



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

Augusta Crocker, Rebellious Servant

Augusta Crocker began life with bright prospects. Her father, Captain John Crocker, had made a respectable fortune in the China trade and built the first mansion ever on Shore Street. Her mother, Susan Wicks, was the only child and heir of Dr. Francis Wicks, the self-made “esquire” whose opinion always carried weight with the citizens of Falmouth. Augusta’s charmed life changed, however, when a mysterious disaster befell her family. The first omen appears in the land records of August 1827. Both Wicks and Crocker suddenly sold their stately homes within days of each other. Dr. Wicks moved into a small dwelling in the business-oriented upper section of Shore Street. Exactly where the Crockers and their brood of thirteen children landed is unclear. The father— and son-in-law had apparently mingled their investments and lost badly. Soon the Crockers would find themselves on the town’s charge, while Wicks could only watch, unable to help.

Residents like Augusta and their families, who were unable to provide for themselves, came under the responsibility of three Overseers of the Poor elected by the town. The next inkling of trouble for the Crockers came in 1829 when those overseers voted “to converse with John Crocker to request him to put out [i.e., indenture] his daughter Augusta & if he will not . . . to inform him that they shall put her out.” The overseers expected the able-bodied poor to work, and they reserved the right either to assign that work within the confines of the poorhouse, or to “bind out” those under their care through articles of indenture. Indentures were contracts whereby prosperous citizens would promise to feed, shelter, clothe, and educate a minor, in return for his or her service. In this way, young people could not only contribute towards their support, but they could also be taught useful skills, and thus increase their chances of escaping lifelong poverty.

June 7th 1831.
The Overseers of Poor met & passed the following vote
Application having been made by Nathl. Eldred
for us to take charge of Augusta Crocker again
her conduct having been such she has broken
her Indenture & he thinks he cannot keep her longer
voted that we take charge of Augusta Crocker
and remove her in the course of one month
if he still wishes it. — — — —

Indentured servants rarely behaved so badly that their masters wanted to cancel the contract. Dr. Francis Wicks's granddaughter Augusta is one of the few exceptions.

The Crocker case is unusual, in that the overseers did not typically “request” people to bind out their children. Some parents did so voluntarily, making private arrangements on their own terms. Others, realizing they needed help, allowed the overseers to act *in loco parentis*. The involvement of the overseers in Augusta’s future suggests that her father had asked for some form of town assistance. Likely still reeling from his failure and clinging to a semblance of gentility, John Crocker did not want his thirteen-year-old daughter bound out, but he had no choice. In January 1830 the overseers, assuming a custodial role, voted to “bind out Augusta Crocker to Capt. Nathaniel Eldred” of West Falmouth. Within the year, her parents and younger siblings resorted to a two-month stay in the poorhouse. Here, they may have worked on the attached farm, growing their own food, or more probably they “picked oakum”—a tedious chore, unravelling old ropes into a mass of fuzzy fiber to be sold to shipowners, who then used it to plug leaks on their ships.

Meanwhile, Augusta was not submitting meekly to her fate. She had not been brought up to be a servant, and perhaps her father’s opposition to the indenture emboldened her. She raised enough havoc in the Eldred household so that on June 7, 1831, her master requested the overseers “to take charge of Augusta Crocker again, her conduct having been such she has broken her indenture & he thinks he cannot keep her longer.” In Falmouth records, instances of a master trying to return a rebellious servant are rare. Mindful of who her father and grandfather were, and might be again, Eldred may have been reluctant to use disciplinary measures on Augusta that would have brought other servants into line.



Augusta’s childhood home on Shore St., now part of Shoreway Acres.



Indentured servants might be expected to keep the kitchen fire burning, and to empty chamber pots.

John, Susan, and their four youngest spent another nine-month stint in the poorhouse in 1832-33. Showing flashes of the commanding spirit that had once quelled a mutiny in the Pacific, John clashed with the overseers, who insisted that he was breaking their rules by seeking outside employment. Sensibly, John believed that finding a job outside the poorhouse was the only way he was going to get his family off town assistance. The determined 60-year-old finally succeeded, and the Crockers left the poorhouse for good in 1833. In 1840, John Crocker was once again the head of his own household in Falmouth.

As for Augusta, she seems to have gone her own way. For a while she lived in Tisbury, then

returned to the Falmouth poorhouse, alone, for two months in 1839. Thanks to dogged detective work by a research volunteer, we know that Augusta moved to New Bedford and eventually married a farmer, Isaac Jennings. She had at least two sons, Roland and Alfred—named after two of her brothers. Augusta’s sister Susan, unmarried, was living with the Jennings household in the 1860 census. Black sheep or not, Augusta maintained at least some family ties. She died in Dartmouth, aged 86, in 1901. Descendants of hers were living in New Bedford in 1920, and some may be there still.

Meg Costello, Terry White, & Thelma A. Spicer



Learn More

To learn more details of the Crocker family’s uneven history, or to view the poorhouse records, visit the Co-nant House Research Library at 65 Palmer Avenue, open on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10-2.

As a child, Augusta no doubt visited her grandfather’s home often. Now one of our museums, it contains portraits such as this one of Thacher Lewis, one of the overseers on Augusta’s case. For a tour of the museums, come to the Hallett Barn at 55 Palmer Avenue, Tuesday - Friday, 11-4. On Saturdays, the hours are 11-2.



Next week’s *Untold Tale*

Augusta’s defiance was not typical of most indentured servants. In the conclusion of our poorhouse trilogy, find out how two ordinary, obedient Falmouth children fared under the indenture system—did it improve their prospects for a decent life?