



# UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green



**Oliver Franklin Swift, c1850.**

## Grandfather Elijah

*Excerpt from a memoir by Oliver Franklin Swift (1840-1918)*

I remember having seen but one of my grandparents. That was grandfather Elijah. His second wife, Hannah, was living in my time, but she was not like an own grandmother to me. I remember how amused my dear mother was to a reply I made to her, when she asked me to go and call on her. "I don't feel acquainted with her," I said, and I did not.

Grandfather Elijah, as I recollect, was probably nearly seventy years old. He was about six feet tall, although in his old age he had grown portly and somewhat bent over, and did not look to be over five feet six or eight inches tall. He walked with a cane and had quite a number of them, some quite valuable ones. The one I liked best was of cane, quite light and about the size of a corn stalk. The head had evidently been formed from a root as it was pulled out of the ground, and had been made to look the exact likeness of a dog's head as large as a man's fist.

He went regularly to the bank every day, and could be seen going from there to his home each morning in the week at about 11:30. He was a great friend of a shoemaker who had a nearby shop, a loafing place for quite a number of old gentlemen. Grandfather provided the fuel for the fire and had a large three cornered chair set in one place. Whenever he entered it was always vacated for him.

He was a great friend to the poor, very benevolent and generous, with a heart as tender as a woman's. For this reason I suppose he was invariably spoken of as Uncle Elijah, addressed as Captain Swift, and his letters came directed to Hon. Elijah Swift. He affected to be very brusque and never failed to say what he thought or felt. The shoemaker's shop served him as a meeting place for many persons who naturally would feel very much out of place at his house or at the club.



**Elijah Swift, c1840, and Hannah (Lawrence) Swift, his second wife, c1840. Both paintings on display at Museums on the Green.**



A story was told to me by an apprentice to the shoemaker. A poor man came into the shop to see grandfather and said, “Captain Swift, I have lost my cow.”

“I am sorry for you. What was the matter with her?”

“She got struck by lightning.”

“You fool, you had no business to let your cow out in a thunderstorm! I won’t give you a cent.”



**Elijah Swift lived in a house that stood on the future site of St. Barnabas Church (above). It was a short walk from Grandfather Elijah’s house to the Falmouth National Bank (top).**

“But, Captain, if you will only put your name down on my paper it will help me so much. Others will give me something if you do.”

“How much do you want me to give you?”

“If you would give me two or three dollars it would help me very much.”

“What kind of cow are you going to buy?”

“Mr. So and So has a cow he will sell me for twenty dollars and will trust me for five dollars.”

“You blamed old fool, you ought to know that that old skinflint would not trust you for a cent—and if he did, what you paid would be more than

the cow was worth. I won’t give you a cent. You don’t deserve it.”

With tears in his eyes, the poor man said, “I don’t know what my wife and children will do. There is no one who will help me if you will not.”

“Let me see your paper. Look here, you old fool, don’t go sniveling around with that old paper bothering people. Take this.”

The apprentice did not know how much it was, but he saw several five dollar bills. “There is enough to buy a good cow, such a one as your children ought to have. Mind you, get a good one, and if you don’t, when I come down hunting next fall I will attend to you.”

**Canes that belonged to Elijah Swift, now at Museums on the Green. Left cane has antler handle; right cane has whale tooth handle.**





Probably he was the most popular man and had more influence with all classes than any other man in Falmouth, with the exception of Rev. H.B. Hooker, Pastor of the Congregational Church. It was not unusual before an election for men living at the East end of the town to come to the village to talk over matters with him. He was not a politician as I understand the word. He was very positive in his convictions, and had a forcible way of expressing himself and persuading others to see things as he did. In politics he was a Whig. I heard it said that some people, when asked about any particular subject in town affairs or state politics, would ask what uncle Elijah had to say, or how he was going to vote. One class of men he was in the habit of meeting evenings at the club, another class at the shoemaker's shop. For many years all elections in Falmouth went according to his wish. He was the great controlling force, though not seeming to be.



**Stores in Falmouth were a magnet for men looking for a place to socialize.**

**Corner chair that belonged to General Joseph Dimmick, hero of the Revolutionary War. The chair reserved for Elijah Swift at the shoemaker's shop would have looked similar to this one, which is now at Museums on the Green.**



**Dianthus, commonly called "pink," in Shanghai Botanical Garden. [From Wikipedia.org.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dianthus)**

He was very fond of flowers, and on Sunday usually wore one in his buttonhole—something seldom

done at that time. The yellow daffodil and the old fashioned variegated pinks were his favorite flowers. Always to this day the sight of those flowers remind me of grandfather. Five children of his lived near his house around the green. Every Sunday afternoon, starting at about three o'clock, he would call on each family. He seemed very fond of the young grandchildren. He would take each one on his knee, talk or play with them, and finally end up by saying he had something for them, and they could have it if they could find it. It was usually some sweets or some small gift which he had with him, hidden away.

I remember talking with Mr. John Parker, a very reliable chronicler of Falmouth events, in regard to grandfather Elijah, especially in regard to his first contract for live oak timber. Parker said, "Yes, Oliver, I remember it well. He heard that the United States government in Washington was going to let out a contract for live oak timber. He said he was going there to be on the spot and get the contract. He did not have ready money enough to pay for the trip and had to borrow it. The authorities there seemed to have been so impressed with his energy and apparent integrity that they awarded him the contract. When they asked for a bondsman, he named his brother Thomas. Captain Swift did not have much more property than an old horse and a bag of oats, and Thomas did not have as much. It is a wonder how he ever got started. For some reason every old woman and man who had any money was glad to trust him, and workmen were anxious to accompany him. It was the first contract of the kind that had ever been faithfully performed. I heard from good authority that he cleared a profit of Ten Thousand Dollars that year."



**Elijah Swift gravestone in Oak Grove Cemetery. From Findagrave.com.**

Freeman, in his *History of Cape Cod*, says

*Elijah Swift, born 1774, son of William and grandson of William, was representative twelve years, Justice of the Peace from 1831. Quorum unus from 1840. Of the Governor's Council two years and gent. of much enterprise and sagacity. By mechanical profession a carpenter, he contracted for and built many houses prior to 1820 in Beaufort, South Carolina, and until 1818 had a store in that place. His contracts with the United States Government, faithfully performed, laid the foundations of a fortune, which he employed with laudable regard to the best interest of this town. These contracts were for furnishing live-oak timber to the Navy Yards. He took*

*the first contract to furnish an entire frame for a 74 ship of the line. Also for smaller vessels, which business he followed successfully for twenty years. He was also first to establish the whaling business and ship building at Woods Hole.*

The last time I saw him was when he was sick, and my mother asked me to go over and see grandfather. He was lying on a bed, his eyes were closed, and he was perfectly quiet. His disease was some kind of kidney trouble, from which he had suffered the last few years of his life. They told me he was in a state of coma. His face shone brightly and there was a beautiful smile upon his lips, as if he could see that which was beyond and hidden from mortal sight.

He died a few days later. I have never forgotten that expression and it now comes before me, as I write, with more vividness than I can describe.