

A Picture is Worth 1,000 Words: Donald Fish, the Man Behind the Vintage Falmouth Photographs

by Christine M. Lynch

Photographs from earlier eras are especially intriguing when they display recognizable places or names. Falmouth is fortunate to have a man who has amassed an impressive collection of historic photographs, and who shares them readily. If the name Donald Fish seems familiar, it's likely that you have seen it as a credit under the hundreds of photographs he's lent for publication.

Mr. Fish preserves history through these photographs. In fact, his family history is entwined with the history of Falmouth. He is a direct descendant of Jonathan Hatch, who arrived here in the 1600s and gave his name to Hatchville. On his mother's side, he traces his lineage back to the *Mayflower* through William Parker. His parents were Marcella and Jehial Hatch Fish. They raised their five children—Melvin, Paul, Adeline, Jehial, and Donald Ernest—in homes around Main Street. Donald, born in 1928, was nicknamed Bucky, due to his then-prominent front teeth.

Mr. Fish has distinct memories of growing up in a much more open Falmouth landscape. He described ponds, fields, and large stands of pine in the downtown area and recalled lacing up his ice skates as he sat with friends on a frosty stone wall behind Eastman's Hardware. That wall bordered Shiverick's Pond years before that part of the pond was filled in for the construction of Katharine Lee Bates Road. Once on the ice, the skaters would cruise around the pond and glide through an arborway over to Weeks Pond. He described the old icehouse on the pond, in ruins even when he was a boy. He mentioned



Jehial Fish, Donald Fish, and Junior Hopkins on Walker St. in 1937 or '38. Photo by Mrs. Charles Morrison.

how his friends would dare each other to climb it and jump off the roof. They would take some of the boards to build “huge bonfires to keep warm so we could keep skating longer.”

He smiled thinking about the “acres of giant pine trees, just like an enchanted forest,” in the area that is today Amvets Avenue. Neighborhood kids would scurry over there to play “cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians.” For Mr. Fish, who relishes history, these detailed depictions of life in earlier days in Falmouth come naturally.

A Sight to Behold

He vividly evoked one particularly historic scene as though he were that young boy playing outside his house: “At the time, 1936, there was a small hill, maybe twelve to fifteen feet high behind Malchman’s

store by Walker Street and I was playing on it.” He heard a deep sound going THUM-THUM-THUM. Blimps, coming from the naval air base in South Weymouth, were a common sight. “Sometimes there’d be five blimps doing maneuvers out over the water.” Still, the noise he heard that day was much louder than the usual such noise.

“All of a sudden I look up and see a *humongous* silver and gray blimp flying so low, only about one hundred and fifty feet up.” He started calling, “Momma, Momma, BIG blimp!” His mother rushed out and stood there with him. “She gasped, ‘My God, that’s the *Hindenburg!*’”

Mr. Fish seemed to see the observation deck as clearly as he had those many decades ago. “We could see tiny hands in the windows waving at us, some of them waving white hankies. My mother reached into



Skaters on Shiverick's Pond in 1900.

From the collection of Donald Fish.

her apron pocket and pulled out her own hanky to wave back.”

His family, during these Depression years, wasn't rich. "My father had all he could do to feed five kids and put a roof over our heads." The family enjoyed a lot of friends, had good senses of humor, and made do with very little, as was common for most families then.

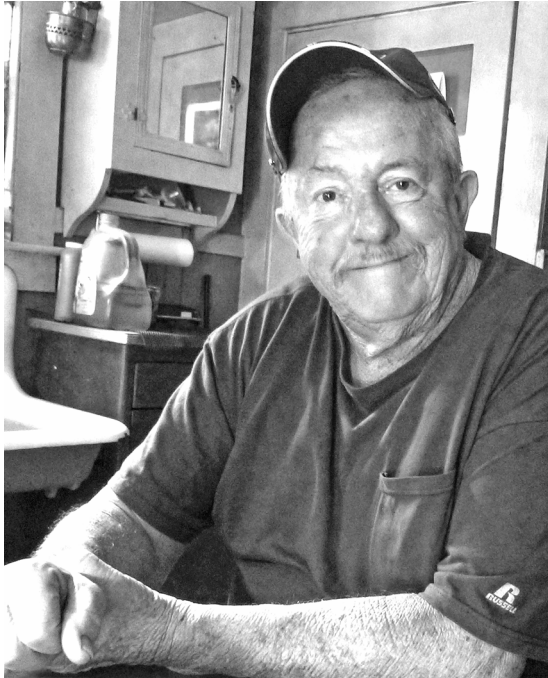
A popular destination for Donald and his pals was the town dump. "We went there to get bottles for movie money, but you never knew what you'd find that could be useful." That's where he came across his first cameras. "We'd find discarded box cameras because they were cheap, maybe a dollar each, so people would toss them." He collected a few and put together working cameras from the parts. That's when he caught the photography bug, but he didn't continue seriously until after World War II.

The World War II Years

When his three older brothers were off fighting the war, Donald couldn't wait to get his chance to do his part. Back home, he helped out the war effort. In sixth grade at the Village School, he took part in the Children's War Sewing group. Each Wednesday the kids would cut out flannel mittens and booties, which would then be stitched by older students

and sent for British relief. In 1943 he joined the Sea Scouts. He was active in fund-raising and worked to refurbish a Coast Guard boat they were given.

In 1946 friends told him to enlist because by the time the papers arrived, he'd be eighteen and eligible to go. "I was so anxious waiting for my papers to come in the mail." When they did, he ran to his mother to sign the release. "Only she wouldn't." He recalled her words: "I'm not letting another son of mine go to war." Being persistent, he went to his father. His dad knew that his son wouldn't want to sit home when there was action somewhere. "My father wanted me out of the house and into the world anyway, so he signed them."



Donald E. Fish.

Photo by Leonard Miele.

Donald Fish joined the National Guard, Battery C, 685th AAA Gun Battalion.

A *Falmouth Enterprise* article dated September 30, 1949, details some of the field-work training maneuvers for that unit. Private Fish, now a 90-millimeter gun director, and the others in his group were commended for their work.

He took on any work he could find in Falmouth. "You'd just feel lucky you were working." He was a self-proclaimed jack-of-all-trades. "I was an ice man delivering ice. Then I worked for Wood Lumber that was and still is a good company." He found steady work in the 1950s when he became a house painter working for several contractors. "Then I realized

that I could do this on my own, so I started my own painting company and did good business. It was all through word of mouth.”

He stayed in Falmouth while some of his brothers moved to the Boston area. “I had everything I wanted right here, so why would I ever move away?” He has continued to live in his family home on Oakwood Avenue, where he cared for his beloved mother until she passed away.

Remaining single, he worked and enjoyed hanging out with friends. He also discovered a hobby he relished: “In the sixties and seventies I started painting pictures. Just took it up myself—self-taught.” He concentrated on nautical themes, ships, and scenes of mountains and lakes.

Gathering His Vast Collection of Photographs

He also resumed his love for photography. “I decided to buy a good camera.” He purchased a quality 35-mm SLR camera, and in the 1950s he became fascinated by copies of old photos by unidentified photographers. He also dabbled in moving pictures with an eight-millimeter camera. “That started when some big storms came through, Hurricane Donna and others, and I’d walk around with the camera going to show the great damage that was done.”

Just as he did as a young boy when he hunted for treasures in the landfill, Mr. Fish scouted for historical images of any kind, including stereoscopes, old family albums, and vintage postcards. He would scour rummage sales, yard sales, and second-hand shops, paying just pennies for stacks of such materials. If the quality of an image was poor, he’d restore it and take the film to Ortins Camera Store to be processed.

Additionally, he had an “in” with Lewis H. Lawrence, director of the Falmouth Historical Society from 1943-1956, who encouraged Mr. Fish’s interest in historical photographs. Mr. Fish fondly remembers that mentor. “He would let me come by every Wednesday, when I’d sit in the archive room surrounded by photographs.”

He especially values one of his oldest, a stereoscopic image dating from 1848. This technique uses two photographs that are taken from slightly offset angles, then placed side by side on a holder. When they are viewed with a stereopticon, the two photographs merge into a 3-D image. Another prized photo dates from 1886, taken on Main Street during Falmouth’s Bicentennial celebration.

In order to pinpoint where and when the photos had been taken, he said, “I’d drive around the area using maps I had from 1848, 1880, and 1906. I’d use these maps for reference until I found the spot.” He made it sound simple, but it could be painstaking work to locate features and landmarks that had gotten obscured through the years.

When asked how many photographs are in his agglomeration, Mr. Fish admitted, “Oh, you know, I never counted them, but an estimate would be a couple of thousand.” He said that he keeps both photographs and slides and has developed a personal filing system in order to know where to look when he wants a particular image.

He demonstrated this system when he related a story about having the winning ticket for a prized sled. Suddenly he stopped talking, popped up, and headed out of the room. When he returned, just half-a-minute later, he was holding a photograph of himself as a nine-year-old standing with his brother

Jehial and a neighbor friend. Young Donald Fish is holding the very sled an older Donald Fish had just recounted winning. His face shows how proud he was of that sled and the excitement he felt heading out into the snow to use it.

As his collection grew, Mr. Fish often gave slide presentations at different events in the town. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, groups like school PTAs and the Rotarians enjoyed nostalgic tours down Falmouth's memory lane. He also went out to Otis Air Force Base to entertain the troops stationed there and had regular Sunday evening showings for tourists and locals at Lawrence's Restaurant in Falmouth Heights.

He still offers his photographs as a weekly feature in *The Falmouth Enterprise*. William H. Hough, the paper's editor and publisher, said that each week Mr. Fish selects an interesting photograph; deciding on the caption is "a team approach." Mr. Fish sometimes supplies the place and names, and Mr. Hough or an *Enterprise* staff person "checks the paper to see what info we have."

They have been collaborating like this for about ten years. Mr. Hough noted, "Donald Fish did this same thing with my father." The late John T. Hough was the paper's publisher until 1991. "That was twenty-five or so years ago, but back then the photographs appeared just occasionally, not each week."

2015 Falmouth Historical Society Heritage Award

On April 16, 2015, Donald Fish was honored, along with Karen Rinaldo and Joan Kanwisher, at the 2015 Falmouth Historical Society Heritage Award Dinner. This award, as described on the society's website, "recognizes individuals or organizations who have provided outstanding leadership over time to help

preserve the character, culture, stories, vistas or other aspects of Falmouth's rich history, or have inspired others to do so, resulting in a lasting legacy."

Mark Schmidt, director of the Museums on the Green, said, "Mr. Fish is most deserving of this honor.... He's proud of his collection and is protective of it." He keeps the photos safely stored yet accessible to the public so that people can enjoy them. "Mr. Fish, I believe, fears that people will forget Falmouth's past."

Mr. Fish loves his town. He regularly visits his sister Adeline, who lives nearby, sees friends, and heads to the Elks and Amvets to socialize. He leads a satisfying life, full of appreciation for the wealth of history that shaped Falmouth and making sure its many stories live on for the ages. "I was born and raised here and I have all these photographs. What better way to preserve the history of the place than to share them? If I didn't they wouldn't be appreciated the way they should be." He firmly hopes to keep his collection privately owned while allowing public access to the photographs for display and print media. He deeply cares about his collection: "This is my legacy."

About the Author

Christine Lynch and her husband Jim moved from Austin, Texas to Falmouth in 1982 to work at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. Currently, she is a library assistant at the Falmouth Public Library and a freelance writer for various Cape publications. She is the author of *A History of the Falmouth Public Library*, which includes many photos from the Donald Fish collection.



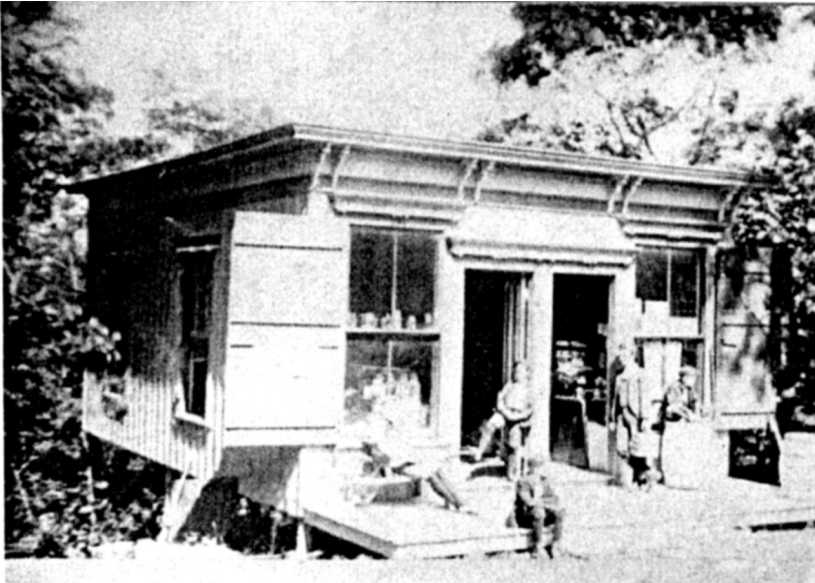
View from the library lawn. Town hall on the right, Methodist church on the left.

From the collection of Donald Fish.



Donald Fish's notes on the back of this photograph: Dr. James Walker in front of his store on Main Street, ca. 1900. "Walker Pharmacy." Later Dr. Robinson's Pharmacy in 1920s. Later was Iris Drug Store in the '30s & '40s. Now Kinchla Bld. Dr. Walker brought my father into the world in 1889. Jehial Hatch Fish. Dr. Walker owned one of the first autos in Falmouth.

From the collection of Donald Fish.



THEN

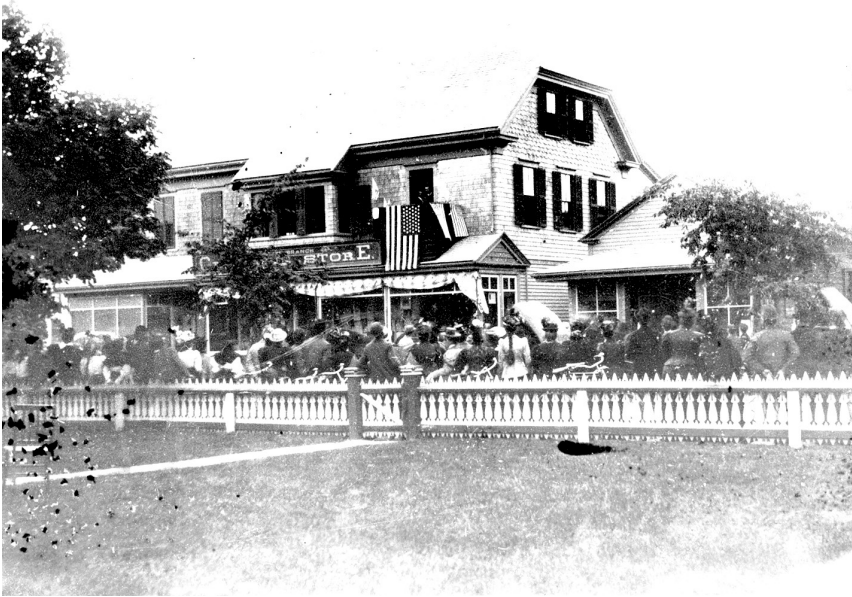
Confectionary shop in Falmouth Heights, 1890. The store sold candy and ice cream.
From the collection of Donald Fish.

NOW



Confectionary shop building, 2016.

Photo by Steve Chalmers.



A parade passing the Nickerson Block, ca. 1908.

From the collection of Donald Fish.



Looking west down Main Street from Scranton Ave. ca 1925. Now the site of 7-11 and John's Package Store.

From the collection of Donald Fish.

Battery C Brings Back Trophy of Camp

Excerpts from a Falmouth Enterprise story from September 30, 1949, provide some details of Donald Fish's National Guard unit on its annual two weeks of training.

The 44 men and two officers had left in their battery vehicles [for a week at Camp Edwards] Saturday, Sept. 10th roaring out of town on their annual training junket. After settling down and organizing the mess and equipment, the group began a training program directed by a team from Fort Bliss, Texas, which familiarized them with the 90 millimeter gun and its radar spotting equipment.

On Friday night over 1,000 dancers, [including all the men in training,] enjoyed a ball. Mrs. Hugh Duglay arranged for the junior hostesses who attended the dance.

On Saturday and during the weekend the men were given passes. They were back in camp in plenty of time to make the trip to the ranges at Wellfleet on Monday, Sept. 19.

The food was good. On the first day the new Army C ration was tried. The men had regular Army rations during the rest of the week. There was steak and all the trimmings, and few complaints.

Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons Battery C let fly at the 22-foot [long] red rayon sleeve towed by [a] plane [on a long tow-line]. Wednesday was a big day for Battery C. The plane came over with the target and only the Falmouth battery was firing. At 210 miles an hour and nearly 6,000 feet it wasn't easy to hit but Battery C cut the target from the plane with a well-placed shot. There was consternation among the observers [for fear the shells had come too close to the plane].

The boys recovered the sleeve, stuffed it in a barracks bag and brought it home with them. It hangs with its rents and tears in the upper room of the town hall, a precious trophy.

At the Friday evening party the boys were commended by Col. Hopkins for their work and the battery was served up a round on the colonel.