

The Old Stone Dock at 200

by Leonard Miele

The rocky remains of the Old Stone Dock at the corner of Shore Street and Surf Drive have been exposed to destructive Atlantic tides and severe New England weather for 200 years. Built in 1817 to replace the original 1806 town wharf, the dock is now a large, jagged horseshoe of boulders at the eastern end of the beach and is the least familiar and most vulnerable historic landmark in Falmouth.

For the first half of the nineteenth century, the site of these two docks and the neighboring stone dock community was the trading and commercial center of Falmouth, the town's economic lifeline for goods and services beyond Cape Cod.

According to a town record dated April 19, 1805, town selectmen Joseph Hatch, James Hinckley, and Prince Gifford petitioned the General Court "to grant them the liberty of a Lottery of tickets for the purpose of raising money sufficient to build a wharf below Falmouth town." Similar to Salem's famous Derby Wharf that was built in the 1790s, the town wharf of 1806 was a crib or cobb wharf, a crib-like structure made of cabbage palmetto logs that was filled in with earth and stones. This structure served the town for nearly ten years before it was destroyed by the powerful gale of 1815 that battered the southern coast of Falmouth.

Documents preserved by the Massachusetts Historical Society present a clear picture of how important the town wharf was to the economy of Falmouth. As early as 1802, Falmouth residents owned sixty vessels, averaging fifty-five tons. Only six of these vessels were used for fishing, while fifty-four of them were coasters or trading vessels. Thirty of these coasters were used to carry lumber from Falmouth to the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, and the West Indies. Central to this lucrative lumber trade was Elijah Swift, the town's first successful businessman and entrepreneur. With his brother-in-law Thomas Lawrence, he shipped precut timber to the south and erected houses during the winter months with crews enlisted from Falmouth. As a prosperous building contractor, based in Charleston, South Carolina, he expanded his business opportunities by obtaining profitable contracts from the United States government shipping southern live oak to the northeast for the construction of naval ships.

Shore Street was the only thoroughfare at this time connecting Falmouth Village to the town wharf on Vineyard Sound. Ox carts and stagecoaches transported goods and foodstuffs along this major mercantile route to the wharf. Falmouth exports of lumber, salt, and onions

were delivered to coastal schooners that, in turn, imported needed supplies such as sugar, molasses, flour, and cotton when they returned from foreign ports. This maritime prosperity, however, would soon change with America's growing tensions with Britain and the onslaught of the War of 1812. From 1807 to 1809, Thomas Jefferson imposed an embargo on American vessels trading at foreign ports and the British began a suffocating blockade of the Atlantic coastline shortly after the declaration of war in June of 1812. These events crippled Falmouth's shipping and salt industries and impeded the importation of sugar and other household necessities.

A British fleet had been patrolling the waters of Buzzards Bay and Vineyard Sound since the blockade began, seizing American vessels and extorting cash payments from Cape towns to protect the lives and property of its citizens against British attack. History proudly records that Falmouth would not give in to this harassment. The Falmouth Artillery Company, under the command of Captain Weston Jenkins, did not hesitate to fire its two brass cannons at British ships that approached the Falmouth shoreline. On January 28, 1814, the town wharf was the center of Falmouth's most historic event when the British bombarded the town in retaliation for Falmouth's defiance of the British. At ten in the morning, the British brig *Nimrod* dropped anchor ½ mile from Surf Drive Beach. Under a flag of truce, an ultimatum was sent to Captain Jenkins and his troops. Unless they forfeited their prized 3-pounder cannons and released the Nantucket sloop and crew detained at the wharf for possibly collaborating with the British, they

would face the wrath of the *Nimrod's* eighteen guns at noontime.

Captain Jenkins and his artillery company remained defiant, entrenched themselves along the beach, and defended Falmouth against a daylong bombardment.

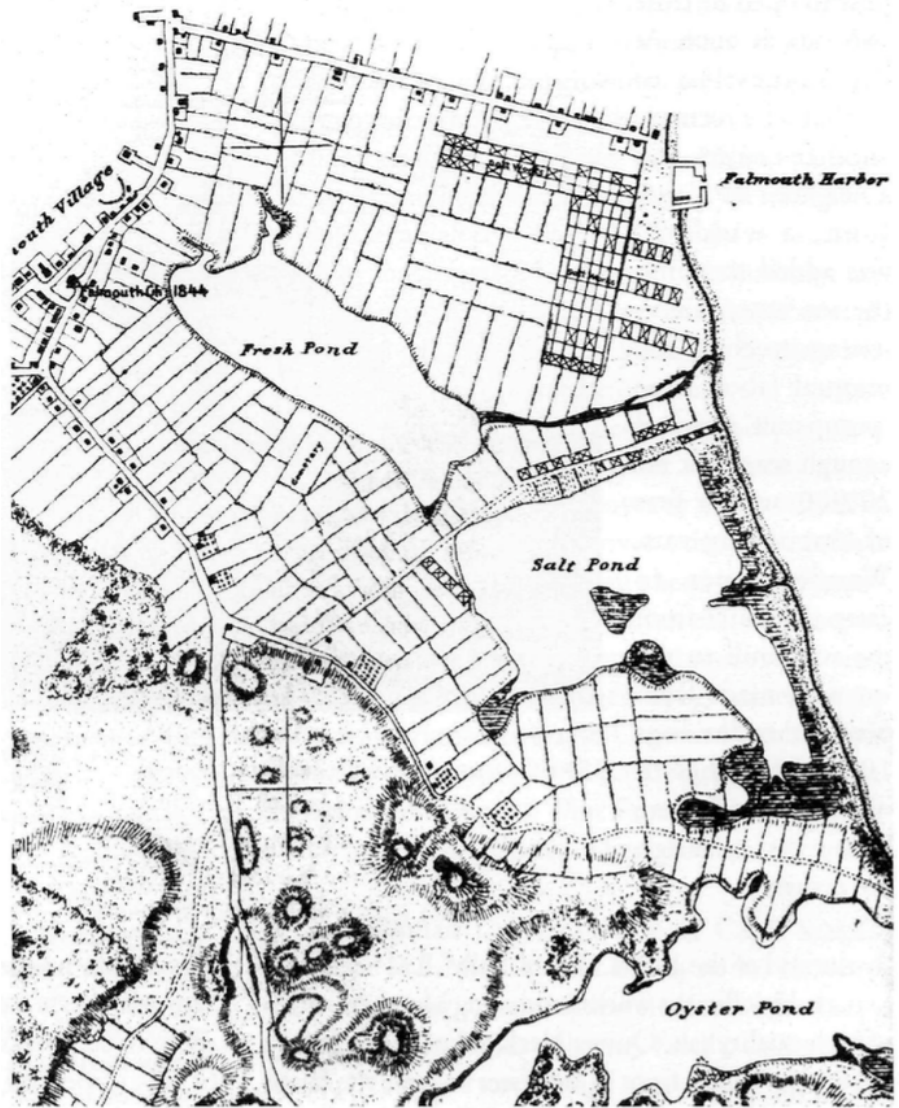
Over 300 cannonballs were fired upon the town, destroying major saltworks along the shore and damaging buildings on nearby Shore Street and homes on Main Street nearly 1¼ miles away. This attack on Falmouth, however, was a futile endeavor. Because the British could not weaken the patriotic resolve of Falmouth's citizenry, the brig *Nimrod* was forced to retreat, empty-handed, to its Tarpaulin Cove refuge on Naushon Island.

As a final act of defiance against the British for its bombardment of Falmouth and its disruption of American shipping, Elijah Swift built a 50-ton schooner beyond British surveillance at his home on Main Street near the site of today's public library. With 50 yoked oxen, the *Status Ante Bellum* was hauled on rollers along Shore Street and launched at the town wharf just a year before the wharf was demolished by the gale of 1815.

The stone dock that replaced the town wharf was built in 1817 by Captain John Hatch. One hundred shares of stock were offered to Falmouth residents in order to raise the \$8,000 needed for the dock's construction. To improve upon the building of earlier wooden crib wharves, the new dock was built of large flat stones gathered along the coastline from Surf Drive Beach to Nobska in Woods Hole. Perhaps the best description of the dock is captured in a recollection by Oliver

Franklin Swift when he described it as one of his favorite places to swim in 1850. "It consisted of two piers about 150 feet apart, extending straight out into the sound about the same distance and then turned at right angles towards each other for 50 feet, leaving an opening at the end of about 50 feet, and by that means forming an entrance for vessels and a shelter for them after they had entered. The top of the piers was six to eight feet high above high water mark and the depth of water from twelve to fourteen feet deep, according to the tide and wind."

Two years after the dock was built, the state Senate and the House of Representatives passed an act to incorporate the Falmouth Wharf Company on June 17, 1817. Twenty-five residents of Falmouth, including Weston Jenkins and Thomas Lawrence, had petitioned the General Court to become the owners or proprietors of the town



Saltworks are marked with an "X" in this US Coastal Survey map from 1845 showing the south coast between Falmouth's Old Stone Harbor at the end of Shore Street and Oyster Pond. Sider's Pond was once known as Fresh Pond. Courtesy WHHM Archives.

wharf under the auspices of the Falmouth Wharf Company. The wharf, generally known as the Old Stone Dock since the last decade of the 19th century, was managed by the proprietors as a privately owned marina open to the town and



Old Stone dock. Courtesy Falmouth Public Library.

its citizens for business and pleasure. Located at the corner of Shore Street and Surf Drive, often referred to as the shore road or the beach road on old maps, the dock and the aptly named old stone dock neighborhood became the economic hub of Falmouth, servicing the mariners, fishermen, traders, and travelers utilizing the dock.

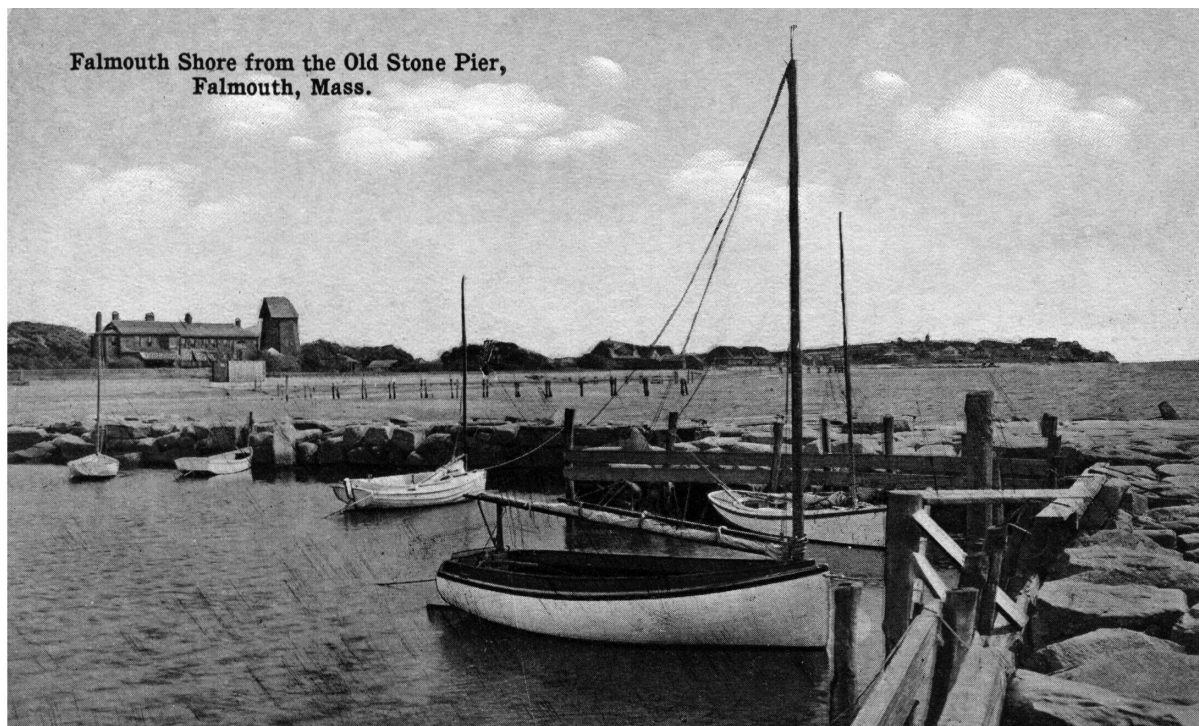
Unlike the earlier town wharf, the stone dock was actually two parallel piers that were large enough to accommodate teams of horses and oxen that brought supplies such as salt and lumber to awaiting trading vessels. Twice a week these trading vessels and packet boats began to bring household goods, foodstuffs, and passengers from New Bedford and Boston, and fishing

smacks sailed into the dock's stone harbor to purchase bushels of salt to preserve their valuable cargos of fish caught in Atlantic waters. Three times a week a Captain Hiller delivered the mail to Nantucket and Joseph Ray, a black employee of the Falmouth Wharf Company, delivered the mail to Martha's Vineyard in a small sailboat for twenty-eight years. During the early years of whaling, before Elijah Swift built the first shipyard in Woods Hole in 1828, whaling ships frequented the dock to make repairs, restock supplies, and, possibly, renew the crew's spirits at the local tavern.

Across the street from the dock, Elisha Gifford opened Gifford's Tavern and Hotel in 1817,

providing lodging and sustenance for sailors and visitors arriving by stagecoach and coastal vessels. The attic of the former Lewis Parker home was struck by a *Nimrod* cannonball during the British skirmish in 1814. The tavern was moved to 64 Thomas Lane about 1900, where it stands today as a private residence. Near the tavern, 21-year-old William E.P. Rogers published the *Nautical Intelligencer and Falmouth and Holmes-Hole Journal*, the first newspaper in Barnstable County. On November 21, 1823, the first issue of the paper cost seven cents if received by mail and five cents if delivered by a paper carrier. The editor was even willing to accept cordwood instead of cash for a subscription to the paper.

At the beginning of the 19th century, "Cape Cod became the salt basket of the new nation" with 440 saltworks producing salt by solar evaporation. Until 1870, the manufacturing of salt was Falmouth's major industry. Between 1830-1845, forty-two saltworks dotted the coastline from the Heights to Woods Hole producing approximately 42,000 bushels of salt annually. Along Surf Drive Beach, windmills pumped salt water from the shore through hollow wooden logs into hundreds of storage vats with pivoting wooden covers. It took 350 gallons of water to make one bushel of salt over three to six weeks. The prosperity of the salt works and the expor-



Courtesy Falmouth Public Library.

tation of its salt to other states contributed to the heyday of shipping at the Old Stone Dock. Shore Street also saw its share of commercial growth with its proximity to the dock. Elisha Gifford deeded an acre of land behind his tavern to the shareholders of the United States Glass Company which, after thirteen months, became the Falmouth Glass Company. A large factory was built in which 40 men worked two shifts, day and night. Because of poor sales, the nine-month operation of the Falmouth Glass Company failed. As the April 4, 1903 *Falmouth Enterprise* explained, "The whole amount of glass manufactured at the factory to May 31, 1851, was \$22,309; whole amount sold to same date \$6,430.13 or less than 30 percent of that manufactured." The company operated for another three months with the last day of glass blowing on July 12, 1851.

A lard oil factory was also built on Shore Street behind the home of widow Bertha Greene, later part of the large Beebe farm. Albert Nye, one of the big investors in the Falmouth Glass Company, and his brother William Nye manufactured oil by a "cold press" method converting lard into oil. The brothers previously lived in Cincinnati and New Orleans where they also produced lard oil as an alternative to the more popular whale oil. As entrepreneurs, the Old Stone Dock was a convenient location for them to distribute their oil to markets beyond Falmouth.

Perhaps the most essential business at this time and most central to all the residents of Falmouth Village was Butler's grocery store. At the southeast corner of Shore and Main Streets, the location of the Falmouth Hotel building since

1872, the store was owned by John and Knowles Butler. As the leading grocers in town, they had their own vessel plying the Atlantic waterways from the stone dock to New York to transport the provisions needed for their store.

The Old Stone Dock celebrates its 200th birthday this year and, unfortunately, is deteriorating with age. The weather conditions of seasonal tides and destructive storms have taken a toll on the dock that once was the economic lifeblood of Falmouth. Over time, competitive forces also contributed to the decline of the stone dock. In 1828, Elijah Swift built the deep-water Bar Neck Wharf in Woods Hole, which was able to accommodate whaling ships and larger trading vessels. In addition, the closing of the last saltwork in Falmouth in 1870 and the arrival of the railroad in 1872 were the final nails in the dock's economic coffin.

About the Author

Leonard Miele is co-editor of *Spritsail*. He has written several articles for the journal and is the author of *Voice of the Tide: The Cape Cod Years of Katharine Lee Bates*. The author thanks Meg Costello of the Falmouth Historical Society, Kevin Doyle of the Old Stone Dock Association, and Linda Collins of the Falmouth Public Library for their cooperation and inspiration during the writing of this article.