

"The More Things Change..."

Frederick T. Turkington

Eighty years ago this coming September, electric power first flowed over wires to Falmouth homes and businesses, and a new era began.

It was a very young Lawrence Makepeace Swift who pressed the button which started the generator, and Mr. Swift, now a resident of Riddle Hill Road, still remembers the event.

He was chosen for the official start-up because his father, Dr. T. Lawrence Swift, owned the property on which the generating plant was built. It was west of Depot Avenue, toward the back of the lot on which now stands the garage building housing Battles Pontiac Buick. Mr. Swift doubts that the new Buzzards Bay Electric Company paid any rent for the site. Dr. Swift was a coal dealer, and the new plant promised to be a sizable customer.

A history of the Cape and Vineyard Electric Company, into which Buzzards Bay Electric was merged, describes that first Falmouth plant. It was a 30 by 45 foot galvanized iron building with steam boiler and 180 horsepower engine, belt-connected to a three-phase 100 kilowatt generator.¹

The engineer was William S. Nickerson, who later ran the steam pumps in the water pumping station at Long Pond.

The steam engine and generator ran only an hour or so that first day, as Mr. Swift remembers it. After that, the generator was started up at sunset. For some time, there was no power during the day.

Private users were few at the start. Henry H. Taylor, first superintendent of the Buzzards Bay Electric Company, listed 17 subscribers here in September, 1909, and receipts for the month of \$34.76. Many names among the 17 are familiar: H. Malchman and Brother, E.E.C. Swift, Falmouth National Bank, Louis

Hurwitch, the Succanessett Club, Dr. George H. Greene, Mrs. M. V. Weeks, H.V. Lawrence, Locust Lodge (Cottage Inn).²

When Mr. Taylor died in 1944 The Enterprise obituary noted that he was remembered by the town's older generation as the man who pedaled his bicycle over miles of dirt roads to install electricity on Cape Cod.³

There had been some anticipation of the coming of electrical service to Falmouth. Lawrence Swift recalls that his family's home had been wired for electricity in advance. The work was done by the late David Quinn, who came to Falmouth from Maine in 1907 and continued as an electrical contractor here for more than half a century. The then new Village School was also wired for electricity when it was constructed in 1904 where the town hall parking space now is. That building later became the Community Center Building.⁴

It was probably street lighting which led to the rapid spread of electric lines through the town. Falmouth had been using kerosene lamps to light the streets. In 1909, the town expended \$2,724.53 on 421 street lights in seven villages. The kerosene lamps were lighted and maintained by contract. They were cheap but they didn't emit much light. Cost ranged, depending on size and length of season, from \$9.99 a year for each of 52 lamps in Woods Hole to less than \$2 for each of the 74 lamps at Falmouth Heights, which were only lit from June 6 to October 16. Also served were Falmouth village, North and West Falmouth, Waquoit and Teaticket.⁵

The report of the Board of Selectmen for 1909 noted that "On May 31 we gave Buzzards Bay Electric Company a franchise to furnish the inhabitants of the town with electricity for light, heat and power." The Selectmen also reported that the company had put up 23 lights "as an advertisement for use free of charge



Postcards of Nobska Point, Woods Hole show evidence of introduction of utility poles and overhead wires to that area. Upper card has 1905 copyright; lower card, with lines leading to the lighthouse, has a message dated November 4, 1906. Wires, predating by a few years the advent of electric power to Falmouth, are thought to be telephone lines. Postage was a penny. Postcard collection, WHHC.



until the next annual meeting when the town will be asked to vote on lighting of the streets by the company."⁶

In 1910, Falmouth town meeting voted to appropriate \$2,000 to maintain "the present street lights until such time as the electric lights are installed."⁷

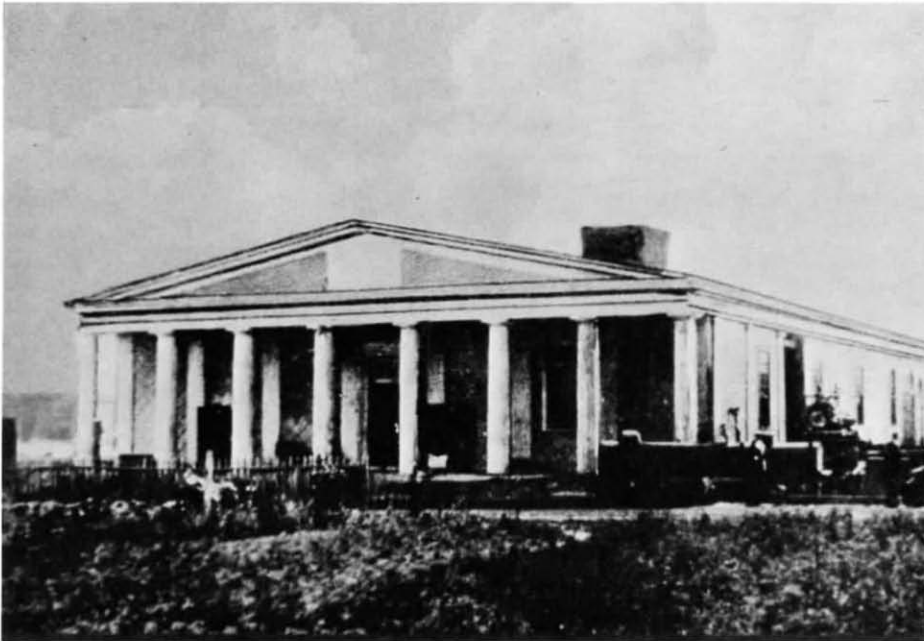
By 1912 the town paid \$6,632.55 to the electric company for street lighting. The town also paid for oil lamps still in operation: Davisville, \$99.88, 135 gallons of kerosene; Falmouth Heights, \$227.50 and 590 gallons; Megansett, \$69.50 and 85 gallons; West Falmouth, \$271; and Menauhant \$20.30 and 70 gallons. Wicks, matches and an occasional chimney or burner were included in the cost.⁸

At the end of that year, the Selectmen reported to the town that the electric lights had been extended through

West and North Falmouth since the last report, so there was now a continuous lighting system from the upper end of North Falmouth following the main road through North and West Falmouth, the village, Teaticket and East Falmouth to the lower end of Waquoit. They had a warning too: "Falmouth Heights, Megansett and Quissett are looking ahead for lighting, so the appropriation for lighting will have to be considerably higher."⁹

Two years later, of the \$9,800 appropriation for street lighting, \$9,696.92 went to Buzzards Bay Electric Company, just \$5.10 for the final bill for kerosene lights.¹⁰

The electrical generating plant which made that kind of expansion possible was constructed in 1911 on the shore of Deacon's Pond Harbor, now Falmouth Inner



"The Parthenon"
housed Falmouth's
electric generating
plant. Ca. 1914.
Courtesy
Donald E. Fish.

Harbor. Designed for ultimate capacity of 1500 kilowatts, it originally consisted of a 500-horsepower engine powered by a coal-burning boiler, driving a 350-kilowatt generator.¹¹

This was housed in a building which had been a roller skating rink on the Falmouth Heights side of the harbor, near the old Tower House Hotel. It was moved across the harbor on the ice and rebuilt for its new purpose, with a row of wooden pillars across the Scranton Avenue side which earned it the nickname of "The Parthenon." Salt water was pumped from a well beside the harbor to cool and condense the steam, and was then pumped back into the harbor.

In the concrete foundation wall which remained after the wooden building was demolished there is still a circular patch, 15 inches in diameter, where the exhaust line once went through.

Frederick W. Wormelle, Jr., whose house is on the north side of the former plant, recalls being told that there had been a row of wood and sheet metal shacks, built by the homeless of that day to take advantage of the heat from the hot water exhaust line.

The 1912 town meeting authorized the water commissioners to lay a main on Scranton Avenue to supply water for the steam boiler. Cost of the six-inch main, 700 feet long, completed that year, was \$555.27.¹² Many years later when Mr. Wormelle wanted a fire sprinkler system for his garage, he had to have part of a too-small water main dug up and replaced.

Choice of the Scranton Avenue site followed by only a few years the opening up of Deacon's Pond to Vineyard Sound, to form Falmouth Inner Harbor. This meant that relatively cheap water transport could be used to bring in coal for the generating plant, first by schooners and later by barges hauled by tugs.

With this larger plant, Buzzards Bay Electric expanded north to Bourne and started to run its transmission lines down the Cape. Lines were carried by small wooden poles and insulated for 6600 volts. The company history records that by 1915 Buzzards Bay Electric had 22 miles of such line and 1,015 customers. In Hyannis and Harwich, before the transmission lines were complete, small gasoline engines drove generators.¹³

During World War I, an interconnection across the canal brought in power from New Bedford to supplement the Falmouth plant. In 1920 transmission line voltage was increased to 23,000 volts. That same year saw consolidation of Buzzards Bay Electric Company and the Vineyard Lighting Company on the island into the Cape and Vineyard Electric Company. It also brought the decision to end use of the Falmouth generator; all Cape power thenceforth was purchased from the Southeastern Company at New Bedford and brought down a single circuit line to Hatchville, where one line continued down the Cape and another led to the rest of Falmouth.¹⁴

There was brief activity in the old power station in 1928, when it became a rehearsal hall for the University Players, the college summer drama group many of whose members went on to fame.¹⁵ This was their first season, eight weeks of shows two nights a week at the Elizabeth Theatre. The ten or a dozen boys in the troupe lived aboard the Brae Burn, a 110-foot former subchaser belonging to the Leatherbee family, which was moored in Falmouth Harbor.¹⁶

Late in 1932 the building changed hands, in what was then viewed as a step toward a yacht club on Falmouth Harbor. Purchaser was the Falmouth Yacht Club Association Inc.

"The association is composed of Belvidere Plains and Falmouth Heights residents, A.W. Goodnow of Boston



Part of the cement foundation wall, all that remains of the old electric generating plant on Scranton Avenue.
Photo by Bruce Chalmers.

and Belvidere Plains being a leading spirit," *The Enterprise* reported. "The property included a large wooden building and a wharf, and is susceptible for remodeling into a handsome yacht club."¹⁷ The sailing association sponsored races for several summers, but never developed its harborfront property, which was described in an *Enterprise* story in 1946 as "an unrealized dream."¹⁸ By that time the successor Falmouth Yacht Club had been organized, and acquired its present larger site on the east side of the harbor at Clinton Avenue, which included beach frontage on Vineyard Sound.

The former power plant site was sold to Falmouth Marine Railways and now, with the recent addition of a boat shed, is owned by the Wormelle family.

By 1934 there was considerable feeling in Falmouth that electrical rates were too high, and that they could be reduced with municipal ownership and operation. The 1934 annual town meeting approved by ballot vote, 301 to 34, an article for that purpose. Town meeting also appropriated \$2,500 for a committee to investigate the desirability and estimated cost of a municipal electric light and power system. Noah M. Gediman was chairman, with Thomas E. Larkin, Eugene E. C. Swift, Dr. Asa L. Pattee and Robert Studley.¹⁹

The 1935 annual meeting brought out what *The Enterprise* described as the largest attendance ever in Falmouth. This was before the town adopted representative town meeting, and the 900-seat Elizabeth Theatre was jammed for the 9:15 a.m. start of the Wednesday session. Following the procedure spelled out in the General Laws for town purchase of a lighting system, it was again to be a ballot vote.

Mr. Gediman presented the lighting committee's report. Metcalf and Eddy, consulting engineers, valued

the utility's property in Falmouth at \$355,000, and worked out an average kilowatt hour cost under municipal ownership of 6.3 cents, a reduction of 28 per cent.

Prior to town meeting, the Cape and Vineyard had distributed a statement arguing that the voters had not been told the full cost. The previous year the committee had estimated \$300,000 to duplicate the utility's facilities. The Cape and Vineyard claimed an appraised cost of \$538,000, plus \$200,000 for a generating plant. "It is apparent," the company's spokesman asserted, "that with a municipally-owned plant, rates cannot be reduced."²⁰

After much debate on that point, and a lunch-time break, the balloting took nearly two hours. Result was 472 in favor, 150 opposed. That same session expressed, 469 to 94, approval of locating a Massachusetts National Guard training base in Bourne, Sandwich and Falmouth. It then adjourned at 4:35 p.m. until Friday morning, having acted on just four articles.²¹

"Crowded Town Meeting Votes To Own Lights"²² was the headline on the lead story in that Friday's Enterprise. Things didn't work out that way. Purchase price for a utility had to be negotiated between town and company. It was a Depression year. Falmouth's total budget for 1935 was \$535,283, to be raised by taxation. Though the municipal lighting committee was continued in existence year by year until 1941, no proposed appropriation to acquire the electrical company was ever put before town meeting.

Frederick Turkington grew up on Long Island, N.Y., graduated from the Syracuse University School of Journalism and came to Falmouth in 1948. He retired after 35 years with The Enterprise but remains a prolific writer and continues to be active in town affairs. He wrote for *The Book of Falmouth* and contributed the feature article to the Winter 1988 issue of *Spritsail*. He is now a member of the editorial board of *Spritsail*.

Notes

1. Excerpts from the history of the Cape and Vineyard Electric Company by Harding U. Greene printed in *The Falmouth Enterprise* June 8, 1971. Mr. Greene was a Falmouth man who went into the electric utility field and retired as a vice-president of New England Gas and Electric Association.
2. Manuscript from the files of *The Enterprise*.
3. *The Enterprise*, Feb. 4, 1944.
4. Mary Lou Smith, editor, *The Book of Falmouth*, Falmouth Historical Commission, Falmouth, MA, 1986, page 54.
5. Falmouth Town Report, 1909, pp. 104, 105.
6. *Ibid*, p. 89.
7. Falmouth Town Report, 1910, p. 10.
8. Falmouth Town Report, 1912, p. 123.
9. *Ibid*, p. 101.
10. Falmouth Town Report, 1914, p. 109.
11. Greene, op. cit.
12. Falmouth Town Report, 1912, pp. 13, 49.
13. Greene, op. cit.
14. *Ibid*.
15. Conversation with Elizabeth Barton Murray.
16. Norris Houghton, *But Not Forgotten*, New York, Sloane, 1952.
17. *The Enterprise*, Dec. 28, 1932.
18. *The Enterprise*, Nov. 8, 1946.
19. Falmouth Town Report, 1934, pp. 17, 38.
20. *The Enterprise*, Feb. 15, 1935.
21. Falmouth Town Report, 1935, p. 21.
22. *The Enterprise*, Feb. 15, 1935.