

Robinson Crocker Bodfish

By Maria C. Ward

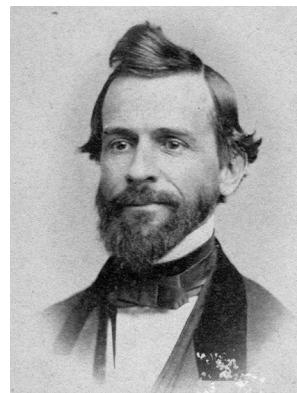
“Waiting Vainly For the ‘Boom’. Robinson Bodfish Went Broke — ‘Land Poor’ And Owning Real Estate Worth A Small Fortune Today” headlined a 1973 *Falmouth Enterprise* account of the life of Robinson Crocker Bodfish.

This son of Falmouth was born on May 11, 1818, in the white frame house on the Village Green, now the parsonage for the Congregational Church. The house had been built by his father, Captain William Bodfish, in 1814, when he moved to Falmouth from Sandwich. The Captain in turn was the son of William Bodfish, who at age 17 had been a drummer boy in the Revolutionary army. The Captain first went to sea as a teenager on a brig in the coast trade. He became a captain by age 19 and was well known for his seamanship. His

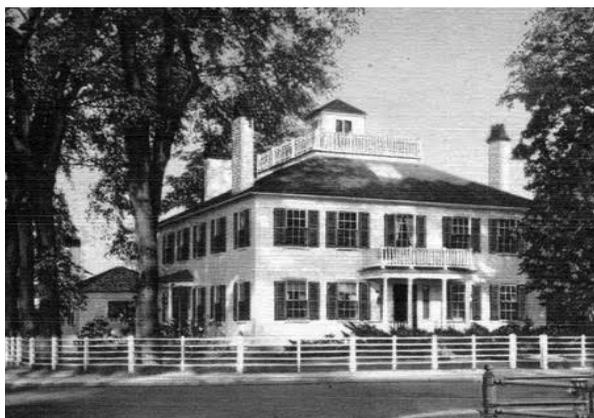
invoices and bills of lading show a lucrative trade route to and from the West Indies.

Robinson Crocker Bodfish was one of five children born to William and Mary Crocker Bodfish. He was named after an ancestor, Isaac Robinson, a 1660 settler in Falmouth.

Bodfish first left Falmouth at age 14 to attend Amherst Academy with two other Falmouth boys, Barzillai Lawrence and James M. Swift. Eighteen months later, he left Amherst for employment at a ship chandler’s store in New Bedford until age 21. He then worked as a clerk in the Weweantic Iron Works in Wareham, followed by a stint as bookkeeper in the Bay State Iron Co. in Boston. Next he worked at the Health Department of New York City and two years at the War Department in Washington, D.C., (salary \$1,800.00), as bookkeeper at a millinery shop in New Orleans, and finally as auditor of the Boston Custom House.



Robinson Crocker Bodfish.
Courtesy Falmouth
Museums on the Green.



Captain William Bodfish home, built 1814.
Courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green.

But Robinson Bodfish, despite his years working in other cities, always had Falmouth's "treasure possibilities" on his mind. He believed the town had promise as a vacation destination far more valuable than its fisheries and farming output. Throughout his life he defied his many skeptics, including his own family, as he began investing in the town's future. He remained a man with a vision through economic times of boom and bust. Only after his death was he vindicated.

In one of his first ventures he underwrote the Reverend Frederick Freeman's *History of Cape Cod*, featuring records and memories of the early Cape, which appeared serially from 1858-1863. One third of the subscriptions which paid for Freeman's work was raised by Bodfish. The Reverend Freeman, in turn, dedicated the Falmouth portion of the book to Bodfish, citing his "filial reverence for ancestry." (See below)

Through his voluminous correspondence with local family members he kept abreast of the

attempts to make Falmouth a summer resort. Perhaps the earliest was the development of 120 acres of "Great Hill," the town name for the current Falmouth Heights. It was described then by locals as "a tangle of scrub oak and pine, briars, and wild grape" - "a dreary waste." However, in 1871 the Falmouth Heights Land and Wharf Company was incorporated. Land was cleared and roads laid out. "Cottages" were built; the 50-room Tower House Hotel opened.

At the same time, 1870 also saw increased agitation for a railroad extension. Oliver Swift, the president of the Falmouth National Bank, became president of the newly formed Old Colony Railroad. A special town meeting that fall bought \$60,000 worth of railroad stock. Martha's Vineyard added \$20,000; individuals purchased \$40,000. Bodfish was in town when the railroad reached Falmouth on July 10, 1872. It was a "heady" time!

Despite a business depression in 1873 and the bankruptcy of the Falmouth Heights Land and

To Mr. Robinson Crocker Bodfish, Secretary of the New York Cape Cod Association,
A descendant of one of the earliest settlers of Sandwich, whose lineage is also traced to Robinson, the Leyden pastor, and in whose veins is, commingling, the blood of the Nyes, the Ellises, the Dimmicks, and the Crockers: whose purity of life and excellence of character command admiration: whose filial reverence for ancestry is worthy of imitation; and whose disposition to encourage by generous acts the publication of the history of our native county deserves grateful acknowledgements, these Annals of his native town are respectfully inscribed as an expression of the kind regards of his sincere friend.

— *The Author*



The long pier built to accommodate boat traffic on the Sound. Courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green.

Wharf Co., sales of Heights land continued. Cottages sold for \$450. The wharf was extended to be the longest on the waterfront at that time. After leaving Woods Hole for the Vineyard, the steamer *Island Home* stopped there regularly. The local paper, the *Falmouth Chronicle*, reported 1000 passengers a day rode the train to Woods Hole at the height of the summer season. *The Barnstable Patriot* reported that money was pouring into Oak Bluffs with sales amounting to “fancy” prices. “Land Fever!” said the *Falmouth Chronicle*. It was at that time that Bodfish considered buying Hog Island (now Chapoquoit). In 1872, that 40 acres sold for \$1,050, to another buyer. This investment would take eighteen years to realize any profit.

Henry Jones, editor of the *Chronicle*, wrote of the need for a hotel. “Several gentlemen are having tracts of land surveyed and laid out for cottage lots.... We would advise those wishing to purchase eligible sites near the beach to secure them at once.” Hotels were coming.

The Menauhant Land and Wharf Co. was formed to develop land around Bourne Pond. In 1874, six jewelers from Attleboro began developing land in the same area. (See *Winter Sprintsail*, 2019). Falmouth real estate valuation jumped from \$1 million to \$1,697,307, the increase due to summer property sales.

Mr. Bodfish, though still living in Boston, was spending more time in Falmouth, meeting and corresponding with many summer residents. One was Dr. George Faulkner, who later founded Boston’s Faulkner Hospital. He owned a summer home on Shore Street, but he considered land in Falmouth to be an unwise investment. He valued the possibility of industrial enterprise in Falmouth for the employment it would provide. He wrote to Bodfish in 1883: “I like Falmouth more and more, but nothing changed my early impression and my habit of thinking that a prudent man will be careful how he puts money into land in Falmouth, unless he wishes to live upon it.”

Bodfish made notations on Faulkner's many letters, filed them away, and paid them no heed.

Ruth Washburn Sterling, daughter of the Reverend Charles Washburn, longtime minister of the First Congregational Church, wrote in her memoir: "Mr. Bodfish was one of our town's characters....On Sundays he wore a tall silk hat, a frock coat, and carried a gold-headed cane. In his prime he had been quite a Beau Brummel." In 1880 Mr. Bodfish married Miss Lydia Soule, daughter of John Soule of New Bedford. In December 1882, Bodfish, Silas Jones, and William H. Hewins bought 500 feet of beach along Surf Drive. Six months later Bodfish, Jones, and Lewis H. Lawrence became "trustees of Falmouth Bathing Beach Association." Joseph Story Fay signed over his rights to that strip to this group in 1883. The cost to Bodfish was \$375.00. (The town of Falmouth now owns this property.) Late in life he was quoted as saying, "The town should have bought the entire Sound shore from the Heights to Oyster Pond 30 years ago when it could have been purchased for \$1000."

A year later in December 1883, Bodfish joined a syndicate formed by Lewis Lawrence, George E. Clarke, E.E.C. Swift, Joseph C. Burgess, B. Baylies King, Nehemiah P. Baker, George A. Davis, Foster S. Shiverick, and John R. Lawrence in the purchase of 40 acres on the west side of Deacons Pond, currently the Scranton Avenue location. The seller was Meltiah Lawrence, who had acquired the land in April 1872 and laid out 250 building lots. The syndicate's cost was \$2,453; his share of land cost Bodfish \$466. At the same time he bought property

at Lewis Neck, now Acapesket. And then he waited for his heavy investment in land to rise in value.

By May 1885, a stock market collapse wiped out most of the cash Bodfish had left. However, that summer there was some vindication for his vision when he was an agent for the sale of Lawrence's Neck to Edward Fenno and other wealthy Boston investors. They called their development "Maravista." (Fenno also bought a large tract of land in Quissett, today the Quissett campus of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, still called the Fenno estate.)

The many wealthy summer visitors to Falmouth in those years must have whetted the appetite of this land-poor investor. Franklin Weld, president of the Albemarle & Chesapeake Canal Co. in Norfolk, Va. built a mansion on Mill Road that commanded rent of \$1,500 for three summer months in 1886. Alexander Graham Bell vacationed in Falmouth. Even his phone system was installed at the Falmouth Hotel to connect with the line of the southern Massachusetts company.

With E. Pierson Beebe interested in acquiring property for his proposed church in town, E.E.C. Swift, owner of the neighboring Succanessett House and land, offered Bodfish \$5,000 for his home adjacent to Swift's land. No sale. (The St. Barnabas parish was formed in December 1888; the cornerstone laid in June 1889; the church consecrated on St. Barnabas Day June 1890.)

Bodfish, a lifelong Democrat, lost his job at the Boston Custom House in 1888 when Republican Benjamin Harrison was elected president. Lydia Bodfish died in 1892. Bodfish then left Boston and moved permanently to the Captain John Hatch House, which he had purchased in 1871 for \$1,500. The property included three acres of land extending from Main Street to Siders Pond.

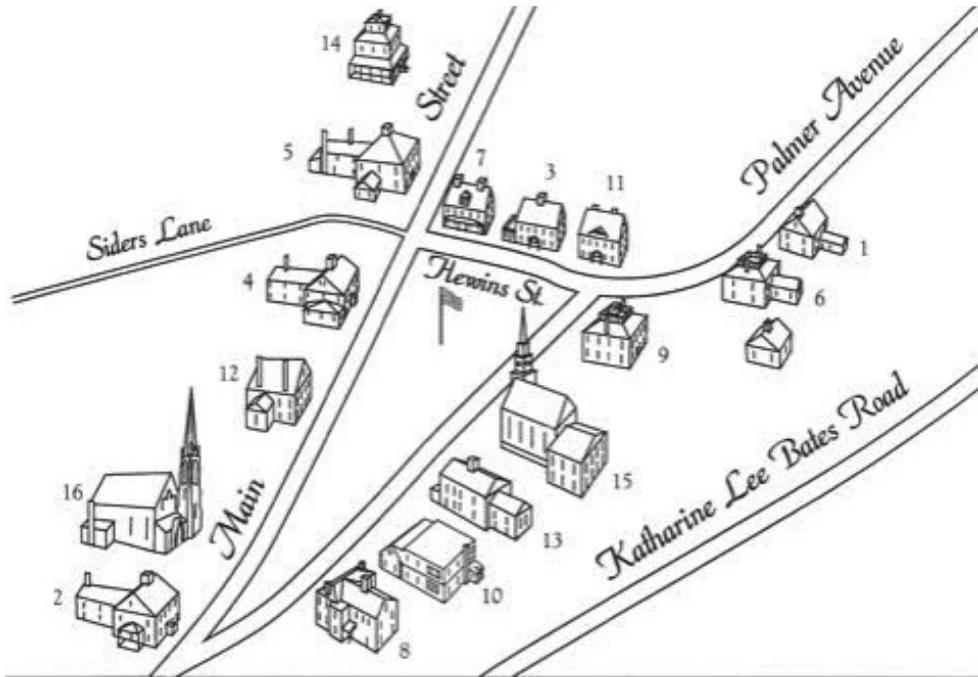
once again, to sell everything. They were appalled to read in the September 25, 1894, *Enterprise* that instead he had bought eight acres running from Lawrence Street (now Locust Street) to Fresh Pond (now Siders Pond). He proposed a tree-lined street through the center of the property which he named "Ocean Vista." After consulting a Boston arborist about what trees were best, pin oaks



Main Street looking east in 1900. R.C. Bodfish house on the right. The water fountain in the foreground was installed in 1899 as a public pump and watering trough for horses. It was a gift from John S. Bleakie whose Falmouth Water Corp. opened the original Long Pond Pumping Station. This was the first public plumbing in Falmouth. Restored, the fountain is now at the Gifford Street entrance to the pumping station. Courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green.

Coincidentally, Falmouth's principal industry, the Pacific Guano Company, had failed in February 1889. Bodfish, casting about for ways to earn money, considered turning his home into a hotel. Complaining that what little money he had was tied up in real estate, he began looking for a job at age 75. Instead his friends advised,

were planted. Lots were laid out along the proposed street, priced each at \$500; there were no takers. The final blow came when, having failed to pay the interest on the purchase note, the bank foreclosed on the property June 20, 1899.



1. Palmer (Conant) House	ca. 1760
2. Captain Jonathan Hatch House	ca. 1760
3. Captain John Grannis House	ca. 1765
4. Benjamin Sanford House	1750-1775
5. Consider Hatch House	ca. 1767
6. Dr. Wicks (Julia Wood) House	1790
7. Deacon Braddock Dimmick House	1804
8. Nathaniel Shiverick House	1812
9. Captain William Bodfish House	1814
10. Falmouth National Bank	1821
11. John Jenkins House	1822
12. Thomas Lawrence Swift House	1844
13. Erasmus Gould House	1844
14. Mostly Hall	1848
15. First Congregational Church	1857
16. St. Barnabas Church	1890

Map of houses on the Green. House #2, the Captain Jonathan Hatch House, was purchased by R.C. Bodfish in 1871. House #9 was built by his father, Captain William Bodfish. *Spritsail*, Winter 1990.

When E.E.C. Swift bought this same property in 1924, in the middle of an overgrown field there were two rows of beautiful trees. Ironically, the development dream of Robinson Bodfish was realized by another developer and named "Pin Oak Way".

In a bid for loans to tide him over, Bodfish wrote to many banks. E.K. Butler of the Lincoln National Bank on Devonshire Street in Boston replied in October 1898:

"Dear Bodfish, Your breezy letter of the 24th duly rec'd. It always gives me pleasure to read your letters or to listen to your views when we

down. However, my friend, what you want of me at this moment is to sell me a lot of land, and I very much regret that I cannot see my way clear to it. I have no use for it. There is no possibility that I can have."

The only property of substance now left in Bodfish's diminished real estate was his home, next to the new St. Barnabas Church. But they had yet to acquire a rectory for the church. When he heard that Mr. Beebe might be interested in his house for just such a purpose, he offered it for sale for \$10,000. That price was too high. The mortgage was held by the Wareham Savings Bank but he was unable to

keep up the payments. On August 1, 1901, E. Pierson Beebe bought the house at a foreclosure sale for \$6,500.

Robinson Bodfish continued to live in the house, even as remodeling for the rectory was being done. As the ceilings were taken down in each room, he moved to other rooms, until only the dining room was left. Finally, he was forced to vacate the house entirely. He sold his

valuable possessions and the family silver. He stored his few remaining belongings - trunks and boxes filled with newspaper clippings - in neighboring barns. (Years later they found their way to the basement of the Falmouth library.) The Reverend Henry H. Smythe, the first parsonage resident, wrote: "Long after I



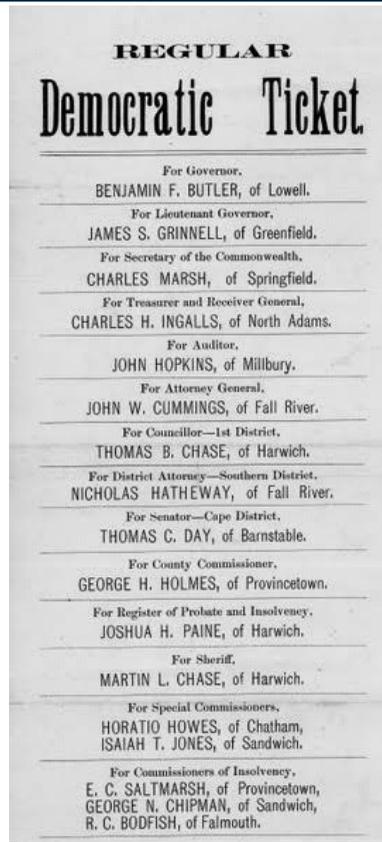
R.C. Bodfish home after it became the St. Barnabas rectory.
Courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green.

meet. I could wish that I could see things in so rosy a light, but I have to go along day by day, doing the best I can at the time & conscious all the time that there are gypsy moths and Colorado beetles to fight, hot suns today and torrents tomorrow, and just as the crop is ready to gather, an unexpected frost comes

occupied the house as a rectory, and until he went to the town farm, he was a constant visitor, coming and going as the mood fitted him. I always had some cigars for his reveries, and he would sit in my study, often alone, for hours."

Robinson Bodfish lived twelve years longer, until age 94. Although his eyesight was failing, he was very instrumental in the founding of the Falmouth Historical Society in 1900 and was its first secretary until 1910. During that time he used the Enterprise office window to exhibit a silk needlework done by his mother in her youth in "memoriam" to her brother who had drowned at age six in 1798 in Shivericks Pond. Other Falmouth families were thus encouraged to look at their family heirlooms as possible donations and the start of the Historical Society collection was begun.

He remained a presence in the state and local Democratic party. (He once served as delegate to the state convention in Worcester.) He tried to persuade Andrew Carnegie to fund a Falmouth library. He was a registrar of voters and a member of the town board of park commissioners. He was quoted as saying: "As soon



Democratic ticket headed by Benjamin Butler for Governor in 1878. R.C. Bodfish's name is at the bottom. The Republicans won. Courtesy of the Woods Hole Historical Museum.

as the town secures the shore front property at the Heights, I shall resign from the board... But I want to be on the board when the land is secured that my name may be associated with this great public improvement."

He was often observed walking about his beloved town and paid regular calls at the newspaper office where he contributed articles about the new Falmouth Historical Society. On the occasion of his 87th birthday, he walked to and from Woods Hole, a distance of eight miles, in four hours, pausing only for dinner in Woods Hole.

Robinson Crocker Bodfish died, nearly blind and a pauper, on March 8, 1912. On March 12, 1912, his funeral service was held at the First Congregational Church where he had been a devoted member. At his death he was the oldest resident of Falmouth. He and his wife are buried in Oak Grove Cemetery.

About the Author

Maria C. Ward has been on the *Spritsail* editorial board since 2005.

Sources: Meg Costello and the archives at Museums on the Green; *The Falmouth Enterprise*.