

The Antique Signature Quilt of the N.F. Congregational Church

by Muriel Locklin and Shirley Dunkle

In 1849, thirty-six North Falmouth ladies sewed quilt squares in the Odd Fellows Cross/Flying Geese pattern, signed their names in the center squares and presented the completed quilt as a “free-will offering for Mr. and Mrs. Cobb, Jan 8, 1850.” Most of the women were wives, sisters or daughters of the founding members of the North Falmouth Congregational Church and Rev. Cobb had baptized many of their children. Simple thoughts like “Absent but not forgotten” and “I think of thee” or like the biblical verses “Blessed are the peacemakers” and “The Lord is my shepherd” are some of the messages also on the quilt. These messages were handwritten by the women in a loving tribute to their departing minister and his wife, Rev. and Mrs. Asahel Cobb. Rev. Cobb had led the congregation from 1844-1848.

In 2005, the MassQuilts Documentation Project asked the Falmouth Historical Society to research the quilt for their records. Muriel Locklin, textile historian and genealo-

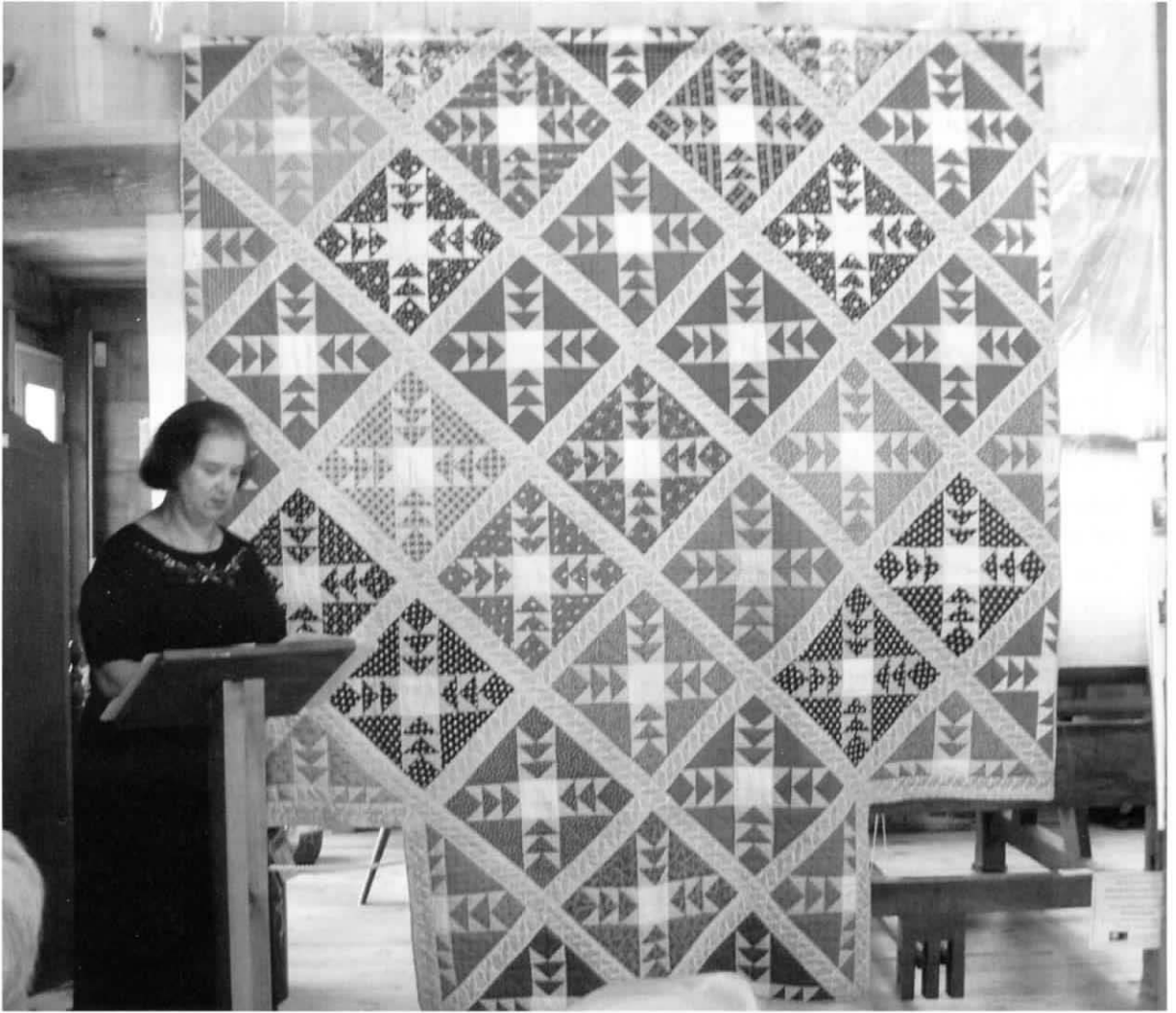
gist, and Shirley and Bill Dunkle of North Falmouth, were able to trace the lives of everyone who signed the quilt and also of the minister and his family. This beautiful and historically significant quilt will now be featured in a book tentatively titled *Massachusetts Quilts: Our Common Wealth* that will be published by the MassQuilts Documentation Project in January, 2009. More information can be found at www.massquilts.org.



Quilt square signed by Abby P. Swift, North Falmouth. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

On August 12, 2005, Muriel Locklin presented a lecture to the North Falmouth Village Association about this special Friendship Quilt. Here are some excerpts from her talk:

When the Falmouth Historical Society was photographing an antique Signature Quilt in their collection in preparation for an exhibition at the New England Quilt Museum in Lowell, Massachusetts, I became intrigued with the names of the sign-



Muriel Locklin, quilter, textile historian and genealogist, stands beside the North Falmouth Congregational Church Friendship Quilt as she gives a lecture to the North Falmouth Village Association in the Falmouth Historical Society's Hallett Barn on August 12, 2005. She titled her lecture, "Friendship Quilt Dated 1850 In the Collection of The Falmouth Historical Society, Falmouth, Massachusetts." Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

ers. I took a list of names and started a search in the 1850 Census to find out more about these ladies. As a result, the Director of the Historical Society urged me to prepare this talk.

It has been determined that all the quilters seem to have been members of the North Fal-

mouth Congregational Church. I took photos of most of the homes of these ladies. At the Historical Society, there are many portraits of men, especially ship's captains, but we found a portrait of only one of the quilters, Elizabeth F.

Nye, who was the wife of Oliver Nye. There is also a portrait of him.

During the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s, album quilts of all types were particularly fashionable. The steel pen nib and permanent inks that didn't run were mass produced by 1830. Also, large quantities of textiles were available and had become inexpensive. Now a quilter wasn't restricted to available scraps and a repeat pattern or color scheme was attainable. This quilt shows by the well laid out pattern and complementary colors that someone with a good sense of color and design was in charge. It's beautifully balanced with squares of matching materials. Then someone had to assemble the squares and put on the sashing, using the material's pattern to bring it all together. Perhaps the closer neighbors met more often with the leader to help. The quilting party took place on Jan. 3, 1850, at Mrs. Tobey's home, according to the hand-written note on the top row of the quilt. That's when the backing material and batting were added and the quilt was quilted and finished.

Friendship quilts or autograph quilts were usually a cooperative effort to be presented to a special person or persons who had touched many people's hearts. Rev. Asabel Cobb and his wife, Helen Hamblen Cobb, were the recipients of this 'free-will offering' in 1850. The ladies were not only relatives and friends, they were all members of the same congregation and their departing pastor and his wife were special to them.

The history of this Friendship Quilt leads naturally back into the earlier history of North Falmouth itself. Brothers John and Ebenezer Nye of Sandwich bought many acres of land from Elizabeth Ellis in the late 1600s. They were the first settlers in the area in the northwest corner of Falmouth that became

the village of North Falmouth. It stretches along the eastern shore of Buzzards Bay for two and one-half miles before joining the neighboring town of Bourne, which was originally part of Sandwich until 1884. At least one of the quilters probably lived in this part of Sandwich. By 1850, there were about fifty families living in North Falmouth, all descendants of those first families, most of whom came from Sandwich. They farmed the land and many depended on the sea and the shore to support their families and each other.

In 1821 about seventy members had withdrawn from Falmouth's First Congregational Church to form the Second Congregational Church at the East End Meeting House on Sandwich Road in Hatchville. For remote families, the rigors of travel into town by horse and buggy must have been a contributing factor. Another factor could have been the new membership requirements which included a conversion experience and a temperance pledge. In 1832 there was a split at this church as well. Twenty-three members from both First and Second Congregational Churches who wanted to have their own house of worship nearby built and dedicated Falmouth's Third, the present, North Falmouth Congregational Church at 155 Old Main Road. The church was officially organized on August 15, 1833.

The twenty-three original members are noted in the church records as "...inhabitants of North Falmouth, desirous of enjoying religious privileges in this place ...[we] do hereby withdraw from the First Congregational Society in Falmouth and form ourselves into a religious Society, and take the name of North Falmouth Congregational Society." Of these, eleven are husbands or fathers of a quilter. Many others became active in the church between 1833 and 1850.

Signers of the 1850 North Falmouth Congregational Church Signature Quilt

Surname	FirstName	MaidenName	Age	Parents	Husband	NF Cem	Address (now)
Childs	Abby W.	Winslow	25	Dean/Rebecca Winslow	Henry	No	NF Hwy.
Cowin	Esther	Hewins	50	Amasa/Esther (Kollock) Hewins	Alpheus	1896	Sandwich
Crowell	Abby B.	Crowell (Ms)	20	Warren/Caroline (Crowell) Crowell	unmarried	1851	0190 NF Hwy.
Crowell	Caroline	Crowell	43	Barnabas/Mary (White) Crowell	Warren	1860	0190 NF Hwy.
Crowell	Drusilla	Gibbs	46	Abraham/Elisabeth Gibbs (ofWareham)	Joshua	1874	033 Old Main
Crowell	Martha B.	Crowell (Ms)	21	Warren/Caroline (Crowell) Crowell	unmarried	1853	0190 NF Hwy.
Crowell	Mary	White	85 ?	White	Barnabas	1850	0190 NF Hwy.
Crowell	Phebe	Crowell (Ms)	60	Stephen/Rebecca Crowell	unmarried	No	Sandwich
Eldred	P(atience) F.	Eldred	42	William/Deborah Eldred	Samuel (2nd)	1886	NF Hwy.
Gifford	Lucy	Nye	41	Arvin/Love Nye	Henry	1895	140 Old Main
Greene	Lucinda	Perkins	50	Barnabas/Polly (Shurtleft) Perkins	William	1865	170 Old Main
Hamblen	Chloe	Fuller	53	Noah/Jerusha (Fuller) Fuller	Charles	No	213 Old Main
Hatch	Elisabeth A.	Capen	20	David/Elizabeth (Hitchings)Capen	Hervey	1865	Sandwich
Hatch	Pricilla	Fuller	50 ?	Fuller	Mark	1862	209 Old Main
Nye	Abigail	Davis	62 ?	Davis	Shubael	1869	114 Old Main
Nye	Almira	Davis	49	Walter/Hannah Davis	James	1890	316 Old Main
Nye	Betsy	Handy	53	William/Love (Swain) Handy	Samuel, Jr	1873	294 Old Main
Nye	Celia	Fish (Tobey)	73	Seth/Bathsheba Fish	Stephen	1855	313 Old Main
Nye	Elisabeth	Tobey	60	Thomas/Abigail (Smith) Tobey	Ebenezer	1864	229 Old Main
Nye	Elisabeth F.	Nye	37	Joshua/Clarissa (Gibbs) Nye	Oliver	1895	193 Old Main
Nye	Emeline	Eldred	27	Ward/Mary Eldred	Francis A.	1900	270 Old Main
Nye	Fanny	Fish	55 ?	Fish	Prince	1876	229 Old Main
Nye	Hannah G.	Gibbs	72	Sylvanus/Katherine Gibbs	Warren	1854	192 Old Main
Nye	Harriet	Goodspeed	41	Charles/Diadema (Howland) Goodspeed	Bethuel	1891	78 Benj. Nye
Nye	Harriet C.	Eldred	27	Levi/Harriet Eldred	Ferdinand	1870	192 Old Main
Nye	Helen A.	Nye	29	Daniel/Experience Nye	Elihu	1917	130 Old Main
Nye	Laura C.	Crowell	36	Jesse/Susan (Gifford) Crowell	Joseph W.	1891	194 Old Main
Nye	Love	Gifford	71	Christopher/Remember (Nye)	Arvin (Ervin)	1871	140 Old Main
Nye	Philenia D.	Nye	25	Joshua/Clarissa (Gibbs) Nye	Daniel B.	1902	130 Old Main
Nye	Rebecca W.	Lucas	25	Stephen/Rebecca (Holmes) Lucas	Alexander G.	No	Plymouth
Perkins	Deborah	Perkins (Ms)	46	Barnabas/Polly (Shurtleft) Perkins	unmarried	No	170 Old Main
Phinney	Harriet N.	Nye	31	Ebenezer/Elisabeth (Tobey) Nye	William	1851	170 Old Main
Swift	Abby P.	Swift	52	Clark/Phebe (Freeman) Swift	Alden N.	1869	085 Old Main
Swift	Zebiah	Hewins	43	Amasa/Esther (Kollock) Hewins	Charles	No	Sandwich
Tobey	Mary N.	Nye	39	Prince/Sarah (Pease) Nye	Henry	1902	199 Old Main
Winslow	Rebecca	Long	48	James/Mary (Higgins)Long	Dean	No	NF Hwy.

Nineteen North Falmouth residents had bought land for a burying ground from John Nye on December 6, 1827, for a total sum of seven dollars and fifty cents. Of these men, fourteen were Nyes, three Crowells, one Ellis and one Eldred. The cemetery already had fifteen burials then, the oldest being in 1804, and two memorial stones. Note that this was several years before the church was built. The North Falmouth Cemetery was established and managed by a committee of residents of North Falmouth, not by the church, and still is to this day. The first quilter to be buried in the cemetery was 85-year-old *Mary (White) Crowell* who died on July 29, 1850, not long after she wrote her name on a quilt square in a loving tribute to Rev. and Mrs. Cobb.

While looking for clues about the families and the lives of the thirty-six ladies who wanted to honor their beloved minister and his wife, we found several interesting stories. We realized that they had daily routines, chores and skills, families to raise, births and deaths, and lots of hard work. Planning, designing and finally, sewing the quilt together must have been a very satisfying endeavor, bringing all the ladies together at *Mrs. Mary Nye Tobey's*, on one day, January 3, 1850.

One story involves James and *Almira Davis Nye*. James was very active in the church, was one of the original founders, and often elected as Moderator or Clerk or to the committee to find a minister. Unfortunately James' and Almira's four children predeceased them. In James' will in 1871, he left his house (now 316 Old Main Road) to the church "to be used as a parsonage forever" after the decease of his wife. Almira died in 1890 at age 89 and the house became "the parsonage" until 1958 when it was sold. In Almira's will, she left her husband's family pew, "second pew from the front on the north side," to Francis A. Nye, husband of *Emeline Eldred Nye*.

(Francis A. Nye was a State Representative in 1869 and 1870 and a State Senator in 1873 and 1874.)

John Galen Nye, teen-age son of Bethuel G. and *Harriet Goodspeed Nye*, shipped out of New Bedford, working his way through the Caribbean, ending up in San Francisco looking for gold. His mother must have been very worried about him. The log in the *Book of Falmouth* says that he "...gained very little gold, became very ill, ... was nursed back to health by a relative ... again to the gold fields ... struck down again with fever..." It seems that he recovered, gave up on the gold, went back to sea and took up whaling, eventually becoming a ship captain.

Brothers Prince and Ebenezer Nye, husbands of *Fanny Fish Nye* and *Elisabeth Tobey Nye* respectively, owned the house known as the Old Nye Tavern jointly. Both families were living there (now 229 Old Main Road) in 1850. The 1841 town map shows a Post Office and Inn. It was an operating tavern in 1825 and remained so until 1860. Ebenezer Nye was the first Postmaster in North Falmouth. He established the post office in the inn on January 30, 1817, a good place for local people to come for their mail, a little gossip and some refreshment. Fanny and/or Elisabeth would have greeted weary travelers and made them comfortable.

Elisabeth Fearing Nye, wife of Oliver Cromwell Nye, and Alexander G. Nye, husband of *Rebecca W. Lucas Nye*, were siblings brought up in Falmouth. Oliver Nye is listed as a "painter" in the 1850 census. The Nye Genealogy shows that Alexander Nye was also a painter in early life, became a dentist, and later "studied higher art and achieved some fame as a portrait and sketch artist." Since there are portraits of both Oliver and Elisabeth at the Falmouth Historical Society, artist unknown, it is tempting to speculate

that someone in the family might have painted these pictures.

This antique quilt was featured during the 175th Anniversary Celebration of the North Falmouth Congregational Church in 2007. The quilt has since been returned to The Falmouth Historical Society and will be carefully preserved for another 150 years. For those of you who will be celebrating the 200th anniversary of the church in 2032, we hope that you may again enjoy this unique bit of North Falmouth Congregational Church history.

Muriel L. Henault Locklin, mother of six and grandmother of 11, is an artist specializing in printmaking, a quilter, a genealogist and a perennial volunteer, working with Elder Services, the Falmouth Hospital Auxiliary and the Falmouth Historical Society.

Shirley R. Dunkle, a native of Fairhaven, is an active member of the Falmouth Historical Society, Falmouth Genealogical Society and Falmouth Chorale. She and her family live in a 200-year old house that was the former "parsonage" of the North Falmouth Congregational Church. They have been there fifty years. Quilter Almira Davis Nye lived in that house in 1850.



North Falmouth Congregational Church, 1894. That year six horse sheds and two privies were added to the rear of the church. The sheds were eventually torn down when a pastor's study was built. In 1938 the bell tower and spire were toppled by the hurricane and the privies went at the same time. From the *Book of Falmouth*.