

Hard Against the Rising Ground

by Thomas Sbarra

Logic would dictate that the oldest part of Falmouth would be the village center or the village green. However, the original center of town was the old burying ground and the meeting house, near what is now the intersection of the bike path and Woods Hole Road. Some of the names of the streets in that area reflect the history of those first settlers. Others—Elm Road, Locust Street, and Pin Oak Way—were named for trees on what had been a treeless plain. The stories of those early settlers and a few determined larger-than-life characters illuminate the changes that occurred as the town center migrated over the last 350 years.

In 1524, a century before the settling of Falmouth, and just 32 years after Columbus, Giovanni da Verazzano sailed into Narragansett Bay and was struck by the treeless landscape extending for dozens of miles inland from the head of the bay. Native Americans had been in the area for thousands of years, fishing, hunting, and cultivating maize. Their farming methods included first girdling the trees, then burning the brush to clear the land and control pests. This successful practice remained unchanged for millennia.

The arrival of Europeans brought smallpox,

measles, and other diseases that were endemic in Europe to the local inhabitants, who had no natural resistance. The Wampanoag population on Cape Cod declined from an estimated 40,000 in 1600 to fewer than 1,600 by 1700, an astonishing 96% mortality. This depopulation left room for waves of immigrants, who then made their own changes in the landscape

Jonathan Hatch, one of the first European settlers of Falmouth, found a treeless landscape when he first washed up on Salt Pond in 1660. By that time, despite historical accounts of fields of maize growing along the shore and likely due to the astoundingly rich shell fishing, as well as the rapid decline in their population, the Wampanoag were not doing nearly as much farming as they had previously. Still, the land was virtually treeless; the rocky soil and exposure to salt spray had kept the vegetation down.

Jonathan Hatch had gotten himself in trouble living in Barnstable by associating “excessively” with the natives and being entirely too tolerant of the Quakers. The Quakers were distinctly *persona non grata* with the majority Puritans, who didn’t care at all for the Quak-



Moses Hatch house.

Photo by Steve Chalmers

ers' fair treatment of women and their pacifism. Jonathan and the town fathers got tired of butting heads. In 1660 he got in his boat and paddled to Falmouth, where he felt he was far enough away to live peacefully. To shelter his house from the north winds of winter, he built into the south side of the last glacier's



Siders Pond.

Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

terminal moraine, in his words, "Hard against the rising ground." His ability to speak Wampanoag allowed him to negotiate the purchase of land from the Native Americans, who also helped him survive. He was optimistic enough to send for his wife a year later; shortly after her arrival in 1663, she gave birth to the first of their eleven children. Moses Hatch is widely considered to be the first European child born in Falmouth.

Over the next few decades, Jonathan continued his purchase of most of the land from Naushon Island to what is now Falmouth's village green. His family spread around him. They lived much as the natives had, off game, some corn, berries and shellfish. They had access to drinking water from Fresh Pond, behind what is now Town Hall. Because of the distance required to bring water, they dug a well down the hill and across what became Elm Road. When son Moses grew up, he built his house close to the well that remained until the 1940s. That house still stands on the same spot.

At a time when throughout the colonies English, French and Spanish settlers were slaughtering Native Americans or kidnapping them and sending

them back to Europe as prizes, the Hatch clan remained on good terms with the native population. These relationships contributed to the reluctance of both sides to engage in the conflict between Native Americans and settlers, known as King Philip's War, named for a Wampanoag chief. This war

raged virtually everywhere else in southeastern New England from 1675 to 1678, devastating both Native American and colonial settlements, but it left the Upper Cape unscathed.

Toward the end of his life in 1747, when Moses Hatch was 84 years old, he donated land to the burgeoning town of Falmouth for a militia training ground, the present village green. In 1796 the Congregational Church was built on the training field and later enlarged. Paul Revere, who had resumed his foundry business after the Revolution, cast a bell for the new church that same year. In 1857 the church was moved across the street to its current location. Houses and businesses were built around the field, and the center of town gradually coalesced around the Village Green.

The Hatches had lived and died in the same spot for 100 years, and the Old Burying Ground near Mill Road is filled with their remains. They probably would have stayed, but about 1750 the oysters in Oyster Pond, a mainstay of the Hatches' diet, began mysteriously to disappear. Although not understood at the time, this was likely due to the silting of the outflow of the pond to the sea near what is now the

Moors beach. Because the pond had a fresh water source at its head, the salinity of the pond had slowly declined and the water had become inhospitable to the nutritious bivalves.*

Grandson Ebenezer Hatch, faced with the loss of this food source, looked for land that was more fertile than the rocky, uneven terrain the family had grown up on. They found relatively flat and fertile land surrounding Coonamessett Pond, a clean source of freshwater near what is now Cape Cod Country Club.

Turners, Geggatts, Robinsons, and Fays joined Ebenezer, all with similar plans. In 1858, almost 200 years after Jonathan came ashore, Silas Hatch was named postmaster of the new Hatchville Post Office, a position he held for 61 years. Hatchville Road, Sam Turner Road, Robinson and Geggatt roads were all named for these early

Oyster Pond, Falmouth, Mass.



Oyster Pond.

Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

settlers. By this time, the Hatch clan, beginning with Jonathan's eleven children, had indeed gone forth and multiplied: by the late 1800s there were 10,000 Hatch descendants from Maine to Connecticut.

Just as that post office was being established in Hatchville, Elm Road, the site of the first settlement, was accepted by the town in 1857, although the road was then only about half its eventual length. The remaining portion was not upgraded from path to road until 1925, when real estate development came to the original Hatch lands, by then farmland. So it happened that the first Hatch homestead was the last to be subdivided.



The Hatch windmill.

Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Hatch descendants remained around the old homestead. Great-granddaughter Katy had gardens near what is now the little triangular park at the intersection of the bike path, Locust Street, and Mill Road. Bill Mullen,

the developer of land in the area, memorialized her in 1955 by naming the main street in his new development Katy Hatches Road.

Consider Hatch had built a house on the village green in 1748. The house backed up to the beautiful pond, the original Hatch drinking water source, then known as Fresh Pond, but now known, in his honor, as Siders Pond. With extensive landholdings the family had enough resources in 1750 to build a grain mill at the head of nearby Salt Pond with unobstructed access to the southwest wind. This mill stood on Mill Road until 1936—for nearly 200 years!

A large tract of land surrounding the mill was sold off to Nathaniel H. Emmons, a wealthy businessman from Boston. He built a mansion near the mill and had a 60-acre dairy farm beginning in 1880. Nearby Emmons Road bears his name. He is known for leading a group of investors in an unsuccessful effort to open Salt Pond to the sea as a deep water harbor for Falmouth, because they thought Old Stone Dock, near the end of Shore Street, was too exposed and too shallow for the landing of big ships. Had he been successful, the present Falmouth Inner Harbor might not exist. The mill was used as a schoolhouse for his children, run by Mary Pickard Winsor, who would go on to found The Winsor School in Boston.

When Joseph Story Fay donated land and invested in the railroad coming to Falmouth, Emmons was an eager participant. He made sure there was a rail stop convenient to his house near Mill Road. Mr. Emmons wanted his guests coming for a Cape Cod vacation to arrive comfortably.

Since that time, the pond became nearly fresh water. Because nutrients from the watershed increased, hazardous blue-green algal blooms developed. Recently, Trunk River has been dredged and salt water inflow has increased. It is not yet known whether the increased salt water inflow will ameliorate the algal bloom.

The Mystery of Elm Road

by Thomas Sbarra

Why were so many streets named for trees when we know trees were scarce at the time?

Clarence Anderson, who died in 2004, grew up on a property that was the site of Jonathan Hatch's log cabin on Elm Road. Struck by the history of the place, Clarence spent an enormous chunk of his 92 years researching the extensive history of the Hatch Family. He contacted Hatch descendants all over the country and conducted dozens of interviews. He has left volumes of writings at the Falmouth Historical Society. He documented most of the history of the Hatch family and this part of town.

He wrote that as recently as 1920, his father could read the clock at the Congregational Church using binoculars, a testament to the treeless landscape, yet Elm Road had been named 60 years earlier. Whence the elms? Numerous photos from 1926, when the summer resort known as the Moors was developed, show how barren the area was. The land for that development was purchased from the estate of Henry Fay (the son of Joseph Story Fay), who had died in 1920. It had been a dairy farm for 30 years and was essentially treeless. Elm Road at that time extended only about 300 yards from Locust Street. Jonathan's, and subsequently Clarence's, house was about 100 yards from that intersection. Yet, especially before Hurricane Bob in 1991, the street was lined with stately elm trees.

There are three theories for this transformation:

First, it seems likely, since the road was named in 1857, that elms occupied that first short segment but did not quite reach Clarence's house; hence, his view of the green.

These may have been planted by Elijah Swift, who got permission from the town to plant the elms on the village green in 1832. He was a sea captain, son of one of the early settlers of West Falmouth, William Swift. He had a house on the green and, perhaps in contrast to his time at sea, loved the look of stately trees. Elms were all the rage in the mid-1800s because of their tall, straight trunks and spreading canopies, and, ironically, disease resistance. They would provide a pleasant arching covering to country lanes and city streets. There is no record that he planted elms anywhere else but the timing would fit with the naming of Elm Road in 1857.

Second, beginning in 1852, Joseph Story Fay, a wealthy Boston business man and avid horticulturist, planted thousands of trees on his extensive properties which extended from Woods Hole to what is now Goodwill Park. He was offended by the remarkable lack of trees surrounding his home. "There was not a tree large enough to shade a rabbit." He sought to transform the meadows into forest by planting a variety of trees including larch, maple, locust and beech. There is no record of him planting elms but he planted the locust trees on Locust Street.

Third, the town of Falmouth also got into the tree-planting business and town meeting reports in the 1920s show a significant budget

for tree planting. Unfortunately, the records do not show where or what kinds of trees were planted. An undated photo in a 1988 article by Janet Chalmers in the *Falmouth Enterprise* about the development of the Moors shows a row of saplings along Elm Road. These were surely planted by the town as minutes of Moors Association meetings show no record of the developer planting them. Prior to Hurricane Bob in 1991 there were dozens of tall elms along the street. A few stately specimens have escaped the ravages of Dutch elm disease and wind and remain the last testaments to the road's identity and a reminder of our enthusiasm to manage the countryside.

About the Author

Thomas Sbarra was a cardiologist in Falmouth for 35 years. He retired in 2014 and now volunteers with several organizations, including Neighborhood Falmouth. He thanks the research personnel at the WHHM, the Falmouth Historical Society, the West Falmouth Library, and the Falmouth Public Library, and his wife Judy for patiently proofreading his research drafts.