

UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

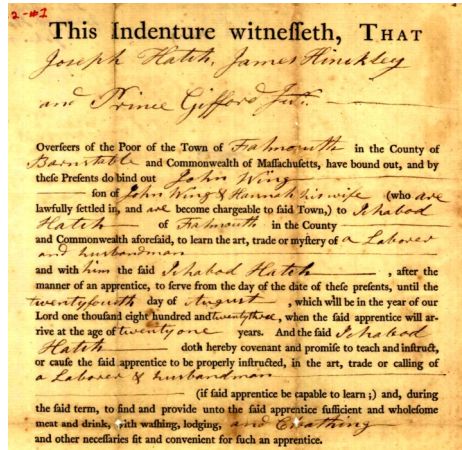
from the archives of Museums on the Green

John and Emily, Freed from Indenture

On September 26, 1807, the overseers of the poor indentured five-year-old John Wing to Ichabod Hatch, to be brought up as a laborer and husbandman. The contract was to run until the youngster's twenty-first birthday in 1823. John, the fifth of seven children of John and Hannah (Russell) Wing, found himself living with one of Falmouth's most colorful characters. In 1814, Ichabod notoriously dared the *Nimrod's* gunners to hit him while he sat at his front door, shaking his fist. After a cannonball splintered the door frame, Ichabod prudently retreated. Hopefully, he had sent eleven-year-old John and the rest of his household to safety well before then. Ichabod died in 1816 and it's presumed that his son-in-law, Nathaniel Lewis, became responsible for John for the remainder of his indenture.

Freed in 1823, John moved to Fairhaven, probably with his widowed mother. Left behind in Falmouth, his sisters, Hannah and Abigail, slipped into a pattern of dependency. Between 1825 and 1913, either they, or their three children by unidentified fathers, were constantly living in the poorhouse. At different times the sisters and their children were described as suffering from "hereditary palsy," paralysis, and "paresis," a condition linked to syphilis. A memorial stone was recently installed to honor all those buried in unmarked graves next to the poorhouse. The names of Hannah, Abigail, and Irene Wing are included, along with the prayer "May they rest in peace."

John, meanwhile, carved out a successful life in New Bedford. He married twice, to Lois Wrightington in 1827 and Susan Morse in 1834, and had eleven children. He supported his family by working as a "cordwainer" or shoemaker, and later as a mattress maker. Where he achieved his shoemaking skills is unclear, since Ichabod is unlikely to have shared them. In 1879, John applied for a pension based on the Civil War service



John Wing's indenture contract from 1807, now on display in the Wicks House.

of his son, John Avery Wing, killed in Virginia in 1864. At age 77, John had lost the strong grip that a shoemaker needed. He also suffered from curvature of the spine and an ulcerated stomach, as attested by Dr. Aaron Cornish the younger—who, coincidentally, had apprenticed with his uncle, the elder Dr. Cornish, in Falmouth.

Thanks to the testimony of Cornish and others who confirmed that he was an “honorable” and “honest” man of low means, John received a survivor’s pension of \$8 per month, retroactive to May 1864. This must have helped considerably to keep him and Susan comfortable for the last three years of his life. John died January 2, 1883, in New Bedford, after a long and productive life that rose above its rough beginning.

On the 2nd day of April in 1844, Emily Frances Gifford, a young girl not yet eight years old, was “bound out” to John L. Webster to serve as his “domestic.” Emily was living in the poorhouse in Falmouth at the time, along with her mother, Desire Gifford, and four siblings. More than once Emily’s family had resorted to the poorhouse. Their latest stay, beginning September 14, 1841, coincided with her father’s absence at sea on the whaler *Bartholomew Gosnold*. To recover some of the cost of the family’s support, the overseers garnished the wages earned by Prince Palmer Gifford on that voyage.

According to the agreement, Emily was to remain with Webster until her eighteenth birthday, August 23, 1854. Webster promised to teach “or cause her to be taught” to read, write and cipher. He was also to offer moral and religious instruction, and to see that she learned the “art of housewifery.” Emily’s upkeep—“sufficient food, apparel and all other necessaries both in sickness and in health”—was to be provided by her master. At the end of her indenture, Emily would be given the customary “two full suits of good clothes, one suitable for the Sabbath and the other for working days.”



Emily’s stone is a tribute to her young life cut short, and to the love she inspired.

John L. Webster (1817-1890) was the son of John Webster, who, in the 1830s, ran the Webster House tavern in Woods Hole, but it is not known whether the younger man took any part in running the inn. John L. worked as a laborer, then as assistant superintendent of lights. For reasons that are unclear—perhaps because John L. moved away to West Roxbury—Emily left the Webster household sometime before the 1850 census, and joined the household of farmer Joshua Crowell and his wife Drusilla.

The story ends tragically for Emily, who died before her original binding out would have expired, on June 8, 1853. She was just shy of 17. Her siblings had a turbulent passage to adulthood, with at least two others also being

bound out. When Prince Palmer Gifford objected and tried to regain custody, the overseers ruled that he was not a “suitable person to have the care of his child.” Emily’s mother, Desire, died in 1863, “a pauper and insane.”

Despite all these troubles, someone who loved Emily eventually found the means to put a marker on her grave in the Methodist cemetery, next to the poorhouse where she had lived. The stone’s half-observed verse speaks of a promise beyond indenture, and a bond stronger than death:

*My youthful (form?) (illegible) /
Within the silent tomb /
But faith and love will (climb?) (illegible) /
And there forever bloom.*

Thelma A. Spicer (John Wing)

Terry White (Emily Gifford)

Edited by Meg Costello



Learn More

To learn more about the indenture system, or the Wings and Giffords, visit the Conant House Research Library at 65 Palmer Ave., open Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10-2.

For a tour of the museums, including a typical servant’s room and a display of John and Emily’s indentures, come to the Hallett Barn at 55 Palmer Ave., Tuesday - Friday, 11-4. Saturdays, 11-2.

Visit the Methodist Cemetery on Main Street, next to the former poorhouse. Many poorhouse residents are buried there, some in unmarked graves.



Next week’s *Untold Tale*

For a complete change of pace, we’ll travel to the Jazz Age and meet Norman Rutherford. Like Gatsby, he threw lavish parties in his waterfront mansion. One day, he simply vanished. What really happened to him?