

The Life of Reverend Samuel Palmer

by Leonard Miele

The life of Reverend Samuel Palmer, the third settled minister of the First Congregational Church in Falmouth, provides us with a clear picture of the social, political, and religious values on Cape Cod during the eighteenth century. During Reverend Palmer's ministry, he dealt with such issues as racial and religious intolerance, blasphemy, sobriety, sex, and repentance. These issues characterized life in colonial Falmouth and form a framework for examining the 44 years that Reverend Palmer served the town and church as its religious leader.

Samuel Palmer was born August 8, 1707, in Middleboro, MA, the fourth of nine children born to Thomas and Elizabeth Stevens Palmer. Although Thomas Palmer was not a college graduate, he was ordained as the minister of the First Church in Middleboro on May 2, 1702. As was the practice at that time, he was also the town physician, perhaps ministering to the physical needs of his parishioners through scripture and prayer. When Samuel was just a year old, his father was discharged by the church on June 30, 1708, for "scandalous immorality and intemperance." He was dismissed "by the advice of an ecclesiastical council of twelve Churches, which deposed him from the ministry, and laid him under Church censure. And some time previous to that, he had been dismissed by his Church and Congregation, and preached in a private home to a party of his adherents." In disgrace, Thomas Palmer most likely supported his family by practicing medicine among those "adherents"

who stood by him. To his credit, however, Thomas was able to vindicate the family name by sending two of his sons to Harvard College, Samuel and his youngest sibling Job. It is unfortunate that Job died at twenty-five in 1745, five years after the death of his mother in 1740 and two years after the death of his father in 1743. All three are buried in the Middleboro Green Cemetery next to the First Congregational Church.

Harvard College was the center of all intellectual activity in the colonies when Samuel Palmer was a teenager. Trying to emulate Oxford and Cambridge in England, the founders of Harvard stressed the importance of combining spiritual experience with academic endeavors. "A religious spirit, of course, permeated the institution....and the college laws enjoined all students 'to lay Christ in the bottom, as



Conant House on Palmer Avenue in Falmouth on the site where Reverend Palmer had his home. Palmer Avenue was named after Reverend Palmer. Photo by Leonard Miele.

- December 19 1731. Baptized Shubael the son of Shubael and Mercy Neale.
- January 9th 1731. Kuffe y^e Negro-Man-servant of Deacon Parker, presented for full Communion.
- January 10 1732 Timothy son of Nathaniel & Bethiah Hatch. Baptized.
- January 30 1732 Ebenezer Parker propounded for full Communion.
- Febr. 13, 1732. Cuthbert baptized & received into full Communion with consent of the Brethren.
- March 5 1732 Ebenezer Parker admitted to Church Fellowship.
And Sarah Rowles wife of Aaron Rowles Jun^r propounded to y^e Ch^h for Baptism and full Communion, and her Relation sent to y^e Ch^h.
(And y^e next Lords Day this wif^e y^e Sarah Rowles stood propounded for full Communion, was signified to y^e Congregation.)
- March 22. 1732. I preached a Lecture, which I designed for y^e Beginning of a course of Lectures before y^e Administration of y^e Sacrament of y^e Lords Supper.
- March 26. The Lords Supper administered.
- Mary Holms }
Elizabeth Nye } Propounded for full Communion.
- April 9. Sarah Rowles her Relation read before the Ch^h and Congregation, and y^e Brethren manifesting their Consent, she gave an Assent to y^e Covenant propounded to her, and was Baptized, and declared a Member in full Communion with this Ch^h.
In like manner
- Mary Holms }
Elizabeth Nye } Admitted to full Communion (they were baptized in infancy) at y^e same Time. and,
- Joestus }
David } sons of Aaron & Sarah Rowles Baptized.
- April 15 Joseph Chadwick }
Prudence Parker } Propounded for full Communion.
- Nehemiah Hatch (wife of Peter Hatch) propounded for Baptism and full Communion.

the only foundation of all knowledge and Learning.” When sixteen-year-old Samuel Palmer entered Harvard in 1723, he was, in all probability, well-versed in scripture and guided by a work ethic that embraced Christ as his academic inspiration. In order to receive his A.B. degree in 1727 when he was twenty, he took prerequisites that included the following subjects: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, metaphysics, ethics, natural science, Greek, Hebrew, and ancient history. Sometime between 1727 and 1730 he received an A.M. degree that possibly prepared him for the ministry, for Harvard would only permit a graduate student with a bachelor’s degree to pursue a serious, professional study of theology. With this classical education, Samuel Palmer became a literate, methodical, and ethical citizen, traits that would soon enable him to be the civic and spiritual leader of Falmouth. He also fulfilled the wishes of Harvard’s educational goal “to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity, dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches, when our present Ministers shall lie in the Dust.”

Three meeting houses were built in Falmouth between 1690 and 1756 to accommodate the civil and religious affairs of the town residents. The first one was erected during the 1690s near the old burial ground at the corner of Mill Road and Locust Street. It was at this location that the Congregational Church was organized in 1708. In 1715, a new and larger meeting house was built on the same site with pews and upper galleries similar to the interiors of many Cape Cod churches today. The third meeting house was situated closer to the center of town on the Village Green. It was built in 1756 after the town appropriated this site in 1749 for a training field and as the location for this meeting house. The 1715 and 1756 meeting houses would be home to Rever-

end Samuel Palmer’s tenure as the town’s minister from 1731 to 1775.

It was on March 2, 1730, that the town fathers invited Samuel Palmer to settle among them as their minister, replacing Reverend Josiah Marshall, the second recorded minister of the Congregational Church. In a joint call to the pulpit, the church congregation, on February 4, 1731, also “voted to treat with Mr. Palmer,” seeking his presence as their spiritual leader. He was offered a 200 pound settlement to take the position, to be paid at 50 pounds a year for four years. He was to receive 90 pounds a year as salary for the first four years, and then 100 pounds a year as long as he served the Falmouth community. These figures would change, however, in proportion to the inflation of the day. It is interesting to note that the purchasing power of 200 pounds in 1731 was equal to \$22,409 in 2002, which would have given Reverend Palmer a salary of \$15,426 a year for his first four years of employment.

Samuel Palmer wrote a gracious, erudite acceptance letter on September 1, 1731, addressing the town leaders and the church community that called him to Falmouth. Although written in the formal style worthy of a Harvard graduate, Palmer is sincerely touched by the offer as he explains at the beginning of his letter:

“To the church and other Christian inhabitants of the town of Falmouth, Brethren: — Since you have been pleased, after my continuance of some time with you, to elect and make application to me to be your pastor and minister, presenting me with the act of the church, bearing date Feb. 4, 1731, wherein is signified their choice of me, and desire of my continuance here to take the pastoral care of them,

&c., and also the concurring act and vote of the town bearing date March 2, 1730, wherein is expressed that the inhabitants of the town have legally chosen me to be their minister, &c. I do gratefully acknowledge the respect for, and affection toward me, which ye have so unanimously expressed and showed. And I have, after humble and earnest supplication to the allusive God to direct and guide me in the consideration of so weighty and important an affair and to influence my determination thereon — set myself seriously to consider of your invitation to me....”

With humility, however, Palmer refers to the more secular, practical matters of life at the end of his letter. He is concerned about the remuneration he will receive if he pursues this pastoral career. He says,

“I do and shall expect that ye exercise towards me that charity, justice and liberality, which the gospel of our Lord requires; to afford me a comfortable and honourable support and maintenance as God shall give you ability, and what you are pleased of your bounty to bestow upon me to promote my settling comfortably among you, I shall thankfully accept. And now you still abiding by your choice of me to take the charge of, and watch over you according to the rules of the gospel, I shall account myself bound and devoted to labour for the good of your souls, desiring and expecting that your prayers be joined with mine, that I may not be given to you in anger but in love; as a blessing of our gracious and ascended Saviour, and by him be made faithful and successful in this great work and whereto I am called.”

Samuel Palmer's acceptance letter was read at the town meeting on September 17, 1731. Although the Christian community was eager to embrace Reverend Palmer, there was dissension among the Quakers in Falmouth. These Friends had been organized since 1685 and built their first meeting house in 1720 in West Falmouth. They were opposed to Reverend Palmer's appointment and to the compulsory taxes imposed upon them to support a church in which they did not worship. The protesting Quakers, with surnames that are still familiar today, were:

Thomas Bowerman	Benjamin Swift
Thomas Bowerman, Jr.	William Gifford, Sen.
Samuel Bowerman	William Gifford, Jr.
Amos Landers	William Gifford,
John Landers	the younger
Richard Landers	Seth Gifford
Stephen Harper	Julius Gifford

To reach a compromise, the town settled the difficulty by “clearing the Quakers” from ministerial taxes. Along with Yarmouth, Falmouth became one of the first towns in America to excuse the Quakers from paying taxes to support the church. Records show that the town then voted 170 pounds for Reverend Palmer's settlement and salary, clearing the way for his ordination on November 24, 1731.

Reverend Palmer was twenty-four years old when he settled in Falmouth, reportedly moving into the Conant House, one of the buildings that is part of the Falmouth Historical Society today. However, there are no definitive records that substantiate this. It is known that he “settled on the same lot” and resided in a large two-story house “on the same site” where the Conant House now stands along what is now known as Palmer Avenue. This was an ideal location for Reverend Palmer to live, however, for it

was situated on the northwest corner of the Village Green and within a half mile of the old and new meeting houses in which he served. Since "his homestead lot was very large, extending from the estate of Dr. Cornish on the east, to Mr. Otis A. Butler's on the north," he maintained the property with his servant Titus, whom he legally held as a slave. Their

Falmouth's Reverend Palmer

A Poem

An early Falmouth pastor, Samuel Palmer,
 Began at fifty pounds, worked up to hundred:
 Incumbency of five and forty years:
 Main avenue in Falmouth bears his name.
 He served his parish well, though history
 states
 He had his gentle eccentricities.

He kept a slave named Titus, called him
 "Tite,"
 Who was far more companion than a slave,
 And did not hesitate to reprimand
 The minister for crooked furrows ploughed
 While smoking dreamily behind his oxen...
 And perhaps already walking streets of gold.

Langley Carleton Keyes

Langley Carleton Keyes' grandfather (Stephen Swan Langley) bought a 180-acre tract of land in what was then called Sippowissett in 1914. The tract included Gunning Point. Keyes eventually retired to a house he built on the Point. He had been a dean at Harvard and taught in its English Department before moving on to advertising. In his retirement years he reverted to his first love and thus all the sonnets.

relationship was legendary in Falmouth for Reverend Palmer treated Titus or "Tite" more as a companion than a slave, unlike the southern stereotype of the master and his chattel. In doing farm work together, especially plowing the fields, they humorously reversed social roles. Titus, the stronger of the two, would always take charge in the fields and seem to swear at Reverend Palmer when he could not keep up with him physically. It became a town joke whenever Titus would lose his patience and complain that the parson's devotion to his pipe made him absent-minded and consequently a poor hand at the plow. It has been suggested that Reverend Palmer willed Titus his freedom when Reverend Palmer died in 1775 at the beginning of the American Revolution. Titus supposedly went to sea on an American privateer and was never heard of again.

As a young, bright, eligible bachelor in the community, Reverend Palmer became the object of a tempestuous infatuation. A Miss Prudence Parker was enamored of the new minister and lacked all restraint in expressing her love for him. When she was in his presence, she seemed to lose her self-control and made public pronouncements that embarrassed Reverend Palmer and scandalized his congregation. She was "adjudged by the church that she walked disorderly, that she perverted the Scriptures to justify her strange carriage and speech and behavior when she pretended to love the pastor." Sadly, she was denied communion and shunned by the congregation. When Reverend Palmer tried to explain to her that he was planning to marry Miss Mercy Parker from Boston, Prudence believed "he was picking the wrong Miss Parker. She told him so in language definitely unbecoming to a young lady, and in the phraseology of the day said she would see him in Hell first – 'the hottest place in Sheol would be his portion.'" It would be twenty years before Prudence Parker was given the chance to apologize to

I hereby do absolutely give Grant Convey & Confirm unto
 Him the said Joseph Palmer, his Heirs & Assigns forever
 a Parcel of Land in Palmouth aforesaid, whereon he hath erected
 a Dwelling House containing fifty Rods, thus Bounded, ~~beginning~~
 beginning at a Stake by the Road it extends Ten Rods West Northward
 by the Road to another Stake, and from these stakes it extends
 North Easterly Five Rods to other stakes, and also a small Strip
 of Land bounded Westerly by the Land of Nathaniel Nicholson &
 Easterly by the Road, which I have in Exchange for such a
 piece of Land opposite thereto, which I have turned out of my
 Close & incorporated the Road, with all Appurtenances.
 To Have and to Hold the said Land, with all the Appurtenances,
 Profits, Privileges & Emoluments thereunto belonging, or in anywise
 appertaining, to him the said Joseph Palmer, his Heirs & Assigns,
 to him and their heirs proper, the Benefit & behoof for ever,
 free and clear from all the lawful Claims & Demands of
 all Persons whatsoever: Only the said Joseph Palmer, his Heirs &
 Assigns, shall make and maintain the same against my (other)
 Heirs & Assigns, so long as I or my Heirs shall live.
 In Witness whereof I have hereunto set my Hand & Seal the Twenty
 Sixth Day of, in the Year of our Lord One Thousand Seven Hundred
 and Sixty Seven.
 Signed Sealed & Delivered
 in the Presence of
 Joseph Bourn
 Hannah Bourn

Samuel Palmer

Barnstable ss: at Palmouth on y^e 6th Day of
 July AD: 1767: Samuel Palmer Subscribed
 to the above written Instrument appeared
 and acknowledged the same to be his act
 and Deed before me Roland Robinson
 Justice of Peace

COMMONWEALTH
OF
MASSACHUSETTS,

BY HIS EXCELLENCY

JOHN HANCOCK, ESQ;

Governor and Commander in Chief in and over the COMMONWEALTH OF
MASSACHUSETTS.

To *Joseph Palmer Gent^l* — Greeting.

YOU being appointed *Captain of the Fifth Company in the*
first Regiment of Militia in the County of Barnstable in the
Rank of Lieut^{nt} Col^l is belated.

By Virtue of the Power vested in me, I do by these Presents, (reposing Special Trust and Confidence in your Loyalty, Courage and good Conduct) Commission you accordingly. You are therefore carefully and diligently to discharge the Duty of a *captain* in leading, ordering and exercising said *company* in Arms, both Inferior Officers and Soldiers; and to keep them in good Order and Discipline: And they are hereby commanded to obey you as their *Captain* and you are yourself to observe and follow such Orders and Instructions as you shall from Time to Time receive from me or your Superior Officers.

GIVEN under my Hand, and the Seal of the said Commonwealth, the *10th*
Day of *July* in the Year of our LORD, 1781 — in the First
Year of the Independence of the United States of AMERICA.

By His Excellency's Command,

John Hancock
John Hancock

Joseph Palmer
10th July 1781
Joseph Palmer
was sworn in to the militia
of Barnstable County
by the
Commissioners of the

Joseph Palmer's appointment to be Captain of the fifth company of the first regiment of militia in the county of Barnstable by Governor John Hancock.

the congregation, redeem herself, and receive communion again.

When Reverend Palmer was twenty-nine, he married Miss Mercy Parker (b. May 1709-d. May 1749) of Boston on Jan. 25, 1736/37. They had six children: Thomas, Joseph, Mercy, Elizabeth, Job, and Mary. Mercy died at thirty-nine. At forty-four, a year after Mercy's death, Reverend Palmer married Mrs. Sarah Allen (b. 1719-d. July 1812) of Chilmark on November 3, 1751. She was the daughter of Judge Zaccheus Mayhew, a descendant of Thomas Mayhew who was the original owner of Nantucket, and the widow of William Allen who died at the age of ninety-three when Sarah was twenty-seven. Sarah and Reverend Palmer also had six children: Lucy, Sarah, Martha, Susan, Anna, and Samuel.

Joseph Palmer (b. June 1739), Reverend Palmer's second son, became the second postmaster of Falmouth, succeeding Jonathan O. Freeman in 1796. He held this position for fourteen years, having his office in his house, the former home of Miss Lydia G. Robinson and Mrs. Sarah Lawrence. This home was eventually sold to Charles R. Robinson before it was torn down years later. Joseph was very active in town affairs, holding the office of selectman for three years and town clerk for fourteen years. He was captain of one of the four companies of minute-men which the town raised to protect its shores against British attacks.

Job Palmer (b. Aug. 1747), Joseph's younger brother, moved to Charleston, South Carolina in 1770 and lived to be ninety-seven years old, dying in 1845. When he was eighty-six, he wrote a paper that gives some insight into the social/religious life of Falmouth when he was a young man. He wrote:

"I was born in Falmouth, Mass in 1747. My father Samuel Palmer was the pastor of the Congregational Church in that place. According to my views of religion now, I believe that real, vital religion was very low in Falmouth when I left it, particularly among the young people. The winters were given up to frolic, dancing, and card playing. Falmouth was my stated home until the 23rd year of my age."



Rev. Samuel Palmer's book of church records.
Photo by Leonard Miele.

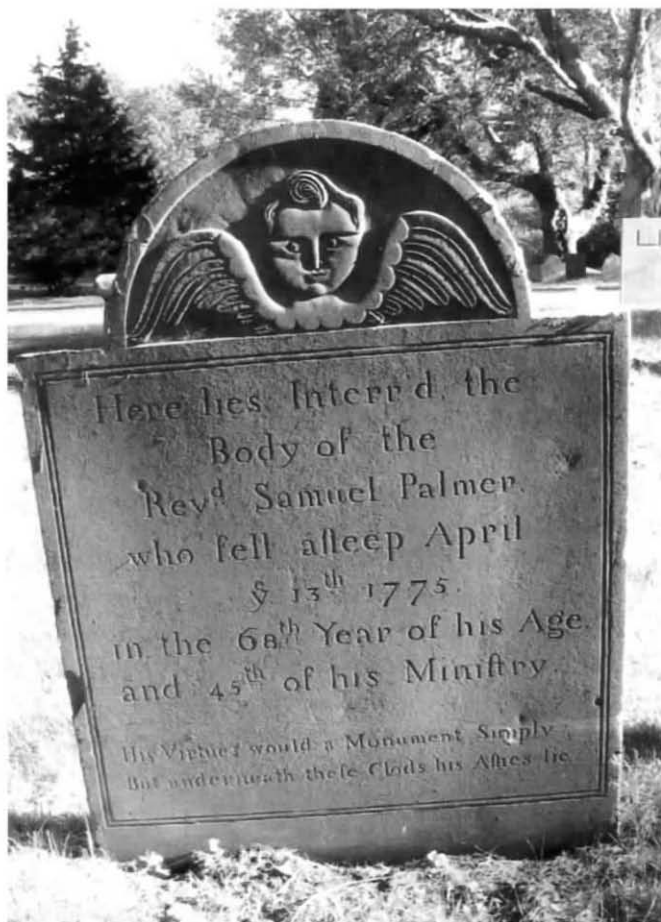
Job seems to suggest that there were generational conflicts within the church. It is not clear, however, if the young were disillusioned by church doctrine or just frustrated by their isolation on Cape Cod during harsh New England winters.

Samuel Palmer's greatest legacy to the town of Falmouth is his writing of the church records that he kept during the 44 years of his ministry. For almost 300 years, the First Congregational Church and the town of Falmouth have preserved these meticulous records, a living history of colonial life from 1731 to 1775. His second entry, for example, is dated Jan. 9, 1731. On that day Deacon Parker's Negro

servant Cuffee was propounded or put forward for full Communion. On Feb. 13, 1731, after just one month of instruction, Reverend Palmer writes that "Cuffee baptized and received into full Communion, with consent of the Brethren." It has been noted that "this was advanced action against the race prejudice of the day" ... and that "a corner of the cemetery was set apart for our 'brother in black.'" The congregation embraced its new "brother," setting a tone of racial tolerance and acceptance under Reverend Palmer's leadership.

As a social document, the church records include all the births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths that occurred during Reverend Palmer's pastorate. Perhaps the most fascinating entry, however, is dated August 7, 1753, when Reverend Palmer explains how the congregation had to deal with the sexual conduct of two of its members. Reverend Palmer records for posterity what today would be a very private matter. The congregation had a suspicion that Joseph Bourn and his wife Hannah were guilty of having premarital sex. Over a period of five weeks, the church held meetings to decide what to do about this moral dilemma. Joseph and Hannah issued a vague Declaration of their Innocency but would not state that "we came not together in way of carnal knowledge before our marriage was solemnized the sixth day of September A.D. 1753." Three midwives appeared before the congregation to describe the child they delivered on April 5, 1753, five months before the Bourns were married. According to their testimony, "That the child appeared to them a middling child for Bigness, Strength and the like, without anything appearing to them as a sign that it was an untimely-born child." This evidence was worthy of church censure, with the recommendation

that "Joseph Bourn and Hannah now his wife be suspended from Communion with this Church in special Ordinances, till they manifest repentance of the sin of Fornication or Uncleaness, which the Church judge they have fallen into." On April 18, 1756, three years after this controversy, Reverend Palmer recorded that the Bourns eventually offered a confession to the Church and "were restored to the Church Fellowship."



Samuel Palmer's gravestone in the Old Burying Ground, Falmouth, MA. Photo by Leonard Miele.

Another entry in the records presents a revealing, yet honest picture of Reverend Palmer when he was sixty-six, two years before he died. Unfortunately, he suffered from the same weaknesses and experienced the same humiliation his father endured when Reverend Palmer was a child. On March 31, 1753, he recorded that among the church brethren there was a "dissatisfaction on account of my drinking." Reverend Palmer, on April 14, "delivered then a Confession in writing...and read the Confession" to the Deacons. In order to repent, as the moral leader of the community, he "read the Confession to the Congregation" the next day and delivered a copy to Deacon Davis. The fact that Reverend Palmer was not dismissed, censured, or denied communion was probably a tribute to his four decades of service to the church and community.

Reverend Palmer's ministry covered a period of 44 years. In that time he solemnized 217 marriages, baptized 364 females and 433 males, administered the Lord's Supper 370 times, and received 227 persons into the church. Beyond the congregation, he preached to the Mashpee Indians for the Society of the Propagation of the Gospel in New England. He also served as the town's physician, as his father had, without the benefit of a medical degree. Although he probably limited his medical practice to his parishioners, his library contained the best medical books of the day. Sadly, he died on April 13, 1775 after contracting pneumonia from one of his patients in East Falmouth. He is buried in the Old Burying Ground in Falmouth and is memorialized on a tombstone there.

Leonard Miele is a retired English teacher, having taught thirty years at Brockton High School. His most recent articles on the Elizabeth Islands and Katharine Lee Bates appeared in "Summerscape," the summer magazine of *The Barnstable Patriot*. He is on the board of directors of the Davisville Association, the school committee Observer for the League of Women Voters, and a board member of the Friends of the Falmouth Public Library.

Special thanks to Mary Sicchio at the Falmouth Historical Society, Rev. Douglas Showalter at the First Congregational Church of Falmouth, and Sarah Carman at Falmouth Town Hall for their research help.

Bibliography

- The Book of Falmouth*, edited by Mary Lou Smith, published by the Falmouth Historical Commission, 1986.
- Cape Cod's Way* by Scott Corbett, published by Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1955.
- The Celebration of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Town of Falmouth, MA, June 15, 1886*, published per order of the town of Falmouth, 1887.
- The Colonial Clergy and the Colonial Churches of New England* by Frederick Weis, published by the Genealogical Pub. Company Inc., 1977.
- A Cyclopaedia of Education*, edited by Paul Monroe, published by The MacMillan Company, 1912.
- Falmouth Church Records, Vol. 1-2, Falmouth Town Hall.
- The Harvard Book*, edited by William Bentinck-Smith, published by the Harvard Univ. Press, 1953.
- History of Barnstable County* by Simeon L. Deyo, published by H.W. Blake and Company, 1890.
- History of Cape Cod*, Vol. I, by Frederick Freeman, published by George C. Rand and Avery, 1858.
- "How Much is that Worth Today?" by John J. McCusker, Economic History Services.
- An Inventory of the Records of the Particular Churches of Mass./Gathered 1620-1805* by Harold Field Worthley, published by Harvard Univ. Press, 1970.
- New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, VII, Vol. 3, 1853
- "Palmer Avenue" article, Falmouth Historical Society.
- Joseph Palmer papers, edited by Amelia Lawrence, Falmouth Historical Society.