



**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 1841, a 21-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 Melville sailed from on that cold winter day was New Bedford, Massachusetts.

It is not surprising that Melville chose to embark from New Bedford—it was the whaling capital of the world. Its waterfront teemed with sailors and tradespeople drawn from all over the globe by the whaling industry’s promise of prosperity, and its wide residential streets sparkled with the mansions of the wealthy whaling families.

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. In the 1850s more whaling voyages sailed from New Bedford than from all of the world’s ports combined.

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

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 by stately buildings, banks, and storehouses from the days when New Bedford was the whaling capital of the world. Tour historic structures, gardens, and museums and 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, maritime workers, and the many people for whom New Bedford was both port of entry and of 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 together to save the city’s history and neighborhoods. Innovative preservation efforts focused on the waterfront, the city’s heart and soul.

The National Park Service joined this partnership in 1996 when Congress created New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park to help preserve and interpret America’s whaling and maritime history. The park consists of the 13-block Waterfront Historic District but is unlike most national parks in that individuals and groups continue to own and operate their properties. The role of the

National Park Service is to work collaboratively with a wide range of local partners, including the City of New Bedford, New Bedford Whaling Museum, schooner *Ernestina*, Rotch-Jones-Duff House and Garden Museum, New Bedford Port Society, New Bedford Historical Society, and Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE). The National Park Service also works in partnership with the Inupiat

Heritage Center in Barrow, Alaska, to help recognize the contributions of Alaska Natives to the history of whaling in the United States. From the South Seas to the Arctic, from South America to Hudson’s Bay, the story of New Bedford whaling 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 making corset stays, skirt hoops, and buggy whips.



Scrimshaw basket and jagg wheel.  
NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

oil increased, square riggers traveled for years at a time worldwide, wherever whales gathered. Americans had plied every ocean from the South Seas to the Western Arctic by the 1850s and found most of the grounds of sperm, right, bowhead, humpback, and California gray whales. Both finback and blue whales were too much for the 30-foot whaleboats and hand-held harpoons of the time.

**Pursuing Whales Worldwide**

Beginning in the 18th 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

**Port of Entry**  
The whaling industry employed large numbers of African-Americans, Azoreans, and Cape Verdeans, whose communities still flourish in New Bedford today. New Bedford’s role in 19th-century American history was not limited to whaling, however. It was also a major station on the Underground Railroad moving slaves from the South up North and to Canada. Among these fugitives was Frederick Douglass, who lived



Frederick Douglass

FREDERICK DOUGLASS NHS

and worked in the city for three years and was to become a leading anti-slavery orator and author.



Whaleboat being ‘stove’ by a whale

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**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 called “trying out.” Sperm whales were prized for their higher-grade spermaceti oil, used to make

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



COLLECTION, NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

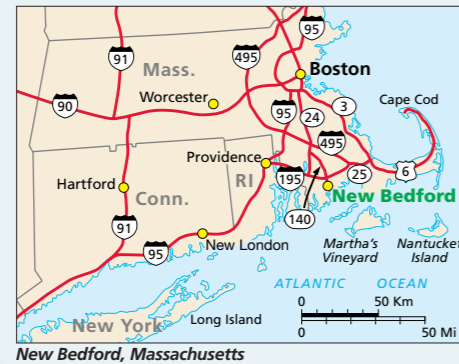
## Visiting the Park

One of the pleasures of visiting New Bedford is to walk its streets and look at its buildings. Most sites described here are within the national historical park. Some are open to the public year-round; others are open seasonally. Most are managed by nonprofit organizations that charge an admission fee. Stop first at the park visitor center to get oriented. Then, using the map at the far right as your guide, tour the park sites, including the waterfront.

For more information contact:  
New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park  
33 William Street  
New Bedford, MA 02740  
508-996-4095  
www.nps.gov/nebe



Centre Street



New Bedford, Massachusetts



Barrow, Alaska

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, contact:  
**Inupiat Heritage Center**  
P.O. Box 749  
Barrow, AK 99723  
907-852-4594  
www.nps.gov/inup

## Park Guide



Park Visitor Center

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

Seamen's Bethel, across from the Whaling Museum, has served mariners since 1832 as a house of worship. Before he shipped out on the whaler *Acushnet* in 1841, Herman Melville attended services there. 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 operating U.S. Custom House still stands at the corner of William and North Second streets. Here seafarers from around the world register their papers, captains pay duties and tariffs, and other transactions take place. This 1836 building features a granite façade and four Doric columns. It was designed by Robert Mills, architect of the Washington Monument.

Bricks from a demolished textile mill were used to build the **Wharfinger Building** as a Works Progress Administration project in 1934. For many years scallop and fish auctions were held here each morning. Now the building serves as the city's waterfront visitor center.



Seamen's Bethel



Seamen's Bethel



U.S. Custom House



Wharfinger Building



New Bedford Whaling Museum



Seamen were known to set their instruments by this sundial.  
JOHN ROBSON



Seamen's Bethel (left) and Mariners' Home



Rodman Candleworks



Double Bank Building



Bourne Counting House

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 its administrative offices.



Rotch-Jones-Duff House Interior

**New Bedford Whaling Museum**, 18 Johnny Cake Hill, holds the world's largest and most outstanding American whaling and maritime history collections. Highlights include the *Lagoda*, an 89-foot, half-scale replica of a square-rigged whaling bark, and rare whale skeletons. The museum has extensive collections of whaling implements, scrimshaw, photographs, logbooks, and paintings of the region and whaling industry by major American artists like Albert Bierstadt and William Bradford. Also on display are decorative art objects and art glass made in New Bedford. Fee.

**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. Set on a city block of urban gardens, the property includes a historic wooden pergola, formal boxwood rose parterre garden, and wildflower walk. Fee.

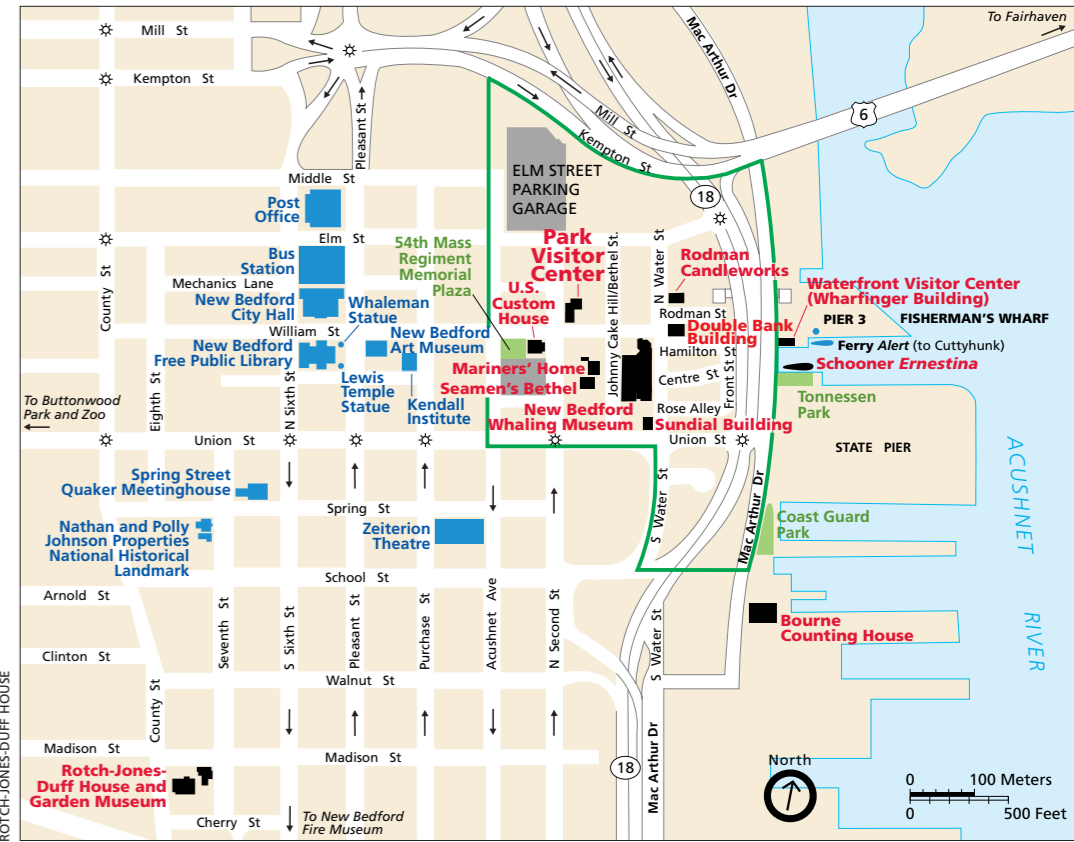


Rotch-Jones-Duff House Interior

**Mariners' Home**, 15 Johnny Cake Hill, was built in 1787 as the mansion of William Rotch, Jr. It has offered lodging to visiting mariners for more than 100 years. It was donated to the New Bedford Port Society in 1851. Not open to the public.

**Rodman Candleworks**, Water Street, produced some of the first sperm-candle candles, known for being dripless, smokeless, and long-lasting. The structure was built in 1810 of granite rubble covered with stucco and then scored to look like blocks of granite. The candleworks closed in 1890. The building was used for various purposes before being rehabilitated. Commercial establishment.

## Park Map



As its name implies, the **Double Bank Building** once housed two banks on Water Street, the "Wall Street of New Bedford." Now the building serves as the headquarters of the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE).

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, Mass., in 1894. Originally a Grand Banks fishing vessel, it has served as an Arctic explorer, World War II supply ship, and trans-Atlantic packet carrying Cape Verdean immigrants to the United States. Now it 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.

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- Historical park boundary
- Park site
- Traffic Light
- Other site
- Parking area



Ernestina