

Books and Benevolence:

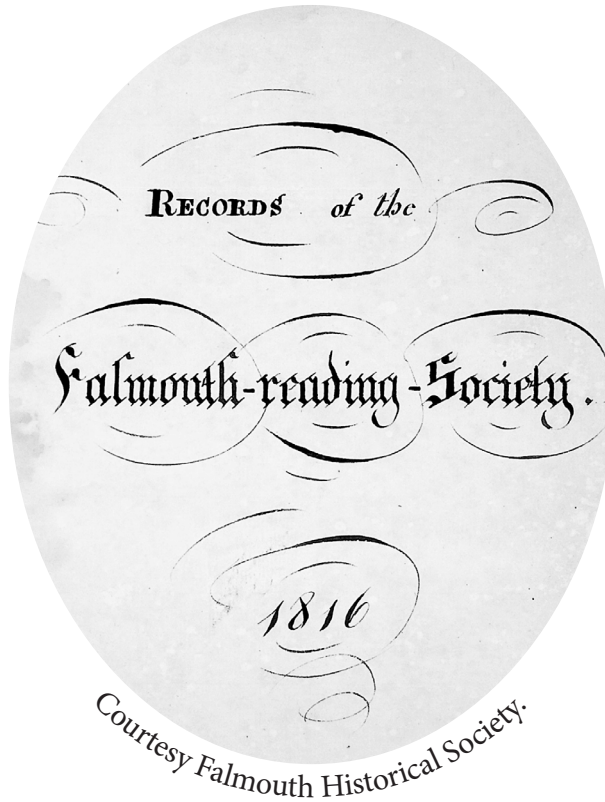
Falmouth Reading Societies of the Early 1800s

By Meg Costello

In the 1820s, Falmouth, with a population of about 2500 souls, had two independent reading societies operating at the same time. Each group left behind a book of records, now housed in the archives of the Falmouth Historical Society at Museums on the Green. These documents provide evidence of a thriving social and intellectual life, in a place then considered a “backwater.” They also mark an important cultural milestone—the emergence of women into public life. In both reading groups, women made up a majority of the members and filled key positions in leadership roles.

The Falmouth Reading Society and its Offshoots, 1816-1834

The Falmouth Reading Society established itself on March 15, 1816. Its constitution states that “to improve in the art of reading and acquire



useful information is the sincere wish of the subscribers.” In a meeting at Rev. Henry Lincoln’s house, the first officers were chosen: Dr. Elisha Fearing as President, Miss Sophronia Wood and Mr. Charles Sanford as Vice Presidents, and the minister’s daughter, Mary Ann Lincoln, as Secretary. They agreed to meet regularly in a room rented from Mr. Shubael Hatch for 12 ½ cents per week. Books, to be read aloud be-

fore the group, were supplied by the members themselves. These were mostly unmarried young adults from the more prosperous families who lived in the center of town.

The Reading Society operated by exclusive and draconian rules. No spectators or visitors were allowed. Members must have a “fair moral reputation.” Candidates were admitted only after winning the approval of two thirds of the current membership. Betsy Fish was

proposed, and rejected, twice. What was wrong with her? We'll never know. Maybe she lacked decorum. Article 16 of the Society's constitution decreed that breaches of decorum shall incur a fine of up to five dollars.

Unexcused absences were also penalized. On May 31, 1816, Achsah Dimmick, Sarah Shiverick, and Hannah Bourne offered unsatisfactory excuses for not attending the week before. Each was hit with a fifty cent fine, and all promptly quit. Over the next two weeks, four more members quit (Olive, Lydia, and Charles Bourne, as well as Asa Gifford). The Bournes likely resigned in solidarity with Hannah, as did Asa Gifford, who married her a year later. Though the record book glides over this turmoil as a matter of course, it is noteworthy that all future absences were deemed to be excused.

Keeping out the undesirables, and policing members' behavior, apparently soon exhausted the group's reservoir of good will. After only ten months, the Society completely reinvented itself, adopting a new constitution and a new name: the Falmouth Circulating Library. Anyone now would be able to join, upon payment of one dollar up front plus 25 cents per quarter. (Betsy Fish, who could take a hint, didn't bother to apply.) The group's funds would purchase books, to be kept in the custody of a designated librarian. Members could borrow books to take home for six weeks at a time. To determine who got to pick



Capt. W. Jenkins's house as it is today.

Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

out a book first, an officer would "draw out the names of the proprietors shaken promiscuously together." There were two business meetings per year, and no more social gatherings.

This system continued more or less intact even when the group changed its name again, to the Falmouth Library Association, in 1825. Interest in the group gradually declined, with no minutes recorded in 1833, and no quorum at one of the meetings in 1834. Still, the officers planned an ambitious purchase of the American Encyclopedia. The clerk noted that if there was not enough money in the treasury, the cost would be assessed on members. It was probably no coincidence that this is the last entry in the record book.

The Charitable and Reading Society,

1820-1827

Meanwhile, another reading group sprang up that offered a social experience without any

tiresome cliquishness. Its guiding force was Mehitable Jenkins, who likely played a major role in writing the group's constitution. The record book declares that on July 20, 1820

A number of ladies met at Capt W. Jenkins's, for the purpose of forming themselves into a Charitable and Reading Society. Miss Mehitable Jenkins was chosen Moderator, and after proper consideration the following Constitution was adopted. Constitution of the Charitable and Reading Society of Falmouth

Preamble

We, the Subscribers, feeling the indispensable duty of adding our exertions to the great work of Benevolence now going on in the world, form ourselves into a Society, the object of which, shall be to aid in relieving the distresses of others, and to assist in forwarding any Benevolent Institution that may be thought proper by us; and while we are doing for others add to the cultivation and improvement of our own minds, in knowledge, and piety, increasing in wisdom and understanding we cheerfully set our names to the following Articles. . . .

The women pledged to make clothing for the poor at their weekly meetings, while a designated member read aloud to the group from "some interesting and instruc-

tive work." "After reading, the rest of the time [was] to be spent in profitable conversation and singing." In this society devised by women, men were allowed to join, but they had to pay extra.

Art 3 Each female on becoming a member shall pay into the Treasurer twenty cents, and each male fifty; the male members paying annually the same sum; but the work of the females shall excuse them from any further tax. By paying \$4 is constituted a life member.

Donations in cash or materials were accepted. Funds from the treasury could be appropriated "to the relief of the distressed around us or any other benevolent purpose deemed proper by a quorum." Meetings were held, with some exceptions, in members' houses, on Tuesdays from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. The books seem to have been

supplied by members also.

This group was quite popular. Its earliest members included Olive, Lucy, and Charles Bourne, who had left the Reading Society in a huff three years before. A few people were members of both societies, notably John and Rebecca Jenkins, siblings of Mehitable. Over the course of its seven-

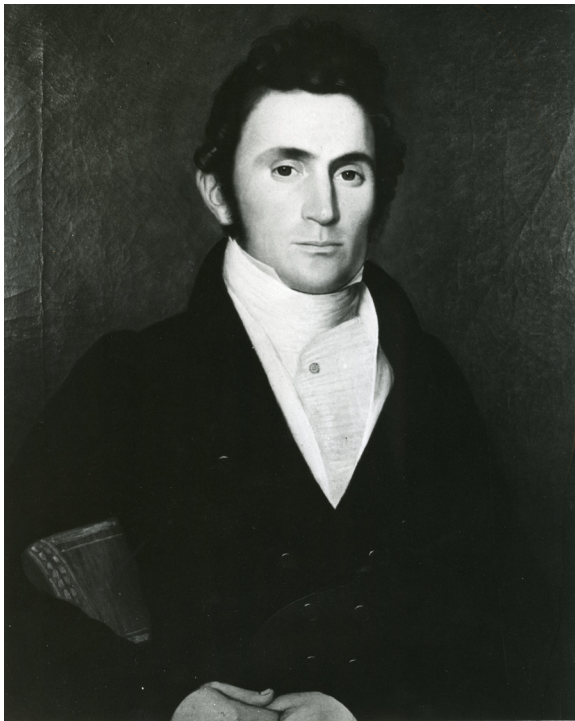
year life, the Charitable and Reading Society enrolled 41 women and 29 men. Visitors were



Sally (Dimmick) Wood, a member of the 1816 Falmouth Reading Society. This daguerreotype would have been made between 1839 and 1860. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

welcomed and there were no punitive fines. Minutes include notations such as “a pair of shirts made;” “yarn sent in to knit a pair of stockings;” “two caps wrought.” Occasionally, the group proactively sought clients to assist. On November 15, 1820, “Miss M. Jenkins laid before the Society the necessities of a poor family in the vicinity. The Society requested that some one of the Board visit the family and inquire into their peculiar wants. Voted that it be left to the discretion of the Board to supply them with whatever was necessary.”

In its second year, 1821, the Charitable and Reading Society had a six-month arrangement to meet weekly in the Masonic Lodge. During



Oliver C. Swift.

Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

this time, perhaps influenced by the Masons, the Society began to sponsor schools for poor children in the remote districts of Davis Neck and Shumit [Ashumet]. The Davis Neck school educated twenty-two scholars, who improved beyond expectation.

By July of 1822, however, there were rumblings that some members wanted to return to the original focus on direct relief to the poor, and on reading. Female attendance was down at weekly meetings. Was this because the women’s handmade “work” was no longer the centerpiece of the group’s charitable activity? In September 1822, the Society stopped supporting the Shumit school. While expenditures on the Davis Neck school continued into 1826, the minutes show far fewer mentions of the school, and many more notations about what books the group was reading at their meetings.

In 1823 Mehitable was chosen as Superintendent, and her brother John as Secretary. With the Jenkinse firmly in charge, the Society enjoyed its peak of popularity. At every meeting, reading was followed by music and singing, including one performance by “a full choir of singers of the Harmonic Society.” Attendance soared. The minutes often note “very full meeting.” In August 1824, the membership showed “great interest . . . in getting up [a] box of clothing for the Choctaw mission. No reading but much interesting conversation. Meeting closed at 10 o’clock.” One imagines the members departing from this meeting in the dark, with no street lighting, and making their way home over unpaved roads and fields.

By 1825 attendance was falling again. One reason could be that as members married and had children, they no longer had time for social gatherings. Also, the town's poorhouse was running efficiently under a new set of rules and a new board of overseers, chosen in 1824. The plight of the poor may have seemed less urgent than it did in 1820.

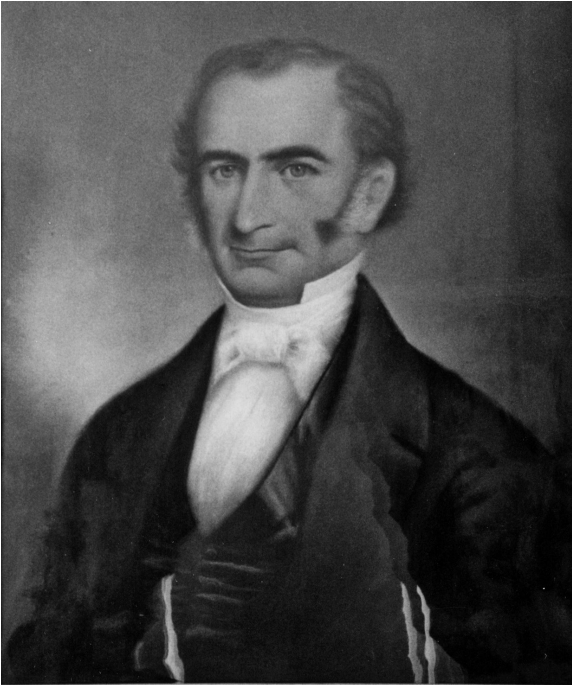
In 1826 a trio of new male members, led by lawyer Zephaniah Bennett, hijacked the weekly meetings and turned them into debates on questions such as "Is the robber more mischievous to Society than the slanderer?" and "Can persons believe what they do not understand?" This diversion lasted only four months, until Mehitable Jenkins regained the post of Superintendent, and reinstated the usual reading sessions.

Eventually, not even the formidable Mehitable was able to turn the ebbing tide of interest in the Society. In August 1827, a committee was chosen to dispose of its property, and to apply the proceeds thereof to some charitable purpose. So ends the record book.

You may be wondering what books the two societies read. Their tastes were very similar, favoring history, travelogues, and biographies. Readers enjoyed both Captain Riley's bestselling tale of shipwreck in Africa, and Hannah More's treatise on female education. Unfortunately, true to the pious Congregationalist spirit that dominated Falmouth life, the reading groups shunned novels, along with any poetry not of a devotional bent. Thus, they ignored the greatest writers of their day: Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Walter Scott, the Romantic poets—even the American Washington Irving.

Jane Austen would certainly have seen many similarities between her world and that of the Charitable and Reading Society. Earnest young members of the provincial gentry mingled here, exposed their foibles, and dealt with matters of the heart. Between the lines of the official records, there no doubt swirled many flirtations and courtships. A Jenkins family history recounts one semi-scandalous situation involving Oliver C. Swift, the biggest fish in Falmouth's matrimonial pond. He became engaged to Rebecca Jenkins, but then she cast him aside for Boston merchant Isaac Parker (an even bigger fish). Rebecca's mortified relatives called her conduct a "disgrace." Meetings at the Society, where all three were members, must have been awkward, until Rebecca and Isaac married and moved away. Four years later, Oliver married Rebecca's younger sister, Eliza (also a member of the Society), and all was forgiven. Happier stories played out as well. John Jenkins married Harriet Swift, after the two of them had worked together as a committee to supervise the Davis Neck school. At least twelve marriages can be documented between members of the two Falmouth reading groups.

The visionary Mehitable Jenkins never married. She was a resident of Boston in 1879 when she died of pneumonia, aged 76. Everyone attached to Falmouth's reading groups proclaimed a desire to improve their own characters, and many of them sincerely wished to help their neighbors. Of them all, Mehitable most clearly understood how to achieve these goals, not in a tightfisted spirit of control, but in an outward-looking spirit of service.



John Jenkins.

Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Sources:

Falmouth Reading Society Records, 1816-1834, at the Falmouth Historical Society.

Charitable and Reading Society of Falmouth, Secretary's Book, 1820-1827, at the Falmouth Historical Society.

Jenkins, Weston. *The Old Home: 1660-1894*. Trenton, NJ, 1894. With handwritten annotations by Edward H. Jenkins, 1928. Book is at the Falmouth Historical Society.

Locations:

Shubael Hatch's "ordinary" was located on the corner of Main and Locust, near where the red Victorian house at 6 N. Main St. now stands. (Theodate Geoffrey, *Suckanesset*, Falmouth, 1992, p. 71).

Rev. Lincoln's home was at the corner of Main and Gifford, where the Verizon building now is. (Geoffrey, *Suckanesset*, p. 63).

Capt. Weston Jenkins's home was at 152 Palmer Avenue. The historic register calls it the Silas Jones house, after a later owner.

John Jenkins lived at 20 Hewins St. (Historic register)

About the Author

Meg Costello is a graduate of Falmouth High School and Wellesley College. She worked for several years in Boston as an editor at the New England Historic Genealogical Society. After moving back to Falmouth, she became a volunteer at the Historical Society, under the guidance of archivist Mary Sicchio. In 2012, Meg was hired to be the Society's Research Manager. She also writes and edits the blog "Untold Tales of Falmouth," which features little-known true stories inspired by documents found in the archives at Museums on the Green.