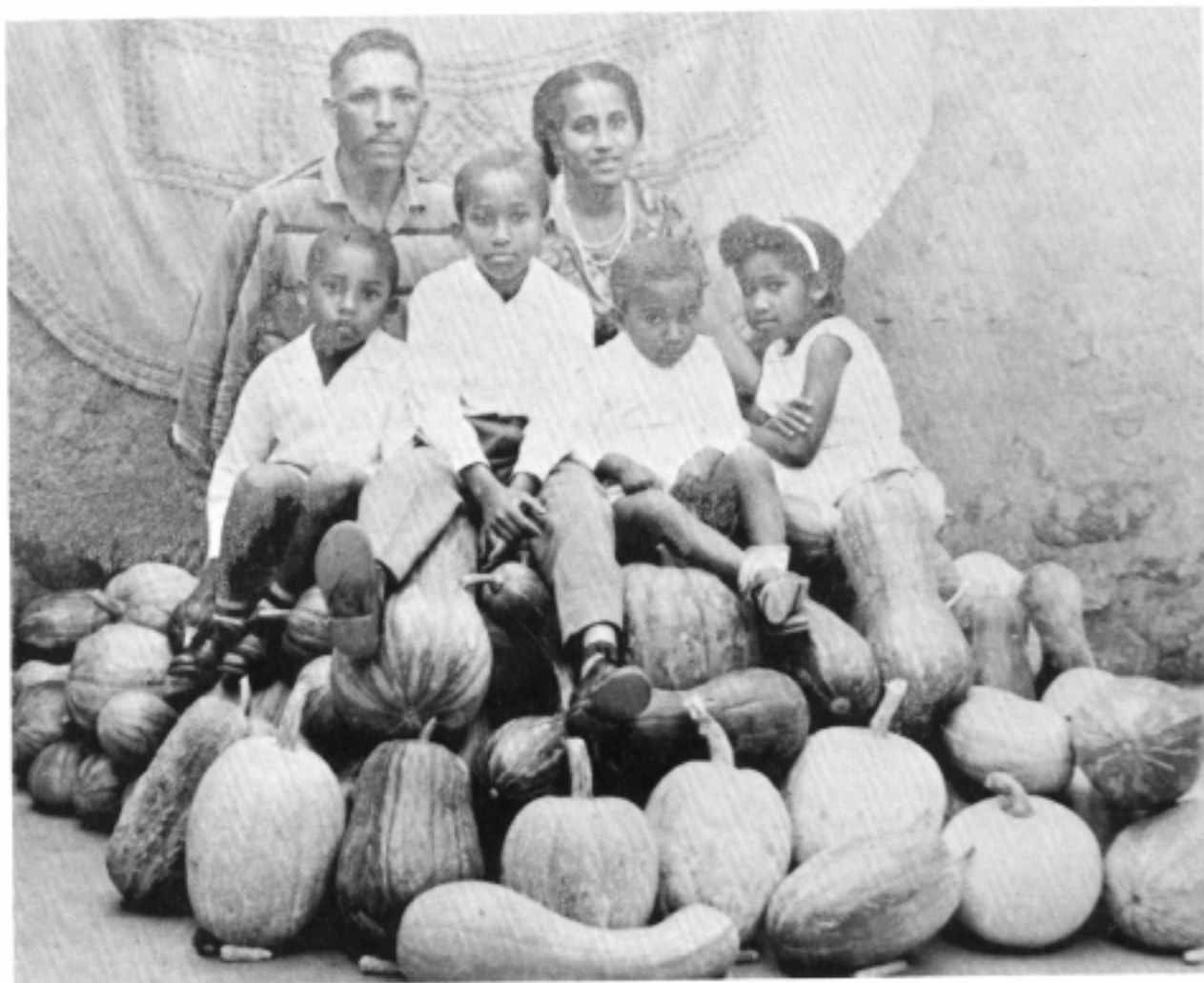


## CHAPTER IV A NEW LIFE IN AMERICA



A Cape Verdean Harvest. The Agnelo DePina family of Nova Sintra, Brava. 1964.

### *"Mantenhas" Maintain Community Ties*

The packets made it possible for Cape Verdeans to live and work for years in the U.S. while remaining firmly connected to their island of origin. Because of the frequency of the packets, news—and gossip—travelled fast; passengers going in either direction bore packages, letters, and verbal greetings to dozens of people on the other side. The orally-delivered greetings, called *mantenhas* in Crioulo (from Portuguese *manter*, to keep up or maintain), are taken much more seriously than the American "say hello to so-and-so for me." They were essential for maintaining relationships across great distances; one only has to hear the tone of indignation in those words "she didn't even send me a

*mantenha*" to understand the importance of these verbal messages.

The custom of sending *mantenhas* was one of the primary ways in which an emigrant could maintain a relationship with those he had left behind. The widespread illiteracy and the fact that letters were written in the unfamiliar Portuguese language, made the *mantenhas* more important than the written word for keeping up ties of family and friendship. Transmitted in Crioulo, the first language of the Cape Verdean people, by a living link between the persons involved, the *mantenha* was a more immediate, intimate communal form of contact. It continues to link Cape Verdeans dispersed throughout the world.



Students and faculty of the Seminary-Liceu in São Nicolau circa 1910. The seminary was the center of educational life for over 50 years.

At the end of the nineteenth century New Bedford was a boom-town. Factories were expanding rapidly and anyone who wanted a job in the mills could find one. In 1880 there were two mills employing 2700 employees and by 1905 there were fifteen mills with 14,500 workers.<sup>102</sup> The third phase of Cape Verdean immigration to the United States was now about to take place. However, passage to America cost money—twenty or thirty dollars was beyond the capacity of the landless peasant of Cape Verde. The peasant family would often pool its resources

and send one son to America. Young men leaving the islands in their teens would return after ten years or more with sufficient funds to establish a household. Until they returned to the islands permanently, they might see their wives and families only for visits every few years. In some cases men spent twenty or thirty years abroad returning to live with their wives only in old age. By this time, the ambition of most young men was to go to America; for women it was to set up an American house, with American furniture, in Cape Verde.<sup>103</sup>



The old dock in São Vicente, c. 1910.

Most of these migrants were impoverished, subsistence farmers hoping to secure a better future for themselves in the Islands by their labor aboard. The system of the land division in Brava made it particularly advantageous for peasants to go to America, since land was not concentrated in a few hands as in São Tiago or several other islands. The more socially prominent *gente branco* or "white people" of larger towns (who were not necessarily white in any European sense of the word) still regarded America as unsuitable for anyone of "refinement" and were not attracted to laboring long hours in the mills or cranberry bogs of New England. They saw emigration to America suitable only for the lower classes of Cape Verdean society.<sup>104</sup>

#### *Immigration 1900-1924*

While more information about this period (1900-1924) is available than for earlier years, we have only a general indication of the volume of the migration. Cape Verdean sources give only the number of "exits" to the U.S., they don't say how many leaving in a given year were doing so for the first time. A report made in Massachusetts in 1911 estimated that at least 500 returned to the

Islands each year.<sup>105</sup> Many would return to the U.S. again and would be included in the departures from the Cape Verdes. American immigration records present the same difficulty, giving only the number of aliens from a given "land of origin" for each year. Because of the colonial relationship, Portugal would always be listed as the country of origin for Cape Verdeans. There were still many "secret" departures from the Islands, some to avoid being drafted by the Portuguese army, others because they could not pay for the trip. A large proportion of the entries to the United States were also unrecorded. Given all these conditions, migration figures cannot provide an accurate record. The disparity between figures from the U.S. Immigration Service and those from the records of immigration officials in Cape Verde bears illustration. From 1912-1920, for example, totals are:

Exits from Cape Verde to U.S.	10,870
Entries of "Black Portuguese Aliens" to U.S.	7,798
Difference	3,082 <sup>106</sup>

The discrepancy was due in part to the fact that U.S. immigration officials would apply the customary American categorizations of "black" and "white" to the



Founding members of the Cape Verdean Beneficent Association of New Bedford. Established in 1916 and incorporated in 1920, the Association is the oldest Cape Verdean organization in the United States. Standing l. to r. - João Miguel Almeida, Antonio Morais, José Nicolau da Silva, Boaventura Barboza, Antonio Lopes, José Nicolau da Silva, Boaventura Barboza, Antonio Lopes, João Ricardo da Cruz. Seated l. to r. - José Damaio, Miguel Antonio Teque, Francisco da Cruz Nereu, José dos Santos and Francisco Ramos. Photo Mary Santos Barros.

newcomers from Cape Verde. All Cape Verdeans who entered the United States legally had valid Portuguese passports. Indeed "Portuguese" was their legal nationality since Cape Verde only won its independence in 1975. However, that segment of the new arrivals from Cape Verde who appeared to be "white" European stock were counted by these U.S. officials as European Portuguese, not as "Bravas" or "Black Portuguese" as Cape Verdeans were called at the time. This early failure of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service to institute procedures which would identify Cape Verdeans as a distinct ethnic cultural group and as a multi-racial people with a geographic "land of origin" would form the basis for many problems they would have as a people in their new homeland.

Approximate as such figures are, they suggest that during this period, migration increased between the Cape Verdes and the U.S. The 1911 report calculated that fifteen hundred Cape Verdeans were arriving in New England yearly (a higher figure than official records give); a 1912 observer estimated a Cape Verdean population of 10,000-15,000 in southeastern Massachusetts alone.<sup>107</sup>

#### *Entry in the U.S.*

Until 1921, the process of admission to the U.S. took only a few hours. Medical inspectors came aboard to check for infectious diseases and give vaccinations followed by immigration officials who were normally satisfied if a person could present a passport, receipt for passage, and a few dollars. If any of these were lacking, the individual could be held until someone came to vouch for him, and to pay his passage if necessary. Tales are told of the same five

dollar bill going down the line of arrivals waiting to be checked out!

At the docks in New Bedford, the immigrants were often able to walk ashore without even undergoing a U.S. customs inspection. The ships were apt to arrive at any time and the casual nature of the Cape Verde Packet trade puzzled inspectors. One inspector commented on their poverty: "When a boatload of Bravas arrived with nearly all of them barefoot, we insisted that the relatives get shoes for the new arrivals before we let them loose on an unsuspecting American democracy."<sup>108</sup>

#### *Cape Cod*

When the U.S. Immigration Commission surveyed the workforce in the New Bedford cotton mills in 1911, it found that 75% of the Cape Verdeans had been agricultural laborers. Many Cape Verdeans were unhappy toiling in dark, dirty, noisy, airless factories; and, when they found they could be paid more in the seasonal cranberry industry of Cape Cod, they set out for the nearby farms.

The newcomers are usually a small group, say half a dozen men, who appear in the press of the cranberry season when their services are gratefully accepted. They find accommodation in some old barn or shed, where they live peaceably enough, the sound of dancing and of a crude guitar on a summer evening being the only thing which proclaims their presence.

They buy milk from a nearby farmer and are punctilious in their payments. Once established, they proceed to make themselves extremely useful. They pick strawberries, in due succession. In the winter they gather shellfish. And so in the spring they import a wife ... buy some abandoned farmhouse and move in. The land that has lain fallow for a decade is coaxed into fertility.<sup>110</sup>



Earning a living during the picking season on the cranberry bogs was a family affair, c. 1890. Photo Ocean Spray, Inc.



By 1910 hundreds of Cape Verdeans were employed as laborers in the bogs the year round, and about three thousand were employed during the six-week harvest season. The pay for a seven hour working day during the harvest was \$1.40 to \$1.75 for a hand picker and from \$3.00 to \$5.25 for a scoop picker.<sup>111</sup> To the bog owners the Cape Verdeans provided a needed source of cheap labor who could be hired on a daily basis. In

addition their employers viewed them as: reliable under supervision, docile, obedient, willing to work, and not over-fastidious with regard to food or shelter or the discomforts of the weather, and apparently satisfied with the isolation and somewhat disagreeable work .... [and] furthermore, they were almost the only men who can now be obtained in sufficient number to supply the demand for bog laborers.<sup>112</sup>



Lunch break in the bogs. Photo Ocean Spray, inc.



Cape Verdean worker in the cranberry bogs of southeastern Massachusetts c. 1895. Photo Ocean Spray, Inc.



Raking cranberries from the bogs of Cape Cod was back-breaking work for thousands of Cape Verdean immigrant laborers.  
Photo Ocean Spray, Inc.

For most of the Cape Verdean pickers this work was only a seasonal occupation but they would come back to the bogs year after year. During the rest of the year, they would go back to Cape Verde or stay in America and try to find jobs in the cities. Some of those who were unable to find steady employment would chop wood, collect wild flowers and fruit, and sell them on the streets of New Bedford. Cape Verdeans are said to have started the strawberry industry in Falmouth. Others found off-season employment on the oyster boats along the coast and in ice plants.

However, a change was now occurring in the type of immigrants as the number increased. Rather than the predominantly lighter-skinned Brava peasant type, darker skinned laborers from the other islands were being brought under contract to the cranberry bog-owners and to the mill towns. Agreements were made with the Cape Verdean sea captains to bring a specific number of laborers for the cranberry picking season; the ship passage was then deducted from the laborer's first months' wages. Some of these people were often children of freed

slaves, the impoverished laborers of the feudal landowners of Fogo and Santiago, and those who were literally starving as a result of the famine of 1902-1903. The conditions aboard these ships approached that of slave ships. A reporter for the *Falmouth Enterprise* noted that:

We caught a well-known and well-to-do citizen of New Bedford, whose name presumably had been Rodriguez, on the shore of Buzzards Bay one night where he had rounded up and was taking away twenty-five barefoot Cape Verde Islanders clothed in two piece garments resembling pajamas and smelling like an old slave ship.<sup>113</sup>

The conditions in the dingy barracks set up to receive these workers were scarcely better. Unmarried men were forced to live in bare barracks rooms, sleeping in shifts. Large families would share houses where only one family previously lived. Most of the houses where the Cape Verdeans lived in the South End of New Bedford were without toilets and the city made no provision for disposing of garbage and waste. The infant mortality rate was very high and schooling



was not encouraged for the Cape Verdeans. It is scarcely surprising that these immigrants were more discouraged and less ambitious than their predecessors, as Black-Americans particularly were experiencing the full brunt of the economic depression.

Conditions were similar for the Cape Verdeans who came to work in the cranberry fields. Housing was often rude company

owned shacks built to give a minimum of shelter and a maximum of profit for the bog owners. Many pickers, unused to American food and climate, died at the bogs of diseases caused partly by these poor living conditions. One doctor commenting on their high rate of mortality and sickness said, "...They died like flies from pneumonia and tuberculosis."<sup>114</sup>



Cape Verdean immigrant worker in the cranberry bogs. Photo Ocean Spray, Inc.



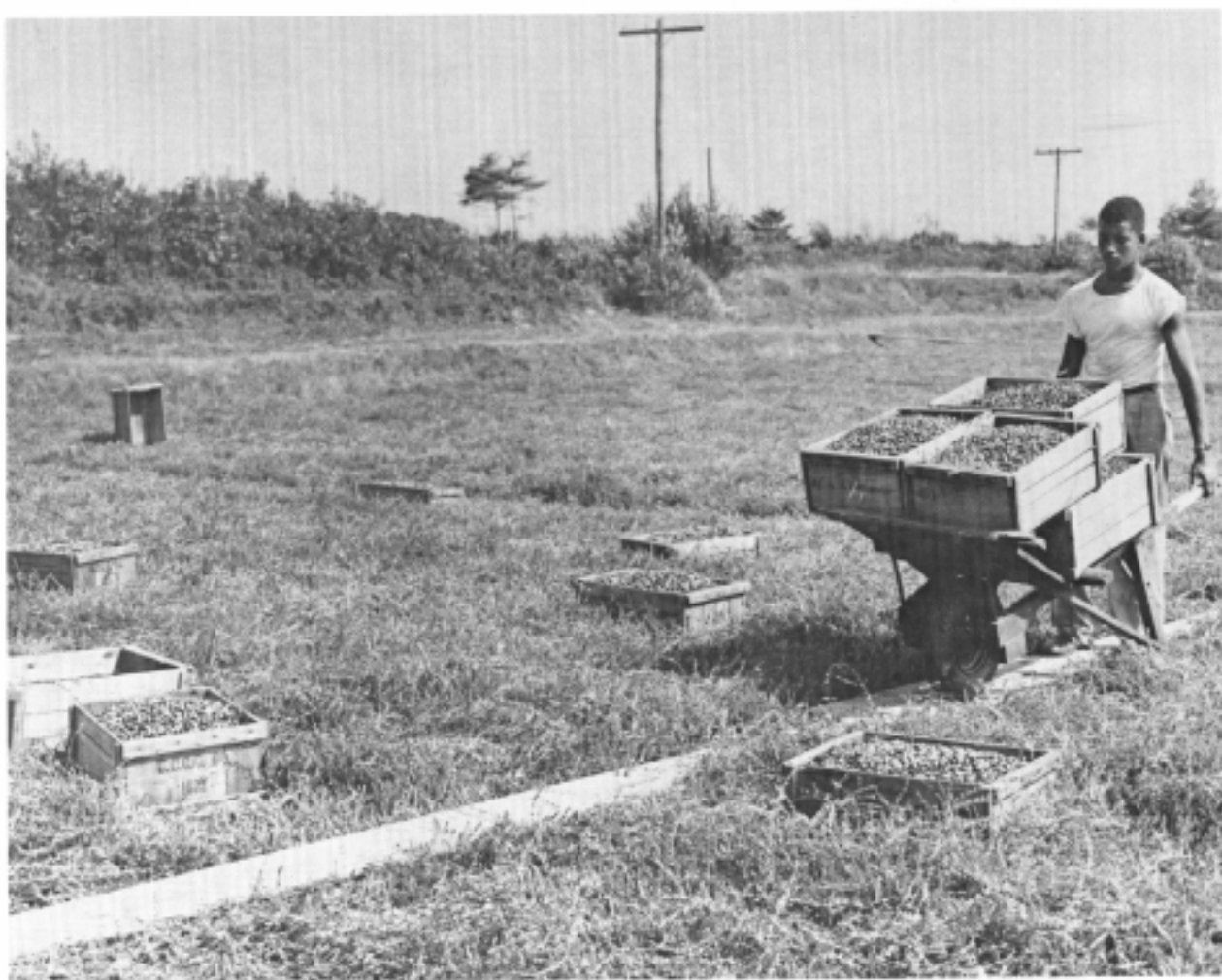
At first, the permanent homes of the Cape Verdeans were little better:

Near Wareham (Massachusetts), where there are several families of permanent residents, they and the transient pickers live in a dirty squalid quarter of the village locally known as "Fogo"...The families living near the bogs dwell in miserable houses. They have gardens and raise some cabbages, beans, and potatoes; some have a few chickens, but the aspect of the whole domestic economy is very depressing...windows stuffed with rags, fences down, doors sagging, roofs leaking...<sup>115</sup>

In 1933, fifteen hundred cranberry pickers went on strike, demanding a 75 cents per hour wage, guaranteed employment until season's end, and recognition of their right to organize. They claimed they were only paid 15-20 cents an hour. The strike spread, and on September 14 violence broke out: a bog owner shot and wounded a Cape Verdean worker when a crowd of strikers gathered at his house. Sixty-four pickers in Middleboro and Wareham were arrested.<sup>116</sup>

Finally, when the growers started using outside or so-called "scab" workers to pick the rotting fruit, the Cape Verdeans, hungry and destitute, returned to work under police protection. One explanation of the strike suggested by Judge James Bento, a Cape Verdean, is that it was organized by outsiders but that Cape Verdean pickers, after a generation of hostility, joined the strike hoping that they could improve their poor wages. The Cape Verdean cranberry picker strike was the first such effort by agricultural workers in the history of Massachusetts.

The mill workers also staged a desperate strike in 1928 in response to a 10% wage cut, but so many workers—French Canadian, Portuguese, Azoreans—were competing for a dwindling number of jobs that the strike was easily broken, and the factories remained "sweatshops."<sup>117</sup> In the Great Depression almost 50% of the Cape Verdeans were unemployed, with an eighteen month average duration of unemployment.<sup>118</sup>



A wheel barrel man balancing his heavy load on a narrow plank leading out of the sponge-like cranberry bogs. Photo Ocean Spray, Inc.



Cape Verdean and Afro-American longshoremen in the early twentieth century.

In 1917, a new U.S. law required that immigrants be literate. Many prepared themselves for the literacy test before leaving the islands or even on the ocean journey. Enrique Mendes taught the Pledge of Allegiance to his passengers on the *Ernestina*. Although some were denied entry, there were cases such as the woman who, when presented with the test in Portuguese, said aloud to herself in Crioulo, "*Ai Nha Mai*"—"Oh, my mother!" (a common expletive in Brava) "Now they're going to send me back!" "Passed," said the Anglo-American inspector, evidently believing she was reading the Portuguese test!<sup>119</sup>

The restrictive immigration laws of 1921 spelled the beginning of the end of large scale immigration. Not only could far fewer Cape Verdeans enter the U.S. than before, but those in the U.S. were afraid to visit the Islands unless their citizenship papers were in order. With America's "open door" closing on immigrants of color, the once busy harbor at Furna on Brava was empty, and the small island became nearly as removed from the outside world as she was early in the nineteenth century. The steady flow of new immigrants began to recede to a mere trickle.

However, Cape Verdeans began to migrate to other areas of the U.S. Colonies of Cape Verdeans have grown in such industrial cities in Connecticut as Waterbury and New Haven, in New York City, in New Jersey textile cities, in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania steel towns, and in Ohio rubber manufacturing centers. Cape Verdeans have gone to Providence to work in the paper and clothing factories and on the docks. Others have followed their predecessors who jumped ship in California to become longshoremen in San Francisco

and Oakland or farmers in Alameda county.

Since the discriminatory restrictions of the 1920's were lifted with the enactment of the new immigration laws of 1965, a new wave of Cape Verdeans are making their way to America. Today the fastest growing centers of Cape Verdean migration in the U.S. are Boston and Scituate, Massachusetts; Pawtucket, Rhode Island; and Waterbury, Connecticut.

Today's immigrants come to a land they have known since childhood, through the letters of relatives and the visits or returns of 'mercados to Cape Verde. For those whose family and friends are already in the United States, going to America is something of a homecoming. At the same time they become part of a worldwide community of "hyphenated Cape Verdeans" who, whether in Lisbon, Paris, Rotterdam, Dakar, or other parts of the world, remain identified with the Islands and involved in their future.



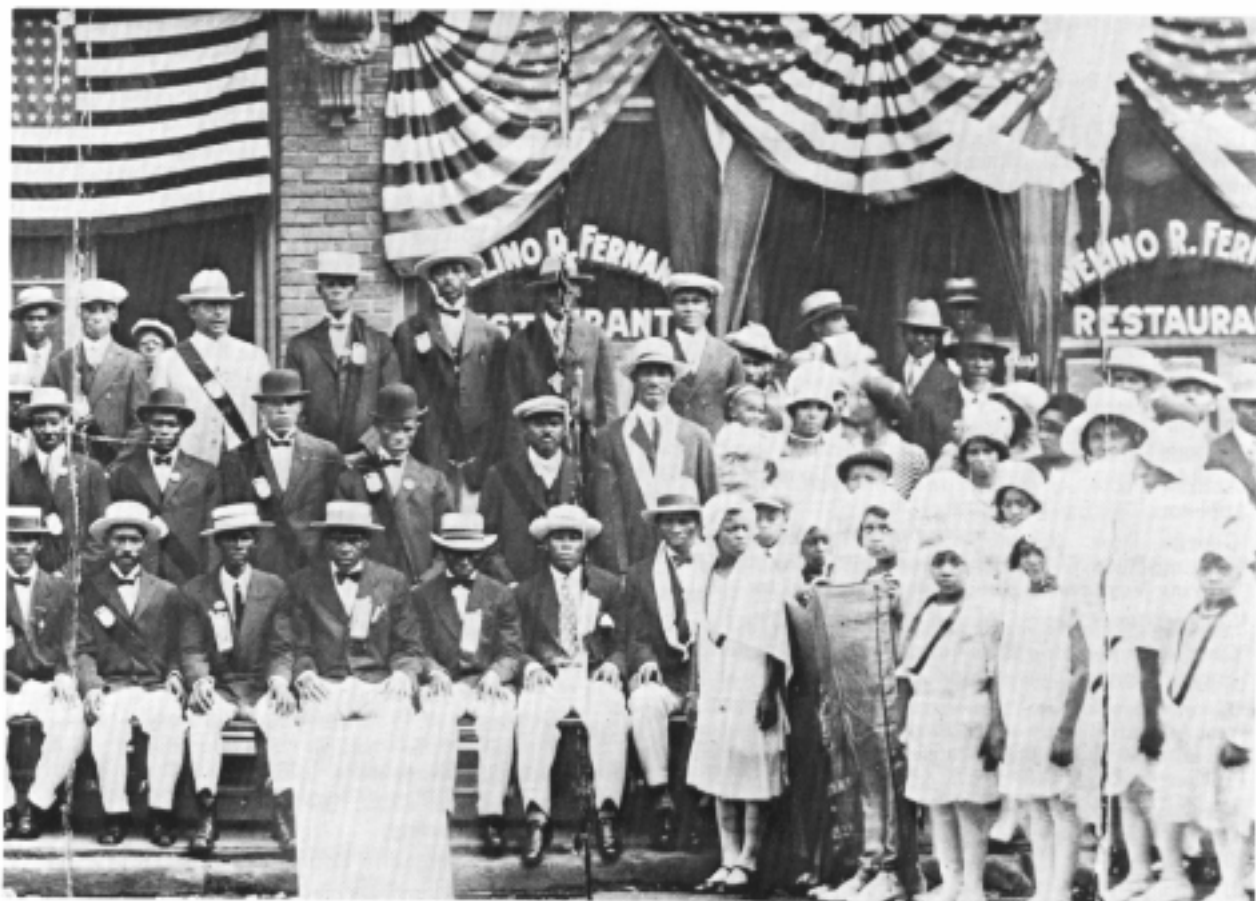
Cape Verdeans have worked in many trades along the waterfront. John Alves from Brava (top left) worked for the Orr Marine Construction and Salvage Company in Providence for 53 years. Photo Mary Alves Haskins.



Cape Verdean Ultramarine Band Club of New Bedford on a visit to the Bridgeport, Connecticut Cape Verdean Club in 1925. *photo courtesy of Antonia Sequeira*



Duke Oliver and his band. These first generation Cape Verdean-Americans formed a popular band in the 1930's.



Officers and members of the Cape Verdean Club of Bridgeport, Connecticut. *photo courtesy of Antonia Sequeira*



The "old church," Our Lady of the Assumption Church, New Bedford. The only Roman Catholic parish founded by Cape Verdeans in the United States. *Photo Mary Santos Barros.*