

New Bedford's Forgotten History: Market Square and "Cheapside"

Cheapside in 1893 – Courtesy of the N.B. Whaling Museum

Once upon a time, in the early 19th century, there was a section of New Bedford that was the premiere shopping destination in the region. Far before the Dartmouth Mall was an area called Market Square. The square was a grouping of businesses and the progenitor of the modern shopping plaza.

Within this Market Square was a strip of businesses that were renown for their relatively low prices on a variety of goods and services: Cheapside. Cheapside was the eastern side of the Market Square, and was a portion of Pleasant Street where the Police Station, Our Lady's Chapel, and the New Bedford Community Development Center sit today. Of course, the success of the district meant spillage into Union Street, Mechanics Lane, William Street and others.

The "cheap" in the name Cheapside was derived from a medieval English word for "market" and Cheapside was a carry-over from the English that first settled in the area. There had been a Cheapside market in London -and even a Canadian equivalent in Nova Scotia – since as far back as the 12th century. That is not a misprint.

This district was famous, or infamous, for attracting Elizabethan poets, playwrights, and musicians. It was a popular destination and by the 16th century was *the* hub for business, commerce and trade. So it was only natural to dub this shopping destination as Cheapside. At the time Cheapside existed the population of New Bedford was 11,113 people. Surely local business men were hoping to replicate even some of the success of the English version. As evident by many of

the town and city names in New England, the English wanted to be reminded of places back home. Places like York, Jersey, Taunton, Swansea, Hampshire, Coventry and so on all have their “original” cities in England. A sort of homage, if you will.

The American version even had its own currency in the 1830s. There were a number of coins that had a one-story building on it that were issued by Francis L. Brigham who originally operated a General Goods and Wholesale Store and eventually became a dentist that had an office on 24 Purchase Street.

Some of the other proprietors listed in 1836 were Gilson Homan who ran a dry goods store, Cyrus Hooper & Co. (Asa Coombs) who sold hats, Nathaniel T. Bent, who was a reverend, Thomas Ellis, furniture sales and repair, Mary T. Kempton, a Milliner (made women’s hats), George J Pope, a Bookseller, Benjamin T. Ricketson, (Tobey & Ricketson), Fanny Robinson, another Milliner, George Sisson, who sold crockery and glass ware and the famous William A. Wall, the artist. There were also carpenters, boarding houses, a lady’s seminary, cabinet makers, dress makers, and even a “dancing master” that went by the name of William L. White. Quite the variety!

The old Market Square was removed in 1916 in the most part to erect the new Police Station that sits there today. Slowly the Market Square began to fade, and surely the Great Depression in the 1920s served as a death knell for it.

I’ve assembled all of the available images of New Bedford’s Cheapside and even a few of the English version. These are courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum and Spinner Publications, who have always been generous in allowing us to use their photos from their massive databases. Enjoy!

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Photo Details

#01: The Grace Episcopal Church on Union Street, City Hall, Market Street and Cheapside,

Fairhaven in the distance. About 1860. N.B. Whaling Museum.

#02: Francis L. Brigham's tokens for his wholesale and dry goods business. 1833.

#03: CF Cushing, Harnesses, Trucks, Bags. William St and Cheapside. N.B. Whaling Museum.

#04: Cheapside spilling into Union Street. Spinner Publications.

#05: Market and Pleasant Streets looking east down Market. Spinner Publications.

#06: Artist William A. Wall's Cabinet Card by Headley & Reed. N.B. Whaling Museum.

#07: Corner of William and Water Street in 1805 by William A. Wall.

#08: Four Corners by William A. Wall.

#09: Market and Pleasant Streets, Kirby & Bates, New Bedford Rubber Co. N.B. Whaling Museum.

#10: The Old Market Square. Spinner Publications.

#11: Northeast corner of Union and Pleasant Street in 1893 showing the decline of Cheapside. Spinner Publications.

#12: Pleasant Street showing the popularity of Cheapside. Spinner Publications.

#13-#15: Cheapside in England.