

New Bedford Whaling

National Historical Park
Massachusetts
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Whaling Capital of the World

“The town itself is perhaps the dearest place to live in, in all New England. All these brave houses and flowery gardens came from the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans. One and all, they were harpooned and dragged up hither from the bottom of the sea.”
—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

In January of 1841, a twenty-one year old seaman named Herman Melville set sail aboard a whaling ship on one of the most important sea voyages in American literature. The book inspired by that voyage was the world-famous *Moby-Dick*, and the place from which Melville sailed that cold winter's day was the port of New Bedford, Massachusetts.

It is not surprising that Melville chose this port as his point of embarkation. New Bedford was the whaling capital of the world. Its waterfront teemed with sailors and tradespeople drawn from every corner of the globe by the whaling industry's promise of prosperity, and its wide residential streets sparkled with the mansions of those on whom the industry had already bestowed its riches.

The whaling industry that flourished in Melville's New Bedford had been born many years before and continued growing for another decade and a half.

CLOSE-UP OF RICHARD ELLIS MURAL OF WHITE WHALE
COURTESY OF RICHARD ELLIS © NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

Park Partners



Sternboard from the brig
Eunice H. Adams, 1845.

COLLECTION, NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

More whaling voyages sailed out of New Bedford in the 1850s than out of all the other ports in the world combined.

Today, New Bedford is a city of nearly 100,000, but its historic districts still retain embellishments that Herman Melville admired. Walk its cobblestone-lined streets with stately buildings, banks and storehouses from the days when New Bedford was the whaling capital of the world. Tour historic structures, gardens, and museums. Visit the working waterfront, homeport to one of America's leading fishing and scalloping fleets.

The streets, buildings, and harbor preserve the stories of early settlers, whaling merchants and maritime workers, including those who found safe haven on the Underground Railroad, and the many people for whom New Bedford was port of entry and opportunity.

Preserving the city's legacy did not come easily. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when buildings were being torn down to make way for urban renewal projects, determined citizens worked in partnership to save the city's history and neighborhoods. Innovative preservation efforts were focused on the waterfront, the city's heart and soul.

In 1996, the National Park Service joined this partnership when Congress established New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park to preserve and interpret America's 19th century whaling and maritime history. The park consists of the 13-block Waterfront Historic District. Unlike most national parks, however, individuals and groups continue to own and operate their properties. The role of the National Park Service

is to work with local partners to preserve and interpret the resources within the park. Partners in the park include the City of New Bedford, the New Bedford Whaling Museum, the schooner *Ernestina*, the Rotch-Jones-Duff House and Garden Museum, the New Bedford Port Society, the New Bedford Historical Society, the New Bedford Preservation Society, and the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE),

which sparked the district's revitalization. The park also has a distant partner. To commemorate the more than 2,000 whaling voyages from New Bedford to the Western Arctic, the legislation establishing the park designated an affiliated area in Barrow, Alaska. From the South Seas to the Arctic, from South America to Hudson's Bay, the New Bedford whaling story is a blend of many cultural influences.



Schooner Ernestina
under sail.

SCHOONER ERNESTINA



New Bedford Whaling Museum



Rotch-Jones-Duff House



Seamen's Bethel

Cultural Effects

Scrimshaw

On voyages that might last as long as four years, whalers spent their leisure hours carving and scratching decorations on sperm whale teeth, whalebone and baleen. This folk art, known as scrimshaw, often depicted whaling adventures or scenes of home. The whalers also made eating utensils, mortars and pestles, salt and pepper shakers, pie crimpers, and other objects out of ivory and baleen. Commercially, baleen was used in the making of corset stays, skirt hoops, and buggy whips.

Pursuing Whales Worldwide

Beginning in the eighteenth century, the whaling industry used small sailing ships to chase whales along the eastern coastline. Then, as the number of Atlantic whales dwindled and competition for whale oil



Scrimshaw
basket and
jagging wheel.

increased, square riggers traveled for years at a time worldwide, wherever whales gathered. By the 1850s, Americans had plied every ocean from the South Seas to the Western Arctic and discovered most of the grounds of sperm, right, bow-head, humpback and California gray whales. Finback and blue whales were too strong to be captured with the ships' 30-foot whaleboats and hand held harpoons.

A Port of Entry

Whaling was an industry that employed large numbers of African-Americans, Azoreans, and Cape Verdeans. These communities still flourish in New Bedford today. Nineteenth century New Bedford's role in American history, however, was not limited to whaling. It was a major station on the Underground Railroad moving slaves from the South to the free North and Canada. Among



Frederick Douglass

those fugitives was Frederick Douglass, who lived and worked in the city for three years before going on to become a leading anti-slavery orator and author.

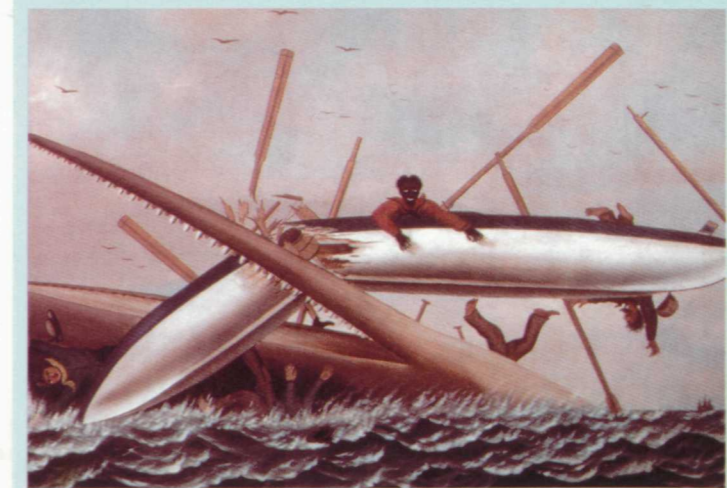
Lighting the World

Starting in the Colonial era, Americans pursued whales primarily for blubber to fuel lamps. Whale blubber was rendered into oil at high temperatures aboard ship—a process whalers referred to as “trying out.” Sperm whales were sought for their higher-grade spermaceti oil, which was used to produce

the finest smokeless, odorless candles. Whale-oil was also processed into fine lubricating oils for industries such as clockmaking. Whale-oil from New Bedford ships lit much of the world from the 1830s until it was replaced by petroleum alternatives, such as kerosene and gas, in the 1860s.



COLLECTION, NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM



Whaleboat being 'stove' by a whale

FREDERICK DOUGLASS NHS

COLLECTION, NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

JOHN ROBSON

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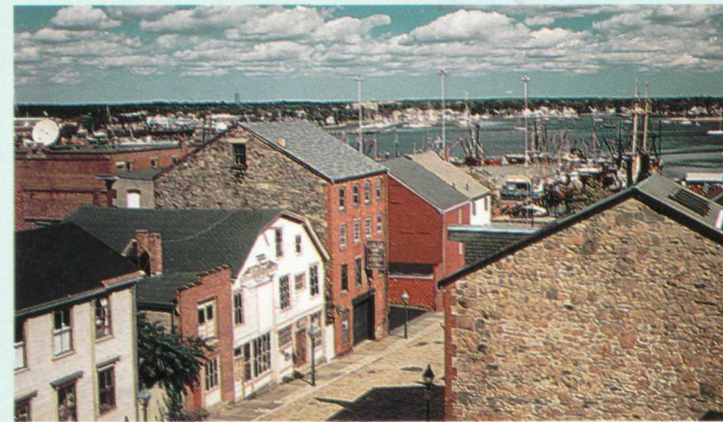
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Visiting the Park

One of the pleasures of visiting New Bedford is walking along its streets and looking at its buildings. The sites described on the following panels are within the national historical park. Some are open to the public year-round, and some are open seasonally. Most are managed by nonprofit organizations that charge an admission fee. We suggest you stop first at the park visitor center for orientation. Then, using the map as your guide, tour the park sites including the waterfront. For additional information, write to New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, 33 William Street, New Bedford, MA 02740, or call 508-996-4095.



By car, New Bedford is approximately one hour south of Boston and 45 minutes east of Providence. From I-195, take exit 15 and travel one mile south on Route 18 to the first set of lights. Follow the brown and white signs to the visitor center and parking.



For information on the park's affiliated site in Barrow, Alaska, write to the Inupiat Heritage Center, P.O. Box 749, Barrow, Alaska 99723.

You may also visit the park's website at www.nps.gov/nebe.

PHOTOS: COLLECTION, NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

Park Guide



Park Visitor Center

The Park Visitor Center at 33 William Street provides information about sites, facilities and activities in the community. This Greek Revival structure, built in 1853, served as a bank, a courthouse, an auto parts store, an antique mart, and a bank again before becoming the visitor center for the national historical park. Park rangers and volunteers are on hand to answer questions.

The Seamen's Bethel, across the street from the Whaling Museum, has served mariners as a house of worship since 1832. Before shipping out on the whaler *Acushnet* in 1841, Herman Melville attended services here. Ten years later, in *Moby-Dick*, he wrote about the chapel's marble memorials to seamen lost at sea. A pulpit in the shape of a ship's bow based on Melville's imaginary description was installed in 1959.

The oldest continuously operated U.S. Custom House still stands at the corner of William and North Second Street. Here, seafarers from around the world register their papers, captains pay duties and tariffs, and other transactions take place. This 1836 building, featuring a granite façade and four Doric columns, was designed by Robert Mills, architect of the Washington Monument.

Bricks from a demolished textile mill were used to construct the Wharfinger Building as a Works Progress Administration project in 1934. For many years scallop and fish auctions were conducted here each morning. It now serves as the city's waterfront visitor center. Open seasonally.



Clocks and chronometers were made in the Sundial Building, but this 1820 brick and stone structure is named for the vertical sundial on its Union Street exterior. Seamen were known to set their instruments by the dial's time, known as "New Bedford time." Check its accuracy. The building was restored after a devastating gas explosion and fire in 1977. Now owned by the New Bedford Whaling Museum, the building houses the New England Steamship Foundation.



Seamen's Bethel



Mariners' Home



U.S. Custom House



Rodman Candleworks



Wharfinger Building



Double Bank Building



New Bedford Whaling Museum



Bourne Counting House

PHOTOS: JOHN ROBSON

The Rotch-Jones-Duff House and Garden Museum, a Greek Revival mansion at 396 County Street, was built in 1834 for whaling merchant William Rotch, Jr. Furnished period rooms and collections chronicle the city's history through the three families who lived here over a span of 150 years. Located on a city block of urban gardens, the property includes a historic wooden pergola, formal boxwood rose parterre garden, and wildflower walk. Fee.

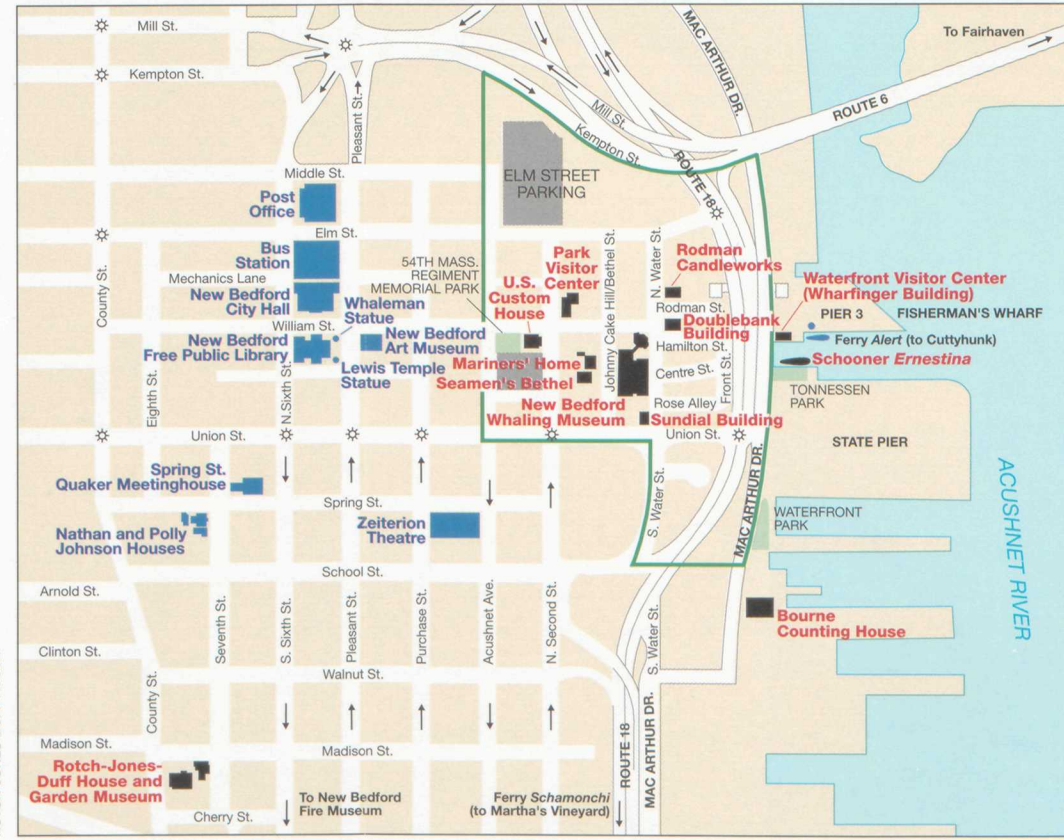


Rotch-Jones-Duff House Interior

The Mariners' Home at 15 Johnny Cake Hill was built in 1787 as the mansion of William Rotch, Jr. Donated to the New Bedford Port Society in 1851, the home has offered lodging to visiting mariners for over 100 years. Not open to the public.

Rodman Candleworks on Water Street produced some of the first spermaceti candles. These candles were known for being dripless, smokeless, and long-lasting. The structure was built in 1810 of granite rubble that was covered with stucco and scored to look like granite blocks. The candleworks closed in 1890. The building was used for a variety of purposes before being rehabilitated. Commercial establishment.

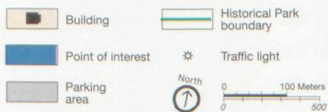
Park Map



As the name implies, the Double Bank Building once housed two banks on Water Street, the "Wall Street of New Bedford." Today the Fishermen's Union and other fishing interests are located here.

From the Bourne Counting House, Jonathan Bourne, Jr. could look out at his whaleships in the harbor and keep records of his outfitting costs, the number of whale-oil barrels the ships brought back, wages paid, and other transactions. This building later housed the Durant Sail Loft, which made its last set of sails for New Bedford whaler *Charles W. Morgan*, now docked at Mystic Seaport Museum. Commercial establishment.

The schooner *Ernestina* has had a multifaceted career since it was launched as the *Effie Morrissey* in Essex, Massachusetts, in 1894. Originally a Grand Banks fishing vessel, it has served as an Arctic explorer, a World War II supply ship, and a trans-Atlantic packet carrying Cape Verdean immigrants to the United States. It currently sails with an educational mission. The schooner was given to the people of the United States by the people of the Republic of Cape Verde in 1982. When in port, this national historic landmark and official vessel of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts can be viewed from State Pier near the Wharfinger Building visitor center.



Ernestina

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