

New Bedford Streets; A Piece of Americana: Purchase Street

Welcome to our eighth installment of New Bedford Streets; A Piece of Americana. I invite you to read up on the history behind [William Street](#), [Kempton Street](#), [Middle Street](#), [Centre Street](#), [Ashley Boulevard](#), [Elm Street](#) and [Coggeshall Street](#). As usual, I'd like to re-iterate the importance of reader feedback, correction, and contributions.

In the process of exploring these streets, I try to confirm or validate statements and dates by finding multiple sources. Unfortunately, if all those sources are making their statement based on an older, incorrect source, and there isn't any dissenting information available, there's no way to know otherwise. So by all means, please join in.

In addition, when trying to validate some statements, often there is very little to no information available. I haven't decided which is worse – finding one source, or finding multiple sources, but not knowing if they were all based on an inaccuracy. So help from local historians, those who remember, oral histories and anecdotes handed down through the generations, people with private collections, and even know-it-alls help!

Modest Beginnings

While Purchase Street has always been one of the vending muscles of the city, it wasn't always as important as it is today. The street wasn't chosen to be a shopping destination from the get-go. Originally, it had a more modest name: Fourth Street. As whaling boomed, bringing money, jobs and people to New Bedford, the waterfront's success progressed further into the city. The waterfront was the first stop for many denizens.

Any businessman worth his salt would set up shop where the highest traffic was; where those who had money spent much of their time.

Naturally, the waterfront was prime real estate for any types of business, service or trade that would support the whaling industry – skilled and unskilled labor included. Shipwrights, carpenters, masons, coopers, navigators, crewmen, accountants, storage facilities, warehouses, ship supplies, entertainment, taverns, inns; virtually any business would have a greater chance of success close to the money.

To illustrate this point, when one stepped away from the wharves the city's "first" street was Front Street. While this makes no sense geographically, it does from the city's perspective. The lifeblood and financial heart of the city was at the waterfront. From the perspective of those that worked and lived here, that was the front of the city. It wouldn't take long for these businesses to pile up on top of one another and spill and sprawl westward from the wharves and Front Street. The merchants and city's officials found it prudent and practical to market and promote streets further in.

After Front Street, there were eight numbered streets; first through eighth streets. They still exist today, but a few have been renamed as their function dictated. We still have 1st, 2nd, 6th, 7th and 8th streets, but lost the middle territory. Keeping the names of these streets numbered was practical for giving directions. *"Go to the fifth street up and you'll find a blacksmith."* 3rd street was renamed Acushnet Avenue as traffic opened up and flowed to Cushnea or Acushnet. 5th street was renamed Pleasant Street perhaps because it was meant to be a break from businesses and was landscaped.



*Fourth Street – Purchase Street's Original Name
(Whaling Museum Photo)*

First Organizations to Crop Up

The first mention of Fourth Street on historical record is 1792, when New Bedford's First Post Office was established. The home of William Tobey, the first postmaster, was located on the corner of King and Fourth Street, or what we would call Union and Purchase Street today. The building served as his residence and work. A painting made by William A. Wall in 1807 captures what this spot looked like then. We know the street was still called Fourth Street at least as early as 1834 based on an extant city map. In 1837 an old Unitarian Society's meeting house became the ever popular and historically important, Liberty Hall on the corner of William and Purchase Streets. The popular entertainment destination is referred to by 1837 as being on Purchase Street. So between 1834 and 1837 the street was re-dubbed. Alas, Liberty Hall and its iconic bell were burned down in a fire in November of 1854, along with a dozen other businesses.

Over the next few decades, the city would continue to burgeon and organizations like the YMCA and St. Luke's Hospital would have facilities on Purchase Street. A few theaters would also pop up, like the Olympia Theater. Purchase Street (and Union Street) was bloated with churches, organizations, and businesses. Traffic – pedestrian, horse and public transit – would magnify to the point of being a legitimate issue. In addition, if tracks for [streetcars](#) and [trolleys](#) were to be laid down, the street *had* to be widened. The street needed to

be widened, but this turned out to be a controversial topic.

Street Widening Project

While Mayor Charles Ashley and the general populace felt the street needed broadening, some city officials and merchants were reluctant to do so. Many merchants did not want their livelihood to go on hiatus or their shop relocated while their building was razed and the project undertaken.



Broadening of Purchase Street in 1913 (Whaling Museum Photo)

In addition, those on the west side of the street felt they would be paying taxes twice. They felt they were already paying taxes and once the widening would be finished they would be responsible for paying an additional tax, called a Betterment Tax, under Massachusetts law. In addition, they would suffer with smaller facilities, meaning less inventory and revenue for shops, and landlords charging tenants less.

In *The American City*, Volume 10 Watson Randolph mentions the street was so narrow and traffic so treacherous that it “...caused danger to life.” By 1913, residents had had enough and a petition 6,000 strong was brought to the city, who followed with a majority vote approving the idea. The project would happen. Purchase and Union Streets were both broadened to support the increased traffic. The west side of Purchase

Street from Union to Elm was expanded by 16' 1/2 feet and the Merchants Bank Building on William and Purchase was completely rebuilt.

The total cost then for the Purchase Street expansion was \$373,885.72, an estimated 30 million dollars in today's money. Damages to local businesses was \$22,114.28 or approximately \$2,500,000. During the reconstruction, these businesses were either demolished or renovated. This foresight allowed Purchase Street to further grow and therefore the city to prosper.

Not many major events happened in the following decades. In 1956, a parade which drew 50,000 went down Purchase Street led by Gregory Peck who was here to promote the film premiere "Moby Dick." Citizens showed their spirit by donning 19th century garb during the parade. There was also a Captain Ahab Beard contest with an award of \$100 as well as a \$25 savings bond!

So that is how Fourth Street became Purchase Street and got its name! If you have some anecdotes or photos to share or corrections to make please comment below. As with all these articles, a discussion is better than a lecture. So please, hop right in and start yapping!

Purchase Street Timeline

1700s: Purchase Street is known as Fourth Street. A small dirt road.

1792: City's first Post Office, at the William Tobey residence opens on the corner of King & Fourth, or Union & Purchase.

1807: William Wall captures Fourth Street view in painting.

1834: Street map is made.

1837c: Unitarian Society's meeting house on William & Fourth becomes the Liberty Hall. Street is renamed Purchase Street.

1839: Purchase Street from William to Union is paved for the

first time.

1869: YMCA leases rooms at the northwest corner of Union and Purchase Streets.

1884: Private foundation St Luke's Hospital began operations at the Taber Estate at 81 Fourth St with 11 beds.

1887: Bradford Smith Building is erected at 1927-1941 Purchase Street.

1890: Photographer [James Reed](#) begins to operate a studio at 5 Purchase Street.

1896: The Dawson Building is erected at 1851 Purchase Street.

1897: Union Street Railway Car Barn and Repair Shop is built at 1959 Purchase Street. Times and Olympia Buildings erected at 908-912 and 880 – 898 Purchase Street respectively.

1906: President Crapo of Union Street Railway has police placed on Purchase Street Line for workers who refused to strike.

1913: Street widening project begins.

1914: [James Reed's](#) Studio is one of the casualties of the widening of Purchase Street.

1916: The Olympia theater is built at 883 Purchase street.

1956: Moby Dick Premiere, 50,000 strong parade, Captain Ahab Beard Contest.

1978: Union Street Railway Car Barn and Repair Shop is placed on the Historic register.

1981: The Greater New Bedford Community Health Center opens on 874 Purchase Street.

1982: The Dawson Building is placed on the Historic Register.

1983: Times and Olympia Buildings both placed on the Historic Register.

1984: Bradford Smith Building is placed on the Historic Register.

1985: C.F. Wing store closes.

2003: Fire at 2343 Purchase Street, Sturtevant & Hook Hardware & Building Supplies.

2012: Elaine Lima's iconic Black Whale Shop closes.

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