

Falmouth Historical Society Annual Meeting

FHS Presents! — An Early Falmouth Family *Our First Experience with Genealogical Tourism*

Online via Zoom—January 18, 2023

The accompanying slides are posted on the Society website at:

[https://thefhs.org/resources/Documents/FHS Presents-An Early Falmouth Family Slides.pdf](https://thefhs.org/resources/Documents/FHS%20Presents-An%20Early%20Falmouth%20Family%20Slides.pdf).

Betsy Jo Whitcomb and Sue Farnham shared what they learned and the challenges they overcame while reconstructing the narrative for a family of Colonial Falmouth.

We receive requests in-person, over the phone, by postal mail, and through social media, but the most common way we get queries is via email. All told, we receive and respond to about five each month.

This request arrived via email from a family in Wisconsin who had been researching their family tree. They were seeking help to plan a visit to the land of their ancestors. They were genealogical tourists! This was a first for us.

There are ten towns named “Falmouth” in the world. Only three have historical societies: Maine, Massachusetts, and Cornwall (England.) Most of the requests we receive are meant for us, but we get a few that should have gone to that “other” Falmouth on Cape Cod. Sometimes, we even get a request intended for our namesake in England.

The first thing we do is determine whether the request was really meant for us.

For questions involving family history, we begin with a search on Ancestry.com. The email provided names and lifespans for a married couple. Just like you see on shows like “Who Do You Think You Are?” we entered the data and clicked “Search.” Heading the list of hits was a family tree.

Only the lazy and inexperienced researcher accepts online trees without question, but we were simply looking for confirmation that this couple had a tie to Falmouth, Maine. They did.

This tree had sources and, at the top of the list, was a published genealogy which we had seen before. It has a lot of information about the Bracketts who settled at Falmouth in the mid-17th century. A good sign.

Rather than take that online tree at face value, we consulted other references.

When researching Colonial Falmouth, we begin with Willis' History of Portland. William Willis was a lawyer, a historian, and a politician. He was experienced in winnowing out the truth. His prominence gave him access to records and people before their stories were lost to time or fire.

The two families mentioned in the email were prominent in Colonial Falmouth. We found plenty of information about them in Willis. They were also covered in a pair of century-old published genealogies: one for the Bracketts and another for the Cox family.

Where do you find these books? In libraries, of course.

Those of you who have been researching your family history for many years recall the days when "research" was synonymous with long hours in a hard chair at libraries such as Maine Historical's Brown Library in Portland, or the New England Historic Genealogy Society's library in Boston.

That's not what we did. We turned to the Internet and digital libraries.

You can use a broad search to discover published genealogies. Once you have a title, search for that, but append "archive.org" at the end of the search. From the family tree on Ancestry, we already had the title of the Brackett genealogy. Steering the search to archive.org (The Internet Archive), we found digitized copies in public the domain available for online viewing, searching, and downloading. You can build your own digital library of PDFs.

There are a several historical societies in the greater Portland area. Is Falmouth Historical a good match or should we refer the requestor to another?

We searched the books by Willis, Brackett, and Cox. We found the couple mentioned by the prospective tourists. Their ancestors lived on Portland's peninsula (then called "Falmouth Neck") and Back Cove for many years in Falmouth before the other towns split off. We routinely handle requests for Colonial Falmouth.

We describe our approach to research as the "three-legged stool." Usually, requests are seeking information about one of three categories: family history, property history, or local history. Our research focuses on that category but draws upon all three to build a complete narrative.

This request was different. They wanted us to blend all three into a complete narrative with an emphasis on places and things they could see.

A self-guided tour seemed like a perfect solution.

We had family trees. We had family stories. We had (of course) local history to provide context. All we had to do is dump all of that into blender and push the "Start" button. This would be a piece of cake. Or so we thought.

One part we had sitting on the shelf: the timeline for early Falmouth. The full list is more detailed and includes the break-up of Falmouth into six towns along with other colonial conflicts.

When researching early Falmouth, local history takes center stage. If an ancestor was supposedly born at Falmouth in 1695 (during King William's War), either the date is wrong, or it is a different Falmouth—there were no English settlers living here in 1695.

These events left their mark on the Brackett and Cox families.

But first, we validated the family trees. We corrected some errors that had been propagated through online trees.

Our goal was identifying the ancestors to be highlighted in our narrative. Many of the dates in published genealogies should have been prefixed with "about" but that didn't affect the story.

Now we had the "Who." Next came the "What and When."

We pulled the story of the Bracketts from Willis' "History of Portland" and Brackett's "Bracket Genealogy."

Anthony Brackett of Portsmouth was the immigrant for this line. Anthony and his wife were killed at his farm during King William's War.

His son, Anthony Brackett, was living at Falmouth by 1662—soon after Massachusetts annexed that part of Maine and established the town of Falmouth. Anthony's home was a 400-acre farm on Back Cove. Anthony and his family were taken prisoner during King Philip's War but escaped. His brother Thomas was killed. Anthony was killed defending his farm during King William's War. The following year saw his son Seth killed and son Anthony captured (but later escaped). Many inhabitants of Falmouth were massacred, and buildings razed.

After a short interval, the peace was shattered by Queen Anne's War. Anthony's son, Zachariah, didn't return to Falmouth until 1715 when took possession of the farm. Life in Falmouth was still unsettled. His family joined him in four years later but they were forced to seek refuge at a garrison on the peninsula during an outbreak of trouble with Native People in 1722. Sometime after 1740, Zachariah sold the farm and moved to Ipswich where he spent his remaining years.

His son, Joshua, was born into strife and spent much of his life serving as a soldier in one war after another. While he was away, his family lived in a home rented from the Bramhalls at the present-day location of the Congress Square Park in Portland. His wife's family, John and Tabitha Cox, lived down the hill toward the Fore River on what is now York Street. Joshua later acquired land on the Presumpscot River near the location of Riverton Park.

Falmouth was on the frontier as well as the front line in conflicts spanning a century—profoundly shaping the narrative for the Bracketts.

We pulled the story of the Cox family from Willis' "History of Portland" and Cox's "Cox Family in America."

William Cox of Pemaquid was the immigrant for this line. He was living at Pemaquid in 1625—five years after Plymouth and seven years before Falmouth. How did he end up living on a remote spot of the Maine Coast?

William Cox appears to have come from a family of mariners in Bristol, England. During the decades before the Popham Colony and Plymouth, mariners would sail from Bristol to the Maine Coast where they would fish and trade with the Native People. They would often set up on offshore islands where they cured the cod before returning to England.

There was a stockade and trading post at Pemaquid—then called Jamestown—by 1633. Archeological evidence suggests that Bristol merchants maintained a fishing and trading center at Pemaquid with a resident agent as early as 1600.

The Cox family fled Pemaquid during King Philip's War. William's grandson, John Cox, returned to Maine in 1729, choosing Falmouth as a more stable place to live than Midcoast. Alas, he was killed on a military mission to Pemaquid during King George's War.

That gave us the "What and When." Next came the "Where."

Placing these families and events on modern maps proved more difficult than expected. Colonial maps show a skinnier peninsula and a larger Back Cove due to subsequent landfill. Landmarks disappeared or moved. This is where local knowledge—best acquired on foot—becomes crucial.

These were prominent families in Colonial Falmouth. Their homes are shown on maps prepared by Willis and Brackett during their research. We used atlases from later periods to pinpoint the locations on current maps. In some cases, we followed the deeds to confirm that we had the correct site.

Anthony Brackett of Falmouth's farm on Back Cove was immense: $\frac{5}{8}$ of a square mile and probably including Deering Oaks Park. The farmhouse where he lived and died was located near the Hannaford supermarket. Zachariah built a new farmhouse up the hill on land now part of the University of Southern Maine campus. This later became the home of Henry Deering, the "Merchant Prince of Portland."

We also identified the homes of some other ancestors on Falmouth Foreside.

For most queries, we are presented with a problem along with whatever information the requestor has. We do the research and provide the response. This project was more interactive with emails flying back and forth between

Wisconsin and Maine. We sent them a link to the Brackett Genealogy with pointers to the sections dealing with their line. There was so much detailed material, we suggested that they download the book because it could serve as a guide on their tour.

We sent our “tourists” a five-page, self-guided tour of places to visit and things to do. The guide was filled with weblinks to get directions and more information.

We scheduled a time for them to visit the Falmouth Heritage Museum.

We suggested that they register in advance with Maine Historical for a guided walking tour.

We recommended sites for local sightseeing and dining.

The scope of this project was broad as we swept together all manner of information to tell the story of this family’s ancestors in Colonial Falmouth.

We began with much more genealogical and historical information than usual. We even had information about their property although geolocating their homes on modern maps was complicated.

Our “tourists” reported that they had a good time and appreciated the research we had done for them.

On a more gruesome note, one of our volunteers commented that he had often walked across ground that must have been soaked with the blood of Bracketts.

As for our “history detectives,” this project was fun. By constructing a more complete narrative, we brought events that took place centuries ago back to life. We put names and events on places we often see in our daily travels around “Colonial Falmouth.”