

Looking Back: Falmouth At Work

From the Editors:

This summer 2007 edition of Sprintsail continues and concludes the series of monographs that began in the Winter 2007 edition. Jennifer Stone Gaines wrote the articles about the historic industries in Falmouth that are shown in 11 bronze plaques installed along the sidewalk on Main Street adjacent to the lawn of the public library. Sarah Peters designed and created the plaques, capturing the essence of bygone industries. Her plaques show daily work in vivid, accurate detail. In the Winter 2007 Sprintsail, Jacki Forbes described the organizational work of the Committee To Encourage Public Art that led to this achievement. Jennifer Stone Gaines adds her part of that story in this edition.

Notes from the Author, Jennifer Stone Gaines

My first connection to this project came when Sarah Peters, the person who envisioned and created the *Looking Back: Falmouth at Work* plaques, came to the archives of the Woods Hole Historical Collection and Museum seeking information. At each step of the way she carefully investigated every aspect of the scene she wanted to depict. I remember the day she came in fussing about the far distant background in the Marine Science plaque. "What houses were standing and in sight then? What were the trees like?"

Only later did the idea arise that written articles should further the story told in the plaques. Still later, the Committee to Encourage Public Art asked if I would write those articles. So began this part of the project, which, like the plaque project itself, has grown bigger and taken longer than any of us imagined.

The results of Sarah's effort are clear for us to see in the plaques. Her quest for historical accuracy and the detail in the finished product are amazing. And she has done all this with a beautiful sweeping artistry. Not surprisingly, her files are rich. As she opens one of her folders, out pop photocopies of historic photographs, her sketches of bonnets and bodices worn at Sturbridge Village, panoramic photos taped together. My admiration and appreciation for her devotion to "get it right" has grown as the project has proceeded. When she discovered Kevin Ford, the country's premier hand sheep shearer, she trekked to western Massachusetts to observe him at work, to see his mastery as he worked with "the blades." She captured the strain of his back, the resignation of the sheep, first on film, later in bronze.

It has been an honor and a challenge to tell the history behind her images, to give a hint at the immensity of what she depicts in just one smallish plaque now resting so modestly in the library lawn along Main Street. While I strived for accuracy and detail, I knew I could only "paint with broad strokes," only hint at the detail, only mention a few of the scientists and shipbuilders, farmers and entrepreneurs of this seaside town.

Through this whole process, Jacki Forbes has been my silent partner, shepherding me along to deadlines, helping me say things better. And she has done it all with great grace and good humor. She has been a great pleasure to work with and should be recognized as the person who has managed this whole project along to completion, the one who paid attention, the one who took care of all the myriad details. Thank you.

Creating the Plaques

by Sarah Peters

The Summer Resort and the Saltworks plaques were the first bas reliefs I had ever made, and there was quite a learning curve. I had to learn how the materials behaved. I worked on these two at the same time, directly in plastilene, and later poured a plaster mold. Next, I “pulled a wax” from the plaster mold. It quickly became clear that there was too much corrective work to be done in the wax, and I was wasting a lot of time. On the rest of the plaques I carved directly in wax. Working this way certainly yielded the best results, but it is also very hard on the hands because the wax is very firm. The wax is a microcrystalline foundry wax. It is firm enough to retain strong edges, but also has added beeswax for elasticity so that it doesn’t shatter. It can withstand a range of working temperatures, but is certainly more vulnerable to accidental scratches, particularly in the summer months. I prefer to work in dark wax because it’s easier to see the play of light on the surface. Light colored wax is translucent, which can be very confusing to the eye. Another limitation I had was that I found I could only work in the daylight hours in my studio’s north-facing window. This was a huge limitation, especially with two young children at home.

With bas relief, the goal is to create a feeling of distance and depth (perspective) without actually carving deeply into the wax. To get depth, you create layers of very slightly tilted planes. It is an optical trick. You can see it easily in the layers of vegetation in the background of some of the plaques, and where the sea meets the sand in Summer Resort. In bas relief, undercuts should be avoided. Traditional bas relief can be “struck” for reproduction (as a coin is struck at a mint – there can be no undercuts with this process.) I have taken a few liberties with a few minor undercuts for added depth on focal points because my pieces are cast using the lost wax process.

Once the wax is completed a rubber mold is made of the piece and the original is sent to the foundry in Chelsea, MA. The wax is then cast in bronze – an arduous process – and I check the raw casting for flaws. Occasionally there can be inclusions in the metal that need to be welded and chased with machining tools. At last the piece is ready for a chemical patina, for color, and a coat of butcher’s wax, for protection.

With these first two plaques I did a lot of experimenting. One of the particularly happy results was pressing fabrics into the swimming costumes. That was how I decided to press grosgrain ribbon into the border, creating a frame around the image. This became a design element that remained consistent in all of the plaques.