

# River Bend Silo

*by Ann Sears*



The tall, ceramic tile block silo at 682 Sandwich Road (formerly River Bend Kennels) is the surviving structure of one of the older, small farms in the Hatchville section of Falmouth.

Built in 1921, the silo stored green fodder — grasses and corn — for winter feed for the cows of a small dairy farm called Sunnyside. The silo was the center-most structure in a cluster of buildings that included a separate one-and-a-half-story house dating to the 1790s and a spring house to the south. It was attached at ground level to a ten-cow barn and storage

shed to the north. The buildings were located on a ten-acre strip of land bordered by Sandwich Road on the east and the Coonamessett River on the west. The cow pasture was across the road.

The other farm buildings were demolished in 2011 after the town's land conservation trust, The 300 Committee, purchased the property as part of an open space plan to protect land along the river. The silo remains in place, at least temporarily, at the request of a group of townspeople who want to see it preserved as a historic landmark and symbol

of Hatchville's agricultural past. Believing that it will make an interesting trailhead center for paths along the river and for displays about Falmouth's agricultural history, the group is raising funds to restore the structure.

Hatchville, located between East and West Falmouth and north of Teaticket village, has long been considered the agricultural heartland of Falmouth. It was first settled in the early 18th century around the Coonamessett Pond and river. Colonial Sandwich Road was the main transportation corridor.

The section between Meetinghouse and Turner Roads, where the silo is located, was the Hatchville village center in 1800 with a church, school, tavern, blacksmith shop and fulling mill. Of that group, only the East End Meeting House of 1797 remains.

Nevertheless, the area retains its rural character, having escaped the intense summer resort development that occurred along Falmouth's coast during much of the 20th century. Across the road from the silo is the Cape Cod Winery, and behind that, the old Tony Andrews strawberry farm. Cranberry bogs stretch out southeast and northwest, and the Smithfield horse farm operates across from the meeting house, now the Falmouth Jewish Congregation.

### *Historic Significance*

The glazed ceramic tile silo is an historically significant structure that marks the site of a succession of rural land uses and people who have been important in the history of Hatchville and the town. The silo itself is historically important as an intact example of the ceramic silos that were once the most effective means of preserving and fermenting grasses and corn for use as food for grazing animals in the winter.

Although the silo was built 90 years ago, the recorded history of the land begins much earlier. More than 220 years ago a young man named Shubael Lawrence thought he could make money by building a fulling mill to finish the coarse woolen fabric that Falmouth residents were making from their herds of sheep. The mill became the foundation of his family fortune and the continuation of two of the town's oldest institutions.

### *Shubael Lawrence 1788 - 1841*

In 1788 Lawrence obtained permission from the Falmouth town meeting to operate a fulling mill at the River Bend site on the Coonamessett where the river had already been dammed. The town meeting record is as follows:

Voted that whereas Shubael Lawrence having a mind to set up a fulling mill on the land of Joshua Jenkins, the town gives up all their write [sic] and title if they have any to said stream, that part of it running through said Jenkins land to said Lawrence, excepting the privilege of herring passing in said stream so long as said Lawrence shall occupy said mill.

Voted that the town will omit taxing said mill as long as said Lawrence shall improve it.

### *Fulling Mills*

Fulling mills were used to finish handwoven cloth, usually wool, by washing it to remove oil and pre-shrink it, and by pounding it with mallets to smooth and soften the fabric. The mills were located on streams that were dammed so that water could be channeled to power the machinery. Sheep-raising towns like Falmouth often encouraged the opening of fulling mills by exempting them from taxation.

Operators of fulling mills were called “clothiers,” and that is how Lawrence is identified in most of his land deeds through 1813. After 1813, deeds identify him as a trader or as esquire, which may have referred to his two-year term in the state legislature around 1812. By that time he was broadening his business interests to include hundreds of acres of land in Hatchville, and saltworks along the shore. In 1821 he became one of the founding investors in the Falmouth National Bank, the first bank on Cape Cod, and his holdings grew to include shares in the Bar Neck Wharf in Woods Hole and several Falmouth whalships.

It is likely that Lawrence built his home near the mill in 1793, the year before his marriage to Dinah Davis. That year he purchased a 3/4 acre wooded site between the road and the river. This likely construction date conforms with the “late 18th century” estimate of the age of the house made in 1988 by an historic preservation expert who remarked that the cottage was “exceptionally plain,” lacking the embellishment of a transom or pilasters at the entry. In later years Lawrence purchased more acreage north and south of the house that make up the present day River Bend site.

In 1826, Lawrence moved to the c. 1800 Jenkins house across the street at 643 Sandwich Road which he purchased for \$1,800. Although the Fish (Fisher) family were the residents at River Bend according to 1840 federal census records, the Lawrence probate inventory shows that River Bend remained in Lawrence family ownership until at least 1841.

It is not known how long the fulling mill was in operation. Just before the turn of the century, a woolen mill was built further downstream by Benjamin Parker on what is now John Parker Road that may have impacted the Lawrence mill. By the

1840s textile mills had replaced most home-based cloth production, and fulling mills were no longer needed. The fulling mill is not listed in the inventory of property after Lawrence’s death in 1841, but two “machinery buildings” without a site are identified and valued at \$20.

### *Shubael Lawrence Junior, 1797-1841*

After Lawrence’s death, his surviving son Shubael, a 44-year-old bachelor living with his parents, according to the 1840 census, became town’s first major philanthropist. Shubael Junior was a husbandman who counted a hundred sheep among his possessions. He died a few months after his father, leaving \$10,000 to support the town’s first secondary school and \$10,000 to the East End Meeting House. Shubael Junior is responsible for changes to the meeting house that made it look more like a house of worship. He stipulated that a steeple and bell be added to the roof and that the large house be turned so that its gable-end faces Sandwich Road. His gift to the town’s first high school required that it be renamed the Lawrence Academy. Falmouth’s public Lawrence Junior High School today continues to carry the family name.

### *Capt. James H. Fisher, 1862-1914*

Whaling Capt. James H. Fisher who bought the farm for his parents in 1862, was one of a number of Hatchville boys who went to sea in the 1850s. The whaling industry was beginning its long decline at that time, and Fisher was witness to and participant in some of the events that eventually made it uneconomical for the industry to continue. He was 18 on his first voyage in 1856 and spent most of the next 23 years in the Pacific chasing a declining number of whales.

Capt. Fisher survived five whaling disasters: he was a crew member on two whalers that were captured and burned by Confederate cruisers during the Civil War. He was captain of three whaleships crushed by Arctic ice in the 1870s as whalers sailed further into the North Pacific in search of whales. In the 1871 catastrophe his ship, the *Oliver Crocker*, was one of more than 20 whalers crushed by the advancing ice. The crews were rescued by nearby whaleships and taken to Hawaii.

In a letter now at the Falmouth Historical Society, Fisher wrote in 1867, "I wouldn't believe that a ship could have passed over so many whale grounds and not see sperm whales." In a later letter, he commented stoically, "Whaling's a lottery."

Fisher left the sea after an illness in 1879 and returned to Hatchville with his wife Rebecca Howland of Dartmouth, whom he had married in 1877. He had grown up in the River Bend farmhouse, according to the 1840 census and the 1858 and 1880 county atlases which listed his father Phineas Fish as resident. Phineas, a former mariner, was probably a tenant in the early years. The 1862 deed shows that his son, Capt. Fisher, purchased the farm from his cousin Joseph Richardson, a Falmouth native, then a New Bedford trader. In the deed Richardson described the two parcels he sold as "the homestead of the late Shubael Lawrence which I bought of Ward M. Parker, executor to his estate. . ."

### *Cranberries 1893 - 1950*

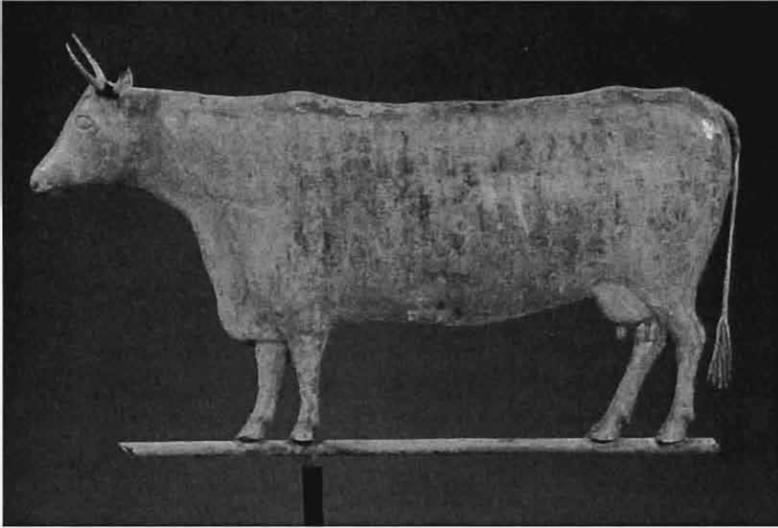
Capt. Fisher built the cranberry bog at River Bend in the boom years of the 1890s when lowlands and swamps along the Coonamessett River and other streams in Waquoit were cleared, leveled, ditched, drained, and planted with cranberry vines. Cranber-

ries were first brought into cultivation around 1816 on Cape Cod, and they had been raised in Hatchville since the 1850s. But they did not become a major crop until the 1890s when the newly introduced cranberry scoop and immigrant workers made large-scale cultivation of this native fruit possible. In Falmouth, many immigrants from the Azores and Cape Verde islands were recruited to work on the bogs. Their settlement in Falmouth helped reverse the decline in the town's population that had begun with the collapse of the maritime economy in the Civil War.

The River Bend bog appears to have gone out of production in the 1950s when the market price for berries was low because of overproduction. The major drop in cranberry production on the Cape occurred in the 1970s when several years of drought, low prices, and competition from more mechanized growers in Wisconsin caused commercial growers to leave Cape Cod and concentrate on improving larger off-Cape bogs near a new processing plant.

### *Sunnyside 1920 -1960*

The history of the River Bend silo begins with Frank Williams of Winchester, an early and wealthy summer resident of Falmouth Heights, who purchased the then 11-acre farm in 1920 along with 19 acres of former orchard land across the street. Williams converted the property to a small dairy that he named "Sunnyside." He built a new barn with ten stalls and a modern watering system and topped the roof with a copper weathervane in the shape of a cow. The silo appears in the 1921 assessors records.



### *Silos*

Silos are rural American structures that developed in the 1870s so that dairy farmers could meet the year-round demand for milk from growing urban areas. Silos enabled farmers to feed their cows moist, fermented grasses and corn during the winter when pastures were covered by snow. Such silage was more nutritious than dry hay, enabling cows to produce better milk.

Construction of ceramic silos began in the early 20th century after it

With Sunnyside, Williams was pursuing an interest in gentlemen farming shared by some of Falmouth's wealthiest summer residents since the 1870s. Sunnyside was a small version of the much larger dairies that were built in Hatchville in the 1920s--Coonamessett Ranch, Kensington, Brae Burn, and Attamansitt.

Sunnyside did not last as long as most of the others, however. By 1927, the number of cows had dropped to zero, according to the town assessors. Williams continued to summer at the Sandwich Road farm until his death in 1939. His daughter Ruth Hixon of Melrose, a summer resident of North Falmouth, visited there through the 1960s, but with the exception of cranberry production, other farm activity appears to have been limited.

became possible to use natural gas to reach the high temperatures needed to fire the thick tiles. The River Bend silo is a variation of the hollow ceramic block silo developed by the Iowa Experiment Station in 1908. It is built of thick, slightly curved, double-sided, partially hollow, glazed ceramic blocks. The blocks are just over a foot square and almost four inches thick, in varying shades of brown. Each contains several hollow channels.

Ceramic silos were considered superior to the early wooden and concrete block structures because the tiles were non-flammable, could better retain moisture, keep out air, and withstand internal pressures from the fermenting vegetation. They were in fashion for only a short time, however. There were structural limitations on how high ceramic block silo walls could be. River Bend's silo is about 25 feet tall with a diameter of 10 feet. By the 1930s farmers had switched to less expensive, larger and taller silos of poured concrete. Today dairy farmers are favoring metal silos and experimenting with large plastic bags.