Researching Early Falmouth
Two Historic Sites on the Foreside (1633-1713)

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Historical photographs, unless otherwise attributed, were obtained through the Wikimedia Commons
Queries from the Community

We responded to 40 requests last year

• Some are easy
• Many are challenging
• A few are very difficult
• Research brick walls encountered most often south of Lunt and Depot Roads

Two cases from 2021

• Portland Country Club: Where was Fort New Casco?
• Mackworth Island: What is the island’s history?
Researching Ancient Falmouth

Research almost always begins with William Willis’ *The History of Portland from its First Settlement*

- Fundamental reference for history of Ancient Falmouth
- Well-researched, well-sourced, well-written

After Willis, the trail becomes harder to follow

- Some resources lost or difficult to access

Recently digitized resources are opening windows into the past
Arthur Mackworth

Falmouth’s first settler

• At Mackworth Point ca. 1633, then on Mackworth Island
• Received grant for 500 acres in 1635
  ─ More like 1,300 acres
  ─ Bounds included everything south of the Fire Station and Mill Creek Pump House
• Died ca. 1657
• Widow made grants to children (Neale, Wharff, Felt, Andrews)

Then war came to Falmouth

Willis’ Falmouth 1633-1690
Showing Mackworth Grant
Nothing on this map is exact!
Falmouth’s Violent Past

Ancient Falmouth abandoned, repeatedly
Suffered terribly over four decades
1675-1678  King Philips War
1688-1697  King William’s War
1702-1713  Queen Anne’s War
Settlers fled south for safety
Buildings destroyed
Town reestablished in 1718
Fort New Casco

Built by Col. Romer in 1700
- 70 square foot palisade
- Bastions at NW and SE corners
- Raised sentry boxes at NE and SW
- Commandant’s quarters, guardhouse & storehouse
- Garrison of 36 men commanded by Maj. March
- Original fort outlined in green

Became the central point of defense for all settlements on Casco Bay

Capt. John Redknapp’s Map (1705)
War Comes to New Casco

Queen Anne’s War erupts in August 1703

• “Whole eastern country was in a conflagration, no house standing nor garrison unattacked.“
• English settlers took refuge in fort
• French laid siege to fort
• Siege relieved by arrival of armed ketch
• Garrison remained while families evacuated
• Fort expanded in 1705
• Treaty of Portsmouth signed in 1713
• Fort demolished in 1716 and settlers began returning to “Old Casco” (Portland’s Old Port)
Where Was Fort New Casco?

An abundance of “authoritative” sources

• Willis, historical societies, maps galore
• All agree it was near the PCC on the former Brown estate
• Locations are all over the place

1705 Plan of fort is most authoritative

• Prepared by a skilled military engineer
• Dimensions and directions should be accurate

19th century maps & charts
The Answer

A: Based on Site Plan
Located on private land near golf course between holes 16 & 17

B: Based on Old Maps
700 feet to east of “A”

300-yard stretch along shore
Both are consistent with contemporary descriptions
Mackworth Island

First step is to build the “skeleton”
- Family history: Family tree
- Property history: Chain of deeds

Deeds for Falmouth are in two counties
- 1635-1760 York County
- 1769-present Cumberland County

Most deeds have been preserved and are accessible
- Unlike many town and some probate records

Except for York County Volumes 20-36 (1737-1760)
The Black Hole of York Deeds

York Deeds Vol 1-19
- Published and downloadable from Archive.org
- Searchable at AmericanAncestors.org

York Deeds Vol 20-36
- Accessible only at Registry of Deeds in Alfred
- Digitized microfilm now accessible at familysearch.org

Records of the Falmouth Proprietors
- Accessible only at Registry of Deeds in Portland
- Digitized transcript now accessible at Archive.org

Brick walls are meant to be broken!
Researching Mackworth Land

Lesson in past presentations
  • Use the 1732 Proprietors Map as a guide to early Falmouth deeds

 Doesn’t work for Mackworth tract
  • Yellow line shows Mackworth boundary
  • Most of tract viewed as “Old Proprietor”

Picked up the trail in Cumberland County deeds after 1760
  • Island had been divided into four parts
  • Confusing deeds misled researchers
Untangling the Chain

Followed the trail back into York Deeds

• One deed in 1765 referred to a sale in 1751
• Armed with the year and name of the seller, found the date of the deed in the index
• Found the actual deed

Continued following the chain back to 1742

• The Mackworths were dead
• A descendant came forward
• She sold the residual estate to a lawyer
• It was resold to Nathaniel Noyes
• Noyes carved up the island and sold the parts
The Peculiar History of Mackworth Is.

York Deeds put us back on the correct trail
Island owned by farmers until 1807
Owned by landlords for the next 77 years
  • Including James Deering, a bank, and a developer
  • Three months as US Army Camp Berry in 1863
James Baxter purchased the island in 1884
Gov. Percival Baxter donated the island to the state in 1943
Conclusions

Reconstructing the narrative for property in Colonial Falmouth is challenging but can be done

Newly digitized records open a window to the past

- Broad range of source materials helped find the answer to “Where was Fort Casco”
- Non-governmental copies of government records broke through brick walls to reconstruct the story of Mackworth Island

Your town historical society is ready to help you solve your mysteries!