



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

Two Hills, Three Towers

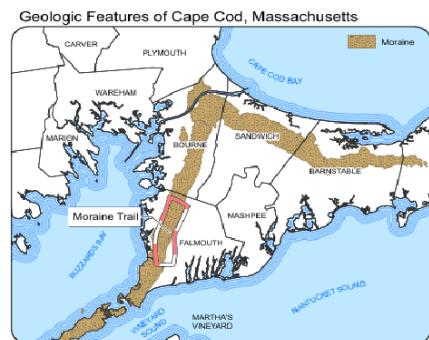
by Terry White and Meg Costello

Falmouth is known for its seashore and beaches. It is not as well known for its hills. In a [recent Untold Tale](#), we described an optical telegraph system that operated on local hilltops between 1801 and 1807. This project piqued our interest in the town's highest hills. Could we pinpoint where the West Falmouth telegraph tower once stood? Our investigation took some surprising twists and turns.

Falmouth's most familiar hill is Falmouth Heights, long ago known as "Great Hill." Most of the town's other peaks are less visible, hidden away in the woods. They are part of the moraine that was left behind by the glacier that formed Cape Cod around 15,000 years ago.

Several hills lie within Beebe

Woods or nearby, including Ridge Hill and Riddle Hill (100 feet each), and Swift's Hill (north of Deep Pond), which is 153 feet high. Hikers can explore this glacial landscape by following [Falmouth's moraine trail](#) from Goodwill Park north to



From 300committee.org, Moraine Trail Map optimized. Accessed 12/8/2025.

the railroad tracks at Route 151.

Impressive though they may be, none of the hills just mentioned is the town's highest point, nor even its second highest point. Topographical maps tell us that Falmouth's highest point is a spot off Fire Tower Road that rises 192 feet above sea level. The town's second highest point, at 167 feet, appears on some maps as "Telegraph Hill" and can be found off Telegraph Hill Road.

Does the name "Telegraph Hill Road" indicate that Jonathan Grout's 1801 telegraph tower was located on the town's #2 peak, somewhere along the street that bears its name? No, not necessarily.

As we discovered, town records and newspaper articles from at least 1898 until about 1958 used the term "Telegraph Hill" very broadly, to refer to the entire ridge stretching from Telegraph Hill Road eastward to the present-day fire tower site. Used in this broad sense, "Telegraph Hill" encompassed both the #1 and #2 peaks in Falmouth. Descriptions of Grout's tower cite only "Telegraph Hill" as its location, without being more precise.



Empty lot on Telegraph Hill Road, photographed 2020. Stone ring is likely the base of a 19th century water tower.

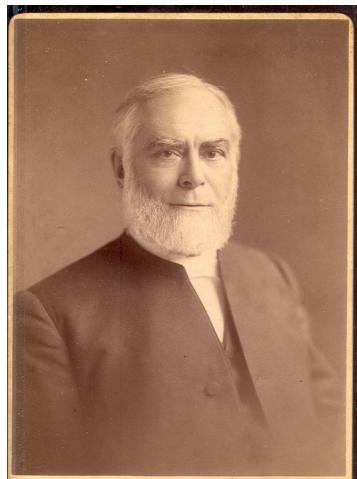
Today, if you walk along Telegraph Hill Road, you may come across an empty lot with remnants of the base of a round stone structure. Could these be the ruins of Grout's tower? We thought so, until we heard the testimony of long-

time town residents who recalled the West Falmouth water tower standing on that site. Their memories were backed up by Falmouth *Enterprise* articles published in 1933 and 1950, referring to a water tower that once stood here, on the town's second highest peak. The ring of stones likely formed the base of this water tower.

Now, Grout's tower might have preceded the water tower on that site, but we had no proof of that.

Continuing our search, we turned to an unpublished local history by West Falmouth native John Hoag Dillingham (1839-1910). Dillingham revealed that his grandfather, Joseph Dillingham, had been employed by Jonathan Grout to transmit signals at the West Falmouth tower. John Hoag Dillingham, therefore, personally knew and spoke to the man who worked in the tower. Unfortunately, his description of its location is not very precise. He says his grandfather was "stationed as signal man on Telegraph Hill, where the observatory formerly stood and now the town water-tower dispenses to us liquids at five dollars a spigot per summer."

Dillingham's statement seems to indicate that the telegraph tower was on the same spot as the water tower. But at the



John Hoag Dillingham (1839-1910) was a West Falmouth native and professor of moral and political science at Haverford College.

same time, he complicates the issue by introducing an “observatory” into the mix. He deepens the mystery by giving us a third structure to account for near Grout’s tower.

Where was this observatory?

If Dillingham isn’t referring to a private observatory on a

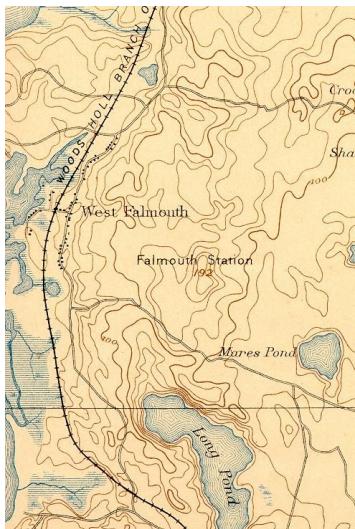
residential lot, then he’s likely talking about a spot that’s called “Falmouth Station” on many maps. W.H. Hewins, writing in the *Enterprise* in 1897, asserted, “For many years past this elevation has been used by different surveying parties of the State and the United States as the point upon which their principal lines of survey centered, and from which they radiated to the different points of the compass. This point was marked upon their maps of survey as Falmouth Station . . . and the altitude is

Massachusetts topographical map, Falmouth sheet, 1893.

stated as being 192 feet above sea level.”

Falmouth Station, therefore, was located on the town’s highest peak, off present-day Fire Tower Road. Hewins called the spot “Falmouth Summit.” He noted that for fifty years this summit had “been known to the people in that vicinity as Telegraph Hill.” Was the highest peak, then, the place where Grout’s telegraph stood?

For those keeping score, it seemed clear that the 19th cen-



tury water tower had been on Telegraph Hill Road. The “station” or surveyors’ observatory had been located at the town’s highest peak along Fire Tower Road. We were still not one hundred percent sure, however, about which peak had hosted Grout’s telegraph tower.

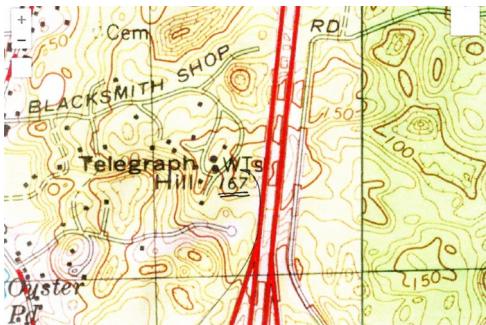
We kept researching, and discovered no definite answers, but some interesting facts. For example, the town’s #1 peak eventually acquired a fire spotting tower in 1914. The original 90 foot high tower was replaced in 1946 with a tower brought over from Martha’s Vineyard that was 20 feet higher. The fire tower, which you can walk past today, sits within Howland Park, a 3.5 acre parcel donated to the town by William Howland in 1898.

We also discovered that the town’s two highest peaks had been a tourist attraction in the early 1900s. Visitors made use of “a private road running east from the stone blacksmith shop” to pass by the water tower and continue on to Howland Park. This delightful trip is no longer possible for us. In 1961, the divided highway (Route 28) was laid down. It bisected Blacksmith Shop Road and cut off the direct route between the water tower and fire tower sites.

The physical barrier imposed by Route 28 changed how



Fire tower at “Howland Park Hill,” photographed by Terry White.



The highway cut Blacksmith Shop Road, and Telegraph Hill, into two sections. Map by USGS, available at nationalmap.gov.

people perceived the Telegraph Hill ridge. After 1961, when the highway came through, written records started referring to the town's highest peak as "Howland Park Hill," while the lower peak retained the old name of "Telegraph Hill" that used to apply to the entire ridge. Over the

past 65 years, in the minds of many residents, the two peaks have come to be considered separate hills.

Until more evidence emerges, our working hypothesis is that Grout's telegraph tower likely sat on or near the town's #1 peak, in the vicinity of today's Howland Park and fire tower. Please let us know if you can prove us right or wrong!

Thus our research journey brought us from one hill to two, and from two towers to three. Along this winding path we encountered an amazing character who deserves an entire tale to herself. Ida Small—fire spotter, gamekeeper, veteran, librarian, and journalist—will be the subject of our next Untold Tale.