

Falmouth Artists' Guild

by Phyllis Heirtzler

Phyllis Heirtzler is an artist and was a founding member of the Falmouth Artists' Guild. She wrote this article for The Book of Falmouth, first printed in 1986 by the Falmouth Historical Commission, edited by Mary Lou Smith.

In Falmouth during the late 1950s, a group of people interested in the arts collected around a colorful figure named Angelo Cangiamilla. He was an architect and a painter. Cangiamilla began teaching painting in his home. As the group expanded they were forced to move out to larger quarters in various community halls including the recreation center on Main Street next to the Town Infirmary. The group by now had formalized their existence, electing a president and titling themselves "The Falmouth Artists' Guild."

One evening during a painting session someone mentioned that the Town Infirmary, on orders of the town, was being emptied. The conversation drifted on to other topics and finally came to a standstill as concentration set in and brushes applied to canvas, but the seed had been planted. Someone put down his brush to relax for a minute. "Wouldn't it be nice if...?" More brushes were put down and a discussion started. By the end of the evening a campaign had started.

After several days of talk pro and con and an excited scrutiny of the derelict building the group became more and more positive and more and more vocal. They began to talk about their hopes to their families, their friends, to town officials and finally to the selectmen. When town meeting was held guild mem-



Falmouth Artists' Guild, east side. Photo by Liza Fox.

bers arrived en masse, accompanied by a backup of well-wishers and supporters. After some discussion the town ceded the Town Infirmary to them for a token yearly fee.

The momentum that had driven the artists into their campaign now catapulted them into a frenzy of cleanup activity and repair work on the building which was sadly run down and buried in litter. The honeycomb of tiny rooms, there were 24 spaces in all, had to be removed to allow for good-sized classes and the exhibitions which members foresaw for the future.

It was a time when everyone worked very hard, delighted and astonished with their luck at having been given a permanent place and with their official recognition by the town.

In 1975 during the Emperor and Empress of Japan's visit to the Cape, the Guild was chosen as a stopping place for Her Royal Highness while her husband visited the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole. The Empress is a watercolorist, so displays were put up in her honor. Security men, reporters, camera men and publicity people riveted their attention on the building and its guest. For

one brief moment in time the Guild had become an international event.

The art association will be celebrating its 25th anniversary soon, but 25 years is not a long time for a structure that must be at least two hundred years old. In a certain sense though, continuity has never been broken; this is a public place where people have gathered and interacted for centuries. They have always walked in engrossed in their immediate present. At the moment it is with paint and clay, inks and precious metals, wools and weights of paper. In the past it must have been with illness and poverty.

Through time the door knob has been grasped, the door pushed open, the stairs climbed. The stairs probably always creaked with the weight of the entrant on the high risers and narrow treads. Thousands of hands have glided over the smooth banister, some touching lightly and some gripping firmly,

rough hands, inked ones, gloved ones, hands calloused and scarred from manual labor. And the elderly and infirm must have moved slowly and cautiously, climbing the stairs to the upper rooms of this Peter Yost Tavern/Poor House/Work House/Town Infirmary/ Falmouth Artists' Guild.



Stairway from front hall. Photo by Liza Fox.

In November 1997 Town Meeting appropriated \$50,000 to repair the Arts Council Building. Town Meeting also voted an amendment to "authorize the Board of Selectmen to execute a preservation restriction on the Artist Guild building formerly known as the Poor House, as execution of a preservation restriction is required to participate in the Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund."

The amendment paid off. In 1998 the Falmouth Historical Commission reported it had "initiated efforts, with the cooperation of the town and the Artists' Guild, to preserve the Poor House and to win a state preservation grant of more than \$30,000 for this project."

Meanwhile in December 1997, and again in May 1998, the Building Commissioner found many building code violations in the old building. He required the Artists' Guild to move out during the repairs. In November 1999 Town Meeting appropriated another \$200,000 "for the purpose of rehabilitation of the Artist Guild Building." The original \$30,000 grant could not be used because of its strict reconstruction guidelines. Another grant was secured from the same source for \$65,000. It came with a deadline for completion of December 2002. The Town met that deadline, but there is still extensive work to be done.

On June 24, 2003, The Falmouth Enterprise reported that the Selectmen had "recently opted to move town offices into the poor house rather than allowing the guild to move back into the space." The paper also reported that Christopher Wise donated two acres of land on Dillingham Ave. for the Artists' Guild as part of his proposed Ch. 40B housing development there. Another chapter begins.