

The Railroad Comes to Falmouth

By Paul C. Dryer

Cape Cod Central Railroad

The first New England railroads, a trio of lines radiating from Boston to Lowell, Worcester, and Providence, were completed in 1835, and rail service reached Plymouth in 1845. A line from Middleborough to Wareham and then to Sandwich was completed in May 1848. Cape Cod did not get a railroad connection until the Old Colony Railroad completed its line to Wareham and Sandwich. In 1854 the line was extended to Barnstable, Yarmouth, and then the port of Hyannis, where steamers docked for trips to the islands. Tracks were extended to Wellfleet in January 1871 and to Provincetown in July 1873.

This expansion in southeastern Massachusetts should be viewed against the rapid industrialization of the U.S. after 1865, with earlier efforts marking incremental progress in the use of the railroad to further economic growth. The railroad age had started in the 1830s in Great Britain, when lines were laid to haul both passengers and freight (often ore from mines). But even earlier, in Quincy, Massachusetts in 1826, the Granite Railroad used three horse-pulled wagons riding on iron-covered wooden rails to haul stone from a quarry to a dock at Boston Harbor. After the Civil War, every town wanted to be connected

to the railroad. In the 1880s seventy-one thousand miles of track were laid, most of it west of the Mississippi, a boom enabled in part by the federal land grants offered in the 1862 Morrill Act that established Land Grant Colleges in the states. The taking, or granting, of land for railroad right-of-way was central to the growth of the many lines that crisscrossed the Northeast and the Midwest.



Railroad yard, Woods Hole, March 11, 1902. Photo by Baldwin Coolidge. Courtesy Woods Hole Historical Museum.

Joseph Story Fay, a prosperous Boston merchant, was the first of the summer visitors and one of the most generous. He had purchased a large farm in Woods Hole in 1850, when Falmouth and Woods Hole were still

served by stage lines with four horses on each stage. Recognizing the importance of bringing the railroad to Woods Hole, he gave a strip of land wide enough to serve as a right-of-way from Oyster Pond to Woods Hole.

In 1861 a group of businessmen in Falmouth petitioned the legislature to grant a charter for a line from Cohasset Narrows (Buzzards Bay) to Woods Hole, and approval was given on April 11, 1861. The next day, the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, and construction was postponed. In 1864 a new name, The Cape Cod Central Railroad, was approved by the legislature, but the first train arrived in Falmouth and Woods Hole only on July 18, 1872. This new line was 17.5 miles from Cohasset Narrows, with stations at North Falmouth, West Falmouth, Falmouth, and Woods Hole.

Tourism Impacts

The impact of the railroad was felt immediately in the area: a small agrarian community and dying maritime economy was transformed into a summer resort area as well as a business center. The ferries to Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket were moved here from Hyannis. In 1872 the Island Home met the first train, and for many decades Woods Hole offered the shortest route to the islands. In the first season over 1,000 people per day rode the train to Woods Hole.

The Martha's Vineyard Railroad was a 3-foot (914 mm) narrow gauge railroad on the island of Martha's Vineyard. It was built in 1874 to



The station stops for the private train. Courtesy of the Bourne Historical Society.

connect the Oak Bluffs wharf with the section of Edgartown known as Katama. However, the line closed in 1896.

Large estates were built in Falmouth, and summer tourists were attracted to the beaches and temperate climate of the shore and islands. Families from New York and other parts of New England used the railroad for their summer visits to Falmouth and Martha's Vineyard. The building of large hotels to accommodate families that stayed for several weeks and often returned each summer dates from this time (see *Spritsail*, Summer 2019).

Business Impacts

Freight trains were also central to this period of intense railway activity. The Falmouth Station was a very active spot in town with the freight yards often filled with freight cars. Many businesses were dependent on the railroad, including Falmouth Coal Co., Lawrence Grain

Co., and Wood Lumber Co. Every evening Sam Cahoon sent carloads of iced fresh fish from Woods Hole to Boston and New York. Strawberry growers in East Falmouth sent carloads of iced fresh strawberries to Boston, where they became a welcome addition to urban markets and a major source of revenue for local growers.

In 1890 Captain Lewis H. Lawrence built a grain mill on the west side of the railroad tracks and a railroad siding was constructed to bring freight cars to the mill. Frederick T. Lawrence, Jr., the grandson of Captain Lawrence, described this siding in *The Book of Falmouth* (p. 79):

The railroad's freight platform extended to within 42 feet of the Lawrence Bros. mill. It was large enough to unload wagons, autos, cement and the annual circus. Later it was expanded east to an entrance off Palmer Avenue with the addition of three tracks.

The Pacific Guano Company on Long Neck, now Penzance Point, in Woods Hole was an initial beneficiary of the railroad. The company produced fertilizer for almost 25 years, processing guano from islands in the Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico with fish meal made from locally caught fish. In 1872 it produced and shipped out by rail 16,000 tons of fertilizer. The processing plant closed in 1889, primarily because inorganic fertilizers took over the market.

Another beneficiary of the railroad extension was the Falmouth Coal Company. Wilbur Dyer came from Westfield, Maine to Falmouth in 1912 as the railroad station master, and he later established the Falmouth Coal Company. His son, Arnold, notes that when the family arrived both the old and new stations were still standing; the older building was later demolished. Wilbur Dyer bought the two independent coal companies which owned the land behind the *Enterprise* office, where there were coal bins and later oil tanks alongside a rail siding. Arnold's grandson, Wilbur (Bill) Dyer, continues with the fourth generation of the business as the Falmouth Energy Company.

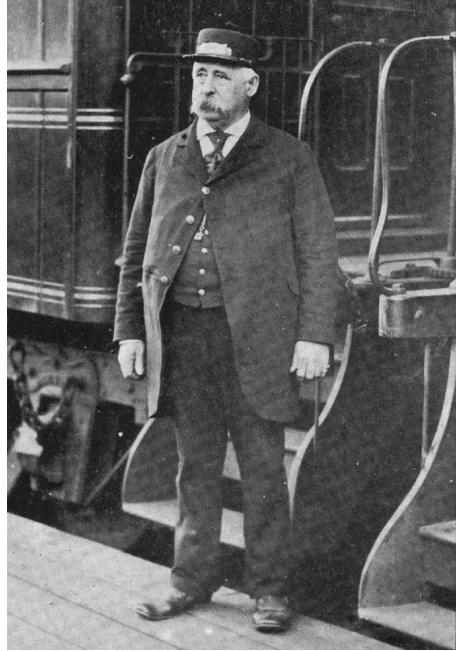
The Flying Dude

In 1884 several industrialists asked the Old Colony Railroad to offer a private train by subscription from Boston to Falmouth and Woods Hole. The inaugural trip of The Flying Dude left Boston at 3:10 p.m. on June 13, 1884, and arrived in Woods Hole at 4:50 p.m. in time for the 5:00 p.m. ferry to Martha's Vineyard. For thirty-two years there were



The Dude Train. Photo by Baldwin Coolidge. Courtesy Historic New England.

enough paying passengers for this railroad service to run from June to early October each year. Though subscription trains had become common in this age of industrial barons, the Dude was described in a 1904 *Enterprise* article as "the finest train in New England." Conductor Augustus Messer was a dignified presence on the Dude from 1890 to 1904, and spent thirty-two years on the Boston to Woods Hole run. He was familiar with all the passengers, including President Grover Cleveland, who would alight at the Gray Gables Station, near the Summer White House in Bourne. In June 1904 Conductor Messer started his first run of the season, but suffered a stroke from which he never recovered. The Flying Dude made its last trip on October 2, 1916.



Augustus Messer. Courtesy Woods Hole Historical Museum.

Get Me to the Church on Time

On July 1, 1904, at Monday noon in St. Barnabas Church, the wedding of Mary Emmons and John Parkinson, Jr. was solemnized. The young couple are "society leaders in the summer set of Falmouth and Buzzards Bay," in the words of *The Enterprise*. A special train from Boston brought many of the two hundred guests, including "the fashionable set summering along the bay shore." The train left the city at 9:25 Monday morning, arriving in Falmouth at 11:45, when the guests were met by carriages to take them to the church.

While the wedding guests enjoyed a wedding breakfast at the home of the bride's father, the "bride and groom took their departure on the 2:27 train for Boston," continuing on to New York before departing for a honeymoon in Europe.

— Olivann Hobbie

The Railroad Bridges and the Cape Cod Canal

The Cape Cod Canal was opened in 1914. Its construction between 1909 and 1911 necessitated a major relocation of the tracks between Buzzards Bay and Sagamore as well as a bridge to carry the Cape Cod railroad across the canal at Buzzards Bay. The present vertical lift bridge opened in 1935; until 1955, its span of 544 feet made it the world's longest vertical lift bridge.

Other Impacts

The hurricane on September 21, 1938, was a devastating event for Falmouth train service as more than four miles of rail were washed out. There was extensive damage to the Woods Hole railroad yard, many of the railroad cars, and the electrical system. Service was restored later that year, and regular passenger service continued to Falmouth and Woods Hole until June 30, 1959.

In 1940, the U.S. Army leased Camp Edwards as a training facility as part of its mobilization strategy for World War II. A railroad spur was built from the North Falmouth Station to transport construction materials to Camp Edwards to build barracks and other buildings for over 30,000 men. Over 18,000 employees worked three shifts, completing 30 buildings a day for a period of 25 days until January 1941. This impressive feat served as a prototype for other camps built during World War II. During the war, the camp functioned as a departure point for troops as well as a training ground for anti-aircraft units.

Falmouth Station

The original Falmouth Station was built in 1872 of wood and provided service for more than forty years. In 1913 a new "fancy" brick station was constructed with stone cornices, a red tiled floor and an iron and glass canopy.



The refurbished Falmouth Station, built in 1913-1914, with stone cornices, a red tiled floor, and an iron and glass canopy. Courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green.

However, after the construction of the interstate highways in the 1950s and the increasing use of cars and buses to get to Falmouth and Woods Hole, rail service declined to the point that the station was scheduled to be razed. A group of concerned citizens petitioned that the station be saved. The restoration of the Falmouth Station, completed in 1989 with funding from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, included improved facilities, a ticket area, and exterior landscaping.

The most recent refurbishment was completed in 2017 under the auspices of the Economic



Station Heater

The original Falmouth station, built in 1872, was a wooden structure heated by a large cast iron station heater. This heater, built in 1868 in Boston, was used in the Station until 1914, when a new station was built of brick. The Station Heater was stored in the carpenter's shop of the Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL) in Woods Hole for more than 50 years until the shop was rebuilt. At that time, it was moved by Elwood Eastman and stored for almost another 50 years in the basement of Eastman's Hardware, now Ace Hardware, in Falmouth Village. Elwood's son, Charles E. Eastman, from West Falmouth, offered the heater to the rehabilitated station in 2017 and provided details of the history of this 150-year-old cast-iron heater.

Photo by Paul Dryer.

Development and Industrial Corporation (EDIC) with funding from the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (which owns the property and leases it to EDIC). The Station serves Peter Pan Bus Lines (with service from Woods Hole and Falmouth to Boston, Logan Airport, Providence and New York City); the Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority, with service from Woods Hole to Falmouth and other towns on the Cape; the seasonal Trolley to Woods Hole; and the local taxi companies.

The celebrated Shining Sea Bikeway crosses Depot Avenue, a name reflected in the section of track still at the site. The Bikeway, built on the old railroad right-of-way in the 1970s and running for more than ten miles from Woods Hole to North Falmouth, attracts many visitors. These bikers and walkers of all ages can stop for refreshment, lunch or breakfast, and a short rest at the handsomely restored station. Each October, participants in the Cape Cod Marathon use the Bikeway for a few of their 26.2 miles.

Falmouth Station continues to be a major entry point to the town. Residents, public and private sectors, and town and state officials showed enormous interest in preserving this historic building for the town. Falmouth and her visitors have greatly benefitted from their success.

About the Author: Paul Dryer, an environmental engineer, worked as a consultant for 40 years in planning and implementing environmental and water resource management programs in the United States, Latin America, the Mideast, Central Asia, and the Far East. He is currently a member of the Falmouth Planning Board and the Coastal Resiliency Action Committee.

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