

Reading History in Falmouth's Old Burying Ground

Ann Sears

One of the richest collections of Falmouth history lies tucked away from the bustle of traffic on Locust Street, down at the end of a narrow, rutted cart path. The secluded path, which is known as Cemetery Lane, leads to Falmouth's Old Burying Ground.

Inside the gate, the burying ground spreads out like a country meadow. It is quiet but for wind rustling through the aged spruce, cedar and maples. A line of old sycamore maples separates the path from the ground where more than 700 gravestones are interspersed with clumps of trees. The nearest third of the cemetery belongs to this century; the middle third dates to the 19th century, and from the above-ground tomb back to the far wall is 18th century. Fieldstone walls surround, in a rectangular shape, the four-acre ground. At the far end lies Sider's Pond hidden by brush and trees. Behind the stone walls on the long sides are the back yards of mid-20th century houses. Their presence is barely noticeable because the ancient cemetery still draws the eye as it did nearly a hundred years ago when Falmouth poet Katharine Lee Bates wrote:

Epitome

A lonely burial-ground is on Cape Cod.
Claiming the privilege of age, each stone
Leans as it will, its scarred front overflown
With winged cherubic head. By grace of God,
Fulfilled in nature's gentle period,
All ghastly blazonry of skull and bone,
Muffled in moss and lichen over-grown
Hath made its peace with beauty. Seldom trod
These grasses are, where, ghosts of old regret,
Once-tended vines run wild, but should a guest

Stoop there, this weathered epitaph to trace,
'Twill whisper him of all the human race.
Here lies, beneath a heartsease coverlet,
"Patience, wife of Experience," at rest.

There is no better introduction to Falmouth's Old Burying Ground than this, written by the author of *America the Beautiful*, who played there as a child.¹

The cemetery stones still lean every which way at the burying ground. There is less lichen and fewer vines today, but some weathered epitaphs and some stones have disappeared entirely.

Even so, Falmouth's Old Burying Ground holds a collection of early colonial gravestone art with unusually broad geographical representation. There are slate markers with death's heads from Boston, soul effigies and cherubs from Newport and Providence, Rhode Island, and Middleborough, Massachusetts, and sandstones from Connecticut.

The larger number of stones are white marbles, which became fashionable in the 19th century. Some of these are topped with urns and weeping willows as symbols of mourning, some with fingers pointing heavenwards, some with open Bibles; most are plain, but do offer a religious verse and many tell how and where death occurred. A number of stones are cenotaphs for men and women who died at sea, in the Carolinas, or in California. In them one can read Falmouth's history as a seafaring community and as the original home of pioneers who went west.

The first proprietors in 1661 set aside common land in which the burying ground, a training field, and

town house were located, and this became the center of the first settlement of Falmouth. The two-wheel path running the southern edge of the cemetery is believed to be the original road to the fresh water pond now called Sider's Pond. There is a gap in the stone wall where it could continue to the water's edge. This opening in the walls is now overgrown with vegetation.

The town's first meetinghouse was in place as early as 1690 in or next to the burying ground. The exact location of that original building is unknown. There are open spaces in the oldest area of the cemetery, suggesting possible first meetinghouse sites, but the actual location may now be covered by graves.² If Falmouth is like other communities, the first meeting house would have been located near the oldest gravestones which lie close to the above-ground tomb of Deacon Joseph Parker, 1733.

The first stones probably date to before 1705 since unmarked pieces of naturally shaped granite lie in the area of the oldest dated stone. Falmouth, like the rest of the Cape, had no natural source of slate—the material then used for engraved markers. The Puritans of Boston, who in other ways strictly observed the Biblical warning against graven images, began carving slate gravestones after 1650. The winged skull was a popular motif: the skull symbolizing the mortality of man, and the wings the possibility of resurrection.³ The use of slate gravestones spread—reaching Sandwich and Barnstable around 1683, although only a few stones date to before 1700.⁴ Later stone carvers in Rhode Island and Connecticut developed regional versions of Boston's death's heads.⁵

In Falmouth the first carved slate is the 1705 stone of Desire Bourne, the 31-year-old wife of Lt. Melatiah Bourne. It may have been the work of an apprentice.



Falmouth's Old Burying Ground, 1993. Photo by Joe Piccione. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

While the lettering is very good, the wings look like segmented spider legs and the narrow skull is marked by an unlikely set of three rows of teeth. One shoulder of the stone has been broken, probably by a lawnmower.⁶

Not far away stands the 1709 stone of Amey Hatch which was created by one of the master Boston carvers (perhaps William Mumford or JN, who is known only



Desire Bourne, 1705, wife of Lt. Melatiah Bourne, one of the Bournes of Sandwich and Mashpee. Photo by Robert Sears.

by his initials, or Joseph Lamson, the first of a family of stonecutters from Charlestown, MA.). Amey, who died at age 48, was the wife of Joseph Hatch, a son of the town's founder, Jonathan Hatch. Their marriage was recorded in Falmouth in 1683, but their births are not, indicating they were born in Sandwich or Barnstable, the two communities on the North side of the Cape from which most Falmouth settlers came. The stone might have been purchased by Amey's father, James Allen of Sandwich, because he is identified on the stone as well as her husband.

Amey's stone faces Sider's Pond on the east; Joseph's stone is located with a cluster of other Hatch stones on rising ground 30 feet away. Joseph's stone faces west, as do the majority of stones in the graveyard.⁷ The couple is separated by time as well as space. Joseph died 26 years later in 1735 at age 83.

The Amey Hatch and Desire Bourne stones appear to have been the only marked stones in the Old Burying



Amey Hatch, 1709, Boston, a small stone of the same size as Desire Bourne's, but of better quality slate, with a finely detailed winged skull and with ribbons flowing down the side borders. Photo by Robert Sears.

Ground for the next 20 years. It is not until 1730s that dated markers again appear. Even the death in 1723 of Joseph Metcalf, the first pastor of the Congregational Church, went without a permanent memorial.⁸ One can only speculate whether Falmouth's settlers reverted to wooden markers, unmarked stones or burying family members on private land. Did Desire Bourne and Amey Hatch receive stones because of their Sandwich connections?

When carved gravestones again appear in the 1730s, the number of stones indicates Falmouth had become

more settled and the residents had money to invest in memorials. On the rising ground are represented most of the old families of Falmouth. The Hatches are in the middle with the Nyes on the left, sprinkled with Lewises and Davises. To the right are the Bournes and the Robinsons. Behind them come the Swifts, Butlers, Crockers and Crowells. The variety of stones indicates some early Falmouth residents had moved into coastal trading. Falmouth roads were poor and the distances between towns long; the sea was the town's best link with the outside world. Trade with ports to the south was more convenient than long voyages around the tip of the Cape to Boston. As a result there are more stones from Newport than Boston in this period.

Most of the Newport slates depict the same "soul effigy": a small oval face cradled in large wings. Exposure to the elements has given them a ghostly image. They are the work of John Stevens II of Newport, who used a poorer quality of slate than the Boston carvers. The Stevens shop was active through three genera-



Joanna Lewis, 1743, Connecticut Valley sandstone being repaired. The round face is topped by a crown. Large wings resembling tobacco leaves are on either side. Photo by Carol Driscoll.



John Bourn, 1754, Plymouth. Towns closer to Plymouth have many of these stones. They are often in poor condition because of the quality of slate. This is one of two stones in this Middleboro style in Falmouth's cemetery. Photo by Robert Sears.

tions of carvers until the Revolution when Newport was captured and held by the British.⁹

In 1743 the grey slates were joined by the reddish-brown Connecticut River Valley sandstone marker of Joanna (Pope) Lewis. The large round face at the top of the stone is typical of the more primitive designs on Connecticut gravestones.¹⁰

Further up the rise is the Moses Hatch stone. It is a good quality slate stone carved by the Lamson family of carvers from Charlestown, Massachusetts. Hatch died in 1747, at age 83. He was the first child of Europeans to be born in Falmouth. He was also the first Deacon of the Falmouth church. Behind this stone a white marble memorial was erected in 1991 for Jonathan Hatch, the founder of Falmouth and father of Moses. Nearby are two sets of irregular granite stones that might be the actual head and footstones of Jonathan's grave.¹¹

On the far right, two stones attributed to the Soule/Fuller group of carvers in the Middleborough area have some of the primitive quality of the Connect-

icut sandstones, and represent a transition from skulls to human faces. The Mary Bourn stone of 1754 has a lightbulb-shaped head with a T-shaped mouth. The John Bourn stone of the same year looks like Steven Spielberg's ET with curls framing the face. John was the son of Desire Bourne.

One of the earlier portrait stones is the 1771 stone of Mary Swift. It is a large, expensive black slate from Newport with an elongated woman's head. Despite the rarity of such a stone on the Cape, it carries one of the era's most common epitaphs:

Pray cast an eye, as you pass by
for as you are, so once was I
And as I am, so you must be
Prepare for Death and follow me.¹²

Behind this stone are some interesting Bourn family markers. The 1750 stone of Ezra Bourn, age 19, displays a winged profile of a young man. This stone has weathered to such an extent that the carving can best be seen around 3:30 p.m. when the angle of the sun

casts shadows on the carving. The final stone in this collection is a fine winged angel for Samuel, dated



Joseph Bourn, 25, and Ezra Bourn, 13, 1776, flying cherubs, unknown carver. Photo by Robert Sears.



Mary Swift, 1771, Newport. The figures of a woman and an hourglass are shown being cut down by a scythe, a symbol of death. There is disagreement whether this stone is the work of John Stevens III or his brother-in-law John Bull. Similar stones can be found in Rhode Island cemeteries. Photo by Robert Sears.



Thankfull Robinson, 1775, Newport, by John Stevens III for Mary Swift's sister-in-law. The stone is a three-quarter portrait. Similar stones can be found in Rhode Island cemeteries. Photo by Robert Sears.



Samuel Bourn, 1791, The carver of this stone is unknown but similar stones can be found elsewhere on Cape Cod and have been attributed to the Pratt family. Photo by Robert Sears.



Samuel Palmer, 1776, by Henry Christian Geyer of Boston. Photo by Robert Sears.

1791, by an unknown carver, perhaps of the Pratt family school of carvers, whose work appears in several other Cape Cod cemeteries.¹³

The cemetery's most handsome stone in terms of quality of the slate and carving was made for the Rev. Samuel Palmer. It stands southwest of the above-ground tomb. The carver was Henry Christian Geyer of Boston who made many similar stones. Its epitaph is one of the most quotable in the cemetery.

Here lies interred the body of the
Reverend Samuel Palmer
who fell asleep April ye 13th 1775
in the 68th year of his age
and 45th year of his ministry
His virtues would a monument supply
But underneath these clods his ashes lie.

Palmer was the minister of the First Congregational Church for 40 years and married into the prominent Parker family. The surrounding group of Parker and Palmer stones are among the finest and most poignant in the entire cemetery. These include Joseph Parker's 1755 reddish striped Lamson death's head slate with

characteristic gourds bordering the sides, a large portrait stone by William Stevens of Newport for Deacon Silvanus Parker, and a refined 1768 sandstone from Connecticut for Elizabeth Palmer. Among them, is the 1768 marker for six-month-old Noah Parker, crudely but painstakingly cut, perhaps by his father.

After the Revolution, Falmouth turned inland for gravestones, coming up with the bewigged head and wide wingspread of the stones of Nathan Hayward¹⁴ and the Middleborough school. The quality of most of these slates is poor and they have not stood up well. One of the best examples of this style is located at the back of the cemetery. It is the 1797 stone of Rebekah Jenkins who died at the age of 26, just fourteen days after her 24-year-old sister. The poetic inscription sounds like a tolling bell.

She's dead, she's gone, oh doleful sound
Snach't from her friends, lies underground
Death gave the stroke, she is no more
To speak on earth, as heretofore
She's dead yet speaks, oh hear her cry
Ye living friends you're born to die,
Come then and see where you must lie.



Silvanus Parker, 1758, by William Stevens of Newport. A large stone similar in style to the earlier John Stevens stones. Photo by Robert Sears.



Joseph Parker, 1755, Lamson family of Charlestown. Photo by Robert Sears.



Noah Parker, 1768, carver unknown. Photo by Robert Sears.



Elizabeth Palmer, 1768, Connecticut Valley sandstone. Photo by Robert Sears.



Rebekah Jenkins, 1797, attributed to Nathan Hayward and the Middleboro school, numerous examples in burying ground. Photo by Robert Sears.

For a brief period a sunburst pattern was fashionable. Often two eyes peeping over the horizon were added to the design. The Dr. Hugh Donaldson slate, which was repaired by the Marine Lodge in the spring of 1995 is an example of this style. Dr. Donaldson had been a founder of the Masonic group. His stone stands in front of those of the two young wives he outlived.

The pattern of men outliving their wives was a common one as shown by the stones in the burying ground; it is a commentary on the health of women and the dangers of childbirth in early America. But one is struck, too, by the number of men lost at sea, the number of infant deaths, as well as the number of people who lived into their eighties.

Until 1790, the burying ground served the entire town except for the Quakers who maintained their own cemetery in West Falmouth. With the growth of the community, burial grounds were opened at Woods Hole, the East End Meeting House in Hatchville, Waquoit, and the North Falmouth Congregational Church; on East Main Street, the Methodists opened a cemetery.

After 1800 the gravestones become more informative. Many memorialize men who died at sea, and many record more than one death. One long inscription tells of Capt. David Wood who died of yellow fever in Cape Francois in 1802 with four of his men: Edward Butler, 15; Prince Fish, 19; Henry Green, 20; and Willard Hatch, 12. The stone is broken into more

than five pieces all of which were saved and encased in cement by the town public works department many years ago.

Twelve stones memorialize Falmouth residents who died in Charleston, South Carolina, or en route to Charleston in the years between 1793 and 1846. Ten of these were men in their twenties and thirties who were probably part of the large group of Falmouth residents who went south each winter to work as carpenters, and later worked in Elijah Swift's live oak lumber camps.



William Dimmeck, 1781, a sandstone from the Connecticut River Valley that is probably beyond repair. William was the eight-year-old son of Col. Joseph Dimmick. The son died during the Revolution. Photo by Robert Sears.

The 1837 marker for Rufus Butler mentions another town industry: whaling. The stone lists Joseph H. Butler as killed by a whale April 18, 1837 AE 30 and David Coleman killed by a whale in 1829 AE 26.

Four stones mark the fate of those who joined the California Gold Rush in 1849-50.

And one sad stone lists the loss of four children of Anselm and Harriet Nye as they traveled west to Cincinnati, Ohio, and Indiana. Elizabeth, Anselm, and Delos died in Cincinnati in the years between 1813 and 1821 and Stephen died in Woodville, Indiana, in 1821 at age six.

Over the years articles in the *Falmouth Enterprise* have poetically called the cemetery the "burial ground of patriots and paupers." That many paupers are buried there is indicated by the number of stones that are marked with crosses but no names.

The patriots are harder to find. Just two old stones suggest the town's involvement in protecting the coast from the British in the Revolution and the War of 1812. The gravestone of Joseph Palmer, Esquire, who was the town's first postmaster, describes him as "a friend of freedom." A check of records shows he was captain of a Falmouth company of militia in the Revolution. Beside him lies his son Samuel who at age 13 served as the company's drummer. Thomas Fish's stone identifies him as "a patriot and soldier of the American Revolution." Flags fly at the graves of Gen. Joseph Dimmick, Lot Dimmick, and Dr. Donaldson, who also served in the Revolution, and at some markers in the newest section of the cemetery, but not many. A search of military records from the Revolution and War of 1812, however, shows that more than 90 of the men buried in this cemetery served in the militias during those two wars.¹⁵

In 1854, the private Oak Grove Cemetery opened on Palmer Avenue and dramatically altered the future of the burying ground. Oak Grove was inspired by the garden cemetery movement that followed the opening of Mt. Auburn in Cambridge in the 1830s. The new cemetery attracted the most prominent residents who moved family members previously buried in the Old Burying Ground to Oak Grove. Most of the town's

Civil War veterans and whaling captains and even Katharine Lee Bates are buried there.

Burials dropped to one or two a year at the Old Burying Ground and it entered a period of neglect from which it has been periodically rescued by civic minded residents such as Frank Worcester after World War II, and Col. Oliver Brown in the 1970s and the town itself. The public works department saved a number of broken stones in this century by encasing them in rectangles of cement, according to local historian Clarence Anderson.

The most recent restoration effort was started in 1993 by volunteers who formed the Friends of Falmouth Cemeteries. With help from the park department, this group cleaned stones and reset and repaired more than 50 markers some of which had been upended or broken by tree damage during Hurricane Bob in 1991. The friends group has begun raising funds to send the more damaged stones out for expert repair.¹⁶ The Old Burying Ground has been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, an action that may encourage the town to honor and protect its oldest historic site, perhaps richer in history than any other place in Falmouth.

Ann Sears first became acquainted with Falmouth's Old Burying Ground on a walk with her husband Bob after their family of four moved to Locust Street in the 1980s. As they stopped to read inscriptions, they were puzzled by the number of people who died in the Carolinas. The explanation for this southern connection was found in Falmouth history books, *Succanessett* and *Live Oaking Southern Timber for Tall Ships*. The books told of Falmouth men wintering in the Carolinas during the 19th century and working as carpenters and mechanics and later cutting live oak for Falmouth's leading businessman Elijah Swift.

Another visit to the cemetery after 1991's Hurricane Bob led to the formation of the Friends of Falmouth Cemeteries to repair stones broken by trees uprooted by the hurricane. Ann was born in Washington, D.C., graduated from the University of Maryland and spent 15 years as a newspaper reporter in Boston before coming to Falmouth in 1982. She is a member of the Local Planning Committee, alternate member of the His-

toric District Commission and secretary of the Falmouth Historical Commission.

Notes

Names are spelled the way they appear on the gravestones. In some cases such as that of William Dimmeck the last name is misspelled, in others, families appear to have dropped a letter such as the e at the end of Bourn.

1 This poem was taken from the 1911 edition of *America the Beautiful and Other Poems*, published by Thomas Y. Crowell Co. of New York. It appeared at the end of a chapter called "Home." In *Dream and Deed the Story of Katharine Lee Bates*, the author Dorothy Burgess writes of Katharine and her friend Hattie Gifford playing in the cemetery. There may be some poetic license here. There is a stone for a "Patience" Swift, but no stone for "Experience" has been found.

2 The meetinghouse was moved to the more central location of what is now the Village Green in 1747. The open spaces in the burying ground do not appear on a 1903 map, drawn by the Rev. Henry Herbert Smythe, rector of St. Barnabas Church and first president of the Falmouth Historical Society. It is unknown whether the lines he drew marked, actual gravesites that may not have had headstones, or potential gravesites. From his 1903 listing of gravestones, we have been able to determine that 20 have been lost since that time. Four more stones are in such poor condition that they will soon join that number.

3 *Memorials for Children of Change, The Art of Early New England Stonecarving* by Dickran and Ann Tashjian, 1974, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Conn.

4 *Epitaph and Icon, A Field Guide to the Old Burying Grounds of Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket* by Diana Hume George and Malcolm A. Nelson, 1983, Parnassus Imprints, Orleans, MA, p. 21, 25.

5 *Memorials for Children of Change*

6 There is no slate marking Lt. Melatiah's grave. A check with Bourne family genealogies finds that he was the grandson of Richard Bourne who was a organizer of the Indian Plantation of Mashpee. Richard Bourne and his son Shearjashub acquired land in Falmouth from the Indians. This land was inherited by Melatiah and his wife Desire (Chipman) Bourne, who were born and married in Sandwich. They had several children. Melatiah left his Falmouth property to their son John. Melatiah became a probate judge and lived in a house that is still standing in Sandwich.

7 We don't know if Amey's stone is in its original place or might have been moved by cemetery workers. In Falmouth old headstones usually face west.

8 It was not until 100 years later that a marble gravestone was installed in memory of the Rev. Metcalf.

9 The identification of 30 gravestones in Falmouth that were made by the Stevens family was done by John Benson who operates the John Stevens Shop at 29 Thames Street, Newport, R.I. Further information was provided by Daniel Goldman of East Greenwich, R.I., a member of the Association for Graveyard Studies, who also identified several stones as the work of carvers in Providence.

10 Many early Falmouth settlers later moved to Tolland, Connecticut, according to local historian Clarence Anderson. Joanna's parents, who originated in Sandwich, are believed to have moved to Connecticut and sent the stone back to Falmouth to mark her grave.

11 Seventeenth and eighteenth century graves were usually marked by headstones and smaller footstones, with the carving on both facing away from the body. Headstones often faced west so that the individual would be facing the rising sun, according to *A Graveyard Preservation Planner* by Lynette Strangstad, 1988, by the American Association for State and Local History.

12 *Epitaph and Icon*, p. 30.

13 *Epitaph and Icon*, p. 72.

14 *Epitaph and Icon*, p. 96.

15 *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War, A Compilation from the Archives*, 1907, published by the Secretary of the Commonwealth, Wright and Potter of Boston. *Records of the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia War of 1812-14*, 1913, published by Brig. Gen. Gardner W. Pearson, Wright and Potter Printing Co., Boston, Ma.

16 Sculptors Carol Driscoll and Scott Wall of Boston, who have worked in Boston's cemetery restoration program, earlier repaired two broken stones. Five more broken stones are to be repaired and others patched with \$2,400 in contributions from Lawrence-Lynch, David Chapman of Cole and Gleason Funeral Home, Falmouth Products Inc., the Falmouth Genealogical Society and the Falmouth Historical Society.

The Local Planning Committee provided Cape Cod Commission funds to make a photographic record of each stone.