

New Bedford's Historic District Gas Explosions – January 18, 1977



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The tranquility of the predawn hours of that frigid January morning was abruptly shattered, like the thousands of window panes throughout the downtown. Three massive explosions disintegrated the historic buildings fronting on Union Street between Water and Johnny Cake Hill on Tuesday, January 18, 1977. The epicenter of the damage, Johnny Cake Hill, shook so violently that it caused cracks in the brick walls of the Whaling Museum's new Cook Memorial Theater, constructed six years earlier.

The explosions were later determined to be caused by prolonged arctic temperatures that had penetrated deep enough below ground causing a 90-lb. gas main to split at a welded seam and fill the Union street storefronts with gas. At about quarter to five in the morning, O'Malley's Tavern located at 67 Union blew up in a massive fireball, obliterating the building instantaneously in a fifty-foot wall of flame.



From its basement the entire structure had slowly filled with gas; detonation came from the spark of a thermostat calling for heat. Next door, the Macomber-Sylvia Building, newly restored by WHALE also went up in the conflagration and spread to the roof the Sundial Building. On the other side of the hill, the 1872 Eggers Building had its entire façade blown off with the rest of the structure mostly burned. Nearly sixty buildings in the Central Business District sustained some damage due to the blasts (Standard-Times, 3/6/77).



Fire crews could not put out the fire until the gas mains were turn off, otherwise there was risk of more explosions as gas continued to fill adjacent buildings, including the Whaling Museum.



The initial blast was so powerful that it shattered most of the Museum's windows, fracturing dozens of sashes and separating window casements from their brick walls enclosures. Shards of glass showered the Bourne Building, embedding themselves like missiles into the canvas sails of the famous half-scale model of the whaleship Lagoda. As luck would have it, this early damage may have help avert total disaster, as the now open-air Whaling Museum vented any gas that had found its way in.



Miraculously, New Bedford's two most important landmarks, the Whaling Museum and the Seamen's Bethel – the veritable heart and soul of the city's celebrated maritime past – stood together atop their hill and remained relatively unscathed as fire raged round about them.





Today, almost no trace remains of the catastrophe, due to the unremitting efforts of a generation of caring individuals, groups and organizations, who

dedicated themselves to a thousand untold works of historic preservation, new construction, beatification and enhancements, side by side and with the support of municipal, state and federal leaders. As the sun rose that frigid morning, no one who surveyed the gut-wrenching scene of utter destruction could have imagined that these smothering ruins would be transformed into a national park in just two decades' time.



New Bedford's response to the 1977 Gas Explosions is an exemplar of its fortitude and resilience. No historic preservation project today comes close to matching the seeming impossibility of 1977 challenge. Restoration and adaptive reuse for city landmarks such as the Armory, Fort Taber, the Orpheum, First Baptist Church and others must be assessed by the 1977 litmus test.

The question is not whether we can do it, but whether we have the will to do it. As Rochefoucauld famously said, "We have more ability than will power, and it is often an excuse to ourselves that we imagine that things are impossible."



Richard C. Kugler, Whaling Museum Director, pauses to catch his breath as he hauls as many museum treasures as possible to safety with the help of firefighters and volunteers on the morning of January 18, 1977. (Standard-Times)