Latin teacher at Falmouth High, liked to tell her students how the ancient Romans had enjoyed a functioning sewer system in the first century A.D., while Falmouth apparently couldn't get its act together, two thousand years later. But Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither were its sewers. Why should Falmouth be any different?

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