

**Falmouth Historical Society Presentation
at Falmouth Memorial Library**

FHS Presents! — Maps of Falmouth

In-person and Online via Zoom—May 25, 2022

The accompanying slides are posted on the Society website at:

<https://thefhs.org/Falmouth-Historical-Maps>

Our job at the Falmouth Historical Society is to preserve the heritage of our town, and to share the story of Falmouth and its people. We receive an average of five queries a month from people in our broad community who want to know more about people, places, or events in our town. Nearly all the queries require some research which makes us feel like history detectives. It's fun and a great way to learn more about this place we call home.

Maps are one of the most powerful tools we have for solving those mysteries.

Maps begin with a view of land. That seldom changes much from generation to generation. Maps also capture details about what people are doing on that land at a particular moment in time. This often includes information you won't find elsewhere.

Researchers have an abundance of written records, but those tend to focus on individual people or places. Maps cover a large swath giving context to those individual records.

If you are digging into the history of people and places in Maine, you will quickly encounter your nemesis: Fire. Decades of warfare and centuries of calamities have seen so many of our records disappear in a blaze. Here in Cumberland County, there is one big exception: Deeds—most of which have survived intact since 1635. Whether you are a genealogist or just curious about the story of your home, you will eventually find yourself looking at deeds (which, thankfully, are accessible online). Deeds often refer to long-forgotten neighbors or vanished landmarks. Maps are your salvation when making sense of old deeds.

Old atlases are wonderful because they provide—at a glance—both “who” and “where.” They are among the first resources to which we turn when trying to reconstruct the narrative for a family or a home.

There is an abundance of old maps. Many do not provide the detail we need. Fortunately, many are very useful. Now we are going to travel back in time examining the maps our volunteers find most useful in discovering the stories of our town and its people.

Google. We begin with a current map and that usually means Google Maps. There are multiple online maps offering overhead views including imagery, but Google comes with some “special sauce.”

Once we find locate a point of interest on a map, our appetite is whetted for more. That’s where Google’s Street View comes into play. It brings the map to life by allowing you to view the location from ground level. Moreover, you can “virtually” study the location without making the residents nervous.

What if the building is obstructed by foliage? Google Street View has an option to look at earlier images and chances are good that at least one set of images was taken when the leaves were down.

In the slide, you can see that Google passed by the Museum six times between 2007 and 2019.

If you are looking at an older home, chances are also good that a real estate agent posted pictures online. One of the oldest homes in Falmouth was recently sold. There are 46 pictures of the house and grounds. Previous owners had preserved many of the original features. Some of the floorboards are so wide, they must have come from mast trees (reserved for the Royal Navy) which may explain why the fellow who built the home served in Washington’s army during the Revolution.

Google Maps help you find a specific location and get a good sense of how it looks today.

Falmouth Town Plat. Our next stop is the Falmouth town plat. Falmouth and many neighboring communities use modern geographic information systems.

These are usually accessible from the assessor's page on the municipal website. Sometimes they can be found by searching for "GIS" and the town's name. Rural communities may simply publish the maps as Adobe Acrobat PDFs on their website. This means cross-referencing with the tax rolls.

The Falmouth GIS can be searched by address or the name of the owner. You can select which base map and kinds of information are displayed. There are distance and area measuring tools that are very useful when reconstructing the bounds of a lot before it was subdivided.

Best of all, the "property card" is attached. It usually lists the current and recent owners along with the book and page numbers for the deeds which is the starting point for tracing the history of the property.

A current town plat provides the remaining details about a piece of property today along with pointers to discovering its past.

1957 Falmouth Town Plat. Beginning in the 1950s, Falmouth experienced tremendous growth in homes built on former farmland. Many older homes in Falmouth were once farmhouses on large (often 60 or 100 acre) tracts.

Discovering the story of an old farmhouse begins with reconstructing the boundaries of that farm. Last summer, we received a donation of a town plat from around 1957 showing the lots before the surge of development. When compared to the current plat, you can see that some lots were combined before being subdivided.

The 1957 town plat is a big help in making sense of older deeds.

Historic Topo Maps. The US Geological Survey has posted its collection of historic topographic maps online. These maps aren't as full of information as the atlases, but they do fill in gaps between since 1871.

The topo maps from the 1940s and 50s are good companions to the 1957 town plat. Both show roads. One shows lots while the others show buildings. The mid-century topos also show the old road names. This is also when census data lets us build a more complete picture of a neighborhood.

Historic Nautical Charts. Nautical charts are all about water. Mariners need accurate information about coastlines as well as landmarks that can be used for navigation. Information about other features on land may not be as accurate but often provides surprising detail as you see in the 1870 chart of the lower Foreside. NOAA has posted its collection of historic charts online. Their website isn't as easy to use as the USGS site.

The Library of Congress also has a chart of Portland (then Falmouth) Harbor depicting area roads at the start of the Revolution.

Sanborn Map. Atlases which give us the what, the where, and the who.

The Sanborn Map Company's fire insurance maps are wonderfully detailed. Alas, they cover only urban or dense suburban areas. In Falmouth, Sanborn maps are available for only one year and cover only portions of the Foreside. It is a good snapshot of Falmouth's most densely populated neighborhood prior to the Depression.

Richard's Atlas of Portland. The Richard's Atlas includes a slice of the lower Foreside prior to the development of the Flats shown on the 1924 Sanborn map.

Stuart's Atlas of Maine. This atlas is sparse on detail, but the landmarks fill in gaps and have helped us respond to queries.

Atlas of Cumberland County. Next come the two sets of atlases that are the most useful because they paint a detailed picture of Falmouth during the second half of the 19th century. If you have ancestors who appear on the 1860 or 1870 censuses of Falmouth, this is where you turn next.

The 1871 atlas is the most detailed with a map of Falmouth and insets for its four villages. The enlarged section shows the Town Landing area of the Foreside.

1857 Map of Cumberland County. The 1857 atlas is the first detailed map of Falmouth plus an inset for one village.

Surveys of Falmouth Roads. Now we turn to early maps of Falmouth when infrastructure—roads and bridges—were a very big deal. Infrastructure was costly to build and maintain. Because infrastructure consumed a large share of

taxes, the road survey was as accurate as possible... for a couple of guys with a compass and a pair of poles connected by a chain.

Only the rough locations of some buildings are shown as landmarks.

The 1828 survey (which is online at Osher Map Library) shows most of the major roads in Falmouth today. Missing is the New County Road to Gray (Route 100). The gold lines show various proposed routes. It does show the Old County Road—now a trail—starting on Winn Road across from Eureka.

A full-sized photocopy of the 1804 survey can be viewed at Maine Historical's Brown Library. It is not as legible but often includes the owners of buildings.

1794 Plan of Falmouth. This survey shows only county roads. It doesn't show the local roads that appear on the 1804 road survey but does reflect bridges across the Presumpscot in 1794.

1775 Map of Falmouth Neck. William Willis, lawyer, politician, and historian, wrote the definitive history of Portland (including early Falmouth) that remains our starting point for research involving Colonial Falmouth. Much of that history was written in the 1840s using records later lost to fire plus first or second-hand oral history. Willis published a pair of maps to supplement his history.

This map shows the Portland Peninsula, then part of Falmouth, at the time of its destruction by the British in 1775. Many families shown on this map became prominent citizens of Falmouth after Portland and Deering split off. If you have ancestors who lived in early Falmouth, this handy reference shows where they lived on "Falmouth Neck."

1732 Proprietors Map. Up to this point, the maps have been "historical." They comprise an important part of the record of Falmouth's history. This map is "historic." The map itself is key piece of a foundational event in Falmouth's history. If you live in Falmouth, this map is part of the legal record for the title to the land upon which you live... as well as the land upon which this library sits.

Following two wars in which Colonial Falmouth was destroyed by the French, land ownership was a "hot mess" of conflicting claims. Recovery of the town was stalled because nobody could be certain as to who owned which land. The

General Court in Massachusetts told the people of Falmouth to sort it out amongst themselves. To everyone's surprise, they did. The Falmouth Proprietors were formed to govern the process which effectively "rebaselined" land ownership. The actions of the Proprietors were recorded in three volumes and two maps. This map is the town plat for Colonial Falmouth north and west of the Portland Peninsula.

For more about the map and its digital imaging by Osher Map Library, see the presentation given at our Society's Annual Meeting in January 2021 and posted on our website under "Documents."

The map is barely legible even though it was expertly imaged using visible light which brought out details not visible on the original. If you are researching families or property in Colonial Falmouth, this map can help you sort through deeds that often refer to long-vanished landmarks. We suggest that you contact us for assistance.

Ancient Falmouth. This is the "other" Willis map. Lack of infrastructure meant English settlers in what is present-day Falmouth lived close to the water. If you are researching families or property in Ancient Falmouth, Willis is your place to start.

Accessing the Maps. All but two of the maps in this presentation are available online. Links are provided on our website page for "Research – Falmouth Historical Maps."

The primary images for these are massive and stored in specialized formats that cannot be processed by consumer photo editing software. Some sites allow you to download a JPEG-formatted image but these do not contain the detail of the primary images.

Rarely do you need a full-resolution image of the full map. Most often, you want a full-resolution snippet including a building or neighborhood of interest. For this, open the map in a browser and switch to "Full Screen" mode (F11 key). Expand the map to "Full Screen" mode (usually an icon at the bottom of the map). Zoom in to achieve full-resolution. Take a screen shot ("prt sc" key) and paste the image into a photo editor for cropping and saving.

More About Maps. Most of us find it easier to absorb information presented graphically as opposed to textually. That's why we make and use maps.

A final caution: maps are incredibly useful but... they are the product of surveying and cartography which are devilishly complicated. Data applied to a map from other sources introduces the potential for more error.

The town plat is a mashup of data from deeds going back centuries and based on physical landmarks that have disappeared or moved. Deeds cite magnetic bearings. The Falmouth town plat is the most accurate representation of our town, but individual lots as shown in the town plat may not exactly match the plat for done by a surveyor. Experience suggests that the precision of maps improves when a map influences the expenditure of money (as in the case of road surveys).

If you need help finding or using maps, our volunteers are standing by.