On the corner of Sun and Moon Streets, in the quaint section of Boston known as North Square, stands Sacred Heart Church. Between the years 1833 and 1871, this same church was the Seamen's Bethel where the legendary Father Taylor romped and spued his sermons full of nautical imagery and wit to hundreds of sailors each Sunday for almost four decades. He was indeed a legend in his own time, and as a preacher, Father Taylor was, in many respects, unrivaled in the American pulpit. The two hundred thousand mariners of America looked to him as a friend and the twenty thousand that sailed from Boston hailed him as "Father." He was a genius who never learned to read but it was always said, particularly if there were any students of human nature in town, that they had not seen Boston until they heard the famed sailor's preacher — Father Taylor.

Appropriately, Edward Thompson Taylor was born on Christmas Day, 1793, near Richmond, Virginia. At the age of seven, young Taylor left his stepmother and their small log cabin on the outskirts of Richmond and followed an aged sea captain down to the sea. He signed on board a small brig as cabin boy bound for East India and South America. Ten years later, when Taylor was seventeen, he entered the Port of Boston for the first time. In 1811, Boston was the center of shipping, a thriving seaport of about thirty thousand, and was without a doubt an exciting site for an adventurous young man.

With his seabag slung across his broad shoulders, Taylor left the two long wharfs that projected over the mud and squeezed his way through the pushy, noisy streets of Dock Square. Crossing over into State Street, then considered the

1. Since 1649, a church has stood on the corner of Sun and Moon Streets. The first Congregational Church burned to the ground in 1676; the second in 1770. In 1871, the Sacred Heart Church bought the Seamen's Bethel and later enlarged the building.
more fashionable section of town, Taylor heard the pounding of the bells in the belfry of the Methodist Episcopal Church on Bromfield Street. Scores of people funneled down every street and alley toward the old Methodist Church. With his curiosity and innate love for preaching aroused, Taylor, still weary from
the long voyage, trailed the motley crowd which ended at the huge gothic doors of the church. To avoid the congestion, Taylor slipped through a side window and seated himself in one of the long wooden pews.

"I put in," Taylor later recalled, "and, going to the door, I saw the port was full. I up helm, unfurled topsail, and made for the gallery; entered safely, doffed cap or pennant, and scud under the bare poles to the corner pew. There I hove to, and came to anchor. The old man, Dr. Griffin, was just naming his text, which was 'But he lied unto him.'"

Taylor, steadfastly listening to Griffin's eloquent and dynamic sermon, thought to himself, "Why can't I preach so?"

But he was scarcely able to read, and one who could not read the hymns or Bible was thought hardly sufficiently educated to enter the ministry. So, off to sea again, this time joining the cause of patriotism in the War of 1812.

Taylor shipped on board the privateer Black Hawk and was out only two days when she was captured by the British man-of-war Acosto. The crew of the Black Hawk was taken to Halifax and placed in the Dartmoor Prison. Days seemed like years in the dingy bowels of the prison and the thought of never seeing the light of day again was always prevalent on the minds of the men. It was not long before the ship's crew became restless and dissatisfied with the stogy sermons of the prison chaplain and approached the commandant and asked if they could select a preacher of their own. He agreed and the crew called on Edward Taylor, who without reservations vehemently responded against the request.

"Preach!" Taylor shouted. "How can I preach, I can't even read."

But despite his reluctant mood, Taylor did agree to preach and it was quite a stirring epistle, full of satire and full of wit. He

5. Dr. Edward Dorr Griffin (1770-1837) was pastor of the Park Street Congregational Church, Boston, from 1811 to 1815. See "Personal Reminiscences of Dr. Griffin," in *Presbyterian Quarterly Review*, March, 1858.
talked about the old, foolish King and how ridiculous he was to wage war against the "sons of their fathers" and then throwing up both arms, he shouted, "You think I mean King George: I don't, I mean the Devil!"\textsuperscript{9} Thus, in the hold of a prison vessel, Father Taylor commenced his life's work among those invaluable "Sons of Neptune."

Upon release from prison, Taylor swapped the quarterdeck for the peddlers' cart and went to work for a Boston junk dealer, where he wandered about the New England countryside preaching, collecting rags, and selling tin.

The actual beginning of his ministerial career was in the small town of Saugus, Massachusetts, in about the year 1841. There a widow offered him a home if he would care for her farm. An interesting anecdote is told about his farming days.

While working on the farm in the north side of Saugus, Taylor told a boy he employed to go into the field and lead up his horse. He went and returned saying he could not find him. Taylor replied with great authority, saying, "Go over to the starboard side of the pasture, and look for the horse." The young boy started quickly but never found the animal because he didn't know which side was starboard.\textsuperscript{10}

The first time he appeared at a meeting house in Saugus was in the "Old Rock Schoolhouse." The minister had just finished his sermon when Taylor, who sat in the middle of one of the long old-fashioned seats, jumped up, removed his coat and began preaching at the top of his voice. Back and forth, he paced intermittently bringing his clenched red fist down on the old pine pulpit.\textsuperscript{11} This was E. T. Taylor. As might have been expected, the Old Rock Schoolhouse was a popular theater for Mr. Taylor's growing talents as a preacher. Through the years, Taylor gradually worked out his earlier secular calling. Converted in a Boston church in 1811, Taylor had grown steadily in character, confidence, and success.

Amos Binney, a Methodist layman and quite an influential man about town, heard Taylor in the winter of 1817, and offered to send him to Wesleyan Academy, New Market, New Hamp-

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., p. 41.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., pp. 49-50.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 63.
shire. At the time, the small New Hampshire seminary was the only Methodist school in America, but Taylor did not like school; he was too old to sit in the classes with younger students and much too ignorant (bookwise) to sit in the more advanced classes. Finally, after six weeks, his passion to return to the pulpit presided and he left the seminary.\(^{12}\)

His elder, Mr. George Pickering, sent Taylor to Marblehead, Massachusetts, a town known for its ruthless sailors and precarious crimps.\(^{13}\) Here, in this small coastal town, he met and married Deborah D. Millet (1797-1869). Deborah, later referred to as “Mother,” Taylor, gave her whole time and thought to being herself a partner in the ministry as well as a devoted mother.

In 1819, Taylor’s long-awaited dream came true — he was admitted to the New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and sent to the Scituate circuit.\(^{14}\) Between the years 1822 and 1827, Taylor bounced from one New England town to another, and finally in 1828, while preaching at Fall River, Massachusetts, his time came. The Boston Methodist Chapel was left vacant, and the conference wanted the church for the convenience of sailors.\(^{15}\) No other man in America could have fit the position of sailors’ preacher better than Father Taylor, who himself sailed before the mast.

Taylor had been a member of the Church seventeen years, a licensed preacher thirteen, and a traveling preacher nine years before coming to Boston as Port Preacher. Services for seamen were held in the old Methodist-Alley Chapel until the Boston Port Society, then newly formed, could erect a permanent church for seamen.\(^{16}\) In 1833, the Seamen’s Bethel was com-

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13. “Crimping” was an accepted part of the system of engaging crews. The crimp was usually the owner of run-down and often disreputable lodging houses who made his living out of the helplessness of seamen lodgers.
14. The Scituate Circuit comprised the towns between Dorchester and Duxbury, Massachusetts.
16. The Boston Port Society was founded in 1829, for the moral and religious improvement of seamen in the Port of Boston. Later, in 1835, the Seamen’s Aid Society was voted in as an auxiliary of the Boston Port Society. The Seamen’s Aid Society was established for the relief of destitute seamen and their families. In 1867, it became incorporated under the title of The Boston Port and Seamen’s Aid Society.
pleted and Father Taylor took his place behind the padded maroon pulpit, backed by an appropriate oil of a stormy sea. The Bethel was one of the best looking churches in Boston. It was ideally located, not too far from shipping and just a short walk from the Mariner's House and the historic home of Paul Revere.

"I set my Bethel in North Square," Father Taylor said, "because I learned to set my net where the fish ran."  

"I heard Father Taylor preach his dedication," wrote A. P. Sargent. "It was on the text 'Glory to God in the Highest; on Earth Peace, Goodwill Toward Men.' It was soon after his return from Europe and the occasion when he said, 'America is the center of the World, and the center of America is Boston, and the center of Boston is North Square, and the center of North Square is the Bethel.' "

Father Taylor's pulpit oratory did become the center of attraction. He was one of Boston's celebrities, not only for seamen but for anyone who might have drifted into his ship-cabin-looking church.

He was written of by most of the major writers of the day, but probably the most noted author to visit the Bethel was Charles Dickens, who after inquiring about certain Boston clergymen, cared only to hear Edward Taylor. In his *American Notes* (1842), Dickens describes his visit:

17. Father Taylor's pulpit and other memorabilia can be seen in the chapel (second floor) of the Mariner's House, No. 11, North Square, Boston.
18. The Mariner's House was erected in 1847, by the Boston Port Society. This boarding house for seamen is still operating today, providing a "home from home" for hundreds of seamen each year.
19. Taken from the inscription on a plaque outside Sacred Heart Church, North Square, Boston.
The only preacher I heard in Boston was Mr. Taylor, who addressed himself peculiarly to seamen, and who was once a mariner himself. I found his chapel down among the shipping, in one of the narrow, old, water-side streets, with a gay blue flag waving freely from its roof. In the gallery opposite to the pulpit were a little choir of male and female singers, a violoncello, and a violin. The preacher already sat in the pulpit, which was raised on pillars, and ornamented behind him with printed drapery of a lively and somewhat theatrical appearance. He looked a weather-beaten hard-featured man, of about six or eight and fifty; with deep lines graven as it were into his face, dark hair, and a stern, keen eye. Yet the general character of his countenance was pleasant and agreeable. The service commenced with a hymn, to which succeeded an extemporary prayer. It had the fault of frequent repetition, incidental to all such prayers; but it was plain and comprehensive in its doctrines, and breathed a tone of general sympathy and charity, which is not so common as a characteristic of this form of address to the Deity as it might be. That done he opened his discourse, taking for his text a passage from the Song of Solomon, laid upon the desk before the commencement of the service by some unknown member of the congregation: ‘Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on the arm of her beloved!’

He handled his text in all kinds of ways, and twisted it into all manners and shapes; but always ingeniously, and with a rude eloquence, well adapted to the comprehension of his hearers. Indeed if I be not mistaken, he studied their sympathies and understandings much more than the display of his own powers. His imagery was all drawn from the sea, and from incidents of a seaman’s life: and was often remarkably good.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), a close friend to Rev. Taylor, made frequent visits to the Bethel and often compared the sailors’ friend to the great orator, Daniel Webster. Emerson wrote in his journal,

21. This gay blue flag was called the Bethel Flag. It was founded by an Englishman named Zebulon Rogers and was hoisted to the mast-head of ships to signal religious worship. Originally the Bethel Flag had a blue ground, with the word BETHEL in the center, and a red star rising in the East.

I do not know whether any of my audience have known Father Taylor, but this great genius appeared thirty years ago in the humble church, the Seamen's Bethel in Boston, a man in every way remarkable - capable of doing wonders among the neglected class to which he was devoted, - and soon awaked wonder and joy in the hearer of every class, - perhaps most in the most intelligent minds.

He preached in Concord in our old church in June, 1841, and I then noted how men are always interested in man, and all the various extremes of our little village society were for once brought together in the church. Black and white, grocer, contractor, lumberman, Methodist, and preacher, joined with the permanent congregation in rare union. Nobody but Webster assembles the same extremes.

In another entry, Emerson noted, "He (Taylor) is not an expert in books, has not read Calvin or Leclere or Eichhorn, but he is perfectly sure in his generous humanity. He says touching things, plain things, cogent things, grand things, which all men must perforce to hear. He says them with hand and head and body and voice; the accompaniment is total and ever varied." 25

Walt Whitman (1819-1892), another admiring of Taylor's almost poetical sermons, said of his preaching, "Hearing such men sends to the winds all the books, and formulas, and polished speaking, and rules of oratory." 26

It has been conjectured that Herman Melville (1819-1891) patterned the preacher, Father Mapple, and the sermon in Chapter 9 of Moby Dick after Taylor. 27 Incidentally, when the New Bedford Port Society completed the erection of the Seamen's Bethel in 1832, Taylor was the one who gave the dedication address. 28

Father Taylor was always in the hearts and minds of men, no matter where or on what ocean they might be. In one of Taylor's many eulogies, a lonely sailor rose and said, "I have been places where the United States has never been heard of;

24. Ralph W. Emerson, Complete Works (Boston, 1904), Vol. 8, p. 115.
25. Ibid., p. 114.
28. Ibid., p. 4.
but not where Father Taylor had not." 29

When Richard Henry Dana, the author of that memorable classic, *Two Years Before the Mast*, returned to California, one of his first inquiries was for Father Taylor. 30

Father Taylor's sermons were always full of imagery and language of the sea, of pathos, and sarcasm, of humor, wit, and profound similes, of hope and denunciation; all unpremeditated and delivered with unstudied dramatic effect. "I am... no man's copyist," he said. "I go on my own hook; shall say what I please...."31

A Republican at heart, Taylor regularly prayed for the election of good sound businessmen to public office. When George N. Briggs was running for governor, he closed a church service on the Sunday before the election with the following supplication:

> O Lord, give us good men to rule over us, just men, temperance men, men who fear Thee, who obey Thy Commandments, men who — but, O Lord, what's the use of veering and hauling and pointing round the compass? Give us George N. Briggs for Governor!32

Taylor was the same out of the Bethel as he was in it — kind, compassionate, and friendly. He was a member of the Corner-Stone Lodge of Free Masons, a Knight Templar of the Boston Commandery and a member of the Odd Fellows. Because he lived among the poor, Taylor was frequently called upon to visit the sick, usually in the most wretched sections of Boston. An old lady who met Taylor for the first time said, "I was struck with the softness and sweetness of his voice — which was tuned just to the pitch of the nervous ear of the present invalid. His conversation was, to a remarkable degree, characterised by beauty."33

During the excited times of the 1850's, no house in Boston would have been a more secure shelter for fugitive slaves than E. T. Taylor's. He was appalled at the abolitionist movement and

32. Cleveland Amory, "The Proper Bostonian," p. 44. This anecdote was originally published in *Old Shipping Days in Boston* (State Street Trust Co., 1918).
was disturbed by their attacks on the church.\footnote{Haven and Russell, p. 312.}

He made a total of three trips to Europe. The first when his Seamen's Bethel was being completed; the second in 1842, when he made a visit to the Holy Land; the last as chaplain on board the \textit{Macedonian}.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 315-319.}

Father Taylor retired from the pulpit in 1868, and after the death of his wife in 1869, he just wandered aimlessly about the house. A few minutes past midnight on April 6, 1871, Father Taylor, the seamen's faithful companion, died at the age of seventy-seven.\footnote{Father Taylor was buried at Mount Hope Cemetery, Boston, next to his wife, in a large enclosure belonging to the Boston Port Society.} The following day, the Boston Transcript wrote:

\begin{quote}
It was high water between 11 and 12 o'clock last night, and Father Taylor passed away on the first quarter ebb at twenty minutes past midnight. Sailors generally believe that when a man dies a natural death he will breathe his last during the ebb tide. He was looked upon as one of the most individual and magnetic of companions and preachers; strangers from abroad, as well as our own citizens flocking to hear him in his own pulpit and where else he poured out in fervid oratory his full, beautiful and devout soul.\footnote{\textit{New York Times}, April 8, 1871.}
\end{quote}