



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green

The Fun-loving Fennos of Falmouth

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You've heard of the Beebes and Fays, but how many of you have heard of the Fennos? The Fenno House on WHOI's Quissett Campus keeps their name alive, but they aren't as well known as the Beebes of Highfield fame. The two families were neighbors in Boston, and it was most likely at the suggestion of a Beebe that Edward Nicoll Fenno first visited Falmouth in 1885. Edward was so taken by the town that he eventually created his own estate at Quissett, where he and his family loved to have fun.

Edward Fenno and his wife Ellen Bradlee had three children: H. Bradlee (b. 1874), Edward Nicoll, Jr. (b. 1875), and Marion Hiller (b. 1878). In 1887, on a visit to J. Arthur Beebe's home in the Back Bay, nine-year-old Marion gained fame as the subject of a painting by Edmund C. Tarbell called [*The Mandolinata*](#) or mandolin player. Later donated to the Museum of Fine Arts, the painting can be seen in Gallery 221. Marion was probably a playmate of J. Arthur Beebe's little girl Emily, also born in 1878.

The closeness between the families continued. For fifteen years the Fennos occupied the Beebe-owned "Vineyard Lodge" at 207 Shore Street, while Edward Sr. searched for a location for his own estate. Edward and "other wealthy Boston men" purchased Lawrence's Neck, later known as Maravista, from Robinson C. Bodfish in the summer of 1885. When prospects there dimmed, the investors resold the property as lots.

Ultimately, Edward purchased nearly 200 acres of land in Quissett, where he built an estate known as *Makatimik*. The family moved into a new Shingle-style house there by 1902. Their estate extended from Woods Hole Road to the shore of Vineyard Sound. Edward Fenno put down deep roots in Quissett, establishing a farm, installing tennis courts, and raising polo ponies. He was known as one of the last summer residents to leave at the end of each season. Edward showed his commitment to Falmouth by encouraging the effort to adopt a town seal. He suggested a design modeled on the seal of Falmouth, England, which he had visited in 1896.



TOP: Edward N. Fenno, c 1866

ABOVE: Marion Fenno as *The Mandolinata*, 1887



Ellen, Edward Jr., and Bradlee, with a pet, at Fenno House, c 1928

The Fenno children followed the pleasure-seeking lifestyle of their father. Son Bradlee was described by the *Enterprise* as “such a devotee of swimming as to be almost amphibian” (*FE*, 8/4/32). For twenty-five years, Bradlee “took a plunge in cold March water to initiate the bathing season.” (*FE*, 7/29/41). He served as president of the Boston Red Cross Life Saving Corps and gave swimming lessons to underprivileged Boston youth. He brought some of these young people to Quissett for outings at the Fenno beach. (*FE*, 7/29/1941).

At age 41, Bradlee accepted a dare from his friends and entered the outdoor tank at the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries, which at the time, was occupied by

two seals and a number of stingrays. When he entered the water, the seals promptly took to cover and were not seen until after he had emerged. Not so with the sharks, however. He had no sooner entered the pool than they were at the surface, but after several kicks they scattered and kept their distance” (*FE*, 9/26/25).

A few years later Bradlee went diving in Bermuda and encountered another shark, which ignored him. (*FE*, 8/4/32).

During Prohibition in 1931, Bradlee was questioned by police, who had discovered a cache of contraband whiskey. It was camouflaged by seaweed and hidden underwater just off the Fenno family pier. The quantity (160 cases) would have supplied quite a party. Bradlee claimed no knowledge of the goods. He told police that he had not noticed the mass of bulky crates while swimming from the pier the day before. (*FE*, 11/12/1931)

Bradlee’s brother Edward Jr. lettered in track and field at Harvard. He was also a member of the Hasty Pudding Club, which suggests he had comedic talent. In a Harvard alumni bulletin, Edward Jr. once wisecracked, “Both my health and peace of mind are excellent, undoubtedly owing to the fact that I am not married.” Later, though, he did get hitched, to a nationally ranked tennis player named Rosamond Newton.

Edward’s sister Marion also played tennis, when she wasn’t busy volunteering at the Ellis Memorial Settlement House in Boston. In 1905, Marion won a championship in New York with her doubles partner Eleanor Sears. While the younger generation was occupied on the tennis court, Edward Sr. might play a round of golf with friends such as Richard Olney and Rev. Henry Herbert Smythe. A letter in the archives shows just such a match being arranged.

When they needed a break from athletics, the Fennos enjoyed the company of their pets. In a pet cemetery on the estate, tombstones can still be seen, inscribed with humorous names. “Minnie the Muncher” sounds like a dog who couldn’t stop chewing things. Her

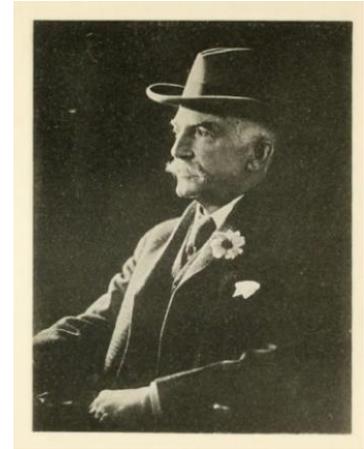


Pet cemetery outside Carriage House, Quissett Campus, 2019

funny name tells us something else, too—that the Fennos kept up with the latest jazz music. Cab Calloway had a smash hit with his tune “Minnie the Moocher” in 1931.

Bradlee’s favorite pet was a crow named *Micawber*, known simply as Mac. When Mac died, Bradlee’s brother-in-law wrote a commemorative poem, “The Livery of Grief: In Memoriam of the Fenno Crow.” It begins:

The late news of our black canary,
Might serve as an obituary
Since, owing to a stroke of fate,
Poor "Mac" himself is now, the late.
(*FE*, 8/19/38)



Edward N. Fenno, c 1906

Don’t look for Micawber in the Fenno family pet cemetery. His body was sent to M.B.L. for a post-mortem. The results are unknown. (*FE*, 8/30/1938)

In 1968 the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) purchased 139 acres from the Fenno estate to establish WHOI’s Quissett campus. Edward’s home became Fenno House, the institution’s headquarters. It also housed a cafeteria. The purchase agreement required that WHOI maintain the pet cemetery, which can be seen today near Carriage House.

Every vacation must draw to an end. Edward Fenno, Sr., 85, died “suddenly and peacefully . . . in the sunset hour of Monday, October 12, [1931] at his Quissett summer home.” (*FE*, 10/15/1931) As always, he had stretched out his summer for as long as he could.