

LEFT: An engraving in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). Douglass's third autobiography, depicts his and his new wife's encounter with New Bedford's Joseph Ricketson and William C. Taber in Newport, Rhode Island, after his escape from slavery.

RIGHT: Frederick Douglass, ca. 1848.

A Near Approach to Freedom

After a sojourn of a day or two in Philadelphia, Samuel and his companions left for New Bedford. Canada was named to them as the safest place for all Refugees; but it was in vain to attempt to convince "Sam" that Canada or any other place on this Continent, was quite equal to New Bedford.

— William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (1871)

When Samuel Nixon escaped from slavery to New Bedford, Massachusetts, in the early summer of 1855, he took the name Thomas Bayne and found "many old friends" from his native Norfolk, Virginia, already living in the small but bustling port city. By that time New Bedford was considered "one of the greatest assylums [sic] of the fugitives," as whaling merchant Charles W. Morgan put it. For fugitives like him, Virginian George Teamoh wrote, the city was "our magnet of attraction."

People who claimed to know something of the Underground Railroad's operation at the time estimated that from three hundred to seven hundred fugitives lived in New Bedford between the mid-1840s and 1860. In a city whose official population of color hovered around one thousand persons, the number of fugitive slaves in New Bedford was large even by the more conservative estimate.

They had come to the city by the Underground Railroad, neither "underground" nor a "railroad" but rather a loose network of assistance to persons escaping American slavery. This network was "underground" only in a figurative sense. The activities of runaways and those who aided them were kept as secret as possible, and this very secrecy has made it difficult to estimate precisely how many southern slaves escaped to the North and to Canada between the 1780s and the Civil War. Surely they numbered in the tens of thousands. In the 1850s alone, when the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act gave federal sanction to southern slave owners' efforts to retrieve escaped slaves, more

than twenty thousand are believed to have made their way into Canada.

New Bedford was attractive to African Americans for four main reasons. First, whaling, the third most profitable industry in Massachusetts at midcentury, had made the city both wealthy and in constant need of labor at a time when the less hazardous and possibly better paying work factories offered—exclusively to white men and women—had begun to draw workers away from whaling ships and wharves. The maritime trades had historically been more welcoming to black participation than other endeavors, and whaling may have been the most open of all.



COURTESY CHESTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, WEST CHESTER, PA.

Second, the city was an active part of an extensive coastal trading system. New Bedford merchant vessels carried oil, whalebone, apples, hats, shoes, and other food and factory products to southern ports and the West Indies and returned with cotton, flour, rice, beef, pork, and naval stores (lumber, turpentine, pitch, and tar). Fugitive slave narratives document that runaways took advantage of this commercial network. Often aided by crew members and dock workers of both races, they stowed away amid ships' cargoes; sometimes sympathetic vessel captains brought them north. Many, like Frederick Douglass, traveled over both land and water to New Bedford, while others, like Joseph M. Smith, traveled entirely by vessel to the port.

Third was New Bedford's "liberal spirit," as U.S. Senator Charles Sumner called it. Quakers, who controlled the city's political and economic life into the 1820s, had taken an early stand against oppression and any form of forcible resistance, an inclination that remained strong among a significant group of the city's anti-slavery leaders until the Civil War. Though some early Quakers had held slaves, individual Quakers, and many Unitarians who had once been Quakers, were among the city's staunchest abolitionists.

Finally, the city was home to a large population of color. In 1850 people of color were 6.3 percent of the city's population, a greater proportion than prevailed in Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia. Between 1850 and 1855, the threat of capture after the Fugitive Slave Act passed impelled many African Americans once held in bondage to flee to Canada, which diminished the black populations of many northern cities. Yet the number of people of color in New Bedford actually rose between these years, as did their share of total city population, from 6.3 to 7.5 percent. And fully 30 percent of New Bedford's people of African descent in 1850 were born in the South, compared to only 15 percent of New York's black population and 16 percent of Boston's at the time.

This African American community was active in antislavery reform since at least the 1820s. When Frederick Douglass arrived in 1838 he found New Bedford's people of color "much more spirited than I had supposed they would be. I found among them a determination to protect each other from the blood-thirsty kidnapper, at all hazards." In 1855 he wrote:

No colored man is really free in a slaveholding state. He wears the badge of bondage while nominally free, and is often subjected to hardships to which the slave is a stranger; but here in New Bedford, it was my good fortune to see a pretty near approach to freedom on the part of the colored people.

Passageway to Freedom

This brochure takes visitors on a tour of sites related to the Underground Railroad in and around New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park. Though some buildings and streets have long since disappeared from the landscape, they remain significant in public and private record and in memory.



New Bedford waterfront

1 State Pier

You stand now on what was once George Howland's and later Merchants' Wharf, one of more than twenty slips and wharves in New Bedford in the late 1840s. Both whaling and coasting vessels were repaired and outfitted for their voyages at these wharves. Here those who escaped slavery on coasting vessels first set foot on free soil. And fugitives who came to labor-hungry New Bedford stepped from these wharves onto whaling vessels. At sea from sixteen to sixty months, they virtually assured themselves that they would not be pursued and returned to slavery.

In 1911, on his one hundredth birthday, Joseph M. Smith told a local reporter that he had escaped from North Carolina on a lumber vessel to New Bedford about 1830:

I waited until the captain went down below to dress for going ashore, and then I made a dash for liberty . . . when the ship tied up at the wharf at the foot of Union Street . . . I was over the edge and in the midst of an excited crowd. "A fugitive, a fugitive," was the cry as I sprung ashore . . . Had never heard the word "fugitive" before and was pretty well scared out of my wits. But a slave had little to fear in a New Bedford crowd in slavery days . . . they stood aside and let me pass.

Having escaped from Maryland early in 1842, John W. Thompson came to New Bedford after lack of maritime experience kept him from securing a berth on a New York City merchant vessel. "I was advised to go to New Bedford, where green hands were more wanted," he wrote. Upon his arrival he came to these wharves to sign on as steward of the whaler *Milwood*, which left New Bedford that June. At sea Thompson confessed to the vessel's captain:

I am a fugitive slave from Maryland, and have a family in Philadelphia; but fearing to remain there any longer, I thought I would go on a whaling voyage, as being the place where I stood least chance of being arrested by slave hunters.

Such a motive may have inspired others who escaped slavery, but only a handful have been identified among whaling crews to date.

Born in Richmond, Virginia, perhaps into slavery, Lewis Temple had settled in New Bedford by 1829. He was a vice president of New Bedford Union Society, an anti-slavery society formed by people of color in 1833. The toggle harpoon he invented in 1848 vastly increased the efficiency of the whale hunt. When fugitive Henry "Box" Brown came to New Bedford in 1849 he found "many friends here who former[ly] lived in Richmond," no doubt including Temple and William Henry Johnson, who escaped from a plantation near Richmond in 1833.

JOHN ROBSON



New Bedford in 1807, oil on canvas by William Allen Wall, 1855

2 The Four Corners

The junction of Union and Water Streets was the heart of the shoreside district that supported whaling. Along the streets closely paralleling the waterfront and those running from the shore to about Second Street was a vast industrial and commercial district of ropewalks, candle and oil works, sail lofts, coopers' and blacksmiths' shops, ships' bread and biscuit bakeries, clothing stores and tailors that outfitted sailors, dozens of restaurants and "rum shops," and scores of boardinghouses.

The boardinghouses and their keepers were critical to the whaling industry. Keepers helped prospective crew find a suitable vessel on which to ship out; vessel owners and agents visited these lodgings to recruit crew. At a waterfront boardinghouse he did not identify, John W. Thompson met an injured ship's cook who instructed him in the rudiments of stewardship.

Two black boardinghouse keepers had notable careers in the Underground Railroad. By the mid-1830s William P. Powell operated a "seamen's temperance boarding house" at 94 North Water Street. An avowed fugitive assistant, Powell housed many black sailors who had come to ship out on a New Bedford whaling vessel; no doubt some were fugitives from slavery. Numerous accounts have

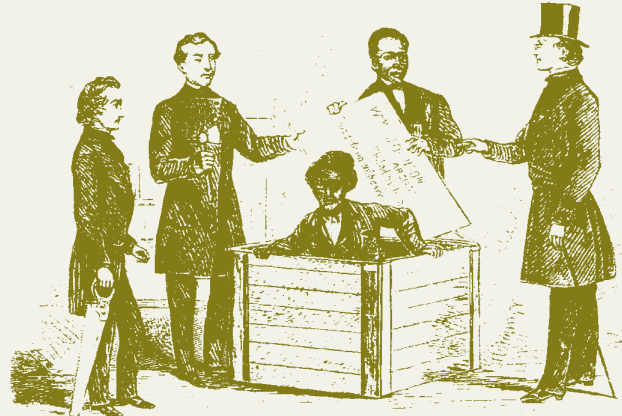


Daniel Drayton, frontispiece from Personal Memoir of Daniel Drayton, for Four Years and Four Months a Prisoner (for Charity's Sake) in Washington Jail (Boston and New York, 1853)

also identified William Bush, a free black man from Washington, D.C., as a boardinghouse keeper whose rooms were always open to escaping slaves. During the 1850s Bush housed George Teamoh, who escaped indirectly from Norfolk, and helped him find work in the mid-1850s. Teamoh wrote of him in the 1870s,

Quite a large number of fugitives for a time stayed at his house and received the same hospitalities as did his regular boarders, notwithstanding the former were not able to pay their way. If any reliance may be placed in the statement of many of the older citizens of N.B. Deacon Bush . . . has been one of the most zealous, hard working and liberal friends the fugitive ever found.

William Bush was the last person whom Daniel Drayton, the mariner who attempted the unsuccessful rescue of seventy-seven slaves from Washington, D.C., aboard the Pearl in April 1848, visited before he took his own life at New Bedford's Mansion House in June 1857. Bush's wife, Lucinda Clark Bush, is believed to have helped bring the hopeful escapees to Drayton's schooner. Poor,



"The 'Resurrection' of Henry 'Box' Brown," engraving in William Still, The Underground Railroad (1871)



William H. Carney Jr. in his 54th Regiment uniform and bearing the standard from the assault on Fort Wagner

discouraged, and broken by more than four years in prison, Drayton was buried in New Bedford's Rural Cemetery. The perpetual care of his burial lot was funded in part by New Bedford people of color.

3 Carney Panel, Union Street

This panel commemorates William H. Carney Jr., the first African American to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroism during the Union assault on Fort Wagner in 1863. One newspaper account noted that Carney, who had been working in the coasting trade in his native Norfolk, "confiscated himself" and came to New Bedford in 1859. Carney's father, who had also escaped slavery, had purchased the freedom of his mother. Loum Snow, a New Bedford merchant who employed William Carney Sr., helped him secure his wife Nancy's release. About 1850, Snow's granddaughters told a Works Progress Administration researcher in 1939, Snow had arranged for an enslaved young girl, Isabella White, to be shipped out of the South to New Bedford in a barrel marked "sweet potatoes."



Nathan and Mary Johnson House, 21 Seventh Street

4 Joseph Ricketson Home Site Union Street

On the north side of Union Street across from Seventh Street stood the home of Joseph Ricketson Sr. and Jr. It was probably Joseph Ricketson Sr. who, with William C. Taber, met Frederick Douglass and his wife on the Newport wharves and brought them to New Bedford. Here, at what was then 179 Union Street, Ricketson's son Joseph housed the famed Henry "Box" Brown. Charles Morgan wrote that Brown had escaped "packed up in a box about 3 ft 2 in long 2 ft 6 in wide & 1 ft 11 in deep and sent on by express from Richmond to Philadelphia—marked 'this side up.' . . . He was twice turned head downwards & once remained so on board the steam boat while she went 18 miles—which almost killed him and he said the veins on his temples were almost as thick as his finger."

The Johnsons were among the best known and most active black abolitionists in New Bedford. Nathan Johnson had involved himself with fugitive slave issues in the city since at least 1822. How and when he came to the city is not precisely known, nor is his status. Johnson was a delegate to most of the early conventions of free colored people in the United States, but he may have been a fugitive himself. Like Ricketson, Johnson is known to have sheltered others who escaped slavery in his home. Twenty-one Seventh Street is now the headquarters of the New Bedford Historical Society, dedicated to preserving and interpreting the history of people of color in the city and region.

The Philadelphia Vigilance Committee sent Brown on to New York City and from there to Ricketson in New Bedford. "I received your very valuable consignment of 200 pounds of Humanity last evening and as merchants say will dispose of it to the best advantage," Ricketson wrote to New York abolitionist

Sydney Howard Gay on March 30, 1849. Ricketson housed a male runaway at the time and in 1851 wrote a friend about "the Slave woman & child consigned to me." How many fugitives from slavery Ricketson may have housed is unknown, but his involvement in the Underground Railroad is the best documented of any of the city's white abolitionists.

5 Nathan and Mary Johnson Properties, 17-21 Seventh Street

On September 17 or 18, 1838, a young man of color named Frederick Johnson (Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in slavery) arrived with his new wife Anna at the 21 Seventh Street home of Nathan and Mary Johnson. The front part of the house had not yet been built, and the couple lived in the older, now rear, section. Nathan Johnson paid the freight charge for the peniless couple's baggage and took them in. Because there were many Johnson families of color already in the city, Frederick wrote, "I gave Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name." From then on he was known as Frederick Douglass, one of the most powerful and persuasive advocates of equal rights in nineteenth-century America.



Liberty Hall with its 1795 bell

The frame, double house next door to the Johnsons' home also belonged to them. Built in 1785, it had been the first meeting-house of the Society of Friends in New Bedford and was moved diagonally across Spring Street by 1822, when Quakers built their second, brick meetinghouse on its site. It was here in 1828 that Benjamin Lundy, founder of one of the nation's first antislavery newspapers and cohort of William Lloyd Garrison, gave what may have been the town's first antislavery lecture.

6 Liberty Hall, corner of William and Purchase Streets

On this site stood Liberty Hall, initially the city's first Congregational Church. Its first floor was converted to shop space and its upper floors to an auditorium and meeting rooms in 1838. The nation's most prominent abolitionists—William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Lenox Remond, Lucy Stone, William Wells Brown, Wendell Phillips, and Frederick Douglass—all spoke here in the 1840s and 1850s.

But Liberty Hall is most famous for an incident that occurred here in March 1851. Frustrated by the failure to return Shadrach Minkins to slavery from Boston, the U. S. Deputy Marshal was said to be planning "the seizure of and car-

rying away of fugitive slaves from New Bedford." Upon sighting a strange vessel in the harbor, abolitionist Rodney French rang Liberty Hall's bell (whose largest subscriber in 1795 had been a man of color) to alert fugitive slaves living in the city. The raid, however, never occurred, and while Boston was inflamed by the return of Thomas Sims and Anthony Burns to bondage in the 1850s, no fugitive is known to have been taken back to slavery from New Bedford.

This first Liberty Hall was destroyed in October 1854 by a fire so intense that it melted the famed bell. Parts of the metal were recast into miniature bells, one of them given by Rodney French to the Rev. William Jackson, the pastor of the city's Second and, later, Salem Baptist Churches. Jackson was a free man, but his journal and correspondence document that in both Philadelphia and New Bedford he assisted in fugitive escapes.

On this block of William Street, between Pleasant and Purchase Streets, several people of color had businesses in the years before the Civil War. One of them was the dentist Thomas Bayne, the escapee from Norfolk who made his way to the New Jersey coast by boat, walked to Philadelphia, and settled in New Bedford.

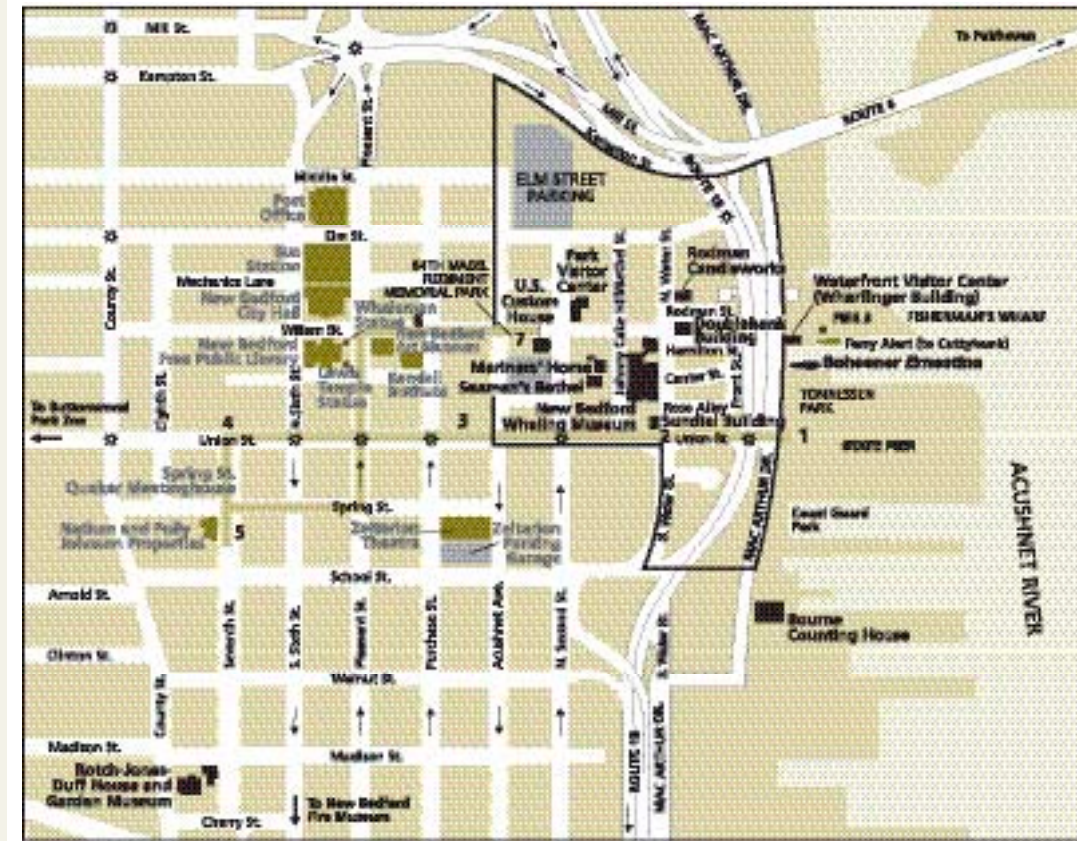


54th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Plaza

7 54th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Plaza

On this site was the local recruiting station for the 54th Regiment, the first African American regiment ever commissioned. Some fifty New Bedford men of color enlisted in the 54th and the 55th, the regiment formed from the surplus of recruits, and some of them are known to have escaped slavery. William Carney was one. So was John L. Wright, a married laborer who enlisted eleven days after Carney did and whose name in slavery was Stethy Swons. Wesley Furlong, who had worked as a ship's steward in New Bedford since about 1860, stated in his 1910 application for a veteran's pension that he had been born "in slavery." The Rev. William Jackson became the chaplain of the 55th Massachusetts Volunteers and was the first chaplain of color in the United States Army.

The city of New Bedford built and dedicated this plaza in February 1999 as a memorial to New Bedford people of color who fought for the Union in the Civil War. All told, more than 350 New Bedford men of color served in the Union forces between 1861 and 1865 in the 54th and 55th Regiments, the Fifth Cavalry, and the U.S. Navy.



Other Underground Railroad Sites in New Bedford:

Daniel Drayton's Grave
New Bedford Rural Cemetery
Dartmouth Street

Rev. William Jackson House (1858)
198 Smith Street

Loum Snow House (1852)
465 County Street

Second Baptist Church
201 Middle Street

John Briggs Home (ca.1836)
29 Allen Street: Briggs's daughter Martha kept school in this home for escaped slaves

William H. Carney Home (ca.1850)
128 Mill Street: now Martha Briggs Educational Society

Lewis Temple House (ca.1830)
54 Bedford Street

For more information, contact the New Bedford Historical Society, Nathan and Polly Johnson House, 21 Seventh Street, New Bedford, Massachusetts 02740, (508) 979-8828, NBHistory@aol.com, or visit the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park Visitor Center at 33 William Street, (508) 996-4095. You can also visit the park's web site at www.nps.gov/nebe. To learn more about the Underground Railroad visit www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr

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