

Herman Melville:

Buffalo's connections to 'Moby Dick'

They say that a friend in need is a friend, indeed. A Buffalo man was that friend to one of America's most enduring authors and perhaps saved his career.

Herman Melville (1819-1891) had met Buffalonian Richard Tobias "Toby" Greene aboard the whaling ship *Acushnet* in 1841. The two escaped the "tyrannical captain who neglected and starved his crew"¹ by jumping ship amid the Marquesas Islands. Melville and Greene allegedly were taken captive by the Typee tribe, who were thought to be cannibals. Melville had been seriously injured during their escape from the ship, so Greene was sent for medicine. He fled the island to find help. Melville eventually was freed and when he returned home to the New York City area in 1844, decided to write about the experience.



His first fictionalized account, "Typee," made Melville a minor celebrity on two fronts: Readers were "fascinated by his racy account of island life, which they took for a factual travelog."² Critics doubted the veracity of Melville's tales, and made their opinions known. Greene was back in Buffalo by then and heard about his friend's plight. He enlisted the help of Dr. Thomas A. Foote, publisher of Buffalo's first daily newspaper, the *Commercial Advertiser*. Greene wrote a letter in defense of Melville, telling the world that he was the famous "Toby" of the novel, and that he and Melville did in fact jump ship and

spend time on the island. Replying to a commentary in *The New York Evangelist*, Greene wrote:

"The Evangelist speaks rather disparagingly of the book as being too romantic to be true, and as being too severe on the missionaries. But to my object: I am the true and veritable 'Toby,' yet living, and I am happy to testify to the entire accuracy of the work so long as I was with Melville, who makes me figure so largely in it."

Melville traveled to Buffalo to visit his friend. He later wrote "The Story of Toby," which was published as a pamphlet and recounted Greene's adventures after he escaped from the island and made his way back to America.

Melville wrote more about his adventures at sea in "Omoo" and "Mardi." "Commercially, Melville never hit the high point of 'Typee' and 'Omoo' again, but while his sales declined his ambition grew."³ In 1851 he published "Moby Dick" under the title, "The Whale." The novel "was generally praised but condemned as blasphemous."⁴ Once again, there was a Buffalo connection to Melville's work - not only in the title (see related page) but in the character of Steelkit: "a Lakeman and desperado from Buffalo. 'Lakeman! - Buffalo! Pray, what is a Lakeman, and where is Buffalo?' said Don Sebastian, rising in his swinging mat of grass. 'On the eastern shore of our Lake Erie... For in their interflowing aggregate, those grand fresh-water seas of ours - Erie and Ontario, and Huron, Superior and Michigan - possess an ocean-like expansiveness, with many of the ocean's noblest traits.'"⁵

Melville also wrote "Billy Budd," "The Confidence Man" and "Bartleby the Scrivener," and developed a long friendship with fellow Massachusetts author Nathaniel Hawthorne, to whom he dedicated "Moby Dick."



*Buffalo Commercial Advertiser,
as seen in "Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo"*

Melville never told anyone how he came up with the name "Moby Dick," but some speculate a Buffalo connection.

The May 1839 edition of New York Knickerbocker Magazine included an article entitled, "Mocha Dick: or the White Whale of the Pacific," which recounted the capture of an infamous giant white sperm whale.



"By July 1846 even the Knickerbocker Magazine had forgotten its earlier version, reminding its readers of 'the sketch of 'Mocha Dick, of the Pacific,' published in the Knickerbocker many years ago...' That account may well have led Melville to look up the earlier issue, in the very month he rediscovered his lost buddy of the *Acushnet* and fellow deserter on the Marquesas, Richard Tobias Greene (inset), and began 'The Story of Toby' [the sequel to *Typee*]. May not 'Toby Dick' then have elided with 'Mocha Dick' to form that one euphonious compound, 'Moby Dick'?"

*Harold Beaver in his "Commentary"
in the 1972 Penguin Classics edition of "Moby Dick"*⁶