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CITY OF NEW BEDFORD
Jonathan F. Mitchell, Mayor

Date: Thursday, April 9, 2026
For Immediate Release

PRESS RELEASE

City to Mark 150th Anniversary of Catalpa Rescue

NEW BEDFORD – On April 17, Mayor Jon Mitchell, the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, and the New Bedford Port Society will commemorate the 150th anniversary of the world-famous rescue of six Irish revolutionaries by the New Bedford whaleship Catalpa.

In April 1876, New Bedford whaling captain George Anthony led the daring escape mission to an Australian prison colony that has all the elements of a Hollywood blockbuster: undercover agents, vicious storms, a furious race to safety, and an Australian police vessel's shot across the bow of the out-manned, out-gunned Catalpa that forced Capt. Anthony into a life-or-death decision.

The story of the Catalpa rescue begins in 1865, when the Dublin Castle Administration arrested members of the Irish Republic Brotherhood and sent 62 of them to the Fremantle prison in Western Australia in 1868. One of those prisoners, John Boyle O'Reilly, escaped the prison in 1869 with the help of a local priest and found freedom in Boston. Five years later in 1874, O'Reilly and another former prisoner hatched a plan to commission a ship, sail to the penal colony and rescue the remaining Irish revolutionaries.

The plan took months to develop with O'Reilly and a small group of conspirators raising money and purchasing the 200-ton, three-mast Catalpa for \$5,500. They hired the 28-year-old Anthony, who captained the vessel out of New Bedford on April 29, 1875 for the year-long voyage.

The conspirators also recruited John J. Breslin and Thomas Desmond to go undercover in Australia and manage the contact and communication with the prisoners. Beslin, portraying an American businessman, and Desmond, who took a job as a wheelwright, arrived in Western Australia in September 1875 and spent months arranging the logistics of the escape while awaiting the Catalpa's arrival.

The New Bedford whaleship arrived in Australia in March 1876, and the plan called to wait until April 6 for the escape. However, Royal Navy ships were found in the harbor, forcing the postponement of the operation until April 17. That morning, with the Catalpa anchored in international waters off the coast of Western Australia, Capt. Anthony took a crew on the long journey to the coast in a whaleboat.

While Capt. Anthony was making his way to shore, the six Irish revolutionaries were performing hard labor outside the walls of the prison when they took off toward a nearby road. Waiting for them were Breslin and Desmond. They jumped in coaches with horses galloping for more than two hours to the Rockingham coast, where Capt. Anthony and crew awaited their arrival.

With a long journey to international waters ahead of them, Capt. Anthony and crew collected the prisoners and headed out to sea. They rowed and sailed well into the night, when a vicious storm struck, breaking the whaleboat's mast and nearly capsizing the ship in the Indian Ocean. They survived the night and spotted the Catalpa off in the distance in the morning. They rowed toward the whaleship, which spotted the rescue boat and began heading toward them in the afternoon. Just as Capt. Anthony's crew realized the Catalpa was heading toward them, they noticed off in the distance another ship was heading in their direction: a police ship from the coast. Capt. Anthony urged the men to row as hard as they could, and they pulled up along the Catalpa minutes before the police vessel arrived. The authorities turned around and headed back to shore, and the Catalpa turned and headed toward the open seas.

The following morning, April 19, 1876, the government sent a heavily armored steamship to intercept the Catalpa and bring the prisoners back. The ship pulled alongside the Catalpa in international waters and fired a cannon shot across the bow with a warning to halt. Capt. Anthony, knowing his ship was out-gunned and out-manned, hoisted an American Flag up the Catalpa's mast and declared that any attack on the ship would be an attack on America. Not wanting to start an international incident with the Americans, the steam-powered police vessel turned around and headed home, with the Catalpa sailing into open waters and on its way to the U.S.

When the Catalpa returned to America on Aug. 19, 1876, it received a hero's welcome.

On April 16, Mayor Mitchell will be presented with a replica of the flag Capt. Anthony hoisted during the rescue mission at the Irish Maritime Awards ceremony in New York, where he will receive the Spirit of the Catalpa honor. Mayor Mitchell will raise that flag at a brief ceremony at New Bedford City Hall on Friday, April 17, at 5 p.m.

Prior to the flag-raising, a wreath-laying ceremony will be held at 4 p.m. at Capt. Anthony's grave in Rural Cemetery. Capping off the commemoration of the Catalpa's 150th anniversary at 5:30 p.m. will be a lecture at Seamen's Bethel by Peter Stevens, author of "The Voyage of the Catalpa: A Perilous Journey and Six Irish Rebels' Escape to Freedom." The lecture will include a

question-and-answer session, and is free and open to the public. Due to limited seating, advance registration for the lecture is required. Registration info can be found online on the City's website, or by [clicking here](#).