

The Turn of the Century: A Snapshot

by Barbara Kanellopoulos

Change in the landscape around Falmouth registered uneasily on Professor Katharine Lee Bates of Wellesley College when she visited her home ground in the 1900s. On the one hand were grand-scale summer estates for fashionable city folk; on the other, near the cranberry bogs, jerry-built shanties for Portuguese immigrant workers.

“Demonstrations of wealth” and “the foreign element” were changing Cape Cod, she told the Society of Mayflower Descendants at their meeting in Boston in 1905. She hoped that “the Puritan sentiment would conquer all and combine all elements for the better.”

At the turn of the century, word was out among the wealthy that Falmouth was the place to be in the summertime. The word circulating among the Portuguese immigrants in the factories and mills of New Bedford and Fall River was that here were farmland, fresh air, and jobs. Then, both groups were outsiders – the wealthy landowners were “our summer visitors,” the immigrants were “the foreign element”; those of mixed ancestry were “half-breeds.” They would not remain on the margins of Falmouth society for long.

In 1905, the estate owners were paying most of the taxes. The town’s spending was getting out of hand. A new school, a water system, an inner harbor with a questionable design – these projects would surely bring about another in-

crease in taxes. When their dissatisfaction peaked, they proposed a radical solution: secession.

In December 1905, Howard S. Crowell, a Boston realtor who developed Penzance Point in 1894, petitioned the state for permission to divide Falmouth. The new town, “Nobska,” would include Woods Hole, Quissett, West and North Falmouth, and most of the coastline. Falmouth would constitute the rest.

Teaticket, Mass., May 1 1932

Mrs. John Costa

To EAST SIDE MILK FARM, Dr.

MILK AND CREAM

TEL. 1132-MK.

Make Checks payable to JACK MARSHALL

30 qts of milk at 12¢	\$3.60
PAID	
Jack Marshall	

East Side Milk Farm receipt signed by Jack Marshall. Courtesy Alice Valadao.

Countering cries that the proposal to divide Falmouth was “bulldozing” and the “suppression by the rich,” H.H. Fay wrote to *The Enterprise* in February of 1906 that Falmouth’s troubles were the result of “mismanagement, extravagance and ...looseness of expenditure....” Voters, he said, had to make a choice: “good government or town division.”

“Falmouth,” Fay wrote, “was very dear to my father and is to me....” Joseph Story Fay, a summer resident of Woods Hole since 1851, gave tracts of open space to Falmouth, including Goodwill Park in 1894. His son regretted what he saw as a “parting of the ways.” Like exasperated parents, the estate owners were determined to discipline the wayward citizens through tough love.

The prospect of town division had a sobering effect on voters; results of the town election in February, 1906, satisfied the recently established Good Government Committee, the year-round citizens, and the “summer visitors.” The petition to divide Falmouth was never acted upon.

Falmouth’s “summer visitors” became a strong force in community affairs. It would take longer for the Portuguese immigrants to be given a place at the table. In 1905 a local newspaper printed the commencement address of a Wareham High School student entitled “Drifting Backward.” Here is an excerpt:

The whole Cape is fairly black with the swarms of Portuguese who are taking the place of our own people and our poor American girls, wishing to make an honest living in the bogs, are obliged to labor side by side with these half civilized blacks.

New Bedford Mercury carried this riposte:

If...the Cape had depended on the natives of that region to develop the cranberry bogs, there would have been no cranberries for the ‘poor American girl’ to pick, and if that picking depended on the American girl, the annual shipments would be smaller.

Hoping for a better life in Falmouth, the Portuguese came – from Massachusetts cities, from the Azores and Cape Verde Islands, from Portugal. They found work, revived abandoned farms, and had children. “You can depend on one acre of strawberries and one child per year from nearly every family of this class, and if either one fails it will be the strawberries,” wrote Frederick K. Swift to *The Enterprise* in 1906. He argued for an addition to the East Falmouth School, a one-room building with 43 pupils (half of them Portuguese) in six different grades. If voters did not approve the expenditure, the children of East Falmouth would find themselves “... in a crowded schoolroom, with the board of health coming at intervals to shampoo the bunch with sulphuric acid or some other insecticide.”

Swift’s letters are full of broad humor and blunt diction, but his actions did not reflect the nativism prevalent at the time. He employed Portuguese men, women, and children on the 39 acres of cranberry bogs he owned with his brothers. A school board member for 12 years, he supported education, especially the education of the immigrants’ children. “The Portuguese are here to stay,” he wrote, “...and let the yields increase, strawberries and all.... By faithfully attending school, their children will be able to read and write, interpret laws and ordinances, and help their parents in business ways for years to come....”

Over a hundred years later, Alice Valadao, a resident of Sandwich Road in Falmouth, attests to the wisdom of Swift's words. "I had no childhood," she said, "not like the kids today. My parents couldn't read or write English or Portuguese. I was their eyes and ears from grammar school on." Her father, Joaquim Machado, kept his inability to read or write a secret. Alice Valadao explains: "When it came to paperwork, he'd say, 'I forgot my glasses.' He'd call on me to read for him."

He came to Falmouth in 1907 from the Azores with nothing in his pocket but the address of a Portuguese friend. Alice Valadao recalls that he found work at first at the "Gifford farm in West Falmouth" – possibly the farm of Arnold Gifford and his wife, a schoolteacher. Machado introduced himself in the only language he knew, an Azorean dialect of Portuguese. With a schoolteacher's efficiency, Mrs. Gifford changed "Joaquim Machado" into the name he would use for the rest of his life: Jack Marshall.

During the cold winters, he was at hand in the early morning to heat the bricks that warmed the blankets around Mrs. Gifford, and to see that she was securely seated in the horse-drawn carriage that took her to school in East Falmouth. When it was time to eat on the Gifford farm, Mr. Gifford would look at his Portuguese farmhand and point to his own mouth. Joaquim Machado knew then to put down his hoe.

With the decline of farming in Falmouth, Jack Marshall found other jobs – whatever he could turn his hand to that promised wages. By 1932, he was self-employed, the owner of a dairy farm on Sandwich Road. Later, he owned the Jack Marshall and Sons Construction Company which employed over a dozen Falmouth workers for many years.

In his memoir in these pages, F.V. Lawrence mentions Louis and Frank Rabesa, "two exceptionally fine dairy keepers of Portuguese extraction." They were the father and uncle of Louis Rabesa, Jr., a Falmouth resident. He recalls that the brothers also worked for Sidney Lawrence in the "ice business." While working for him in the '30s, Frank Rabesa lost an arm in an encounter with a crushing machine.

Like so many Portuguese immigrants, Louis Rabesa was a jack-of-all trades. He is mostly remembered as an excellent stone mason. His stone walls and sea walls add character to many Falmouth roadways. Louis Rabesa, Jr., recalls his childhood years, not an easy time. "I grew up working alongside my father. After that, anything I faced in life seemed easy. We were poor, but we never were hungry. My father always had a sack of potatoes for a Portuguese widow and her children who lived down the street from us."

When Louis Rabesa was not engaged in building projects in Woods Hole and Falmouth, he grew strawberries on his 11-acre farm on Sandwich Road. Early on, he joined the Falmouth Farmers Cooperative Association whose members became a notable part of Falmouth's agricultural history.

The town's ambivalence toward the estate owners and the Portuguese immigrants at the turn of the century was not long lasting. By mid-century their contributions to Falmouth were widely recognized and acknowledged. Katharine Lee Bates would be pleased.

Barbara Kanellopoulos lives in Falmouth with her husband Christos. A retired teacher and member of the *Spritsail* editorial board, Barbara enjoys reading and writing, and has a special interest in immigration history.