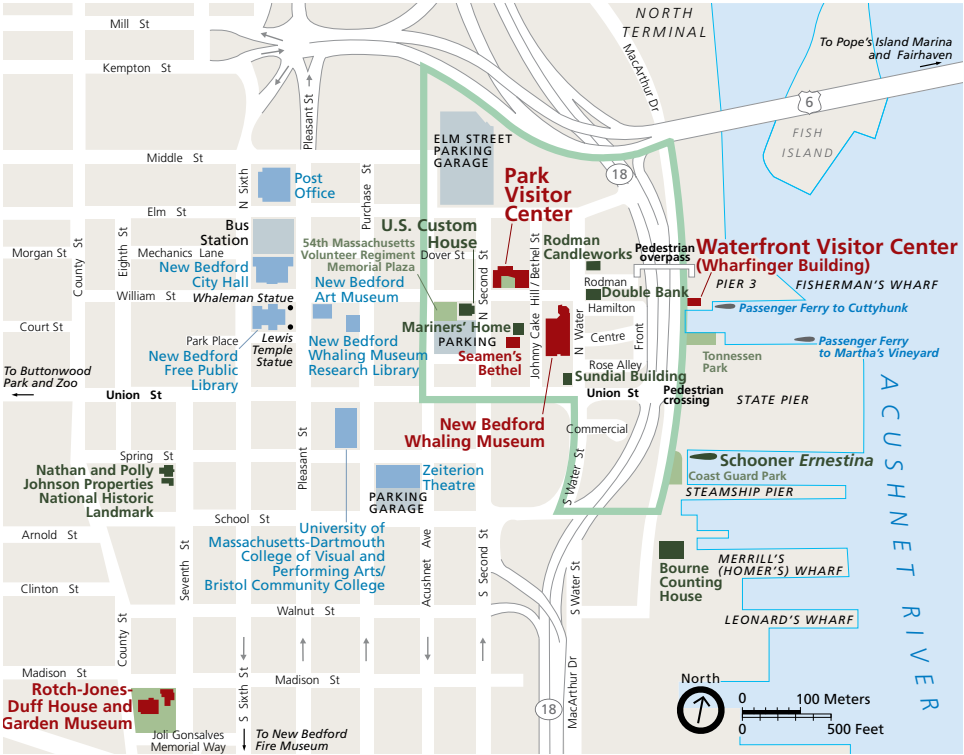


Welcome to a walking tour of a unique New Bedford neighborhood. This diverse area is where the owners and the workers of the whaling fleet and supporting businesses lived and worked in the mid 1800s. While the community that lived here is best known for harvesting and processing whales for the production of oil for lamps and candles that lit the world, the support by many residents for integration and abolitionism provided an even longer lasting light in the hope for freedom. In this neighborhood Polly Johnson baked ginger cookies in her confectioner's shop and home on Seventh Street. Here, gardeners worked for the wealthy Rotch family, laborers sawed wood and cleaned yards, and whaling merchants oversaw their enterprises. Whether you were a captain of a whaler, a blacksmith with recently-obtained freedom, a weary sailor taking a night's rest at a boardinghouse, or a lawyer defending a fugitive slave, this was the neighborhood in which the work was done and the dreams for a better life realized.

Each of the nearly twenty sites highlighted on this tour represent the places, people, and stories that illustrate a neighborhood's diversity—in whaling work, in integration, and in abolitionism. Plan to take about an hour to stroll through this historic neighborhood. The map on the centerfold of this walking tour guide provides an orientation to the sites, which you may visit in any order you wish. The Rotch-Jones-Duff House and Garden Museum on County Street is open to the public. All others residences are maintained privately. Photography is allowed but please view these homes from the sidewalk to respect the privacy of the owners.



**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 390 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](http://www.nps.gov/nebe). This brochure was funded by the National Park Service *Parks as Classrooms* program.

A small map showing the location of New Bedford National Historical Park (NHP) in Massachusetts. It highlights the state of Massachusetts and its neighboring states (New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New York). The park is located in the southern part of the state, near the Acushnet River and the Atlantic Ocean. A scale bar indicates distances up to 50 miles.

# Behind the Mansions

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

New Bedford Whaling  
National Historical Park

A collage of four historical black and white photographs. The top left shows a group of men in formal attire. The top right shows a man in a hat and uniform. The bottom left shows a large whaling ship with multiple masts. The bottom right shows two men working on a small boat.

A large, sepia-toned photograph of a grand, multi-story house with a prominent portico supported by columns. The house is surrounded by mature trees and a well-manicured lawn.

the mid 1800s, New Bedford was the whaling capital of the world. The success and global, exploratory nature of the whaling industry helped to create a bustling, cosmopolitan seaport community, and one of the richest and most diverse cities in the world. Opportunities for individuals and families from all backgrounds to make a living and prosper were readily available at sea and in the shoreside businesses that supported the whaling industry.

New Bedford was also attractive to slaves seeking freedom because of the opportunities for employment presented by the whaling industry, an active abolitionist community, and a coastal trading system that provided escaping slaves opportunities to hide on vessels heading to New Bedford from southern ports. Much of this history happened against the backdrop of something familiar to us—the neighborhood—the streets where we walk, the people we call our neighbors, the houses we call our homes. So what happens when you combine black, white, rich, poor, free and fugitive in a New Bedford neighborhood? Read on and discover the stories of the community located Behind the Mansions.

“IT MATTERS LITTLE WHAT MAY BE A MAN’S NATIONAL-ITY, HIS COLOR, HIS LANGUAGE, OR RELIGION...THE ONLY QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED ARE, HAS HE THE ARM TO PULL AN OAR, THE EYE TO AIM A HARPOON, THE HEART TO FACE A WOUNDED WHALE IN HIS STORMY WRATH.”  
-Harpers Monthly, 1860

# Behind the Mansions: A New Bedford Neighborhood

A detailed map of the 'Behind the Mansions Walking Tour Area' in New Bedford. The map shows a grid of streets including Union, Spring, School, Walnut, Pleasant, South Sixth, Russell, Bedford, County, Wing, and Allen. Numerous historical houses are marked with red icons and labels: Nathan & Polly Johnson House, Elisha Thornton Jr. House, Gideon Allen House, William H. Allen House, George Howland House, David Coffin House, Moses Gibbs House, Mary Rotch House, Our Lady of the Assumption Church, William Rotch Jr. House (Rotch-Jones-Duff House), William Rotch Rodman House, Joshua Richmond House, George F. Fletcher House, New Bedford Fire Museum, Humphrey Smith Houses, Lewis Temple House, William Piper House, Cuffe Lawton House, and Henry Johnson House. The map also shows the waterfront with various wharves and piers. A scale bar indicates distances up to 1000 feet.

# Behind the Mansions Tour Map



**Nathan and Mary (Polly) Johnson House**  
21 Seventh Street



Anna Murray Douglass

Nathan and Mary (Polly) Johnson were active abolitionists. Here they housed at least three escaped slaves—the most famous being Frederick Douglass. The Johnsons, who began their careers as domestic servants, were caterers and confectioners. They owned a considerable amount of real estate, including two houses beside them and one on Spring Street. By 1850, Johnson was one of the two most affluent men of color in New Bedford.

**Elisha Thornton Jr. House**  
20 Seventh Street



William Winters  
Deep River Historical Society

Elisha Thornton Jr. was the grandson of a Quaker preacher who was an early opponent of slavery. He began his career as a druggist and starting in the 1820s, he invested in eight whaling vessels.

Here in 1855, Thornton sheltered the fugitive slave Daniel Fisher, who had taken the name William Winters upon reaching the North. Winters lived with Thornton in 1855 and 1856 and left New Bedford after the Civil War.

**William H. Allen House**  
30 Seventh Street



cloth, thread, and clothes to whaling agents and outfitters.

Together and separately, the Allen brothers invested in the city's whaling fleet. They owned all of three vessels and nearly all of another four; William Allen owned large shares of five ships and barks. The 1830 federal census shows three people of color living in the household, most likely domestic servants.

**Gideon Allen House**  
23 South Sixth Street



Along with his brother William, Gideon Allen was a whaling agent and investor. He owned shares in numerous whaling voyages. One study found that the firms of Gideon Allen established—active from 1830 to 1887—were together the most profitable in the city.

The Allen brothers represent part of the web of kinship that bound this neighborhood together. They were related by marriage to the two branches of the Howland family that lived in this district. In *The Life of John Thompson: A Fugitive Slave*, Thompson identifies Gideon Allen as the agent who hires him for a whaling voyage.

**“I WENT TO THE OFFICE OF MR. GIDEON ALLEN, WHO WAS FITTING OUT A SHIP... AND ASKED IF HE WOULD LIKE TO EMPLOY A GOOD STEWARD, TO WHICH HE REPLIED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE...”**

JOHN THOMPSON: *The Life of John Thompson: A Fugitive Slave*

**Moses Gibbs House**  
43 Seventh Street

This house was built for Moses Gibbs, who shipped as mate on the whaling vessel *Mansarin* in 1812. He also owned shares in several ships.



After Gibbs died, the house was leased by whaling merchant Edward Mott Robinson. Robinson's daughter, Henrietta Howland Robinson (later known as Hetty Green) was born here. Hetty inherited her father's fortune, investing it frugally. By the time of her death, Hetty, sometimes known as the “Witch of Wall Street” was one of the richest women in the world.

Edward Merrill, who founded a whale oil refinery in the city, later purchased the house. He built Merrill's wharf and stone counting house, which survives to this day.

**George Howland House**  
245 Walnut Street



George Howland lived here from 1810 until his death in 1852, remaining in this relatively modest home when most of his peers moved into mansions on County Street. By the time of his death, he was one of the wealthiest men in New Bedford. His estate, worth \$615,000 (at least \$15 million today), included nine whaling vessels, a counting house, a wharf, a candle factory, stores, houses, and parcels of land.

Howland had a longstanding relationship with people of color in the city, including 12-year-old John Briggs, whom he raised alongside his own sons. Briggs' daughter, Martha, was one of the first African Americans to graduate from New Bedford High School. From their home, she taught fugitive slaves to read and write.

**David Coffin House**  
34 South Sixth Street



David Coffin was involved in many aspects of the whaling industry. He owned shares in vessels and operated a candleworks and a “tryhouse” where blubber was melted and turned into oil.

Coffin's nephew William, who lived most of his life in this house, was one of the city's most active abolitionists. William was a supporter of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* and of the Boston Vigilance committee, which assisted fugitive slaves. During the summer of 1841, William C. Coffin encouraged Frederick Douglass to speak at an anti-slavery convention in Nantucket. Coffin had heard Douglass speak at the Zion Methodist church in New Bedford and suggested he share his story at the anti-slavery meeting.

**“...WHILE ATTENDING AN ANTI-SLAVERY CONVENTION AT NANTUCKET, ON THE 11TH OF AUGUST, 1841, I FELT STRONGLY MOVED TO SPEAK, AND WAS AT THE SAME TIME MUCH URGED TO DO SO BY MR. WILLIAM C. COFFIN, A GENTLEMAN WHO HAD HEARD ME SPEAK IN THE COLORED PEOPLE'S MEETING AT NEW BEDFORD.”**

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*.

**Mary Rotch House**  
46 South Sixth Street



This house was built in 1838 for Mary Rotch, the daughter of whaling merchant William Rotch Sr. The house, which now faces east, is said to have faced west so it looked upon the County Street mansions of Mary's family.

Like her father and brother, Mary Rotch had strong anti-slavery beliefs. She had a working relationship with New Bedford's people of color, including John Goings, Nancy King, and Patience Freeman, who all worked and lived in the house.

**Lewis Temple House**  
54 Bedford Street



Believed to have been born in slavery in Richmond, Virginia, Lewis Temple came to New Bedford by 1829, where he established a blacksmith shop. Temple became best known for inventing the *toggle iron*

harpoon, which revolutionized American whaling. Because Temple did not patent his invention, other blacksmith shops profited from producing thousands of toggle harpoons.

In the 1840s Temple moved closer to his waterfront shop, located on the Coffin Wharf at the foot of Walnut Street. His niece, Mary Clark, moved here with her Cape Verdean husband, Miguel Fortes. Fortes was also a blacksmith—and may have been among the first in New Bedford to bear a now-common last name.



Lewis Temple Statue

**William Piper House**  
58 Bedford Street



Next door to Lewis Temple lived the family of William Piper. Like Temple, Piper was born in the South and may have been an escaped slave when he came to New Bedford between 1825 and 1830. For decades Piper worked from William Rotch Rodman, less than two blocks away, caring for his horses and handling other domestic chores.



The Piper Family,  
New Bedford Historical Society, Carl Cruz Collection

Rodman sold his property at 87 South Sixth Street to Piper, and Piper sold it to acquire this house. After Rodman's death, Piper worked as an overseer for Rodman's brother-in-law Charles W. Morgan. The Piper family remained in this house until 1870.

**Cuffe Lawton House**  
62 Bedford Street



Cuffe Lawton was born in Newport, Rhode Island in 1789 and moved to New Bedford by 1826. He bought this property in 1834. In Newport Lawton had been a student at the African Free School, a member of that town's Free African Union Society, and clerk of its African Benevolent Society.

In New Bedford he worked mostly as a laborer for whaling merchants, both on their vessels and around their homes. For whaling merchant Charles W. Morgan, he helped fit whaling ships, cleaned yards, and once sawed “old wood at Candleworks” from Morgan's ship *Francis Henrietta*.

**Humphrey Smith House**  
61 Bedford and 111 Seventh Street



Here in the southern section of the neighborhood, houses were less costly, lots were smaller, residents tended to be working class, and integration was more common than in the northern section. Often, multiple families shared one residence.

Humphrey Smith, a white laborer who worked for lumber and oil dealer Samuel Leonard & Company, bought the 111 Seventh Street lot in 1856 and built this house two years later. Smith had lived at 61 Bedford, which he jointly owned with Frederick Davis. The house at 61 Bedford housed three families in 1850—the Smiths, the Davises, and the family of black tailor Thomas Thompson.

**George F. Fletcher House**  
114 Seventh Street



George Fletcher came to New Bedford from the District of Columbia in the early 1830s. City records suggest he may have been a fugitive; his name changed from Hitch to Fletcher. Both he and David Fletcher, who was probably his brother, began working as laborers and later ran an oyster house on Union Street.

In 1844 David Greene, for whom George Fletcher had worked as a laborer, sold him this and land. In the late 1840s, George Fletcher shared this house with James Davis, a black mariner from Richmond, Virginia, as well as other transplants from the Washington, D.C. area.

**William Henry Johnson House**  
46 Wing Street



This house was home to William Henry Johnson, one of the first black lawyers in Massachusetts.



William Henry Johnson  
New Bedford Historical Society

his practice. He was afterward known as “Squire” Johnson.

From his earliest years in New Bedford, Johnson was an aggressive opponent of slavery. He often represented the city at local, state, and national antislavery meetings.

**Joshua Richmond House**  
378 County Street



In 1845 Joshua Richmond bought this parcel from William Tallman Russell. Richmond was a very successful tailor. His waterfront merchant and tailoring shop, *Richmond and Wood*, provided “slop clothing” —clothes sold during a whaling voyage from the vessel's “slop chest.” He also boarded and recruited crew for whaling ships. In 1847 whaling agent Abraham Barker paid Richmond and Wood nearly \$800 for providing clothing for 11 men for the voyage of the *Roman*.

**William Rotch Rodman House**  
388 County Street



This grand house sat on two acres and cost \$74,000 (at least \$1.7 million today) to build. Its owner, William Rotch Rodman, was a major owner in the whaling industry and president of the Mechanics Bank. Rodman had close relationships with several people of color. For years he employed William Piper and sold him land. Thomas Randolph and John S. Jacobs (brother of famed author Harriet Jacobs), both fugitives, lived and worked at Rodman's estate.

**William Rotch Jr. House**  
(Rotch-Jones-Duff House)  
396 County Street



This house was built for William Rotch Jr.—for decades the wealthiest man in New Bedford. The Rotch family built and owned whaling vessels, supplied materials for shipbuilding, transported and sold whale oil and bone, purchased and sold goods, made candles, and owned wharves and storehouses. Rotch had a close association with black merchant, shipbuilder, and captain, Paul Cuffe. He also hired other people of color as tradesmen and crew. Rotch was one of the staunchest abolitionists in the city and a charter member of several anti-slavery groups. He also regularly hired men and women of color for whaling crews and domestic work.

After Rotch's death, Edward Coffin Jones bought the estate. Fugitive slave David W. Ruggles lived and worked for Jones at this estate before moving to California in the 1850s. By 1857 Jones was the third wealthiest individual in New Bedford.

To view the entire “Behind the Mansions” study, please visit [www.nps.gov/nebe](http://www.nps.gov/nebe)