

**THE PORTUGUESE
IN
RHODE ISLAND
A HISTORY**

BY
M. RACHEL SOUSA BAXTER,
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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In 1975 and 1976, on the eve of the bicentennial observance, in my capacity as chairman of Rhode Island's celebration (ri76), I established eighteen ethnic heritage committees, consisting of recognized leaders of this state's major ethnocultural groups. One purpose of this move was to involve in bicentennial activities those ethnic communities whose contact with this country did not extend as far back as the Revolutionary era. I urged such groups to observe and commemorate the contributions they had made to the American and Rhode Island experience from the time of their arrival down to the bicentennial year. A much more important reason for establishing the ethnic heritage program, however, was to allow each group to present its unique contributions, customs, and folkways to its neighbors from other cultural backgrounds. Formulated under the premise that knowledge promotes understanding and understanding begets brotherhood, the program was designed to break down the ethnocentric barriers and antagonisms that hindered us from achieving that lofty motto and goal—*E pluribus unum*, one out of many.

The one task assigned to each group upon its formation was to write a brief interpretive account of its Rhode Island experience—its motives for migration, areas of settlement, cultural survivals, and economic, political, and social activities—together with an assessment of its contribution to the development of our state. Though some efforts are more sociological, subjective, anecdotal, or selective than the neat, precise historical narrative that I envisioned, each of these pamphlets in its own way makes a valuable statement to all Rhode Islanders and provides a useful self-evaluation for the group that is the subject of analysis.

After the bicentennial's expiration, the concept of an ethnic heritage pamphlet series was kept alive by the Rhode Island Heritage Commission and its tireless chairman, Robert J. McKenna. Albert T. Klyberg of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Dr. Hilliard Beller of the Rhode Island Publications Society, and, especially, the authors of the various essays have also labored to bring this project to fruition as their contribution to the 350th anniversary of the founding of the state. No historical enterprise could be more appropriate for this 1986 celebration than a recounting of the toil and the triumph of our diverse peoples: From American Indians to Southeast Asians, we are Rhode Islanders all!

Patrick T. Conley

INTRODUCTION

The Portuguese in Rhode Island — what thoughts come to mind as the average Rhode Islander of non-Portuguese origin considers this ethnic group? Does he think of a neighbor who shares gifts from his backyard garden? Does he remember a family gathering at the home of another Portuguese neighbor, a party attended by scores of relatives and accompanied by hours of singing and laughing? Or does the Rhode Islander recall a local religious festival held by the Portuguese church and a procession through the streets to honor a patron saint? Perhaps his mind turns to the food he tasted, at the feast or elsewhere—the *linguiça*, the *bacalhau*, the *malassadas*.

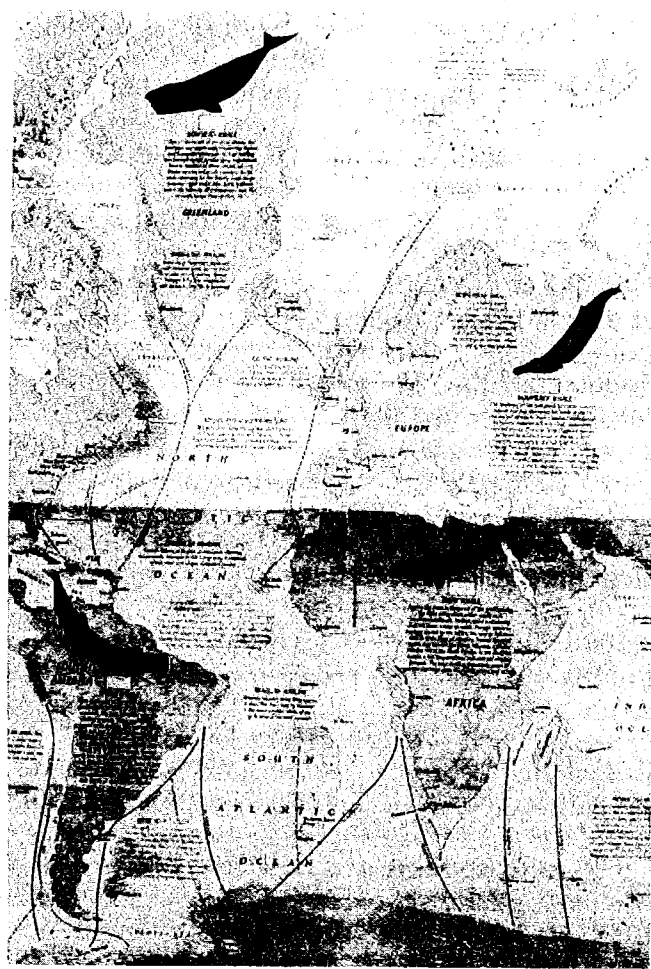
The Rhode Islander might even go beyond things he sees and consider the many Portuguese workers who help keep the state's industries functioning. He could even remember that many Portuguese seamen staffed New England's whalers in the mid-nineteenth century as well as her factories in the later part of the century.

Whatever thoughts one might have concerning the Portuguese in Rhode Island, one fact is certain: as a group, the Portuguese deserve our attention. They are a significant group in the state, yet one relatively little known and little studied. What caused these people to emigrate? What reasons, what forces, influenced them to leave their homes and families— or to transplant those families—across miles of ocean to a land of strange language and customs, where they often received a less than friendly reception? What drive propelled these immigrants to leave their farms and firm community structures to work in factories and to live as foreigners? What has made tens of thousands of Portuguese—over 10,000 in just the past ten years—leave their land to make a home in Rhode Island?

These are only first questions. What is of greater importance for this study is how the Portuguese have reacted to

Rhode Island—and, in turn, how Rhode Island has reacted and responded to the Portuguese. What did the Portuguese find when they arrived in Rhode Island? How did they live and work? How did they respond to a new culture? What societies and organizations did they encounter to help them deal with their situation? How did their own culture fare in the New World? What did they take from Rhode Island—and more importantly, what have they given to their new land?

The Portuguese, just as any immigrant group, have brought more than mere numbers to America. They have brought their culture, their hopes, and their dreams. America

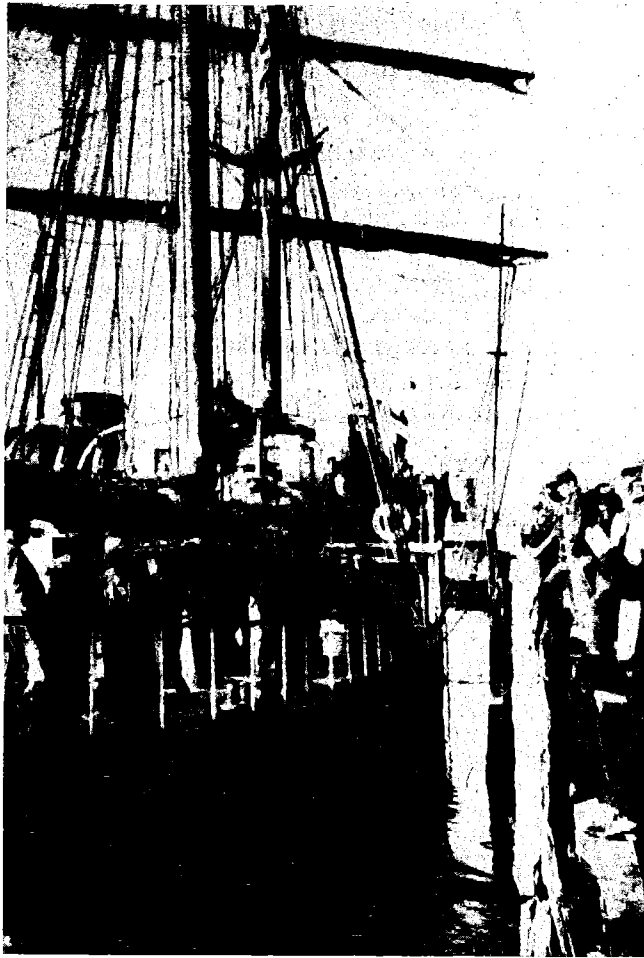


has been called a "nation of immigrants." She was built and nurtured by the toil and ingenuity of successive waves of immigration. Her culture is a blend of many cultures, and her dreams are constantly renewed by new dreamers.

Immigration has been a great source of strength and vitality for the United States, and not only in the economic sense of new workers and consumers. Immigration reflects an optimism about the future of our country. The immigrants believe they have a better chance in America; they have faith in the potentialities of life here. And America, by welcoming the immigrants, illustrates a faith that she is a land of hope and opportunity, where dreams *can* be fulfilled, where a better, richer, and freer life *can* be found.

Surely our state fits squarely into this framework, since Rhode Island has significant numbers of immigrant groups—groups that have enriched her, both economically and culturally. And the Portuguese are excellent examples of the classic "immigrant experience." They come to America with hopes and dreams, which they see fulfilled in themselves and in their children. They come with a faith in progress and in the future—and in themselves. They work hard, they achieve, and they form an attachment to the new land, where they will stay and raise their families.

The strength that Rhode Island, and the United States, have gained from their Portuguese immigrants—the fresh ideas, spirit of hope, and belief in the future—can be expressed in the words of the late President John F. Kennedy: "The secret of America," Kennedy said, is that of "a nation of people with the fresh memory of old traditions who dared to explore new frontiers."



Packet ship *Madaian* arriving at Providence River dock adjacent to the Point Street Bridge. Photo courtesy of Joseph "Bud" Latham and the Rhode Island Department of State Library Services.

HISTORY

The Portuguese are fairly recent immigrants to Rhode Island, and to the United States in general; that is, they are recent in their large numbers, for there has been a small Portuguese population here since the colonial era. In essence, the Portuguese influence is at the very root of American history. The Portuguese were the European leaders during the fifteenth-century Age of Discovery. During this period European nations desired to find a route to the rich trading centers of the Orient that was safer and faster than the dangerous, slow overland path. It was the Portuguese explorers, taught by Prince Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), who insisted that ships could sail around the tip of Africa and on to the East. In their fast new ships, called caravels, the Portuguese bravely accomplished their goal. In 1488 Bartholomew Dias reached the tip of Africa and named it the Cape of Good Hope. In 1498 Vasco da Gama continued on to India. Bit by bit they led all of Europe to strange and distant lands.

The Portuguese were not unique in their desire to explore unknown areas. What was unique, however, was their courage to be the first, to venture forth where many thought sea monsters, fires, and certain death waited. Neither were they merely explorers. The Portuguese colonized and built an empire during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the mid 1400s they settled the Azores and Madeira Islands in the Atlantic off the coast of Portugal. Later they moved on to colonize Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique in Africa and São

Tomé, Príncipe, and the Cape Verde Islands off the west coast of Africa. Other colonies were established in such distant places as Goa, Damão, and Diu in India; Aden on the Red Sea; Macau on the southern coast of China; and Timor in Indonesia.

Prince Henry had established a school of navigation at the Portuguese port of Sagres. Christopher Columbus studied there in 1476, imbibing the spirit of discovery; Portugal was already the world center of navigation, and Columbus went there to further develop his knowledge of navigation and map making. It was also from Portugal that Columbus gained invaluable experience in voyages to Iceland (1477), Madeira (1478), and the west coast of Africa (1483). He married Felipa Moniz, the daughter of the prominent Portuguese navigator Bartolomeu Perestrelo, and for several years lived in Madeira. His studies in Portugal convinced him that the earth was round, and he conceived the idea of sailing due west to Asia to reach the Indies. It was for a route to India that he was searching when he sailed west and eventually landed in what is today the West Indies. Although the Portuguese government declined to sponsor the man who dreamed of sailing the western seas, it is certain that Portugal had helped train and influence his adventurous spirit.

As for Portuguese exploration in the New World, in 1500 Pedro Alvares Cabral discovered and took possession for Portugal of the area now known as Brazil, and Miguel Corte-Real is said to have explored the Cape Cod and Narragansett Bay area a century before the establishment of the Plymouth Colony. It is also not outside the realm of possibility that Portuguese fishermen had reached North America much earlier than history tells us. Had the disastrous earthquake of 1755 not destroyed priceless archives in Lisbon, perhaps proof of American discoveries would be available to us today.

Basically, Portuguese immigration to North America—and to Rhode Island—occurred in four stages. In 1658 fifteen Jewish families sailed to Newport from New Amsterdam (New York). These Jews, called Sephardim, had originally come from Portugal. The religious persecution of Jews that was rampant in Europe at this time had forced them to leave Portugal. Eventually they found their way to Brazil. Here they again met with animosity, and so they sailed to New Amsterdam and finally to Newport, Rhode Island, where they settled and prospered. A

little more than a century later (1763) another group of Portuguese Jewish refugees founded Touro, the oldest synagogue in North America. Many of the Sephardic Jews contributed financially to the Revolutionary cause. This group, which included Aaron Lopez, one of Newport's most prosperous merchants, dispersed in the years following independence.

The next period of Portuguese immigration to and settlement in North America occurred during the nineteenth-century whaling period. During the flush, prosperous whaling era (1830-1860), ship captains sailing from such ports as New Bedford and Fall River, Massachusetts, would stop in the Azores, and here they would take on Portuguese sailors to replenish their crews. Whaling ships might also stop in the Cape Verde Islands, and again captains would take on mariners, who were more than willing to escape the poverty of the islands (although they often fared little better on the whalers).

Many of these Azoreans and Cape Verdeans remained in America after the whaling industry declined. They settled in the New Bedford and Providence areas, sent for their families, and went to work in the newly developing textile and cotton industries. In these trades they supplied the abundant, inexpensive labor force so necessary for a burgeoning industrial economy. Some of the Portuguese also settled on the land and became farmers in such places as Little Compton and Portsmouth, Rhode Island.

The third phase of Portuguese immigration took place during the five decades from 1871 to 1921. The number of immigrants swelled during these years until in 1921 alone 19,195 Portuguese arrived. Table 1 shows the numbers of Portuguese arriving in America between 1871 and 1930.

TABLE 1

Years	Number of Portuguese Arriving
1871-1880	14,082
1881-1890	16,978
1891-1900	27,508
1901-1910	69,149
1911-1920	89,732
1921-1930	29,994
	(including 19,195 in 1921)
Total: 1871-1930	247,443

Many of the Portuguese immigrants to the United States worked in New England's textile mills, once again providing a cheap and plentiful labor force, a vital component of the rapid industrialization of the United States. Without such a labor force our country would never have attained its unprecedented prosperity.

Rhode Island received quite a large share of the Portuguese immigrants. In fact, only Massachusetts and California have larger Portuguese populations. Table 2 provides yearly figures, beginning in 1897 and continuing through 1990, of the number of Portuguese immigrants naming Rhode Island as their intended residence.

TABLE 2

Year Ending	Portuguese Immigrants	Year Ending	Portuguese Immigrants
1897	131	1921	2,569
1898	159	1922	148
1899	216	1923	297
1900	383	1924	427
1901	421	1925	65
1902	535	1926	106
1903	1,029	1927	61
1904	769	1928	84
1905	467	1929	84
1906	1,020	1930	79
1907	745	1931	47
1908	534	1932	29
1909	307	1933-1967	No figures available
1910	614	1968	1,445
1911	493	1969	2,194
1912	780	1970	1,577
1913	1,333	1971	1,459
1914	960	1972	1,143
1915	441	1973	1,061
1916	1,147	1974	1,009
1917	1,206	1975	1,114
1918	257	1976	903
1919	98	1977	1,345
1920	2,127	1978	1,285
		1990	1,361

Although the majority of Portuguese arriving in New England were from the Azores, there was also an incoming population of Continentals. Immigration from the continent began in 1910, with the social and political upheavals caused by

the founding of the Portuguese republic. For many, however, economic improvement was still the prime motivation for emigrating from Portugal.

In 1924, with the passage of the National Origins Quota Act by the United States Congress, immigration to this country was virtually cut off. The climate of opinion in the United States at this time was strongly hostile to foreigners, and the 1924 law was an ideal mirror of the times. This act reduced the yearly number of incoming foreigners to 2 percent of the number of that ethnic group residing in the United States in 1890. The law was especially detrimental to recent immigrant groups, such as the Portuguese, who had not reached high numbers until after 1890. The Quota Act was specifically designed to exclude such "new immigrants," who were considered undesirable foreign elements by many of the older immigrant groups. And yet a Portuguese community had already been established in Rhode Island. In addition, there was a clause in the Quota Act allowing for the immigration of spouses and children of naturalized citizens. This loophole undoubtedly aided many Portuguese.

In the late 1950s emergency legislation was passed specifically to facilitate Portuguese immigration to the United States. Volcanic eruptions in the Azores caused Congress to allow a brief flow of Portuguese to immigrate from these islands.

In 1965 the Quota Act was lifted and a new immigration law, initially proposed by President John F. Kennedy, was signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson. This law, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, established preferential categories of immigrants, which included spouses and unmarried children of resident aliens and brothers and sisters (and their children) of citizens. Thus began the fourth phase of Portuguese immigration. The Portuguese once again surged to America and to Rhode Island. Between 1964 and 1974, 100,000 arrived in the United States.

It was not only family ties—although these were strong—that brought this post-1965 influx of Portuguese to the United States: once again the economic underdevelopment of Portugal and the job market in this country were motivating factors. This large number of immigrants was thus lured by close family ties, a strong job market, and a desire to leave behind the weak economy of Portugal. Here the hardworking

immigrant could see concrete financial and material results: he could improve his chances for a stable and secure future for himself and for his family. This is clearly evident in Rhode Island, where one can easily observe diligent Portuguese families which, within a matter of a few years after their arrival, became property owners.

As we have mentioned, the main body of Portuguese in the United States originates from the Azores, especially from the island of São Miguel. This is also true of the Portuguese in Rhode Island. The areas of heaviest Portuguese settlement in Rhode Island—primarily of Azorean Portuguese—are Bristol, the Fox Point and Washington Park sections of Providence, Pawtucket, and East Providence. In the twentieth century, when more Continentals began arriving in Rhode Island, a large proportion of this group settled in Valley Falls, Cumberland. In Central Falls there is a community of Portuguese from the Madeira Islands. There are also sizable numbers of Portuguese residing in Jamestown, Little Compton, Tiverton, Portsmouth, Middletown, Newport, and West Warwick, with smaller communities in Warren, Cranston, and Warwick.

PORTUGUESE FARMERS in Rhode Island

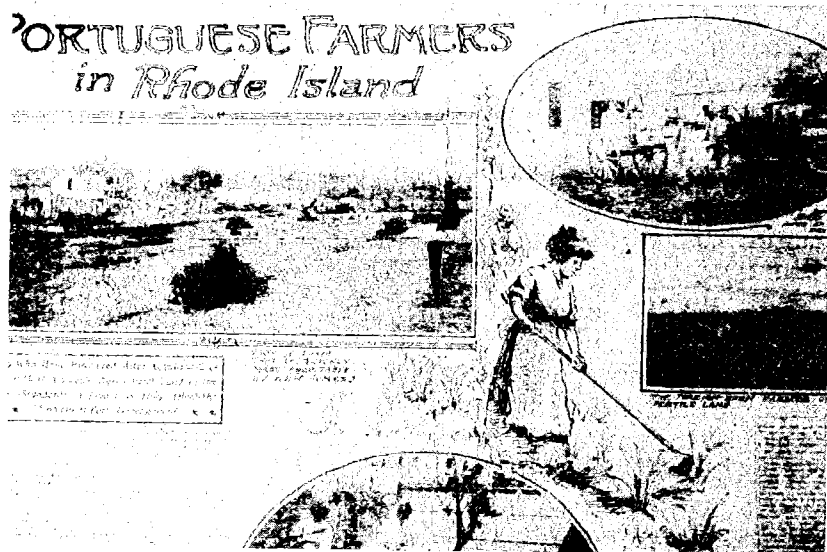


Photo courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society

And so the Portuguese came to Rhode Island, a trickle during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, slowly increasing in numbers in the nineteenth century, and a surge in

the twentieth century. They came—and they still come today—alone, with their families, or perhaps to join family members already in the state. They came by ship, and today they come by jet; they came to work on whaling ships, on farms, and in factories, and now they come to work in the trades and in the professions. They have uprooted themselves and a part of their culture and attempted to transplant both in the New World. The federal census of 1990 indicated that 94,650 Rhode Islanders claimed Portuguese ancestry.

We have seen how the Portuguese came to Rhode Island, and why. Let us now examine how they reacted to their new home and what they have contributed to it.

ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION

From the first days of their immigration, the Portuguese have played a vital role in the economy of Rhode Island. Even that first small group of Sephardic Jews assumed a significant economic role by their prominence as merchants and by their financial contributions to the American Revolution.

Later, Portuguese seamen helped to man the whaling ships from the 1830s onward. In this way the Portuguese aided in nourishing the important New England whaling industry of the mid-nineteenth century.

On land the Portuguese supplied Rhode Island with an inexpensive and hardy labor force. The Portuguese—of yesterday and of today—have reputations as willing and industrious workers. Even in the 1920s, when many writers championed the anti-immigration cause and wrote against the “illiterate” and “mongrel” races of immigrants, references can be found to the diligence of the Portuguese. The hard work of the Portuguese contributed to the economic growth of Rhode Island in various sectors. From the mid-nineteenth century through the early years of the twentieth century, immigrants worked in the textile industry, in farming, in sea-related industries, and on the docks. The more recent immigrants exhibit a wide range of educational and professional backgrounds. Some immigrants join our labor force by working in textile factories and jewelry shops, while others become teachers, college professors, attorneys, and physicians.

The Portuguese have been very successful financially. They have labored long and diligently and saved their money

carefully, and they have been able to buy homes and property. This is no small accomplishment for people from a small and poor country where food—not to mention land—was often scarce. Fathers who, in Portugal, could only hope for enough food for their families can now see all their children with a comfortable home, with well-paying jobs, and with a better chance for the future. Many Portuguese in Rhode Island can even save enough money to return for visits to their homeland, and they may send for their relatives to come to America. America—and Rhode Island in particular—has truly been a land of opportunity for the Portuguese.



John and Emilia Sylvia with their sons John, William, and Lawrence, 1903.
Photo courtesy of Mrs. Alice S. Garcia.

THE PORTUGUESE FAMILY

Two hallmarks of Portuguese culture are a strong patriarchal family—that is, a family having the father as the leader and authority figure—and a firm family commitment. The cohesive family structure of the Portuguese has long been a source of great strength, vitality, and self-sufficiency. Parents, grandparents, and children are bound together—religiously, physically, and emotionally—both in days of joy and festivity and in times of sorrow. Just as an entire family will often attend a religious feast or secular affair together, so too will it unite in times of hardship and sorrow. In fact, the Portuguese family is really an extended family, consisting of aunts, uncles, godparents, and cousins, who often live within a few miles of each other.

In times of trouble, be it personal or financial, the Portuguese have tended to seek assistance from their families. The family unit serves a multiplicity of roles in the Portuguese community. Whether one needs the everyday necessities—a babysitter, a ride to the doctor, an interpreter at the Social Security office or at the bank, marital advice, a partner for a card game—or larger needs—financial assistance, perhaps, or even sponsorship for immigration to the United States—the family has generally met such demands.

Sons and daughters in the United States frequently send for their parents in Portugal, as brothers and sisters send for their siblings or their spouses' families. Although the newcomers may pay their own passage, it is their relatives

already in the country who sponsor them, promising that they will have employment. These relatives locate jobs, housing, and furnishings for the new arrivals and often see that the children are enrolled in schools. Sometimes the incoming families must live with their relatives in America until suitable accommodations can be found. When the new family sets up its own household, the relatives—and these include aunts, uncles, and cousins, as well as parents and brothers and sisters—often contribute furniture, dishes, and utensils. Strong lasting ties are formed within these families. For years to come, advice, assistance, and ideas will be exchanged.

Often the Portuguese in Rhode Island have been praised for their industriousness and concern for maintaining and improving their homes and property. It is common for the purchase of a home to be the result of the hard work of parents and several children, with immigrant families pooling their earnings and working long hours to benefit all the family members by purchasing that house and that piece of property. Such a purchase is no mean achievement, especially among a people from a small country where land is at a premium, and is often owned by the few and worked by the many.

After the momentous purchase, one can observe the larger family, including nephews and cousins, working to renovate the newly acquired home. The results of such united efforts are often commented on by appreciative neighbors. These family efforts frequently have a festive quality, with women preparing elaborate meals and much singing issuing from inside and outside the house. Evenings bring further singing, music, and sometimes dancing.

Rhode Islanders often comment on the fruitful and luxurious gardens of their Portuguese neighbors. What magic do the Portuguese possess that can so quickly transform a dry, barren bit of land into a miniature farm? Once again it is the family that unites to water, weed, and fertilize the almost sacred family plot. These small truck gardens—containing fruit trees, vegetables, flowers, grape arbors, and often a small shrine to a patron saint—are a tradition the Portuguese proudly bring from their homeland. They are manifestations of the Portuguese desire for self-sufficiency. These rich gardens also offer Rhode Islanders a glimpse of Portuguese generosity, which exhibits itself in proud gifts of produce to family, neighbors, and friends. The Portuguese tend to maximize the productivity

RELIGION

Most Portuguese are members of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church was the first institution with which the Portuguese could identify in the New World. Yet, even though the religious tenets and the celebration of the Mass were, and are, universal, the predominantly Irish priests and their English tongue were foreign to the early Portuguese immigrants. Consequently, immigrants and their descendants strove to establish national parishes staffed by Portuguese-speaking priests. Today there are eight such parishes in Rhode Island.

TABLE 3

Church	Location	Year Established
Our Lady of the Rosary	Providence	1885
St. Elizabeth	Bristol	1913
St. Francis Xavier	East Providence	1915
St. Anthony	Pawtucket	1923
St. Anthony	West Warwick	1925
Jesus Saviour	Newport	1926
St. Thomas the Apostle	Warren	1952
Our Lady of Fatima	Cumberland	1953

Before the first church, Our Lady of the Rosary (now referred to as Holy Rosary), was established in 1885, the Portuguese attended St. Joseph's Church in Fox Point and had a special mass held monthly by the Reverend Anthony Freitas from New Bedford.

Our Lady of the Rosary, the third oldest Portuguese-American parish in the United States, was a triumph for the Portuguese immigrants. It was established as a national church without parish lines. Under the direction of the Reverend Antonio M. Serpa, pastor, Holy Rosary grew rapidly. In 1906 it moved from a remodeled Protestant church to a location on Wickenden Street.

In 1910 the Sisters of St. Dorothy, who had fled Portugal during the revolution, first arrived to provide the Portuguese with dormitories for the women immigrants and a school to teach Christian doctrine to parish children.

The Catholic Church has long played a varied role in Portuguese life in Rhode Island. For the Portuguese, the Church has provided much more than religious services. The Church brought the immigrants together, fostered a sense of community spirit—a sense of being Portuguese—and gave the immigrants a place where they belonged and where they could be among friends. The Church took the individual immigrant and his family and made them part of a larger group. It may in fact be said that the Church took the concept of the extended family and broadened it beyond blood relationships.

Of course, the Church also taught and nurtured the values associated with Catholic doctrine and Christian morality. In addition, she represented and reinforced the values of Portuguese culture and the Portuguese family structure, such as respect for authority. For the Church was like the patriarchal family, where all worked together under the father's leadership and authority; the father, on the parish level, was the pastor.

The Church was also a source of recreation. The religious feasts were like parties, offering dancing, singing, and native foods, in addition to solemn religious processions. With these feasts the Church played a much more important role than merely providing entertainment. The feasts were an opportunity for the Portuguese to meet and enjoy the company of neighbors and friends, to feel less alone in a strange new land.

These feasts and public processions were also a cultural statement, an expression of what it meant to be Portuguese, to be Catholic, and to be a Portuguese Catholic. They reinforced traditions long established and enjoyed in Portugal. They supported the mother tongue and the songs and dances of the homeland. The religious events reaffirmed the faith learned in

Portugal and brought to America. They also stressed the idea that to be a Portuguese Catholic was to be different from Catholics of certain other ethnic groups. To be a Portuguese Catholic meant the public display of religious fervor, so that all could witness the faith of the believers.

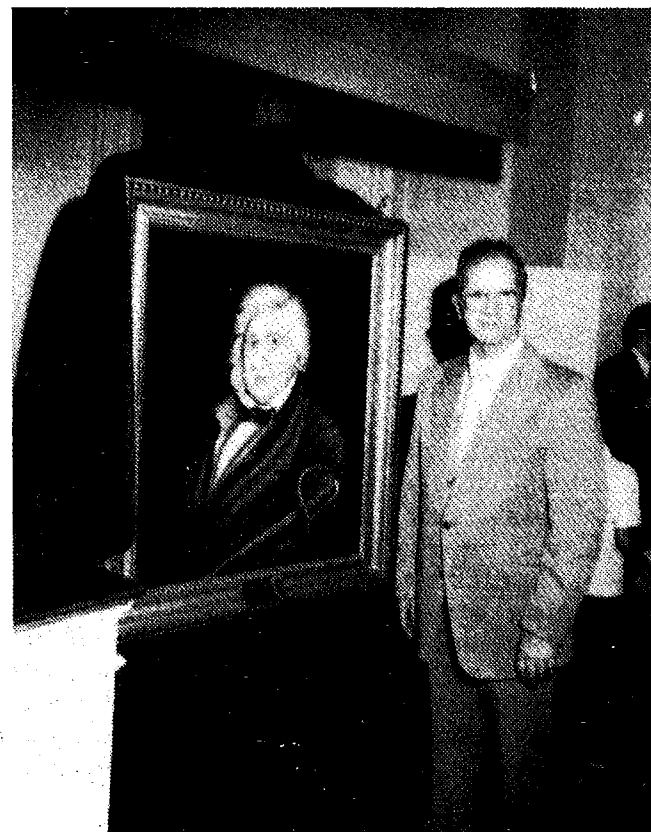
The Church continues to assume various roles among the Portuguese of today. The recent immigrants, those of fifty years ago, and the second and third generations can all find in the Church a social and cultural life as well as religious and moral teachings. The annual parish feasts are an example of how the Church continues to foster a sense of cultural heritage and community. Held in honor of Christ, the Blessed Virgin, or various patron saints, these feasts have their origins in similar feasts long celebrated in the islands or in mainland Portugal, and so they serve to reinforce historical-cultural ties for the Portuguese. Parishioners work together to ensure a feast's success. The women cook the traditional Portuguese dishes and produce hand-crafted articles to sell, while the men string lights, put up booths, and sometimes play in the band. All work during the feast and join in the holy processions. These activities strengthen a sense of history and culture, of what it means to be Portuguese, at the same time that they promote a sense of community and group identity, and the spirit of working together for a common goal.



Members of the Mission Church (later St. Catherine of Siena Church), 1925. *Photo courtesy of Mrs. Serena C. Gomez.*



Festa de Espirito Santo, 1927. *Photo courtesy of Mrs. Isabel S. Feijo.*



José Cabral Martins, painter of Peter Francisco.

CLUBS

The Church was not the only organization that offered the Portuguese a sense of community and group identity. The Portuguese, like many other immigrant groups, formed ethnic social clubs. These organizations served many functions. For example, they sponsored fairs and dances, organized activities to promote and preserve Portuguese traditions, and helped to acquaint the immigrants with their new society. Moreover, many of the clubs fulfilled definite economic needs.

A number of Portuguese societies and clubs in Rhode Island were founded in the late 1800s. The reasons for their founding lie at the very root of human needs. Strangers in a new land, individual Portuguese immigrants soon recognized that their loneliness and frequent helplessness was shared by their fellow countrymen in Rhode Island. The need for security and companionship generated gatherings where the immigrants could share their joys and sorrows, their doubts and fears. People met informally at first, often on streets or in private homes; just talking seemed to relieve their worries and uncertainties. Not being totally accepted in the American environment was something with which they had to cope. Joining together in a group, where others would understand and sympathize, was valuable therapy for these pioneers. In addition, these gatherings offered the Portuguese an opportunity to share their discoveries about the ways of an alien society.

Initially, Portuguese societies were organized on the basis

of the immigrants' point of origin in Portugal. For instance, Azorean Portuguese organized with other Azoreans, Continentals with Continentals. Sometimes immigrants from particular areas of Portugal or certain islands banded together. This type of organization aided in relieving homesickness, especially for the first groups of immigrants.

At first there was little or no rigid organization within the gatherings, but rather a desire to share common grounds of communication. Later these small gatherings established rules of organization and developed more definite and specific goals. Some rented permanent quarters; still others bought an existing structure or land on which to build.

The Portuguese immigrant began to turn to his club or society in time of trouble. The clubs took on the flavor of contemporary life; health and accident insurance plans were offered, as well as various social welfare programs. For example, when a death occurred, each member would contribute an amount to be donated to the family of the deceased to help defray the funeral expenses.

As the societies grew and as they acquired more funds, they began to expand their functions. Members contributed on a regular basis, perhaps monthly or weekly. Some societies reimbursed their members for any and all types of illness, since few families had the available resources when sickness struck. Unfortunately, there were soon more claims than individual clubs could handle. As a result, more formal procedures were established, and many of these mutual-aid societies began to allocate benefits more rigidly. Nevertheless, the economic situation did take its toll, and some societies were forced to disband or merge with others because of lack of funds and/or membership. Yet many groups flourished and continue to grow to the present day. There are over forty different organizations in Rhode Island today. In New England as a whole, there are more than three hundred clubs and societies.

Many groups that were organized as mutual-aid societies later became channels through which the Portuguese could carry on the traditions of their homeland. At the core of most Portuguese-American organizations was the social factor, and to some extent this remains the case today. One of the events that excites great enthusiasm in the Portuguese community is the *feira*, the religious and social feast to honor Christ or one of the saints. These feasts, which provide an opportunity for the

Portuguese to display religious and social solidarity, may be sponsored by the Church or by the social clubs.

One of the most popular *festas* is the Feast of the Holy Ghost, commemorated yearly by a number of organizations throughout Rhode Island. This feast is very special to the Portuguese people. The history of the celebration dates back to the year 1300 and is mixed with both legend and lore. It is believed that this tradition originated in Portugal during the reign of Queen Isabel, known in Portuguese history as the Holy Queen, *Rainha Santa* Isabel. This saintly monarch is remembered for her compassion and charity to the poor. It is told that every year on Pentecost Sunday (the first day of the Holy Ghost), Queen Isabel would crown a peasant girl and set her to preside over the ceremonies of blessing meat, bread, and wine and distributing these to the poor. Centuries later, Portuguese colonizers brought this tradition to the Azore Islands, keeping the feast of the Holy Ghost alive as they fed the needy.



Our Lady of the Rosary Church, Wickenden Street, Providence, 1888.

Years later the Portuguese again transplanted their customs as they had been observed in their native islands. Nearly ninety years ago a group of Azorean immigrants who had settled in Rhode Island organized to perpetuate this tradition of the feast of the Holy Ghost (the seventh Sunday after Easter). Clubs combined charity with piety in their yearly celebrations and distributed food to hundreds of poor families in Rhode Island. Today the feast has grown tremendously and may include not only the traditional *sopa do Espirito Santo* (a broth made with beef and cabbage and served over chunks of bread) but also brass band concerts, block dances, auctions and raffles of home-baked goods, a soccer match, and an evening fireworks display.



Rev. Antonio M. Serpa, pastor of Holy Rosary, 1888.

Although most of the Portuguese organizations in Rhode Island today do not maintain their traditional role of feeding and aiding the poor in the manner of the past, they still continue to help their fellow Portuguese. For example, some of the clubs and societies passed resolutions urging Congress to loosen immigration restrictions for the survivors of the 1958 earthquake on the Azorean island of Faial. Another cause was the drive to collect and send clothing to the Portuguese flood victims of Lisbon in the fall of 1967, and again in the winter of 1983 a similar drive benefited victims of the disastrous earthquake on the island of Terceira on January 1, 1980. One of the

Portuguese-American organizations was even successful in having Portuguese translations of the drivers' manual made available in Rhode Island.

A number of clubs support the cause of education by offering scholarships to students of Portuguese parentage who plan to attend college. Scholarship recipients are selected from many applicants, drawn from either the state at large or a particular area. Each organization establishes its own criteria for awarding its gifts. These criteria may be proven scholastic ability and College Board scores, financial need, or a combination of the two. Societies also honor outstanding Rhode Island high school seniors who have excelled in the study of the Portuguese language.

Various clubs, societies, and news media hold annual awards dinners to honor persons of Portuguese extraction for distinguished service to the community, state, or nation. Some organizations seek to promote a better understanding of Portuguese heritage through art, music, and other forms of cultural expression by sponsoring art exhibits, theatrical performances, concerts, folklore groups, *fadistas* (folk singers), and lectures. Sometimes groups come directly from Portugal or the Azores to perform for the Rhode Island public.

Certain organizations focus on the achievements of Portuguese notable in American history, such as the mariner Miguel Corte-Real. Some historians assert that Corte-Real sailed into Narragansett Bay in 1502 and later left his inscription on Dighton Rock, and thus date the first Portuguese contact with Rhode Island as occurring twenty-two years before the more famous voyage of Verrazzano.

Another organization awards the Peter Francisco Medal to outstanding persons who have contributed to the promotion of Portuguese heritage. Some of the recipients of the medal have been the late President John F. Kennedy, the Portuguese-American novelist John Dos Passos, businessman Joseph E. Fernandes, the late Humberto Cardinal Medeiros, and Rhode Island's own Senator Claiborne Pell. (Peter Francisco, believed to have been of Portuguese ancestry, was a patriot and hero of the American Revolution. A two-by-three-foot portrait of Francisco, painted by the immigrant artist José Cabral Martins and presented to the state's Bicentennial Commission by its Portuguese Heritage Subcommittee, hangs in the Old State House on Benefit Street in Providence.)



Students at Hope High School, Providence.

The various ethnic organizations also serve a social and recreational function for the Portuguese in Rhode Island. The fairs and dances they sponsor offer the occasion for Portuguese to meet and find new friends. Young people may even form romantic attachments. Many clubs also support soccer teams, which provide an opportunity both for recreation and companionship and for the promotion of physical development and team spirit. Portuguese-American youngsters have dominated high school all-state selections in this demanding sport.

We have spoken rather generally of the Portuguese clubs and societies in Rhode Island without mentioning any by name. The organizations are many, and to name a few would be an injustice to the rest. What is more important than particular club names is the good these organizations have done and continue to do, from the ones founded in the first days of heavy immigration to those of the last decade. The clubs brought the immigrants together, offered them financial and social assistance, and helped them adjust to a new society. They took the concepts of self-sufficiency and mutual aid learned in the family and extended them to a larger group. They also perpetuated the traditions and culture of the homeland, a particularly important function in early twentieth-century America, where many native Americans believed that all new immigrants should be assimilated into society at the

expense of their native customs and languages.

Today the various Portuguese organizations continue to foster Portuguese culture and tradition and to offer the Portuguese the companionship of their fellows in Rhode Island. They also sponsor education and the arts and honor those Portuguese who have distinguished themselves in Rhode Island and/or American society. In all their varied activities the clubs and organizations attempt to instill a pride in the Portuguese: a pride in their history, both in Portugal and in Rhode Island; a pride in their traditions; and a pride in their accomplishments as Portuguese-Americans.



Portuguese Subcommittee booth at the annual Rhode Island Heritage Festival.

CONCLUSION

How can we summarize the experience of the Portuguese in Rhode Island? They came—that is a fact. Portuguese immigration to Rhode Island, modest in numbers in the eighteenth century, became an ever-increasing influx in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The flow diminished in the aftermath of the Quota Acts of the 1920s, but it rose rapidly with the passage of the new immigration law in 1965. Today the Portuguese make up nearly 10 percent of Rhode Island's population.

The Portuguese came—and they settled. True, many immigrants accumulated some savings and then returned to Portugal, but the overwhelming majority stayed and made their home in Rhode Island. They bought homes in Rhode Island's towns and cities; they worked the land; they offered their craftsmanship to the state; they manned the state's industries. Portuguese families grew and flourished, children attended school, and churches and clubs sprang up. And let us not speak only in the past tense. Immigration, settlement, building and buying homes—these are all going on today. Portuguese churches, clubs, and organizations still thrive, and Portuguese children are still educated in Rhode Island schools.

Yet these are only facts, concise and dry. What do they all mean—for the Portuguese and for Rhode Island? These facts mean that entire families often uprooted themselves, traveled thousands of miles, and settled in a foreign land where they could not speak the language or understand many of the customs. Many came with only a minimum of funds, but they

worked hard, saved their money, and bought a bit of land, struggling to achieve a better life for themselves and their children, a life more stable and secure than Europe could provide. They came to work, asking little from the state except for the opportunity to work and prosper.

Although now, in the 1990s, most Portuguese arrive by plane, and perhaps with more money than their forebears, they are still uprooting themselves and coming to a strange land. And that land has not always welcomed the Portuguese with open arms. Immigrants often were—and are—looked down upon, called “greenhorns,” ridiculed for their speech and dress, made to feel inferior.

Yet the Portuguese endure, and they prosper. Their industry is well known, and they have made a significant contribution, both as workers and as consumers, to the Rhode Island economy. Young Portuguese are attending technical schools, colleges, universities, and professional schools in growing numbers. Today Rhode Island is witnessing the growth of a Portuguese middle class that is making its presence felt in politics and in the various technical, industrial, and service professions.

The Portuguese have become a part of Rhode Island society, but not at a loss to their heritage. The Portuguese churches preserve the faith brought from the homeland. In addition, they work to sustain the Portuguese language, customs, and culture, as do the Portuguese social clubs. In the course of a year, Rhode Island sees many Portuguese fairs and religious feasts and processions. Several radio and television programs spread Portuguese music, art, language, and history, both to the Portuguese population and to other Rhode Islanders as well.

Rhode Island has been able to observe and participate in Portuguese customs and culture. In fact, we might even say that Rhode Island has become a little bit Portuguese, for the culture of any state is made up of the cultures of its various ethnic groups.

The Portuguese experience in Rhode Island illustrates what some people like to call the “American experience”—the experience of people with a sense of adventure and courage who set out to seek their future and fortune in a new land. They are apprehensive but eager, with longings (what the Portuguese would call *saudades*) for the homeland, yet happy to be in

America and to pledge their allegiance to their new home. As new trends indicate, the Portuguese will be increasingly visible in their English-speaking communities in the future.

The Portuguese came—and they settled. That coming has benefited and enriched not only the Portuguese but all of Rhode Island and the United States.

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Works supporting the authenticity of Miguel Corte-Real's visitation to the Narragansett Bay area during the first decade of the sixteenth century are Edmund B. Delabarre, *Dighton Rock: A Study of the Written Rocks of New England* (1928); Manuel DaSilva, *Portuguese Pilgrims and Dighton Rock: The First Chapter in American History* (1971); and George F. W. Young, *Miguel Corte-Real and the Dighton Writing-Rock* (1970). Other authorities such as Morison and Prestage reject this claim.

Portuguese-American Catholicism can be examined at the grassroots level in the commemorative booklets prepared by the following Rhode Island parishes: Our Lady of the Rosary (Providence), St. Elizabeth (Bristol), Our Lady of Fatima (Cumberland), and Jesus Saviour (Newport).