



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

Herman Melville's New Bedford



left: 1851 map of New Bedford

I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world.

The pressing claims of my business . . . confined me to my acc't books at home through most of the day to avoid the distracting inroads on attention at the c'g [counting] house. Returned there with my books toward ev'g but returned home again soon after dark on account of the storm of snow which came on about noon.

On January 3, 1841, two days after New Bedford whaling merchant Samuel Rodman wrote this entry in his diary, the 359-ton square-rigged whaleship *Acushnet* left New Bedford harbor bound for the Pacific Ocean. This scene had played out many times before in the seaport, but this particular vessel had among its crew the twenty-one-year-old Herman Melville. Like many of his contemporaries, Melville was looking for adventure. Bored with the prospects of a mundane life and still reeling from his father's death, Melville sought to pacify his "reckless and rebellious side" by joining a whaling crew. From his experience arose one of the greatest American novels ever written—*Moby-Dick*.

It is not surprising that Melville chose New Bedford as his point of embarkation. In 1841, the port was the whaling capital of the world, and its waterfront teemed with sailors and tradespeople drawn from every corner of the globe by the whaling industry's promise of prosperity and adventure. By 1823, New Bedford had surpassed Nantucket in the number of whaling ships leaving its harbor each year and by 1840, with the arrival of the railroad and easier access to markets in New York and Boston, the domination of the port was decisive.



The Whalemens' Shipping Paper from the *Acushnet*. Herman Melville's entry is 25.

Herman Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* at his home in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, a decade after his own whaling adventure. This brochure highlights some of the places that may have inspired Melville to write so vividly about the landscape of New Bedford in Chapters 2 through 13 of the novel. Though some buildings have long since disappeared, the city of New Bedford retains some of the landmarks and a good deal of the character that sparked Melville's imagination.



Photo of Herman Melville by Rodney Dewey, 1861

1 Custom House

Constructed on the corner of North Second and William Streets in 1836, the United States Custom House was a stop for many seamen during the mid-nineteenth century. It is the oldest continuously operating custom house in the United States. Designed by Robert Mills, the architect of the Washington Monument in the nation's capital, the custom house is the central repository for all maritime records in the port of New Bedford, which in 1841 included the towns from Wareham to Westport. Captains seeking to clear their ships and cargo through customs and seamen wishing to take out protection papers walked up the granite stairs to transact their business with custom agents.

Melville may have registered at this custom house before setting out on



U.S. Custom House, ca. 1860

his only whaling voyage. His name is among the crew list of the whaleship *Acushnet*, registered in Fairhaven. The ship's crew list includes this note: "Herman Melville: birthplace, New York; age, 21; height, 5 feet 9 1/2 inches; complexion, dark; hair, brown". Melville received an \$84 advance against his future earnings to equip himself with "necessaries" for a four-year voyage.

2 Benjamin Rodman House



Benjamin Rodman house, ca. 1870

Nowhere in all America will you find more patrician-like houses; parks and gardens more opulent, than in New Bedford. Yes; 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*

Standing in its original location, the Benjamin Rodman house is a fine example of the kind of house Melville was moved to describe. While many prosperous whaling merchants had moved away from the waterfront district by 1841, Rodman and his brother-in-law, Andrew Robeson, stayed and built stately homes and gardens. With its balustrade and iron fence, the Federal-style Rodman house might have inspired Melville's proclamation, "Go and gaze upon the iron emblematical harpoons round yonder lofty mansion." The original owner of the house, Benjamin Rodman, was one of the founders of the New Bedford Institution for Savings, now the Visitor Center of New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park.

3 Seamen's Bethel

In this same New Bedford there stands a Whaleman's Chapel, and few are the moody fishermen, shortly bound for the Indian Ocean or Pacific, who fail to make a Sunday visit to the spot. I am sure that I did not.

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*



Seamen's Bethel, ca. 1860

Built in 1832 by the New Bedford Port Society for the Moral Improvement of Seamen, the Seamen's Bethel has served the community as "a place of meeting for religious purposes for those who are temporary residents in our town and whose business it is to follow the sea." In the nineteenth century, the Bethel provided an alternative setting for religious services that were originally given by Bethel chaplains on the decks of ships in port. The Seamen's Bethel offered a moral oasis amidst the many boardinghouses and taverns located in the waterfront area. Concerned citizens hoped that the



Johnny Cake Hill, looking north from Union Street, 1907

Bethel would be a haven "free from the demoralizing influences to which sailors are too often exposed" and would keep the young, impressionable whalers away from the "licentious literature of the tap room and brothel." In the Bethel, seamen could "listen to the blessed gospel without money and without price."

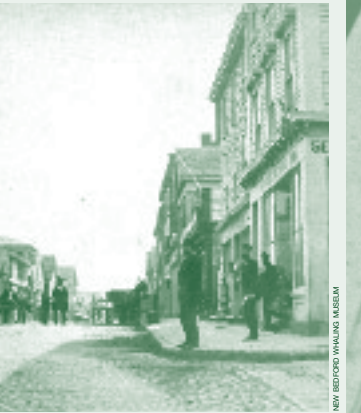
Melville, it is believed, visited the Seamen's Bethel, immortalized in *Moby-Dick* as the Whalemens' Chapel, during his brief time in New Bedford before sailing on the *Acushnet*. In the novel, from a bow-shaped pulpit, Father Mapple delivers his fiery sermon on Jonah and the Whale to a small, fearful congregation—Ishmael, Melville's protagonist, among them.

4 Water and Union Streets

Besides the Feegeians, Tongataboosans, Erromangoans, Pannangians, and the Brighggians, and, besides the wild specimens of the whaling-craft which unheeded reel about the streets . . . There weekly arrive in this town scores of green Vermonters and New Hampshire men, all athirst for gain and glory in the fishery.

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

Commonly referred to as the "Wall Street of New Bedford," Water Street was the hub of the whaling port in 1840. By midcentury, four of the city's five banks and all six of the principal insurance companies were located on North Water Street, between Union and Rodman Streets. Boardinghouses, candleworks, and other maritime



North Water Street, looking south, ca. 1870

businesses also dotted the landscape and undoubtedly formed the backdrop for Melville's observations of the busy scene in Chapter 6 of *Moby-Dick*, "The Street." In 1840, a mix of working men, as well as New Bedford's elite walked along Water Street, creating a well-worn path from the wharves to the counting house to a myriad of financial, cultural and social institutions.



Advertisements from 1849 city directory



A whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard.

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

In New Bedford, fathers, they say, give whales for dowers to their daughters . . .

Like Melville, many young men arrived in New Bedford daily. Coming by steamship, train, and stagecoach, it was not uncommon for a young man to leave the family farm one day and be off on a whaling voyage the next. Not all new arrivals sought the adventure of a whaling voyage, however. Some instead sought to make a living on the wharves of New Bedford working as caulkers, coopers, blacksmiths, rope or sailmakers, outfitters, or stevedores.

Although no boardinghouse called "Spouter-Inn" is listed in New Bedford directories between 1835 and 1845, there is no doubt Melville used existing inns and boarding houses as Ishmael's "spot for cheap lodging" while in New Bedford.

Choices for an overnight stay between the late 1830s and 1850 included several kinds of accommodations—some where a typical seaman could spend a brief overnight before shipping out,



Advertisements from 1849 city directory



Citizen's National Bank, corner of North Water and Centre Streets, ca. 1890

others where one could reside for longer periods. According to the 1836 city directory, Lydia Doubleday ran the Mansion House at 87 Union Street, providing higher-end accommodations for the elite who came to New Bedford. During the same period, just down the street closer to the waterfront, in the lower Howland Street section, James and Mary Dyer took in "destitute" Sandwich Islanders. Between the years of 1838 and 1849, while her husband was away at sea, Charlotte Dunbar took in men of color on a regular basis at her home at 66 South Second Street.

Other women listed as boardinghouse keepers in the 1841 city directory include Hannah Huttleston, Ann Winslow, and Esther Albertson. Many of the establishments were temperance boardinghouses, such as the one located at 94 North Water Street in 1838 and run by William Powell, a man of color and blacksmith by trade. These inns were established as an alternative to the many brothels and taverns located in the waterfront district during this period. Melville's sketch of the "Spouter-Inn," a "dilapidated little wooden house with a swinging sign, standing on a sharp bleak corner, not far from the docks" was probably a composite of the many inns Melville saw while in New Bedford.



5 Water and Centre Streets

Whether the desire was to be a whaler or tradesman, an important place to visit was the Exchange News Room, located at 35 North Water Street. Here, whaling captains, merchants, and general seamen met to get the news of the day, discuss the price of whale oil, assess their recent voyages, and receive letters from ships still at sea. The September 12, 1843, issue of the trade newspaper, *Whalemen's Shipping List*, and *Merchant's Transcript*, lists letter bags that had just arrived at the Exchange News Room from the whaleships *Roscoe* and *George Porter*. Whaling voyages in the mid-nineteenth century could last anywhere from three to five years and mechanisms such as the *Whalemen's Shipping List* and the Exchange News Room provided New Bedford an invaluable connection between those who stayed ashore and those who went to sea.

It is our intention to present to our readers, a weekly report carefully corrected from the latest advices, of every vessel engaged in the Whaling business from ports of the United States together with the prices current of our staple commodities, and interesting items of commercial intelligence. From the ephemeral and fragmentary form in which our shipping news appears in general newspapers and the many thousand seamen engaged therein, we have been led to believe that a paper of this kind would be interesting to ship owners and merchants, parents and

wives of that vast multitude of men who are for years separated from those to whom they are dear.
—First edition of the *Whalemen's Shipping List*, March 17, 1843

Before departing on a voyage, a whaler had to be "fitted out" with clothing and other necessities for the trip. The Water and Centre Streets area offered numerous places to purchase clothing and gear. In 1837, the four-year-old Ladies Branch of the New Bedford Port Society opened an establishment called the Clothing Store for Seamen and Others at 49 North Water Street in order to offer both clothing to visiting seamen at fair prices and respectable employment to the wives and daughters of New Bedford's resident seamen. In addition to operating the store, the women met to sew and knit for the needy sailor and also raised money to help the families of sailors.

6 Water and William Streets



"Double Bank" building, North Water Street, ca. 1870

As its name implies, the Double Bank Building, constructed in 1831 at 60-62 North Water Street, once housed two

banks, the Merchants Bank and the Mechanics Bank ("Mechanic" refers to any trades- person). Immediately north, the Rodman Candleworks, located at 72 North Water Street, was built in 1810. The candleworks, owned by the Rodman family until 1890, was one of the first to produce spermaceti candles (spermaceti oil was found in a "reservoir" in the head of the sperm whale). Known for being dripless, smokeless, and long-lasting, spermaceti candles were expensive and, therefore, only available to the wealthy. Melville, trying to capture the affluence of the city wrote, "They have reservoirs of oil in every house, and every night burn their lengths in spermaceti candles."

The worldwide reach of the New Bedford whaling fleet created a diverse population, a feature of the city into the current day. Through Ishmael, Melville depicted a community of many races and ethnic backgrounds. Wandering about the waterfront on his first night in New Bedford, Ishmael comes across a fairly large congregation of people of color in a part of town "all but deserted." At the time, one of the three black churches in New Bedford was located in the waterfront district where Melville walked, and it may have been the same church in which Frederick Douglass, famed abolitionist and orator, made his first public addresses. "In the summer of 1841," Douglass wrote in his autobiographical *My Bondage and My Freedom*, "Mr. William C. Coffin . . . had heard me speaking to my colored friends, in the little school-house on Second Street . . . where we worshipped."

7 Waterfront (as seen from observation deck on the east side of overpass)

At last, passage paid, and luggage safe, we stood on board the schooner. Hoisting sail, it glided down the

Acushnet River. On one side, New Bedford rose in terraces of streets, their ice-covered trees all glittering in the clear, cold air. Huge hills and mountains of casks on casks were piled upon her wharves, and side by side the world-wandering whale ships lay silent and safely moored at last; while from others came a sound of carpenters and coopers, with blended noises of fires and forges to melt the pitch, all betokening that new cruises were on the start; that one most perilous and long voyage ended, only begins a second; and a second ended, only begins a third, and so on, for ever and for aye.
—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

In 1840-41, New Bedford's whaling industry employed nearly 10,000 people and was capitalized at more than \$12 million. All along the waterfront, maritime-related businesses thrived. Outfitters, shipyards for building and repairing whaling vessels, bakeshops, barrel makers, caulkers, carpenters, sail lofts, ropeworks, and whale oil refineries were active at the water's edge. At the foot of Rodman Street, just north of where the overpass stands today, were the wharves of Parker, Howland, and Hazard. Jutting out into the harbor to the south were the wharves of other wealthy merchants such as Rotch, Taber, and Merrill.

Today, the port of New Bedford is home to the largest commercial fishing fleet on the East Coast and consistently one of the top five ports in terms of dollar value of its catch in the United States. Here, much like Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, people still come seeking adventure, opportunity, and a chance to see "the watery part of the world."

8 Headquarters of Bradford and Fuller, Old South Wharf, Fairhaven

The headquarters of Messrs. Bradford and Fuller, chief owners of the whale-ship *Acushnet*, was located on the Fairhaven side of the



Bark *Helen Mar* at Central Wharf, New Bedford, photograph Stephen F. Adams September 1871.

Acushnet River, on what was then the foot of Center Street. Immediately south was Old South Wharf where the *Acushnet* was berthed. Opposite Old South Wharf (the area now occupied by Kelley's Shipyard) along Water Street stood dwellings that were reported to be boardinghouses. It is quite possible that young Melville would have taken the small ferry, known as the *Crab*, from the New Bedford waterfront across the river to Fairhaven to spend the night before shipping out early the next day.

Continue your voyage through New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park and visit the city's working waterfront. Brochures and information are available at the City of New Bedford Visitor Center on Fisherman's Wharf. The town of

Fairhaven is a short ride across the New Bedford/Fairhaven Bridge on Route 6. Stop at the Fairhaven Visitor Center, located at 43 Center Street. For more information contact the Fairhaven Office of Tourism at (508) 979-4085.

Melville's Enduring Legacy: Exploring His World

The New Bedford Whaling Museum is the world's largest and most extensive museum dedicated to preserving the history of American whaling in the age of sail. The museum's collection and library archives are an enduring testament to the importance of the maritime experience that Melville so eloquently described in *Moby-Dick*. These artifacts, documents, whaling



New Bedford Whaling Museum

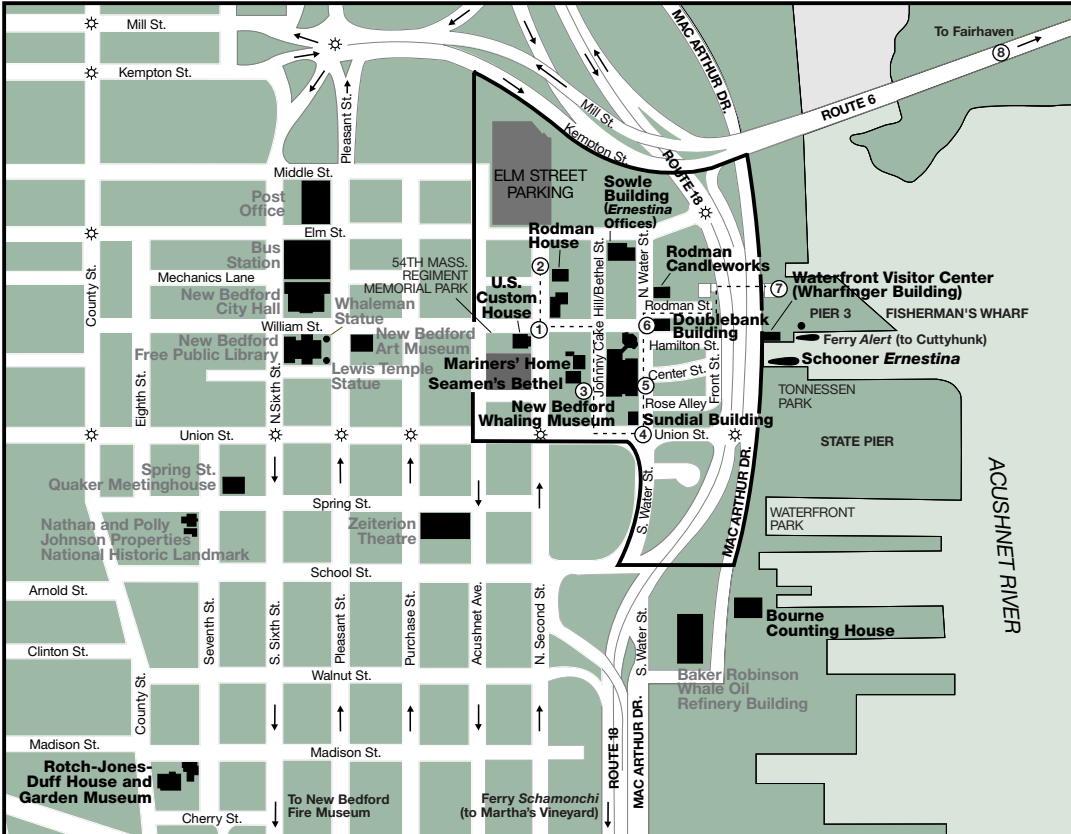
logs, and the art of Melville's era document the culture of his time. Visit the museum to see the crew list that Melville signed, original editions of his major works, and interpretation of his stories in contemporary art as well as the tools of the trade and the decorative scrimshaw of the whaling era.

The museum also hosts many special events connected to Melville during the year. Every January 3rd to 4th, New Bedford residents, Melville scholars, and other lovers of literature and the sea mark the anniversary of Melville's departure on the whaleship *Acushnet* by participating in a 25-hour marathon reading of *Moby-Dick*.



Cenotaph in Seamen's Bethel

Melville's New Bedford Map and Guide



National Park Service Experience Your America

The National Park Service cares for the special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage. Established by Congress on November 12, 1996, New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park is one of many urban parks administered by the National Park Service. The National Park System includes more than 380 natural, historical, cultural, and recreational areas. For additional information, write to New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, 33 William Street New Bedford, Massachusetts 02740 or call (508) 996-4095. You can also visit the Park's website at www.nps.gov/nebe.

