



HISTORY

The New Bedford Lyceum Society was the nexus of community life both intellectually and culturally in nineteenth century New Bedford, once the wealthiest city per capita in America during the height of the whaling era. With the exception of the town's religious societies the Lyceum was acknowledged early on as New Bedford's oldest institution. Established in 1828, the Lyceum Society's mission was "The improvement of its members in useful knowledge and the advancement of popular education."

Its programming was as broad as it was substantial; tackling the most profound topics and social challenges of the day, and presenting some of the leading minds of the nation and beyond.

The first officers of the Lyceum were a Who's Who of New Bedford's leaders, including James B. Congdon, Benjamin Rodman and Charles W. Morgan. Considered a learned society, the Lyceum grew rapidly from its original 160 members, collecting a substantial library and attracting large audiences to its varied programs well into the second half of the nineteenth century.

At first, lectures were held in the former meeting house of the First Congregational and Unitarian Societies. In 1829, the first Lyceum Hall was erected at a cost of about \$2,000 "on the north side of William Street, a few rods west of Purchase." (Ellis, 1892)

In 1838, the building was sold and became known as Liberty Hall. It hosted many and diverse lectures, concerts and performances. Historian Leonard Bowles

Ellis noted that Liberty Hall under the auspices of the Lyceum was an important public venue for the Abolitionist movement in Massachusetts. "It became chiefly noted as the place for lyceum lectures and for lectures by the distinguished advocates of the cause of the slave." Speakers included William Lloyd Garrison, Herman Melville, Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass, Stephen Foster, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Ward Beecher, Theodore Parker, Charles Dickens and Abraham Lincoln among others.

By 1904, the Lyceum's organization had begun the process of disbanding. In 1905, The Evening Standard aptly summed up the legacy of the Lyceum in its bringing to New Bedford "lectures of national and world-wide distinction, authors and poets, editors and statesmen, scientists and speakers, and men and women of prominence from almost every aesthetic and instructive line in life: thus contributing very effectively to the intellectual advancement of the city."