They had come to the city by the Underground Railroad, neither under guard nor a ‘hurking’, but a loose network of assistance to persons running away from slavery. These were, however, only in a figurative sense. The activities of runaways and those who aided them were kept as secret as possible, and as the very word was made difficult to use, estimates range from many hundreds to four thousand. The leading anti-slavery papers, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, expressed concern at the number of runaways in the city.

Second, the city was an active part of an extensive coastal trading system. New Bedford merchant vessels sailed oil, whaling, sponges, tobacco, dried fish, and fish products to southern ports and the West Indies and returned with cotton, flour, rice, beef, pork, and new money (rum, tar, pitch, and tar). Fugitives, as well as the vessels involved, had to navigate a network of space and time that ran from New Bedford to Canadian border towns and back. The Underground Railroad, a network of escape routes, is often credited as the means by which escaped slaves made their way to Canada. In a tragic irony, however, the same network of escape routes and routes of commerce ran along the same rivers and the same roads. The maritime trades had historically provided a great deal of freedom to African Americans, and the slave narratives document the extent to which runaways took advantage of this freedom.

People who claimed to know the Underground Railroad found themselves frequently exposed to the rhetoric of the greatest apostle of the ‘rallying cry’ of the early 1840s, Charles W. Morgan. But only a handful have been identified among whaling crews on record. In the case of Henry Morris, a Bostonian who escaped to New York in 1842, John W. Thompson, a fugitive from Maryland early in 1842, and several others who escaped to New York in the mid-1840s, the luxuries of the maritime trades were often subjected to hard realities. No colored man is really free in a slaveholding state. He wears the badge of bondage in a free state. He is often subjected to hard realities, and in a strange city he may be despised and frightened. He is a stranger; but here in New Bedford it was my good fortune to meet a stranger who treated me like a brother.

Finally, the city was home to a large population of color. In 1840 people of color were 6.5 percent of the city’s population, a greater proportion than in the port cities of Charleston, New York, and Philadelphia. Between 1850 and 1855, the threat of capture after the Fugitive Slave Act passed impelled many African Americans on the Underground Railroad to New Bedford. In 1855, the city’s people of African ancestry amounted to 16 percent of the city’s population, the highest proportion in the state. The South, compared to only 15 percent of New York’s black population and 16 percent of Boston’s at the time, was often the first stop for fugitives (Douglass, 1881). The African American community was vibrant in New Bedford and, as abolitionist Quakers who controlled the city’s black community were later to state, because it was one of the most open of all the northern cities. The city’s political and economic life reflected the city’s political and economic life. Quakers, who controlled the city’s economy, had made the city both wealthy and in memory. They remain significant in the Underground Railroad in and around New Bedford, as a tour of sites related to the Underground Railroad is a popular tourist attraction today.


The maritime trades had historically provided a great deal of freedom to African Americans, and the slave narratives document the extent to which runaways took advantage of this freedom. For fugitives like him, Virginian Henry Morris, the greatest assylum to the fugitives,” as whaling merchant and prominent mover, was large even by the more conservative estimate. No colored man is really free in a slaveholding state. He wears the badge of bondage in a free state. He is often subjected to hard realities, and in a strange city he may be despised and frightened. He is a stranger; but here in New Bedford it was my good fortune to meet a stranger who treated me like a brother.
Powell housed many black sailors during the 1830s. William P. Powell operated a boardinghouse on the waterfront to serve as a haven for runaways. He hid escaping slaves in his own home and helped them escape by obtaining a suitable vessel on which to ship out; vessel owners were more likely to ship out prospective crew find a suitable vessel if they could also identify Powell. Powell was an energetic man who employed William Drayton as a cook in his boardinghouse. Poor, hungry, and desperate, Drayton was helped bring the hopeful escapees to shore. Powell housed many black sailors during the 1830s. William P. Powell operated a boardinghouse on the waterfront to serve as a haven for runaways. He hid escaping slaves in his own home and helped them escape by obtaining a suitable vessel on which to ship out; vessel owners were more likely to ship out prospective crew find a suitable vessel if they could also identify Powell.

The Boardinghouse and their Residents

The boardinghouses have been referred to as “enclaves” and “islands” of freedom. Powell’s immediate market was the black sailors who came to New Bedford to escape slavery. Powell’s immediate market was the black sailors who came to New Bedford to escape slavery. Powell was an energetic man who employed William Drayton as a cook in his boardinghouse. Poor, hungry, and desperate, Drayton was helped bring the hopeful escapees to shore.

Underground Railroad/New Bedford Map and Guide

This site was used by the local residents of New Bedford to help the first African-American regiment to escape to freedom. The first African-American regiment to escape to freedom was the 54th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. The 54th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was established in the 1860s and this site served as a hub for the local residents to help fugitive slaves escape to freedom. The 54th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was established in the 1860s and this site served as a hub for the local residents to help fugitive slaves escape to freedom. The 54th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was established in the 1860s and this site served as a hub for the local residents to help fugitive slaves escape to freedom.

100 Smith Street

The Benjamin Johnson House was a central location for fugitive slaves in New Bedford. Benjamin Johnson’s house was a central location for fugitive slaves in New Bedford. Benjamin Johnson was a central location for fugitive slaves in New Bedford. Benjamin Johnson was a central location for fugitive slaves in New Bedford. Benjamin Johnson was a central location for fugitive slaves in New Bedford. Benjamin Johnson was a central location for fugitive slaves in New Bedford. Benjamin Johnson was a central location for fugitive slaves in New Bedford. Benjamin Johnson was a central location for fugitive slaves in New Bedford. Benjamin Johnson was a central location for fugitive slaves in New Bedford. Benjamin Johnson was a central location for fugitive slaves in New Bedford. Benjamin Johnson was a central location for fugitive slaves in New Bedford.

On Long Isabella Island in the Bay near New Bedford, the current Diana of the Wilderness statue marks the exact landing place of a former slave known only as “Little Jimmy” who escaped to freedom in 1842. On Long Isabella Island in the Bay near New Bedford, the current Diana of the Wilderness statue marks the exact landing place of a former slave known only as “Little Jimmy” who escaped to freedom in 1842. On Long Isabella Island in the Bay near New Bedford, the current Diana of the Wilderness statue marks the exact landing place of a former slave known only as “Little Jimmy” who escaped to freedom in 1842. On Long Isabella Island in the Bay near New Bedford, the current Diana of the Wilderness statue marks the exact landing place of a former slave known only as “Little Jimmy” who escaped to freedom in 1842. On Long Isabella Island in the Bay near New Bedford, the current Diana of the Wilderness statue marks the exact landing place of a former slave known only as “Little Jimmy” who escaped to freedom in 1842. On Long Isabella Island in the Bay near New Bedford, the current Diana of the Wilderness statue marks the exact landing place of a former slave known only as “Little Jimmy” who escaped to freedom in 1842. On Long Isabella Island in the Bay near New Bedford, the current Diana of the Wilderness statue marks the exact landing place of a former slave known only as “Little Jimmy” who escaped to freedom in 1842. On Long Isabella Island in the Bay near New Bedford, the current Diana of the Wilderness statue marks the exact landing place of a former slave known only as “Little Jimmy” who escaped to freedom in 1842. On Long Isabella Island in the Bay near New Bedford, the current Diana of the Wilderness statue marks the exact landing place of a former slave known only as “Little Jimmy” who escaped to freedom in 1842. On Long Isabella Island in the Bay near New Bedford, the current Diana of the Wilderness statue marks the exact landing place of a former slave known only as “Little Jimmy” who escaped to freedom in 1842. On Long Isabella Island in the Bay near New Bedford, the current Diana of the Wilderness statue marks the exact landing place of a former slave known only as “Little Jimmy” who escaped to freedom in 1842.