

= New Bedford Historic District =

The New Bedford Historic District is a National Historic Landmark District in New Bedford , Massachusetts , United States , west of the community 's waterfront . During the 19th century , when the city was the center of the American whaling industry , this was its downtown . After its decline in the early and mid @-@ 20th century , through the efforts of local activist groups the district has since been preserved and restored to appear much as it was during that period .

Most of its buildings were erected between 1790 and 1855 by Russell Warren and other builders working in the Federal and Greek Revival architectural styles . Many of them reflect the legacy of whaling in the city 's development . The district was designated a National Historic Landmark (NHL) and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1966 . Later it was recognized as a local historic district and protected by local zoning . One building within it , the U.S. Customhouse , is the oldest such facility currently in use and has been independently recognized as an NHL . Since 1996 the district has also been a part of New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park .

= = Geography = =

The district is bounded by Front Street on the east , Elm Street on the north , Acushnet Avenue and the Central New Bedford Historic District on the west , and Commercial Street on the south . This area includes 11 city blocks and part of a twelfth . On these 19 @.@ 6 acres (7 @.@ 9 ha) are 20 buildings , mostly historic but with some modern intrusions , mainly parking lots , a gas station and newer additions to the New Bedford Whaling Museum . Cobblestone paving and gas lamps have been added since the historic district was designated , in order to recreate the neighborhood 's 19th @-@ century appearance . The majority of the buildings are commercial in design and use , but there are some houses , and some mixed @-@ use structures .

Just east of the district is the John F. Kennedy Expressway (MA 18) , a limited @-@ access highway which has become a barrier between the district and the neighboring waterfront , is still in use . Local preservationists have supported a plan to redesign the highway and restore access to the waterfront that spurred the area 's original development . The city received a \$ 16 @.@ 3 million grant to make this possible .

= = History = =

= = = Rise as whaling center = = =

New Bedford 's potential as a whaling port was seen by Joseph Rotch , who moved to the recently settled area in 1765 . He and Joseph Russell , a local landowner who is generally regarded as the city 's founder , saw that it had a deep harbor that could receive seagoing vessels at docks . Nantucket , then the center of the American whaling industry , did not . Rotch and Russell attracted shipbuilders to the area , and soon one of their ships , the Dartmouth , sailed from the city 's docks . In 1767 , it carried the first load of New Bedford whale oil to London . By the time of the Revolution , there were 50 ships in the local fleet .

In 1778 , the British Army burned the city in retaliation for the acts of local privateers . The fire destroyed 34 ships , 76 shops , 26 storehouses and 11 homes . After independence , the city concentrated on rebuilding its major industry , and in 1791 , the Rebecca set sail , becoming the first American whaler to harvest oil from the Pacific . Two decades later , the War of 1812 again took a toll on the industry , which recovered again and by 1823 , New Bedford 's fleet equalled Nantucket 's in tonnage . Four years later the city 's whaling industry had surpassed the island 's in barrels produced .

As the city prospered in the following years , much of the historic district was built . In the 1830s , Robert Mills designed the U.S. Customhouse , where whaling captains filed necessary paperwork and paid their tariffs and duties . Joseph Rotch 's grandson William , by then a wealthy man , built

his mansion , now the Rotch @-@ Jones @-@ Duff House and Garden Museum , further inland . The Seamen 's Bethel , built in 1832 , became the traditional spot for sailors ' religious services before departing for the deep oceans , such as the one described in Herman Melville 's classic 1851 novel Moby @-@ Dick , which begins in New Bedford .

By 1840 , New Bedford , connected to the growing railroad network , had displaced Nantucket as the country 's top whaling port . The streets grew busier and the houses grander . Early in Moby @-@ Dick , Melville , who had lived there a decade earlier , describes the city at the height of its prosperity :

But think not that this famous town has only harpooneers , cannibals , and bumpkins to show her visitors . Not at all . Still New Bedford is a queer place . Had it not been for us whalers , that tract of land would this day perhaps have been in as howling condition as the coast of Labrador . As it is , parts of her back country are enough to frighten one , they look so bony . The town itself is perhaps the dearest place to live in , in all New England . It is a land of oil , true enough : but not like Canaan ; a land , also , of corn and wine . The streets do not run with milk ; nor in the spring @-@ time do they pave them with fresh eggs . Yet , in spite of this , nowhere in all America will you find more patrician @-@ like houses ; parks and gardens more opulent , than in New Bedford . Whence came they ? how planted upon this once scraggy scoria of a country ? ... Go and gaze upon the iron emblematical harpoons round yonder lofty mansion , and your question will be answered . 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 . Can Herr Alexander perform a feat like that ?

In New Bedford , fathers , they say , give whales for dowers to their daughters , and portion off their nieces with a few porpoises a @-@ piece . You must go to New Bedford to see a brilliant wedding ; for , they say , they have reservoirs of oil in every house , and every night recklessly burn their lengths in spermaceti candles .

In summer time , the town is sweet to see ; full of fine maples ? long avenues of green and gold . And in August , high in air , the beautiful and bountiful horse @-@ chestnuts , candelabra @-@ wise , proffer the passer @-@ by their tapering upright cones of congregated blossoms . So omnipotent is art ; which in many a district of New Bedford has superinduced bright terraces of flowers upon the barren refuse rocks thrown aside at creation ? s final day .

The New Bedford Institute for Savings (NBIS) , now used as the National Park Service 's visitors ' center , was built in 1853 .

= = = Decline and historic preservation era = = =

The whaling industry peaked in 1857 , when New Bedford accounted for half the U.S. fleet . Growing competition from the new petroleum industry , and the impact of the Civil War , ensured that it would not recover as it had in the past . The Bethel was rebuilt after an 1867 fire , with a new exterior and an added tower . The NBIS building became a local courthouse , and the center of commercial activity in New Bedford moved west , where it has remained , as textiles became the city 's dominant industry . The whaling museum was established in one of the old buildings in 1907 . But ships lost at sea were not replaced as they had been before , and in 1927 , the John R. Mantra made the last whaling voyage from the city and the last in American history .

Some of the old whaling buildings were torn down to make way for new construction in the 20th century , or deteriorated . But the customs house remained in use , as did many of the buildings in its neighborhood . In the mid @-@ 1950s director John Huston came to town with Gregory Peck to film a scene from his adaptation of Moby @-@ Dick in front of the Seamen 's Bethel . Although it was the only scene in the film actually shot in the city , it sparked a resurgence of tourist interest when it was released .

Citizens of New Bedford became interested in preserving and protecting the remnants of the city 's whaling past . They formed the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE) in 1962 . In 1966 , the waterfront area was among the earliest National Historic Landmarks designated by the Secretary of the Interior . Five years later , in 1971 , WHALE succeeded in getting today 's historic district

designated as the Bedford Landing Waterfront Historic District . The city later enacted zoning regulations to preserve its character .

Thirty years later , Congress passed legislation creating New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park , commemorating the city 's past . It included the entire historic district within its boundaries , and the park service chose the old NBIS building as its visitors ' center . In 2008 , WHALE turned over the neighboring Corson Building , built 1875 @-@ 84 , to the Park Service , which it had renovated after a 1997 fire . Plans call for it to be used for educational purposes related to the park , with a 60 @-@ seat theater , archival space , seminar room , and similar features .

= = Significant contributing properties = =

Several of the district 's properties are notable . Two have been added to the National Register in their own right , and one has further been designated a National Historic Landmark .

Mariner 's Home . The oldest building in the district , this Federal style stone structure dates to 1790 . It was originally built as William Rotch 's home , and moved to its present location from William and North Water streets .

Samuel Rodman Candlehouse . This stone (later stucco) structure dates to 1810 . One of the oldest commercial buildings in the district .

Seamen 's Bethel . White clapboard church first built in 1832 and mentioned (as Whalemen 's Chapel) by Melville in Moby @-@ Dick . Redesigned and expanded after 1867 fire .

Mechanics ' Bank and Merchants ' Bank Building . Warren @-@ designed bank building along North Water Street with Ionic columns in facade was first Greek Revival commercial building in district in 1831 .

U.S. Customhouse . Robert Mills @-@ designed Greek Revival public building opened in 1836 . Still in use by U.S. Customs and Border Protection as a port of entry , and has been designated a National Historic Landmark in its own right .

Old Third District Courthouse . Warren @-@ built sandstone Greek Revival building opened in 1853 on opposite corner from Customhouse as New Bedford Institute for Savings . Became a local courthouse in 1896 , later an antiques shop and auto @-@ parts store . Today serves as the National Park Service visitors ' center .

= = Preservation = =

The City of New Bedford maintains the historic character of the district through its zoning , a condition of the state historic @-@ district designation . WHALE has also been active in applying for grants and raising money to restore individual properties within the district .