



# UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

## Dr. Bessie Davis

Bessie Delano Davis was born in Quissett on December 5, 1861. She was the twelfth of thirteen children born to Samuel Palmer and Mary Delano (Hitch) Davis. She graduated from Lawrence Academy and was active in the town's social life, joining the all-female Peaks Drill Team run by Julia Wood (see photo). It's not clear what the Peaks did, exactly, but surely a sense of humor was a requirement for membership. Bessie was also a good organizer. When Falmouth celebrated its 200th anniversary in 1886, she served on the floral decorations committee along with H.V. Lawrence, H.H. Fay, Frank H. Beebe, William C. Davis (Bessie's brother), Julia Wood, and several others. Her interests seemed the same as any other typical Victorian lady's.

But in 1893, Bessie achieved something different—she graduated from the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Boston. The May 9 issue of the Barnstable *Patriot* noted that “quite a number of Falmouth citizens were present” to cheer her on. We don’t know what inspired Bessie to take this unusual path. Most women in the medical field at this time worked or volunteered as nurses. Elizabeth Blackwell had been the first American woman to graduate from medical school, in 1849. The number of female doctors was slowly growing, though acceptance was also slow. The Massachusetts Medical Society had just begun to admit women in 1884.

Though Bessie could now be called “Doctor,” her college was not accredited. She jumped at the chance to enroll in the brand new School of Medicine at Tufts College in Cambridge. She earned her degree in 1895 — one of six women in her graduating class. She also studied at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, taking a postgraduate course during which she had the privilege of “walking the wards” with Sir William Osler, the creator of modern medical education. He took students out of the lecture hall and brought them to the patient’s bedside. No one could question her credentials now.



Bessie is third from right. Many photos from this era are now on display in the Museums' exhibit "Circa 1870."

Bessie gained valuable experience as assistant to the Cambridge city physician for one year, then for seven years she was a visiting physician for the city's school system. She also ran a practice from her home on Magazine Street.

In that home, on June 4, 1903, Bessie married Michael W. Callaghan, a well known lawyer from Newport, Rhode Island. He had been born in 1865 in Bristol, England, and emigrated to America with his parents sometime between 1871 and 1880. Michael had worked hard to establish himself from his humble start, and had been admitted to the Rhode Island Bar in 1889. The ceremony was performed by Rev. Charles Washburn, the pastor of Falmouth's first Congregational Church during the 1890s. Bessie and Michael honeymooned for several months in England. On their return, they continued their work as before, with Michael commuting between Newport and Cambridge regularly.

In 1904, Falmouth celebrated Old Home Week, and Rev. Washburn was invited back to give the keynote address. He included Bessie, along with Katharine Lee Bates and others, in his list of outstanding Falmouth natives. Washburn praised Bessie as a "beloved physician in the schools of Cambridge, whose courage and ability has surmounted all the prejudice that once confronted the woman physician, and placed her among the leading doctors of the university city."

Tragedy struck Bessie's family when Michael collapsed on the evening train to Cambridge and died on January 28, 1911. A "heavily built man" with "apoplectic tendencies," Michael had suffered a cerebral embolism.

Bessie carried on with her home practice, and served as librarian of the Middlesex

South Medical Society and as physical examiner for the YWCA, positions formerly occupied only by men. Bessie's sister Harriet shared her home and worked as a nurse in her practice. They took in several lodgers over the years, including a clergyman, a salesman, and a "lady clerk."

When Bessie was 91, she was honored for over 50 years of membership in the Massachusetts Medical Society. The Falmouth *Enterprise* of May 29, 1953 published an interview where she reminisced about her career. She had never used a horse and buggy to attend her patients. "I relied on my bicycle and my two legs . . . I could cover as much ground as any of them." She had specialized



DR. BESSIE D. DAVIS

—Cambridge Chronicle Sun photo

The Falmouth Enterprise ran this photo along with Bessie's interview in 1953.

in gynecology and thought that in the days of home births “the babies were just as healthy and it was a whole lot cheaper.” Bessie tried to retire more than once but people kept turning up at her house to be treated. A member of the Prospect Congregational Church in Cambridge, she remained cheerful and optimistic to the end. She said that in her practice, she had many times seen “a direct answer to prayer.”

Bessie passed away on October 18, 1956 at age 94. She was laid to rest in Falmouth’s Oak Grove Cemetery alongside her husband, Michael W. Callaghan. In her final years, she declared, “I believe I have had one of the happiest lives a mortal ever had.”

*Thelma A. Spicer*

*& Meg Costello*

## Learn More

To learn more details of Bessie Davis’s life and career, visit the Conant House Research Library at 65 Palmer Avenue, open on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10-2.

For a tour of the museums, including the exhibit “Circa 1870” which brings to life the Victorian world of Bessie’s youth, 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*



Bessie Davis was likely inspired by the example of Francis Wicks, another homegrown doctor. But Wicks had interests beyond medicine that extended into every aspect of town life. Read about this enigmatic figure next week.