The Story of New Bedford’s Arks; Of Sketchy Denizens, Mob Violence and the Hard Dig Neighborhood

Once upon a time, or in the 1820s to be exact, there was a brothel run out of the shell of a whaling vessel right here in New Bedford. This city has been a chameleon of sorts over the centuries being famous or infamous for a variety of commodities, industries, and shall we say activities of the constructive and base kind.

New Bedford’s Early History and Crime

As with any city that is economically sound, money will attract both good and bad elements and it was certainly the case in the 1820s. New Bedford had its share of gambling halls, brothels, saloons, ruffians and rogues of varying degrees. At many points throughout the city’s history these bad elements got so bad that people resorted to mob violence to fill in the void due to the police department’s lack of manpower, ability or in rare cases desire. Surely corruption played at some level.

By 1826, the time this tale takes place, New Bedford’s population reached approximately 6,000 people. For comparison, Boston had approximately 50,000 people and New York City around 150,000 people. New Bedford at this time was entering one of what would be many stages where it was infamous for this bad element. One could cynically say that this character trait has *always* been a part of New Bedford and the two have never been separated.

N. Water St. from Ark Lane (Whaling Museum)

It was during this time that one neighborhood in particular stood out for these exact characteristics. The neighborhood was called the “Hard Dig” and centered where Kempton Street would meet the waterfront, if Route 18 and Route 6 weren’t there. Water Street, and the streets called High Street and Charles street that are no longer present, were also streets that were part of the “Hard Dig.” High Street met at the foot of today’s Fairhaven/New Bedford Bridge. While High Street and Charles street have separate names, High Street was technically an extension of Charles Street. This street ran parallel and south of Kempton Street.

The Camillus on Ark Lane

At the foot of Water Street and High Street was a peculiar building. This building was odd enough that the street it laid on and that Water and High street abutted, was called Ark Lane. The name hints at this odd structure. The building was called the “Ark” because this residence, unlike any other in the city was a sea vessel called “The Ark” that became too old and unsound to be considered seaworthy. The Ark was broken up and it’s stern or rear portion was merged with an old whaling hulk, called “The Camillus.”

Atop this odd structure a house was built, with a four foot wide walkway circling it. One set of stairs permitted egress. The ship/building rested on the shore at the water’s edge, was kept upright by keel blocks and high enough so that when high tide arrived it would not set it afloat.

Originally, it was said the unnamed occupants were *"…decent people of moderate means."* However, the city had other plans. "Progress" could not be halted. It's not stated how or exactly when the building made the leap from residence to brothel, but considering the neighborhood that it was in, it was seemingly inevitable. The general populace who considered themselves morally upright and decent folk, found this brothel (and neighborhood) objectionable and abhorrent. A one Jake Peterson was said to be *"…the leader of the place."* implying his status as a local crime lord or kingpin and he figures into the story a bit later.

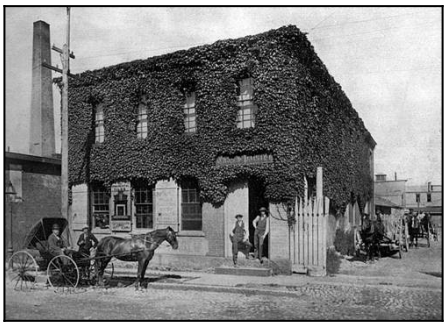
The Hard Dig Neighborhood

It wasn't uncommon in the "Hard Dig" for people to turn up missing and so the story of a ship's carpenter having disappeared didn't stand out as particularly disturbing news. On one of the hot August summer days of 1826, a number of boys were out harvesting Huckleberries, a fruit very similar to a blueberry, in the woods near the "Hard Dig" neighborhood. While doing this, echoing Stephen King's novel "The Body" or the movie "Stand By Me", they came across the body of a dead, adult male – our missing ship's carpenter. This sent the boys into a tizzy and they raced back into town to inform the officials of their morbid discovery.

In the few short minutes, it took the boys to run into town, inform the authorities and for the group to arrive, the body had been removed. However, the offender or offenders that carried the body away knew that they were pressed for time and in their haste, they left enough evidence behind to remove any doubt that there was indeed a body.

Apparently, the police department was either unequipped or uninterested in following up on this crime. Perhaps they felt it was yet, just another crime in a crime-riddled area that no one particularly cared about. Perhaps, they didn't work at a frantic enough pace to the populace's liking. Either way, a number of people were fed up and were determined to take

action and do something. That evening a mob formed on Kempton street in spite of attempts by others to “read the Riot Act” or stem the growing mob. This mob took up stones, pick axes, ladders, crowbars, and anything else they could get their hands on.



Charles Paisler Building (Spinner Publications)

An Attempt to burn down the Ark; Mob Justice

The first thing they took their angst out upon was Jake Peterson’s residence. Using sheer manual manpower, they smashed the building until it collapsed. Fueled by their quick success they continued on to other buildings owned by less reputable citizens and within two hours had been responsible for substantial damage in the “Hard Dig.” Records indicate that fires were allowed to burn freely and that the fire department was present, but only took action to save surrounding residents. We know this since a Capt. Joseph Wilcox, Jr. from the fire department had said as much.

Wanting a *coup de grace* to cap off the night, some proposed destroying the Ark. However, having been a night filled with arduous work, with fatigue settling in, and out of respect for of the death of a baby of one of the prostitutes, they decided to take action the following evening.

This gave those who “worked” the Ark fair warning of the mob’s intentions and allowed them to prepare to defend themselves. They took up anything that could be thrown and prepared a

sufficient amount of scalding hot water to dump on anyone. A Timothy Griffin tried to disperse the crowd with another failed attempt to read the Riot Act. The mob continued where they left off from the evening before and began to smash, burn, and demolish.

After a give and take battle, the mob brought forth a cannon, loaded a cartridge and threatened the occupants. However, this was a bluffing maneuver since the cannon was a "Quaker's" cannon or a cannon that did not actually fire anything in compliance with their tenet of non-violence. Their tactic worked and the occupants abandoned "ship" and the mob immediately seized upon the "Ark" with the same fervor they had the previous evening. They made short work of the Ark with their crowbars, ladders, axes, and other tools and the Ark was utterly destroyed.

These actions resulted in a few score individuals being summoned to give account at court in Taunton. However, everyone involved claimed to have seen and heard nothing.

The Ark Reborn

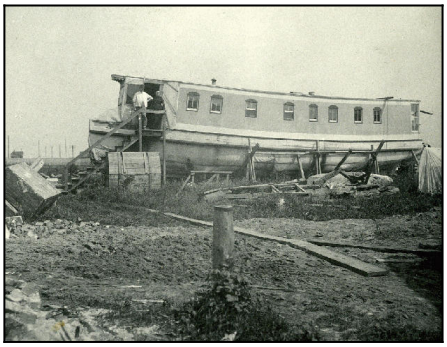
As mentioned earlier, New Bedford has never really shrugged off its darker side and it always has been and always will be part of its flavor. A physical structure was destroyed, but the darker elements did not dissolve and it didn't take long for a second Ark to pop-up.

And it didn't take long for a second riot to crop up.

The incarnation of the Ark was up and running in by 1829. This structure was the old hull of the merchant brig "The Indian Chief." and was located just a little north-west of where the first ark sat. This "business" was run by a fellow named Titus Peck, and he was described as "*…a bully and desperado,*" and his cohorts were said to terrorize the entire town, including the officials.

That spring a mysterious fire erupted and burnt down the Elm Street Methodist Episcopal Church. It was a common belief, in spite of the lack of evidence, that those responsible were Peck and his crew. It didn't take long for the rumor to spread like the church's fire and for a town meeting to be held to come up with ways to remedy the matter. Over 200 citizens showed up and town officials did their level best to quell the uprising, including many very influential personages and iconic historical figures like Zachariah Hillman, Jethro Hillman, Francis Taber, Samuel Rodman, Thomas Mandell, J.A. Parker, and Barney Taber.

This had little to no effect since a plan was derived to rid the town of the Ark once and for all and the folks were determined to stick with it. To complete what the first mob did not. At 9:00 p.m. that evening a mob formed. Part of the mob consisted of fire department officials as evidenced by the presence of a hook and ladder truck and the eyewitness report that stated *"…25 men, distinguished by their uniform coats turned inside out, trousers covered in white canvas at the knees, and slouch hats."*



Man and woman standing at the entrance to their house built out of the hull of a ship. (Spinner Publications)

The fire department was not there to save the Ark, but protect the surrounding residences and business and nothing more. With

the ringing of a local church's bells and the cry of "Jerry is in town!!! Hurrah for the Ark!!!" the mob descended down Ark Lane and began to manually smash the Ark and battle with Peck and his crew. At midnight, the mob was in a frenzy and torched the ark and by morning nothing but embers remained. The fire department was commended for what it *didn't* do even though the fire did spread and destroy many surrounding buildings.

The Start of the Protecting Society

On July 30th, 1830 a town meeting was held to try to prevent the public from rioting and a group consisting of 110 men called the Protecting Society was created and became part of the New Bedford Fire Department. These men were assigned to the task of preventing mob violence in the future.

Regardless, riots broke out in 1856 because of poor conditions on Howland and South Water streets which were full of dance halls (Oh my!), saloons, gambling houses, hotels and there were frequent fights, robberies, and other crimes. When there were indications of a mob rising, Mayor George Howland Jr. began to prepare to quell yet another similar riot, but he was too late. Saturday, April, 19 the Howland Street Riots broke out. 17 Howland Street was torn down and burned and when the fire department showed up to put the fire out, the mobsters cut the hose. There were too many mobsters for even the police to have an effect and little could be done until the men dispersed around midnight.

In 1836 William W. Swain erected a stone building at the site where the Ark stood at 160 North Water Street at the lawn in front of the current Standard-Times building. It was almost as if it was erected there to prevent any future arks from being started! This building eventually was taken over by Charles S. Paisler who had two businesses on the site and who the building would be named after.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder

#1: Apparently there was a surplus of sea vessel hulls and it wasn’t that uncommon to build a house atop them! (Whaling Museum Photo)
#2: The first Ark built by Asa Smith by the Whaling Museum
#3: This Whaling Museum photo shows a view down North Water Street from Ark Lane, where the first ark stood.
#4: The Charles Paisler building at 160 North Water Street by Spinner Publications.
#5: Perhaps the most common painting of the ark in circulation.
#6: A realistic and probably most accurate depiction of the ark that uniquely captures a building in the background. Whalin Museum.
#7: Another depiction of the Ark by the Whaling Museum.