

Swift Family Whaling

E. Kent Swift, Jr.

In the first place it should be noted that Woods Hole Whaling and Falmouth Whaling are synonymous. There was no port in the town of Falmouth except Woods Hole that could accommodate a whaleship; Falmouth Inner Harbor was not created until 1896 and the old stone dock by the present public bathing beach on Surf Drive was only big enough for the many small coasting vessels that frequented these

waters. The other harbors we know today such as West Falmouth, Quissett, Waquoit, etc. were and are too shallow. In the 1830s or so, John Jenkins and Oliver Swift made a proposal to dredge a deep water channel into Oyster Pond but gave it up as too expensive. Hence Woods Hole was the port even though all the records including Starbuck give the hailing port for the various vessels as Falmouth.



Commodore Morris, whaling ship built at Bar Neck Wharf, Woods Hole in 1841. Painting by E.F. Lincoln. Falmouth sign and carriage painter. Photo by Kathy Frisbee. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.



Elijah Swift, 1774-1852, founder of the Swift family whaling industry. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

The history of whaling here in Falmouth is intimately tied up with a most interesting gentleman, Elijah Swift, and his son Oliver Cromwell Swift. An article in the *Falmouth Enterprise* of August 3, 1927 noted that of the 532,000 barrels of Sperm Oil imported into Falmouth, all but about 4,000 was brought home by Swift whalers. In the period of greatest whaling activity from Falmouth, from 1831 to 1848, the Swift interests outfitted twenty-four vessels, while other Falmouth vessels made fourteen voyages. Elijah and Oliver had at least a controlling interest in the *Sarah Herrick*, the *Pocahontas*, the *Uncas*, the *Awashonks*, the *Brunette*, the *Hobomok*, the *William Penn*, and the *Commodore Morris*. These vessels with an aggregate tonnage of 2,558 tons represented more than two thirds of the vessels to sail from Falmouth. While some of these vessels such as the *William Penn* were divided into 64ths for ownership, others such as the *Commodore Morris* were owned by a very few; in the case of the *Commodore Morris* by Elijah, his son-in-law, Henry Bunker, Oliver, and Oliver's brother-in-law, John Jenkins. In

the case of the ships mentioned, the Swifts were the managing partners.



In the Counting House at the New Bedford Whaling Museum are wooden boxes which once held ships' papers. On the lowest shelf are two which belonged to *Uncas* and *Commodore Morris*, Swift family whaleships built in Woods Hole in 1828 and 1841. Courtesy Woods Hole Historical Collection. Photo by Fred E. Lux.

To fully understand the involvement of Falmouth and Woods Hole with whaling, one has to go back a bit further. Beginning as early as 1803, Elijah Swift had spent winters in the Carolinas working for his father-in-law assembling what must have been among the first prefabricated houses sent down from Cape Cod and assembled there. Elijah was a carpenter by trade and in fact built the old school house and Masonic Hall still standing on Main Street next to the Eastman block. During this period in the Carolinas, he became acquainted with that wonderful tree, the live oak, that grows into such strange and varied shapes and is so strong and impervious to rot. After the war of 1812 he began to go each year to Beaufort, South Carolina, with a number of men from Falmouth to timber live oak.

They would leave in the fall after everyone's garden crops were in and return in the spring before the fever season began in the Carolinas and in time to put in the new year's crops.

By 1818 Elijah had contracts with the Navy Department in the amount of \$81,157.40 to furnish live oak for naval construction. While I have never seen this written, I suspect that one of the great attractions of live oak for ship construction was the variety of shapes and bends it grew in; thereby making it usable for a variety of natural knees and bends in the structural members of the ship. (In general it was considered too heavy and expensive for planking.) The live oak found not suitable for the Navy was shipped to Woods Hole for shipbuilding and it was the live oak trade that furnished the capital for the first whaling vessels. The *Sarah Herrick* was Elijah's first vessel and is listed in Starbuck as sailing from Falmouth in 1820; hence the shipyard in Woods Hole must have been commenced in 1818-19, I would think. I have been told that Solomon Lawrence was not only the master shipwright but also the designer. I believe that these vessels were designed from a large wooden half model that was inspected closely by those interested and refined by an addition here and a cut there until with all satisfied the lines could be taken off for molding.

The shipyard and the outfitting of the vessels contributed greatly to the prosperity of the town; more so I think than the employment furnished to the crews. In fact it soon became difficult to enlist local Cape Codders to go a'whaling, or even to enlist farm boys from Vermont who thought that anything would be easier than a Vermont farm. For example, in 1833 the

Awashonks sailed with a crew of twenty-eight, only two of whom came from Falmouth. It was for this reason that stops at the Cape Verde Islands and the Azores became a routine to fill out a sparse crew list; stops that brought to Falmouth the ancestors of many of its present inhabitants.

The inhibitions about going to sea did not apply to those bright young men aspiring to be officers and



Capt. Silas Jones, 1814-1896, Third Mate aboard *Awashonks* in 1835. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.



Uncas, whaling ship built at Bar Neck Wharf, Woods Hole in 1828. Colored print by Lebreton. Photo by Kathy Frisbee. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

captains of whaleships. Probably the most famous was Silas Jones, Third Mate aboard *Awashonks* one fateful day when she was anchored off Namarik, an atoll in the Marshall Islands. Apparently Silas, being the most junior officer had to eat his mid-day meal last and alone after the Captain and First and Second Mate. He had thus just gone below when eight bells or noon struck; at the stroke of which the natives revolted. Silas rushed on deck, saw the Captain and Mates decapitated or dead, and grabbing a whale spade, threw it at one of the natives. The native ducked and the spade dug into the deck. Silas was attempting to pull it out of the deck by its long eight-foot or so handle when he realized that two of the natives were behind him on the handle, also trying to pull it out. Silas had sense enough at this point to run and dive down an open fore-hatch. He made

his way aft to the Captain's quarters where he found the ship's cook, blacksmith, and one or two others. Breaking open the ship's armory, he was able to load a musket and fire it up through the deck. By what must have been sheer luck, he was able to wound the native chief who had taken the wheel with the intention of steering the ship onto the shore. Silas then broached a small keg of black powder, laid a powder train up the companionway to the deck above, ran below and touched a match to the train. The powder in the keg, not being confined, flared up in a great burst of flame and smoke and in the resultant confusion Silas and his men, together with those of the crew who had been in the rigging looking for whales, were able to drive the natives overboard, repair the braces which had been cut by the lookouts to prevent the vessel from being sailed on

shore, and with the help of a most fortunate fair tide work the vessel away from Namarik.

Once away from the island, Silas was faced at the ripe old age of 20 with not only being responsible for navigating the vessel back to Honolulu, since he was the only man left with a knowledge of navigation, but also with the task of being surgeon to many who had been most terribly wounded. Silas did well and lived to swallow the anchor in Falmouth where he became the third president of the Falmouth National Bank. In 1892 he related this story to my aunt, Mrs. Arthur Chute, who was then spending the few days before her Smith College graduation with college friends at her father's house next to the Congregational Church. Mrs. Chute told me around 1946 that with a little Port wine judiciously applied to Silas, the story got better and better with every telling!

The yard in Woods Hole also built a number of other ships, I believe among them the bark *Elijah Swift* of 400 tons, later wrecked off Great Isaac in the Bahamas. But the Civil War brought an end to the live oak business in the South: Elijah's grandson, Elijah, just got out of Jacksonville on the last schooner *North* with his skin and little

else. After the Civil War the great days of New England whaling were over and Woods Hole and Falmouth became the sleepy towns they were to be until discovered by the summer residents and tourists.

E. Kent Swift, Jr. is the great-great-grandson of Elijah Swift. His knowledge of Woods Hole and Falmouth whaling comes mainly from his mother, Katharine W. Swift, and her great work of Swift genealogy on Cape Cod from about 1660, *The Swift Family*, published after her death by Kent's father, E. Kent Swift. Kent also remembers fondly many conversations with his aunt, Mrs. Arthur L. Chute, who knew much family history. After Harvard and the Harvard business school, Kent was in the textile machinery business for some years before moving to Woods Hole and Quissett. He has been the owner of Gun and Tackle/Harborside Marine in Falmouth since the sixties.



Commodore Morris and the Falmouth captains who served on her. Captain William E. Jones, upper left; Captain Lewis H. Lawrence, lower left; Captain Silas Jones, upper right; Captain S.L. Hamlin, lower right. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.