



**Mayor Jon Mitchell
City of New Bedford
Dedication of *Melville and Jonah's Journey*
Seaman's Bethel
[remarks as prepared]**

Friday, August 13, 2026

Good morning. When you first look at a statue of a historic figure that is larger than life size or perched high upon a pedestal, there's a temptation to presume that the subject of the statue must have been destined for greatness. It's understandable. After all, erecting a statue to a particular person is an act of exaltation, an invitation to admire the subject. But the reality is that greatness is never preordained.

In the year 1840, Herman Melville was an unemployed twenty-one-year-old from New York with six years of formal schooling. Although he was a precocious writer and had intermittently studied the classics in his teens, he had failed to hold down a steady job after trying his hand as a law clerk, teacher and merchant seaman. Nothing in his life to that point foretold the possibility that he would experience high achievement or contribute much to society.

But his decision that year to travel to New Bedford to try his hand at a new line of work would change everything. What he experienced in the following two years would expand his worldview and consciousness and would supply him with the major elements of a story for the ages.

Melville arrived here, having decided, like the young men observed by Ishmael reeling about the streets of New Bedford, to "join the great whale fishery." He attended a

service in this very chapel, the same one where Father Mapple would deliver his sermon about Jonah and the whale. The next day Melville sailed out on the bark *Acushnet* on a voyage that would take him to the vast whaling grounds of the Pacific Ocean. Just as Ismael explains that his whaling voyage served as his college education, so it was with Melville. For eighteen months, he quartered with crew before the mast, hunted whales, and in between contemplated the vastness of the sea and sky. As was not uncommon among whalemens of this period, he eventually abandoned ship in the south seas, and lived among the indigenous Polynesian tribes, befriendng them as Ishmail would Queequeg.

During the voyage, Melville began to hear the story of the Nantucket whaler *Essex*, which twenty years before was sunk by an enraged bull sperm whale. In a moment of serendipity, the *Acushnet* encountered a Nantucket whaler near the same latitude as the *Essex* sinking. During the gam between the vessels, Melville met the son of Owen Chase, the first mate of the *Essex*, who lent Melville a copy of his father's manuscript of the *Essex* saga, which Melville promptly read that night. The *Pequod* thus would meet a fate similar to that of the *Essex*.

At the risk of gross understatement, there is much that can be said about the novel that emerged from this experience. In this two-hundred-year-old church without modern air conditioning, I am not about to inflict on this audience my armchair literary opinions. There is a three-day Melville Symposium now underway across the street at the Whaling Museum where much more will be said about *Moby Dick* and with greater authority.

But I will offer this: Why *Moby Dick* remains compelling to this day is a matter of lively and edifying debate, but we can agree that it invites us to consider timeless questions, like these:

- Is the American version of democracy, which at that moment was careening toward Civil War, prone to self-destruction?
- How do we ascribe meaning to our seemingly arbitrary world? (On this question, a college professor of mine held that the chapter titled "The Whiteness of the Whale" was the most important one in the book).
- Do we have free will? "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who that lifts this arm?"

Of course there is so much more. It is for good reason that *Moby Dick* has been called America's Bible. Like the Bible, we return to *Moby Dick* in part because there is new understanding to be discovered with each reading.

Its imprint on American culture has been broad and indelible. It is the most famous work of prose in the English language; it has inspired the emulation of countless authors,

playwrights, musicians and painters the world over; it is the most assigned novel on college campuses; it has shaped America's national identity.

So it is entirely fitting that today on the grounds of the chapel where he once worshipped, having been drawn to New Bedford's great whale fishery, we dedicate a statue of Herman Melville, whose magnum opus continues to call us to reflect deeply on our place in the world.

We do so recognizing that public statuary is meant to convey something also about those who do the dedicating. This work we are about to reveal also tells a story about New Bedford and its place in America – in Melville's time and today.

New Bedford in 1850 epitomized the spirit of the nation. Barely a half-century after the end of the Revolution, America was expanding, rapidly and unabashedly, into a bi-coastal country; cities were springing up; canals and then railroads began to crisscross the land; and thanks to vast natural resources, seemingly endless fertile land, and revolutionary innovations, its economic output was already surpassing that of the major European powers. It was a land of ambition.

High seas whaling was arguably the most American of industries. It operated according to an audacious proposition – that men would sail across the world for three to five years in wooden vessels and hunt the largest creatures in the sea with hand weapons. It was fraught with danger, and modern estimates are that nearly a third of the vessels would not return. But in its heyday, it was incredibly lucrative, exceeding the profit margins of even today's most successful technology companies.

New Bedford was the epicenter of it all. By the 1850s, nearly half of the whaling vessels in the world were home-ported here, making New Bedford the wealthiest city in America. Its waterfront was a beehive of activity, and its fleet of whaleships made New Bedford known in every corner of the world. By virtue of the city's global connectedness, and the egalitarian sensibilities of the city's Quaker fathers, New Bedford had America's first truly multi-cultural workforce, both at sea and on land. Just as remarkably, according to one historian, New Bedford had the highest per capita population of former slaves of any Northern city. At once, antebellum New Bedford manifested the ambitious heights of American capitalism, and the possibility that America could begin to realize the core ideals of the Declaration of Independence, at a moment when the country was struggling intensely with the question of what those ideals meant.

In the opening chapters of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael gushes about New Bedford. He explains that New Bedford has effectively monopolized the business of whaling, which had yielded stunning prosperity, "Nowhere in America will you find more patrician like houses,

gardens more opulent than in New Bedford.” Ishmael is enthralled with seemingly everything he encounters along his stroll through the city: the ubiquitous smell flowers of the air, the majesty of the tree lined streets, the omnipotence of art, and the beauty of the women of New Bedford. Yet Ishmael makes clear New Bedford isn’t merely an enclave of wealthy merchants. More than the world’s other major seaports, New Bedford is teeming with people from other places, from New England farm hands to cannibals from the South Pacific – all of them contributing to a roaring economic engine. What is unmistakable in these passages is that to Melville, New Bedford is America at its finest.

A city is not just a point on a map. It’s just not the sum of its streets and buildings. It consists of its people and the stories they choose to tell about themselves. These stories are the threads of civic identity, which makes community possible and enables common purpose. Especially in times of division, it’s what holds us together.

A statue is a means of making a story physically present. It proclaims something about who we are. It doesn’t require you to open a book. It is there for anyone to behold.

The statue we are about to reveal, brilliantly conceived by Stephanie Rocknack in the ambitious spirit of Melville himself, is meant to tell the story of the New Bedford that Melville recognized: audacious, outward looking, diverse, egalitarian, and resolute. Like Jonah of Father Mapple’s famous sermon, it is a city willing “To preach the Truth to the face of falsehood.”

We are reminded in this hallowed hall that this story is not merely a figment of memory. The cenotaphs memorializing those lost at sea, the ones Ishmael pondered as he sat in his pew, continue to serve the same purpose, here in America’s preeminent commercial fishing port. As they did in Melville’s day, they offer solace to family members who have no grave to visit. But they also enshrine the daring and resolve of those among us who’ve gone to sea in ships. Each of them is part of the still unfolding, unique, and deeply American story of New Bedford.

My hope is that the statue we dedicate today will enrich and amplify that story, and make our residents even more proud to tell it to those who follow us.