#MyResearchStory, pt. 1/3: Objective

This is the first of three posts for #MyResearchStory, giving a general overview of my thesis topic and the progress I've made over the last six months. I've taken you through the highs and lows of thesis research and writing, but not I wanted to share what it is I've been doing and how all this craziness fits together.

As I've mentioned before, my thesis looks at a women's organization in New Bedford, Massachusetts, at the height of the whaling industry. It's entitled "Charity as Coercion: The Ladies' Branch of the New Bedford Port Society, 1833-1880." I initially wanted to write a microhistory of this organization to understand what a woman's life was like in the nineteenth century. Especially in context with contemporary women's reform movements, I wanted to talk about this group as a place of socializing and friendship in championing an important cause.

But after doing extensive research, I learned the more interesting story was the cause they were championing: the relationship between the Ladies' Branch and the mariners they intended to help. This was just one of many organizations seeking to aleve public welfare in New Bedford. The town reacted strongly to changes along the waterfront, as the population grew exponentially and the town transformed into the whaling capital of the world. There was a lot more for me to understand in terms of class and racial stratification within the town, especially in how the upper-class citizens viewed those changing demographics. I also learned that New Bedford, as a case of port cities, wasn't the only place experiencing this change and developing charitable aid societies as solutions. Most importantly though, I had a lot of catching up to do in terms of studying women's history and how to put the ladies back into the narrative of New Bedford whaling.
My thesis objective has significantly changed from last spring when I first drafted my proposal. It's along the same lines, sure - I'm still looking at this organization and New Bedford and maritime history. But over time, my research questions and my argument have shaped my thesis into something a lot stronger and valuable to my education as a historian. And that's a good thing! I'm a better student for it.

Blog Column:
A Moral Voyage

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