

# Historical Personages of New Bedford: James and Sarah (Rotch-Rodman) Arnold

*The posh, luxurious Arnold Estate with its splendid grounds.  
(Spinner Publications)*

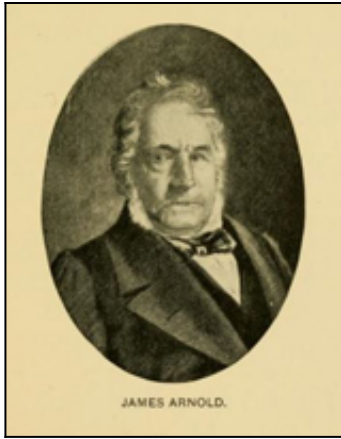
## Series Introduction

Welcome to the eighth installment of the series “**Historical Personages of New Bedford.**” The previous six installments can be found by using the keyword “personage” in the search window in the column at the right or click **here**.

My intention with this series is to shine some light on the lesser known names and figures of New Bedford’s past.

I won’t focus on the more popular and well-known figures since they have not only been covered in substantial depth, but information about these figures is something most people already have a cursory knowledge of. Though redundant to say, if any more information is desired, it is readily available and easily accessible.

Some of these great and popular figures got to be well known, wealthy, or famous on the shoulders of names vaguely recalled or ne’er heard. I don’t want to swing all the way to the other side and overcompensate by saying that these great figures would be no one without those you haven’t heard of. Perhaps they would have, but I think since history has traditionally ignored the lesser known figures, let’s give them their due!



*James Arnold,  
1781 – 1868.  
(WhalingCity.net)*

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Unlike any of the past installments, this article is per request. Do you have a street or personage that you think – or know – has an interesting back-story? Curious about why it is called what it is? Send your request to [nbgarts@gmail.com](mailto:nbgarts@gmail.com)!

This article is a combination of chocolate and peanut butter – “You got your street article in my personage article!” The James Arnold featured in this article is the one that gave Arnold street its name. If you are a history buff, nerd, or fan, how Arnold Street got its name maybe “common” knowledge. However, there are a lot of people – dare I say the majority – that aren’t privy to many of New Bedford’s historic figures. If you are of the former group, perhaps you may enjoy some little factoids that you weren’t aware of...or even better, perhaps you’ll chime in and embellish.

If you are of the latter group, you will learn about a hugely important figure in New Bedford’s past. A real cornerstone of the city’s success in the 19th century. I hope you’ll chime in too. Hopefully this will pique your interest and you’ll head to the library or book store and read books written by far better authors going into greater depth.

**Well born beginnings of a polymath**

Arnold Street got its name from a one James Arnold, son of Quakers Thomas Arnold and Mary Brown. He was born in Providence on September 9, 1781. James' family was a prominent one, so he had interest and access to many academic areas. He was fond of agriculture, literature, horticulture, public speaking, and was a member of the debate society called the Old Dialectic Society. Of temperament, he was said to be impassioned, exacting, disciplined, and in business matters, autocratic.

As he grew into adulthood, he was attracted to New Bedford because of its robust economy, whaling industry and the opportunities those offered. Arnold worked for the family that was responsible for developing New Bedford's whaling industry in the first place: the Rotches. These whaling moguls owned a number of enterprises including William Rotch Jr. & Sons, William R. Rotch & Company, Rotch Wharf Company, Rotch Candle House, and New Bedford Cordage Company. Specifically he received work under the tutorship of William Rotch III.



*The house where James Arnold was born on South Water & Madison Streets. (Spinner Publications)*

James' first house – a modest one – was built by Jonathan Howland on the corner of South Water and Madison Streets. Arnold's intellect, temperament, and business acumen helped him rise through the ranks rapidly and he would eventually be

made a partner. It would be through his close work with the Rotches that he would be introduced to his future wife, Sarah (Rodman) Rotch, daughter of William Rotch Jr. Sarah was a sort of precursor to businesswoman Hetty Green, in the sense that she had a similar business acumen, was well respected, and intelligent. However, she was well cultured and had a soft spot for the poor of New Bedford.

Sarah had an indelible effect on James and through their relationship she would soften some of his rough edges. They would marry on October 29, 1807. Surely due to the influence of his wife, he began to take a more serious role in the city of New Bedford's economic environment – something that would help the poor, by creating more jobs.

### **Post War of 1812**

The War of 1812 certainly hurt the economic aspirations of New Bedford and some serious work was needed to get things back on track. Arnold along with many Howlands, Russells, John Avery Parker, Grinnells, Nyes and Rodmans was one of the principals on a committee to recharter the Bedford Commercial Bank in 1816. As a business partner and now family member of the Rotches, Arnold begun to amass a sizable fortune allowing him a greater role in the city and region's economy.

In 1819, Abraham Russell sold his farm and James would buy a large portion of the land to build what would become an iconic building in the city. In 1821 he commissioned housewright Dudley Davenport to begin work on a home at 427 County Street: a large Federal Style brick house at the head of Spring Street – you know this building today as the Wamsutta Club.



*Built in 1821, the James Arnold House on County Street would be purchased by the Wamsutta Club in 1919. (Spinner Publications)*

Arnold's wealth allowed him to not only erect a large home, but his love for horticulture and agriculture could be expressed here. A large amount of monies were spent to create greenhouses, impressive groves, grottos and extensive gardens – in fact, James and Sarah spent considerable time traveling throughout the world, particularly Europe, to find and bring back all sorts of botanical items. These were easily brought back to New Bedford aboard one of the many whaling vessels under his or the Rotches' employ.

In what was considered rather unusual for the city's aristocrats, Arnold allowed the public to enjoy his gardens and it was quite popular in its day – in fact, there is mention of "villagers" having Maypole dances and festivities in the gardens and Arnold's Grove, it was a popular picnic ground on the site. I'd imagine this was through the encouragement of his wife, and because it was a source of great pride. The entire region knew of Arnold's Gardens and it would garner visitation by many famous people including President John Quincy Adams and Herman Melville. It is sometime in this period that James abandoned his Quaker upbringing and he and his wife became congregants of the Unitarian Church.

The amount of wealth that James Arnold had amassed continued to grow. As he got older, he became more and more interested in city issues and increasingly philanthropic. While he and his wife maintained an anti-slavery stance, their ambitions were focused on the city's poor.

### **The Arnolds from 1820s-1830s – political aspirations, serving New Bedford, and various committees**

From the late 1820s through much of the 1830s he would spend most of his time not only traveling to improve his gardens, but was very active in the city's economics. In 1829 he would become the Massachusetts State House of Representatives, the same year he would form a committee with Samuel Rodman, Abraham Gifford, Thomas Greene, and many others to establish the lines of the streets as accurately as possible. Up to that point, the rather pedestrian "red oke" or "crooked black oak" method of defining streets was used, but this led to much confusion. This method utilized a length of oak to define the width of the streets as well as the "run" of the street's length by flipping the log end to end. It certainly wasn't a standard that was defined in any specific way. In small towns and hamlets where a few feet here and there weren't that important, the method was adequate. In the cities, where a few feet meant a difference in revenue, liability, or legality it was a method that simply could not be utilized. This committee established permanent, accurate boundaries across the city – which primarily are still used today.



*The whaling vessel  
James Arnold at sea.*

In the early 1830s, New Bedford went through a sort of recession. Arnold helped form another committee with many other local business leaders to prepare resolutions to help New Bedford economically. This endeared him to many locals, and they rallied to support him as thousands of locals from New Bedford, Dartmouth, Rochester, Wareham, Westport, and Fairhaven signed his resolutions.

He was a president of the Port Society associated with the Mariner's Home who the Rotches owned. The objective was to help the moral improvement of seamen and to assist them in any way possible through the little recession.

By 1836, Arnold was now 55 years of age and was perhaps slowly working towards less work and more of a retirement lifestyle. He, his wife, and daughter would spend the next three years abroad. On their return, they would find an altogether different economic environment in New Bedford. The whaling industry was going through a boom – indeed it was heading towards its peak in 1853. This new environment and even more increase in his wealth would allow him to enjoy his passion for horticulture even more. He and a number of other businessmen would found the New Bedford Horticultural Society in 1847.

In 1854 the mansion of William Rotch Jr. at the southwest corner of William and Water Streets was owned by Arnold's wife Sarah. She donated it to the Port Society and it was moved to Johnny Cake Hill where it was dubbed as the Mariners' Home.

In the 1850s, a sort of minister-at-large, Reverend Moses Thomas was also of a philanthropic lean and was very active in helping the city's poor. He had the support of the Unitarian Church that the Arnolds were congregants of. For unknown reasons, the church withdrew its support and the Arnolds stepped up to the proverbial plate and put him in their employ

in a full-time capacity until his retirement. A very nice gesture.

### **Legacy: Last Will & Testament, Arboretum, and Philanthropy**

Sadly for Arnold he would outlive both his wife and daughter, passing away right here in New Bedford in 1868. His estate was worth \$1.4 million dollars, or about \$24 million dollars today. In his will he specified that \$100,000 (approximately \$1.7 million today) of his fortune be left behind to advance agriculture and horticulture. Unfortunately, these monies didn't stay in New Bedford, as one of the trustees of his estate, George Emerson had the funds sent to Harvard University for botanical research and helped build the Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plains, founded in 1872.



*One of the  
Arnolds' legacies:  
The Arnold  
Arboretum in  
Jamaica Plains,  
founded in 1872.  
(Daderot)*

However, he did leave something for New Bedford: \$100,000 or \$1.4 million dollars in today's money for the city's poor. Of course, his mansion, the Wamsutta Club still stands today – with additions and renovations. In 1919, the Wamsutta Club purchased the mansion and added two wings, and a squash court.



Today the mansion is on the National Historic Register of Historic Places.

The Arnolds had big hearts and were of a generous, sympathetic bent. Their philanthropic mission lives on with the James Arnold Fund started in 1934. This charitable organization offers "...gifts, grants, or loans to other organizations, Gifts or grants to individuals (other than scholarships), Aid to the handicapped." The Arnolds' have made themselves immortal in a sense – their presence lives on in the street names, Wamsutta club, charity organizations and philanthropic nature that is part and parcel of the city's spirit. This is a trait of New Bedford's citizens, regardless of what other places will say about us. We may bark and even bite, but there's always someone eager to help those in need, in hard times, or down on their luck. There is a humanity and kindness to most and I'd like to think it was a precedence set by James and Sarah Arnold.

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