A Moral Voyage: Mighty Theme

"To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme." - Herman Melville, Moby Dick

No matter when you start your CHC career, one goal looms in the distance: the senior thesis. It’s not a requirement per se, but it’s highly encouraged that students write one as conclusion to the CHC experience, and it’s been one of my goals since coming to UMass. But as I’m starting to learn in the process, you don't really know how to write a thesis until you dive right in.

The first step to any good thesis is to have a topic in mind. I’m writing a microhistory of the Ladies’ Branch of the New Bedford Port Society, an organization formed for the “moral improvement of seamen.” My argument is that wealthy, Quaker women who participated in the organization used it as a way to contribute to their rapidly changing urban landscape by imposing moral standards on the transient seamen.

Figuring out the topic for my thesis was the easy part. During my freshman year, I started working with Professor Miller in the history department on her research for a National Park Service study on New Bedford, which looks into the ethnography of whalers and how the city has depicted or presented that diversity in its whaling history. When it came time to register for my thesis, I wanted to continue investigating New Bedford’s whaling history by using what I’d already learned through my work with Prof. Miller. But I also wanted to challenge myself by taking it in a new direction. I had learned a lot about didn’t know how the rest of the city operated and how the industry fit into the day-to-day lives of people. I was also interested in investigating this concept of “two New Bedfords” – the juxtaposition of the working class with the wealthy whaling elite. After some preliminary research, I thought the Port Society would be a great way
to look into the community at large.

So that’s my first piece of advice: it’s a lot easier for this process if you start with something you’ve worked with before. Having that background information made my the thesis already seem less intimidating, and gave me a chance to work with materials and primary sources I already knew about with a new perspective.

Blog Column: A Moral Voyage

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