

Falmouth Historical Society Annual Meeting

FHS Presents! — Falmouth’s Western Frontier

The Story of Mast Road and its Families

In-person and Online via Zoom—January 23, 2024

The accompanying slides are posted on the Society website at:

<https://thefhs.org/resources/Documents/FHS%20Presents-Falmouths%20Western%20Frontier.pdf>.

Betsy Jo Whitcomb and Sue Farnham shared what they learned while reconstructing the narrative about four families who shaped the history Mast Road in West Falmouth.

Our community turns to us for stories about the history of Falmouth. We’re happy to oblige. Researching the history of our town is what we love to do.

Presentations at the last two Annual Meeting featured Falmouth Foreside. Here it’s West Falmouth’s turn to be in the spotlight.

We say that our research is “locally-directed.” That is because most of our research is done in response to questions from our community.

We average five queries a month about the history of Falmouth people, places, or things. We seldom have ready-made answers sitting on the shelf. Most require research. This is no exception.

We recently received a pair of routine questions about the history of two properties on Mast Road. Before we could answer questions, we had to discover the facts. For this, we have a standard methodology we call the “three-legged stool.” For every topic, we blend family history (genealogy), property history (deed-diving), and local history to reconstruct the narrative for the subject of our question.

These were property history questions. We began by tracing the deeds. We’re good at that. We get lots of practice. That tells us who lived at the property.

Next, we built mini-genealogies for each of the families.

Then we added our “special sauce.” We brought in local history to provide context.

And that’s what we did for these two questions.

When we are looking at property history going back more than a century, we begin with the 1857 and 1871 maps.

There were only four families on Mast Road in 1857. There were only four in 1871.

As we began running the deeds, we were surprised to discover that three of those families were descended from the original settlers who built those homes in the 1700s. We learned that all three families stuck around, well into the 20th century.

This was shaping up to be an interesting story. It got better when we found close ties between two of the families. This was the rare case when four families influenced Falmouth’s history spanning three centuries. The stories of those four families were the stories of our town. We began reconstructing the narrative for Mast Road.

The story begins before the arrival of English Settlers in 1633. Reliable accounts about the Aucocisco, the band of Wabanaki who lived here, are uneven. In this case, the property we are researching abuts Highland Lake. Falmouth records tell us that archeological research has turned up evidence of human habitation there. Some of what the archeologists found goes back in time potentially thousands of years—well before the Aucocisco.

When does our narrative begin? We know there weren’t any English settlers living in that part of Falmouth before 1725.

Prior to 1675, the area around Highland Lake was wilderness. There were no roads other than trails made by Native people. Willis’ map showing Falmouth prior to 1690 shows us there were no settlers living in the interior away from the Presumpscot River.

The next 50 years brought nearly non-stop violence. First it was an uprising of the Native people. That was followed by two wars with France on one side and England on the other. King Louis XIV didn’t like people from New England encroaching upon *Nouvelle France*. Making matters worse, the English were

Protestant heretics encroaching upon good Catholic soil. He told his governor to clean them out, and that is just what was done. At one point, nearly 240 men, women and children of Ancient Falmouth were massacred in what today is Portland's Old Port. It was nasty. It was bloody. Settlers fled south below York for safety. Some semblance of peace returned in 1725. Settlers returned to Falmouth, but they tended to stay close to the water for transport and (if things went bad again) an avenue for escape.

Back then, Maine, including "Falmouth on Casco Bay" (so-called to distinguish it from that "other" Falmouth on Cape Cod), was part of Massachusetts. Those Puritans didn't come to the new world looking for religious freedom. They wanted to live where their austere, ultra-conservative, Calvinist faith was the official religion. Life could be difficult for those who didn't conform, such as Quakers. For people who weren't Puritans, it was prudent to keep your distance from Boston.

During the wars with the French when most of Maine was a battleground, Quakers found refuge in New Hampshire and towns in southern Maine like Berwick. After things settled down, they migrated north.

Quakers were industrious and had a closely-knit society. This was a time when Portland was still part of Falmouth. Many settled along "Quaker Lane," today's Old Washington Avenue beginning just behind Lib's Ice Cream at Allen's Corner. As their community grew, it extended north, along Lambert Road onto Blackstrap Road (where they established a meetinghouse), and across the Presumpscot River.

Many of Falmouth's finest old houses are along Blackstrap Road and its side roads extending all the way to the Cumberland line. Most of these homes belonged to Quakers. We believe the migration into western Falmouth began around 1750. By the late 1700s, a majority of the people living within what today are the bounds of Falmouth were Quakers.

That brings us back to our question: When was Mast Road settled?

It had to be before 1763 when the Purinton House was built.

Timber. There is good reason to believe that when the Quakers arrived, the wilderness wasn't quite so wild. They probably took advantage of logging roads.

It is likely that roads such as Blackstrap, Hardy, and Mast were carved out of the wilderness by foresters.

One such forester was William Huston who worked for the Royal Mast Agent. He purchased land on what is now Mast Road and built a log cabin before 1750. (Records say 1739 or 1749, and we haven't been able to locate the deeds.) While overseeing timber operations near Blackstrap Hill, he would have become very familiar with the area.

Why was there a Royal Mast Agent in Falmouth? At the time, Falmouth was the center of the mast trade in Colonial New England.

This takes us back to the real reason Massachusetts seized Maine, town by town, between 1652 and 1658. It is reasonable to assume that Massachusetts coveted Maine's natural resources. That's true, but not in the way many people think.

It was all about wood. Massachusetts desperately needed wood for domestic needs—building everything from fires to homes. Wood was also something that could be exported to create the kind of trade that enabled colonists to import needed goods from England. Topping the list was wood for ships' masts. In particular, masts for ships of the Royal Navy.

As an island nation, England depended upon its Navy. It depended upon its Navy to protect the island and its colonies... to protect trade... to ensure survival of the nation.

Today, navies enjoy strategic advantage from technological improvements. 300 years ago, warship technology had changed little in two centuries. Back then, the strength of wooden ships was determined by botany.

Masts and spars needed to be lightweight, durable, and supple. Only certain long-grained softwoods met this requirement. Only specific species of pine or spruce trees grown in narrow climatic bands would perform adequately on a ship of the line. Most forests in England had been denuded. Moreover, trees best suited for masts didn't thrive in England's soil and climate. England had gotten suitable trees from the Baltics, but those had become more difficult to obtain. White pines of Maine and New Hampshire were perfect. Moreover, foresters could find the massive trees needed for mainmasts in the virgin forests of northern New England.

The mainmast for a 74-gun two-decker (the workhorse of the fleet) needed to be three feet across and 108 feet long. It weighed about ten tons.

For England, the mast trees of Maine were of upmost importance to national security. And those massive pines thrived in the woods near Blackstrap Hill in Falmouth.

Timber was the biggest (and most important) industry in colonial Maine. The fishery was important but took second place to timber. Farms were there to feed the people working in timber. The trouble was—timber was so lucrative, there weren't enough farms to put food on the table.

Ancient Falmouth became the center of the mast trade when Colonel Thomas Westbrook became Royal Mast Agent at Falmouth in 1727. After fires destroyed pine forests near Portsmouth, the bulk of masts shipped to the Royal Navy came from Falmouth. All of this came to a sudden halt on the eve of the American Revolution in 1775. Colonists seized and carried off masts awaiting shipment to England. One load was dumped into the Fore River where the trunks rotted for decades.

There was a dark side to the timber trade. It was hard, dangerous work. Timber operations in New Hampshire relied on Scottish prisoners of war who had been shipped to America and put into indentured servitude working in the sawmills. Their indentures expired before 1760, and African slaves were imported. That speaks volumes about the nature of the work. Most of the people working in timber were paid poorly. A small number of politically powerful merchants grew enormously rich on the mast trade. Samuel Waldo was one.

The nature of the timber industry led to major consequences during the American Revolution.

Colonists in northern New England deeply resented the "King's Broad Arrow" edict of 1729 which gave the Crown ownership of trees on private property in Massachusetts (which included Maine) and New Hampshire. That it didn't apply in England only enraged colonists more. This fueled revolutionary sentiments.

Captain Mowatt of the Royal Navy became involved in attempts to enforce the edicts in Falmouth. Colonists took him prisoner to prevent his interference. Seething after he was released, Mowatt returned with a flotilla of five vessels and burned Falmouth Neck—present-day Portland's Old Port—to the ground in 1775.

When militia from Gray and Brunswick were summoned to help Falmouth defend itself against Mowatt's attack, they saw that many of the burning homes belonged to the fat cat merchants and lawyers who had exploited them in the timber trade. The militiamen looted what they could and returned home.

Of greater consequence, England's only source of North American mast trees became Canada. As England's reserves were depleted, replacement of worn-out masts and spars was deferred. When the English tried to block a French fleet from assisting the American rebels in 1778, the English ships were shattered in a storm leaving many badly damaged and limping back to port. A strong case can be made that the loss of masts and spars from Falmouth altered the balance of power at sea, thus affecting the outcome of the Revolution.

That was the all-important role of timber in Colonial Falmouth. Now let's switch our sights to the four families of Mast Road

Huston. The first to settle on Mast Road was William Huston Jr. He was Scots-Irish. His family had fled Presbyterian persecution. Family legend says that his family came on one of the several ships from Ireland in 1718. Some said they were among the unfortunates to spend the brutally cold winter on the ship in the Fore River, but this is unlikely. Records tell us that William Huston Sr lived in the Scots-Irish community at Pleasant Hill in Falmouth before 1740.

William Huston Jr is believed to have lived somewhere in West Falmouth during the 1730s before acquiring land on Mast Road and moving there, possibly by 1740. According to family legend, he built a log cabin, but it was burned by Native People. (This was around the time the Pigwackets were making their presence felt in nearby Windham.) He rebuilt the cabin only to have it burned a second time. Family legend has it that he invited Native People to dinner at his home. Visitors reported seeing Native People sleeping near his home. His hospitality appears to have kept his property safe.

This was the hinterlands and not far removed from wilderness but, as a forester for the Royal Mast Agent, William would have been familiar with the area around Blackstrap Hill.

The farmhouse was built around 1764. It has undergone successive renovations over the years.

In 1870, the farm was occupied by Stephen Huston, William Jr's great-grandson. With 100-odd acres, and agricultural production typical for a farm of that size, Stephen self-identified as a yeoman. The Puritans brought the English system of social classes to Massachusetts, and it took hold. A yeoman was the head of a fully self-sufficient farm of at least 60 (and preferably 100) acres. The Yeomanry were the backbone of agriculture in 19th century New England.

Six generations of the Huston Family farmed there for at least 177 years.

Purinton (down the hill). Elisha Purinton came from Hampton Falls, New Hampshire, where his father was a very successful clockmaker. Elisha learned the trade from his father but became a blacksmith instead.

We do not know why he came to Falmouth, but he was a leader in the Quaker community. The migration of so many Quakers to Falmouth may have been what drew him to Maine. He married Sarah Huston, William Jr's daughter. Their wedding present was the land upon which his farmhouse sat.

The farmhouse was built around 1763. It is one of the best preserved and most attractive colonial homes in Falmouth. It is listed on the National Register.

In 1860, the farm was occupied by Francis, Elisha's grandson. With 200 acres and agricultural production typical for a farm of that size, Francis self-identified as a Yeoman.

Three generations of the Purinton family farmed there for about 100 years.

Pride. The Purinton farm was purchased by the Pride family in 1867 and their name continues to be associated with the property today. It was a struggle to keep the farm operating during the Great Depression. The sale of antiques made it possible to keep the farm solvent. Three generations of the Pride Family farmed there for almost a century. Fortunately, recent owners possess the means and desire to preserve this fine old home.

Purinton (up the hill). The farmhouse was built around 1790. His father sold Abraham an 85-acre tract across the road the following year.

In 1860, the farm was occupied by Abraham's son George. With 90 acres and agricultural production typical for a farm of that size, George self-identified as a Yeoman.

Two generations of the Purinton family farmed there for about 105 years. Part of this farm was cleaved from Elisha's farm. Taken together, three generations of Purintons farmed on Mast Road for 132 years.

The 125-acre farm was purchased by a Purrington from Bath who was so distantly related to the Falmouth Purintons that they were probably unable to discern how they were connected. Thanks to Ancestry, we were able to make the connection: they were fourth cousins twice removed.

Lord. The farmhouse was built around 1791. Not much is known about the Lord family that lived on Mast Road. They came from Berwick and some of their kin were Quakers. Inheritance of the farm followed a tortuous path, often through the female line.

Five generations of the Lords or their Lowell descendants owned the farm for 173 years.

Camps. The "rustication" movement really took hold in Falmouth around the turn of the last century. We saw the proliferation of seasonal cottages on the Foreside, sometimes on postage-stamp sized lots.

Construction of seasonal camps on Highland Lake was slower with only a handful appearing in 1900. The number had grown to 28 by 1911. Today it is about 100. Unlike the Foreside where seasonal cottages became year-round homes after WWII, many of the lakeside camps are still seasonal.

At first the camps along Mast Road were built on land belonging to the three landowning families. We didn't find records of leases, but those may not have been recorded. Only after the landholding families sold their land did the camps appear in land records as privately owned.

There have been community associations for over a century. Now there are also camp road associations. Gathering information about the history of Falmouth's seasonal camps on Highland Lake is a good topic for future research.

Anyone who spends time delving into the history of Falmouth is prone to think of Highland Lake by its original name of "Duck Pond." Oral history and written records suggest a strong-willed woman of Westbrook convinced the Postal Service to change the name to Highland Lake because "Duck Pond" had no class. This provoked drama that lasted decades.

There seems to be less controversy over the change from Duck Pond to Mast Road. We can only speculate about the choice of name.

Most “Mast Roads” led to Mast Landings where mast trees could be loaded onto vessels for transport. That isn’t the case here. Samuel Manning’s excellent book, “New England Masts,” goes into detail about twitching and baulking of mast trees. Assuming that pines of Blackstrap Hill were harvested for masts and other purposes, getting the “sticks” off the hill to a mill would have been the first challenge. Alas, we have come across no accounts of how this was done in the area that is present-day Falmouth. Mast Road may have been the best route for moving trees near the ridge to lower, more level ground from which there were several options for milling or moving.

The arc of history in western Falmouth differs from the Foreside.

Settlement began about a century later.

Timber was a big part of the story for the first half-century. There is land along Mast Road still belonging to “S.D. Warren” (now Sappi).

Camps along Highland Lake are seasonal and many of the trappings (e.g., associations) persist.

Farmland has been carved into residential property (as is the case for much of Falmouth), but zoning and limited utilities have preserved much of the rural character.

What makes Mast Road stand out is the extent to which four families, owning 700 acres over the course of 200 years, have shaped this two-mile-long neighborhood.

By comparison, this would be the equivalent of a half-mile-wide swath on the Foreside from Waites Landing Road to the Cumberland line. That four families living along Mast Road for a period spanning three centuries left such a profound mark on their neighborhood is indeed remarkable.