

From the Archivists

Massachusetts Maritime Academy The Ship Sloop *Falmouth*

Fred Turkington

In the young United States Navy, *Falmouth* was a second class ship sloop carrying 18 guns and a crew of 190. She was launched Nov. 3, 1827 at Boston Navy Yard, one of the sloops named for towns in Massachusetts and Maine.

A sloop, as in "sloop of war," did not then mean a single-masted sailing vessel, fore and aft rigged, but a naval vessel smaller than a frigate with guns on a single deck. Her length was 127 feet six inches between perpendiculars, beam 30 feet ten inches, tonnage 703. For comparison, USS *Constitution*, a large frigate, is or was 1,576 tons.

History of *Falmouth* is sketched in *The American Sailing Navy*¹ by Howard L. Chapelle and at somewhat more length in Vol. 2 of *American Naval Fighting Ships*² published by the Naval Historical Division.

Ready for sea at the start of 1828, *Falmouth* was first commanded by Comdr. C.W. Morgan. In the next 12 years she made two cruises to the West Indies and Gulf of Mexico, and two to the Pacific. Her duties were normal ones for a small naval unit, "protecting American citizens and their property," as the Navy history puts it.

She was out of commission for repairs, but in 1841 was recommissioned, cruising the Gulf of Mexico and

East Coast in the Home Squadron. In the first months of the Mexican War, *Falmouth* blockaded Mexican ports and then sailed North for overhaul. This was done in Boston, where *Falmouth* "lay in ordinary," decommissioned, 1846-49.

In 1849 *Falmouth* was recommissioned and again set sail for the Pacific, to protect American settlements on the West Coast, where the discovery of gold in California had increased traffic and interest. She returned to Norfolk, Virginia, in 1852. Search for the *Albany*, another sloop of war which was lost with all hands, took *Falmouth* again to the West Indies. She lay in ordinary in New York, except for an expedition to Paraguay in 1858, until she was decommissioned in 1859.

Fitted out as a stationary storeship, *Falmouth* was taken in April of 1860 to what is now Colon, Panama. There, in 1863, she was sold out of the service.

The Navy history does not record whether any of *Falmouth's* 18 guns were ever fired in action.

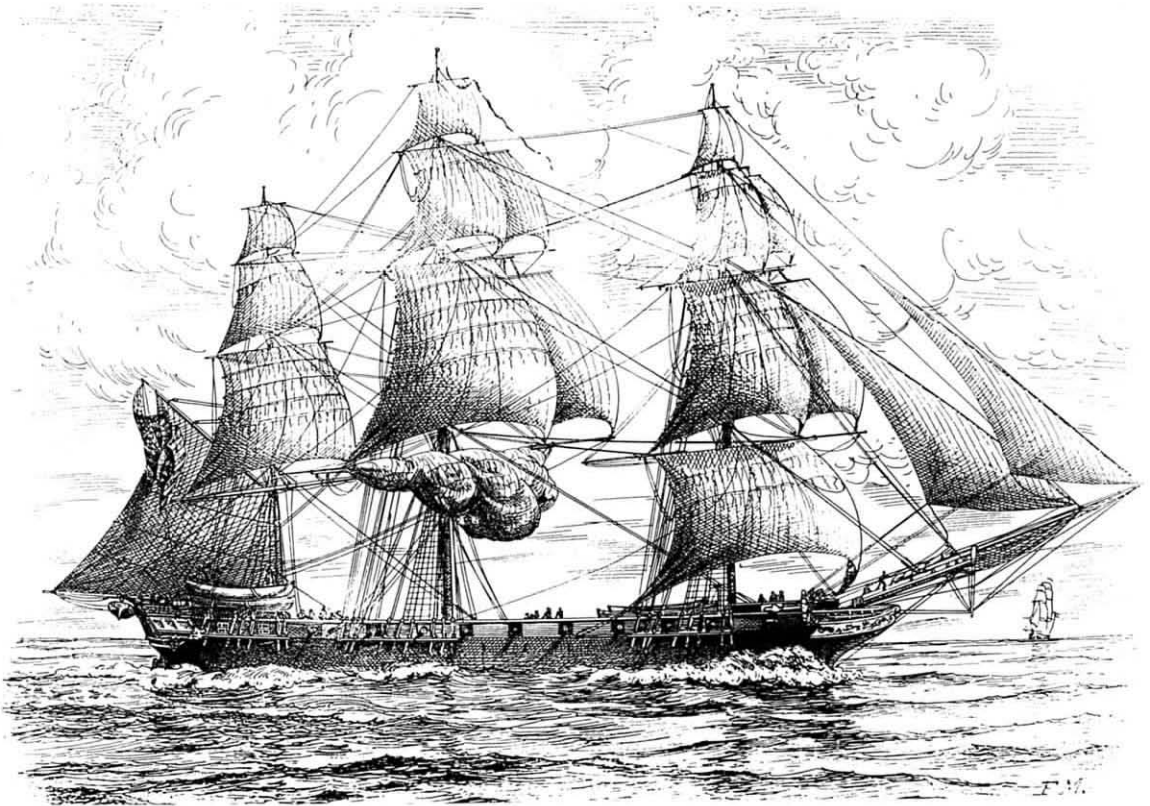
Mr. Chapelle's book includes an appendix of 11 solid pages of general instructions for building *Falmouth* and a sister ship, *Warren*. These give an idea of the tremendous amount of labor and wood which went into building a sailing warship.

The keel was of white oak one foot and two and a half inches deep, with a false keel or shoe giving a total thickness of two feet two inches. Bottom planking was white oak three and a half inches thick, with bilge strakes up to five inches thick. Berth deck beams, "heart pine free from sap," were 13 inches on a side. Side planking was 10 inches wide, two and a half inches thick, average length 40 feet.

Sources

1. *The History of the American Sailing Navy*, Howard L. Chapelle, published by Bonanza Books, New York, copyright 1949 by W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.
2. *American Naval Fighting Ships*, Navy Department, Naval History Division, Vol. 2, 1963.

Fred Turkington is a former member of the Sprintsail editorial board who has written frequently about the history of *Falmouth*.



The sailing vessel *Van Dalia*, same class as *USS Falmouth*. Courtesy National Archives.