



# UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

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## “Weird” Women of 1850, as recalled by O.F. Swift

There were no free-love suffragettes or any other breed of women who preferred gadding and walking about the streets, proclaiming their own virtues to the detriment of others to staying quietly at home and attending to their own family concerns.

There was one woman, however, very different in character and thought, which attracted my attention early in life, and whom I learned later to love and respect. When I first saw her I was told she had just returned from a sanitarium. I think it was not Clifton

Springs, but one in New York State near there. She was a tall slim woman with a very thin face. She was attired in a pair of red flannel trousers, confined at the ankle with an elastic or ribbon. She wore heavy shoes and her dress came down just below her knees. She had on her head something that was neither cap, hat or bonnet. It was nondescript. Her proclamation to the world was, “don’t use salt in your food. It is not food; it is a mineral and will kill you in time.” She was the mother of one of my dearest school boy friends. He died early in life. Later, when I went to boarding school and returned home on my vacations, I always called upon her. She had a very peculiar way of pronouncing my name. Oliver, with the accent long drawn out on the O, as I never heard it before or after pronounced. The last time I ever saw her was at her own home. She sat beside me, holding my hand and looking intently into my face. At this time I could see reflected on her saintly face the picture of that beautiful city, where I am sure she went on her last journey from earth.

There was one other woman I remember. She was called the old witch by some and by others Aunt Jennie. She lived in a small house near the old burying ground. She and her cat were the only occupants. I think she must have been wrong in her head. We



*Old Burying Ground off Mill Road. This is approximately the view that “Aunt Jennie” saw from her windows every day.*

boys used to like to plague her and impose upon her good nature. When we did so, she would appear at the window, open it a little way and pointed out a broom stick which she held to her shoulder at the other end, and said she would shoot if we did not go away. She never did shoot and never would even if her gun had been loaded. Only one boy was her favorite, and that was, he said, because he always read to her out of the Bible (the apocrypha). She was very suspicious and always afraid that some bad thing was to happen. Finally the first telegraph wire passed through the town and by her house on two poles standing near by. She was greatly excited and said, "I told you so. That thing in front of my house is the devil's road leading to hell." One night, someone threw the remains of an old hoop skirt over the wire. She was more excited than ever and said "look at that, the devil passed by last night, I heard him. See! He left some of his baggage behind him. Be careful boys, he will catch you sometime when he is passing. I wonder he has not done so before this." She must, I think, have been eighty years old when she breathed her last. She was carried out by willing neighbors and friends and buried within sight of the house she had lived in so many years. If she was ever called to travel the road that had troubled her so much during her stay on earth, I think she was smart enough to take the opposite direction and so fool the evil one, for she never had us. I hope so.

*Oliver Franklin Swift*

*Editor's Note:* The mother of Oliver's schoolmate has not yet been identified.

"Aunt Jennie" was Jane (Hatch) Butler (1772-1863). She married Rufus Butler in 1801. They had a daughter, Ruth, for whom no further records are found. They also had sons Rufus Jr. and Joseph Hatch. In April 1837 Jennie lost both her husband and son Joseph (the latter was killed by a whale). Rufus Jr., upon the death of his wife in 1851, seems to have left town, taking his two children with him. When Oliver Swift knew her, Jennie was nearly eighty years old, with no immediate family living nearby. Sources suggest that Jennie's house stood at or near the spot where the Mariner's Memorial now stands. No gravestone for her has been found in the Old Burying Ground, so she may have been buried as a pauper, or perhaps she had no relatives able or willing to put up a stone for her.



*Her gravestone was one of the few public records that marked a 19th century woman's life. Clockwise from top left: detail from the stone of Frank and Laura Gilbert (Oak Grove Cemetery); stone of Achsah Lawrence (Oak Grove Cemetery); stone of Rachel Jenkins (East End Burying Ground, Hatchville).*