



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

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Newsflash on Telegraph Hill

by Terry White and Meg Costello

Early Falmouth dwellers were a practical lot. They liked to give landmarks names that were both obvious and helpful. Long Pond, for example, was a long pond. Brick Kiln Road led travelers to a brick kiln. Given this tendency, can you guess why a certain neighborhood in West Falmouth might be called “Telegraph Hill?”

Long before Samuel B. Morse developed his electrical telegraph, people constructed optical telegraph systems that used visual signals to convey messages over great distances. Napoleon is famous for having used such a telegraph system, created by Claude Chappe in 1792, to transmit military information quickly across France, giving him an advantage over his enemies in battle.

A similar optical system was used in Falmouth between 1801 and 1807. A West Falmouth hilltop was one of fifteen signaling stations between Vineyard Haven and Dorchester Heights in Boston. Unlike Napoleon's military use, the Massa-

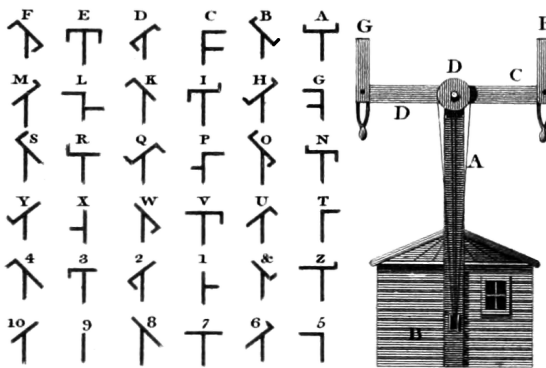


Chappe's Telegraph, a 19th century painting by an unknown artist. Image accessed at Wikimedia Commons.

chusetts system conveyed information about the movements of merchant ships, announcing their arrival at Vineyard Haven to owners in Boston.

The man responsible for bringing the telegraph to Falmouth was Jonathan Grout (1761-1820), a lawyer from Belchertown. He hoped to make money by charging merchants for up-to-the-minute reports on cargo shipments. Knowing when their goods would be delivered was valuable information for importers in Boston. Moreover, these merchants could use the telegraph not only to receive information, but

also to send instructions to their ship captains, sometimes diverting them to other cities where buyers were paying higher prices.



Chappe's telegraph symbols as printed in Rees's cyclopedia c. 1820, accessed at Wikimedia Commons. Grout would have used symbols like these to spell out messages in code.

Each station of the optical telegraph system used a tower topped by a device that allowed two arms to be shifted into various positions, representing the elements of the message that was being sent. Think of it as a windmill-mounted semaphore system.

Operators manned each station during daylight hours, using telescopes to monitor the towers north and south of their position. They relayed any new message to the next tower.

The system could convey a message from Vineyard Haven to Boston, a distance of over 70 miles, in ten minutes. Imagine trying to cover that distance by ferry and car today under summer traffic conditions.

Now, imagine the reaction of a Falmouth resident in 1801 to the telegraph. All his life, messages could travel only as fast as a good horse or sailing ship. The idea of sending a message to Boston and getting an answer back in less than half an hour must have seemed miraculous.

Let's trace the route a message would take over Grout's system. On October 21, 1801, the ship *Mercury* returned from a trip to Sumatra and anchored in the harbor at Holmes Hole, now known as Vineyard Haven. Spotters at West Chop identified the ship and immediately transmitted news of its arrival to the next tower, perched on a Quissett hilltop about four miles away.



View of the Village of Holmes Hole [Vineyard Haven], Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, 1856, by William Sturtevant, artist, and J.H. Bufford, Lithographer. Accessed at Boston.Athenaeum.org.

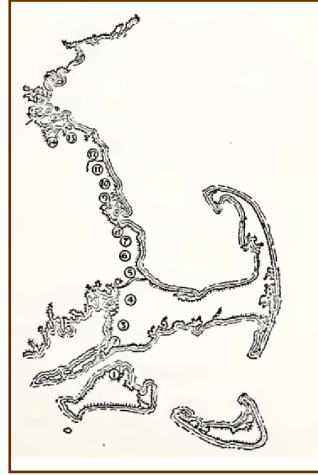
The exact site of this second station is not known, but probably it stood on the 90 foot high hill where, one hundred years later, Edward Nicoll Fenno built his summer home. Fenno House now hosts office space for the Woods Hole

Oceanographic Institution's Quissett campus.

The alert operator at Quissett saw the message and used his semaphore to pass it along to the West Falmouth station, five miles to the north.

The West Falmouth tower operator was Joseph Dillingham, a 25-year-old Quaker, not long married and the father of a growing family. Dillingham observed the signal from Quissett and moved the arms of his semaphore to convey it. The message sped to Sandwich, thence to Plymouth, and so on by stages to Boston. It arrived at Jonathan Grout's office, on what is today Washington Street in Boston, in a matter of minutes.

There were drawbacks to the optical telegraph system. It only worked in daylight under conditions of good visibility. Its speed depended on operators being vigilant and quick to respond. Although a ten-minute message time was possible, realistically most messages probably took longer. Even the best operators couldn't stay



It is believed that Grout's telegraph line was along these hills:

West Chop (1)*	to Quissett Hill, Wood's Hole (2)	4	Miles
Wood's Hole	to Telegraph Hill, West Falmouth (3)	5	"
West Falmouth	to Telegraph Hill, Pocasset (4)	7½	"
Pocasset	to Telegraph Hill, Bourneville (5)	4½	"
Bourneville	to Monument Hill, Cedarville (6)	3½	"
Cedarville	to Telegraph Hill, South Plymouth (7)	4½	"
South Plymouth	to Pilgrim Hill, Chiltonville (8)	3½	"
Chiltonville	to Great Captain's, Duxbury (9)	5½	"
Duxbury	to Telegraph Hill, Millbrook (10)	3½	"
Millbrook	to Telegraph Hill, Marshfield (11)	4	"
Marshfield	to Greenbush Hill, Scituate (12)	5	"
Scituate	to Turkey Hill, Cohasset (13)	7½	"
Cohasset	to Great Hill, Weymouth (14)	5	"
Weymouth	to Telegraph Hill, Dorchester (15)	7½	"
Dorchester	to 112 Orange St., Boston (16)	1½	"
		<u>72</u>	<u>Miles</u>

Map and list of stations were taken from *Proceedings* of the Bostonian Society, Annual Meeting, 1929, page 37.

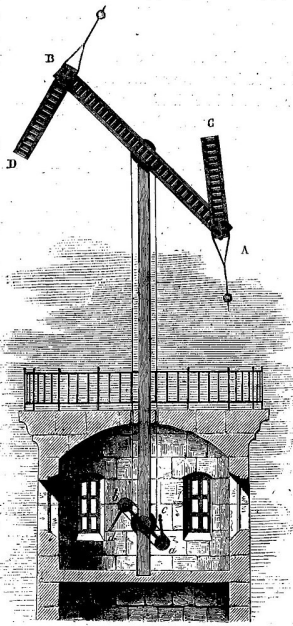


Fig. 19. — Télégraphe de Chappe.

By Illustration parue dans *Les merveilles de la science*, Louis Figuier, 1868, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3266931>

glued to their telescopes for twelve hours, and some operators probably took extended breaks. Tower arms could break down on occasion, and messages might be misread. Finally, maintaining fifteen towers and paying as many signalmen came at a high cost.

After six years of mixed success, Grout decided to shut down his telegraph system in 1807. Optical telegraphs continued to flourish in Nantucket, New York, and elsewhere, until they were replaced in the mid-nineteenth century by the almost instant capabilities of the electric telegraph system using Morse code. Unlike the optical system, the Morse telegraph

was not subject to interference from storms or darkness.

The memory of Grout's optical telegraph lingers in the "telegraph hills" still to be found in Falmouth, Plymouth, and Dorchester.