



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green



High Spirits

by Meg Costello

Are angels and departed human souls watching over us? Many religions throughout history have assured us that they are. In the United States, during the decades around the turn of the 20th century, Spiritualism took that belief a step further: not only could the spirits see us, but they could also speak with us, by using mediums.

But how could you tell who was a true medium, and not a faker? It might help if mediums came with a stamp of approval from a professional psychic society, similar to how lawyers are endorsed by the bar association. Such was the thinking of some Boston spiritualists who regularly congregated at the First Spiritualist Temple, a grand edifice at the corner of Exeter and Newbury Street.



The First Spiritualist Temple was built in the Romanesque style of nearby Trinity Church. Among the embellishments on its façade are carved “ghostly faces.” After ceasing to be a Temple, the building has housed businesses such as the Exeter Theater, Waterstone’s bookstore, and a Montessori School.

The Boston spiritualists printed a pamphlet in 1883, titled “Articles of Association of the Working Union of Progressive Spiritualists.” A copy of that pamphlet is now in the archives at the Museums. The text begins by setting out rules for how the association will operate. These include a provision that the Board of Managers shall direct the Union “as instructed by the controlling spirit of the third sphere.” Once these housekeeping details are out of the way, the booklet gets down to business: Just what kind of medium are you?

An application form asks potential new members, “If a medium, state what kind; whether materializing, test, business, healing, speaking, inspirational or trance, public or private.” Sixty-five types of medium are helpfully listed to choose from.

Are you one of those “Vibrating Mediums, who are sometimes controlled and shaken, and sometimes lifted and propelled, without any conscious volition”?

How about a “Telegraphic Medium, in whose presence the sound of the telegraphic click is heard and read”?

Perhaps you belong with the “Etherealizing Mediums, through whom Spirits are enabled to rise in full form out of a tumbler of water, and sometimes from larger bodies of water.”

On and on it goes, listing Hieroglyphic Mediums, Mesmeric Mediums, Hydrological Mediums (dowsers), and Planchette Mediums (Ouija board experts). There were apparently mediums who could make pictures appear, with or without cameras, and Speaking Mediums, both conscious and unconscious. Surely not many people claimed to be Red Letter Mediums, “upon whose arms the names of spirits appear written in blood.”

Spirit Exposing Mediums, “who are obsessed by unprincipled spirits of evil tendencies, formerly termed devils,” would have been considered demon-possessed in a more traditional religious group. The spiritualists included them as just another type of medium.

“Inspirational Mediums, for speaking, writing, or acting” sound like the 19th century equivalent of today’s motivational speakers and life coaches.

The Boston spiritualists promised to publish a registry of mediums whose gifts had been verified through strict examination by the leaders of the Temple. They hoped that this professional certification would help members to refute skeptics, and to avoid “the barbarous test conditions imposed upon Mediums by bigoted, evil-minded and ignorant persons.”

We don’t know who gave this pamphlet to the Museums, but we don’t have to look far beyond the borders of Falmouth to find a spiritualist who left a lasting mark on our region.

William F. Nye was born in 1824 in Pocasset. He moved to New Bedford at age 16 and apprenticed with various master builders. William sailed out to India as a ship’s carpenter and spent three years there with the Tudor Ice Company in Calcutta. Later, he headed to California, where builders were in high demand during the gold rush. By the 1850s he was back in New Bedford. Described as a “deep thinker,” he supported Garrison, Philips, Parker, and other anti-slavery leaders who lectured in that city.

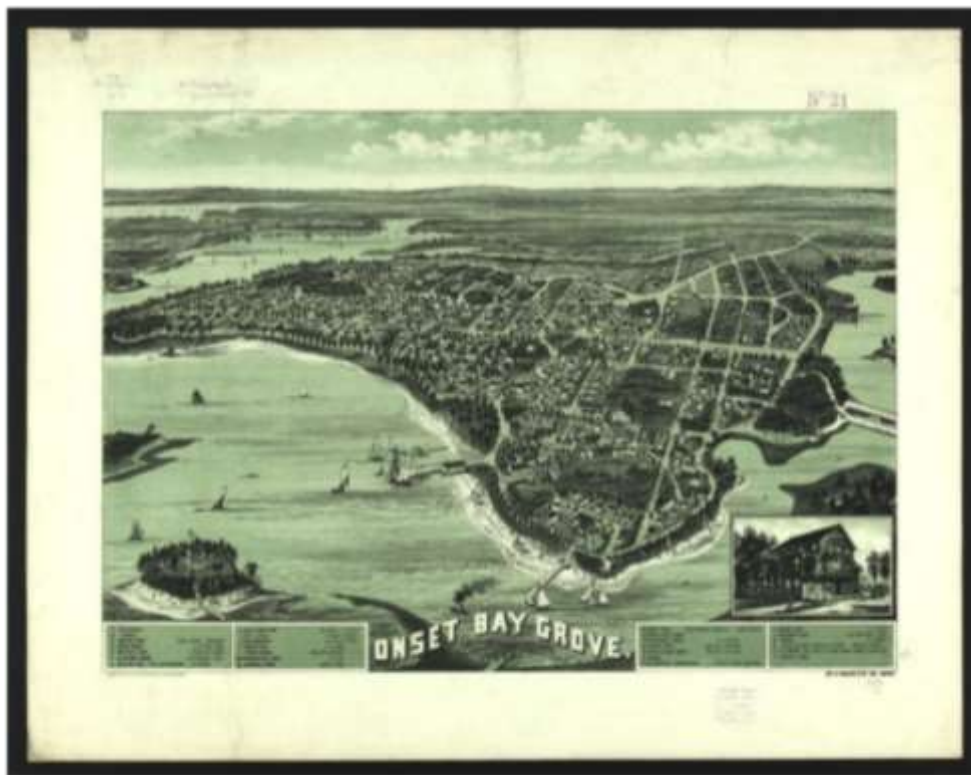
During the Civil War, William served as a sutler, a civilian merchant who sells supplies to troops in the field. He worked with the Massachusetts Artillery and later with the 4th Massachusetts Cavalry. Soldiers recalled, “He often held his ground when the other sutlers packed their wagons and ran for it.” After the war, William built up a successful business in Fairhaven, manufacturing oils used to lubricate watches, typewriters, and other machinery. By 1888, William F. Nye was one of the world’s largest suppliers of refined lubricants. His company still exists today, as Nye Lubricants.

Somewhere in the course of his adventurous life, William became a committed believer in Spiritualism. He founded and promoted Onset Bay Grove, a summer community for spiritualists.¹



TOP: William F. Nye, from *A Genealogy of the Nye Family* (1907)

ABOVE: Besides the pamphlet of unknown origin, we have in our collection two artifacts definitely associated with William F. Nye: a commemorative paperweight and a partially filled jug of whale head oil, bearing his company’s label. That jug is now on display as part of the exhibit “Falmouth: Changing with the Times” in Conant House.



From 1877-1900, Onset Bay Grove served as a resort and an educational retreat on Buzzards Bay for mediums of every type (including some fakes). The Grove gave a big boost to the commercial development of Onset Village. For a while, the town took on a distinctly spiritualist flavor.

Seances were conducted in the firehouse. Once word got out about how much fun the spiritualists were having in Onset, other people started moving in, and eventually their greater numbers prevailed. Spiritualist influence had ended by about 1915.ⁱⁱ

William Nye died in 1910. Could he be the person who donated the spiritualist pamphlet to our archives, over a century ago? It's fun to think so, but we can't be sure, unless more historical evidence comes to light...

... or unless William gets a message through to us from the other side, to confirm it.

LEARN MORE

[About Boston's Spiritualist Temple](#)

<https://www.glessnerhouse.org/story-of-a-house/2017/8/7/postcards-from-boston-1-first-spiritual-temple>

ⁱ Information about William Nye comes from FamilySearch.org and from *Our county and its people: A descriptive and biographical history of Bristol County, Mass.*, 1899, accessed online at <http://www.onlinebiographies.info/ma/bristol/nye-wf.htm>.

ⁱⁱ ["Onset's Spiritualist History Explored in New Book"](#) in *Wicked Local Wareham* online. Article posted on July 24, 2016.