



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

Dr. Wicks and the Poorhouse

Francis Wicks's personality, like a slippery eel, is hard to grasp. Though best remembered as a vaccination pioneer, he aspired to be more than a mere physician. Restlessly, he ventured into every corner of town service, from hog reeve to state rep, and in his heart, charity mingled with a shrewd business instinct. His medical rounds brought him into contact with every level of society, including the desperate, the destitute, and the insane. As Falmouth struggled to care for its poor and dependent citizens, Wicks characteristically rose to the challenge. In 1812, he chaired a committee that established a one-stop social service center for the town. Two buildings still standing in Falmouth owe their existence to Francis Wicks: the elegant house that bears his name, and the old town poorhouse.

The concept of the poorhouse dates back to the English Reformation. Up to that point, religious orders had cared for the poor, but when the crown dissolved the monasteries and appropriated their wealth, it also assumed their social responsibilities. The Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 enabled local Anglican parishes to establish taxpayer-funded poorhouses. The New England colonists were aware of these English practices, but at first they tried a different system that seemed more suited to their small, frontier communities. The selectmen (or later, the overseers of the poor) would find solvent families willing to take in needy neighbors. These hosts would then be reimbursed by the town for their visitors' expenses. This "foster family" system prevailed during the early part of Dr. Wicks's career. Town government records at the Historical Society show pages of expenditures to host families, their guests, and those who supplied them with goods and services — including medical treatment.



In 1819, Dr. Wicks successfully amputated the leg of his kinsman, Abisha Weeks, using knives and saws like the ones in this cabinet. Then he sent the town his bill for \$30.50.

In these old ledger books, Dr. Wicks's name appears again and again. — Paid 83 cents for treating Josiah Cotten, under the guardianship of Joseph Davis. — Paid \$2 for treating "Edward Edwards an Irishman." — Received \$10.50 for "attending Granny Chadwick." On March 27, 1806, Wicks was paid \$30.11 for "doctoring Bristol Boston." Bristol was boarding with, and being nursed by, Woods Hole innkeeper Abner Davis. A couple named Reuben Boston and Zilphe Harrington, described as "blacks," had married in Falmouth in 1795; maybe Bristol was a connection of theirs. Dr. Wicks surely knew another person who appears in the records: Katy Hatch, whose daughter Polly received regular sums for her aged mother's upkeep. The eccentric Katy was regarded with affection by her neighbors, who named a street after her near her home.

In 1804 Wicks was summoned in the aftermath of an affray. Samuel Gifford was being carried off to prison, and in the tumult of his arrest somebody broke a leg. Wicks was paid \$13.64 for his services. The clerk, caring only about town funds spent, does not note any details of this sensational incident—neither what crime Gifford allegedly committed, nor even whose leg was broken.

Wicks's compensated service to the poor spanned at least sixteen years, from 1803-1819. His charges could be as low as 29 cents, or as high as the \$30.50 he charged for amputating his cousin's leg. Other doctors in town were also being reimbursed. When poverty levels soared during the hard years of Jefferson's embargo and beyond, it became clear that the decentralized "foster family" system was no longer cost effective.

Late in 1811, Francis Wicks was named chairman of a committee to "consider the expediency of building a house for the reception of the poor." Also on the committee were Shubael Lawrence, Thomas Fish Jr., Wm Phinney, and Ebenezer Nye. In April 1812, the committee was authorized to buy a tavern in Hatchville operated by Peter Yost. After some odd procedural moves, and some rumblings of discontent from Yost,

town meeting approved \$380 for its new poorhouse. Wicks received \$10.48 for his efforts. In March 1813, he helped raise funds to move the building to the center of town. Now called the Edward Marks Jr. Building, it stands on the spot that Wicks helped to choose for it, at 744 Main St., near the police station. Town business is still conducted there, though it hasn't sheltered any poor residents since 1960.



The poorhouse, circa 1888. The open land around it was farmed by the able-bodied residents.

With all the town's poor concentrated in one location, officials could buy supplies in bulk, grow food on site, and prevail upon the able-bodied residents to work in exchange for their benefits. The town could also reduce medical expenses by designating an official poorhouse doctor and putting him on salary. In 1827, the overseers of the poor asked "Doctors Wicks, Cornish, Brown and Belcher" to bid for the poorhouse contract. Dr. Brown's bid of twenty dollars won out.

Whether Wicks even submitted a bid is not recorded. A stunning reversal of fortune threw his life into a tailspin in 1827. When he gave Falmouth a better way to care for the needy, he surely never expected to see his own grandchildren living in the poorhouse, but such was his fate.

*Meg Costello
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Learn More

To learn more details of Dr. Wicks's life and career, or to view the poorhouse records, visit the Conant House Research Library at 65 Palmer Ave. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10-2.

For a tour of the museums, including Dr. Wicks's house and the actual office where he treated patients, visit the Hallett Barn at 55 Palmer Ave. Tuesday - Friday, 11-4. On Saturdays, the hours are 11-2.

Read Candace Jenkins's article [Poor House and Methodist Cemetery](#) in the Winter 2004 issue of *Spritsail*.



Next Week's *Untold Tale*

Dr. Wicks's granddaughter Augusta went from riches to rags. Find out how she defied the overseers of the poor and their plans for her future.