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Report: Melville Society—Bezanson Archive Fellowship 2016

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*Melville Society—Bezanson
Archive Fellowship 2016*

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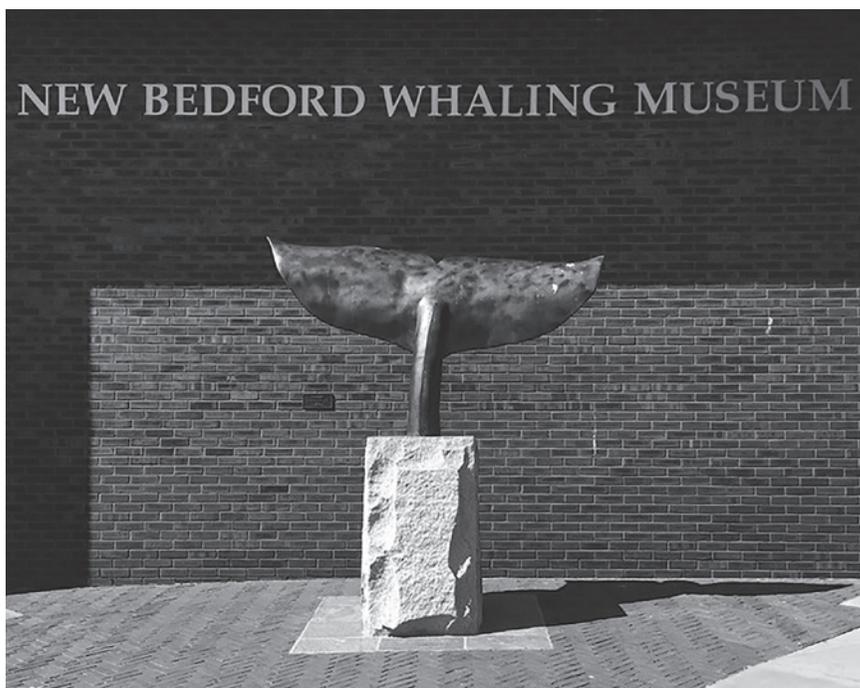


Fig. 1. Entrance to the New Bedford Whaling Museum. The Melville Society Archive is housed within its Research Library. Photo courtesy of Meredith Farmer.

In July 2016, I had the opportunity to read through the papers of the Melville Society Archive, which are housed in a brand-new space at the New Bedford Whaling Museum's Research Library in Massachusetts. I proposed to read material for my first book project, *Melville's Ontology*, along with a collection that I am co-editing with Jonathan Schroeder, *Rethinking Ahab: Melville and the*

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Materialist Turn. One claim at the heart of our collection is that, in the early 1950s, Melville criticism abruptly shifted away from work that engaged with the material world. Instead scholars emphasized a Cold War frame for *Moby-Dick*, focusing intensely on the leadership (or lack thereof) of monomaniacal Captain Ahab. When I arrived, I was especially interested in learning more about Tyrus Hillway, the founder and first Secretary of the Melville Society, who never converted his 1944 dissertation into a book on Melville and science. I wanted to know why. And the archives told a story that I had not anticipated: in 1950 Tyrus Hillway stopped work on “Melville and Nineteenth-Century Science” to write a play called *Captain Ahab*. This transformation bolstered the claim that I wanted to make and provided the perfect anecdote for our collection’s introduction. And yet this detail only scratched the surface of what I discovered when I got lost in the Melville Society Archive. The richness of the files in “Melville Society Archive, Box 1 of 5” took me down a different path (see Fig. 2).

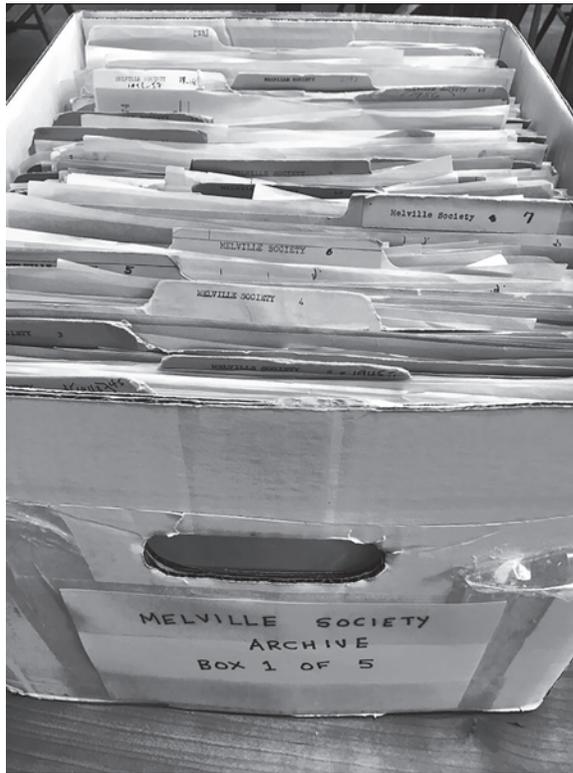


Fig. 2. Melville Society Archive Box 1 of 5, which contains the earliest records of The Melville Society. Photo courtesy of Meredith Farmer.

Just before my trip to New Bedford, I learned that I was about to become the Associate Secretary for Programs and Conferences of the Melville Society. So with boxes of the Society's history in front of me—and an unexpectedly complex set of identifications with Tyrus Hillway—I found myself totally absorbed by the story of the Society. It unfolded through letters by a number of scholars whose work I had read but will never view in quite the same way. I was absolutely captivated. And I hope the best way to show the real strengths of these collections is to share a brief overview of what I was able to learn about our history in only ten days.

In the spring of 1945, Tyrus Hillway sent out a set of invitations to join the new Melville Society for the modest fee of \$1. Replies indicate that the group had two goals: to select editors for a centenary edition of collected works and to build a Melville Room that could hold important relevant collections. Potential members were invited to join. And letters poured in. Every response in the Society's archives was an acceptance, including a number of notes from people who indicated that they did not generally join groups. Most convey strong approval for Hillway's project: an ambitious undertaking for a scholar a year out of defending his dissertation at Yale. Many sent names of potential board members or of junior scholars who might receive invitations. A handful sent offprints of essays that could be included in the new Melville Room's library. And a few wondered whether membership should be open to anyone with "an interest in Melville," resisting the idea of an organization that would only represent scholars: a stance that still shapes the Society today.

In May of 1945, a group of scholars from Princeton, Columbia, and New York University—including Jack Birss, Henry Wells, and Willard Thorp—met with Hillway in New York to discuss rapidly developing plans. The group seems to have been based in New York City. Jay Leyda writes from the Northeast as often as anywhere else, and when Hillway was forced to move West to Colorado because of his son's health problems, the distance and a desire to return were at the heart of all his letters. Even so, by July, Howard P. Vincent, then a professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology, was unexpectedly named General Editor for developing the first "Complete Works of Herman Melville" with Packard Press/Hendricks House, overseen by Walter Hendricks. This prompted the group's first crisis, which unfolds dramatically in a series of letters and postcards in the Melville Society Archive.

Hillway had been working to develop the first scholarly edition of Melville's complete works, which he wanted to publish with either Harvard or Yale University Press. (Harvard held papers restricted for use with their own University Press, and at Yale Stanley Williams advised a remarkable number of early Melville scholars). Unfortunately Hendricks's edition created clear conflicts. It

did not have the kind of scholarly standing that Hillway and a number of other Melvilleans imagined. And Hillway and his society were not formally involved. In the archives we see Hillway struggling to find a way to preserve his project, reaching out to his contacts with a growing sense of anxiety and concern about a series of imagined futures: the future of his own career as he struggled to find employment at a research university, the future of the fledgling Melville Society stripped of its primary goal of producing scholarly editions of Melville's collected works, and even the future of Melville as a canonical author.

In many ways Vincent's coup was unexpected. Harrison Hayford and Howard Vincent seem to have been isolated in Chicago, with Merton Sealts frequently regretting the degree to which he was even more isolated in rural Wisconsin. (I had no sense of the degree to which Chicago was not even on the map for scholars from the Northeast. And this story makes the eventual production of the Northwestern-Newberry edition seem even more historically contingent and geographically fascinating).

Prestige, not surprisingly, was also a major factor in the search for a publisher. Willard Thorp, for example, wanted to publish with Oxford, the press that was about to release the first scholarly edition of *Moby-Dick*, which he had edited. But he was also willing to consider his own university press at Princeton after Vincent's competing series destroyed the possibility of work with Harvard or with Yale. This battle over geography and exclusivity seems to have shaped the Society throughout its first decade. And as the Hendricks series unfolded—all too slowly—under intense scrutiny from scholars in and beyond the Northeast, each of its setbacks and failures was discussed in detail with a mixed sense of triumph and of disappointment.

Meanwhile the group's second goal—to create a Melville Room or depository—was still being considered but with less urgency and far less passion. Here some scholars, not surprisingly, pushed for a major city on the East Coast. Williams and others, of course, pushed for Yale. A competing group in Pittsfield offered to provide substantial funding for the project, which led to concern about accessibility alongside renewed conflicts about whether the Society was a national organization with a reach that included a public beyond the Academy. For example, R.E. Spiller cautioned that the Society should “think twice before putting the Melville Room off in Pittsfield for sentimental reasons.” He found that “some center of learning would be much better for the cause.” Spiller went on to explain that framing an American author as an essential part of literary history, deserving of institutional space and concomitant recognition, would be an important development for the entire field of American Literature.

These letters felt familiar in many ways, as they offered a voyeuristic peep into personal and professional dramas that could have happened yesterday. But

they also deepened my understanding of the Society's goals and especially its dual aims of facilitating research and outreach. A number of smaller details also resonated in interesting ways. For example, these letters showed that current concerns that not enough people are able to attend annual business meetings are by no means unique. Charles Roberts Anderson, the first President of the Melville Society, had to miss the group's second meeting and left Hillway, who essentially ran the Society for its first fifteen years, in charge of the agenda and arrangements. And yet: things also change.

The most striking aspect of these early letters is the absence of discussion of World War II—even as letters poured in to the Society from around the globe in the aftermath of the war, sent by scholars who were unsure of when they would be able to return to the United States. Sealts memorably mentions budding administrator Hillway's interest and involvement in "the readjustment question" in his letter sent from India, on "HQ 4th AACCS Wing" stationary. And here my detour into the history of the Society helped bring an answer to one of my initial questions into focus. The turn to criticism about Ahab as a kind of dictator—my research interest—became more real and more personal when I read letters by scholars who seemed to go out of their way to avoid discussions of the war. Instead, a number of them explained that they wanted a return to Melville, which they framed as a return to normalcy. At the risk of practicing bad psychoanalysis, I would suggest that, in this context, readings of Ahab seemed like a way of working through experiences that were only mentioned briefly and then immediately dismissed in letters by these scholars. There is clearly more work to do with these letters as we think about the Cold War frame that is, arguably, giving way to other perspectives, like "non-human," "materialist," or "environmental" approaches.

While I spent most of my time unexpectedly lost in boxes of institutional history, this fellowship also gave me the opportunity to wander the Whaling Museum and New Bedford at length. Highlights included the Frederick Douglass Walking Tour of New Bedford, along with the Whaling Museum's new Melville Room, which housed Michael P. Dyer's fabulous exhibit on "Mapping Ahab's 'Storied Waves': Whaling and the Geography of *Moby-Dick*." I also had the opportunity to take a number of short trips to the Houghton Library, Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, Mystic Seaport, and the spectacular exhibit on Turner's Whaling Pictures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. (This exhibit, curated by Alison Hokanson, is detailed in the Museum's Spring 2016 *Bulletin*).

I would like to end by thanking Robert K. Wallace, Wyn Kelley, Timothy Marr, Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, and the rest of the Melville Society Cultural Project team for helping make this a wonderful experience. I was not able

to spend as much time with the MSCP team as I would have liked, since the annual *Moby-Dick* Marathon and related festivities conflict with the Modern Language Association's annual conference. But I am especially grateful to Tim Marr for bringing my attention to this fellowship, to Bob Wallace for sending information about the Turner exhibit, to Wyn Kelley for answering countless questions about the Archive (and for so much encouragement along the way), and to Mary K. Bercaw Edwards for an unforgettable tour of the 1841 whale-ship *Charles W. Morgan*, which brought my reading of Melville's work to life in new ways. Thanks, also, to everyone at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, especially Librarian Mark Procknik, who helped me find a number of wonderful materials that related to Captain Ahab, told me an unforgettable story about his history, and encouraged me as I attempted to read an entire box of correspondence in one week. Last, but certainly not least, thanks to Jonathan Schroder for helping me explore "the Islands." This is all to say that my time in New Bedford as a Walter E. Bezanson Fellow was about far more than my research: it was also about fellowship. I gained so much from other Melvilleans, past and present. And it was wonderful to learn more about the long history of the Melville Society.



Fig. 3. A white whale sits proudly outside the entrance to the New Bedford Whaling Museum. Photo courtesy of Meredith Farmer.