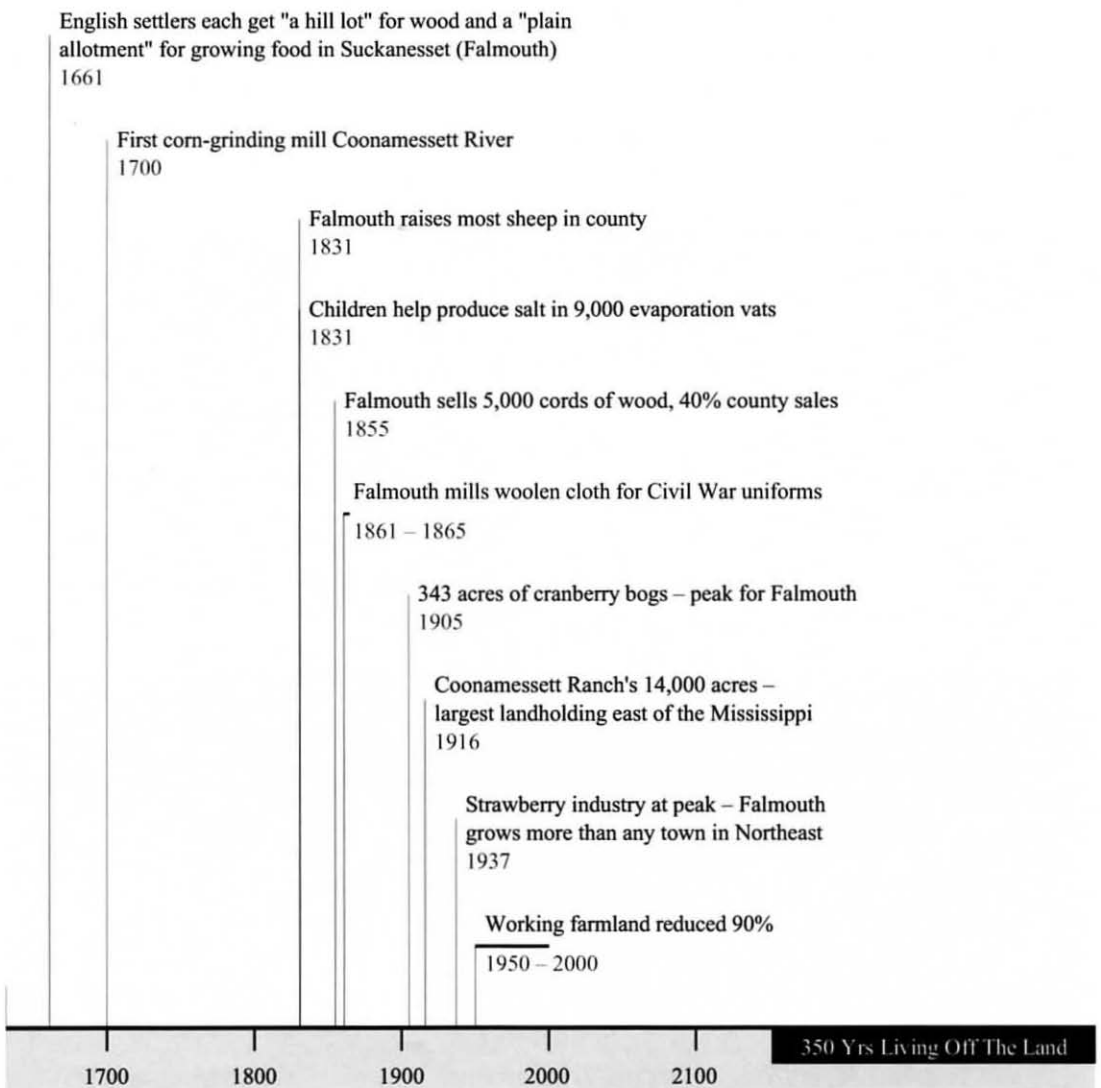
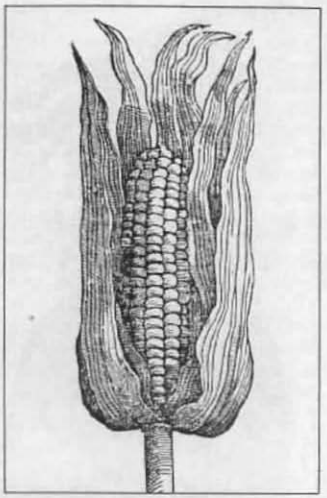
Living Off The Land – A Photo and Timeline Essay

by Nannette Drake Oldenbourg

This photo and timeline essay highlights moments in Falmouth's history from the time when nearly all people were actively gathering and growing their own food to the present when fewer than one percent farm or fish for a living. The timeline below shows the 350-year rise and decline of Falmouth's agriculture and related manufacturing.



The Indian tobacco plant, in a 1786 illustration

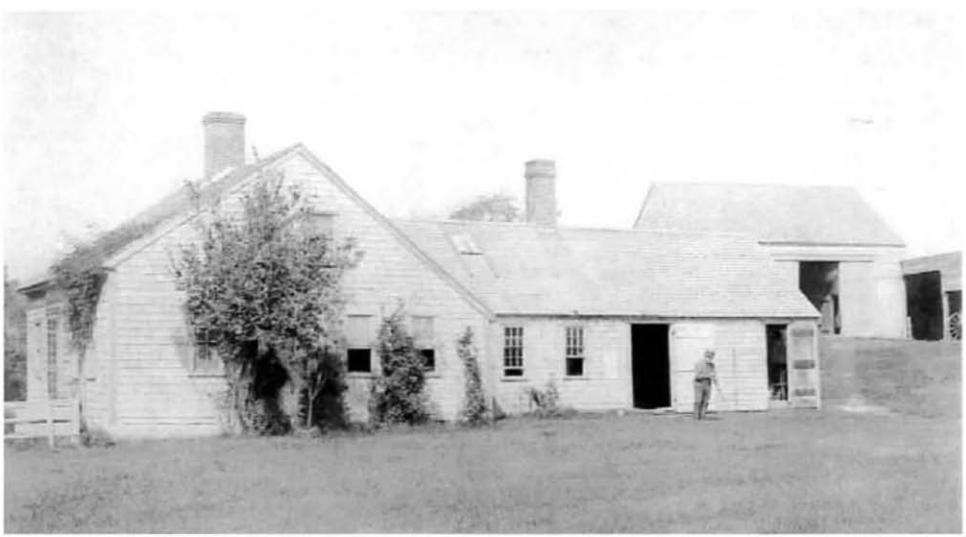


The first illustration of corn published in Europe, which probably dates from 1535. Corn was a major food of the Indians.

First Nation men in this region hunted and fished and raised tobacco for ceremonial purposes. The women gathered food including greens, Jerusalem artichokes, berries, and nuts. They planted beans, squash, melons, gourds, and corn. Scholars debate how the original people of the Americas managed to develop corn from a typically-shaped grass into a plant with ears big enough to hold in two hands. The "flint corn" that helped early New England settlers survive had only eight rows.
Graphic courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

The colonists thought Native garden scenes like this were messy. Only a close-up view reveals the genius of planting corn, squash, and beans together as "the three sisters." The beans fixed nitrogen in the soil, the squash leaves kept moisture in and weeds out, and the corn stalks provided a pole the beans could climb. Photo courtesy Nannette Oldenbourg.

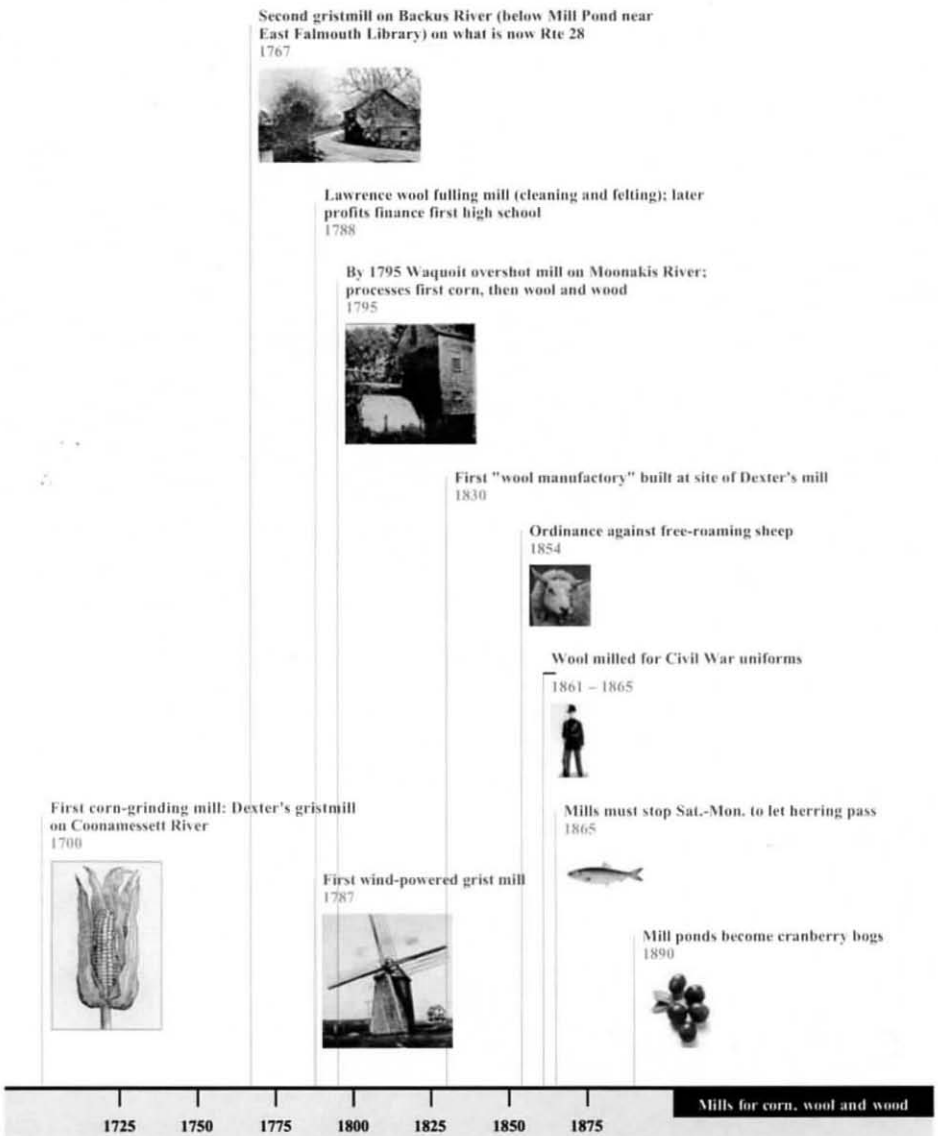
European settlers were able to move to Falmouth from Barnstable knowing there would be salt hay for their cattle. The myth that Falmouth's first English baby, Moses Hatch, was born among reeds may have lived on because the grasses were so essential to families from the 1660s to the 20th century. Another indicator of their importance is the name of Hayway Road, once a well-worn path to the grasses. Gardeners keep up the tradition today when they gather eel grass to use as mulch. May 1897 photo of Sippewissett Marsh by H.G. Corless. Courtesy West Falmouth Library.



After the very first English families in Falmouth settled near Fresh (now Siders) Pond in 1661, settlement spread in all directions. In 1679 land was granted to John Weeks, and his family farmed here for nearly 300 years. Situated in a small local valley protected from erosion, the farm holds particularly good soil. According to one account, this farmhouse featured water underneath. Inhabitants opened trap doors to get drinking water or to place food to keep it cool. The building was demolished in 1938. Steamship Captain John Peterson and his wife bought the farm in 1949 to grow vegetables to serve at the Cape Codder, their famed waterfront hotel and restaurant. He worked with other growers in East Falmouth to market the strawberries he grew. Today, with a llama as protector, the sheep on the town-owned Peterson Farm keep the fields clear, ensuring that Peterson remains the oldest farm still operating in Falmouth. The 300 Committee provides a trail guide to the property. Photo courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Visiting the 40-acre Bourne Farm offers a rare glimpse of Falmouth's agricultural past. Joseph Crowell built the farmhouse in approximately 1775 when West Falmouth was known as the North Shore. Crowell then founded the saltworks around West Falmouth Harbor (originally "Hog Harbor" named for the livestock kept on the adjacent Hog Island). Salt Pond Areas Bird Sanctuaries owns and maintains the farm and its collection of antique tools. Photo courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

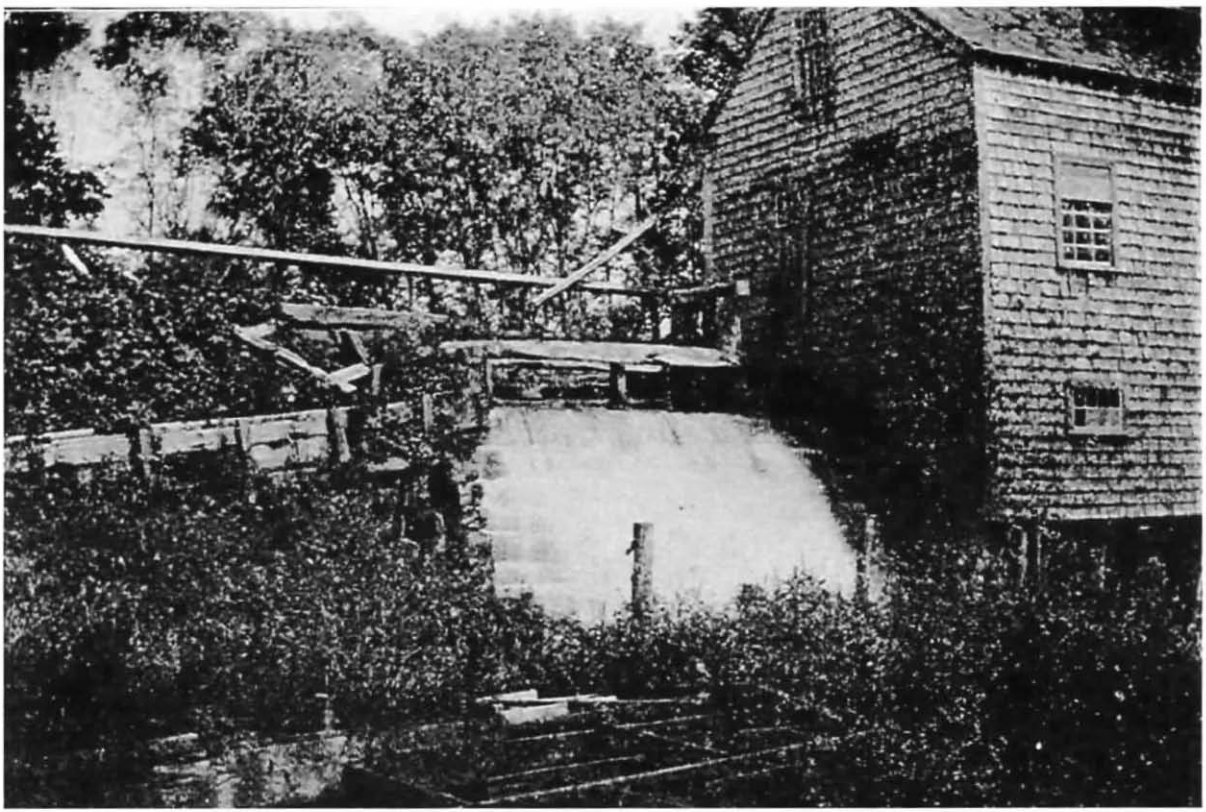
The William Davis farm at 319 Woods Hole Road in Quissett. Gardens and subsistence farms were at one time so common they were the rule, rather than the exception. Their activity was so ubiquitous it was rarely recorded. The nineteenth century brought more specialization and larger farms. After World War II, fewer people wanted to work on farms and more people wanted to buy homes in Falmouth. According to Friends of Falmouth Farms, between 1950 and the present, Falmouth lost 90% of its working agricultural land. Photo courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.



Having ground their dried corn and other grains by hand for decades, the settlers must have prayed for a mill, but the only river was at the very edge of Falmouth, the Coonamessett River known as Five Mile River. In 1685 settlers got permission to buy lots that extended Falmouth's eastern border past the Coonamessett River. Finally, in 1700, enough people had means to persuade Philip Dexter of Sandwich to establish a gristmill (off today's John Parker Rd., opposite Clark Rd.) They renamed the river again, calling it "Dexter's River" in the miller's honor. Miller Dexter (and perhaps a successor or two) enjoyed a monopoly for 67 years. Timeline by Nannette Oldenbourg.

This post card depicts the first wind-powered mill built for grinding corn and rye in Falmouth. Located near what is now Windmill Lane in West Falmouth, it was dubbed "The Constitution Mill" because it was framed the same year the U.S. was "framed" by its Constitution, 1787. At the height of its use, it could grind as many as 100 bushels a day in a good breeze. The railroad laid its tracks just feet away from the mill in 1871, and the last miller, Silas Swift, also served as the West Falmouth station master. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

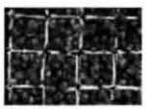
In 1767 Famouth Town Meeting authorized the building of this mill where the Backus River Mill Pond flows into Green Pond with the following article: "Voted to give Benjamin Gifford fifty-three pounds six shillings and eight pence, if he will build a grist mill and keep her in good repair for himself, his heirs and assigns forever, and to grind for two quarts out of a bushel and to make the dam a sufficient cartway over Green's River where the mill is to stand..." The miller probably earned the going rate of two quarts of grain out of every 60-pound bushel. After people were able to import flour, sometime before 1858, the mill was converted to a lumber mill. It was torn down around 1925. Rumor has it that the discarded old millworks are still at the bottom of Mill Pond (down the hill from the current East Falmouth Library). Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.



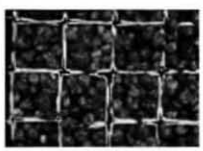
After Falmouth acquired Waquoit, Allan Green first built a grist mill at this site on the Moonakis River, but it burned down. Then, in 1832, Zenas Ewer and Harrison Goodspeed built a shingle mill. The river had a steep enough incline to allow the wheel to be placed deep enough so that the water flowed over the wheel, in the manner of the mills the ancient Romans designed. The "manufactory" took advantage of the power of the "overshot" mill to handle more than one work area. Between 1832 and 1840, around a dozen individuals worked with wool at the site, most of them spinning and a few either weaving or carding (preparing the wool for spinning.) A fire destroyed the factory in 1894. Some remains are still visible near Martin Road. Falmouth's woolen mill industry spanned about 100 years and provided cloth for fishermen, whalers, and Civil War soldiers. Shubael Lawrence erected the first woolen mill in 1788 on the Coonamessett River where it crosses Sandwich Road to "full," or clean and felt, woven items. Another woolen mill, the Pacific Factory, eventually the town's largest, was built in the 1830s farther down the river at the site of Falmouth's first gristmill (off today's John Parker Road, near Clark Street). Photo courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

John Emerald (Amaral) starts to grow strawberries after noticing plants thriving near refuse
1890

USDA declares Falmouth the country's highest-yield producer of strawberries
1920

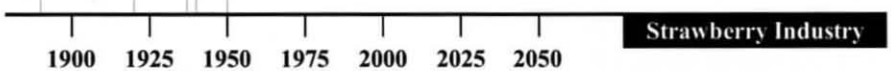


Falmouth's strawberry farming at its peak: 13 million quarts
1937



During and after World War II, strawberry pickers are hard to find.
1940

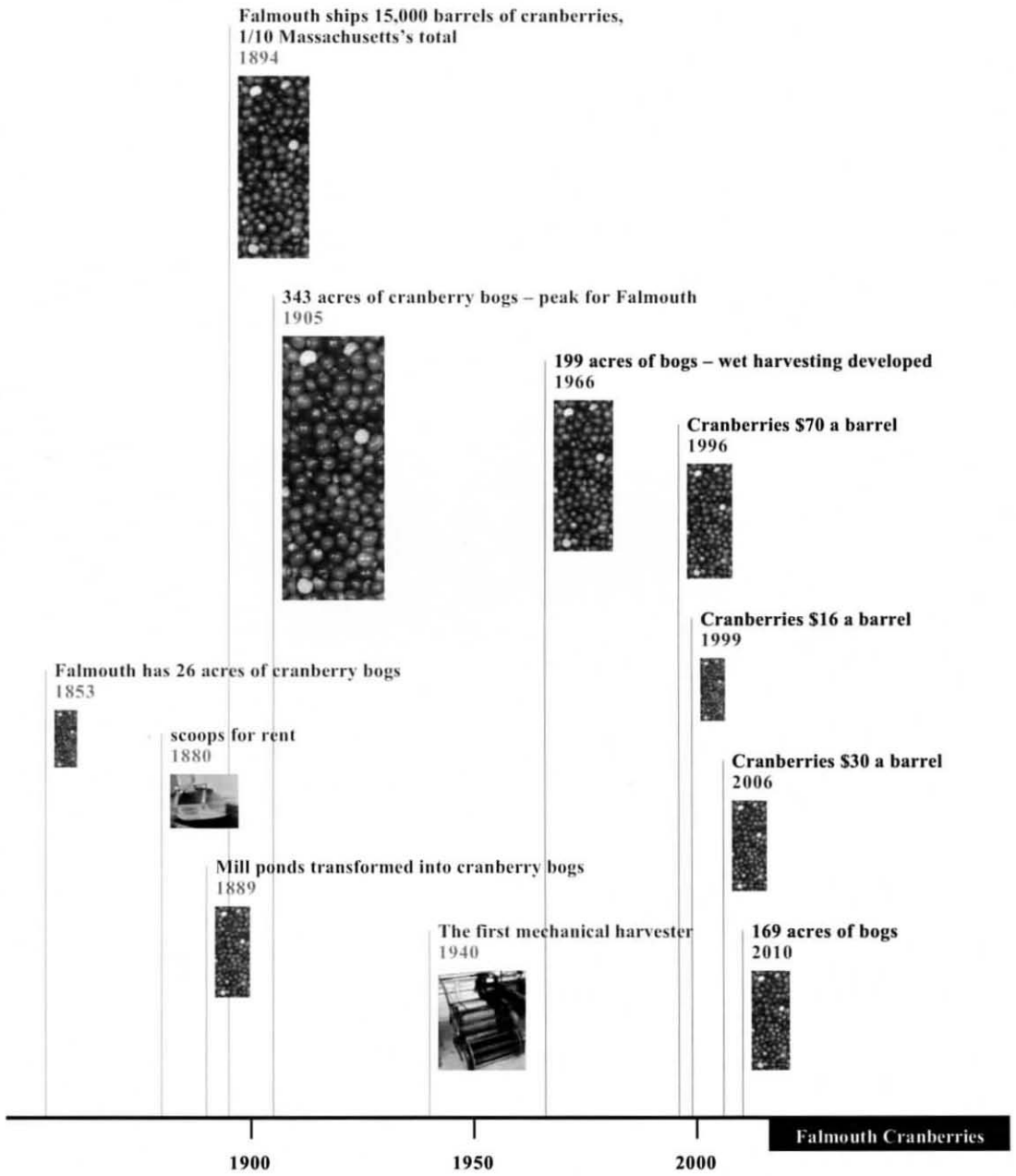
First strawberry festival and picking contest. Many fields are sold to housing and commercial developers. Tony Andrews Farm converts to "Pick Your Own."
1950



Aside from the delicate, tiny strawberries that grow wild in this area, some of the first commercially viable berries were reportedly grown at the Falmouth poor house, or "poor farm" on Main Street in the 1880s. Around the same time, as legend has it, the first Portuguese American in Falmouth, John Emerald, noticed how well some strawberries were growing at his employer's trash pile. He recognized a winning prospect. On his own land, Emerald planted more and more berries, and his family and friends did the same. Portuguese Americans in Falmouth, forty percent of the population in the mid 1930s, "put the town on the map," developing the strawberry industry which vied with, or even surpassed, tourism as the main business of the town. Falmouth grew more berries than any town in the Northeast, and it grew more berries per acre than any town in the United States. Special practices included protecting the plants with pine needles. In the remaining months of the growing season, farmers grew other crops including turnips, which stored and traveled well and, like the berries, provided Vitamin C. "Pick your own" opportunities are still available at Tony Andrews Farm on Old Meetinghouse Road. Timeline by Nannette Oldenbourg.

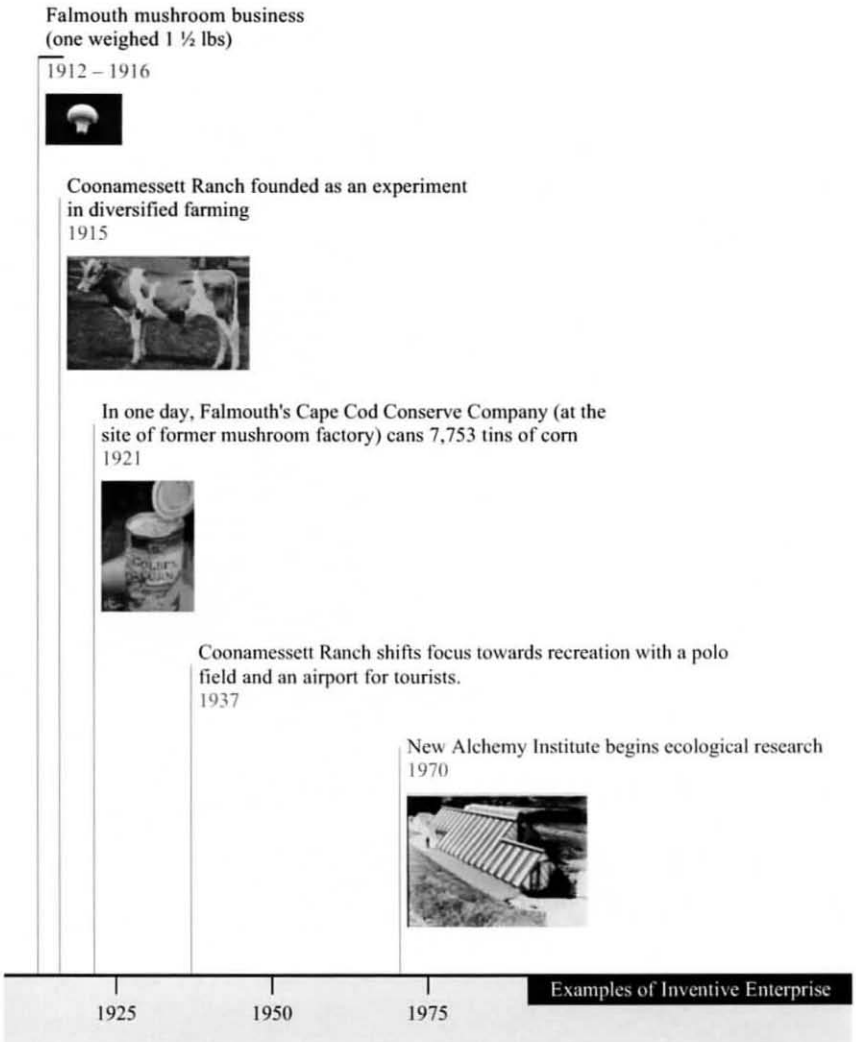
This undated photo of the Marshall farm shows how everyone pitched in in the race to get the berries to market before they became too soft. In the 1930s, thousands of people, including more than 3,000 from other towns, were picking berries on 600 acres each June, and Falmouth farmers were shipping to Boston and beyond. During and after World War II, it was difficult to find enough help at harvest. Falmouth held picking contests and developed "pick your own" operations. The strawberry parade drew 10,000 people, the equivalent of the town's population. Photo courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Harvest time at the Jack Marshall Farm on Sandwich Road. *The New Bedford Standard Times* wrote in 1930 that Portuguese immigrants in Falmouth had "cleared themselves a strawberry empire." Some of the family names involved included Amaral, Andrews, Augusta, Balona, Benevides, Botelho, Costa, DeMello, Emerald, Ferreira, Frias, Pacheco, Rapoza, Rodrigues, Rose, Sambade, Souza, Tavares, and Teixeira. Whether they came to Falmouth directly or first worked on whaling ships and New Bedford factories, people rapidly established their own farms. They worked evenings to clear land after working their fields or landscaping for someone else during the day. Photo courtesy Alice Valadao and the Falmouth Historical Society.

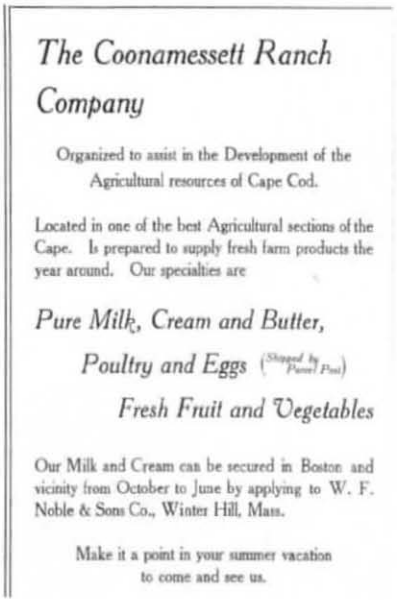


Cranberry growing caught on in Falmouth after 30 years of trial and error research down Cape. A profitable season required the right amounts of sand, water, and homemade tobacco extracts applied at the right times to foster growth and control pests. For easy irrigation, bogs were established near Falmouth's rivers. Timeline by Nannette Oldenbourg.

Originally, people picked cranberries by hand, wearing long sleeves to try to protect their skin from the woody vines. Starting around 1880, strong pickers could rent heavy wooden scoops with wooden or metal teeth, doubling their production. Women worked at sorting tables, and farmers developed wooden sorting machines that took advantage of the bouncing characteristic of fresh and healthy berries. Starting in the 1940s, mobile harvesting machines were available. Farmers pushed them somewhat like a lawnmower. The machines scooped up berries and put them on a vertical conveyor belt to sort and bag them. Finally, in the 1960s, a market for juice and canned sauce justified harvesting by flooding the bogs and floating the berries. Today, fresh dry-harvested berries are sold at Falmouth's Farmers Market. Photo courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.



Two of Falmouth's trademark characteristics are inquiry and innovation, and Hatchville is especially noted for agricultural entrepreneurship. Hatches and Turners settled the village in the early 1700s, but in the early 1900s a new era began. A group of investors bought 14,000 acres stretching into Bourne, Sandwich, and Mashpee, forming what *The Boston Globe* called the largest landholding east of the Mississippi. They called their enterprise the Coonamessett Ranch Company and intended to develop agriculture, wood, land, and real estate. In Hatchville, they established a modern, large (by the day's standards) dairy, poultry, and vegetable farm eventually with 25 farm buildings and 12 houses. When agricultural ventures did not prove as lucrative as they had hoped, the investors developed facilities for entertainment, including a theatre and a polo field. The spirit of inquiry arose again in Hatchville when the New Alchemy Institute was founded to conduct ecological research in the early 1970s. It closed in 1991, but its research articles are still available through the Green Center, and its founders are still doing ecological work. Today, at the Coonamessett Farm next door, farmers are experimenting again. They apply old and new methods, traditional and hydroponic. They develop educational and entertainment activities and operate their own wind turbine. Timeline by Nannette Oldenbourg.



The Coonamessett Ranch Company

Organized to assist in the Development of the Agricultural resources of Cape Cod.

Located in one of the best Agricultural sections of the Cape. Is prepared to supply fresh farm products the year around. Our specialties are

Pure Milk, Cream and Butter,

Poultry and Eggs (Shipped by Parcel Post)

Fresh Fruit and Vegetables

Our Milk and Cream can be secured in Boston and vicinity from October to June by applying to W. F. Noble & Sons Co., Winter Hill, Mass.

Make it a point in your summer vacation to come and see us.

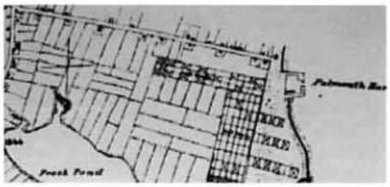
Coonamessett Ranch marketed to the summer population of Falmouth. One of the men connected to the Coonamessett Ranch project (and connected to the investors by marriage) was Concord farmer and First Massachusetts Agricultural Commissioner Wilfrid Wheeler who trained other farmers and later established Ashumet Farm. Some of his prized horticultural work lives on in Falmouth at the Ashumet Holly and Wildlife Sanctuary operated by Massachusetts Audubon Society. Graphic courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

New methods of measuring butter fat allowed farmers to compare milk from individual cows. The stone foundation of a barn at Atamannsit Farm, one of Coonamessett Ranch's later rivals, can be found on the Dupee conservation parcel. The 300 Committee maintains information about trails on the property. Photo courtesy Falmouth Historical Society. Graphic courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

The nation's best mushroom expert, Dr. George T. Moore of St. Louis, and a team of professionals convened in Falmouth in 1912 amid much excitement. They expected their mushroom-growing enterprise, at what is now Homeport at the corner of Jones and Gifford Streets, to help them break into a lucrative city market that thus far had been monopolized by Pennsylvania growers. Excitement about the venture peaked when A.V. Jackson, the foreman who'd been recruited from Chicago, displayed a one and one-half pound mushroom specimen. But even the best talent could not foresee the problem, either blight or transportation, that ended the business in 1916. The next venture to occupy the property was the Cape Cod Conserve Company. World War I had made food preservation a major concern. J.F.Randall, who owned and operated Kensington Farm (which later became New Alchemy) was also president of the Conserve Company. The firm supplied farmers with tomato plants in the spring and later canned the tomatoes. Other produce it processed included apples, string beans, corn, lima beans, and beets. Photo courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Continental Congress encourages local salt production with a bounty: 1/3 dollar per bushel
1776

9,000 salt evaporation vats dotted Falmouth's western shores. In this 1854 survey detail, Xs in squares show vats along Shore Street, and what is now Surf Drive on the right. Shore St. linked Main St. shown in upper left with the original stone dock harbor on the right. Fresh Pond is now known as Siders Pond.
1831



Saltworks in decline; salt imported again. Photo shows movable roofs over last saltworks near Falmouth Heights.
1865

Iceboxes replaced spring houses, cellars and wells
1879

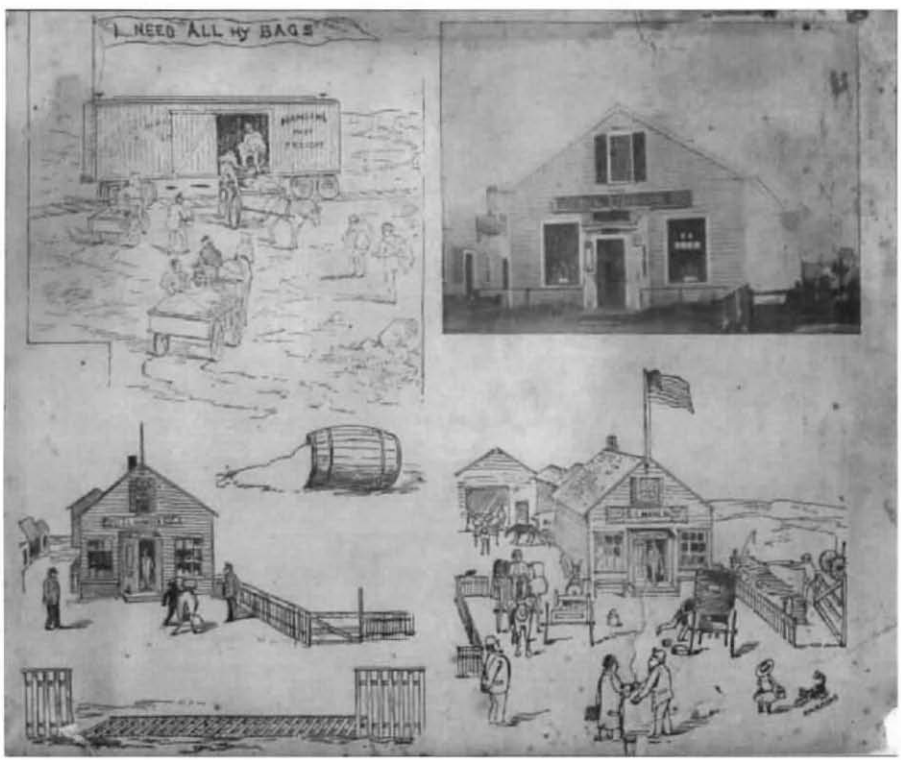
Refrigerators replaced iceboxes; ice harvesting ends
1933

1800 1850 1900 1950

Salt and Ice food preservation

Our predecessors developed methods of preserving food as actively as they developed ways to catch, grow, and prepare it. Of course, preservation of food was critical for survival as well as wealth. Since the advent of electricity in the 1920s, refrigeration has been a constant and unquestioned method of preserving food. Today, salt is seldom used as a preservative in home kitchens, and salt cod and salt pork are not as popular as they once were. But most of our processed foods are high in sodium. Timeline by Nannette Oldenbourg.

In the 19th century, horse-drawn carriages enabled E.E.C. Swift and other food purveyors to supply the new hotels and summer residents as well as year-round neighbors. The predecessors of the man using this horse-drawn carriage had at first traded with neighbors, using carts and even wheelbarrows to hawk their wares. People conducted business on foot and on horseback all along Falmouth Road from Davisville, through Teaticket along Main Street to the Falmouth Village Green. Photo courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.



After 1871, when the railroad came to Falmouth, farmers and grocers received and shipped goods via rail. Taking the crops to the busy station became a major social event. The hardest part was keeping the horses calm when the train roared in. Graphic courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

This photograph captures the way of life in Falmouth at the turn of the previous century. Wild game provided nourishment, while some other wildlife was not appreciated. In the early 1700s, Falmouth proposed that other Cape towns help build a wall to keep out wolves from the woods of Plymouth and Middleboro. As recently as the 1920s, Falmouth selectmen offered a bounty of 50 cents for the ears of a woodchuck. Woodchucks not only ate crops, but they left holes where farm horses sometimes broke their legs. Photo courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

For at least 8,000 years in this region, people have gathered, fished, grown, and hunted food and have gathered wood and grasses for shelter. In the late 1660s, when English settlers arrived in Falmouth, they divided the land with food and wood production in mind. Each settler received a piece of plain land for food production and a piece of hill land for wood production. Initally, every person had a hand in producing food and shelter. Later, people developed specialized professions including farming, and food was traded at Falmouth's dock. In the late 1800s, when the train brought contact with bigger markets, both by bringing summer visitors to Falmouth and by taking products to Boston and beyond, farms grew with the markets they served. Strawberry, cranberry, dairy, vegetable, and other farms peaked in terms of numbers, size, and output before the second World War. Today fewer than 1% of people on Cape Cod work in agriculture, fishing, or forestry. This photo and timeline essay highlights Falmouth's history of living off the land from the 1600s subsistence agriculture, the earliest "manufactories" in the 1700s, to the peaks of commercial agriculture in the mid-1900s, and subsequent decline.

Nannette Drake Oldenbourg developed the "Living Off The Land" tours for the Falmouth Museums on the Green, working with Carolyn Powers, Mary Sicchio, and Cipperly Good with help from Jennifer Gaines, Ann Sears, and others. She has been living, eating, writing, and teaching in old houses on Cape Cod since 1989. Some of her short recordings on historical themes are heard as 30-second "sonic IDs" on WCAI.