

*the city that lit the world*  
*by joe flanagan*

REKINDLING A LEGACY AT N



NEW BEDFORD WHALING NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

*Restless, bored, and grieving the recent death of his father, the young man watched the shoreline drift slowly past from the deck of a departing ship. He was engaged in a rite of passage and a ritual of self-discovery that was probably not uncommon in that winter of 1841. Recalling the scene later, he would write, “On one side, [the town] 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 . . .”*

BELOW: NEW BEDFORD'S CITY HALL. ALL PHOTOS DAVID ANDREWS/NPS EXCEPT AS NOTED





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**ERMAN MELVILLE WAS 21, A GREEN CREWMAN ON THE** 359-ton *Acushnet*, bound for the Pacific in pursuit of the sea's most coveted prize. New Bedford, the town he describes in the immortal *Moby Dick*, was growing rich on whale oil, evident in its teeming waterfront, its grand houses, and its thriving financial institutions. Whaling money founded railroads, textile mills, and land corporations. It transformed New Bedford into an exotic, cosmopolitan city, its streets crowded with people from Cape Verde, the Azores, Portugal, and other distant ports. The New Bedford of Melville's time exuded the vitality of a place that had urgent business in the world, that had exceeded its humble beginnings. A hundred years later, New Bedford had the desperate and hollowed-out look of so many New England towns that hit their prime in the 19th century, then were left behind by advancing technology and economic change. The glory days of whaling were a distant memory. What was not visible, looking down on the decay from the elevated interstate that cuts through the city, was the struggle to preserve a heritage. It was a struggle fought locally, against sometimes high odds, in the face of indifference and the shadow of urban renewal.

**LEFT: BOATS CROWD THE DOCKS OF NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS.**

**OPPOSITE, BELOW RIGHT: THE DOUBLE BANK BUILDING, ITS FACADE GRACED WITH TWO ENTRIES. BELOW CENTER: LOOKING DOWN COBBLESTONE STREETS. BELOW LEFT: CHIEF OF VISITOR SERVICES JENNIFER GONSALVES.**

The establishment of New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park in 1996 was recognition of the national importance of the whaling story and, in many ways, the crowning achievement of decades of hard work and faith. Comprised of 13 blocks of the historic waterfront, the park includes more than 70 structures, many of which are privately owned or managed by local authorities. It is a nontraditional model of a national park, whose viability depends on partnerships. In fact, the legislation that established it demands collaboration. Says Superintendent Celeste Bernardo, “We tend to look at partners as external to the park, but in this case they *are* the park.”

It is not a case of the National Park Service swooping in and rescuing history. Local organizations had been telling the whaling story for a long time. Advocates had been lobbying for preservation for years, and a nonprofit had quietly acquired scores of historic properties. New Bedford already had perhaps the most extensive whaling museum in the country. If anything, the park is a convergence of vision and experience, an arrangement where each party contributes its strengths to give voice to the city’s heritage.

## Lighting the World

Whaling began as a serious enterprise on Nantucket in the 18th century. When Joseph Rotch, a wealthy whaling merchant, bought land near what is now New Bedford in 1765, he noted the depth of the harbor, an asset the island lacked. Whaling ships traveled far for their quarry. They were processing plants designed to strip the whale of its blubber and extract the precious oil by “trying out,” or heating the fat over fire. The oil was then stored in casks. For these reasons, whaling ships tended to be large, so when Rotch discovered New Bedford’s harbor, he began making plans to move his business there. Others followed, and in time, New Bedford was a boomtown, where every kind of business needed to keep the fleet afloat was in swing: bakers, oil refineries, caulkers, rope makers, carpenters, sail makers, riggers, shipwrights, marine insurance companies, and banks.

The most popular fuel of its day, whale oil was in demand around the world, and the city supplied a large share of it. It was used in everything from lamps to lighthouses, and it was also the finest mechanical lubricant available. By the end of the 1820s, whaling was almost exclusively an American industry, and New Bedford had surpassed Nantucket as the leader. The city’s population increased more than sevenfold between 1800 and 1830. By 1845 it had doubled yet again. In time, it would become known as “the city that lit the world.”

Exploring the blocks within the park boundaries, visitors experience the urban feel of the old whaling capital, imagining its noise, its frenetic pace. The cobblestone streets are lined with wood frame clapboard houses and red brick structures frequently interrupted by grander buildings that indicate power and perma-



*Visitors experience the urban feel of the old whaling capital, imagining its noise, its frenetic pace. The cobblestone streets are lined with wood frame clapboard houses and red brick structures frequently interrupted by grander buildings that indicate power and permanence.*

nence. But looking at the park’s wayside exhibits and other interpretive media, it is soon apparent that a lot more than whaling was going on here. The industry’s broader economic, social, and environmental impacts are among the themes explored by NPS and its partners via the park’s historic sites and educational programming.

In part because of ship contact with distant cultures and in part because of the influence of Quakers, New Bedford earned a repu-





**LEFT: A MURAL IN DOWNTOWN.**

tation as an open, tolerant city. Crews that signed on to whaling ships in the Azores, West Indies, and other places settled here and turned New Bedford into one of the most ethnically diverse cities of its day. Whaling captains who docked in the South often took on fugitive slaves, hiring them as part of the crew or bringing them back to New Bedford. Abolition got an early hold here. The city was a stop on the Underground Railroad and for three years Frederick Douglass made it his home.

Hunting and processing whales gave birth to highly specialized technologies. Whale oil and baleen—also known as whalebone—had an impact on everything from engineering to fashion. The oil was used in soap and candles; the stiff yet flexible bone was used for corset stays, carriages springs, hat brims, and buggy whips. As the whales dwindled, crews traveled greater distances in search of them, encountering foreign cultures that were often profoundly

## Rescuing the Waterfront

Recounting the history of preservation in New Bedford, the national park's general management plan says that "by the mid-20th century, the waterfront district's decline was unmistakable." This period saw the first stirrings of a preservation effort at the community level. Jean Bennett, who, along with her husband Arthur, would become very much involved, recalls how a great deal of the historic fabric still remained. "It was never destroyed because we were too poor to build something new over it."

In the early '60s, with large parts of the historic city being demolished in the name of urban renewal, advocates formed the Waterfront Historic Area League, or WHALE, a nonprofit that acquires old buildings in order to save them. They are then sold under the condition that they will be preserved, with the proceeds going to a fund to acquire more buildings.

There were successes and losses. Government officials, devel-

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changed by the Yankee mariners and the practices, materials, and diseases they introduced. Voyages routinely lasted as long as four years, and separation from home and family gave rise to new social conventions both aboard ship and on shore.

A handful of sites conveys the breadth and richness of this story. The visitor center, an 1853 Greek Revival building, was originally a bank whose heyday was at the height of the whaling era. A short distance away is the New Bedford Whaling Museum, and the Seamen's Bethel, a chapel built in 1832 as a sanctuary from the taprooms and brothels. It is believed to be the inspiration for a scene in *Moby Dick* in which Father Mapple delivers his sermon on Jonah and the whale to a spellbound congregation that includes the novel's protagonist, Ishmael.

On the ridge above town is the Rotch-Jones-Duff House and Garden Museum, exemplifying the style and taste of the wealthy whaling merchants of the time. From there down to the waterfront are a host of other historic sites as well. Some are specifically mentioned in the legislation that created the park; all share the goal of preserving the whaling legacy and telling its story.

**ABOVE: A FEW SCENES FROM NEW BEDFORD'S MANY FESTIVALS CELEBRATING LOCAL HERITAGE.**

opers, and business owners were not always sympathetic. In the early '70s, the league managed to stop a four-lane highway from slicing through the

center of the historic district. Instead, it went through a traditional Cape Verdean neighborhood near the waterfront. "We lost a whole piece of the city," says Lisa Shugrue, the league's current director. "And we lost a piece of ourselves."

It was during that period that John Bullard, fresh out of MIT with a graduate degree in urban planning, approached the groups with the biggest stake in the waterfront district. Bullard had done his thesis on a theoretical revitalization of New Bedford, which he presented as a blueprint. The league, the museum, and the local merchants were all agreeable.

The preservation community also had a friend in Mayor John Markey, who was generous with federal community development funds available during the Nixon administration. This money funded a tremendous amount of work in the waterfront district, including burying power lines, replacing deteriorating blacktop with cobblestone, planting trees, and installing period street lamps.

ABOVE CENTER AND RIGHT NEW BEDFORD WHALING NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

BELOW, RIGHT: VIEWS FROM THE WORKING WATERFRONT.

But the idea took some selling. Bullard recalls how the mayor later confessed his initial skepticism: “Here’s a young guy with a beard coming in and saying that this most blighted section of the city ought to be fixed up.”

The area was designated a state historic district, which offered some protection. Boundaries were adopted that today delineate the national park.

## An Urban National Park

The superintendent’s office was in the back of the ornate bank, later donated by WHALE. “We had two employees and a laptop,” says John Piltzecker, who, as first superintendent, guided the park through its early years. “The community had very high expectations. The Park Service just sent us there and said, ‘go do it.’”

Chief of Visitor Services Jennifer Gonsalves recalls that initial phase of getting acquainted: “I think some didn’t quite understand what the Park Service was doing here in New Bedford. There were folks that thought it would be an instant cash cow.” For others, it seemed too good to be true. After the failed attempt to earn designation as a state park—and a train link to Boston that never materialized—residents were skeptical. Says Gonsalves, “People said, ‘Gee, we missed the boat on everything. Now what’s this thing? We don’t even know what this means.’ It was perceived as the unattainable.” She spent many nights in church basements and community centers explaining what it meant to have a national park created in the city.

Coming into a place where other organizations had long been fighting the good fight had its delicate aspects. “The whaling museum predates the park by about 90 years,” Gonsalves says, “the Rotch-Jones-Duff House by 25 years, the New Bedford Port

*In the old days it was said that the smell of whale oil was the smell of money.*

*Today, wealth rides the scent of diesel fuel and shellfish. The value of New Bedford’s catch is higher than that of any port in the United States.*



ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT NEW BEDFORD WHALING NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

In the 1980s, the state’s distressed economy underwent a dramatic recovery when a proliferation of high tech companies set up business on Boston’s outskirts. They ushered in what came to be called the “Massachusetts Miracle.” Suddenly, there was more money for preservation. A new state initiative, Heritage State Parks, got started. It looked like New Bedford was going to become one when the miracle collapsed.

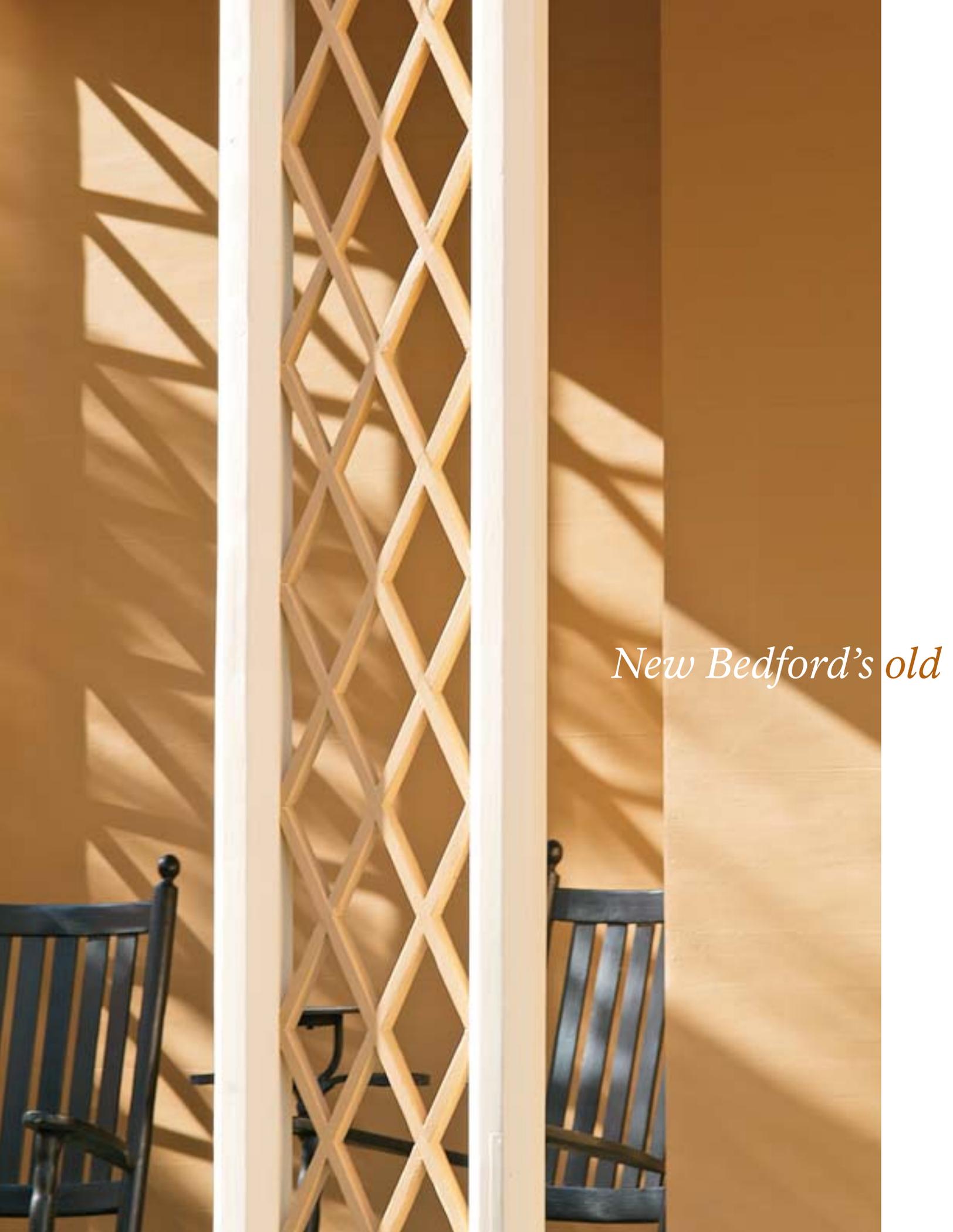
Supporters—who had prepared the documentation they needed to establish the area’s historic significance—decided to send representatives to Washington. They lobbied senators Ted Kennedy and John Kerry and Representative Barney Frank. But now the idea was inclusion in the National Park System.

New Bedford’s case was compelling. Enough so that the National Park Service agreed to a special resource study to evaluate if the place could become a park and, if so, how it would be interpreted and managed.

Society by 170 years. How do you come in and say, ‘You’ve done a real good job but we’ve got another way to look at this?’” But Gonsalves says the groups understood what was being brought to the table—“a connection to a wider network of special places.”

There were public meetings on the park, what kind of story it would tell, what the visitor experience would be like. The group Partners in the Park got started, an initiative that brings together cultural institutions, city agencies, and community organizations to share their ideas and help shape the interpretive approach. In addition to WHALE and the museum, partners include the privately run Rotch-Jones-Duff House, the schooner *Ernestina* (built in 1894, the oldest surviving vessel of its type and a national historic landmark), the New Bedford Historical Commission, and the New Bedford Historical Society, an organization devoted to researching the role people of color played in the city’s history. It has cosponsored (with the National Park Service) research on maritime connections to the Underground Railroad as well as an oral history project.



A photograph of a wooden lattice screen between two dark wooden chairs, with shadows cast on a tan wall. The lattice is made of light-colored wood and is set within a white frame. The chairs are dark-stained wood with vertical slats. The background is a warm, tan-colored wall with shadows cast by the lattice and chairs.

*New Bedford's old*

OPPOSITE, BELOW LEFT: SWEETNESS AND LIGHT IN AN HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD A SHORT STROLL FROM THE PARK.

A unique aspect of the park is its affiliation with a place thousands of miles away. The Inupiat Heritage Center of Barrow, Alaska, is also a partner, due to the intimate connection between the city's whaling crews and the native Inupiaq.

Whalers made more than 2,000 voyages to the western Arctic in the 19th century. Ice-bound crews stayed for long periods among the Inupiaq, and their presence had an enormous impact. Some of today's Inupiaq trace their lineage to them. Designated an "affiliated area," the center has a special status whereby the National Park Service contributes to its management and interpretation, recognizing Native Alaskans' role in whaling.

The park also sponsors training programs for teachers, has sent staff to the Azores and Alaska to work on exhibits, and maintains a dialogue with New Bedford's diverse ethnic groups.

Two chapters in New Bedford's story that had gotten little attention are addressed in walking tours and accompanying brochures: Herman Melville and the Underground Railroad. Today, visitors can see the places that figured prominently in American literature and civil rights. Each year, there is a 24-hour marathon reading of *Moby Dick* in the museum. Passages are read in Portuguese, Cape Verdean Creole, Inupiaq, and other languages associated with whaling. For the scene that includes Father Mapple's sermon, the reading moves to the pulpit at the Seamen's Bethel.

unloaded directly into refrigerated trucks and taken to restaurants and distributors up and down the eastern seaboard.

The discovery of petroleum in Pennsylvania in 1859 spelled the end of whale oil's usefulness and started the industry's long decline. By the end of the 19th century, whaling was, for all practical purposes, a thing of the past. The future was in textiles. The city industrialized, and factories went up, buildings whose vacant hulks are still there today. Textile manufacturing moved elsewhere in the 1920s. The fishing industry took its place as the economic engine that drives New Bedford today.

John Piltzecker recalls that when the park and its partners were soliciting ideas on how to tell the story, he found that the fishing community tended to feel left out. Says Jennifer Gonsalves, "It's seen as dirty, separated from the rest of the city by the highway."

This was addressed by the "working waterfront" part of the interpretive plan. Visitors follow a self-guided tour of the docks with a brochure that gives an inside look at a modern fishing industry, based primarily on shellfish, which is in great demand.

On the waterfront the old mixes with the new. The warehouses, icehouses, and vessels are side-by-side with reminders of the city's maritime history. Wayside exhibits show where immigrants took their first steps in America, where casks of whale oil piled high once covered the waterfront.

*streets are a remarkable monument to an era, made more remarkable still by the process that made it possible to walk down them today and disappear fully into the past.*



Touring the park, visitors encounter the elevated four-lane highway that emphatically announces that you are leaving the past and entering the current-day city. From a pedestrian walkway that goes over the highway, the riggings of dozens of boats come into view. Beyond is the grey, flat horizon of Buzzard's Bay and the way out to sea. This is the scene of yet another renaissance for New Bedford: its highly successful commercial fishing industry. In the old days it was said that the smell of whale oil was the smell of money. Today, wealth rides the scent of diesel fuel and shellfish. The value of New Bedford's catch is higher than that of any port in the United States. Scallops, flounder, cod, and haddock are

At the Wharfinger Building, where daily fish auctions used to be held, the city operates a visitor center. A permanent exhibit, produced in collaboration with the National Park Service, looks at the history and workings of New Bedford's fishing industry. And each year brings the Working Waterfront Festival, a three-day event that includes dance, food, music, tours, oral histories, and demonstrations.

**ABOVE RIGHT: THE HISTORIC ROTCH-JONES-DUFF HOUSE, WHICH BORDERS DOWNTOWN, REFLECTS THE ARCHITECTURAL RICHNESS OF MANY NEARBY RESIDENCES.**

ABOVE RIGHT NEW BEDFORD WHALING NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

## A Course for the Future

As the park's tenth anniversary approaches, it looks to the future with optimism—and a plan to build on what's been done so far. Jennifer Gonsalves stands on the sidewalk outside the visitor center, pointing to a vacant three-story brick structure that dates back to 1877. The Corson building, which housed a succession of maritime-related businesses, is considered critical to the park's historic fabric. When it caught fire in 1997, it was given up as a total loss. The league acquired and donated it. Now the Park Service will spend \$6 million converting it into the park's education center.

Gonsalves, who grew up in New Bedford, offers some perspective. "I remember pre-park," she says. "And I can tell you that

chapters of *Moby Dick*? They happened here. Right here."

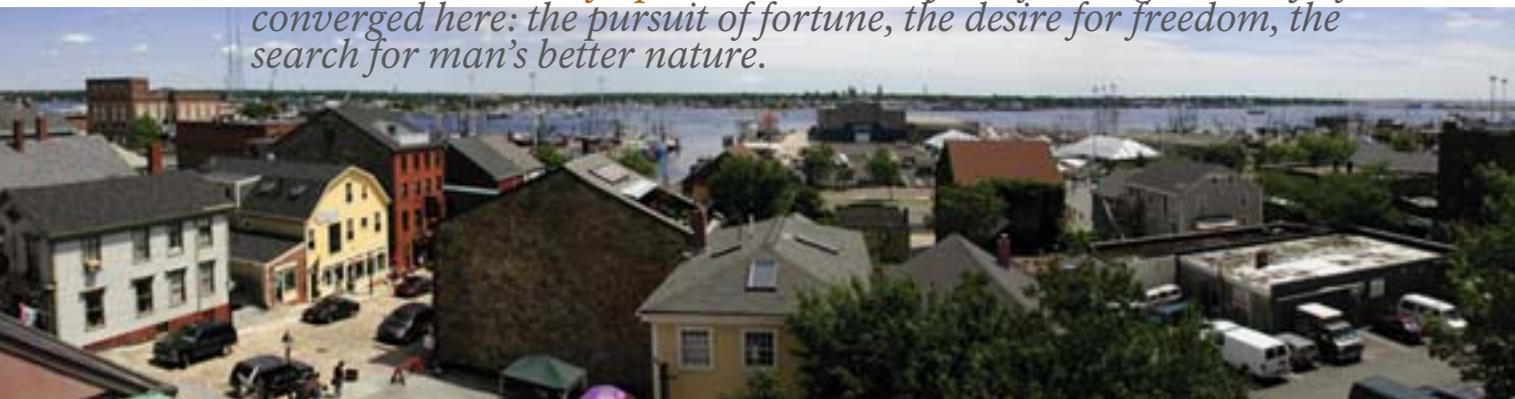
In the whaling museum's small auditorium, "The City That Lit the World," a short film produced by the Park Service, is shown several times a day, prefaced by a short presentation by a ranger. At its conclusion, visitors wander through the museum, exploring what now seems a distant culture, built entirely from the ocean and the giants that swam in it. From there they go out into the streets, which are themselves artifacts. It is often a new experience for visitors who have preconceived notions of what a national park is, who occasionally ask, "Where is the green?"

Even when it is out of sight, the sea can be sensed over the elevated highway, over the ancient rooftops. It is like history itself, telling the story of what converged here: the pursuit of fortune, the desire for freedom, the search for man's better nature.

Courage, altruism, and ingenuity. New Bedford's old streets are a remarkable monument to an era, made more remarkable still by the process that makes it possible to walk down them today and disappear fully into the past.

For more information, contact New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, 33 William Street, New Bedford, MA 02740, (508) 996-4095, or visit [www.nps.gov/nebe](http://www.nps.gov/nebe).

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what the Park Service has done for this community is bring everybody to the table. Growing up here, I did the requisite fourth grade visit and I don't remember ever really feeling a sense of how big the whaling story was."

About the future education center, she says, "That's going to be the place where we tell kids that Frederick Douglass came to New Bedford. That's going to be the place where we read the first ten chapters of *Moby Dick*. We can tell them, 'You know the first ten

**ABOVE: LOOKING DOWN ON THE HEART OF THE PARK, THE SEA BEYOND. RIGHT: CITY HALL.**

