

Postcards from Falmouth Oral History Transcript

Recorded: February 24, 2020

Oral Historian: Reverend Jonathan Drury

Interviewer: Troy Clarkson

Topic: First Congregational Church

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

00:00	[Music]	
00:44	so welcome	
00:45	thank you and my first question to you	
00:47	is I'd like to begin by	
00:48	asking you to tell us your full name and	
00:51	the postcard you'll be discussing and	
00:52	you can certainly show it to us	
00:54	my name is Jonathan Drury I'm the 24th	
00:57	pastor of the First Congregational	#firstcongregationalchurch Hunt_Village_Bldg_001 Hunt_Village_Sts_152 Gunning_Village_Sts_0073 Gunning_Village_Bldg_0346 through 0365
00:58	Church in Falmouth	
00:59	uh this is the postcard that I'm going	
01:01	to be discussing that's a photograph	
01:03	of or a picture I don't know if it's a	
01:05	photograph	
01:06	um of the church that is taken from the	

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01:09	south side of the green	#falmouthvillagegreen See above for postcard views of the First Congregational Church on the Green
01:12	and there's a number of other postcards	
01:15	of this church	
01:16	here's another example	
01:21	it's a very prominent structure on the	
01:24	green	
01:24	probably the most prominent structure on	
01:26	the green and so I I thought I'd talk a	
01:28	little bit about the history of	
01:30	the buildings that have supported the	
01:32	Congregational Church over the years	
01:34	the First Congregational Church in	
01:36	Falmouth was established in 1708	#1708
01:39	and it was established at the same time	
01:40	that the town of Falmouth was	
01:42	established	
01:43	so the congregation was an offshoot of	
01:45	the West Parish in Barnstable	#westparishofbarnstable
01:48	which claims to be the oldest	
01:49	congregation on Cape Cod they were	
01:51	established in 1614.	#1614
01:54	um so this is you know for for American	
01:56	history this	
01:57	predates our nation by easily 150 years	

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02:01	so it's it's pretty remarkable	
02:02	um 1708 a group of people decided that	
02:05	they wanted to establish their own	
02:07	congregation	
02:08	and to do that they also had to	
02:09	establish a meeting house where there	
02:11	could be	
02:13	some form of governance some some	
02:15	structure of governance so	
02:17	initially the the first meeting house	
02:19	was built off of Mill Road in the old	#millroad #oldburyingground Gunning_Village_Sts_0001 through 0016 Hunt_Village_Sts_075 through 178
02:21	burial ground	
02:22	and it was likely built sometime between	
02:24	1690 and 1700	
02:27	that would have also been the seat of	
02:29	governance for Falmouth at the time	
02:31	and it was a very simple structure as	
02:33	far as I know	
02:34	had no paint had no heat no organ no	
02:37	bell	
02:38	um the Puritans were were	#puritan
02:43	their approach to purity included	
02:45	aesthetics and	

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02:47	they they didn't need much in terms of	
02:49	artifice	
02:52	later on there was another	
02:55	meeting house built on that location	
02:58	this was a	
03:00	meeting house built in 1717 that was	#1717
03:03	actually	
03:05	designed to look just like the meeting	
03:07	house in	
03:08	Barnstable so they they very much saw	
03:10	themselves as an offshoot of that	
03:12	congregation	
03:13	and then in 1750 the first church	#1750
03:18	was moved to the from the old burial	
03:21	ground	
03:22	to the brand new green space that had	
03:25	been established in Falmouth what we	
03:26	think of now is the town green	
03:28	the town green initially was actually	
03:30	kind of the front lawn of the church	
03:32	because the church was built on the	
03:33	south end of of the green	
03:36	in 1750 and at that time there were	
03:40	roads but it was not divided the way it	
03:42	is today um	
03:43	there were you know dirt roads that were	

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03:46	used for	
03:47	horses and and buggies um but they were	
03:50	not in the same	
03:52	location that our current roads are in	
03:54	the green was much larger and what's	
03:55	also kind of interesting about the green	
03:57	is that it has always been a green space	
04:00	um	
04:01	before it was established as the town	
04:03	green it had been a green space that was	
04:04	available for anybody to use	
04:07	for their horses and so it's the	
04:09	equivalent of the parking lot for for	
04:11	downtown Falmouth	
04:12	and remains a green space of course	
04:15	today	
04:16	um that's also where the the local	
04:18	militia would have gathered	
04:19	uh to do their training um both for the	
04:22	Revolutionary War then later for the	#americanrevolution
04:23	Civil War	#americancivilwar
04:25	which is interesting so in 1750 the	
04:28	church was built on the south end of the	
04:29	green	
04:30	and it remained there until 1796 when	#1796
04:33	the fourth meeting house was built and	

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04:36	at that time in 1796	
04:39	a decision was made to outfit this new	
04:41	meeting house with a bell	#churchbell
04:42	which brings me to a riddle the riddle	
04:45	is	
04:46	the living to the the living to the	
04:49	church I call	
04:51	and to the grave I summon all	
04:54	what am I a bell	
04:58	a church bell that's right that riddle	
05:01	which is actually not a riddle it's just	
05:03	a poem is engraved along the top of all	
05:06	of Paul Revere's bells	#paulrevere
05:08	so in 1796 the First Congregational	
05:11	Church	
05:11	uh commissioned a bell from Paul Revere	
05:13	who was a bell maker in Boston at the	#boston
05:15	time	
05:16	the bell that was purchased weighs 807	
05:18	pounds and we have the original	
05:20	receipt signed by by Paul Revere and	
05:22	what's interesting about that receipt	
05:24	is that along with having the price and	
05:26	the weight of the bell	
05:28	it indicates that the price was derived	
05:31	by a specific cost per pound	

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05:34	so almost like you were selling poultry	
05:36	or something he sold his bells	
05:38	42 cents per pound so 807 pounds	
05:42	at 42 cents came out to just under 400	
05:46	which would have been a small fortune in	
05:47	1796.	
05:49	so in 1796 that bell was put into the	
05:52	steeple of the church	
05:53	and has been ringing over Falmouth ever	
05:56	since	
05:57	which is quite remarkable	
06:00	but the church was moved it was moved in	
06:03	1858	#1858
06:05	the decision to move the church came as	
06:07	a result of a very generous offer offer	
06:09	from the Swift family	#swift
06:10	to give them a parcel of land the Swift	
06:14	family was a very prominent	
06:16	family in town they owned the first	
06:18	mercantile store in Falmouth	
06:20	they also owned the first bank in	
06:22	Falmouth and they owned quite a bit of	
06:24	land in Falmouth	
06:25	um probably the equivalent of the Beebes in	#beebe
06:28	that regard	

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06:29	they owned all of the land that exists	
06:32	behind the church	
06:33	and the parsonage which is directly next	
06:34	door to the church extending	
06:36	all the way back to Lakeview which is	#lakeview
06:40	the neighborhood behind the Lawrence	#lawrenceschool Gunning_Village_Bldg_0232
06:42	School so all of the Lawrence athletic	
06:44	fields all of the Katharine Lee Bates	#katharineleebatesroad
06:45	Road	
06:46	all of the land behind the church all	
06:47	belonged to the Swift family	
06:49	and in 1858 they agreed to offer a	
06:53	parcel of this land	
06:54	to the to the congregation the	
06:57	congregation decided to take advantage	
06:59	of this offer and to move the church and	
07:02	so depending on who you ask	
07:04	the story is that they either rolled the	
07:06	church on logs across the green	
07:08	I think that's very unlikely the truth	
07:11	is most of the trees would have been cut	
07:12	down by that point	
07:13	to build the ships in Woods Hole so	#woodshole
07:16	there's a widow's walk on top of the	
07:18	parsonage next door	

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07:19	and you would have easily been able to	
07:21	see the ocean	
07:23	from that widow's walk today you can't	
07:25	see those you can see a lot of trees	
07:27	but those trees didn't exist when in	
07:30	1814 when that house was built	
07:32	so they probably didn't roll the church	
07:34	across the green	
07:35	um some people say that they put it on a	
07:38	sled	
07:38	and they pulled it across um which is a	
07:41	possibility though I think that the	
07:43	train wouldn't have really accommodated	
07:44	that	
07:45	it was a big building and then other	
07:47	folks said that they parceled the the	
07:49	church	
07:49	literally taking apart piece by piece	
07:51	and then rebuilding it in	
07:53	a new location whatever they did they	
07:56	didn't do it well	
07:57	because within a year they tore that	
07:59	building down and they built the fifth	
08:01	meeting house	
08:01	I say that the truth is the claim has	
08:03	always been that the congregation was	

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08:05	growing so quickly that they needed to	
08:06	have a larger sanctuary	
08:08	and needed to have a larger foundation	
08:10	for the church	
08:12	so we'll go with that but they did build	
08:14	that	
08:15	that church in 1858 the fifth meeting	
08:18	house	
08:19	now here's some also some some	
08:21	remarkable history attached to the	
08:22	church	
08:24	two things one we discovered not long	
08:26	ago	
08:27	that um the steps in front of the church	
08:30	were covered with bluestone and we had	
08:33	to add a new railing to the front of the	
08:35	steps	
08:36	when the the masons were doing the work	
08:38	on the steps	
08:39	we heard them kind of yell out they were	
08:40	very excited I was hoping they had found	
08:42	a box of gold doubloons	
08:44	underneath the stone steps that wasn't	
08:46	what they found what they found	
08:47	might be you know an equivalent treasure	
08:50	though they discovered that underneath	

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08:51	the blue stone was	
08:52	original pink granite some of the	#falmouthgranite
08:55	Falmouth granite	
08:56	and so somebody in fact we know is	
08:58	probably in	
08:59	1952 someone decided to put	
09:03	bluestone on the steps we had lost track	
09:06	of that	
09:07	and so it was a great find to be able to	
09:09	restore those front steps back to their	
09:11	original condition	
09:12	so um in 1858 these were what the steps	
09:16	would have originally looked like	
09:17	in the process of of thinking about	
09:19	those steps and looking at the steps we	
09:21	also had some of the masons	
09:22	bring to our attention the fact that the	
09:24	whole foundation of this church	
09:26	is made from that pink granite	
09:30	and there is virtually a few hundred	
09:31	tons worth of this pink granite	
09:34	at this church so it may be that the	
09:36	true value of the church	
09:38	is really the church's foundation we'll	
09:41	see	
09:41	um but I I just think it's it's a	

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09:43	remarkable piece of kind of	
09:45	lost history that was recently	
09:46	discovered	
09:48	one of the most interesting aspects of	
09:50	that move	
09:52	that took place in 1858 is that that is	
09:54	the year	
09:55	that William Bates came as the pastor of	#williambates
09:58	the church	
09:59	so William Bates who is the father of	
10:00	Katharine Lee Bates	#katharineleebates
10:02	was the was one of the ministers of the	
10:04	First Congregational Church	
10:05	he served that church for one year 1858.	
10:09	he was sick from the moment he arrived	
10:12	to the moment he passed away in fact the	
10:15	last service he presided over was	
10:17	Katharine's baptism	
10:18	she was three months old at the time so	
10:21	I've always wondered	
10:23	was this seen as a great challenge for	
10:26	the congregation	
10:27	this decision to move the church during	
10:29	this time when the pastor was not	
10:31	available to offer leadership	
10:32	or was this seen as kind of	

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10:35	an opportunity to make that move because	
10:37	they weren't able to meet for worship	
10:40	this was a chance for them to to make a	
10:42	transition to a new space	
10:44	as a result I don't know the answer to	
10:46	that but I've	
10:47	I've always been curious to know um how	
10:50	that impacted the	
10:52	the move itself not having William Bates	
10:54	as the pastor or actively	
10:56	engaged as the pastor at the time	
11:00	so there have been a number of of other	
11:02	additions to our	
11:04	church building over the years in 1952	
11:07	an educational wing was added	
11:08	and then in 1992 as a result of a very	
11:11	generous	
11:12	gift from the Faxon family we're	#faxon
11:14	able to build a Christian education	
11:16	center the Faxon	
11:17	Education Center and so the church has	
11:20	continued to	
11:20	expand and grow we really do think of	
11:24	ourselves as a community church	
11:26	we take to heart this this attachment to	
11:29	the to the town of Falmouth and we see	

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11:31	ourselves	
11:32	as a place where people should gather	
11:33	and meet um to to be in conversation to	
11:36	have potluck suppers to worship	
11:39	um we've got really great parking	
11:42	which is essential if you're going to	
11:44	have people gather	
11:45	we're in a wonderful location and so we	
11:48	really try to open up the church as much	
11:49	as possible	
11:50	we're we're actively looking for ways to	
11:52	support our community	
11:54	with with our space um and it is a	
11:56	beautiful space	
11:57	I'm always surprised recently in the	
11:58	last four or five years we've been	
12:00	opening up the the	
12:01	church on the Lighting of the Green um	
12:04	in December	
12:05	and it's amazing how many people come	
12:07	for the Lighting of the Green	
12:08	opening of the church has allowed people	
12:10	just to come in and warm up we usually	
12:12	have a little bit of a hymn sing	
12:13	the bathrooms are available I'm always	
12:17	shocked to hear from folks who have	

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12:18	lived in Falmouth	
12:19	their whole lives that this is the first	
12:22	time they've been in the First	
12:23	Congregational Church	
12:25	I say that not as a pastor of a church I	
12:28	say as someone who's just genuinely	
12:30	curious about history and and the	
12:32	connection of that church to the history	
12:34	of Falmouth	
12:35	I think that that church should be on a	
12:38	short list	
12:39	of locations where every single student	
12:41	in our school system should come and	
12:43	hear about the history of that church	
12:44	I'd love to take them up to the bell to	
12:46	see the bell but you've got to be a	
12:47	little bit of a billy goat and	
12:49	I would hate to lose any children along	
12:51	the way um	
12:53	but it is remarkable history and and	
12:55	we're really proud of it and we really	
12:57	would like to be able to share it	
12:58	generously	
12:59	with folks so the	
13:02	the building itself is one of the	
13:05	uh iconic images of Falmouth for sure	

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13:08	yes and you've just described the rich	
13:10	history one of the	
13:12	interesting things that has emerged	
13:14	during the interviews that we're	
13:15	conducting	
13:16	we've chatted with Rabbi Lieberman with	#eliaslieberman
13:20	Reverend	
13:20	Will Mebane yes is the shared history	#williammebane
13:23	uh of the congregations in the faith	
13:27	communities	
13:29	for instance the the Jewish Congregation	#falmouthjewishcongregation
13:33	can trace	
13:34	its history the building at least	
13:37	to that same first meeting house that	
13:39	you mentioned is that right	
13:40	uh because the East End Meeting House	#eastendmeetinghouse Gunning_Hatchville_Bldg_0526 through 0531
13:43	which is today	
13:44	the the headquarters of the Jewish	
13:46	Congregation	
13:47	uh was built and created because	
13:50	uh the meeting house down at Mill Road	
13:53	uh	
13:54	could not accommodate a growing	
13:56	community is that right	

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13:57	so what's fascinating is that uh the	
14:02	history	
14:03	is a shared history it sure is and and	
14:05	today that interconnectivity	
14:07	yes uh Reverend Mebane used the same	
14:10	phrase that you just use as a community	
14:12	church	
14:12	yes and and and so	
14:17	uh today those faith communities	
14:20	continue to have	
14:21	yes we do a shared history and a shared	
14:23	mission absolutely	
14:24	I think two of the finest examples of	
14:26	that shared history mission	
14:27	would be the Service Center in Falmouth	#falmouthservicecenter
14:29	so the Service Center which	
14:31	which has a huge impact on this	
14:32	community and is really the front line	
14:35	in terms of responding to need there are	
14:37	other organizations that	
14:38	that provide outstanding support to	
14:41	folks in need but I think that we all	
14:43	consider the Service	
14:44	Center to be at the center of that that	
14:46	support system	
14:47	that organization was established	

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14:49	originally by the clergy in Falmouth	
14:51	because they recognized that they could	
14:53	not do	
14:54	as much of the follow-up and the	
14:56	background uh work that they needed to	
14:58	do to be able to provide the the best	
15:01	care available and so 25 years ago they	
15:04	they got together and said this is	
15:05	worthwhile and we should make it happen	
15:07	and now	
15:08	that has a huge impact on this community	
15:10	another example is the Upper Cape	#uppercapechaplaincy
15:12	Chaplaincy which supports the	
15:13	the chaplain's position at the hospital	
15:15	that was also	
15:17	a result of of the collective will of	
15:20	the clergy in town	
15:22	and we still have an active group of	
15:24	people who meet together on on a monthly	
15:26	basis to talk about our community and	
15:28	how we	
15:29	as the communities of faith should be	
15:32	supporting one another and	
15:33	and supporting the good work that's	
15:35	being done by so many organizations in	
15:37	this town	

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15:38	I I feel this absolutely today you know	
15:41	we are living in a time	
15:42	where there's so much divisiveness and	
15:45	division	
15:46	um regardless of how you feel	
15:50	about your relationship with with	
15:52	eternity or	
15:54	or the divine or not um	
15:57	we are in relationship with one another	
15:58	and our churches	
16:00	and our um congregations have always	
16:04	been at the center of of the community	
16:07	and they should continue to be they the	
16:09	our our	
16:11	congregation should be open and	
16:12	available as a place where people can	
16:14	feel	
16:16	you know not the divisiveness but the	
16:18	the potential that exists in harmony	
16:20	when we work together	
16:22	to do good things and I think we're	
16:24	going to have plenty of opportunities	
16:26	to talk about doing good work with one	
16:27	another in the in the next few years	
16:29	indeed for sure so what does it mean to	
16:31	you	

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16:33	to be part now of the the rich history	
16:37	of	
16:37	the Congregational Church and Falmouth	
16:39	and and	
16:41	that the congregation itself has evolved	
16:44	along	
16:45	as the history of the building unfolded	
16:47	and today	
16:48	continues to be a vibrant part of the	
16:50	fabric of the community	
16:51	it does um you know I'm very honored to	
16:54	be	
16:54	in the role that I have been given and	
16:57	I'm	
16:58	really grateful to work with really good	
17:00	people you know my colleagues	
17:03	both within the the church that I serve	
17:05	but also you know the	
17:07	my fellow clergy folks and and the other	
17:10	folks who are serving organizations in	
17:12	town that we support	
17:13	um I really appreciate the the good work	
17:15	that they do	
17:16	but also the members of the of our	
17:20	congregation are really outstanding	
17:22	people they're they're all	

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17:23	very effective people and they're all	
17:26	very much engaged in in this world I	
17:29	will say our churches are trending much	
17:31	older	
17:31	and Cape Cod in general is turning much	
17:33	older and so	
17:35	I spent a lot of time with with my	
17:36	constituency thinking about the end of	
17:38	life and	
17:39	and some of the concerns that that exist	
17:41	around that	
17:42	um it's all good it's all good	
17:45	and and so I'm grateful to have that	
17:47	opportunity there's a certain amount of	
17:48	of	
17:49	responsibility that comes with that and	
17:51	I I am aware of it	
17:52	um and I take it to heart and so there	
17:55	are times where where	
17:56	I think you know we we really have a lot	
17:58	of work to do in Falmouth	
18:01	there's a lot of need in this community	
18:03	and it's not always apparent	
18:05	right we work hard to make Falmouth a	
18:07	beautiful place	
18:08	and certainly we're aware that we have	

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18:10	folks who visit us every summer	
18:12	who come because this is a beautiful	
18:14	place and so we work hard to keep a	
18:16	certain	
18:17	a certain beauty here	
18:20	it's not a facade it's real but below	
18:23	that beauty	
18:24	below the surface of it there is another	
18:26	community that exists and	
18:28	there are a lot of people who struggle	
18:30	there's a terrible affliction	
18:32	that exists in this community addiction	
18:34	is awful	
18:35	in Falmouth there are a lot of folks who	
18:38	are living right at the point	
18:39	of of not being able to to get by	
18:42	and so um I'm aware of that we're the	
18:45	downtown church one of the downtown	
18:46	churches and I	
18:47	I learned a long time ago if you're	
18:49	going to point at God	
18:51	with your big steeple you better expect	
18:53	that people are going to see that and	
18:54	they're going to come looking for God	
18:56	or you know the equivalent of that so I	
19:00	take that to heart too we we try to do	

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19:01	right by people if we can	
19:04	it's a long answer to your question what	
19:06	a wonderful one thank you	
19:07	is there anything that we didn't cover	
19:09	that you'd like to share today	
19:12	there's so much there's so much rich	
19:15	history if you had	
19:16	an hour I would fill it um so I you know	
19:19	I can't think of anything	
19:21	specifically right now that I didn't	
19:23	cover that I wanted to but if there's	
19:25	ever anything	
19:27	that you're curious to know more about I	
19:28	would love to to come and	
19:30	talk more about the history of of our	
19:32	community	
19:34	thank you so much you're very welcome	
19:55	[Music]	