#MyResearchStory, pt. 2/3: Methodology

So now that you've learned about the topic of my research, you're probably wondering: where did I find all this information? (At least, that's the question that keeps appearing in my committee's comments - SOURCE???)

Thanks to my previous experience, I had a good idea of the depositories and archives to visit for the materials I needed. I started my research by looking through the records of the Ladies' Branch of the Port Society on loan to the New Bedford Whaling Museum - lots of meeting minutes, scrapbooks, and newspaper articles documenting the group's existence. I supplemented this with the annual reports of the Port Society's male branch at the Free Public Library's special collections.

From there, I had a lot of names to work with, and I used Ancestry Library's database to get a sense of the demographics of the Port Society's members. I spent hours analyzing census records and city directories, or scanning through reels of microfilm for newspapers and crew lists. I also investigated important figures in the organization, reading some of their personal papers and diaries, to understand how they contributed to the Port Society's success. For broader understanding of the nature of port societies, I reviewed the newsletters, reports, and other publications of similar voluntary associations involved with maritime missionary groups. To get a sense of how New Bedford was changing, I read contemporary accounts, viewed city directories over time, and checked out lots of maps. And, of course, I had a stack of books about three-feet high with secondary sources. From women’s history to maritime history to reform history, I read/skimmed probably thirty books or so to inform my work of previous scholarly literature.
When you're writing a thesis, you're bound to find sources just about anywhere. The real issue is having the time to sort through them and knowing which ones are the most important for your research. The trick is to keep great notes and keep track of them as you work your way through the madness.

Blog Column:
A Moral Voyage

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