

# Seamen's Bethel and Mariners Home to be Restored



A collaborative project to restore two of the city's most iconic buildings, the Seamen's Bethel and the adjacent Mariners' Home on Johnny Cake Hill, is gathering momentum, organizers say.

Grant applications for the proposed 'Port Society Complex' have been submitted and a gala fundraiser is scheduled for March 29 at the Whaling Museum with retired Congressman Barney Frank as keynote speaker.

WHALE, New Bedford Port Society, and Working Waterfront Festival have joined forces to preserve these historic structures. Plans include making both buildings fully handicap accessible and repurposing the Mariners' Home to showcase the history and culture of the fishing industry.

Teri Bernert, Executive Director of WHALE, said that funding for the \$2.3 million project is expected to derive from several sources such as state and federal historic tax credits, the Massachusetts Cultural Council and a Community Development Block Grant.

"These historic treasures provide an anchor for the Whaling Historical Park. We need to make them fully accessible. And creating an educational venue will honor New Bedford's fishing legacy," Bernert said.

Historically, the Mariners' Home provided lodging to seafarers between voyages but it has been vacant for the past several years except for Port Society office space on the ground floor.

Paul Stubbs, Port Society treasurer and chairman of the project's development committee, said he is excited by the possibilities the project raises for his organization and the City of New Bedford.

"If we want to promote the city, we need to show what we do here," he said. "This great project will help us attract visitors and raise the visibility of our fishing community."

When complete, the planned fishing exhibits will offer visitors a look inside an industry that has made New Bedford the number one fishing port in the United States.

JMBA Plus Architects of New Bedford drew up plans for the project. A glass-fronted connector will link the two buildings. Installing an elevator within this space will permit people with disabilities to freely enter the Bethel and the upper floors of the Mariners' Home for the first time. Structural alterations to the historic structures will be minimal, according to architect Joe Booth.

The Port Society, WHALE, and the Working Waterfront Festival are working together to raise funds for the proposed complex, scheduled for completion in 2015. "We look at this as another way to enhance the cultural life of the city," said Fred Toomey, president of the Port Society. In support of the project, the New Bedford Whaling Museum has opened its Jacobs Gallery as a major sponsor for the group's inaugural fundraiser.

'Taste of the Port,' on March 29 will feature an open bar, seafood specialties prepared by local chefs and jazz with Peter Arteaga. For more information or to purchase tickets contact WHALE at (508) 997-1776. All proceeds benefit the New Bedford Port Society Complex.