

Postcards from Falmouth Oral History Transcript

Recorded: February 24, 2020

Oral Historian: Rabbi Elias Lieberman

Interviewer: Troy Clarkson

Topic: East End Meeting House

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

00:00	[Music]	
00:44	I'd like to begin by asking you to tell	
00:46	us your full name	
00:48	and the postcard you'll be discussing I	
00:50	am Elias	
00:51	Jacob Lieberman I'm rabbi of Falmouth	#falmouthjewishcongregation
00:54	Jewish Congregation	
00:55	and I am discussing this wonderful	
00:57	postcard	
00:58	which depicts the East End Meeting House	#eastendmeetinghouse Gunning_Hatchville_Bldg_0526 through 0531
01:01	in East Falmouth	
01:03	so the East End Meeting House has a rich	
01:06	history in this community	
01:08	and it goes way back to the	
01:12	the days of the incorporation of our	
01:14	community tell us a little bit about it	
01:15	absolutely	
01:16	um I need to give a shout out I'm	
01:18	indebted to a couple of people who did	

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01:20	some wonderful	
01:21	early research on the Meeting House one	
01:23	of whom is Reverend Doug Showalter the	#douglasshowalter
01:25	minister for many many years of First	#firstcongregationalchurch
01:27	Congregational Church here in Falmouth	
01:29	he's an avid historian and he did	
01:31	incredible research on the history of	
01:33	the Congregationalist community in	
01:35	Falmouth and the other is Andrea Rosen	#andrearosen
01:37	who for her Master's thesis in	
01:40	Architecture	
01:41	did a study of the history and the	
01:43	structure of the East End Meeting House	
01:45	so here's what I learned back in 1686	#1686
01:49	among the early settlers in Falmouth	
01:51	decided it was time for a meeting house	
01:53	so a very simple structure was	
01:55	erected with town funds probably	
01:59	where Mill Road is in Falmouth today the	#millroad Gunning_Village_Sts_0001 through 0016
02:02	Old Burying Ground	#oldburyingground
02:04	several structures occupied that spot	
02:06	until well into the 1700s it was decided	
02:09	to	
02:09	move the location of that meeting house	
02:12	and a simple structure was built on what	
02:15	is now the	

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02:16	Falmouth Village Green later that became	#falmouthvillagegreen Gunning_Village_Sts_0053 through 0078
02:19	the beautiful	
02:19	First Congregational Church with its	Gunning_Village_Bldg_0346 through 0365
02:21	beautiful white spire	
02:23	etc later in the 1700s as the town grew	
02:28	there was a perceived need for a second	
02:30	meeting house	
02:31	and there was a debate about where that	
02:33	should be so	
02:35	the powers that be decided to divide the	
02:37	town in half	
02:38	with a dividing line roughly separating	
02:41	Teaticket from the rest of Falmouth	#teaticket
02:43	Tataketa at that time	#tataketa
02:45	and it was decided that the Falmouth	
02:48	meeting house would be the beautiful	
02:49	white church on the green	
02:51	and that a new meeting house would be	
02:52	built in East Falmouth	#eastfalmouth
02:55	Ezekiel Robinson one of the early	#ezekielrobinson
02:58	founders of Falmouth	
02:59	and a land owner donated land out in	
03:02	what is now Hatchville	#hatchville
03:04	the corner of Hatchville and Sandwich	#hatchvilleroad #sandwichroad
03:07	Roads today	

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03:08	and that's where a very simple structure	
03:11	was built	
03:12	the initial meeting house in the east	
03:15	end of town	
03:17	it was probably a simple uh gabled roof	
03:19	structure	
03:21	its main entrance faced the small road	
03:23	Hatchville Road	
03:24	its long side was facing the main road	
03:28	which is	
03:28	Sandwich Road so in in	
03:32	those days uh you mentioned that uh	
03:35	the original meeting house down by Mill	
03:37	Road was constructed actually with	
03:39	town funds so explain to us a little	
03:42	bit about how that worked because in	
03:43	those days as you know	
03:44	those meeting houses were both civic	
03:47	spaces where people would gather but	
03:49	also where people would worship	
03:50	absolutely this predates what we've come	
03:52	to think of as the separation of church	
03:55	and state	
03:56	but prior to that point it functioned as	
03:58	as you say	
03:59	a meeting house for civic affairs for	
04:01	worship	

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04:03	those structures certainly	
04:04	Congregationalist meetinghouse were very	
04:06	simple	
04:07	and it was only probably early	
04:10	1840s or so when this principle began to	
04:13	evolve	
04:14	that there should be a separation	
04:16	between government and	
04:17	church and religion that	
04:21	meeting houses and worship spaces took	
04:23	on a decided	
04:25	Christian look spires were added	
04:28	bells were added as if to say we're now	
04:31	dedicating this space	
04:33	for religious purposes civic purposes	
04:36	might be held elsewhere and so that's	
04:38	when many of those buildings begin to	
04:40	look more like a stereotypical	
04:43	New England church and that was true for	
04:45	the East End Meeting house	
04:48	1842 a member of that congregation whose	#1842
04:52	name was Shubael	#shubaellawrence
04:54	Lawrence and I meant to look up the	
04:57	derivation of that name because it's	
04:59	certainly a biblical name	
05:00	and to the best of my Hebrew knowledge	
05:02	it probably means God's	

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05:03	oath	
05:06	regardless he left a bequest in his	
05:09	estate	
05:10	he said I will leave to the East End	#eastendcongregationsociety
05:14	Congregational Society the sum of ten	
05:17	thousand dollars	
05:18	to be invested in what he described as	
05:20	good stocks	
05:22	which will serve as a preaching and	
05:24	teaching endowment	
05:25	to fund a minister and his	
05:29	service to the community and I'll give	
05:31	you that gift if you do the following	
05:34	if you rotate the building 90 degrees	
05:37	so that the main entrance faces Sandwich	
05:40	Road	
05:41	if you put up a spire and a bell	
05:45	and you agree to maintain the cemetery	
05:48	behind	
05:48	the meeting house in perpetuity	
05:52	the congregation jumped at that	
05:53	opportunity it met his	
05:56	requirements within two years of his	
05:58	will being	
05:59	probated and the meeting house really	
06:03	took on the look that it has to this	
06:06	very day	

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06:07	so can you share with us uh	
06:10	to the degree that that you know	
06:14	the evolution then of the that building	
06:17	since that point	
06:21	nearly 200 years the occupants and the	
06:24	people who have gathered	
06:25	right so I've learned some interesting	
06:27	things about the building from reading	
06:29	and certainly from experiencing uh	
06:30	the building over the past few decades	
06:34	when it was originally built there were	
06:36	galleries	
06:37	on three sides of that building upstairs	
06:39	galleries	
06:40	those galleries were designated for the	
06:42	poor and for servants	
06:44	pews down below the fixed pews were	
06:47	essentially sold	
06:48	to family members when the building was	
06:52	rotated	
06:53	two of the side galleries came down	
06:55	there was a remaining gallery in the	
06:56	back which which still exists	
06:59	the building really had no heat not	
07:02	surprisingly	
07:02	there were two pot-bellied stoves with	
07:05	long pipes	

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07:07	going around sides of the building not	
07:08	doing much	
07:10	the records indicate that people would	
07:12	bring heated bricks	
07:14	they would bring small portable stoves	
07:16	of some kind to	
07:17	set at their feet and uh the pews had	
07:21	doors to try to keep out some of the	
07:22	draft	
07:23	but it's hard to imagine that it was a	
07:24	very comfortable space especially in	
07:27	winter weather uh	
07:31	it's still a very beautiful building	
07:32	much of the the glass windows are still	
07:34	the original glass	
07:37	through the years the building suffered	
07:39	from	
07:40	the weight of that additional steeple	
07:42	and bell	
07:44	since the building was not originally	
07:45	designed to carry that weight	
07:47	over the course of time the roof began	
07:49	to experience some serious sag	
07:52	so uh I'm jumping ahead now so	
07:56	by the 1960s that	
07:59	congregation had grown quite small and	
08:02	it was hard to	

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08:03	find the finances to maintain that	
08:05	building in the way that	
08:07	it needed to be a	
08:11	society was formed the East End	
08:12	Congregational Society	
08:14	circa 1964 and it set about to do some	
08:17	serious fundraising to address some of	
08:19	those	
08:20	problems with the building and it was	
08:22	quite successful in that regard	
08:24	the building was used um somewhat beyond	
08:27	that point it was open to many different	
08:29	denominations who would use it	
08:31	and almost exclusively in the summer by	
08:33	that point	
08:34	summer worship became a a factor from	
08:37	the 1960s on	
08:40	by about 1981 that group had grown so	
08:44	small	
08:44	that the decision was made to see if	
08:46	there might be another	
08:48	faith community interested in taking	
08:50	over that building	
08:51	and taking over the responsibility of	
08:53	maintaining it	
08:55	and by happy coincidence certainly for	
08:56	the Jewish community that was right at	

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08:58	the time when a fledgling Jewish	
09:00	congregation was being formed	
09:04	Bob Ament Jeff Oppenheim	#robertament #jeffreyoppenheim
09:07	to stalwarts of our community were	
09:09	movers and shakers both young men at the	
09:11	time	
09:12	but they realized that there were	
09:13	probably enough Jews in Falmouth by that	
09:15	point	
09:16	to see if it would be feasible to	
09:19	pull together a congregation and that's	
09:21	what happened around 1981	#1981
09:24	and around that time this wonderful	
09:26	offer came from the East End	
09:27	Congregational Society	
09:29	we'd like to offer you this historic	
09:31	meeting house	
09:32	we'd like to offer you the parsonage	
09:34	house which sits just down the road on	
09:36	Hatchville Road	
09:38	as well as that preaching and teaching	
09:40	endowment	
09:42	and it's my understanding that by 1981	
09:44	that ten thousand dollars	
09:46	was about seventy five thousand dollars	
09:50	by the way that ten thousand dollars in	
09:52	1842 would have been the	

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09:53	equivalent of about three hundred	
09:55	thousand dollars in 2020	
09:56	dollars	
09:57	so it was a significant gift the Jewish	
10:00	community	
10:00	jumped at that opportunity it was really	
10:02	quite extraordinary because	
10:04	the Jewish community had been meeting in	
10:06	Saint Barnabas church	#saintbarnabaschurch Gunning_Village_Bldg_0316 through 0343
10:07	in bank meeting rooms and the	
10:10	opportunity to create a home	
10:12	was really just enormously powerful and	
10:16	wonderful	
10:18	the meeting house was conveyed to the	
10:20	Jewish community	
10:21	the Jewish community set about raising	
10:22	funds to make restorations	
10:25	and to do those things necessary to	
10:27	transform it into a synagogue	
10:31	the parsonage house became offices and	
10:33	classrooms for this fledgling	
10:35	congregation	
10:36	and uh the congregation took on the	
10:39	opportunity to maintain this building in	
10:41	perpetuity	
10:42	as well as the cemetery behind it so	

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10:46	someone at the time approached the	
10:49	American Jewish	#americanjewisharchives
10:50	Archives premier historical research	
10:53	organization	
10:54	and we received the really phenomenal	
10:57	message that to the best of its	
10:59	knowledge	
11:00	this was the first time in recorded	
11:01	history of a Christian community	
11:04	donating its building to a Jewish	
11:05	community	
11:06	so that it might have a home to worship	
11:08	in which is a pretty powerful story	
11:13	until this very moment didn't know that	
11:14	portion of the history so	
11:16	what a remarkable example uh of the	
11:19	sense of community that	
11:20	to this day is woven through uh	
11:24	so many facets of our community	
11:27	absolutely	
11:28	Troy right around that time	
11:31	circa 1983 the first uh Jewish service	#1983
11:34	was held there	
11:35	on July 29 1983 a Sabbath service	
11:39	and members from all over the community	
11:41	were invited and attended	
11:44	Jewish communities need and go to great	

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11:47	lengths to	
11:48	attain a Torah scroll the Torah contains	#torah
11:51	the Five Books of Moses and	
11:53	is read regularly in Jewish worship	
11:56	the congregation did not have a Torah	
11:58	scroll but was able to acquire one	
12:01	with a very special history	
12:05	after World War II it was discovered	#worldwartwo
12:07	that the Nazis had collected Torah	#nazi
12:10	scrolls and Jewish ceremonial objects	
12:12	from all of the Jewish communities that	
12:14	they had destroyed in Europe	
12:16	they gathered all those items in Prague	
12:18	and warehoused them	
12:19	at the end of the war they were	
12:20	discovered including hundreds of	
12:23	Torah scrolls some that were centuries	
12:25	old	
12:26	in many cases they were too far damaged	
12:28	to ever be used again	
12:31	those which could be restored were sent	
12:34	to a synagogue in Westminster	
12:36	London which became the repository for	#london
12:38	what are called	
12:39	Shoah scrolls Shoah is the Hebrew word	
12:41	for devastation the word	
12:43	referring to the Holocaust those scrolls	#holocaust

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12:46	that were able to be repaired were then	
12:48	made available on permanent	
12:50	loan to Jewish communities around the	
12:52	world	
12:54	Falmouth Jewish congregation applied for	
12:56	one of those scrolls	
12:58	and the cost of bringing it here	
13:00	shipping it insuring it	
13:02	were donated by the Church of the	#churchofthemessiah Gunning_WoodsHole_Bldg_0565 through 0569
13:04	Messiah in Woods Hole	#woodshole
13:06	so that church that community made	
13:08	possible	
13:09	a key element in the celebration of	
13:12	Jewish life and worship for our	
13:13	community	
13:14	and that's a that's a gift that	
13:17	remains firmly in the minds of our	
13:19	community ever since	
13:22	so really the the East End Meeting House	
13:25	symbolizes	
13:27	so much more than being simply a	
13:29	gathering place but	
13:31	how it exists today is	
13:35	based on the story you just shared is	
13:37	one of the shining examples of	
13:39	community really absolutely without	

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13:42	question	
13:43	by happy coincidence the Hebrew word for	
13:46	a synagogue	
13:47	two Hebrew words beit which means house	
13:50	kneset	
13:51	gathering or meeting so beit kneset	
13:55	really can translate	
13:56	quite easily as a meeting house	
13:59	and so it's very wonderful that the	
14:01	first worship space for our community	
14:04	was a beit kneset from 1797	#1797
14:07	a meeting house that's wonderful is	
14:09	there anything else you'd like to share	
14:11	I'll just give a quick synopsis of what	
14:12	happened since then	
14:14	the congregation um had taken over the	
14:17	Meeting House circa 1982	
14:19	did the necessary restorations and began	
14:22	to use it full time for worship	
14:24	um the congregation grew quite quickly	
14:27	in the 1980s	
14:29	and it became apparent by that point	
14:30	that it would need to expand	
14:32	but there was no room around the meeting	
14:34	house for that expansion	
14:36	so the congregation purchased 10 acres	
14:38	of land across Hatchville Road	

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14:41	and built a building with the	
14:43	possibility of picking up that	
14:45	meeting house and moving it across the	
14:47	street	
14:48	and then joining it to the building	
14:50	which was designed for that new space	
14:53	for various reasons that I won't go into	
14:55	that didn't happen the meeting house	
14:56	still sits in its	
14:58	original location and we have another	
14:59	beautiful facility	
15:01	our Seifer Community Center building	
15:03	which has a chapel classroom	
15:05	social hall et cetera so we have these	
15:07	two wonderful buildings	
15:08	the meetinghouse is still used although	
15:10	primarily in warm weather	
15:13	we put in heating and air conditioning	
15:15	back in the 1980s	
15:17	90s so it is certainly functional but	
15:20	most of what we do takes place in our	
15:22	community center building	
15:24	but that building remains a cherished	
15:26	part of our congregation	
15:28	uh and hopefully always will be	
15:31	wonderful thank you so much for uh	
15:33	sharing this rich history with	

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15:36	all of them you are very welcome thank	
15:38	you	
15:40	[Music]	