



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green



Grandmother's Garden

by Meg Costello

Fred Lewis always loved to visit his grandparents' house. When he was a schoolboy, each year his parents would pack him onto a train and send him to Falmouth for his summer vacation. The Lewis homestead was the middle one of three on Hewins Street, facing the Village Green. During those Falmouth summers, Fred found the course of his future life. The ocean, woods, and fields fed his passion for nature, and pointed him towards a scientific career. His aunt Sarah, a primary school teacher, and grandfather Thomas, a selectman and school trustee, were strong

beacons lighting his path. But in the depths of his heart, Fred might have been closest of all to his grandmother Cynthia.



Cynthia probably seemed very old to little Fred when he first met her. She was 66 when he entered the world. She had been born in Falmouth to Frederick and Rebecca (Sanford) Parker in 1809. Around 1820, when she was eleven or a bit younger, Cynthia made a sampler that is now in the collection at Museums on the Green. Worked on homespun flax linen with a strand of black cotton floss, it reads:

*Patience will wipe away the streaming tear
And hope will paint the pallid cheek of fear
Content will always happiness supply
And virtue calls a blessing from on high*



At age 23 Cynthia married Thomas Lewis, a carpenter; they had four children. Their worldly affairs prospered and Thomas earned the respect of their neighbors. By the mid-1850s the family had moved into the house on Hewins Street, originally built by Revolutionary War veteran Capt. John Grannis.

Cynthia must have relied on patience and hope to sustain her, as she watched her children grow up and venture into the wide and dangerous world. Her firstborn Frederick (uncle to our Fred) moved to Illinois and served in the 97th Illinois Volunteer Infantry during the





A Pastoral Scene, — Shiverick Pond.

This illustration accompanied Fred's essay on "Botanic Falmouth" in *Falmouth by the Sea* (1896).

parts of plants and animals."ⁱⁱⁱ At eleven he wrote home from Falmouth, "I went over to Mr. George Swift's and saw his stuffed birds."^{iv}

But Fred was really interested in creatures that were still alive, and there were plenty of those to track down and classify. His first published work was an article titled "Botanic Falmouth" in the book *Falmouth by the Sea*.^v Now a junior at Harvard, Fred wrote, "There are so many plants which are very much at home in Falmouth, that an attempt to select the most characteristic is extremely bewildering." He singled out for mention "the Beach Pea (*Lathyrus Maritimus*), which holds the sand in place with its long rootstocks," and the "large and showy" golden-rod (*Solidago Sempervirens*). The Swamp Rose Mallow (*Hibiscus Moscheutos*), he noted, grows in the marshes of Penzance and Sippewissett, while the purple Aster (*Tenuifolius*) appears to be laughing "as it pops its head above the salt-marsh grass."

The wild Carrot, however, was a widespread nuisance. Its white blossoms made "many a Falmouth field in midsummer look like a great snowdrift." Fred joked that the local farmers spent most of their time "pulling carrots to plant turnips." Alas, he had to admit, "Of all the places which I know, Falmouth may pride itself on having the most poison ivy; it is practically everywhere, and the more poisonous dogwood is by no means rare."

Fred earned his A.B. degree in 1897, and his M.D. in 1901.^{vi} He went straight to work at Harvard Medical School and remained a fixture in the departments of histology and anatomy for the rest of his life. He wrote reference works that ran through multiple editions; one of them was even translated into Chinese. Fascinated by microscopes, Fred catalogued Harvard's historical microscope collection.^{vii} In his classroom lectures, he often referred to the microscopic research of Cotton Mather. It makes one wonder if perhaps, when he was visiting Falmouth, he had seen the copy of Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* that had once belonged to his cousin, Capt. Nathaniel Lewis.^{viii}

In 1904 Fred married Ethel May Stickney and they eventually had a son, Thomas Lothrop Lewis. The proud papa informed the Harvard alumni bulletin that two-year-old Thomas could recognize and name portraits of Aristotle and other embryologists.^{ix}

Civil War. He was present at the surrender of Vicksburg in 1863 and wrote home to his parents, "Glory! Glory! Glory! Vicksburg is ours, surrendered today. Hurrah for Grant and the Western Army!" On April 9, 1865, his unit charged through raking fire to a victory at Fort Blakely, Alabama, where Frederick was commended for "the gallant performance of his duties."ⁱ Cynthia's prayers for her son's safety were answered, but she lost her daughter Rebecca, who died, unmarried, at age 22 in 1869.

Her third child, Charles, graduated from Lawrence Academy and went to work as an accountant at Boston's R.H. White Company.ⁱⁱ Charles married a New Hampshire girl named Nellie Brown, and in 1875 they became the parents of our boy Fred. Nellie noted with pride that from a very young age, Fred "was fascinated by the shapes, forms, and



Frederick S. Lewis

Unfortunately, we have no photos of a younger Fred.



Grandmother's Garden quilt that belonged to Fred Lewis, now at Museums on the Green.



**Cynthia (Parker) Lewis
(1809-1883)**

Outside the walls of the academy, Fred worked with the Boston Society of Natural History to conserve resources needed by migratory birds. He also saved Boston's Park Street Church from demolition in 1903. Starting

with almost no support, he rallied his fellow pew holders and defeated a proposed sale of the church to a developer who wanted to put up an office building.

Through it all, Fred kept coming back to Falmouth whenever he could. Cynthia and Thomas had both died before he was out of school, but his aunt Sarah continued to welcome him to the family homestead.

After Fred's death in 1951, the Historical

Society received the gift of a handmade nineteenth century quilt. Fred had left specific instructions that this item must be donated to the Falmouth museum.

The quilt is a variation on the "Grandmother's Garden" pattern, a hexagon motif that dates back to the late 1700s.^x Grandmother's Garden quilts were labor-intensive, requiring much careful piecing and stitching. The quilter often folded the fabric over paper templates to achieve the correct shape. The hexagons were then basted on the back and sewn together by hand. It was painstaking and precise work. Given the age of our quilt and its Lewis family connection, there is a high probability that it was made by Cynthia Lewis, perhaps with some help from her daughter Sarah.

Why did Fred set such a high value on this quilt? Of course he would cherish any relic made by his grandmother's hands. But this quilt was also the product of a mind apparently tuned to the same wavelength as his own.

Fred had spent the last twenty years of his career conducting independent research into the shapes and patterns of epithelial cells. He had published papers on the "geometrical principles which govern the arrangement of polyhedral bodies . . . [in] the greatest economy of space."^{xi} Colleagues said that Fred had a special gift for reproducing and interpreting patterns found in nature.^{xii} The quilt suggests that Cynthia shared this gift.

Fred was buried in Falmouth's Oak Grove Cemetery.
His gravestone bears a quotation of his own words.

The forms of life are supremely beautiful.
To observe them is a delight;
To interpret them in the slightest degree,
Is high achievement.

It's easy to believe that Cynthia would agree.



ⁱ *Falmouth Enterprise* 7/25/1961, "Fighters in the West."

ⁱⁱ *Falmouth Enterprise* 2/28/1925, "Charles S. Lewis Dies in Cambridge."

ⁱⁱⁱ "Frederic Thomas Lewis (1875-1951)," memorial pamphlet, reprinted from *[Harvard] University Gazette*, Vol. 47, December 15, 1951; p. 3. [Hereinafter Memorial Pamphlet.] In the archives at Museums on the Green.

^{iv} Memorial Pamphlet, p. 4. An atlas of 1880 shows George W. Swift living on West Main St.

^v *Falmouth by the Sea* (Falmouth, Board of Trade and Industry, 1896), pp. 19-21.

^{vi} *Harvard Bulletin* Vol XXV No. 11, 1922, p. 304. Free ebook on google books.

^{vii} See <http://waywiser.fas.harvard.edu/people/3828/frederic-t-lewis;jsessionid=682AE18498F39E60F83040CC4B1385F2>

^{viii} The Mather volumes, with Nathaniel Lewis's inscription, are now at Museums on the Green.

^{ix} Harvard College Class of 1897, 5th report (1917), accessed through Google Books.

^x See http://www.womenfolk.com/quilt_pattern_history/mosaic.htm

^{xi} Memorial Pamphlet, p. 5.

^{xii} "Embryology History: Frederic Lewis," at https://embryology.med.unsw.edu.au/embryology/index.php/Embryology_History_-_Frederic_Lewis