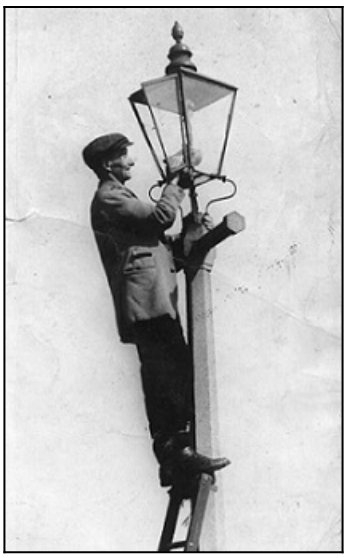
Forgotten Occupations of New Bedford’s Yesteryear; Of Lamplighters, Milkmen, & Town Criers

In the modern age, there are a dizzying variety of occupations. While modern technology and progress have either taking over many of the menial jobs or made them obsolete, there are always new occupations being created. One job dies, another crops up. The unfortunate aspect of modernity is that many occupations have driven a wedge between people.

Often the customer is hundreds or thousands of miles away at the end of a phone call or e-mail. Or the business is so large and based on volume that even a frequent customer is never really more than a face with no name. Of course, there are jobs where the old world relationship exists, but it’s increasingly rare. In the “olden days” as my daughter would say when she was younger, it was pretty common to be on a first-name basis with a proprietor. To walk into a store and have half your needs known before you’ve reached the counter was the norm.

Because of this intimacy, things could be purchased “on the cuff” or placed on the tab or even bartered for. It was a romantic era, to say the least, but unpractical in this day and age in any community of modest size or larger.



Lamplighter – streetlighter, night watchman, community helper

In this article, I will showcase a number of occupations from yesteryear that have been almost forgotten. Some have altogether disappeared. There may be some that exist in remote parts of the world in some small village or hamlet. In some cases, they exist because the city wishes to retain its history, London for example. Some have been replaced with a modern equivalent. Others have been entirely replaced by a machine or robot. Some of you may be old enough to have childhood memories of some of these occupations, and by all means *please* share them. These romantic occupations were executed by unsung heroes. Nameless people that served the community, helped it progress and make the city of New Bedford what it is today, a city of almost 100,000.

As always, the images are culled from the generosity of the the New Bedford Whaling Museum and Spinner Publications. Without their kindness, these articles would be dry, boring texts. They breathe life into the articles and do a much better job helping with visualization than any cleverly designed assemblage of words into a sentence could. Please consider them for patronage. In addition, these articles are made possible through sponsorship. If you would like to help

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Keeping the City of Light lit: Lamplighters

In addition to being known as the Whaling City, New Bedford was also known as the City of Light for the sheer amount of lamp oil it produced in the 19th and 20th centuries from the whaling industry. This oil not only lit homes for practical and obvious reasons, but miner's headlamps served as added security within the streets, allowed mills and businesses to extend their hours of operation and increase revenue, and spurred progress. Originally these lamps used simple animal fat before being replaced with kerosene, gas, then electricity. Whale oil being the one that burned the best, with the least smoke and bad odor. Luckily for New Bedford, there was a whale ship or two putting around.



Coopers Hard At Work- Courtesy of the N.B. Whaling Museum

An hour before dusk or dawn a crew of men would set out with ladders or long poles, whistling as they went, and would light all of the lamps in the city. In many cases -the less trafficked areas – the lights would have to be extinguished a

few hours later. In rather remote locations, more than basic tools and a ladder or pole would need to be carried. The lamplighter would have to carry the fuel himself. A simple task that had a massive, widespread effect.

While it seems this is hardly a “job” since it took only a few hours a day, the lamplighters had to do this regardless of weather and had many related tasks to do turning it into a full-time occupation. Within the specific lighting itself, there were a number of tasks. Many lamps had automatic clocks that would regulate the intensity of the light and they would need to be set and maintained. If the lamp needed painting, scraping, or repair it got it. Often there was a build-up of waste that would need to be scraped, removed and carried off.

In addition to their regular duties, many would make extra money by doing small tasks on their route, like delivering letters, dropping off shoes at the cobbler, relaying messages, or acting as a Caller-Up – an occupation we’ll flesh out later in the article. Lamplighters also acted as a night watchman and crime deterrent. They would sound an alarm or report any criminal activity. For this reason lamplighters were thought of in a fond way by the community, for their specific contribution in lighting the city and for their presence period. Lamp-lighting was a coveted enough job that it was passed from father to son and in some cities formed a union. By 1897 New Bedford had 525 gas lamps and 200 arc lamps that needed to be attended to.

Eventually, technology made it so lamps could be automatically or electrically lit, making the occupation an obsolete one. Unfortunately, with it went the small community tasks, night watchman element, and romanticism. In some parts of the world, like London, Brest, Paris, this romantic occupation carries on because these cities are proud of their history. New Bedford’s historic district of course still retains those lamps, but they are electrically lit. How about we fire half of the meter

maids and take that money and bring back the Lamplighters?



Coachman J.W. Clark – Courtesy of the N.B. Whaling Museum

Caller-Ups, Coachmen and Dirt-Carters

Another occupation that was tied in closely with the lamplighters was the *Caller-Up*. These fellows were the first alarm clocks. If you have come to dread the sound of your alarm clock and a habitual snooze button user, imagine have an actual person tapping a pole at your window and not going away until you sent him away! While the caller-up typically has a route whereby he tapped on windows to get everyone ready for the workday, he could come at a specific time for individuals, just like a paper route.

While today everyone has a BMW, Lexus or Toyota there was a time where horses were the primary mode of transportation. Not everyone could afford a horse, so you could call for a *Coachman* to taxi you anywhere you needed to go. Obviously, he was eventually replaced with the modern cab, and it is still a service used by those who can't afford an automobile. Since horses were the primary mode of efficient travel, this meant poop. Lots of it. A horse can produce up to 30 pounds of it in a day. Horses had assistance from pigs, dogs, cows and other livestock that commuted.

It has been said that during the 18th and 19th-century manure would fill the streets a foot high in no time if there wasn't someone to remove it. Since it simply wasn't practical to stop

to scoop it during travel it just filled the streets. If you think Rex left some “mines” imagine the size of these piles. This was to old equivalent of exhaust and equally as unhealthy! The men that scooped and removed the manure were called “*dirt-carters*.” Insert obligatory “crappy” job pun here. Thanks to these guys the roads were cleaner, healthier, and less dangerous to travel on.

The *Iceman* was another regular seen on the city streets. Before freezers and refrigerators, there was the iceman. The ice industry or frozen water trade as it was called, was a booming one in the 19th century. Indeed, it was a global one by the 1850s, and New England was a large source of ice. Many made a fortune cutting ice from ponds and lakes and using clever methods to store and transport it. Ice was cut in a variety of sized from 25-100 pound blocks and delivered by ice wagon throughout the day. While usually only the well-to-do could afford ice in their homes, meat handlers, butchers, fishmongers, and other jobs needed it to survive. This was a job that began at 4:00 a.m. to service businesses before they opened, worked until these businesses closed, and had to work seven days a week including holidays.



Women working at a Telephone Switchboard – Courtesy of the N.B. Whaling Museum

Milkman, Iceman, and others

The *Milkman* was also a popular figure. Many were actually the dairy farmer himself, delivering his cow's product. The iceman helped prolong the spoilage of his product which allowed him to stay away from the farm for longer periods. Ice also allowed him to cart more. Besides his regular route and customers, the milkman would simply alert the community as he traveled the roads and streets. You could bring your chosen container to him and he would fill it for a small fee. Eventually, the milkman that many of us "old-timer" recall, left the milk jars at your doorstep and when you woke up you had fresh milk or cheese. Unfortunately, some people saw this as "free" milk and eventually this contributed – along with convenience stores on every corner and refrigeration – to the disappearance of the milkman. Well, he still survives in insults and jokes about fatherhood.

Other occupations that have died out and/or been replaced or because there's an app for that:

- **Typesetter** – This person assembled the sorts into readable sentences for print like newspapers.
- **Town Crier**– The Town Crier was the original Facebook or Google News alert. Particularly helpful for the illiterate.
- **Cobbler** – The Cobbler repaired shoes for a cheap price. Today, just buy yourself another $350 pair.
- **Cartwright** – The Cartwright would repair wheels, the axles or other parts of one's cart. The first mechanic.
- **Cooper** – The Cooper made barrels, casks, buckets and the ilk. Many also helped package product and load vessels.
- **Glassblower** -The Glassblower took molten glass and made drinking vessels, window panes, and more.
- **Coal merchant** – These men, like the ice and milk men sold and delivered coal to keep houses warm.
- **Pinsetters**– These lucky guys got the exciting job of resetting bowling pins after they were knocked down.
- **Switchboard Operator** – Before cell phones, phones were

connected physically by wire. You also talked to real live people. I know, crazy.

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Photo Guide

#01: Andreoly Ice House 1920. Spinner Publications.

#02: Lamplighter racing the evening sunset.

#03: 1927 Noqachoke Pond, Reed Road, North Dartmouth. Spinner Publications.

#04: Charles Canell Pond Ice House. Spinner Publications.

#05: Cobbler hard at work!

#06: Two young Coopers hard at work on New Bedford waterfront. N.B. Whaling Museum.

#07: Cooper’s workshop, unidentified location New Bedford. N.B. Whaling Museum.

#08: Two veteran coopers earning a day’s pay. N.B. Whaling Museum.

#09: Another cooper’s workshop. N.B. Whaling Museum.

#10: Glassblower Gilly Gulbransen at Gunderson Glass. N.B. Whaling Museum.

#11: Glassblower Anders Thoen at Gunderson Glass. N.B. Whaling Museum.

#12: Hathaway Road Lynchs Ice House. N.B. Whaling Museum.

#13: Kids hoping to get some ice shavings on a hot summer day!

#14: Iceman delivering ice to the Waterfront. Spinner Publications.

#15: Philadelphia Reading Coal Pier on New Bedford Waterfront. N.B. Whaling Museum.

#16: Telephone Worker Donat Cormier. Spinner Publications.

#17: Coachman on the Corner of Union & Front Streets. N.B. Whaling Museum.