

Falmouth Historical Society Annual Meeting

FHS Presents! — Researching Early Falmouth

Two Historic Sites on the Foreside (1633-1807)

Online via Zoom—January 18, 2022

The accompanying slides are posted on the Society website at:

<https://thefhs.org/FHS-2022-Annual-Meeting>.

David Farnham shared what the Society uncovered while researching two historic sites in Falmouth in response to queries from the community. He also described how the Society used online resources to find this information.

Local research and education are a big part of what every town historical society does. For our Society, this means discovering the stories of our town and sharing them with others. Learning more about the place we call home is what drew many of us to join.

Last year, we responded to 40 requests from people in Falmouth or with connections to Falmouth. Most of those requests dealt with local history, property history, and family history.

We seldom find ready answers in a book, binder, or folder. When we do, they are often suspect. Some previous researchers went with the first thing they found that fit their narrative. A little more research shows they took a wrong turn.

History is all about finding the truth. We are forever dispelling legends. Don't come to us if you are deeply attached to your family's narrative and would be upset to learn it strayed from the truth. What we offer instead is usually more accurate, deeper, richer, and (we think) more interesting. That's what town historical societies do.

The farther we peer back in time, the more difficult the research. In Falmouth, there are areas where we have come to expect research "brick walls" as we dig into our town's turbulent colonial past. Topping the list are the Flats and southern Foreside. There are two reasons: First, many records were lost during the conflicts with Native People and the French. Second, land records get fuzzy because we're dealing with a huge grant of land to a single family.

Here we will look at two questions we fielded last year involving this part of Falmouth.

While reviewing our records for information about the Portland Country Club, we found several references indicating that colonial Fort New Casco was located on what is now the country club's golf course. More digging turned up conflicting information about the location. That left us with a simple question: Where was Fort New Casco?

Another request asked about the history of Mackworth Island. We were surprised by how scant the information was. We set about reconstructing the story of the island that is now a state park and home to a well-known school.

The history of Falmouth's colonial past is found in William Willis' excellent *History of Portland*. Falmouth and Portland were one up until 1786. Willis' experience as a lawyer is reflected in his writing. He is uncommonly meticulous about detail and sources. He had access to information that has been lost. Oral histories were still fresh. He relied on records that were subsequently destroyed by fire. Willis' book is our starting point for any research about early Falmouth.

Following the trail after Willis used to be difficult. Many of the surviving resources were not easy to access.

Digitized images of those old records have changed everything. Not only is the information readily accessible, but anyone can do it from the comfort of their home. During 2021, we saw massive collections of microfilmed town and county records come online. Even better, access is free.

Returning to brick walls, we have Arthur Mackworth, the first English settler of what is modern Falmouth. He settled first on the point, and soon thereafter moved to the island, both of which bear his name.

He received a large grant of land encompassing the entire peninsula from Mill Creek and the pond at the head of the Scitterygusset down to Mackworth Point and including—almost as an afterthought—the island. Surveying wilderness was imprecise. The size of the tract was estimated to be 500 acres. It turned out to be closer to 1,300. His stepson and the husbands of three daughters were granted sizable lots out of this enormous tract.

Willis' history includes a map showing the approximate locations of English settlers in Ancient Falmouth prior its destruction by the French in 1690. Willis' cartographer marked a supposed location of Fort Casco on the map that made plenty of sense from a military perspective but was not consistent with contemporary accounts.

We dared to challenge Willis? Absolutely!

Why was there a Fort New Casco? The answer can be found in the violent and bloody events leading up to 1700.

- In 1675, King Philip's War, an uprising by Native People across eastern New England, came to Falmouth. There were deaths and destruction. Many English settlers headed south to Salem for safety. Following the Treaty of Casco in 1678, settlers gradually returned.
- Next came King William's War in 1688. This was the North American theater of the European Nine Years War. The campaign was organized, commanded, and supported by the French to halt incursions by New England on *Nouvelle France*. Ancient Falmouth was wiped from the map in May 1690. Settlers who hadn't escaped, or already been killed, took refuge at Fort Loyal (at the intersection of India and Fore Streets in Portland). The French and their Native allies laid siege to the fort. When the English surrendered, nearly all were massacred. It was a quarter-century before English settlers returned to Falmouth Neck (today's Portland peninsula).
- English settlers gradually began returning to Ancient Falmouth in 1698. This time they settled in "New Casco" along the Foreside. Massachusetts was required by treaty to establish a trading post at Falmouth and Fort New Casco was built in 1700.

The fort was a palisade built on donated land to serve as a trading post. It was defended by militia with limited munitions. Construction was overseen by a Royal engineer sent from London by the Board of Ordnance. The original fort was modest in size. With good cause, it was expanded in 1705.

Queen Anne's War was the North American theater of the European War of Spanish Succession. A French and Native force of 500 men commanded by Lt. Alexandre Le Neuf de Beaubassin was sent into Maine to conduct raids. The handful of families at New Casco took refuge in the fort. Families across the Fore

River in Spurwink and Purpooduck (today's Spring Point) were not so fortunate—47 English settlers were killed or captured.

After they “laid waste to more than 15 leagues, and killed or captured more than 300 persons,” the full force with 200 canoes arrived at New Casco and laid siege to the fort. Over the course of two days, they attempted to undermine the fort from the water side where the steep bank offered protection from the fort's guns. This was shaping up to become a repeat of the disaster at Fort Loyal 13 years earlier.

The English were on the verge of surrendering when Massachusetts Bay Colony's only armed vessel arrived to relieve the siege. The families were taken away leaving a garrison. The fort was the easternmost English outpost during the war.

Capt. (later Col.) John Redknapp of the Royal Engineers supervised a major expansion in 1705. The fort became 290 feet long and 190 feet wide. It included privies, a doctor's office, and a blacksmith shop. In 1707, Major Samuel Moody (1667-1729) succeeded Major March in command of the fort. It was never attacked again.

The war ended with signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1713. In 1716, Massachusetts ordered resettlement of “Old Casco” on the Portland peninsula and the razing of Fort New Casco.

Where was New Casco? We have no shortage of “authoritative” sources including Willis. Our own files even include a photo from the golf course of the purported location. The Society of Colonial Wars placed a marker at Pine Grove. There are contemporary accounts. The fort appears on maps published more than a century after it was razed.

The problem is that they don't agree. They are all over the place in a box one mile wide and a half mile deep.

Of all the resources, the site plan prepared by Capt. John Redknapp in 1705 is the most authoritative. It was made when the fort was standing. It was drawn by a skilled military engineer for whom dimensions and directions were important.

The 19th century maps and nautical charts place the fort in the same location as the 1914 Richards Atlas.

We overlaid Redknapp's plan on a current map. We adjusted his plan to correct for true north (magnetic north was 5½° different then). His plan includes 250 yards of shorefront. We compared his shoreline to current maps and found a match. We overlaid that location on the town plat and a Google Maps "satellite view."

19th century maps and charts are virtually identical to current maps. They show the fort being 700 feet farther along the shoreline to the east.

Both are consistent with collateral information such as contemporary accounts.

That left us with a location on private property along a 300-yard stretch of the shore. (The fort was 60 yards wide and stood about 100 yards back from the shore.)

We now know approximately where Fort New Casco was located with enough precision to hunt with earth-penetrating scanners. It wasn't on the golf course. Nor was it where Willis' cartographer put it.

Turning to Mackworth Island, we return to the story of Arthur Mackworth's family. When King Philip's War burst onto Falmouth in 1675, Arthur Mackworth's widow and some of the family headed south to Salem to ride out the conflict in safety. She never returned. The entire settlement was wiped out in 1690. Everything but Fort New Casco was destroyed in Queen Anne's War. By 1718 when Falmouth was re-charted, the Mackworth family was gone and most of the descendants didn't return. What happened to their land including the island?

With family history, we begin by building family tree and bring it to life by attaching stories about the people on the tree.

With property history we do much the same: we start by building the chain of deeds and that gives us the people and their stories.

For colonial Falmouth, deeds are split between two places because Falmouth was part of York County until Cumberland County split off in 1760.

Nearly all the deeds survived. Many are readily accessible and searchable online—except for a crucial period during Ancient Falmouth's rapid growth in the mid-1700s.

The troublesome deeds were York volumes 20-36 which were never transcribed and were accessible only at the York County Registry of Deeds in Alfred.

Much of that information (and sometimes more) was contained in the records of the Proprietors of Falmouth, but those were accessible only at the Cumberland County Registry of Deeds in Portland.

That is, until now. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons) visited town and county offices throughout Maine more than a half-century ago microfilming records including York Deeds all the way back to 1635.

FamilySearch.org digitized those microfilm copies and has made the images accessible online for free. (One must register for access to the site.)

Archive.org digitized a 19th century transcription the records of the Proprietors and made it accessible online. You can download the file, but it is so massive, many computers would have trouble handling it.

There is a catch. These are page by page images of documents. In the case of York Deeds, they are microfilmed documents which are not searchable. Most optical character recognition technology cannot process 18th century handwritten legal documents. The imaged documents include grantor/grantee index pages by year for navigating the collection. You access the images just as you would a book or roll of microfilm.

The good news is that you can view these records from home in comfort and without dealing with a cranky microfilm viewer. You click instead of cranking the wheel to advance the film. The difference is that now you're sitting in a comfortable chair with a cup of coffee. It's a big improvement.

The availability of this information has made it possible for us to break through brick walls that, until recently, had stymied us.

At last year's annual meeting, we showed how the digitized copy of the Proprietors Map, the companion and Rosetta Stone to the Records was a shortcut to making sense out of old deeds.

If you look at the Flats on the Proprietors Map, the space is blank because what remained of the tract was treated as a single property belonging to an "Old Proprietor." The map is little help.

We lost the trail for ownership of Mackworth Island when the published York Deeds ran out in 1737. We couldn't pick up the trail again until Cumberland County deeds were available starting with 1760. By then, Mackworth Island had been divided into four parts. The post-1760 deeds for the Mackworth land were a jumble. Many researchers lost their way; we now know that some "facts" found in reputable publications are wrong due to misleading verbiage in deeds.

To untangle the chain of ownership, we needed the full story including the unpublished deeds prior to 1760. The first post-1760 deed mentioning Mackworth Island referred to a sale in 1751. As is often the case, it named the seller and buyer. Armed with that information, we were able to find the sale in the indices, and that gave us a book and page number in the deeds.

That deed referred to another deed, and we followed the chain back to 1742 by which time the Mackworths were dead. As early as 1724, depositions had been filed reaffirming the Mackworth claim to this large piece of Falmouth. To whom did all that land belong? In 1740, a woman stepped forward claiming to be the personal representative of the lawful heirs. An attorney from North Yarmouth purchased the estate from her. A year later, he re-sold the tract to Nathaniel Noyes of Falmouth who carved it up and sold it piecemeal.

Those microfilmed deeds put us back on the trail. We were able to sort out the deeds and learned the island had been owned by farmers until 1807. For the next 77 years it was owned by landlords. The first was James Deering who was also known as the "merchant prince of Portland." Others included Union Bank of Bath and a real estate magnate in Canada who planned to develop the island into a summer colony.

During a few months during the Civil War, Camp Berry—the Army's center for processing recruits—was relocated to the island as an attempt to stem desertions. It didn't work and the Army post returned to South Portland.

Another owner was a famous magician who purchased the island before leaving to go on national tours performing magic shows. He didn't pay the mortgage and lost the island through foreclosure.

James Baxter, mayor of Portland, purchased the island in 1884 as a summer residence and experimental farm. His son, Percival Baxter, inherited the island.

The farm was shut down during the Depression. In 1943, Gov. Baxter deeded the island to the State. It became a state park and school for the deaf.

These two examples show how researchers can reconstruct the narrative for property in Ancient Falmouth.

Many early town records, along with some later county records were lost to fire. We are indeed fortunate that nearly four centuries of deeds for Falmouth escaped the flames. Moreover, they are accessible online with all but 23 years having been indexed and made searchable online.

Property records are a gold mine for information about Falmouth families. Older deeds usually provide the occupation and town for both parties plus the name of the seller's wife (due to dower rights). Probate records are often copied into deeds. Seemingly extraneous information, such as the fact that a son was adopted, can be found in deeds.

Some researchers are reluctant to use deeds. Making sense of deeds often requires more work than tracing people through vital records and the census. Chasing the story of Falmouth homes into York deeds can mean going "old school" by hunting through a hand-compiled index.

Your town historical society helps our community discover the stories of its people and homes. We have found deeds to be an invaluable resource. We plan to add guides for tracing Falmouth deeds to the "Members Only" section of the website. As always, your Society stands ready to help you solve the mysteries of your family and their land.