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# History of Falmouth Maine

Town of Falmouth

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# The History of Falmouth

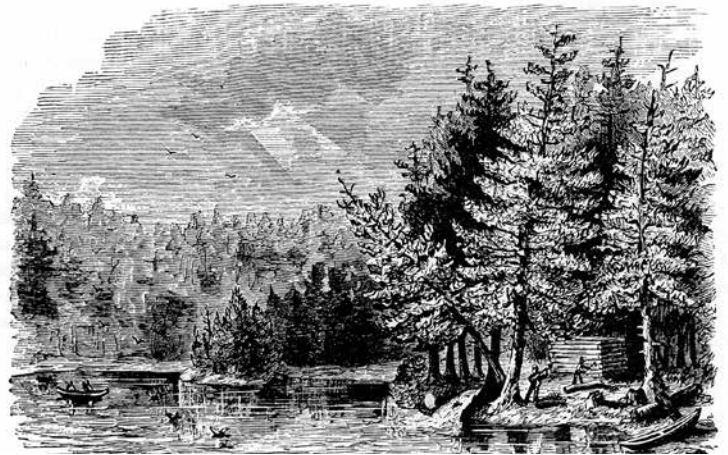
## EARLIEST INHABITANTS

The story of Falmouth, Maine begins long before its incorporation in 1718. Thousands of years before European explorers arrived in Maine, Native Americans made their home along Casco Bay. Twelve thousand years ago, as glaciers retreated, Paleo-Indians, followed big game into what is now Maine. Between ten thousand and seven thousand years ago, as the climate became more temperate and tundra gave way to wooded forests, Maine's indigenous populations shifted from a lifestyle of large game hunting to one of seasonal migration. They moved throughout the year between favored locations for hunting, fishing, and food gathering. With the invention of new tools for food processing and improved methods of transportation, Maine's Indians expanded their diet and began to establish trade networks. With new food sources, their population grew. Another warming trend brought the advent of agricultural production. In southern Maine, Native Peoples harvested corn, beans, and squash. The invention of ceramic pottery brought improved food storage and production, allowing for increased populations living in more permanent settlements along coastal areas.

We do not know what the earliest inhabitants of Casco Bay called themselves. English and French explorers traveling along the coast of Maine in the early 1600s provided the first accounts of the area and the people who lived there, whom they called "Wabanaki," the Algonquin word for "dawnlanders." As many as one thousand Wabanaki made their home in a village called Ashamahaga, located on the Presumpscot River. Here they tended their farms, harvested clams, fished the ocean and rivers, and hunted deer and wild fowl. The peaceful existence of this community was not long lasting. A decade-long war against neighboring tribes and a series of epidemics—diseases introduced by European settlers—decimated Maine's indigenous population. By the time the first Europeans established settlements in the Casco Bay area, the native population was severely reduced.

## A TIME OF CONFLICT

The first European settler in the Casco Bay region was Christopher Levett who, in 1623, established an outpost on an island in Casco Bay. In his journal, Levett recounts his travel up the Presumpscot River to the falls where he met and was entertained in the home of Skitterygusset, the sachem (leader) of the Presumpscot. Arthur Mackworth was the first settler in what is today's Falmouth. He arrived around 1632 and secured title to Mackworth Island, the nearby point, and a significant parcel of land on the east bank of the Presumpscot River. At about this same time, George Cleeve and Richard Tucker established a small farm on the site of present day Portland. Over the next twenty years, a community began to form around Casco Bay and, in 1658, these settlements were brought together under the control of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and given the name of Falmouth.



*This 1871 rendering depicts Cleeve and Tucker establishing their farm. Courtesy Library of Congress.*

The Wabanaki initially welcomed Europeans as both partners in trade for European goods and possible allies against their native enemies. Yet, these relatively peaceful relations were short-lived as increasing numbers of Europeans began to settle in the region. Tensions increased, leading to disputes over land and competition among traders. Conflict broke out in 1675, beginning several decades of violence. The English struggled to defend the scattered "ribbon settlements" of Casco Bay. In a retaliatory killing, Abenaki men raided the homestead of the Wakely family who lived on the Preumpscot River in today's Falmouth, killing three generations of the family and taking a young girl captive. Attacks such as these eventually drove surviving settlers to completely abandon Falmouth. This cycle of violence, abandonment, tentative peace, and resettlement, repeated itself time and again.

Meanwhile, the conflict between England and France for supremacy in the New World further fueled tensions between the native population and white settlers. In an attempt at peace, and at the bequest of local Abenaki, the English agreed to build a new fort on a point of land east of the mouth of the Presumpscot River. It is believed the fort was located on the grounds of today's Portland Country Club. Named Fort New Casco, it was conceived as a convenient place of trade for the Abenaki and headquarters for defense of England's northern frontier. The site became a frequent venue for negotiations, councils, and treaties. Peace was reaffirmed there in June 1701 when Massachusetts officials again met with local Abenaki-Pigwacket sachems to further negotiations. To symbolize the peaceful co-existence of these two peoples, stone cairns were erected and called Two Brothers. Two islands just off shore later were named in memory of this event. Unfortunately, the peace would not last. Hostilities again surged between France and England, playing out in increased violence throughout New England.

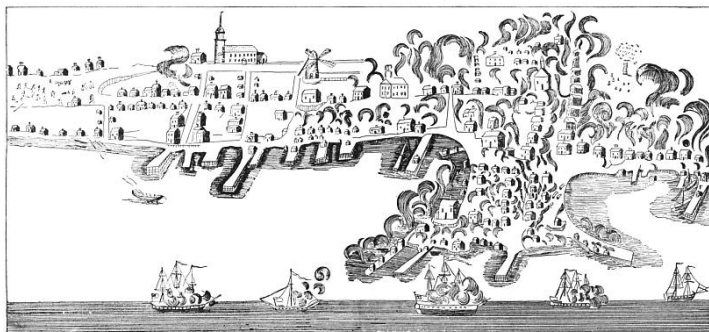
## BECOMING FALMOUTH

Falmouth was officially incorporated in November 1718. Its boundaries included today's Portland, South Portland, Cape Elizabeth, Westbrook, and Falmouth.

Falmouth, as we know it today, was located within this larger community and sometimes referred to as New Casco. Most families chose to settle in the populated Falmouth Neck, today's Portland, but a few carved out homes in the dangerous and unprotected area along the Presumpscot River and near Mussel Cove. From the 1720s on, settlers flooded into Maine. By 1753, 62 families called New Casco their home and, over time, residents were able to establish a secure enough economic base to support a minister, a milestone in the formation of a strong community.

The wooded lands of early Falmouth proved crucial to its early economy. Wood was harvested for building materials and fuel. Many of Falmouth's earliest settlers established lumber mills along the Presumpscot and Piscataqua Rivers, and at Mussel Cove. In these early days, Maine's tall white pines were its most precious commodity. Falmouth was a crucial supplier of masts for the British navy, bringing an economic boom to the settlements of Casco Bay. A large number of Falmouth residents worked in the mast trade. Some of the earliest ships built in Falmouth were mast ships, constructed to carry huge cargoes of masts to England. Today's Falmouth boasted several shipyards, along the Presumpscot River, Skitterygusset Creek, and near Lady Cove close to Waite's Landing.

their neighbors on the Neck to protest a proposed tax on all printed paper. By 1775, in a show of resistance to colonial rule, Falmouth voted to support several boycotts of British goods. Tensions between the elite merchant class on Falmouth Neck, local militias, and the British grew, culminating in the burning of Falmouth (today's Portland) by British forces that same year. When fighting broke out between colonists in Massachusetts and the British, Falmouth sent a company of soldiers to Boston to aid the rebellion against England. At least ten men from New Casco marched with them and served in the Revolutionary War. They are buried at cemeteries throughout Falmouth.



The burning of Falmouth in 1775.

As the 1700s drew to a close, the mast trade dwindled and today's Falmouth became primarily a community of farmers. Gradually, the interests of New Casco's rural community began to diverge from the merchant economy of Falmouth Neck. The difference in priorities between these two communities became too difficult to overcome and Portland separated from Falmouth in 1786. Cape Elizabeth and South Portland had already broken away in 1765. Westbrook followed in 1814.

## THE 1800S

In 1820, Falmouth voted 136 yeas to 35 nays to separate from Massachusetts and become the state of Maine. Peter M. Knight and Nathan Bucknam served as delegates to the state's Constitutional Convention, held in Portland. John Wait was Falmouth's first representative to the Maine Legislature.



Falmouth Corners at the intersection of Falmouth, Bucknam, and Middle Roads, in 1895. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.



Spinning wheels, like this one on display at the Falmouth Historical Society, were a fixture in most New England homes. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Families settled early Falmouth. The men worked as farmers, fishermen, shipwrights, or in the lumber or mast trade. As the settlement grew, trades and occupations expanded to include bricklayers, coopers, stonemasons, and blacksmiths among others. Falmouth's women maintained their homes, raised children, planted gardens, and tended livestock. They

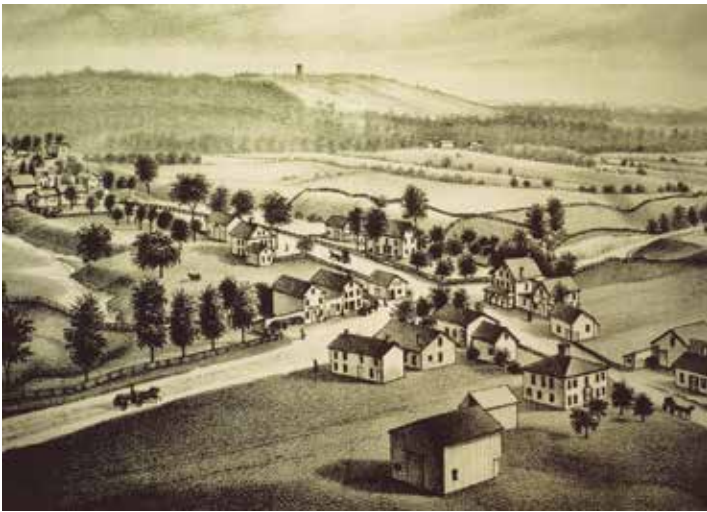
contributed to the domestic economy by selling the fruits of their labors, including butter, eggs, wool, yarn, and cloth. Children worked alongside their parents, helping to ensure the family's survival in what was still very much a wilderness.

## INDEPENDENCE

With the fall of Quebec City to the British in 1759, the French surrendered their foothold in the colonies. Without the aid of their French allies, the few remaining Native Americans migrated west and north. After some one hundred and thirty years since white settlers first came to Casco Bay, Falmouth residents could now live in relative peace and security.

Yet, a new battle lay on the horizon. Decades of war with France left England deeply in debt. To raise funds, the Crown levied a series of unpopular taxes upon the colonists. In 1765, residents of New Casco joined





1880 Bird's eye view of West Falmouth at the intersection of Falmouth, Gray, and Mountain Roads. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Falmouth's close connections to Portland determined its pattern of growth. Rather than settling around a village center, residents established themselves throughout Falmouth along various roadways leading out of Portland and usually within close range of a water source and mill site. These neighborhoods boasted their own churches, schools, stores, and social clubs. The unique character of these "hamlets" remains a distinct feature of Falmouth even today.

During the 1800s, Falmouth sent soldiers to battle in three major wars including the War of 1812 and the Spanish American War. When Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter in 1861, Maine's governor called for the formation of ten regiments of volunteer infantry. Of the 73,000 Mainers who served in the Union Army, Falmouth sent at least 102 men to battle during the Civil War. Soldiers from Falmouth saw heavy fighting in units that sustained some of the highest percentage of casualties of all federal regiments.



1909 view from Falmouth shore with steamboat. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

## THE 1900S

By the 1900s steam boats were regularly docking at Falmouth's Town Landing, running from Portland to Freeport and to Casco Bay's islands. Eben Ramsdell, then the postmaster of New Casco, and an aspiring developer, divided his land into small lots, selling them to summer residents who built small cottages. Known as

the Auburn Colony, the development ushered in a new era as Falmouth became known as a summer destination. Trolley service extended from Portland through Falmouth Foreside and provided Portland's wealthy classes with easy access to Falmouth's scenic coast and resort-like amenities. The construction of Underwood Springs Casino and Park in 1899, and the opening of the Portland Yacht Club (1885) and Portland Country Club (1913) ensured even more tourist traffic to Falmouth.

When America joined World War I in 1917, at least fourteen Falmouth residents, including several high school students, enlisted. The war inspired the townspeople to set aside \$50 for Memorial Day observances and to help fund the establishment of a war memorial at Pine Grove Cemetery.

In the 1920s, Falmouth began to see a new trend called net in-migration, a population increase greater than the difference between the number of births and deaths. Demographers attribute this to the rise of the automobile, which increased mobility and allowed people to live further away from where they worked. With these changes the role of Falmouth's town government began to expand beyond the construction and maintenance of roads and bridges, distributing aid to the poor, and overseeing schools. The Town purchased large equipment such as snow plows, buses, fire engines, and tractors, installed hydrants and electric lights, took over the care of several cemeteries, established parks, and allocated spending to promote tourism. In 1918, the Town voted to allocate money towards a commemoration of its 200th anniversary and, in 1922, funded an Old Home Days event. Increased governance required more space for Town offices and officials, thus, in 1927, a second story was added to the Town Hall originally built in 1899.

World War II brought another population boom to Falmouth. Casco Bay served as a base for America's destroyer fleet, resulting in an influx of military personnel between 1941 and 1944, many of whom lived on the Flats. Of the 316 Falmouth residents known to have served in the war, six died in the line of duty. On the home front, the residents of Falmouth honored their service members through public displays, memorials—including the Falmouth Memorial library—and fundraisers to help the war effort. The Town also established a Civil Defense Committee which operated well-beyond the war. After the war, Falmouth veterans returned home and established by charter American Legion Post #164 in 1946.

## GROWTH AND CHANGE

Falmouth experienced significant growing pains from 1947 to 1957. To address this issue, the Town organized its first Planning Board in 1948 and created its first zoning ordinance in 1952. During these boom years, the school population increased 81%, leading to the construction of a new middle and high school. Land use at this time was still primarily agricultural. The construction of the interstate highway system, including I-295 and the Maine Turnpike, physically divided the community in half, with the majority of residents living east of I-95. These new roads decreased travel time for commuters who found Falmouth's proximity to Portland and its rural character attractive, further propelling the town's dramatic growth.

Growth also led to the development of new recreational opportunities for Falmouth's residents. The public pier and beach at Town Landing were improved and parking expanded. The Town maintained Skitterygusset Pond on Lunt Road and a small pond in West Falmouth near Gray Road for ice skating. In 1956, the Falmouth Playground Association formed to create a central area for sports and recreation. In conjunction with the American Legion, which provided a 99-year lease on approximately 27 acres on Depot Road, the community-wide endeavor resulted in the creation of three baseball fields, two tennis courts, a surface area for badminton, volleyball or basketball, and a skating rink. With these new public facilities in place, an athletic program began in 1957 at the junior and senior high schools.

From its incorporation in 1718, Falmouth was governed by a Town Meeting style of government. Elected selectmen formed the administrative body and residents met annually to vote on proposed budgets and policy decisions. In 1962, however, Falmouth shifted to the Council-Manager form of government used today. Under this system an elected Town Council provides political leadership while a Town Manager and other professionals are hired to implement the policies established by the Council and manage day-to-day operations.

In 1963, Falmouth's first Town Plan noted that the town's proximity to Portland would ensure steady residential and commercial growth for the foreseeable future. Most residents at this time found their employment and family incomes through opportunities elsewhere in the region, despite what the 1963 Plan identified as economic opportunities of "major magnitude" for employment within Falmouth. The plan proposed continued commercial development, like the new Falmouth Shopping Center on Route One and new commercial development at the intersection of Gray Road, the Falmouth Spur, and the Maine Turnpike. Additionally the plan advised industrial development both on Gray Road and on Route One north of the Spur. The plan also noted that aside from school sites, Falmouth had almost a total lack of public land, and recommended the acquisition of land for future schools, recreational and conservation areas, and municipal uses. At about the same time, community members, recognizing the need to preserve Falmouth's history, established the Falmouth Historical Society in 1966.



1970 Falmouth Town Shopping Center. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

## A NEW CENTURY

The closing decades of the 20th century saw a significant loss in Falmouth's farm land and forests due to increased development. Falmouth's citizens responded to this loss by supporting the creation of a Conservation Commission and the efforts of the non-profit Falmouth Land Trust to conserve land for recreation and wildlife habitats.

In the 21st century, Falmouth continues to grow. Today, over 11,000 people make Falmouth their home. The town covers approximately 32 square miles from the coastline to rural areas further inland. As was the case in the last three centuries, Falmouth is still a vibrant and changing community.

Falmouth's schools are ranked as some of the best in Maine, attracting families to settle here. Its proximity to Portland and ease of access to the interstate and turnpike still make it a practical choice for commuters. Today, however, more individuals come to Falmouth to work than leave it for employment elsewhere. Falmouth also boasts a significantly high number of residents who work from home or remotely. Falmouth is also home to a large and active senior community. As more residents age in place, Falmouth has met the need with the creation of specialized senior programming and a Senior Citizens Center.

As this new century of growth and change continues, residents and Town officials are more committed than ever to balancing the preservation of Falmouth's rural character, with the need for smart growth and economic development, in order to maintain a thriving, vibrant, and attractive community for future generations.

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