



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green

The Case of the Missing Unitarians

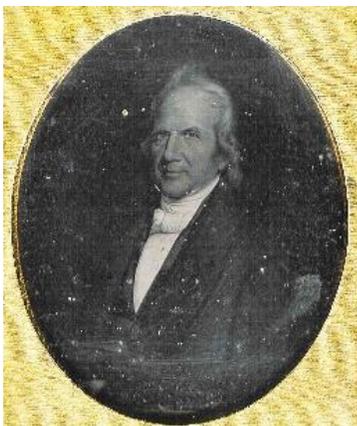
First Congregational Church, with its white spire soaring above the Village Green, is a classic symbol of a typical New England town. But why isn't our beloved landmark a Unitarian church, instead of Congregational? In many Massachusetts towns, Unitarians appeared on the scene in the early 1800s, and their churches often occupied the best real estate. Falmouth's lack of any Unitarian presence until the late 1950s stands out as a curiosity in need of explanation.



Postcard, c1880, in Museums' archives.

Puritans and Pilgrims had made Congregationalism the official church of Massachusetts, but by the year 1800, this establishment found itself challenged on two fronts. The revivalist movement known as the Great Awakening, often associated with Rev. Jonathan Edwards of Northampton, Mass., called churchgoers to a deeper and more emotional faith. At the same time, the rationalism of the Enlightenment was becoming the dominant theological view at Harvard, where many pastors were trained. Since the rationalists rejected the notion that Jesus was divine and saw him rather as a great moral teacher, they were known as Unitarians. They scored a triumph in 1805 when the Unitarian Rev. Henry Ware was appointed a professor of theology.

As ever more Harvard-trained pastors took positions in local churches, they began to influence those congregations in a Unitarian direction. The struggle between revivalists and Unitarians resulted in splits within congregations. The Unitarians were frequently the majority population within a particular town, giving them control of the historic meeting house. Church members who still espoused Trinitarian beliefs were forced to separate and build a new church. In Boston, ten of the city's eleven Congregational churches became Unitarian.



In this contentious atmosphere, Falmouth's First Congregational Church hired Rev. Henry Lincoln, ordained in 1790, who had studied at Harvard and been tutored by the Rev. William Shaw, a Unitarian. In 1801, under Lincoln's leadership, the parish began using a hymnal compiled by Rev. Jeremy Belknap that was attractive to churches with Unitarian tendencies. During Lincoln's tenure, the church stopped requiring new members to provide testimony of conversion, also a trend in the more liberal congregations. First Church seemed headed toward a Unitarian future.

*Rev. Henry Lincoln c1840.
Daguerreotype in Museums' archives.*

At this point, a second Great Awakening swept across the land, again placing emphasis on a personal conversion experience of Jesus as savior. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, a Baptist pastor from Hyannis, Barnabas Bates, and a young Congregational evangelist, James David, came to Falmouth to hold revivals. The positive effect of this was a significant increase in membership at First Church. In 1809, one hundred and fourteen persons joined the Falmouth congregation, versus a more usual annual increase of fifteen to thirty. These new members tipped the balance back toward a Trinitarian theology. In 1810, the church again chose a new hymnal, this one by the popular hymn writer and Trinitarian Isaac Watts. In 1811, Rev. Lincoln himself had a conversion experience, a clear shift from his earlier inclination toward Unitarianism.



Susanna (Crowell) Fish, c1830. Her portrait is on display in Conant House. Photo courtesy of Deb Shemo.

Meanwhile, at Quissett, in a house perched above the harbor, Susanna Fish was worried about the state of her soul. Her earthly life gave little cause for complaint. Her husband Thomas was a good man and an upstanding citizen. He had fought in the Revolution, worked as an agent for a shipbuilding company, and cut a figure in local politics. Together they were raising eight children. By all accounts, Susanna enjoyed her role as a mother and as the manager of a very busy household. She and Thomas had joined First Congregational in 1804, when the bar for membership was set relatively low.

Still, Susanna was unsettled. She wanted the spiritual assurance of a conversion experience. Many of her neighbors had received this gift. Why was it withheld from her? She told Pastor Lincoln that she feared she was not good enough to be a member of the church. His response was that if she were not good enough, no one was. After much prayer, on the morning of May 12, 1812, “light broke in on her mind, and [Susanna] was filled with joy and peace unspeakable.” Whatever had happened to her spread like wildfire to others. As word of her experience got out, people flocked to her home, and many of them said that they too had a vision of heavenly light. The revival sparked by Susanna’s experience continued for several days, even interrupting nearby shipbuilding activities. Workers threw down their tools and broke out in spontaneous prayers and singing.

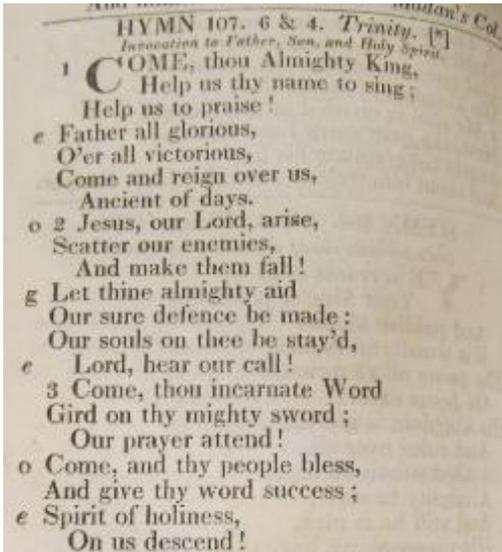
What made Susanna’s inner vision so contagious and convincing? Had she spoken in tongues? Perhaps she just had a powerful gift for preaching. In any case, her experience sent out shock waves that rippled right up to the edge of the twentieth century. The 12th of May was celebrated annually in Quissett until the 1890s. Rev. Charles Washburn, in 1908, cherished fond memories of these gatherings that celebrated “the wonderful blessing of God.” Susanna’s surviving children and grandchildren would attend and sing her beloved old hymns.

Thanks to the roving revivalists, Susanna Fish’s vision, and Rev. Lincoln’s conversion, Falmouth was diverted from the Unitarian path. In 1816, First Congregational “adopted a new Confession of Faith. From that point on, every person joining [the] church was expected to . . . [affirm] belief in the Trinity.” (Showalter, Vol. I, p. 91).

Worldly considerations also played a role in keeping Unitarianism at bay. During this era, rural Massachusetts communities often found themselves at odds with the Boston elite for a number of reasons—political, economic, and cultural. It’s not surprising that the general tension between city



Susanna Fish's home in Quissett, later known as Hurricane Hall, front and back views. Photos in Museums archives.



Trinitarian hymnbook in Museums' collection.

and countryside was also reflected in this religious dispute. In fact, of the fifteen Congregational churches on Cape Cod at the time, only those in Sandwich and Dennis became Unitarian.

Falmouth was not destined to be forever without a Unitarian Church. In 1959, a Unitarian fellowship was organized in Falmouth. For the first two years, its services were held at the Falmouth Community Center. In 1962, the group began using the Quaker Meeting House in West Falmouth. By 1995, the Unitarians had their own building, at 840 Sandwich Road. Coincidentally, this site had once belonged to Falmouth's Second Congregational Church, which had transferred the property in 1983 to the Jewish Congregation, from whom the Unitarians eventually purchased their parcel of land. In Falmouth, the usual path between Congregational and Unitarian denominations took a long, meandering route, with a Jewish detour that is surely unique.

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SOURCES:

Rev. Douglas K. Showalter, *Chapters in the History of the First Congregational Church of Falmouth, Massachusetts of the United Church of Christ*, 2010, chapters 4 and 8.

Simeon L. Deyo, ed., *History of Barnstable County, Massachusetts*, 1890, pp. 676ff.

Assorted papers in the Historical Society archives

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