
Letters

To the Editor, *Sprintsail*:

It has often been recorded that the building which served as Falmouth's town hall from 1840 to 1881 was moved about that latter date to Depot Avenue, and became an apartment house until its demolition in the 1970's.

There has seemed to be some reason to question this prevailing wisdom, since the shingled, two-story, hip-roofed house on Depot Avenue, at the corner of the H. V. Lawrence Inc. property, bore little resemblance to the one known picture of the old Town House extant, with a square tower rising over the street end. This photograph is reproduced in *Falmouth-by-the-Sea* (1896) and the Winter 1988 issue of *Sprintsail*.

But proof that the two buildings are the same is provided by Alberta F. Donahue, who lived in it for 23 years. Miss Donahue, retired after a career as executive secretary of the Falmouth school department, recalls being told by Mrs. David Butler that she had enjoyed many a dance in that old building when it was the Town House. Mrs. Butler, who lived on Locust Street, was the grandmother of Ellen Barstow (Mrs. James Dufur) and Alvah Barstow and their other brothers and sisters.

Miss Donahue also remembers "There was a very large front door which I understood was the original town hall door. It was seldom used."

Falmouth, which had never had a town hall, moved to remedy that on April 1, 1839, when a town meeting held in the Methodist meeting house, then on Main Street at the Elm Arch Way corner, voted "that the Town take measures to build a Town House." A building committee was appointed, to include one representative from each school district in town, just about the equivalent of the present precincts.

A year later the town voted "that the proposed Town House be 55 feet long, 46 feet wide and 18 feet post,"

presumably 18 feet high at the corner posts. The site chosen was at the east end of the Meeting House Green.

The seven-man building committee chose Stephen Davis as agent for the construction, and Elijah Swift and John Hatch Jr. as advisers. The agent was authorized to borrow \$2,000 for the purpose of building the Town House, which was to be completed on or before the next December 1.

The location was changed at a meeting on June 8, 1849, to "a lot of land situated on the North side of Main Street between the house of the estate of Nathaniel Shiverick, deceased, and the house of the estate of Samuel Shiverick, deceased." There were 130 votes in favor, 61 opposed.

Stephen Davis was authorized and instructed to purchase the lot, just west of the present Falmouth post office, on behalf of the Town for \$140, and the meeting voted to apply two coats of paint on the outside of the building, except for the roof. Voters tabled an article to paint the woodwork inside, and voted that nine sheds be erected behind the Town House.

Apparently construction proceeded as planned. The warrant for the town election on February 22, 1841, summoned voters "to meet at the Town House." That April, at annual town meeting, Charles Jenkins was named "to keep the Town House in order." Mr. Jenkins was then town clerk and treasurer. An article proposed to have a stove in the Town House for the purpose of warming the same, but no action was taken on this. The meeting did vote that the report of the building committee be accepted.

Forty years later Falmouth's municipal needs had grown, and a new and larger town hall, its ground floor devoted largely to offices, was erected just west of where Hamlin Avenue extension joins Main Street.

The old Town House was on its way to Depot Avenue.

I'll add here further extracts from Alberta Donahue's letter:

"My family did live in the old Town House, which had been moved from Main Street to Depot Avenue, but it was not a three-apartment house. I've always been disappointed that I've never seen a really clear picture of the building when it was the Town House.

"We moved into the apartment on the west side when I was a year old, and we lived there for 23 years. During that time at least eight different families lived on the other side. My father told me a Mr. Latter had lived on the east side and he had a machine shop on the side where we lived. We were the first family to live on that side after it was made into living quarters. I never heard what kind of machine shop he had. We moved in during 1908. Each family had five rooms—two large rooms downstairs, and two large and one small bedroom upstairs. We also had a large walk-in closet in our side, and both sides had a good-sized pantry. Our stairs went up from the front, the other side went up from the back off the kitchen.

"When we moved in the building was owned by Fay, who later sold it to H. V. Lawrence. Mr. Lawrence made some improvements to the grounds, including the laying of a brick walk from the sidewalk to the front door. The walk was made of West Barnstable brick.

"After we moved out in 1931, the family on the other side moved out about the same time, and Mr. Lawrence remodeled the house into four apartments. I never saw them so don't know what they were like. It was at the time when Camp Edwards was very busy, and housing was difficult to find for the young couples.

"There was a time when everything on Depot Avenue was owned either by a Swift or a Lawrence, except the Beebe Tanglewood property across from the old house. Mr. Lawrence (H. V.) had bought the Beebe property next to us.

"Dr. Greene's dental office was moved to its present location from Depot Avenue. It had been the real estate office of his father-in-law, E. E. C. Swift Sr., and sat between Dr. T. L. Swift's garage and a house occupied by the Rogers family, now the site of Battles' garage.

"Depot Avenue was a busy street. The freight house lay between the railroad crossing and the Grain Mill. Everything was shipped either by freight or express in those days. The Express office was just north of the railroad station. I remember freight car loads of strawberries and of turnips going out; piles of express on the platform after the Boston train arrived. The circus unloaded on Depot Avenue. The livery stable—now Molly's—had a stage which met all trains and carried passengers and the mail.

"I've often thought of writing something about those days, but it would only be recollections, without actual dates of activities. I do have a few old snapshots of the stage, which my father drove, and of H. V.'s flower gardens where the Enterprise is now located."

Turning to Alberta Donahue for an answer on this did remind me of what a source she is ... one that you might want to tap for accurate memories of 80 years in Falmouth.

Fred Turkington

Fred Turkington is the author of "From Meeting House to Church and Town House" which appeared in the Winter 1988 issue of *Spritsail*.