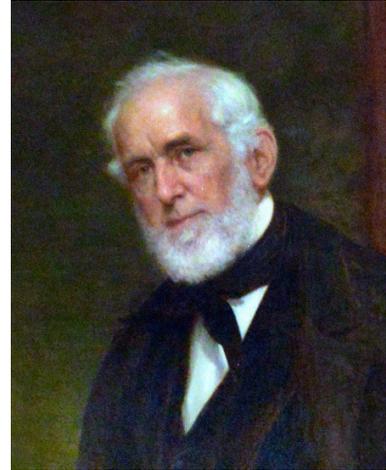


“All are and have ever been satisfied, and no schools in our Commonwealth stand higher than ours.”

– James B. Congdon, *The Liberator*, November 9, 1849

James B. Congdon (1802-1880)

James Bunker Congdon was born in New Bedford December 19, 1802. Considered one of the “founding fathers” of the City of New Bedford, Congdon penned the original draft of the City Charter and many of its ordinances, adopted March 18, 1847.¹



Portrait of James B. Congdon by James Oriel Easton, 1868. NBFPPL Collection.

The new city’s inaugural ceremonies held April 28, 1847 in the Common Council chamber saw Abraham H. Howland take the oath as the first mayor and James B. Congdon elected as the first president of the Common Council.

Indeed, there is hardly a public institution or philanthropic project of 19th century New Bedford that Congdon did not have a hand in founding and fostering. New Bedford historian Zephaniah W. Pease wrote, “He was identified with the early history of this city and with the foundation of all of the local institutions.”²

Often called the father of the New Bedford Free Public Library³, Congdon headed a citywide petition to establish the library when the state passed a law in 1851 enabling publically funded libraries. He served as one of its first trustees and oversaw the building of the first library edifice (now City Hall), officiating at the laying of its cornerstone August 28, 1856.⁴



Congdon’s vision of establishing a public library for the newly minted city prompted historian Leonard Bolles Ellis to draw comparisons between Congdon, a “birthright Quaker,” and the city government he had a large hand in framing. “The city seal just adopted had declared that the aim of the city was to shed light and knowledge; the literal was to be made figurative, and the lamp of wisdom and learning was to be lighted and tended for the benefit of all the citizens,” Ellis wrote.⁵

Congdon acted on his lifelong enthusiasm for public education. “With John Avery Parker and Timothy G. Coffin, Mr. Congdon led the fight to remove the onus of “pauper” from the public schools of the city, and served on the school committee 1833-1844.”⁶ The onus was due to “the method of managing the public schools which treated them as charity schools.”⁷

A devout adherent to the tenets of the Society of Friends, Congdon identified the Quakers’ spiritual mission of ‘spreading inner light’ with public education in all its pathways “as an effective means of diffusing among the body of the people the wisdom necessary for the preservation of popular rights and liberties.”⁸ This philosophy echoed the preamble of Friends Academy, established in New Bedford in 1810, “to diffuse useful knowledge among the members of their own religious society.”⁹

It is not surprising that Congdon, a prolific author, poet, librettist, and widely acknowledged by his contemporaries as the leading authority on the history of New Bedford, viewed public education in all its forms as “the means of intellectual culture among the people.”¹⁰ In his 1854 Annual Report of the Trustees of the New Bedford Free Public Library, Congdon saw the new library “as the cap-stone of our beautiful system of public education, the Public Library has claims upon all whose aim is the promotion of the general welfare,” and an enduring edifice in which “To train and enlighten the public mind.”¹¹



New Bedford Free Public Library, c. 1860.

Drafter of the City Charter, Congdon is the likely author of the city motto emblazoned on the City Seal described in the first ordinances. *Lucem Diffundo – I Diffuse Light.*

As a historian¹², Congdon was unsurpassed. Throughout his life, he collected a vast catalogue of materials related to New Bedford history that, as the Boston Globe noted, “Nothing was too small for his record and he made a specialty of history which would otherwise have been overlooked.”¹³

William W. Crapo, Congdon’s lifelong friend, fellow Water Board Commissioner and donor of the Whaleman Statue (1913), lauded his friend’s myriad historical contributions toward enriching New Bedford’s civic and cultural identity, fostering in the people its unique sense of place that endures even to this day. In his address during the city celebrations of the National Centennial in 1876, Crapo said, “...to our esteemed fellow-citizen James B. Congdon we owe a debt of gratitude, for he has done more than all others for the collection and preservation of those perishable materials to which the future historian and the curious student in family genealogy and biography will turn.”¹⁴

A superb writer¹⁵ with well-honed elocutionary skills, Congdon was often called upon for ceremonials and as a welcoming emissary for important visitors to the city, including former President John Quincy Adams in 1843.¹⁶

Congdon’s civic endeavors are too lengthy to document in detail here save to list some of his public service:

- Officer of the first New Bedford Guard, established January 25, 1841
- Selectman before New Bedford’s 1847 incorporation: 1833-1840, 1842-1845
- Member, City Council, representing Ward 5 during the city’s first years, 1847-1860
- Mayoral candidate in the first city election, defeated by Abraham Howland, 389 to 936
- Clerk of the first Board of Water Commissioners in 1865, appointed to establish the Quittacus waterworks.
- Congdon in 1837 worked with famed architect Russell Warren to oversee the building of the Town Hall edifice, which today houses the New Bedford Free Public Library.
- New Bedford School Committee, 1833-1844
- Treasurer, New Bedford Merchants Bank, 1825-1857
- Treasurer, City of New Bedford, 1856-1879.
- Organizer of the establishment of New Bedford Gas Light Company, 1853
- Secretary, New Bedford Institution for Savings
- Secretary, Board of Trustees, New Bedford Free Public Library

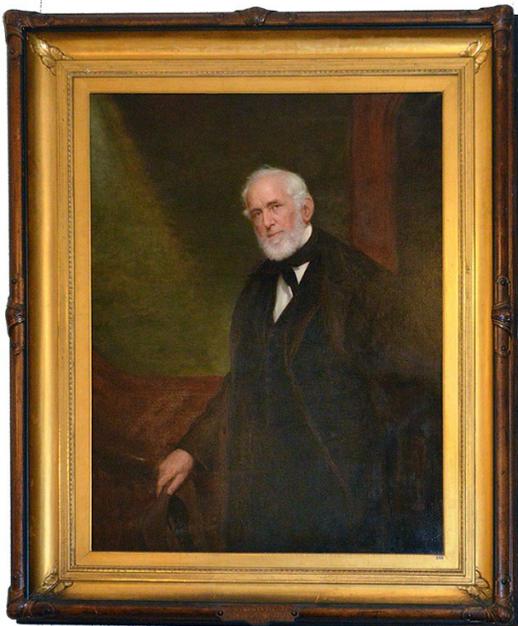
- Officer, New Bedford Port Society
- Building Committee, First Unitarian Church of New Bedford, 1838
- Chairman, Board of Health
- Recording Secretary, New Bedford Anti-Slavery Society, 1834¹⁷
- Charter member of the New Bedford Lyceum¹⁸

In 1868, Congdon’s many friends and admirers honored him by commissioning his portrait by the renowned New York artist James Oriel Easton. “His portrait, the gift of grateful friends, hangs in the main hall of the Library. It is in the most fitting place. He seems to be looking approvingly down (as if in realization of his fondest hopes) upon the Library itself, so much the work of his hands, and the volumes, so much the delight of his heart.”¹⁹



Congdon died June 10, 1880 at his home at 118 County Street, which was then located at the southeast corner of Walnut Street. At a meeting of the Board of Aldermen that night, Mayor William T. Soule “announced the death of James B. Congdon, and said it seemed fitting that the City Council should take some action in recognition of that event.”²⁰ City offices closed on the day of his funeral. Befitting his Quaker heritage a small headstone bearing only his name within the modest family plot marks his final resting place in Rural Cemetery.

Despite Mayor Soule’s pronouncements on Congdon’s merits, no official recognition was enacted. Nevertheless, many years later Congdon’s friends had not forgotten. When in 1907 a new school building was erected at Hemlock and Thompson Streets, W.W. Crapo and other prominent voices called to name the school in Congdon’s honor. The new 3-story brick schoolhouse had 16 rooms with seating for 768 students and it had an estimated value of \$123,039²¹ (approximately \$41 million in 2023 dollars).



Of New Bedford Free Public Library and the Congdon portrait that hangs there still, George Dunbar sought to make them exemplars of civic excellence. “As those who avail themselves of the advantages of an institution, which he did so much to establish and foster, pass and repass that silent image, may they sometimes remember his example, and be inspired to lead lives of faithful citizenship and disinterested philanthropy.”²²

Respectfully submitted,

Arthur P. Motta, Jr., M.A.
New Bedford Public Schools
March 11, 2024

¹ New Bedford Daily Mercury. "Obituary. James B. Congdon." New Bedford Daily Mercury, June 11, 1880, p. 2.

² Pease, Zephaniah W. History of New Bedford, Vol. I. New York: The Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1918. p. 154.

³ Ellis, Leonard Bolles. History of New Bedford and vicinity, 1602-1892. Syracuse, New York: D. Mason & Co., Publishers, 1892. p. 313.

⁴ Ibid. p. 308

⁵ Ibid. p. 311.

⁶ Wallbank, Lucy. "James Bunker Congdon." New Bedford Standard-Times, September 11, 1966.

⁷ Ellis, Leonard Bolles. History of New Bedford and vicinity, 1602-1892. Syracuse, New York: D. Mason & Co., Publishers, 1892. p. 610.

⁸ Ibid. p.608.

⁹ Ibid. p. 626.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 87.

¹¹ City Documents. "Annual Report of the Trustees of New Bedford Free Public Library." New Bedford, Mass.: Benj. Lindsey, Printers, 1854. p.78.

¹² "The historical details in the appendix to the Centennial History of New Bedford, which was published in 1876, were edited by him. He was a frequent contributor to the press in both prose and poetry; and his productions were often admirable, always creditable." (Ellis, p. 957)

¹³ Boston Globe, October 7, 1017. Boston Globe Scrapbook Reel, New Bedford Free Public Library., p. 3, p.166.

¹⁴ Crapo, William W. Centennial Address in New Bedford, 1876. New Bedford, Mass.: Published per Order of the City Council, 1876. p. 22-23

¹⁵ George H. Dunbar wrote in Congdon's biographical sketch, "He readily responded to every demand made upon his facile pen. He wrote most of the annual reports, historical sketches, and other publications of the institutions with which he was permanently identified." (Ellis, p. 957.)

¹⁶ "On the evening of September 27, 1843, John Quincy Adams, a former President of the United States, visited New Bedford as the guest of Joseph Grinnell, and was escorted from the depot by a company of forty young men with torches. The next day a public reception was tendered the distinguished guest in the town hall, Chairman of the Board of Selectmen James B. Congdon making the address of welcome. After a twenty-minute responsive speech by ex-President Adams, hundreds of citizens availed themselves of the privilege of shaking hands with their honored guest." (Ellis, p. 296)

¹⁷ In an organizing meeting called by Congdon, "An Anti-Slavery Society was formed at Lyceum Hall June 25, 1834. A constitution was adopted and the following officers elected: President, William Rotch, Jr.; vice-presidents, Joseph Ricketson, John O. Choules, Andrew Robeson, Joseph Congdon; corresponding secretary, John Burrage; recording secretary, James B. Congdon; treasurer, John F. Emerson." (Ellis, 276)

¹⁸ New Bedford Lyceum.—This society was established November 19, 1828, at a meeting called by James B. Congdon, in the office of the Merchants' Insurance Company. The officers were chosen December 8, as follows: President, Stephen Merrihew; vice-presidents, Abner Bourne and Benjamin Rodman;

treasurer, William T. Hawes; corresponding secretary, Francis Rotch ; curators, Charles W. Morgan, Joseph Congdon, Thomas A. Greene; committee of arrangements, Orville Dewey, John H. W. Page, J. W. C. Fleeming. The objects of the lyceum were, in brief: "The improvement of its members in useful knowledge and the advancement of popular education." (Ellis, 637)

¹⁹ Ellis, Leonard Bolles. History of New Bedford and vicinity, 1602-1892. Syracuse, New York: D. Mason & Co., Publishers, 1892. p. 956.

²⁰ New Bedford Daily Mercury. News column "THE CITY FATHERS." New Bedford Daily Mercury, June 11, 1880, p. 2.

²¹ City Documents. "Annual Report of the School Committee for the Year 1908." New Bedford, Mass.: New Bedford Printing Co., 1909. p.41

²² Ibid. p. 956.