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The "Pointer Draft" of Falmouth in October 1775

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FROM THE COLLECTIONS:
THE "POINTER DRAFT"
OF FALMOUTH IN OCTOBER 1775



Figure 1.

By CHARLES P.M. OUTWIN

IN August 1776 selectmen of the recently ruined town of Falmouth (Portland) appointed a committee to petition the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, in a final attempt at remuneration for losses from the depredations wrought by Mowatt's ministerial troops some nine months earlier. The appeal was presented in Watertown by Samuel Freeman (1743–1831), Falmouth's representative to that body, with a long list of persons and the enumerated losses they had sustained. The Falmouth committee also directed a young man named John Pointer to draft a chart of the town as it had existed at the time of its destruction. Freeman presumably took this map with him to his Watertown meeting, and kept it after his return home. Later, around 1821, Freeman had a very clumsy woodcut made of the map to go with his heavy-handed edition of the journals of the Reverends Thomas Smith (1701–1795) and Samuel Deane (1733–1814).

The "Pointer draft" was also the source of the engraving "Falmouth Neck as It Was when Destroyed by Mowatt, October 18th 1775," that accompanies *The History of Portland* (1831, 1833, 1865) by William Willis (1794–1870). (That diagram was reproduced and published by the Maine Historical Society in 1976.) Willis's engraving, executed by Bailey and Noyes of Portland, was apparently based more closely on Freeman's rough chart than on the original. It, too, was rather crude but still gave a passable impression of the location of major structures and the extent of the damage wrought by Mowatt's bombardment. Captain Lemuel Moody, a vigorous early Portland collector into whose hands the original had come, worked with Willis in the early nineteenth century to produce the engraved chart. Ever since, the composition of the original had been ascribed to Captain Moody. That attribution, based on Moody's long-time ownership of the map, is probably in error.

The map, 62 by 99 centimeters, which sat safe but little regarded in the Society's storage throughout the twentieth century, appears to be drawn on paper of not very good quality, using organic inks and washes, now badly deteriorated. This paper, which had at some early point been folded into quarters, was later glued to a fine canvas backing, probably in an attempt to conserve it. Some portions are so faded that they are very nearly illegible, largely due to early neglect. There are rusty holes around the margin that show the document had been pinned roughly to a board or wall. Freeman, Moody, Willis, and perhaps others made notes all over the original, in both ink and pencil, and altered its layout with anachronistic features, such as the Portland Observatory on Munjoy Hill, built in 1807. Going over the old document inch by inch with a magnifying glass, many more objects and in finer detail can be seen than in Willis's copy, such as the extra buildings in the Hay Market (now Monument Square, figure 2), or a gallows, constructed around 1772, near the upper left edge. Houses are colored, not only red but yellow, brown, blue, and green. Most important, specific criticisms leveled by Deane at the "miserably done" Pointer draft in a letter to Freeman, which was written some time before Deane's death in 1814, conform exactly with errors in the old map.

We presently know little about Pointer himself. His family is mentioned in a few records of Saint Paul's Anglican Parish in the late 1760s, but not elsewhere. He may have been the son of one William Pointer. John himself is mentioned only by his last name in Samuel Deane's letter of criticism to Freeman. Pointer was either no surveyor, or in haste to complete the draft, or, most probably, both. The map's proportions are

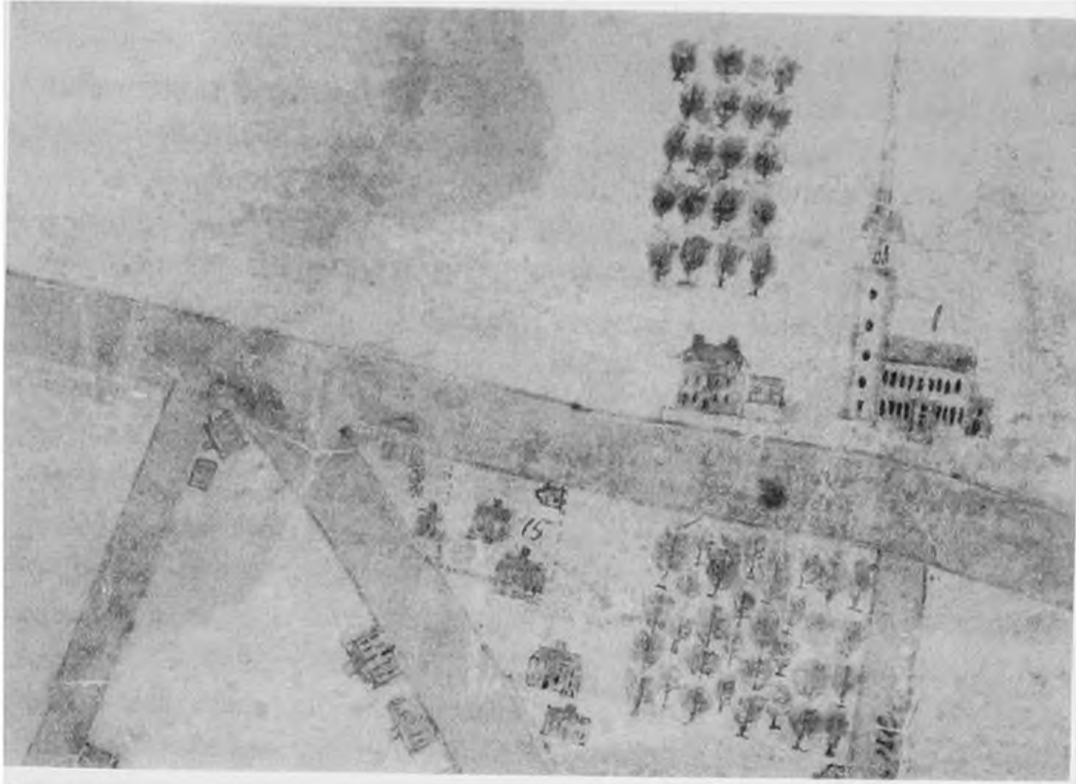


Figure 2.

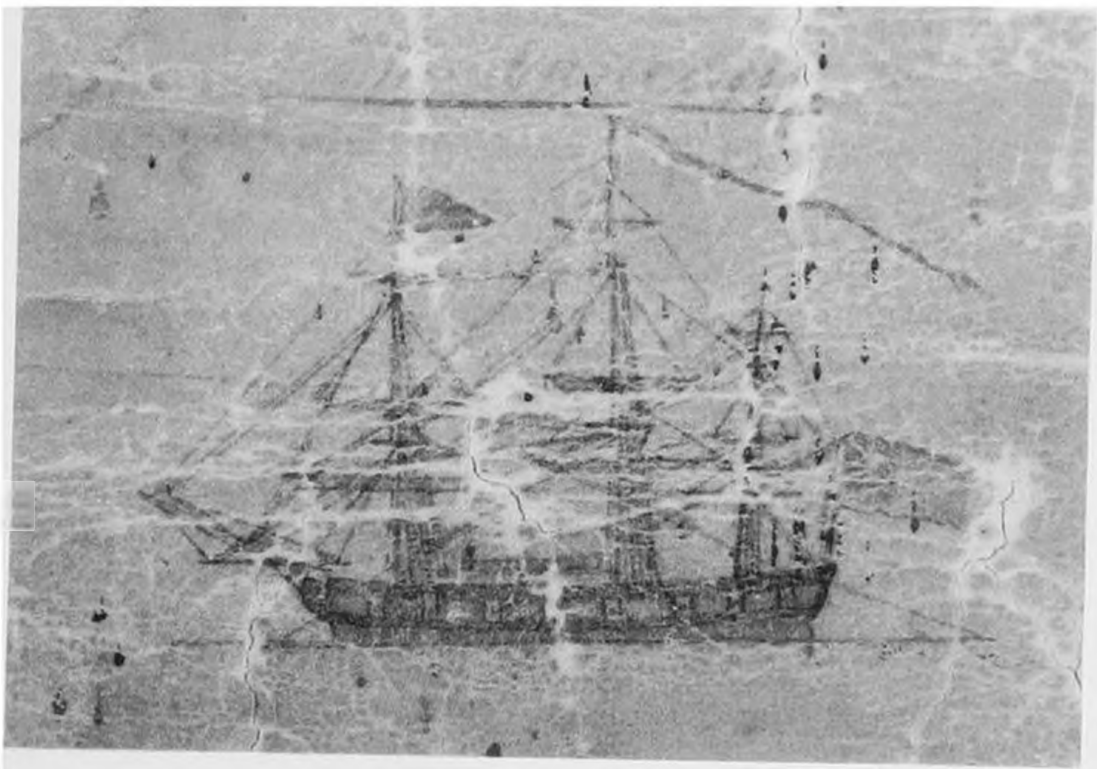


Figure 3.

wrong, with streets too wide and buildings too small. Many structures have been left out or misplaced, according to Deane, and one street was completely omitted. The impression is of a much less densely settled area than actually existed. Pointer's drawings of Mowatt's fleet, however, are exquisite, especially that of the *H.M.S. Canceaux* (figure 3). He may therefore have been a marine draftsman, perhaps employed by one of the hugely profitable shipyards in Falmouth, such as that belonging to Messrs. Jeremiah Pote and Thomas Coulson at the foot of King Street, also destroyed in the bombardment.

Conditions in Falmouth deteriorated rapidly from 1776 through 1780. Epidemic and famine decimated the population, and refugees, both Whig and Tory, streamed away in all directions. The Provincial Congress's reluctant rejection of the 1776 petition left the wrecked town in destitution. Freeman then had little time to think about the failed appeal, or the chart that went with it. During the heady days of thriving early republican Portland, the Pointer draft was apparently little valued as a reminder of the vanished colonial port. Yet, imperfect as it is, this map, with Deane's letter, is the most accurate guide we have to the appearance and settlement patterns of Falmouth at the height of its prosperity.

The map number for the Pointer draft is F219, at the Maine Historical Society Library, 485 Congress Street, Portland.

Photographs by John A. Monroe, Portland.