

THE BOOK OF FALMOUTH

Nostalgia is in the air or, rather, in cyberspace. Facebook followers recall fond memories of the sights and sounds they knew in childhood. “If you grew up in Falmouth,” the postings say, “you remember Blueberry Muffin, Ortin’s, Harvey’s Hardware Store... .” Many of us are finding that we have short memories—we can’t remember what replaced the missing store, house, restaurant...

Falmouth as a community has also changed, more slowly, more profoundly, and, I believe, for the better. For many people “the good old days” were not only not good—they were awful. The evidence is in *The Book of Falmouth*, a chronicle of 300 years of change. Edited by Mary Lou Smith, it was published by the Falmouth Historical Society in 1986 to celebrate Falmouth’s 300th birthday. The hefty volume traces Falmouth’s beginnings in the 1600s as a township of 100 people busy fending off wolves to what Bruce Chalmers described, in 1986, as “multifaceted Falmouth.” The following are my summaries of just a few of the book’s findings. I hope to show that our community, with all its difficulties, is much better than it was in the past.

Concern for our neighbors: Marjorie Moore, one of the book’s many contributors, describes what it was like to be poor in Falmouth in the early centuries. No mention is made of helping the poor until 1800 when Town Meeting charged a five-member committee to find some way to assist them. The committee recommended the purchase of a house, assistance for the “inmates,” and supervision. The Selectmen did nothing. Fourteen years later an official Poor House was established. In 1826, it became the Work House with the following rules and regulations:

In case any person shall refuse, be idle or not perform such reasonable task or stint as shall be assigned, or shall be stubborn and disorderly, such person shall be confined in solitude on coarse or very simple foods, or be put to hired labor for such term of time as may be judged necessary.

In 1878, the Poor House became the Poor Farm at which time the lodgers were required to raise chickens and pigs and sell vegetables, meat, and dairy products. Moore reports that in 1886 a newborn was added to the rolls. With the advent of Social Security and government aid, in 1960 the Poor Farm, by then called the Town Infirmary, closed.

In 1975, the compassionate people of Falmouth founded Falmouth Human Services. It provides counseling for mental health and substance abuse, counseling for couples and families, and information about a range of other community services. Its website carries this message: “It’s easy getting lost. Help is available.” Food is provided by the Falmouth Service Center, Around the Table, and Meals on Wheels.

Concern for education: Alberta Donahue’s report makes it clear that education was a luxury in the 1700s. It took our forebears almost a century to get a school building erected. In 1719, wrangling over what to pay the schoolmistress ended with this agreement:

She shall have twelve pounds for her salary and suitable diet and shall be allowed to have the use of a horse to visit her friends twice in the year.

After years of steady gains, education became a luxury once again during the 1930s. Donahue writes: “During the Depression period the Truant Officer spent more time trying to obtain shoes, clothing and lunches for children kept home from school than checking on actual truancies.” In 2013, the Falmouth schools receive strong support from the community. Our shared belief is that all children deserve an education of high quality.

Concern for religious diversity: Quakers are generally thought of as peace-loving people. Yet they were seen as radical and dangerous by the Puritan theocracy of New England, according to Mary Mangelsdorf. Those who settled in Falmouth in the 1670s were whipped, fined, and jailed. Mary Rogers, writing about religion in Falmouth, states that the town minister was appointed by law, paid by the town, and assigned to the only church in town—the Congregational Church. The Quakers, known as the Society of Friends, persisted and were eventually tolerated; the two denominations were active in the 1700s in two churches. In the 1800s, there were five denominations and 12 churches. The movement toward a pluralistic religious community grew in the 1900s when 16 denominations and 23 churches were established. My 2013 telephone directory lists about 20 denominations and about 30 churches in Falmouth.

Concern for democratic town government: Perhaps the most dramatic change in the practice of government was the move from “open” Town Meeting to Representative Town Meeting in 1936. As the population increased, open meetings became unwieldy and easily manipulated by powerful factions. Bruce Chalmers argues in *The Book of Falmouth* that the real reason for the change was a contentious zoning change in 1933. His report is worth reprinting here:

A member of the Woods Hole Community, Sam Cahoon, had an ice house beside Miles Pond on Sippewissett Road. It had been built to store the ice which he harvested from the pond each winter. In 1933, however, he installed ice making machinery, the noise from which disturbed those who dwelt nearby. They objected, pointing out that the ice house was in an area zoned for residential, not industrial, use. Woods Hole, with its traditional solidarity, was in favor of an article in the Town Meeting warrant to change the zoning law to legalize the ice house; others in town, especially the landowners near the pond, were opposed. A large contingent arrived at the Town Meeting from Woods Hole (by special train) and prevailed when the vote was taken. This was reported to be because the largest meeting room available (capacity 600) was not large enough for the opposition to attend in sufficient force to defeat the motion. Dissatisfaction with this “undemocratic” way of doing business eventually led to the division of the town into precincts, each of which elected its representatives to vote at the Town Meeting.

Town Meeting is no less contentious than it was in 1933, but it is probably more orderly. What remains the same is the practice of democracy: freedom of thought and expression, with the requirement that respect be shown for conflicting opinions.

Time will bring change, and another generation will post memories of their Falmouth childhoods on some future iteration of Facebook. What John Stuart Mill called “experiments in living” will continue. And maybe residents will celebrate Falmouth’s 400th birthday by writing a second edition of the *Book of Falmouth*.