



Tim Walker

Naomi Slipp:

So this is Naomi Slipp. I'm here recording a story for Common Ground. Tim, will you introduce yourself?

Timothy Walker:

My name is Timothy Walker. I am a professor of History at the University of Massachusetts in Dartmouth, and I live in New Bedford, Massachusetts. I moved here in 2004, and I have lived downtown or up on the hill near County Street since that time.

Naomi Slipp:

Great. Well, thank you. I know you've thought about a couple of stories and moments in your life and connections to New Bedford that you have to share with us, so if you want to start at the beginning and tell us about your story.

Timothy Walker:

Well, I learned about New Bedford, of course, in school and about whaling and Moby Dick and all of that, and so it always lived in my mind as a fascinating place. I grew up in the Midwest. I was born in Michigan outside of Detroit, and I grew up mainly in Ohio and Michigan. So the East Coast was always a mythical place, and so coming to Boston, I came to Boston and the East Coast as a teenager with my parents when I was about 15. But I came to Boston in 1987 to start graduate school there, and a few years later, I had advanced to the point where I was teaching my own courses, and I brought a group of students to New Bedford as part of a course on Maritime History and the Atlantic world, and we had, I don't know, about 15 students. And I brought them down because I had made contact with the Schooner Ernestina organization, and I wanted to bring the students aboard a real sailing vessel, a historic vessel to do an actual day sail. So we took them, we boarded the vessel on State Pier in New Bedford early in the morning, and we did a long day sail through the Cape Cod Canal up to Boston the ship was being moved up there. And so Gregg Swanzey, I believe was the captain and maybe Amanda Madeira was on board, and some of the people that really were the heart and soul of that organization, and I got to know them quite well. A few years later, I was offered a job at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, and a lot of my colleagues were talking to me about where might I want to live.

And some of them were commuting from Providence and some were commuting from Boston, and some were living in Dartmouth. And I said, "No, I really want to live right in the heart of New Bedford." I wanted to be in this historic whaling town, and I wanted to have that experience of being near the waterfront. So a funny story, I was with yet, another group of students on another large sailing vessel. I was sailing aboard the Liberty Clipper from Charleston, South Carolina in June of 2004, and I had been offered the job at UMass Dartmouth, but I didn't have a place in New Bedford yet. So I spoke to the captain, and we weren't scheduled to stop in New Bedford, but I said, "Look, I need some time to look around New Bedford, could you please go in?" And I sent my students to the Whaling Museum and Bob Rocha, who I knew at the time and very kind, and my students came in and I gave them assignments to see.

And I went walking around looking at apartments that had been recommended to me by my friends at the Ernestina, and within 24 hours, I had found a place. It was right on the corner of a Acushnet and Union Street, and I looked out my window and I saw the Seamen's Bethel and the Whaling Museum, and that was where I lived for 15 years. Well, and so we sailed out again and went on our way to Boston, so that was just a great way to find an apartment. But in that apartment at the corner of Union and Acushnet, I did some of my research here in town at the Whaling Museum and started to really become involved in the story of New Bedford. And one of the things that happened a few years after that, I had gotten to know Lee Blake at the New Bedford Historical Society, and she suggested that we, perhaps, apply for a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant to tell the story of New Bedford's role in the Underground Railroad and New Bedford's role as a destination for people who were escaping enslavement often by water.



And so this was a really compelling story, and I thought, I really want to become involved in this, so I worked with Lee, we collaborated and we were fortunate enough to get the funding. So over a five year period, we ran three major workshops for the National Endowment for the Humanities on New Bedford and the Underground Railroad. And this then evolved into a bigger project where I actually edited a book on maritime dimensions of the Underground Railroad and how the Underground Railroad was... Actually, we think of it as primarily a terrestrial overland project, but in fact a very significant portion of people escaped by water, and many of them ended up in New Bedford which becomes known as the fugitives Gibraltar which is a story very well told in Kathryn Grover's book of the same name. Pause for a second. So I moved to New Bedford in part because I wanted to work with the Schooner Ernestina and continue to be an onboard educator teaching Maritime History.

And so the Schooner, shortly after I came here in 2005 or 06, she started to have some issues with funding, but I continued to work with the organization and some of the great people in the Schooner Ernestina-Morrissey Association, Mary Anne McQuillan, and Fred... Oh, what's Fred's last name? I can't think of it right now. But Fred and Mary Anne have just been fantastic, and they have been super in getting behind the effort to get her sailing again which I'm very happy to say now in 2021, it looks like it's right on the cusp of having the vessel back in New Bedford next summer in 2022... Fred Sterner, that's his name. I knew it would come to me... But I should say something else about one of the reasons I moved here, and that is that before living in New Bedford, I had finished my doctorate at Boston University, and my main focus of my studies is Early Modern Europe and European overseas expansion, and my real focus is on the Portuguese and their overseas empire.

So I spent a lot of time prior to coming to New Bedford and after living here doing research in places like Brazil and Continental Portugal and the Azores, and in Portuguese colonies in Asia as well, so I worked in Macau and in Goa in India. And so moving to New Bedford in many ways was to continue my deep engagement with this global Portuguese diaspora, and I was astonished to find that in New Bedford, occasionally I would need Portuguese to ask directions or to order in a restaurant. It was just the language that was more comfortable for people than English, and so I was very happy to use my Portuguese and practice it, and engage with the local community here who were largely from the Azores, but also from the Cape Verde Islands and from Continental Portugal.

And then a few years after moving here, in 2008 I was over in Lisbon working in the archives in Lisbon, and I met the woman who would become my wife, who was a Portuguese woman from northern Portugal, but who had immigrated as a teenager to the United States, and her family was living in Rhode Island, but she was a student at University of Connecticut. And so it became very clear very early on that we were actually fairly close in the United States as well as working together in the archives that summer in Portugal, and so long story short is that we got married nine months later, and we have stayed in New Bedford. But people often ask her, did she come to New Bedford because of the Portuguese community? And the answer is no. She came to New Bedford because of me, but was very happy to also engage in this community. Her name is Danielle Mellow, and she's also been very engaged in New Bedford's cultural life since she's moved here.

Another thing that I wanted to say about New Bedford, when I first moved here in 2004 and I was living right downtown, literally across the street from the Historic District, in 2004 New Bedford didn't have much of a nightlife. The weekends were slow and there wasn't a lot of activity downtown, but every year in the past 16, 17 years that I've been here, New Bedford just keeps getting better. There are shops that come and go, but there's always a kind of energy of really interesting cultural events and aha nights that are organized every month, and the artists who live and work downtown and the really creative restaurateurs who have opened up places that are really unique. And one of the things I really value about New Bedford is that it's not overwhelmed by national chains. There's a lot of local creativity and local energy that really gives a kind of cultural buoyancy to New Bedford, and I really appreciate that a lot.



And the ability, coming back to the Portuguese connection, because New Bedford has this extraordinary Portuguese community, I can buy products here, good Portuguese wine and cheese, and bread, and all of the things that Portuguese love to celebrate their cuisine and their food culture, and there're dozens of Portuguese restaurants that are really good. It allows me to have the best of both worlds. I'm in the United States and all of that, but I also get to feel in some ways like I haven't left Portugal. This is really the 10th island of the Azores as people like to joke. There are nine actual islands, but between New Bedford and Fall River, they call it the 10th Island, and that's an apt description.

I've been really grateful here in New Bedford because I get a chance to work with some of the extraordinary cultural organizations like the New Bedford Whaling Museum which currently I'm co-curating an exhibition on New Bedford's role in the Underground Railroad in the Maritime side of the Underground Railroad, working with Mike Dyer and Mark Procknik, and everybody here at the institution has been really helpful. But also places like the New Bedford Free Public Library with Jody Goodman in the Special Collections Department there, and at the Rotch-Jones-Duff House and Lee Blake with the New Bedford Historical Society, and the National Park, the New Bedford Historic Whaling Park that is run by the National Park Service and Jen White, who is the head over there.

They've been such good partners to help develop and promote, and host many of the historical initiatives that I get to do because I live here in New Bedford, and my university, UMass Dartmouth has this very strong link to New Bedford. The College of Visual and Performing Arts is right downtown, and I have a lot of students that come here, but I think that through my own efforts and the scholarship that I'm able to do, I can help to increase that link and strengthen it and make it a stronger link between the university, the town and the gown, if you will. That we don't see it as a rivalry, we see it as a collaboration and a cooperative effort, so that's a very good thing to have been involved in over the years.

So most recently, one of the projects that I've been involved in that has involved a number of institutions here in New Bedford, but primarily the New Bedford Free Public Library and the New Bedford Whaling Museum because of the size of their archival collections pertaining to whaling log books. A number of years ago I was actually, this is a project that I cooked up with a fellow sailor on board of the Ernestina, who has since gone off and earned a PhD at Stanford in Ocean Climatology. But he and I were always looking at ways that we could put our different skill sets together to do a collaborative project, and so about four or five years ago, he and I approached a ocean climatologist at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute which is just across Buzzards Bay, about 12 miles as the crow flies from New Bedford to Woods Hole.

And we pitched this idea that historical documents could be used to provide climate data or more precisely, weather data going back hundreds of years that otherwise climate scientists would not have access to. And after about five minutes of listening to us, this climate scientist at Woods Hole said, and whose name is Caroline Ummenhofer, she's a wonderful young, very creative scholar in her field. She was convinced that this was the way to go, and she said, "Yes, I think this project has legs and let's pursue it," so we've been working very hard to not only extract climate data from log books at places like New Bedford Whaling Museum, but also the Nantucket Historical Association and the New Bedford Free Public Library, and now the Providence Public Library which has the second largest collection of whaling logbooks in the world. So this project has become really, the central focus of my scholarship right now, and it's the project that'll probably continue for the rest of my career.

It's a very long project where we're 50 logbooks in to more than 5,000 logbooks that we have to cover, and it's a meticulous and painstaking process, but the data that we derive is really super valuable for creating and verifying long-term patterns of weather that then climate scientists can use in a predictive way to see if what we're experiencing now is really very different or how much change has happened in the world's climate. So I'm very excited about that, and I couldn't do it anywhere else. It's the fact that these records were literally in my... Well, not literally, but they were in my backyard and I could use them with great ease. It was simply a matter of walking a few minutes over to the Whaling Museum or the library to get started, and so that's been a great side benefit of living in New Bedford.