



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

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Fire in Beebe Woods

by *Terry White and Meg Costello*

It was a clear and pleasant Indian summer Thursday afternoon in Falmouth, October 23, 1947. When an alarm sounded at 1:37 p.m. to report a brush fire on the west side of Beebe Woods, Chief Ray D. Wells was not overly concerned. Such events were not uncommon--there would be 78 brush fires in Falmouth that year.

Despite a forty-five day drought, and the governor's declaration of a forest fire emergency just the day before, Chief Wells believed that the period of peak danger had passed. He would soon realize how wrong he was.

The Chief led his men into the woods on the east side of Sippewissett Road, opposite Gunning Point. They found what looked like "an easy-to-catch one-spot fire." But as they tried to surround the blaze, they discovered it was not one fire but three, all of which appeared to have been set.ⁱ Wells had a much bigger fight on his hands than he had expected.ⁱⁱ

While Police Chief Baker initiated a watch for suspicious motorists to prevent any further incendiarism, Wells considered his options for containment. Back in April, the department had cleared six miles of fire breaks throughout the town, but almost none of them had been situated in Beebe Woods. Still, the Beebe family's winding old carriage trails might offer some protection.

Even as Wells marshalled his resources, the fire spread steadily east into the woods. Fanned by 25-mile per hour winds during the night, it approached Two Ponds by early Friday morning. Another alarm was sounded. Police and firemen maintained motorcycle patrols on Woods Hole Road, and the highway was closed to traffic from Locust Street crossing to Quissett Four Corners.



Top: Looking into the woods.
Above: Chief Wells
(Falmouth Enterprise,
10/31/1947)



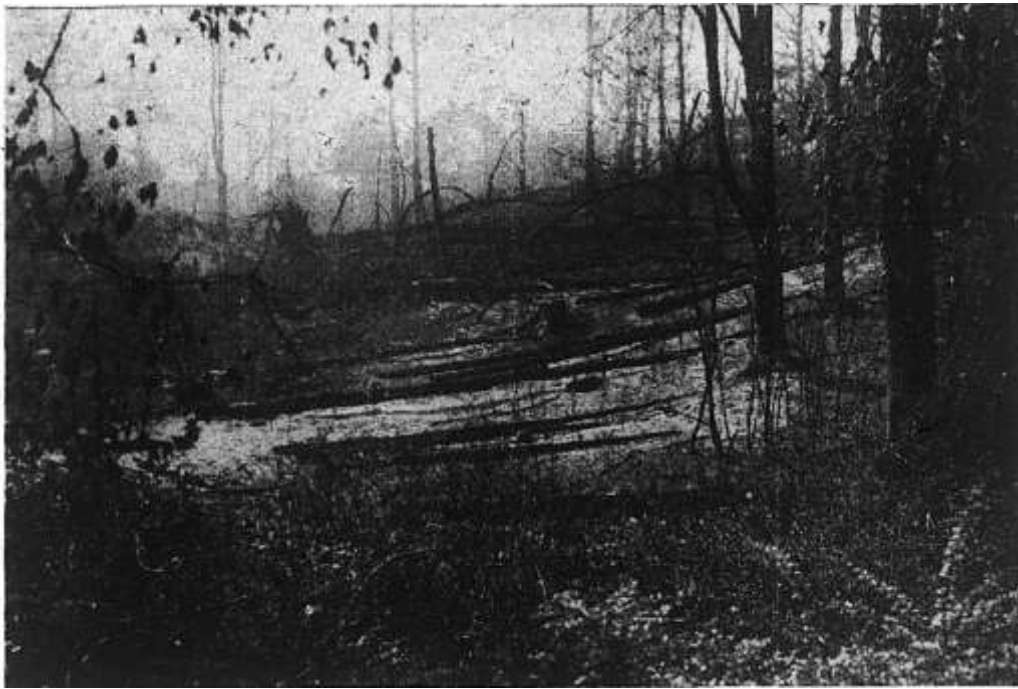
Top: The East Falmouth Crew (*Falmouth Enterprise*, 11/28/1947)
Middle: Neighbors feared gas tank explosion (*Falmouth Enterprise*, 10/31/1947)
Bottom: Fires near railroad

At 11:10 on Friday morning, a third alarm was sounded as the fire neared the Edgar McCallum estate on the hill above Miles Pond in Quissett.ⁱⁱⁱ Residents could see for themselves the smoke now billowing over Beebe Woods. By noon “[a] line of fire four and a half miles long extended easterly through the woods between Sippewissett and Woods Hole roads.”^{iv} The *Falmouth Enterprise* reported, “Late this morning smoke was thick on Main Street and [it] filtered sunlight to an orange glow. The smell of burning wood was strong through the village”^v Crews with dozers struggled to create fire breaks and access roads. They found that the “terrain [was] extremely difficult, and passage [was] hampered by bullbriars and fallen trees.”^{vi}

The threat to the McCallum residence was turned aside, but greater dangers loomed. At the top of the hill were Tanglewood Arms (present day Highfield Hall) and Tanglewood Manor (its sister mansion), as well as the Tanglewood Theater. Fortunately, the compound included a water tower and hydrants which proved to be crucial in protecting these estates. Down the hill, in the area of the train station, sat the potentially explosive Texaco gasoline storage tanks at the Locust Street rail crossing, and the highly combustible Lawrence grain storage facility, Wood Lumber, and the Falmouth Enterprise farther to the north. Beyond these businesses lay dozens of homes within the fire’s reach.

Chief Wells had never seen so many houses endangered in his 25 years of experience. He resolved that his fire fighters would make a stand at the railroad line. They would not allow the fire to jump the tracks and invade the town. He was determined to save the Highfield-Tanglewood complex as well.





Helping the seventy or more Falmouth fire fighters were crews from six surrounding towns. These included the Barnstable county brush breaker which arrived at noon on Friday with a crew of ten men. Chief J. Thomas Wallace of Bourne brought 800 feet of hose in response to Chief Wells's call for help. The Falmouth regulars were supported by "call men," a paid reserve of trained firemen who were "on call" for emergencies.



Among them were high school students, several of whom reported to headquarters in their football uniforms after the first alarm on Thursday afternoon. Ultimately, "nearly half the boys at Lawrence High School took part in the fight against the fire."^{vii}

An army of firefighters encircled the Tanglewood complex to insure its survival, creating a bulge in the line of fire as it moved east toward the railroad (see map). On Highfield's front lawn, Wells stationed two of his apparatus to soak down roofs, walls, grass, and the edge of the woods.^{viii} An

East Falmouth crew beat back flames near the hotel, while firemen from Woods Hole fought the blaze from the theater parking lot. The firefighters from East Falmouth then raced down the hill to protect the Lawrence Brothers grain mill, "arriving in thick smoke as flames crept nearer the building." They also protected the Texaco fuel tanks at the Locust Street crossing.^{ix}

As the fire swept down the hill toward town, homeowners and business owners near the train station battled sparks and embers on their roofs. Many packed and left the area, carrying only what was most valuable. The railroad continued service, but bussed about sixty passengers to Woods Hole on Saturday afternoon; the evening train came without any passengers. Over the four days of firefighting, 750,000 more gallons of water were pumped by the Falmouth Water Department than in the same period the previous year. Much of that water flowed through the 32 hydrants on the ring around the woods formed by Palmer Avenue, Sippewissett Road, Locust Street, and Woods Hole Road.

Top: Along Tanglewood Driveway; Middle: Snyder's House (Falmouth Enterprise, 10/31/1947)

Bottom: Half the boys at Lawrence High School helped fight the fire (The Lawrencian, 1948)





**Top: After Fire Scene (*Falmouth Enterprise*, 10/31/1947)
 Left: Damage from fire is still evident in this 1976 photo (*Ring Around the Punch Bowl*)**



A still remnant of a tree charred by the fire in 1947. Photo by [unreadable]

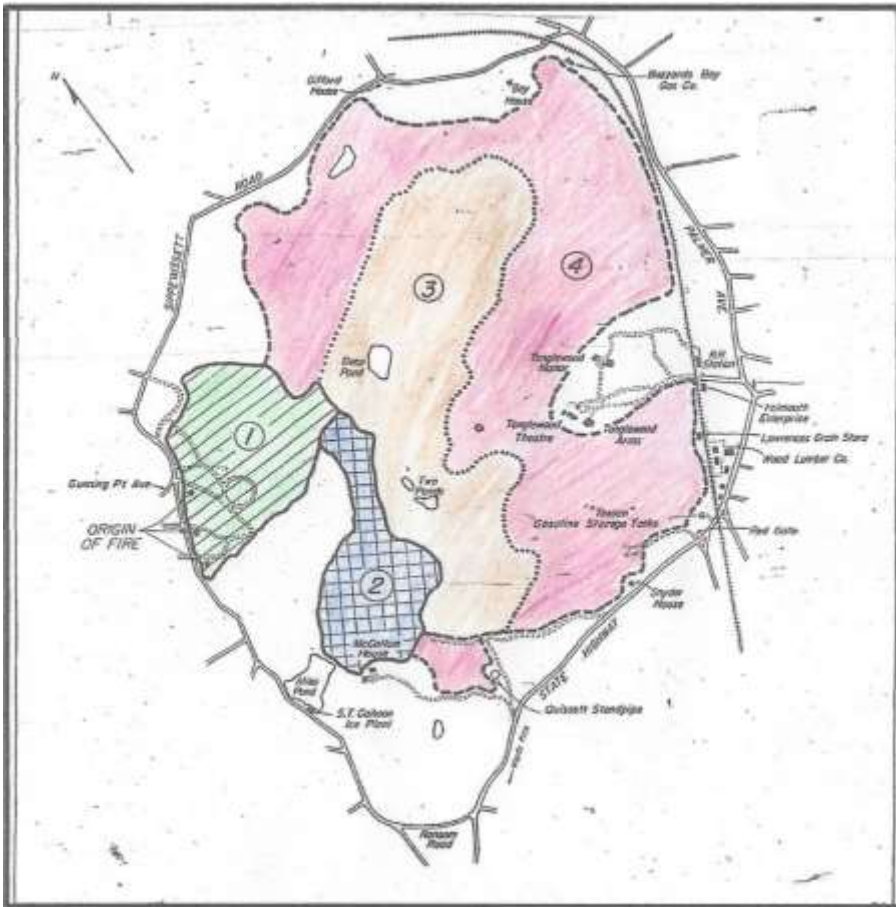
George Hough later recalled, “Falmouth folks were standing their ground, wetting roofs and yards with hoses . . . lugging pails to upper floors and attics . . . [They] watched a great sheet of flame sweep down on them from the hills above carrying chunks of fire in the heavy smoke.”^x From his vantage point at the Enterprise building, where men were spraying the roof with a garden hose all day on Saturday, Hough witnessed the fire’s approach.

“Flames jumped into the tall trees which fringed the woods. The sky flared red and yellow. It became a sheet of light. Pine tops sputtered. A telephone pole became a torch. The air beyond the track was filled with what looked like red dust with a glint of yellow in it and a steady shower of sparks, like giant fireflies, began to fall and dance and bounce. . . . The bed of the woods became a mass of flame laced with black shapes of charred limbs and trunks.”^{xi}

At the moment of greatest panic, the fire suddenly burned itself out.

“The wall of flame descended from the Beebe hill. It was terrifying as it swept down on us. It leaped the stonewall boundary of the Beebe estate. The gravel road to the grain mill stopped it. One minute it was on the point of sweeping into town. The next the flames were disappearing in a cloudburst of fire, soot and debris. . . .”^{xii}

The line of defense had held. Chief Wells confirmed, “The fire is all over.”^{xiii}



PROGRESS OF THE FIRE IS MAPPED--

The story of the fire can be followed on this map from its start on Thursday on Sippewissett road, opposite Gunning Point road, to its Saturday night Climax along the railroad tracks and Palmer avenue:

1. Stars show the three spots at which Fire Chief Wells says the fire was set. Area One was burned over Thursday afternoon and night. The black outline of this area shows the approximate fire line at dawn on Friday.
2. Cross-hatched area was burned over on Friday. Note how the fire escaped from the narrow point to the north which the firemen tried unsuccessfully to close and worked down by Two Ponds to menace the McCallum houses.
3. Dotted line is the line of fire at noon on Saturday, when firemen gave up hope of preventing its sweep to the railroad track.
4. Broken line shows the final extent of the fire. This line marks the further-most reaches of the fire at end of the fight on Saturday night. Note the morning approach to the Snyder house and how the fire was split to save the Tanglewood buildings. Note close approach to grain store and gas tanks. Map prepared by Robert W. Griffin from information supplied by Fire Chief Wells.

[*Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, October 31, 1947; Page: 3; map color added]

Reports on the fire began to roll off the Enterprise presses. Nearly the entire issue of October 31, 1947 was devoted to the subject, and included a map of the fire's progress [see below]. In one article, headlined *Trees Are Planned*,^{xiv} Frederick V. Lawrence called for an immediate program of reforestation and a scenic drive through the woods in order to prevent a repeat event. He blamed the spread of the fire on the scrub growth that had fueled it. Lawrence's plan was not adopted. Instead, the following decades saw developments such as Greengate and Falmouth Hospital being carved out of Beebe Woods.

The fire left a lasting mark on the woods. In 2001, Robbie Shaver, a Falmouth Academy student, found traces of its "fierce assault" still visible, even after the passage of fifty years. He noted that

pine tree seedlings grow up earlier than those of oaks or other hardwoods. This head start means that pine trees will mark the extent of a devastating fire for decades afterwards, until the hardwoods once again grow tall enough to shade them out.^{xv}

I have also heard it said that if you dig down an inch or two in the soil of the woods, you can still see a layer of ash. The woods may have reclaimed the hill, but 74 years have not completely erased the evidence of what George Hough called "The Great Fire."

ⁱ *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, October 24, 1947, p. 1. The perpetrator was never caught.

ⁱⁱ *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, October 31, 1947, p. 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, October 24, 1947, p. 1.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, October 31, 1947, p. 3.

^{viii} George Moses, *Ring Around the Punch Bowl* (Taunton, Mass., 1976), p. 267.

^{ix} *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, November 28, 1947, p. 10.

^x Quoted in Moses, *Ring Around the Punch Bowl*, p. 266.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 266.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 266-267.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 267. The three-day fire burned over 1000 acres of the woods, but no houses or businesses were damaged. It was said that not a single shed was lost to the fire.

^{xiv} *Falmouth Enterprise*, Friday, October 31, 1947, p. 1.

^{xv} Quoted in Judith G. Stetson, "Beebe Woods: Falmouth's Miracle," *Spritsail* Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer 2003), p. 16.