

Falmouth Public Library – Postcards from Falmouth

Postcards from Falmouth Oral History Transcript

Recorded: August 19, 2021

Oral Historian: Charles McCaffrey

Interviewer: Troy Clarkson

Topic: West Falmouth Library

Note: The right column references postcards by identifiers searchable in the Digital Commonwealth online collection.

00:00	[Music]	
00:45	so on the theme of libraries Charlie	
00:47	welcome you are part of the West	#westfalmouthlibrary Hunt_West_Bldg_479 through 482 Gunning_West_Bldg_1558 through 1563
00:49	Falmouth Library which is	
00:51	not only a beautiful and historic	
00:54	building in the West Falmouth Village	#westfalmouth
00:56	but also an important part of the	
00:58	community's culture and cultural history	
01:01	so just please give us	
01:03	a brief introduction of both the	
01:04	building and the organization okay well	
01:09	you said my name is Charlie McCaffrey	
01:10	I'm	
01:11	a lifelong	
01:13	summer resident of Falmouth	
01:15	of North Falmouth actually not West	#northfalmouth
01:18	Falmouth	

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01:19	and	
01:20	I moved to Falmouth full time in	
01:24	2005.	
01:26	at that time I was aware of the	
01:29	West Falmouth Library as a wonderful	
01:31	building but I had never been in it and	
01:34	a friend urged me	
01:35	to go visit the West Falmouth Library	
01:38	shortly after I moved full time	
01:40	I quickly became involved with its	
01:43	activities and learned a great deal	
01:45	about its history	
01:47	I was struck by the library because it	
01:49	reminded me	
01:51	physically of the small	
01:53	branch library in Boston that I had went	
01:56	to as a child it looked very similar	
01:58	and that was the center of my childhood	
02:01	in uh growing up in Boston	
02:03	so I felt very comfortable	
02:05	at the library and began to volunteer	
02:08	for events	
02:10	the library was started	
02:13	in the late	
02:16	19th century by the 1870s by a group of	
02:19	women in West Falmouth who wanted to get	
02:22	together and share books	

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02:24	they	
02:25	had a small building	
02:27	which they quickly outgrew	
02:29	and sought to develop a real library	
02:32	and	
02:32	got through the	
02:34	generous donation of people in the	
02:36	community they were able to acquire the	
02:38	land that it's on	
02:40	and to build	
02:42	the main building	
02:43	in	
02:44	1895	#1895
02:47	and it's continued as a library since	
02:49	1895.	
02:51	initially staffed primarily by	
02:54	volunteers	
02:55	but increasingly over the last 20 years	
02:58	by professional staff	
03:03	the library building	
03:04	uh	
03:06	was added on to	
03:08	in the 1970s	
03:10	and then	
03:11	we became aware	
03:13	while I was on the Board of the library	
03:16	that we needed to modernize and bring it	

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03:19	up to the	
03:21	21st century needs of a public library	
03:25	I say public library we are a public	
03:27	library	
03:28	though we are not a municipal library we	
03:30	receive a small amount of support from	
03:33	the town but we need to raise	
03:36	our budget	
03:37	annually	
03:39	to keep the library operating and thanks	
03:42	to the generosity of people in West	
03:44	Falmouth and in Falmouth as a whole and	
03:46	be	
03:47	beyond we're able to sustain a very	
03:50	efficient library operation	
03:52	but as I started to say we need	
03:55	to recognize that the physical plan was	
03:57	not adequate for a 21st century library	
04:01	so we needed to add	
04:03	such things as better accessibility	
04:07	handicapped-accessible bathrooms	
04:09	modern heating and ventilation uh	
04:13	archive space that's temperature	
04:15	controlled for the significant papers of	
04:18	the history of West Falmouth that we	
04:21	hold some going back to the	
04:23	mid uh 17th century	

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04:28	so in	
04:30	2013 we began to raise funds	#2013
04:33	to renovate	
04:35	the existing library to restore it to	
04:37	its original	
04:39	appearance	
04:40	it had been well maintained	
04:43	and not altered in any great detail	
04:47	since 1895 but it certainly showed the	
04:50	effects of 120 years of wear and tear	
04:55	and to put in the modern features that	
04:57	we needed without compromising the	
05:01	original space we put on a small	
05:03	addition	
05:04	that has	
05:06	the archive room	
05:07	for handicap-accessible bathrooms a new	
05:11	quiet reading room	
05:12	uh stairs and in that great entrance	
05:17	the general the project cost us	
05:19	approximately	
05:21	three million dollars	
05:22	and through the generosity of the	
05:25	community in a town and state grant	
05:28	we were able to complete the project in	
05:31	2017.	#2017
05:34	today we are	

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05:37	open 30 hours a week	
05:39	we have a professional staff	
05:42	and we undertake many programs such as	
05:45	lectures	
05:46	music programs	
05:48	children's programs that are open to the	
05:51	whole town and are well attended by	
05:53	people from throughout the town	
05:56	thank you	
05:57	for that wonderful history of the	
06:00	organization and the building I always	
06:02	say a library is the heart of a	
06:04	community and that certainly is true for	
06:06	the West Falmouth Library and I'm glad	
06:08	you do the distinction	
06:11	between the West Falmouth Library and	
06:14	the Falmouth public slash municipal	
06:16	library because	
06:17	the West Falmouth Library is	
06:21	open and accessible to the public and I	
06:23	know that's an important part of your	
06:24	mission	
06:25	it is and it's interesting that	
06:29	as a community center and that's very	
06:32	much what it is as a library and has	
06:33	always been that	
06:35	but that also	

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06:37	correlates well with what is happening	
06:40	to libraries today	
06:42	libraries are very much community	
06:44	centers and a provision for the place	
06:46	for the community to gather and	
06:48	individuals to use for many purposes	
06:51	they are not just	
06:53	about lending books	
06:56	particularly as	
06:58	reading materials are available from	
07:00	many sources they continue to provide	
07:03	that	
07:03	and need to expand what they provide	
07:06	the key thing with the library is it	
07:08	provides	
07:10	materials for learning for free	
07:14	but it complements that	
07:17	with a variety of programs	
07:19	that the community can enjoy in a place	
07:22	where the community can gather	
07:25	I remember	
07:26	this is going back	
07:28	some years but when I was running for	
07:30	public office for the what was then	
07:32	called the Board of Selectmen is today	
07:34	called the Select Board uh local	
07:36	candidate debates would be held at the	

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07:39	West Falmouth Library and I know you	
07:41	still have many of those civic events	
07:42	there now and so that really reinforces	
07:46	the role of a village community library	
07:49	as as you say not just an institution	
07:52	where you can experience information in	
07:55	multimedia fashion but where you can	
07:58	gather and be part of the community one	
08:00	of the great events that I've enjoyed	
08:03	participating in is one of the annual	
08:05	fundraisers where people gather at the	
08:07	library then fan out to different	
08:09	people's homes to eat and then come back	
08:11	for dessert tell us about that	
08:13	that's called the Movable Feast it has	#movablefeast
08:15	been a major fundraiser for the library	
08:17	for the last 12 years	
08:19	excepting	
08:21	the last year of course because of the	
08:23	pandemic	#pandemic
08:25	actually was an event that I started and	
08:28	copied it from	
08:30	an event of the same name and character	
08:32	that was held by the Historic Albany	#historicalbanyfoundation
08:35	Foundation where I used to live before I	
08:37	moved to	
08:38	Falmouth um	

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08:40	it	
08:41	well received it because it does	
08:43	build	
08:44	on and strengthen community interaction	
08:48	the idea is that people come to the	
08:50	library and they're randomly for	
08:52	cocktails and then they're randomly	
08:55	assigned	
08:56	to one of a dozen homes in the	
08:58	neighborhood	
09:00	for dinner and conversation so they meet	
09:03	new people	
09:04	and then come back to the library and	
09:06	where did you have dinner who did you	
09:08	meet what	
09:10	new people	
09:11	uh have you found you know so it's it's	
09:15	a very popular event uh	
09:18	I would add on the community center role	
09:21	of the library and how	
09:23	that's not just a new concept in	
09:25	libraries	
09:26	but	
09:27	when the library was built in 1895	
09:30	the main building had two rooms of	
09:32	approximate equal size one had the books	
09:37	and the other was a community room which	

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09:39	still exists	
09:41	and did not have any books in it it had	
09:43	a bench all the way around the perimeter	
09:46	and it was for community gatherings so	
09:49	it was built as much as a community as	
09:52	much as a community center and gathering	
09:54	place as a place for borrowing books	
09:58	and because the the library has been	
10:01	part of the community for	
10:03	as you said more than 120 years now but	
10:06	is also	
10:07	the keeper of archives dating back even	
10:09	before the building was built you	
10:11	mentioned that your archives include uh	
10:14	documents that date back to the 17th	
10:16	century tell us about uh some of the	
10:18	more interesting documents you have in	
10:20	your collection uh one of the documents	
10:22	is a deed	
10:23	from a Wampanoag Indian	#wampanoag
10:26	granting 30 acres of land	
10:29	to I forget first name but a Gifford and	#gifford
10:31	we know that his	
10:33	name has a long history in town	
10:36	uh so it's the actual deed from	
10:39	1673 I believe of 30 acres of land in	#1673
10:42	West Falmouth to the	

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10:44	Giffords um	
10:47	I have a friend actually who's who	
10:50	bought	
10:51	the Giffords built a house	
10:54	and today it's the oldest extant Cape Cod	
10:57	style house	
10:58	in	
10:59	1678	
11:01	and it remained in the Gifford family	
11:04	until the early 90s	
11:07	when actually a friend of mine acquired	
11:10	it	
11:11	and occasionally opens it to the public	
11:15	so isn't that amazing so uh although the	
11:17	building has been around for a little	
11:20	more than a century it captures nearly	
11:22	four centuries of local history yes	
11:24	another document that's interesting is a	
11:27	passport	
11:29	for a ship	
11:31	signed by	
11:32	Secretary of State James Madison and	#jamesmadison
11:35	President Thomas Jefferson	#thomasjefferson
11:40	and it's an it's rather an elaborate	
11:42	printed document with their signatures	
11:45	for a ship that had been built in West	
11:48	Falmouth Harbor and sailed around the	

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11:50	world	
11:51	isn't that amazing now in fast	
11:53	forwarding all these years still today	
11:56	the West Falmouth Library is an active	
11:58	participant in	
12:00	capturing today's history and and being	
12:04	part of the living history like what	
12:06	we're doing today	
12:08	but also continuing to be a focal point	
12:10	a gathering point as you called it for	
12:12	the community yes and I do recall a	
12:14	while ago	
12:15	we did have an oral history project and	
12:18	recorded some older residents of West	
12:20	Falmouth	
12:22	isn't that then that's so important like	
12:24	what we're doing here today so that	
12:25	future generations can understand uh	
12:28	what life was like in in Falmouth uh in	
12:31	2021 yeah	
12:33	um	
12:35	and I I would add	
12:37	um I myself	
12:39	uh I'm President of the Board	
12:42	for another few days	
12:44	but will continue in my involvement with	
12:46	the library I'm giving a presentation	

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12:50	at the library on	
12:52	sea level rise	#sealevelrise
12:54	which will be	
12:56	the probably the most important event	
12:58	that will affect West Falmouth and all	
13:00	of the town over the next 50 100 years	
13:04	so I'm reporting on what the town	
13:07	is doing	
13:08	to make us resilient to sea level rise	
13:11	which will require a huge effort on the	
13:13	part of everyone	
13:15	for sure and so	
13:17	a generation or two from now people will	
13:19	look back on what we did	
13:21	uh	
13:22	to to understand uh	
13:25	and to deal with sea level rise and and	
13:28	that will be	
13:29	that is an important part of what	
13:31	Falmouth will look like a generation in	
13:34	the library	
13:35	not only West Falmouth but the others	
13:38	are a key place where	
13:40	what we are facing can be communicated	
13:42	to the public effectively	
13:45	you know that that's a really good point	
13:46	because	

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13:48	today	
13:50	it seems is sometimes	
13:53	scientific fact	
13:54	is even debated but libraries continue	
13:57	to be a place where there is	
14:00	some ability to to have discussion about	
14:04	public policy and facts and to share	
14:06	those in a in a neutral uh educational	
14:10	environment right	
14:12	and where	
14:13	people actually interact rather than	
14:16	individually looking at the information	
14:18	and making decisions	
14:20	without the context of discussion right	
14:24	and that's so that goes back to your	
14:25	original point about the value of a	
14:27	library as a gathering place because uh	
14:30	rather than it's a place where people	
14:31	can come and rather than speaking at	
14:33	each other can speak with each other yes	
14:37	yeah the idea of libraries as a	
14:40	quiet place is somewhat passé right and	
14:43	importantly so right yeah	
14:46	uh so	
14:47	are there any other either historical or	
14:50	interesting facts about the West	
14:51	Falmouth Library you'd like to share	

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14:53	with our viewers	
14:57	I think its role as with discussion	
15:00	implies is central	
15:02	to the community	
15:04	a community to be in a	
15:06	a thriving community needs a sense of	
15:09	place	
15:10	which is created by its history and	
15:13	interactions but also by key physical	
15:16	places	
15:17	and	
15:18	the West Falmouth Library is central	
15:21	to that place called West Falmouth it's	
15:24	an interestingly enough	
15:28	in this series we also had someone from	
15:29	the Woods Hole Library	#woodsholepubliclibrary
15:32	which has a similar rich history as a	
15:35	partially privately funded but publicly	
15:38	accessible library makes me I think of	
15:41	the point	
15:42	Falmouth more than many communities	
15:45	has distinct villages each with their	
15:47	own identity and each with their own	
15:49	history and and so	
15:52	it's important that the West Falmouth	
15:55	library not only catalogued the history	
15:57	of the Falmouth community	

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15:59	but what's unique uh and special about	
16:01	West Falmouth itself yes	
16:04	uh	
16:05	it it is very much West Falmouth but as	
16:07	I said earlier too it also serves and	
16:10	draws people from throughout the town	
16:12	I myself	
16:14	have always lived in North Falmouth	
16:16	but found the library a very important	
16:19	cultural	
16:21	center so became involved	
16:24	and as by doing that became much more	
16:27	familiar with West Falmouth	
16:29	as well as	
16:31	other parts of Falmouth	
16:33	and that's so important because we are	
16:36	at the end of the day we are one	
16:37	Falmouth in one one community absolutely	
16:40	well Charlie thank you so very much for	
16:42	sharing some time with us and a little	
16:44	bit of the history of both that	
16:46	beautiful historic building that's been	
16:48	lovingly restored and modernized but	
16:51	also of the history of the library	
16:53	organization itself and we wish you many	
16:55	many more decades of success	
16:57	thank you Troy	