

# Poor House and Methodist Cemetery

by Candace Jenkins

*In its annual report to the town in 1997 the Falmouth Historical Commission wrote:*

*This year we have been busy with a \$20,000 town-supported project, which the Massachusetts Historical Commission approved, for writing National Register nominations for the West and North Falmouth Historic Districts. This project also included nominations for the Long Pond Pumping Station, the old Town Poor House, now the Artists Guild, the Central Fire Station on Main Street and the old Lawrence School, now the Chamber of Commerce.*

*In December 1997 the four buildings that had been nominated by the Falmouth Historical Commission were placed on the National Register. The description and "statement of significance" for the nomination of*

*the Falmouth Pumping Station was written by Matthew A. Kierstead. The lead article in the Summer 1998 issue of Sprintsail was based on his text.*

*Candace Jenkins wrote this narrative statement of significance in 1997 for the Falmouth Historical Commission, part of its successful application to place the Falmouth Poor House and Methodist Cemetery on the National Register of Historic Places. The photographs we include by Liza Fox are some of many she took in 2001 for the town while the Poor House was being refurbished.*

The Falmouth Poor House and Methodist Cemetery have a long history of over 200 years that embraces several important themes in local, regional, and state history. The Poor House building was constructed ca. 1769 as a tavern. At that time it was sited at an

## Introduction by Bea Buxton

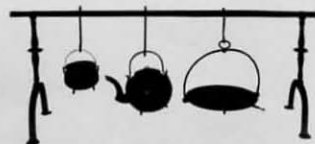
*Yost's Tavern sits on its newest stone foundation. It has become Falmouth's Poor House, on Main Street next to the little Methodist cemetery. It is 1815.*

*The building has two stories and two chimneys. It has always been the scene of food, drink and lodging. Winter warmth comes from several fireplaces. Food is cooked at the large fireplace nearest the rear door. That fireplace has a generous hearth, a crane, spits, trammels, oven and heavy iron pots.*

*Water comes from an outdoors hand pump near the right back corner of the house, closest to the "kitchen" door. All the water goes in that door and all the "slops" go out.*

*Everything needed in that Alms House is either made there or carried there, by hand. No luxuries. Coarse fare. Dependence discouraged. Pauperism abhorred.*

*Through the years society appears not to have discovered an effective way to change the poor to be ambitious and self-sustaining citizens.*



important crossroads in the interior Falmouth village of Hatchville. In 1812 - 1814, the tavern was purchased by the town and moved to its present site in Falmouth Village to centralize and upgrade facilities for poor and otherwise dependent citizens. The site was donated by the newly formed Methodist Society, and adjacent to their cemetery and church.

When municipal use of the Poor House ceased in 1960, the town retained ownership, and the building was happily reborn as the new home of the Falmouth Artists' Guild. Today, it is one of the few extant poor house buildings in Barnstable County. Its continuous post-1812 history of municipal ownership and public use have helped to preserve more of its historic character than most other examples.

In addition to its strong and multi-layered historical associations, the Poor House building has considerable architectural significance as an unusually well preserved and well documented example of the poor house building type. The current building fabric preserves a physical record of the property's long and varied history, with most elements reflecting the primary period of significance from 1812 - 1920. Rem-

nants of the 1823 interior subdivision into 8' x 8' cubicles, provide an especially important tangible record of 19th century attitudes toward the poor.

The Poor House remains as Falmouth's oldest municipal building, and one of the oldest buildings of any type in the community. The social history and physical presence of the Poor House is reinforced by the adjacent Methodist Cemetery where some of its former residents are believed to be interred. The Cemetery is also the only extant record of the origins of the Methodist faith in Falmouth, the church having been moved and then replaced.

Together, the Poor House and Methodist Cemetery remain as the primary surviving symbols of the historic character of East Main Street. They possess integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and associations, and meet criteria A and C of the National Register of Historic Places. The property is significant on the local level, with a primary period of significance extending from 1812 - 1920, and a more general period of significance embracing its entire history from ca. 1769 to the present.



Old Methodist Cemetery and Falmouth Poor House prior to 1896. Photo from *Falmouth By the Sea*, originally published by the Falmouth Board of Trade and Industry in 1896, and reprinted with additions by the Falmouth Chamber of Commerce in 1976.

*Town Assistance Events Compiled by Bea Buxton*

1. *Dr. Francis Wicks amputated the thigh of Abisha Weeks, 6 July 1818. Cost the town \$30.50. Ruth Swift provided Abisha with board and nursing care for two months (July and August). Cost \$36.00 Town Paid.*
2. *April 1819. Town paid Dr. Francis Davis \$44.00 for Brandy and Clothes for Samuel Green.*
3. *1818 and 1819. The Town paid Lemuel (?) Green \$33.00 for caring for "Lucy Black child" for six months.*
4. *Samuel Fish had several "uncompas" [non compos mentis] children for whom the Town provided support.*

The primary period is focused on the building's use as the local Alms House, Poor House, Work House, and Poor Farm because these overlapping uses were the most enduring and well documented, and because the present building and site are most closely associated with that time period. The tavern use (pre-1812) is not well documented and occurred on a different site in a building whose exterior and interior configuration is unknown. The later Town Infirmary use (1920 - 1960) represented a period of decline, while the Artists' Guild use (post-1963) has occurred within the last 50 years which is beyond the NRHP cut-off date. The dates of the cemetery parallel those of the poor house.

The Falmouth Poor House illustrates many important historical concepts about poverty and public responsibility, and about 19th century society in general. These include changing attitudes toward the poor, the changing make-up of the population that was encompassed under the general heading of "poor," and the proper balance of humanitarian concern versus cost control. Falmouth's experience is directly related to that of the state and nation as a whole. Massachusetts was a national leader in the 19th century in a wide variety of social reform movements, many of which related to the proper care of dependent citizens.

Throughout the primary period of significance, town records refer to the property as the Alms House, the Poor House, the Work House (after 1826), and the Poor Farm (after 1880). As implied by these alternative names, the Poor House remains as a tangible symbol of changing attitudes toward the poor, including who and what they were, along with the nature and extent of appropriate public support. These local changes mirror similar shifts at the state and national levels as well.

Care of poor and otherwise dependent citizens has been considered a public responsibility in New England from its earliest settlement period, and until the 20th century that responsibility was carried out at the local level. In Barnstable County for example, in 1683 "...the court ordered that the selectmen in each town 'shall take care of the poor in their respective townships, the town to provide for the expense.'" (Freeman Vol. I: p. 306) During the Colonial period, many towns cared for the poor by "placing out" or "auctioning" them to citizens who offered the lowest bids for their care. In some cases, the poor were offered assistance in their own homes.

At that time, and throughout much of the 19th century, "poor" was a catch-all phrase that encompassed a wide range of conditions that might render per-

2

## Town of Falmouth to Treasurer of Overseers Poor etc

1824	Brought from Page 1 <sup>st</sup>	\$ 472 18½
	Stephen Davis Bill	66 34
	Oliver C. Swift Do	27 50
	Ward M. Parker Do	45 70½
	Watson Crocker &	7 12½
	Shubael Lawrence Do	27 30
	John Jenkins Do	5 - 7½
	Nathl. Shiverick Jr Do	5 22
	Elisha Sperey Do	13 24
	David Lewis Do	4 - 7½
	Elisha P. Fearing Do	3 00
	Solomon G. Bourne Do	11 58
	Micah Sampson Do	29 29
	Stephen Nye Do	2 75
	John Jenkins Do	2 00
	David Lewis Do	14
	Simon Harding Do	52
	Aaron Cornish Do	30 00
	William Nye Do	98 30½
		\$ 851 35

The undersigned being a committee chosen for the purpose of preparing orders and regulations needful for the good government of the work house recently established in this Town, respectfully report the following articles viz.

Article 1<sup>st</sup>

There shall be chosen at the first meeting of the Overseers of the work house a Chairman for the year - it shall be his duty to ~~provide~~ and preserve order at the meetings of the Overseers.

Art. 2<sup>d</sup>

There shall be chosen at the first meeting of the Overseers a Clerk to serve for the year, it shall be his duty to keep a true record of the proceedings of the Overseers at their several meetings, and notify all special meetings when requested by one or more of the Overseers, at least twenty four hours before such meeting is to be held, he shall also be the Treasurer to receive and pay out all monies as he may be directed by the Overseers.

Art. 3<sup>d</sup>

The master shall be appointed by the Overseers at their first meeting and all necessary assistants at that or any other meeting, who shall have the immediate care and oversight of the persons received into or employed in the said house - they may be removed at any time by the Overseers in case of misconduct or the interest of the establishment imperiously demands it.

Art. 4<sup>th</sup>

All persons sent to the work house by order of the Overseers of the Poor of the Town, shall be subject to the orders and regulations established for the government thereof.

sons unable to support themselves. The "poor" included orphans and widows, the chronically ill and alcoholic, the aged and infirm, and the physically and mentally impaired. Those who were able to perform some useful work to offset the cost of public support were often required to do so.

Most Barnstable County towns established poor houses. Barnstable and Sandwich were first, both replacing 18th century buildings in the 1820s; none remain. Provincetown was third when it converted an 1801 small pox hospital to poor house use in 1806. Falmouth was fourth with its purchase of Peter Yost's tavern in 1812. Most other local poor houses in the region date to the 1830s and 1840s when the county population peaked. These include Eastham (ca. 1825), Wellfleet (ca. 1830), Orleans (1831 replaced 1873), Yarmouth (1835), Dennis (1837), Brewster (1838), and Truro (1840 - 1845) (Deyo 1890). The Brewster, Eastham, Falmouth, and Wellfleet examples survive and are included in the state inventory.

Falmouth appears to have followed the typical path of "auctioning" and "placing out" the poor until at least 1800. This conclusion is supported by many entries in town records that specify payments to various townsmen for poor support. Some of the poor were "placed out" or boarded with those individuals, while others may have remained in their own homes. In 1800, the town appointed a committee of five:

...to see what method the town will take for supporting the poor...

That committee recommended

...that the town empower the Selectmen or any other person whom they shall choose either to hire or Purchase if to be found a

House which shall be fitted up for the reception of such persons as apply to the Town for assistance also to provide some suitable person to take care of those who go into the House to see that they are employed in such useful occupation as they are capable of.

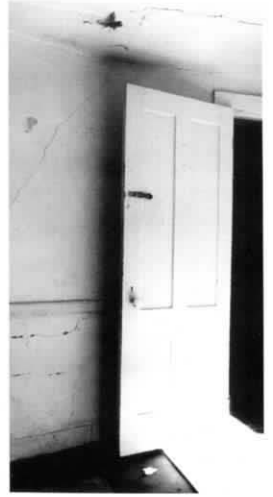
The following year, the town voted to have three Overseers of the Poor and to empower them to "hire a house." Such a house was apparently not found, and between 1803 and 1807, the town voted against rental or purchase of a Poor House. A payment of \$20 to Thomas Nye for his house in connection with the poor was recorded in 1809, but this seems far too small an amount to represent a rental. County historians Frederick Freeman and Simeon Deyo both state that a Poor House existed on Shore Street in the very early 19th century, but that information is unsubstantiated by the primary source of town records. In addition, former town clerk, William Hewins does not mention this use in his 1920s description of buildings that stood on Shore Street by 1850.

It was not until the March and May town meetings of 1812, that positive action was taken. On March 9 the Committee was authorized to "receive proposals for building the poor house," or "to buy or hire the house of Peter Yost if they see fit." On May 16 it was voted that

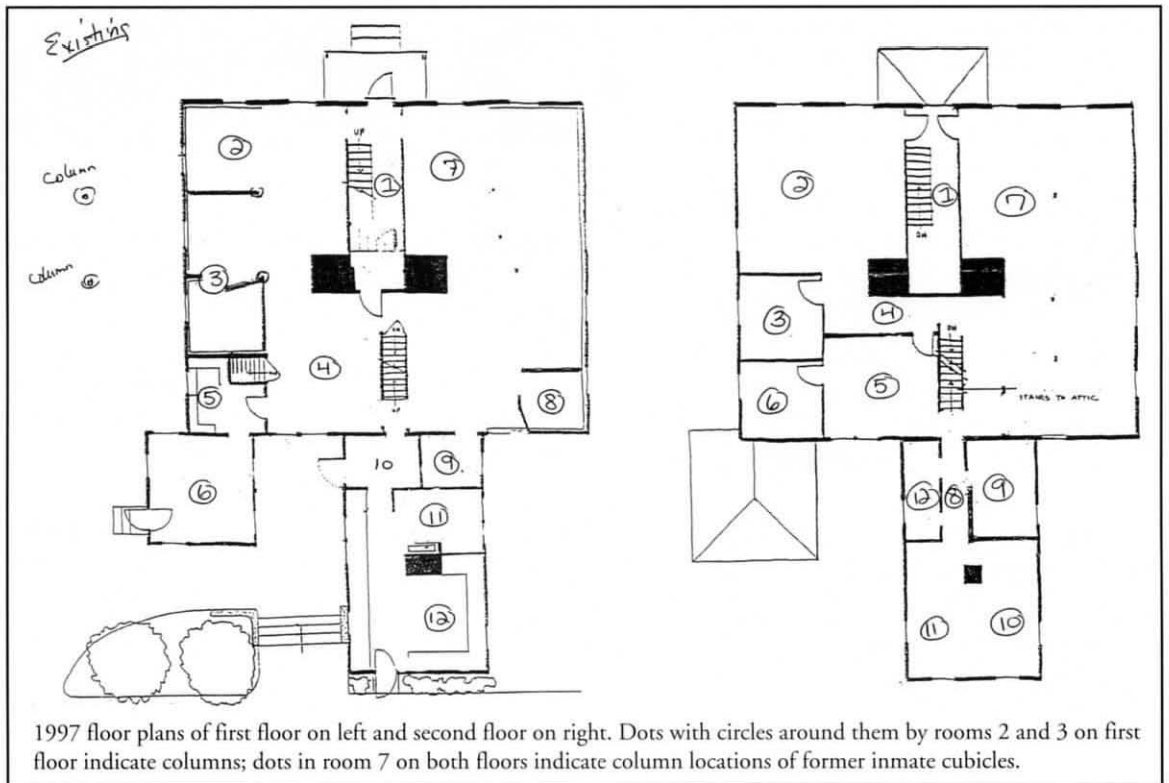
The Committee appointed to purchase or hire a suitable house for the Reception of the Poor have attended the same and report as follows: that is; have purchased an house near the East End Meeting House (1797), of Peter Yost, for which we have agreed to give three hundred and eighty dollars.

The Tavern was constructed ca. 1769, on a site about 4.5 miles north of its present location, in the inte-





Room 8 on first floor,  
an intact inmate room.  
Photos by Liza Fox.



rior (non-coastal) village of Hatchville. The Hatchville site was an important local and regional crossroads, supporting the building's early use as a tavern. The tavern faced Sandwich Road, which was a major thoroughfare connecting Falmouth Village (primary settlement of the Town of Falmouth) with the neighboring town of Sandwich, and the more distant county seat at Barnstable. Intersecting roads including Carriage Shop Road, Meeting House Road, Thomas Landers Road, and Hatchville/Sam Turner Road led to the neighboring villages of Waquoit, Davisville, West Falmouth, and North Falmouth. Construction of the East End Meeting House in 1797, opposite the tavern, confirmed the importance of the area. Shubael Lawrence was the early tavern keeper. Several taverns existed in various parts of Colonial period Falmouth. Another extant example is the Abner Davis Tavern (built late 17th century; tavern by 1804) in Woods Hole.

In March, 1813 the town voted to move the newly acquired Poor House to Falmouth Village. A committee of three was chosen to select an appropriate site, and to oversee a subscription campaign to pay for the move and associated expenses. In April, the Town

Voted to accept the report of the Committee on the subject of the poor house fixing it on the Society Land Mr. Lincoln lift [lived] on during his ministry.

Other entries refer to this as the parsonage land. The Society cited above is most likely the Methodist Society organized in 1808 and formally organized in 1811. Early Methodist services were held in the home of General Swift (immediately east of the Poor House site). The Society established a cemetery ca. 1809, and erected a meeting house in 1811 on the land of



Stairwell to second floor. Photo by Liza Fox.

early member and pastor, Dr. Hugh George Donaldson. (immediately west of the Poor House site) The relationship of the Methodist Society and the Poor House is somewhat confused by the fact that the Reverend Henry Lincoln (1766 - 1857), cited in town records, was minister to the Congregational Society for 33 years (1790 - 1823).

In any event, the Poor House was moved, set up next to the Methodist cemetery, and repaired under the supervision of Thomas Lawrence as agent for the sum of \$342.45. The Methodist Society apparently retained a connection with the Poor House even after their church was moved in 1829, allowing paupers to be buried in their cemetery in unmarked graves.



In March, 1814 town meeting debated about the management of the poor, and whether they should be placed out, or whether some or all should live in the Poor House. In April and May, it was voted that the board of the poor should be put up at auction and struck off "to the highest bidder." Nathaniel Bourne won the year-long contract with a bid of \$950.00. It is unclear how many were lodged at the Poor House, and how many remained elsewhere. It was also voted to fence the site immediately.

The town's poor did not become an important topic of debate again until 1823. Still at issue were their



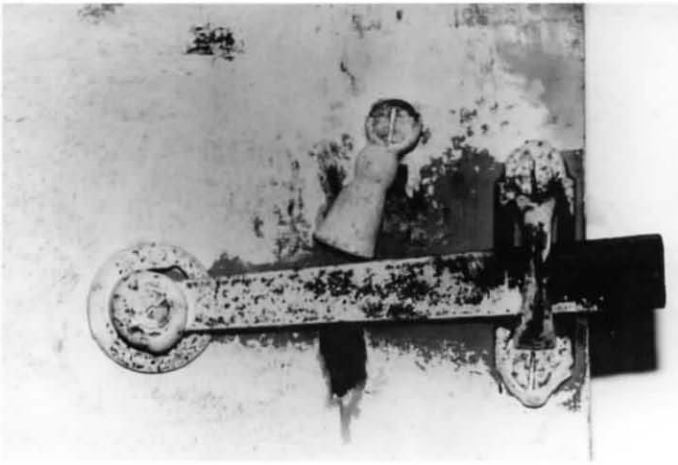
Floor divisions of inmates' rooms. Photo by Liza Fox.

numbers, along with the best method and lowest cost of providing proper care. That year a committee was appointed to consider building a larger Poor House to accommodate the town's 69 paupers. At the same time, the existing building was subdivided into 24 cubicles, each measuring 8' x 8'.

The following year, the town concluded that the Poor House was the proper place to offer assistance with a vote that "all persons wanting any help from the Town should go into the Poor House." This policy was reaffirmed in 1852 when the Overseers of the Poor voted that "It is not the Town's duty to respond to requests for help unless the named person receive it at the Town Poor House." A larger building was not mentioned again, and it is unclear how all of the town's poor were accommodated. Continuing entries in later reports under the heading of "Expenses of Town Poor Out of Almshouse" suggest that the policy adopted at town meeting was not of long endurance, and/or was not strictly enforced.

As part of the process of consolidating care, a committee of six was appointed in 1824 to visit the poor and take inventory of any possessions that could be brought to the Poor House with them. A committee of three was chosen to lay in supplies, and still another committee of four was established to actually "remove the poor to the Poor House." In 1825, it was voted to place a family in the Poor House to care for its residents, and Nymphas Davis was allowed to live there without expense in return for acting as caretaker. In addition, a 16' x 18' barn was constructed to promote self-sufficiency.

The public expense of caring for the poor, and ways to encourage or require them to contribute to their own support took center stage in 1826 when the town considered creation of a Work House, and a board to be called the Overseers of the Work House.



Door Latch.

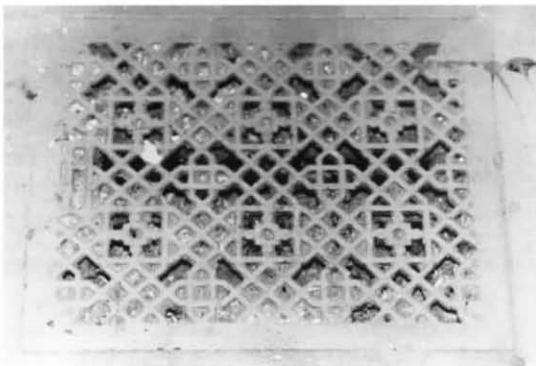


Door Knob.

Photos by Liza Fox



Lath and Plaster, attic.



Floor Grate.



Radiator.

The rules and regulations for the workhouse included the following provision:

In case any person shall refuse, be idle or not perform such reasonable task or stint as shall be assigned, or shall be stubborn and disorderly, such person shall be confined in solitude on coarse or very simple foods, or be put out to hired labor for such term of time as may be judged necessary.

The Work House appears to have been established in addition to, rather than in place of the Poor House. Both terms appear in town records along with the third term of Alms House which was used for all formal reports to the state. Nymphas Davis, who had been the supervisor of the Poor House, also served as master of the Work House. Mayhew Baker (b. 1822) of Davisville was appointed keeper in 1869, and served until ill health forced him to resign in 1890. Lemuel Howland served in the intervening years. (Deyo 1890: 638, 678)



Scratches on Punishment Room door, attic. Photo by Liza Fox

Establishment of the Work House, and distinction of the able-bodied poor, reflects the general trend toward classification of the poor that was occurring throughout the nation in the 19th century, a movement in which Massachusetts was a leader. Local classifica-

tion is hinted at in the 1823 census of the poor which illustrated the range of conditions that were grouped under that general heading. That census listed 24 persons who were partially supported by the town, 25 of various ages who were in good health, 8 who were described as "insane non compas" and 12 who were "sick, incurable, and past labor."



Second floor hallway. Photo by Liza Fox

This early recognition that the "poor" were actually made up of distinct classes, was succeeded by more concrete developments. These include the creation of special quarters for the unruly and the insane in the new rear ell of 1842, and boarding some insane at the state asylums that were established to improve their care and treatment in the second half of the 19th century. A moving testimonial to the state legislature by reformer Dorothea Dix that documented the horrific treatment of the insane at many local poor houses, was a key factor in the creation of these state facilities.

Falmouth town records include specific entries for expenses related to the support of local residents at the state asylums in Taunton and Danvers. In 1877

the cost of boarding two persons at the Taunton Lunatic Hospital (established 1851, and the closest state institution to Cape Cod) was \$571.00. The records also refer to the state Reform School (probably the Massachusetts State Reform School/Lyman School of 1847 in Westborough) where the cost of boarding one person in 1877 was \$91.99.

Despite earlier concerns about the size of the Poor House, the numbers of poor, and the policy of offering care only at the Poor House, the building was not enlarged or substantially improved until 1842 when it was:

Voted that an additional building be put to the rear of such house and uniting with it — 20 feet in length and 17 feet in breadth ... and so constructed ... as the lower room .... may be conveniently occupied as a wash and sinke room — and also as a suitable place for the confinement and punishment of the refractory and unmanageable — and the upper story to be divided into lodging rooms for the insane — and such other inmates ... as require to be kept separate from inmates generally therein.

Town records indicate that the Poor House received regular maintenance in addition to the major interior alterations of 1823 and the new rear ell of 1842. For example, the exterior was whitewashed several times. Unusually comprehensive repairs to the Poor House were made in the mid-1870s when carpenters and masons were hired to repair or replace doors, windows, blinds, hinges, pipe, hair plaster, paint and



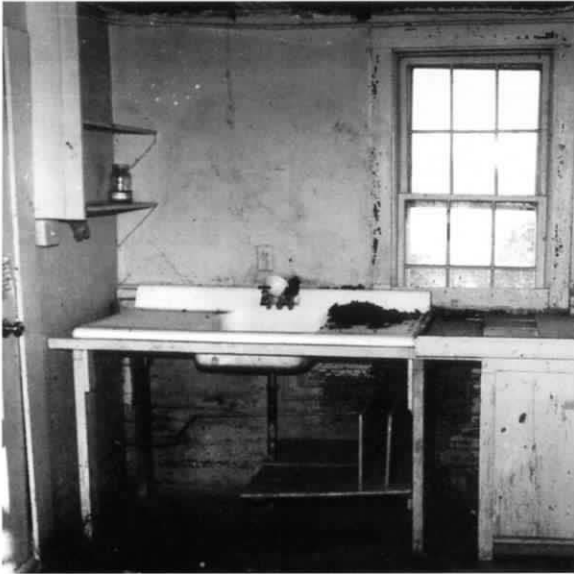
Wallpaper in first floor room. Photo by Liza Fox.

wallpaper, an iron sink, and a stone door step. In addition to the building repairs, many new furnishings were purchased for a total cost of \$218.15. These included several iron bedsteads and one dozen quilts, 24 spindle bentwood chairs, 6 wooden rocking chairs, 12 small bureaus, 6 small and 2 large mirrors, several tables, and 3 settees. While repairs were being made, 20 residents were boarded at a house rented from the Maravista Land Company for \$35. Later improvements to the building facilities included a \$46.04 cooking range in 1889, \$1,000 in sanitary improvements in 1890.

The site was enlarged and improved on a regular basis as well. Most efforts were focused on maintaining perimeter fences. Other site improvements enhanced the abilities of the poor to contribute to their own support by producing items for their own use, and for sale. This trend is closely related to the establishment of the Work House in 1826, and to ongoing concerns about the relatively high level of expenditures required to support



Vegetable Bins in Basement. Photo by Liza Fox.



Kitchen Sink. Photo by Liza Fox.

the poor. Residents of the Poor House began to produce goods for sale in the 1840s. In 1878 the agricultural capacity of the property was enhanced by the addition of a hen house and hen yard, a hog house, new and repaired fences, alterations to the 1824 barn, painting of various structures, and grading of the land for a total of \$311.66. These improvements led to another name for the property,

the Falmouth Poor Farm. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the poor farm produced potatoes, hay, barrels, fowl, eggs, milk, cream, beef, pork, butter, and strawberries for both internal consumption and for sale.

During this period, the numbers of Poor House residents steadily dropped, and more transients were included. In 1875 for example, the average daily number was 12, a number that was expanded during the year by 56 tramps who were accommodated on a short term basis. Poor House records also chronicle the issue of the settled vs. the unsettled poor which distinguished a community's long-term residents from newcomers and transients. As increased economic opportunity coupled with major transportation improvements encouraged people to leave their birthplaces, disputes arose about who was responsible for their care in the event of misfortune: the community of birth or that of current residence. Falmouth records include payments both to and from other towns for support of the poor. By 1900, the daily average population at the Poor House had declined to 3.75 while the cost of support had risen to \$3,468.26. In 1920, the Poor House was renamed the Town Infirmary, and seems to have functioned

*Marjorie Moore concluded her article on the Poor House printed in 1986 by the Falmouth Historical Commission in The Book of Falmouth with the following:*

Public welfare and Social Security finally made the poor house superfluous. It was closed in 1960 and the last seven tenants went onto the welfare rolls, into hospital or provided for themselves.

The *Falmouth Enterprise* of July 26, 1960, reporting this closure in an article entitled: "Sprees spelled end at Town Infirmary," added: "Social Security checks were financing drinking parties among the infirmary tenants. Not too long ago police had to be summoned to break up a lively brawl after one such party." It seems at the end of a long, austere life as poor house, Work House, alms house, poor farm, and town infirmary some spirit (or spirits) from its first incarnation as Peter Yost's Tavern was active again at the last in the town's oldest public building.



primarily as a nursing home. That function ceased in 1960, made superfluous by state and federal public welfare and Social Security programs.

Soon thereafter, in 1963, the town leased the Poor House building to the Falmouth Artists' Guild, an organization that had informally gathered in the late 1950s around the catalyst of architect/painter Angelo Cangiarella. The Guild paid a nominal \$1 annual fee to the town, and took responsibility for repair, maintenance, and insurance of a building that was described as "sadly run down and buried in litter." Guild members and friends removed most of the 24 cubicle partitions that had been installed in 1823 as part of their renovation effort. The Guild has continued to occupy and maintain the building, and to preserve a significant piece of Falmouth history, to the present time.

During this same period of the 1950s and 1960s, the transition to the modern era was also affecting the Methodist Cemetery. The last known burial occurred in 1951, and in the 1960s the church planned to raise funds by selling the increasingly valuable Main Street frontage for commercial development. This portion of the site was subdivided on local

assessors maps, and remains reinterred at the rear of the cemetery before the plan was abandoned. Thus, both poor house and cemetery remain among the handful of historic resources that survived the wholesale transformation of East Main Street to a commercial strip in the second half of the 20th century.

Candace Jenkins is a former resident of West Falmouth. She graduated from Smith College in 1974 and received a Master's degree in Preservation Studies from Boston University in 1976. She is a consultant in architectural history and historic preservation and has worked with several Cape Cod towns, including Barnstable, Yarmouth, Chatham and Falmouth. She wrote the feature article for the Winter 1992 issue of *Spritsail*, "The Development of Falmouth as a Summer Resort 1850-1900."

Bea Buxton is a Falmouth resident with a life-long interest in researching genealogy and local history.



Methodist Cemetery and Falmouth Artists' Guild, ca. 1980. Falmouth Police Station is visible at the rear left and old Gus Cauty recreation building behind the Artists' Guild building. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.