

Falmouth Historical Society Presentation at OceanView

FHS Presents! — Town History

In-person—October 18, 2022

This presentation is all about adventures with one of our town's small institutions. "Adventures?" It isn't the stuff of Indiana Jones, but the dictionary says an adventure is to "engage in an exciting activity, especially the exploration of unknown territory." That describes what volunteers at the historical society do as they pierce the mists of time to recover forgotten narratives about our town and its people.

What Is a Town Historical Society. When asked to describe a historical society, many people imagine a social club for older residents of a town who gather to recount tales of bygone years. The stories improve with the consumption of alcohol.

Those who have watched TV programs—such as "Who Do You Think You Are?" or "Finding Your Roots"—have learned that historical societies are places to get help from skilled genealogists.

Many historical societies have museums to store and display their collections.

An accountant would describe a historical society as a public charity delivering humanities-focused services—historical preservation, research and education—to the community.

Historical societies do all those things.

For most, historic preservation is the biggest job with space being a constraint. It isn't just valuable and durable items. Often ephemera such as telephone books or town plats are invaluable records for documenting the history of a town.

The rest is storytelling.

Just saying the word “history” is likely to cause a flashback to high school history class which involved rote memorization of dates and names of people long dead and forgotten.

History is really the story of the people who came before us. Proximity makes stories compelling. Eyes glaze over at the story of an obscure battle, far away and long ago. When that battle took place down the road from where you live, or you are reading a first-person account involving a someone whose DNA is flowing in your veins, the story becomes exciting.

That’s how historical societies make history fun. They make it personal.

They conduct research to reconstruct the narrative of people or places close to you. Then they share those stories.

Falmouth Historical Society. Your local historical society is one of 145 in Maine.

It was founded during the post-WWII surge of building in Falmouth that saw suburban homes being built on farmland.

Like most town historical societies, FHS has no paid staff, and its volunteers wear many hats.

FHS has a donated 19th-century house plus a barn to house its collections. Most of its artifacts are displayed. There is a research area where visitors can access documents and small library. The Museum is open to the public one day a week in summer and by appointment.

FHS has been adding to its online museum. For every adult visitor who comes into the museum, there are usually interactions with two visitors online.

Ancient Falmouth Timeline. Time for a brief history lesson. When talking about town history, there are two Falmouths: “Ancient” and “Modern.”

Ancient Falmouth was chartered by Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1658. It is roughly an 8x8 mile square encompassing the present-day cities of Portland, South Portland, and Westbrook, as well as the towns of Cape Elizabeth and Falmouth.

It all started out as one town. Between 1765 and 1814, parts of the town split off forming new towns. What remains is “Modern Falmouth.”

FHS volunteers respond to questions about both Ancient and Modern Falmouth.

A 107-year period in the timetable is marked with bright yellow “explosions” reflecting episodes of death and destruction. For much of that time, Falmouth was the frontier—the front line of an English colony facing the French who were determined to crush encroachment upon *Nouvelle France*. Falmouth’s early history was violent and bloody.

How Well Do You Know Falmouth? After that short history lesson, it’s time for a pop quiz!

How did Falmouth get its name?

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The last answer was correct. It resulted from Maine being on the losing side of the Civil War. The English Civil War.

Remember Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan Roundheads? Massachusetts Bay Colony was settled by Puritans—many of whom came from southeastern counties of England—to establish a Puritan theocracy. Maine attracted people from the west of England who were royalists and belonged to the Church of England.

After King Charles the First was deposed, Massachusetts took an imaginative look at its charter and decided the northern boundary ran along what is now the Falmouth-Cumberland town line. Commissioners were sent to Maine where, town by town, they pressured the townspeople to “voluntarily” join Massachusetts. It was a classic “offer you can’t refuse” given the size of Massachusetts’ militia.

Spurwink (Cape Elizabeth) and Casco (Portland) were the last two towns to cave.

Massachusetts immediately chartered a new town and named it for the town in England overlooked by Pendennis Castle, the last royal stronghold to fall to Cromwell.

Falmouth's Community. FHS serves a broad community and responds to requests from a surprisingly wide number of organizations.

- Realtors listing old homes ask if there is anything interesting in the files.
- Nonprofits come with questions about history; most recently the Library and Land Trust.
- The town occasionally sends requests. The state checks with FHS before doing work that might impact historical properties.
- FHS works with the schools.
- FHS routinely gets queries from the press and authors.
- The bulk of FHS' interactions are with residents or people from away with connections to our town.

Preserving History. FHS is the town's attic.

Stuff that nobody wants but seems too good to toss out often ends up on FHS' doorstep. 2021 year was a bonanza as everyone stuck at home due to the pandemic cleaned out their attics.

FHS has several hundred artifacts, the largest being the town's first motorized fire truck.

Researchers are amazed by what they discover in the files.

FHS is migrating the catalog for its collections from ledger books and index cards to a modern online application used by museums. The transcription is mostly complete. This past summer, a Boy Scout working on his Eagle project inventoried and photographed the artifacts. This information will be added to our online catalog.

Artifacts. What kind of artifacts can be found at the Museum?

David Leighton was the son of a prominent Quaker family of farmers and merchants. As a young man, he was taught business skills by his elders, one of whom was probably his grandfather, Hatevil Hall.

FHS has the copybook he used for these lessons during the Revolutionary War. It covers everything from currency exchange (they were still using pounds, shillings,

pence, and farthings) to long division. One page features a doodle of a stern-faced elder who may be Hatevil.

We show this to older schoolchildren. The lessons—done 250 years ago—look familiar.

Discovering History. FHS' volunteers are history detectives!

If you like mysteries, this is loads of fun. People bring their mysteries to be solved.

- I have an ancestor who lived in Falmouth...
- Can you tell me the story of my home...
- Is it true that a Falmouth sea captain got so angry...

FHS gets a steady stream of about five inquiries each month. Rarely is there a ready answer sitting on the shelf.

Usually, some research is required.

FHS volunteers have developed a methodology. They know where the information can be found. Then there is the “special sauce”—knowledge of local history that provides context.

Sometimes queries involve real crimes. FHS recently received a query about yet another murder.

Discovering History. In British murder mysteries, the detective gives a suspect “The Caution.” FHS volunteers should warn people that historical research is all about uncovering facts. Nobody should poke about in the history of a family or home unless they are ready to be surprised.

Dispelling family legends is routine. Sometimes, more disturbing facts are discovered.

The owner of a home down the road asked what FHS might have in its files. Research revealed there had been a gruesome series of tragedies in the home. Suicide, murder, insanity, supernatural occurrences. Even an exorcism. Who knew Lutherans did exorcisms?

It must have worked because the current owner is the fourth generation of her family to own the home.

Sharing History. FHS researchers reconstruct the narratives about people, places, and events.

Storytelling is how narratives are shared with those who are interested.

A story prepared in response to a query may be of interest to few, but it is shared with a broader audience because it illustrates the techniques used, and that may be of interest to people doing their own research.

Some research deals with major events or entire neighborhoods. For these, FHS may give a presentation or publish a paper.

The job of a town historical society is to get the story out to as many interested people as possible so they can share it with others.

That's What We Do. FHS does all the things expected of a town historical society.

FHS has a small but amazing team of dedicated volunteers.

Some are newcomers to Falmouth while others have lived here for decades. They come from all walks of life. Two have degrees in history (one is a teacher, the other a retired dietitian), but a shared interest in the history of Falmouth makes everyone “accidental historians.” Just as everyone in Falmouth was once engaged in farming regardless of their occupation—even sea captains had a small subsistence farm to provide food for the table—our volunteers become knowledgeable about the history of Falmouth.

As for challenges, FHS has plenty. Maintaining our 19th-century “fixer-upper” consumes the bulk of the budget and a lot of volunteer time. Like all historical societies, FHS operates on a shoestring and never has enough volunteers.

History Can Be Fun! Invite a non-profit to speak and, as surely as the sun rises, you will be asked to become a member or volunteer!

FHS needs volunteers. Are you an amateur genealogist? FHS would love to make you a history detective. Do you miss using those tools in your closet? FHS has

maintenance work to do. Experienced crafting the written word? FHS needs an editor for its newsletter. Strong technical skills? FHS needs a webmaster. Know your way around QuickBooks. FHS needs a bookkeeper. The list is endless. Whatever you can do, there is a place in FHS for you.

With all the nonprofits looking for volunteers, why choose FHS? If you are interested in history, what FHS does is fun, and everyone gets to learn a lot more about our town. Every old house has a story, and, over time, you get to know those stories.

FHS is a nice, congenial group. There is enough drama in our town's history, we don't need organizational drama. FHS is also big on transparency. If you want to look under the hood, the website has detailed minutes, financial reports, etc., going back years.

If you'd like to volunteer where you are needed, call or email FHS. Or just talk to one of our volunteers.

How Well Do You Know Falmouth? Time for another pop quiz.

People often ask why our town doesn't have a quaint village center.

Ideas?

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We do have an old village center—it's just in a different town.

"Old Casco"—Portland's Old Port—was the commercial center of Ancient Falmouth after 1716. Then the business district divorced the rest of the town on July 4th, 1786.

Falmouth was left as a collection of villages. They are shown on the 1871 Atlas:

- West Falmouth
- Presumpscot Falls
- Falmouth Corner(s)
- New Casco

The same is mostly true in Cumberland which split off from Ancient North Yarmouth.

That old village center isn't quite so old. Relatively little in the Old Port is older than 1867. Portions of the Peninsula were partially or completely destroyed by fire in 1675, 1690, 1703, 1775, and 1866.

Keepers of Town History. Falmouth is a wonderful place to live. There is much that draws people to the town. History is part of the attraction. We take it for granted. That "colonial style" home at the end of the street may well be a colonial period home.

The old photograph is a bit faded, but a careful look reveals that the George Knight House at 26 Middle Road still looks much as it did in 1888. Town records say the house was built in 1726. George served as a sergeant during the Revolution.

Living in Falmouth means you can't kick over a stone without finding a story underneath.

That's what FHS does. Kicks over those stones. Discovers those stories. Shares those stories with others who will pass them on.

Through those stories, FHS brings the narrative of our town to life and keeps it alive for others to enjoy.