

# 100 Years of a Beloved Holiday Tradition

By Janet Gardner

In the winter of 1919, with the country still reeling from the recently ended Great War, a small group of Falmouth residents imagined a new way to lift the spirits of the town—the erecting and lighting of a community Christmas tree on the Village Green. The idea was proposed at a Board of Trade meeting on December 4 of that year, leaving just twenty days to organize the event. *The Enterprise* report of that BOT meeting assured readers that, “It was proposed to make this affair a strictly non-sectarian festival” adding that “all the churches including the Roman [Catholic] church [would] be invited to participate in the festivities.”

And participate, they did. Within a week details were falling into place. The Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole donated the tree. The lighting was scheduled for nine o’clock on Christmas Eve, and a rehearsal had been arranged to practice the carol singing and the procession from St. Barnabas Church to the Village Green. Immediately before the lighting, a cornetist would play “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” from the steeple of the Congregational Church. These details were published in the December 13 edition of *The Enterprise*, noting that “the innovation appears to meet with general approbation.” By December 20, the newspaper had dubbed the community tree a “beautiful custom” and was encouraging the entire community to participate, hoping



The Village Green, ca. 1950. Courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green.

“it will prove so successful that it will be made a feature for future holiday festivities.”

Unfortunately, the weather chose not to cooperate with these quickly-but-carefully laid plans, as a major winter storm brought wind, snow, and ice to Southern Massachusetts. In true New England fashion, however, the organizers of the tree lighting were not to be stopped by a mere blizzard.

*The Enterprise* reported:

The Community Tree was held on Christmas Eve in spite of the inclemency of the weather. The program was carried out as arranged, with the exception that some of the carols were omitted. A good-sized crowd was present, although the number would have been much larger had people been sure the exercises were to be held. Where the weather was so unpleasant many thought that the program would be postponed, but the committee decided it was best to carry out the arrangements as planned. . . . The Christmas Tree with its colored electric lights made a very pretty picture, but it was not to be compared with the beautiful spectacle it presented on Christmas night when its branches were covered with snow. It was a sight well worth seeing.

The people of Falmouth apparently agreed with this assessment. The new tradition not only took hold, but each new generation has continued to bring its own particular flair (and sometimes its own challenges) to the lighting of the Village Green.

Twenty-five years after that first lighting, in 1944, a community tree could no longer be considered an "innovation." By that year, an official Christmas Tree Lighting Committee was listed in the *Falmouth Annual Report*, and multiple other community trees were to be found in addition to the official Falmouth town version. A tree for North Falmouth children was sponsored jointly by the Thursday Club

and the Know Your Neighbor Club. Several churches—including St. Barnabas, First Methodist Church, and the Church of the Messiah—had their own trees and held services including lighting ceremonies. The tree at the Megansett Grange held joke gifts. Though World War II was in full swing by then, *The Falmouth Enterprise* of December 1, 1944 reassured citizens who might have been concerned about shortages:

**"There will be Christmas trees for everybody this year and furthermore they will not be subject to war-time controls . . ."**

Owing to the war, the decision was made to move the official Falmouth community tree from the Village Green to the USO Clubhouse on East Main Street, which has since become the Gus Cauty Community Center. The USO Club opened in 1942, "to offer a home-like atmosphere to all the soldiers who seek recreation there." Community members were encouraged to donate small gifts to the servicemen who frequented the USO, including books, cigarettes, and playing cards as well as monetary donations to support the best gift imaginable for service members far from home: long distance telephone calls to their homes.

Times change. Twenty-five years later, when another new generation celebrated the holidays in 1969, the community was apparently not so unified in its love of Christmas pageantry. The festivities started off on a high note on December 7, with the now-annual parade welcoming Santa Claus to town and culminat-

ing in the traditional lighting of decorations on the Village Green. By now these decorations included trees along Main Street as well. *The Falmouth Enterprise* noted that the parade and lighting served as the "official pronouncement that Falmouth Stores are ready to help everyone get ready for a Merry Christmas."

Less than two weeks later, though, both spirits and lights were dimmed when vandals began attacking the town's holiday displays. More than 100 bulbs were either broken or stolen from the pole on the Green and trees along the street, and wires were broken, leaving several formerly lighted trees in darkness. One tree was torn down and thrown on the ground in front of the fire station. By December 23, the vandalism spree had spread to both public and private displays from Woods Hole to Teaticket. The front page of the paper just two days before Christmas included a headline reading "Whole Strings of Bulbs Stolen from Yule Display." There were even some dark rumblings that the traditional lighting might be cancelled in coming years, as it was becoming "very difficult for the town to maintain the holiday decorations."

Fortunately, the allure of the festive lights outweighed the fear of future vandalism, and the tradition lived on and even grew in the coming years.

The Falmouth Coal Company's Gulf Station at the corner of East Main Street and Scranton Avenue decorated with laurel roping for Christmas, ca. 1933-34. Courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green.

Another twenty-five years later, in 1994, the quickly organized tree lighting ceremony of 1919 had evolved into a multi-day Christmas by the Sea event similar to what today's Falmouth residents know as Holidays by the Sea. *The Enterprise* published a schedule of four days' worth of festivities, beginning on Thursday, December 1, with events including a Christmas Tea at The Marlborough Bed and Breakfast on Woods Hole Road and a Fashion Show at the Coonamessett Inn. Friday included Holly Days at Ashumet Holly & Wildlife Sanctuary, a "Proper English Tea" at the Palmer House Inn, and a Deck the Halls Festival at Falmouth Academy. On Saturday, various churches, hotels, and restaurants held their own celebrations, while Santa sailed into Falmouth Harbor, Woods Hole Community Association hosted its Renaissance Faire, and of course the Village Green lit up to the sound of community caroling. Sunday brought the parade on the year's theme "A Victorian Christmas" as well as a contest for the best-decorated windows for a downtown business.



Unlike the storm that dampened spirits and attendance in 1919, temperatures in the mid-fifties allowed “the largest crowd in recent years” to enjoy the events in “light jackets and shirtsleeves,” according to *The Enterprise*. The Chamber of Commerce estimated that there were around 60,000 spectators for the parade. Members of Falmouth Health and Fitness won first place in the adult walking category of the parade, as their members “stopped occasionally to do step aerobics along the way.” The grand prize went to a float by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine program at St. Anthony’s Church, featuring “children snuggling under a giant quilt that covered the flat-bed, with dancing sugar plums and a guardian angel above.” The window-decorating contest was won by Ivies Flowers Gardens & Gifts.

On Saturday, December 7, 2019, the carol singing and lighting of the Village Green was a highpoint in a whole suite of beloved traditions that now make up the Falmouth Holidays by the Sea Weekend. Highlights again included Santa sailing into Falmouth Harbor, the Downtown Holiday Stroll, the annual 5K

Jingle Jog and Kids’ Elf Run, and (according to the Chamber of Commerce) “the biggest small-town Christmas parade in all Southeast New England.”

As the tradition continues to develop in the coming years, those lights on the Green may seem to shine just a little brighter when you recall a bit of the hundred-year history that brought them to you.



Photos, left to right: Tamsen George and Grant Willis wear Victorian garb at the holiday parade in 2006. The famous Clydesdale horses during the holiday parade, ca. 2000. Courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green.

#### About the Author

A long-ago North Falmouth summer child, Janet Gardner has lived full-time in Falmouth since 2005. She writes both fiction and nonfiction and works at the Falmouth Public Library.