

The Spoils of Grafton: Frank O'Hara (1926-1966)



This self-guided tour (20 minutes driving, 60-90 minutes walking) leads you around Grafton Common, along North, West, and Church Streets in Grafton, Massachusetts, to seven locations associated with Frank O'Hara (Fig. 1)—a New York School poet, art critic, and curator at the Museum of Modern Art. The tour, one of two devoted to O'Hara, focuses on his hometown. Although O'Hara never lived in Grafton again after his father's death, he retained memories and souvenirs—like the “spoils” seized by a victorious army—of various locations there. Our tour begins at **Grafton Common** and ends at the site of the **Waskanut Bowling Alley**, 2 Main Street, South Grafton.

Fig 1. Pen-and-ink portrait of O'Hara by Emma Kuper; courtesy of the artist

1. After returning to Massachusetts from Baltimore, Maryland, a year after Frank's birth on June 27, 1926, his parents, Russell and Katherine O'Hara, settled in the rural town of Grafton, which was so picturesque that it was chosen as the setting for the 1935 film *Ah, Wilderness!* Frank's childhood later inspired pastoral poems such as “Ode to Michael Goldberg,” with its punning reference to Stravinsky's revolutionary *Rite of Spring*:

*The wind sounded exactly like
Stravinsky
I first recognized art as wildness, and it seemed right,
I mean rite, to me*

He also explores romantic images of youth, nature, and discovery in “Oranges: 12 Pastorals”:

*Thoughts, fabulous and eternal, lie unclaimed in my brain. My feet, tender
with sight, wander the yellow grass in search of love.*

Grafton Common (Fig. 2) lies at the heart of the town, with streets emanating from it “like spokes on a wagon wheel” (Gooch, 18). O'Hara's childhood also revolved around it, whether to visit the library, play in nearby fields, or occasionally travel to school in Worcester on a bus departing from the Common.

➔ You may wish to park near Grafton Common (spaces are often available on the west side near the Congregational Church) and walk around town as you tour the next few sites. We also recommend visiting the Uncommon Cow ice cream shop or the Grafton Country Store, at 1 and 2 Grafton Common Road, respectively.



Fig. 2. Photo of the bandstand at the center of Grafton Common by Madeline Zafon-Whalen

2. En route to O’Hara’s childhood home on one such road, you’ll pass the former site of the family business owned by his great-uncle, J. Frank Donahue, at **2 North Street**. (Fig. 3). Frank’s father, Russell O’Hara, and his uncle, Leonard O’Hara, ran various affiliated businesses in Grafton, including a livestock dealership, dairy farm, hardware store, and John Deere agency. The family also managed other farms, an apple orchard, and a lumber mill. Frank often helped with haying at Tower Hill, an 83-acre working farm with cows, vegetable gardens, and a house with seven fireplaces, which was one of his favorite places in Grafton. He also rode horses from J. Frank Donahue’s stables, swam at nearby Kitville Lake, and played with his beloved dogs, as he recalls in “Ode to Michael Goldberg”:



Fig 3. Photo of J. Frank Donahue’s barn at 2 North Street by Edward S. Clark; courtesy, Grafton Historical Society

*Up on the mountainous hill
behind the confusing house
where I lived, I went each
day after school and some nights
with my various dogs*

➔ From Grafton Common, head north toward Millbury Street and continue onto North Street. J. Frank Donahue’s home and business, at 2 North, would have been immediately on your right, after the railroad crossing. Frank O’Hara’s childhood home, at 12 North, also on the right, is only a few steps farther.



3. At **12 North Street** (formerly numbered 16), stands O’Hara’s childhood home (Fig. 4), a white colonial two-story house with black-shuttered windows. Frank lived here with his parents, Russell and Katherine Broderick O’Hara (who were both originally from Worcester), his brother Phil, and his sister Maureen. “The Spoils of Grafton,” the only poem that O’Hara set in this house, describes how “the cast-iron savings / bank slides down the banister!” and how the winter wind drives “mice into the cellar. / By November they’ll be upstairs.” It is dedicated to Maureen and echoes his advice that she too should leave Grafton after their father’s death. The poem’s last lines emphasize getting away: “Oh piano! hire a moving van! / Put down Mendelssohn and run!”

Fig 4. Photo by Madeline Zafon-Whalen

Frank was a talented pianist and loved classical music, especially by Rachmaninoff; a neighbor remembered hearing his “marvelous piano playing” on hot summer nights from her porch. At age seven he began studying piano in Worcester, and later attended the New England Conservatory as a special student, 1941-1944—so in a sense the piano did help him escape. O’Hara traveled the furthest from Grafton, however, when he enlisted in the U.S. Navy at age 18 and served in the South Pacific from 1944 to 1946. The house at 12 North Street now bears a plaque commemorating his residence there (Fig. 6).

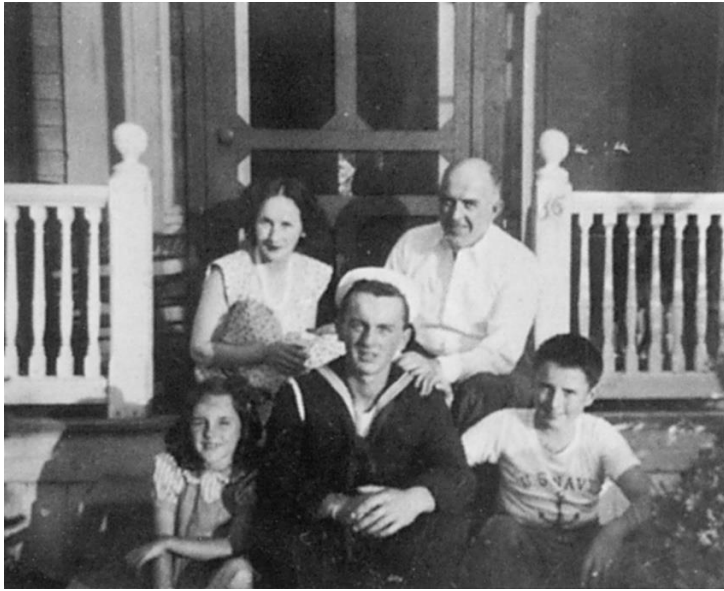


Fig. 5. O’Hara, on a visit home from the Navy, poses on the porch steps at 12 North Street (then numbered 16) with his parents, his sister Maureen, and his brother Phil (wearing a Navy T-shirt); courtesy, Maureen O’Hara. Fig. 6: Photo of the plaque by Madeline Zafon-Whalen.

4. Although O’Hara was not religious himself, his family were devout Catholics who attended **St. Philip’s on 12 West Street**, which was the only Catholic church in a mostly Protestant town (Fig. 7). Russell O’Hara attended the College of the Holy Cross, and Frank went to parochial schools in Worcester. He later left Catholicism—and Grafton—but many of his relatives remained deeply connected to the Church. St. Philip’s now occupies a modern building quite different from the one, pictured here, that he would have known.

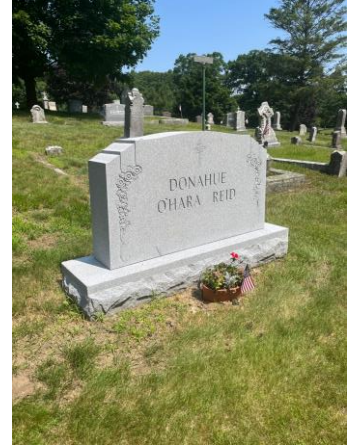


Fig. 7. Image courtesy of the Grafton Historical Society.

➔ From 12 North Street, turn around and return to the town center, turning slightly right onto Grafton Common Road. Follow Grafton Common Road around the Common until you pass the Congregational Church on your right, and then turn right onto Church Street. Take your first left onto West Street, and St. Phillip’s Church will be on your right.

5. The next stop on our tour is a visit to **St. Philip's Cemetery** on **Millbury Street** (Fig. 8). Frank O'Hara's parents, Russell O'Hara (1899-1947) and Katherine Broderick O'Hara (1907-1979), and his brother, John Philip O'Hara (1933-2020), are buried in the St. John's section of this cemetery, along with other family members, including his great-uncle, J. Frank Donahue (1865-1931); his paternal grandparents, John P. O'Hara (1857-1912) and Mary E. Donahue O'Hara (1858-1940); his aunts, Elizabeth I. Donahue Reid (1867-1944) and Grace E. O'Hara (1895-1952); and his uncle, Leonard F. O'Hara (1900-1955).

Fig. 8. Photo of the gravestone for Frank O'Hara's paternal grandparents and unmarried aunts by Madeline Zafon-Whalen.



➔ From St. Phillip's Church, turn around and continue westward on West Street, crossing Church Street and then turning left onto Millbury Street. In approximately seven-tenths of a mile you will find St. Philip's Cemetery on your right.



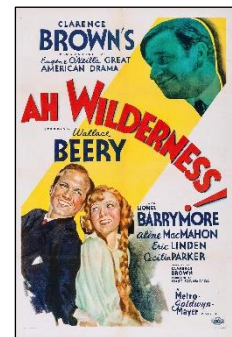
Fig. 8. Photo by Madeline Zafon-Whalen

and actors, which was reinforced by trips to Worcester cinemas with his Aunt Lizzie and summers spent with other teenagers at the Red Barn Summer Stock Theatre in nearby Westborough, MA. Later, in New York City, O'Hara wrote an unpublished novel, *The 4th of July*, whose main character, a young boy, is fascinated by theater and film.

Fig. 10. Movie poster for *Ah, Wilderness!* (1935); courtesy, Wikipedia Commons

6. Frank O'Hara was an avid reader as well as a devoted patron of the **Grafton Public Library** (Fig. 9), at **35 Grafton Common Road**, whose entrance welcomes visitors with a brick pathway that is surrounded by gardens and comfortable benches. The library stands diagonally across an intersection from the Common in view of the town bandstand.

That quaint structure was installed, when Frank was seven years old, for the filming in Grafton of *Ah, Wilderness!* (Fig. 10). His encounter with the Hollywood adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's play no doubt contributed to a life-long passion for movies, plays,



➔ From St. Phillip's Cemetery, turn around and go back up Millbury Street toward Grafton. Turn right on Church Street, which leads lead you back to the center of town. Grafton Public Library, with its green front doors, faces you across the Common. You may wish to park your car and walk there. Otherwise, turn right onto Grafton Common Road and follow it around to the other side; the library will be on your right.

7. While Frank O'Hara was an undergraduate at Harvard, which he attended on the G.I. Bill, his father died suddenly, at age 48, from a heart attack at the **Waskanut Bowling Alley**. Russell O'Hara had been an active member of many community organizations, including the Grafton Bowling League, and he especially enjoyed candlepin bowling, a type of bowling common to New England, with smaller balls and thinner, taller pins, which originated in Worcester in 1880 and became popular in the 1930s. Our tour ends at the **Cumberland Farms** in South Grafton where the **Waskanut Bowling Alley** once stood.

➔ From the Grafton Public Library, drive back around Grafton Common and past the Congregational Church, then turn right onto Church Street as you did before. From Church Street, turn left onto Massachusetts Route 122 South. Drive straight for 1.8 miles until you read the Cumberland Farms where the Waskanut Bowling Alley once stood.

By 1952, Frank O'Hara had become a leading member of the New York School, living in Manhattan, working at the Museum of Modern Art—where he eventually became an associate curator who specialized in contemporary American painting—and hanging out at jazz clubs with friends who were experimental poets or Abstract Expressionist painters. He avoided Grafton after his father's death, especially due to his mother's struggles with alcoholism. He came home one last time for the funeral of his Aunt Grace, who fostered his love of reading and the arts and encouraged him to attend Harvard and the University of Michigan. O'Hara spent the rest of his life in New York (Fig. 11), working as a curator, art critic, and poet, and occasionally traveling to Europe to coordinate exhibits of American art.

He never returned to Grafton, not even following his own early death, at age 40, when he was struck by a jeep on Fire Island: he is buried in Green River Cemetery, New York. Still, his hometown remembers him fondly and maintains a small Frank O'Hara collection at the **Grafton Historical Society Museum**, 71 Main Street, in South Grafton (open on Sundays and Tuesdays, 2-4 pm, or by appointment; contact them at 508-839-0000 or graffonmahistory@gmail.com).

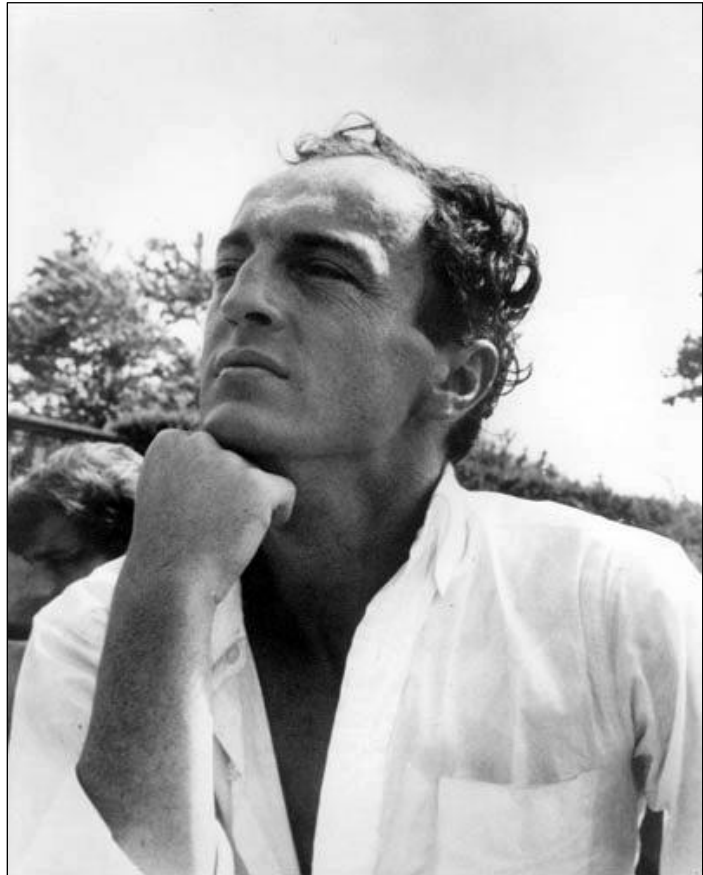


Fig. 11. Photo of Frank O'Hara by Kenward Elmslie, as reproduced on the dust jacket of his posthumously published 1971 volume of *Collected Poems*; courtesy, Wikipedia Commons

Bibliography

Essays

- Ali, Hanna. "Why candlepin bowling took off in New England — and not anywhere else." WBUR.org, Nov. 18th 2023, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/11/18/candlepin-bowling-history-new-england-massachusetts-maine-newsletter>.
- Kaci, Irena. "Frank O'Hara." Worcester County Poetry Association website, <https://worcestercountypoetry.org/frank-ohara/>.
- Towles, Parker, ed. Feature section on Frank O'Hara. *Worcester Review* 22 (2018): 1.

Books

- Gooch, Brad. *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993.
- O'Hara, Frank. *Amorous Nightmares of Delay: Selected Plays*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- . *Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. Ed. Donald Allen. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- . *Lunch Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1964.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, with a new introduction, (1998)
- Shaw, Lytle. *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006.

Archival Collections

- Allen Collection of Frank O'Hara Letters. University of Connecticut Archives and Special Collections.
- Frank O'Hara Papers in the Museum of Modern Art Archives. Museum of Modern Art, New York City.



Mapping Worcester in Poetry is a project supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, developed in collaboration with the Worcester County Poetry Association, and directed by Susan Elizabeth Sweeney. Special thanks to Frank O'Hara's sister, Maureen O'Hara, for patiently answering questions, kindly suggesting resources, and generously sharing family photos. Nancy Therrien at the Grafton Historical Society helped to provide information about the town.

Two Holy Cross students, Katie Knippler '22 and Madeline (Tessa) Zafon-Whalen '26, assisted with researching, organizing, and drafting the self-guided driving/ walking tours that explore sites related to Frank O'Hara in Grafton and downtown Worcester. A Google map of the Grafton tour may be found here:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1DE0-x7ukPXrqW7KffKpcNH787SMXBjE&usp=sharing>