

Postcards from Falmouth Oral History Transcript

Recorded: March 3, 2020

Oral Historian: William Swift

Interviewer: Barbara Kanellopoulos

Topic: Dwight Estate

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

00:00	[Music]	
00:45	I am Barbara Kanellopoulos	
00:47	and Bill Swift is going to talk about	
00:51	the Dwight Estate on Mill Road and the	#dwrightestate #millroad Gunning_Village_Sts_0001 through 0016 Hunt_Village_Sts_075 through 178
00:54	history of that	
00:56	building thank you Bill you're welcome	
01:00	uh I'll try to bring you up to date a	
01:04	little bit on the uh	
01:07	the house uh back in	
01:10	1882 or 3	
01:14	John E. Dwight who was the CEO	#johndwight
01:18	of Arm and Hammer soda	#armandhammer
01:22	baking company and he decided	
01:26	to build a summer cottage for his family	
01:30	and in	
01:34	1884 or so he brought his family from	#1884
01:38	Princeton New Jersey down to Falmouth	
01:42	and back in those days when houses were	
01:46	built along the waterfront	

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01:48	they actually owned the land right	
01:51	to the waterfront so he ended up	
01:54	owning the beach front and right to the	
01:57	water	
01:58	in front of his his house and	
02:02	he built a beach house on the beach at	
02:04	the end of his property	
02:06	which is still standing today it's the	
02:08	first house you see it's up on stilts	
02:11	but it's still there and	
02:15	he also built a big carriage house	
02:18	down at the other end the north end of	
02:20	his property which is still standing	
02:23	today	
02:25	and he was quite a land owner he owned	
02:28	quite a lot of land in Falmouth	
02:31	he owned the property down on Locust	#locuststreet
02:34	Street right	
02:36	as you hit Mill Road on the left there	
02:39	was a farm in there and that was his	
02:41	farm	
02:42	he lived in a farmhouse in the fall and	
02:45	spring	
02:46	of the year when he probably didn't have	
02:48	heat in the mansion he used to live in	
02:50	the farmhouse	
02:52	and on that property they had	
02:55	two other houses and a few outbuildings	
02:59	and a big barn which is still there	
03:02	today and	

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03:04	they are now remodeling the house but	
03:08	he owned that property and	
03:11	down Locust Street across from a	
03:14	7-Eleven store where the	
03:16	Cape Cod Apartments are now he owned the	#capecodapartments
03:20	land from there	
03:21	all the way back to Siders Pond which	#siderspond
03:24	was quite a big	
03:26	big piece of land and when we were boys	
03:29	we used to play baseball out on the	
03:31	field there there	
03:32	was a mowed field	
03:35	right next to Barbara Jones's house	
03:37	which I think	
03:39	was included on his property at that	
03:41	time	
03:42	but he uh also owned	
03:47	two houses in Belvidere Plains and	#belvidereplain
03:51	a piece of property next to the	
03:54	Catholic church on Main Street with	#mainstreet #saintpatrickschurch Gunning_Village_Sts_0017 through 0041
03:58	where the nursing home is today he owned	
04:00	that property	
04:02	and in 1921	#1921
04:06	he built a hotel in there called the	
04:09	Terrace Gables	
04:11	uh excuse me Column Terrace and	#columnterrace

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04:14	he ran the hotel for	
04:17	six or seven years and then he sold it	
04:19	to someone else who	
04:21	bought it and then eventually they put a	
04:24	nursing home in there	
04:25	but that was his property	
04:28	and he also was a	
04:31	shareholder and one of five board	
04:34	members	
04:35	on the mushroom plant that was on	Hunt_Village_Bldg_030
04:38	Gifford	
04:39	Gifford Street across from the Coonamessett	#giffordstreet #coonamessettinn
04:42	Inn where	
04:43	Homeport is now and	#homeport
04:46	he was running he ran that for a while	
04:50	or he was on the board for a while and	
04:53	eventually it	
04:54	went out of business but he was also	
04:58	involved in the	
05:01	racetrack the Trotting Park racetrack	#trottingpark
05:05	he was an original member of the	
05:07	Falmouth	
05:08	gentleman's racing club	
05:12	and I have happened to find in	
05:16	in my home where I lived a stock	
05:19	certificate of his	
05:21	back in the day when he belonged to the	
05:24	racing club	
05:26	and Sundays they would have a trotting	

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05:28	race	
05:29	and that was a big entertainment in	
05:31	those days	
05:34	and a lot of people attended	
05:37	and he also was an early member of the	
05:39	Woods Hole Golf Club	#woodsholegolfclub
05:41	back in 1899 when they first	#1899
05:46	built the club it only had nine holes	
05:49	then but	
05:50	a few wealthy men in town wanted to play	
05:53	golf and they had no place to play so	
05:55	they	
05:56	they started the club	
06:00	and when he brought his wife	
06:03	and family down	
06:06	his wife liked peace quiet and solitude	
06:11	so he decided to build her	
06:14	an island on Salt Pond	#saltpond Gunning_Village_Sts_0010 through 0016
06:18	so she had her own little island which	
06:21	is still there today	
06:23	and she could go out there and bring a	
06:25	chair or bench or whatever and	
06:27	sit read and meditate and	
06:30	have her own private time and	
06:34	they had two daughters one was	
06:37	Ruth and one was Janet Ruth married	
06:41	Albert McVitty and Janet	
06:44	married Frank Nicholson and	

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06:49	they lived they lived there they	
06:52	actually	
06:52	the Ruth and and Albert McVitty	
06:55	eventually	
06:56	bought the property why I guess	
07:00	Mr. Dwight might have died and the estate	
07:03	was	
07:04	uh trying to be settled when they	
07:08	they bought the house and used it for	
07:10	their family in the summer	
07:13	and uh	
07:18	I can't remember exactly when	
07:22	I think that was in 1921	
07:25	they they uh they bought the house from	
07:29	the estate	
07:31	and well	
07:36	because I think I'm going to	
07:39	you may want to cut it a second um	
07:44	Bill and maybe it strikes me that um	
07:47	Bill that um Mr. Dwight was quite	
07:50	influential	
07:52	in the town uh doings in at Town Hall	
07:56	would	
07:56	would you think that he had quite a lot	
07:59	to say about how	
08:00	the town was run yes	
08:03	he did I think he was on some	
08:07	quite a few boards and	
08:10	at one time uh there was a group of men	
08:14	who who decided that Salt Pond would be	

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08:18	a great place for Falmouth Harbor	#falmouthharbor Hunt_Village_Har_103 through 120 Gunning_Heights_Har_1320 through 1334
08:21	because the Old Stone Dock	#oldstonedock Gunning_Village_Har_0173 through 0188 Hunt_Village_Bch_0089 through 0095
08:23	was not large enough anymore to handle	
08:27	the boating traffic and he and some	
08:30	other	
08:32	influential gentlemen went to the	
08:35	legislature and tried to get	
08:37	the permit to build a harbor	
08:41	well that was fine except that would	
08:43	mean	
08:44	the road would have to be detoured	
08:47	because you couldn't you couldn't have a	
08:50	bridge it would be too	
08:52	inconvenient so the road plan was to go	
08:56	up to Elm Road	#elmroad
08:57	through the moors and down Elm Road uh	
09:01	to the beach and that didn't sit too	
09:04	well with some of the	
09:06	landowners up in the moors and that was	
09:10	quickly squelched so that deal fell	
09:12	through	
09:14	and they did talk about Siders Pond	
09:17	being a harbor because it was right to	

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09:20	the middle of the town where the	
09:22	town hall is today but	
09:26	that was too much it was too far to	
09:28	dredge a channel so	
09:30	they ended up at uh Falmouth Harbor	
09:33	where it is today	
09:39	I suspect that the joint the Dwight's had	
09:42	some	
09:42	rather influential neighbors too they	
09:45	did the house across the street	
09:48	belonged to Richard Olney	#richardolney
09:52	who was secretary of state to Grover	#grovercleveland
09:55	Cleveland President Grover Cleveland	
09:58	and I think he used to invite them down	
10:01	and take them out on fishing	
10:02	trips the President and	
10:06	they had a lovely estate across the	
10:08	street and the Minot family	#minot
10:10	finally ended up owning that property	
10:15	but down the street there was quite a	
10:18	few	
10:19	uh wealthy people wealthy estates	
10:23	and there was a Spalding house	#spalding
10:27	and Harding and	#harding
10:30	there was the E. E. Swift house	#swift
10:34	and uh Emery Leland owned	#leland
10:38	a big house big estate there and these	
10:41	were big estates which	
10:43	where Salt Pond Road goes in it's the	#saltpondroad
10:46	loop in there	

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10:47	that was one estate and they	
10:52	after the war uh housing was	
10:55	critical and so these estates were	
10:58	bought and and developed	
11:01	now the farm that you spoke of was that	
11:04	a working farm	
11:07	I think he it was a working farm for his	
11:09	own use	
11:10	I think I don't think that was a	
11:12	commercial	
11:14	but it was probably a hobby farm but he	
11:17	did have a huge	
11:19	barn there that took quite a lot of uh	
11:22	carriages or horses or whatever he	
11:24	wanted in there	
11:26	and he also	
11:29	as I mentioned he owned the carriage	
11:33	house down on	
11:34	on Mill Road and he had a caretaker	
11:39	that used to come down and take care of	
11:41	his property that lived	
11:43	in the carriage house and his name was	
11:46	George Gammons and he was a Swedish	
11:49	gentleman	
11:51	and very friendly and when we were boys	
11:55	we used to walk to the beach every day	
11:58	in the summer	
11:59	and outside his house outside the	
12:03	carriage house	
12:04	he had a Doberman Pinscher dog	

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12:07	chained up to a leash on the yard and	
12:10	every time we walked by	
12:11	he was straining at that leash to get it	
12:15	we were scared to death of that dog but	
12:18	he was friendly and he befriended us and	
12:22	I think I was around 12 years old at the	
12:24	time and he taught us how to fish	
12:27	because at night when his duties were	
12:30	over at five or six o'clock	
12:32	he had free time and he'd go down to the	
12:34	beach	
12:36	and cast off the beach and catch fish	
12:39	and we were young kids and didn't know	
12:42	too much about it but	
12:43	he taught us a lot about fishing and	
12:45	we'd go down there and meet him	
12:47	and go fishing and	
12:50	when the when Mr. Dwight died	
12:55	in his will he had left George	
12:58	life rights to live in that carriage	
13:01	house	
13:02	and so as the years went by	
13:09	actually in 1938	#1938
13:12	we had a big hurricane and it destroyed	#hurricane
13:15	the main house	
13:17	and the parking lot and they rebuilt it	
13:21	and during the	
13:24	the war years I think in 1943	
13:28	the government leased the house for	
13:31	housing	

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13:32	because Camp Edwards was being built and	#campedwards Gunning_Hatchville_Miltry_0557 through 0561
13:35	was growing and they didn't have place	
13:37	for family so they actually had eight	
13:41	married couples living in that house	
13:44	during the war until 1944	#1944
13:48	when the next hurricane came and	
13:51	destroyed the house again	
13:54	and this time they didn't rebuild it	
13:57	they said	
13:58	enough's enough so that is when	
14:03	I think in 1945 the Town of Falmouth	
14:06	wanted to extend	
14:08	the beach and so from the beach house	
14:11	down at Old Stone Dock	
14:13	they bought the beach front all the way	
14:15	down	
14:16	to his property where his first beach	
14:19	house was	
14:21	and so the town owns that today and they	
14:26	they also after the	
14:29	hurricane the town wanted to buy the	
14:32	land for	
14:33	a parking lot for the beach so	
14:37	that's why the parking lot is there now	
14:40	but	
14:41	they couldn't do anything with the	
14:44	carriage house because of	
14:46	the life rights so	

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14:49	the town owned halfway down to the	
14:52	carriage house and the carriage house	
14:53	was separate	
14:55	and back in 1980	#1980
15:00	I think it must have been when uh Mr.	
15:04	Gammons died	
15:05	because one day my wife and I were	
15:08	walking by and we saw a for sale sign	
15:10	out in front of the carriage house	
15:13	and it was kind of in	
15:17	disrepair because no one had lived in it	
15:19	for years	
15:20	it was strictly a summer house with no	
15:22	heat	
15:23	and no insulation but my wife said	
15:27	why don't we look at it and I said are	
15:29	you crazy	
15:31	and we know the reality and	
15:35	we did take a look at it and we decided	
15:39	we fell in love with it the the sunsets	
15:42	were just	
15:42	gorgeous and we decided	
15:47	we would take a chance and buy it and we	
15:52	did	
16:06	[Music]	