

# Florence Eldred Johnson

## 1892-1984

by E. Graham Ward

Thomas Carlyle, the British historian and essayist, once defined history as "the biographies of great men." It would seem that he might be wrong on at least two counts.

History, as presented in this journal, has been understandably local with the idea that the powerful and the prominent cannot be ignored; but the truly local history of this peninsula is best seen through the eyes of those who lived and worked here, who grew the crops, built the boats, taught in the schools, produced the art, and entertained themselves with wit and invention. And not all of them were men.

Take Florence Eldred Johnson, for instance. Historian, teacher, photographer, bird-carver, painter, and taxi driver, Florence Johnson is a good example of a kind of Renaissance woman cultivated by character and the conditions of early 20th-century rural living.

Florence's story begins, naturally enough, with her father Charles Henry Eldred who, it turns out, was not an Eldred. His real name was Charles Tainter

Fish, one of the five or six children (at least two daughters, Mary and Martha) of George Washington Fish and Helen Tainter Fish. Despite his large family, George Fish decided to join the Union army (or was conscripted – sources vary) to fight in the Civil War. He died of disease at Baton Rouge in 1863 and his wife died the following year, leaving their children orphans.

The town of Falmouth stepped in and families were found for them. Lorenzo Eldred of Quissett and his wife Mercy Fish Eldred took the baby Charles, who was about 2½ years old at the time. It was not until 1878 that Charles was officially adopted (age 17) and his name was changed to Charles Henry Eldred.

Lorenzo was a major land owner in the Quissett area, his property extending from the harbor all the way to Racing Beach. In the area that is now Gray

Lane, off Sippewissett Road, he had even developed cranberry bogs. His dock was in the same place the boatyard dock is today.

In 1891 Charles married Adelaide Cook of Woburn, MA, who had come to Quissett as a schoolteacher



Cecelia Mercy, Charles Lorenzo and Florence Elizabeth Eldred, children of Charles Henry Eldred and Adelaide Cook, ca. 1902. Courtesy Judith Cooper.

for the Quissett school, a one-room schoolhouse serving the small village community. Three children were born to them: Florence Elizabeth in 1892, Cecelia Mercy in 1896, and Charles Lorenzo (known as "Charlie") in 1901. They all grew up in the large house, still standing and inhabited, which faces the dock on the right-hand side of Quissett Harbor Road.



The old Eldred Homestead. Courtesy Judith Cooper.

What follows are Florence Johnson's reflections on her life and the life around her taken from two interviews with her, conducted by Molly Willett in 1971, and a document she wrote for the Falmouth Historical Commission.

## Part I - Growing up in Quissett

### On the Eldred Homestead:

*The Eldred Homestead on Quissett Harbor Road was built by Lemuel Eldred about 1790. [It] was occupied by his son Lorenzo Eldred who died in 1888, and his son Charles who died in 1927, who was my father. I was born there, and my younger sister and brother – we all grew up there.*

*As I think back, the buildings were in the best of repair and convenient - large barn and carriage house and corn crib attached. A long shed held a woodhouse, blacksmith shop and space for a horse-drawn wooden roller for farm land. The house was a double house of 14 rooms. Many fruit trees and berries persisted for years. Lorenzo was one of the first in this area to develop cranberry bogs. The barn was never moved; the lower part of it was the pig pen. On the south side were two little rooms, and I remember one time we kept hens in there. All under the barn,*

*with horses and hay and everything else on the top floor. The cows kept the growth down. The Careys kept cows in the summer for the hotel [the Quissett Harbor House]. All of Sunset Hill [now Carey Lane] and all that land that comes right down in back of our old place was pasture. As a young man my father had a milk business, delivering milk in Quissett and Woods Hole.*

*Facilities for arts and crafts were in the attic of the Eldred homestead – spinning and flax wheel, yarn winder, flax and reed, quilting bars. At one corner, the herring closet – two horizontal bars across which were laid sharpened sticks run through the eyes of smoked herring. I think this was only for storage after smoking was done.*

### On her schooling:

*The school bell would ring at quarter to nine and my mother would be combing my hair – it was long and took a long time and it pulled. Then I'd have to run to get there in time. You could always hear the bell; it was also the fire alarm! On the outside of the school house was a*



The Quisset schoolhouse. Courtesy Judith Cooper.

box with a glass front – about 6" x 8" – and the key to the school house was in it. When there was a fire, anybody that wanted to gave an alarm – broke the glass, took the key out, opened the school house and rang the bell. The hose house was next to Quisset Hall [still standing]. The hose wagon was just two wheels with the hose wound on a spool and it was pulled by the men. They did not need to use a horse as they did not have to go far; it was just for Quisset!

We had two sessions at school and at noon I went to the Post Office which was practically next door, got the mail and went home to lunch. I gave the mail to my Father. My first teacher was Virtue Bowerman who married Arnold Gifford. She was the mother of Arnold Gifford Jr. who owned Saconnessett Homestead. That was her home. She lived to be quite an old lady. The Quisset school was closed about 1904. A new school was constructed on the site now occupied

by Town Hall parking space. I went into the 7th grade there.

#### On food and other supplies:

Evidently there were two grocery stores, one across the street from the Post Office referred to above and the other in the "new" Post Office near the school.

*Frank Davis, the store-keeper [in the new Post Office] was a very economical man. He would come to my Mother's and take orders and then go back and bring them in a basket. Mr. Aaron Fish [across the street] had a horse and wagon and delivered also.*

*We got mostly canned things and packaged things. We got our meat from a man who came from Woods Hole with a butcher's wagon. A Mr. Daniels used to drive it. It was a big wagon with a white covered top and at the back was a long chest. The corned beef was in the brine. Sidney Lawrence used to come with his fruit cart and he lived in Teaticket then. F.T. Lawrence, same family who had the grain store, delivered the ice. It came from Falmouth. I remember seeing it being cut from Shiverick's Pond.*

*The Evening Standard from New Bedford was delivered by express. A man in Waquoit used to go to New Bedford to do errands for people and he would drive from Waquoit right through to Woods Hole with his horses and leave them there to go to New Bedford on the boat. As he went by the Post Office [on his return], he'd throw out the big package of papers. So after school I could go and get the paper to bring home.*

### On leisure time and social activities:

*The early social life of Quissett was centered at the Quissett Hall. Bean and chowder suppers were held, followed by active games, square dances, etc. These were attended by the whole family. Children's parties were held and, as time went on, card parties for raising money.*

*Do you remember the bathhouses behind the hotel? We had more fun playing hide and seek around them. Whenever we had any company, we would come over and run along the platform. You could run all around them back and front and go through between the clusters of bathhouses. They were washed away in the hurricane of 1938.*



Joseph Fish and Charles H. Eldred, proprietors of Quissett Harbor Boatyard, then known as "Eldred and Fish." Courtesy Judith Cooper.

### On boats and sailing:

*My father and Mr. Joseph C. Fish started the boat business, probably about 1900. I do not remember the workshop being built but the buildings for winter storage were built later as boats of summer residents increased. My brother Charles Lorenzo Eldred had the business for a good many years after the death of his father.*

*I never sailed much, but we always slopped around in an old rowboat, went swimming in the harbor, went clamming and quahogging. We mostly swam right down by the boat shop. The same buildings were there as are there now, except that they have been improved some. There was a building down in front of Cornelia's [Carey] in the cove that was used as a boathouse part of the time. My father and Mr. Chadwick worked in the shop during the winter and built skiffs, and I think they might have built one or two small sailing boats, I don't remember, but they were always working on something like that. Mr. Alex Chadwick was a very dry, moderate type of man, not too talkative.*

*The family had a catboat named Addie. She was built in Fairhaven. I think he [Florence's father] had her built around 1900. She was named after my Mother. Addie was capable of carrying 25 people and was equipped with a 5 horsepower Lathrop one-cylinder outboard.*

*At the cat races in Little Harbor in Woods Hole we would go down in her and stay all day. My sister, my brother, and myself would go with Father. There was a big dock there; people came from up the Bay, Monument Beach, etc. Lots of people had catboats...this was a big day. All the people would be on the dock when the races were going on. They would start in Little Harbor and then go on a course into the Sound and back*



*again. It was real exciting. Sam Cahoon was the boatman. He organized the whole thing. The boats used motor and sail both. It was a lot of fun!*

*I never did any racing or anything like that. My Father used to take parties in the evening to Cottage City [Oak Bluffs] and sometimes I went along to steer. I was probably about fourteen or fifteen; and, of course, the weather was always an uncertainty. My Mother would worry to death before we got home, but Father always knew the way through the Hole. One time I went to New Bedford with him to take a man who had to have an emergency operation. This was the quickest way to get him there in those days. There was only one ferry a day [Sippewissett Road and other roads out of town had yet to be built]. I remember we went in the daytime and it came up quite windy; but Father wanted to get home, and he didn't want to leave his boat over there, so we came home. It was very, very, rough and we had had a nice dinner in a restaurant over there and I had had watermelon for dessert. When I got home I did not have the watermelon.*

*They had to try to keep me quiet to be sure I didn't say anything to my grandmother about it.*

## Part II - Beyond Quissett

Florence Eldred graduated from Lawrence High School and went on to Bridgewater Normal School, now Bridgewater State University, a university known for its interest in teaching and learning. After graduating from Bridgewater she embarked on a teaching career, following in her mother's footsteps.

### On her teaching years:

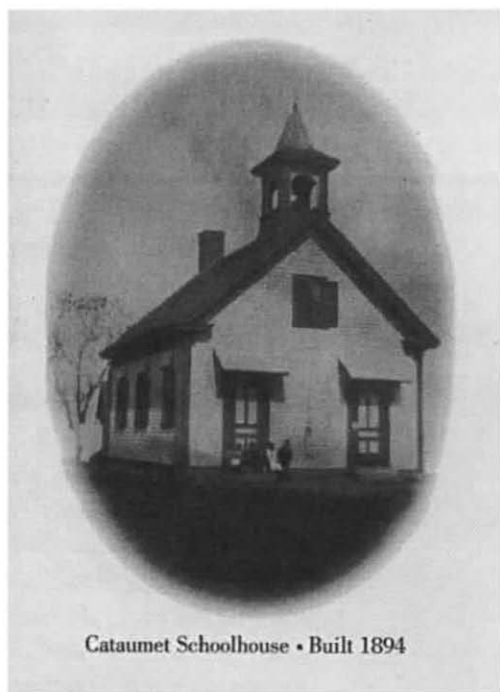
*I taught in North Falmouth one year and then I taught in Cataumet six years and I taught in North Uxbridge and in Whitinsville one year. When I taught in Cataumet I boarded with the Fullers and came home on weekends because at that time my Father did not have a car. The last year I was there I used to go back and forth on the train. I would go Sunday afternoon and come back Friday afternoon, and I used to take my bicycle. Sometimes I would ride it all the way home on Fridays if the weather was good, but I loved the train.*

The Cataumet schoolhouse where Florence taught is still standing and has recently been renovated. In fact, according to

Nancy Eldridge of the Cataumet Schoolhouse Preservation Group, a photograph taken by Florence of the schoolhouse was used in the renovation process. Also, according to Mrs. Eldridge, six years was quite a long time for a teacher to stay at such a school.



Florence Eldred's 1910 graduation picture from Lawrence High School. Courtesy Judith Cooper.



Cataumet Schoolhouse • Built 1894

Card featuring a 1919 photo of the Cataumet School House by Florence Eldred, teacher 1913-1919. The card was made for the Cataumet Schoolhouse Preservation Group, dedicated to the restoration, preservation, protection, and sharing of the 1894 one-room schoolhouse in Cataumet. Photo by Florence Johnson.

Most of the teachers were single young women. Once married, though, they had to leave their jobs, according to the rules of the times.

The Cataumet Schoolhouse, which was built in 1894, housed grades 1-8, girls and boys, who had separate entrances and, of course, separate outhouses out back. The students, who walked to school, came from the nearby neighborhood. Florence photographed her students at work and play and some of those photographs are on exhibit at the restored Schoolhouse.

Florence seems to have had an interest in photography from an early age. Given that interest one can

assume that she took most of the photographs in her various family albums. Certainly photographs from her travels are hers and they show a careful consideration of subject matter, composition, and lighting – more so than the casual snapshot of the day.

### Part III - Return to Quissett

In August, 1921, Florence married Edward (Ted) Johnson. He worked for her father and was 14 years older than she. The marriage officially ended her career as a teacher but it stimulated a new career as a bird carver. Florence had collected glass and china bird miniatures but they were mostly birds not native to the Cape area. She asked her husband, who was used to working with wood in the boatyard, if he would carve her some local birds. She would do the painting.

Initially these carved birds were created just for themselves, but those who saw them began to ask if they could buy duplicates. At this point in Florence's life her husband had died. They had had no children and she had time on her hands. She became both carver and painter. Her "customers" would look at the original birds on her shelves and pick one or two for her to duplicate. In addition to the carving and painting Florence would scour the beaches around Quissett for suitable driftwood for the base of the carvings. In a profile of her in *The Falmouth Enterprise* she is quoted as saying, "I bring home everything I find, like all beachcombers, but mostly it's driftwood."

Like the glass and china birds she had earlier assembled she also had a collection of exotic shells that she and her husband had brought back from Florida where they also beachcombed during their trips there. Part of the "everything," that Florence brought back from the Quissett beaches was a hand-

ful of shells and unusual rocks. These became part of her display in her sunroom overlooking the harbor. Neighborhood children felt comfortable visiting her and began to refer to her as "the bird lady." The rocks and shells were for sale – five for a penny with a top price of a nickel. "Their parents don't seem to feel they are bothering me if the children pay a tiny price. And they are company and fun," she said to *The Enterprise*. Some of the older children were even allowed to carve their own birds, under supervision. Florence's sunroom began to look like a small schoolhouse.

As *The Enterprise* concluded, "If she isn't teaching them, and if no small hands are fingering her five-for-a-penny shells, she sits down quietly by a window for two or three hours a day. Hands busy with her hobby, she doesn't think of herself as being quite alone. As I make the bird, I'm thinking of the person it's for and how she will like it."

Florence lived for another 15 years after this 1969 profile was published. She expanded her creative endeavors to oil painting, concentrating on her surroundings – boats, the ocean, the winding roads of Quissett. She continued to write a daily log, unemotional and direct, which she had been doing since 1907. Sample:

*1938, Sept. 20, Tues. Went sketching at Knob beach in P.M.*

*Sept. 21, Wed. Big Hurricane. Went to town in A.M. Wind and Tide came up. Tide 8 ft. above normal tide. Wharf, floats, and bath houses wrecked.*

*Sept. 22, Thurs. Bath houses gone at Harbor House. Walked over in A.M. Went to Maravista with kids and Ted to see wreck. We have great loss of life.*

*1984 [her last entry], Jan. 7, Sat. Windy at night.*

According to her nephew, Ernest "Bud" Baker, she also had a brief stint as a taxi driver for the Palmer Bus Co., picking up her passengers from the train stop off Depot Ave. and taking them to the Quissett

Harbor House. In her later days she was a familiar figure behind the wheel of her car, moving slowly now through the well-traveled streets. The car? A suitably named 1963 Plymouth Valiant.

#### Sources and Acknowledgments:

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*The Falmouth Enterprise*.

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E. Graham Ward, together with his wife Maria, has been a member of the *Spritsail* editorial board since 2005.



One of Florence Eldred Johnson's carved birds. Photo by E. Graham Ward.