



**Preserving and Promoting Ethnic Heritage, Identity and Representation in the U.S.: The Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives**

**M. Gloria de Sá**

**Sonia Pacheco and**

**Judy Farrar**

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth  
North Dartmouth, MA, USA

**Meeting:**

**107 — *Dispossessed persons: preserving culture in an age of migration* — Genealogy and Local History Section**

**Abstract:**

*Despite being largely concentrated in a few urban industrial cities of the Northeast, where they have been the major ethnic group for over a century, until recently, Portuguese Americans have remained largely invisible and powerless in their communities of settlement. This paper explores how the establishment of the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and the programs and initiatives it has undertaken are contributing to an enhanced sense of empowerment and identity among the Portuguese in the U.S. while preserving and connecting them to Portuguese-American heritage.*

**Introduction:**

In the modern world, there is no such thing as an objective past or history, argues French historian Pierre Nora (1989); both are socially constructed through the actions of groups and institutions, such as those he called *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, of which archives are a prime example. Like other sites of memory, however, archives are usually established by the powerful to protect or enhance their position in society. Through archives, the past is controlled and the future is shaped; certain stories are privileged and preserved while others are marginalized and forgotten (Schwartz and Cook 2002); certain groups are made visible while others are kept invisible. Thus, ethnic heritage, memory, history, identity and representation are, in large degree, constructed by the actions of those that appraise, select, preserve and interpret the fragments of culture that are stored in those institutions and used to represent the group.

Given this process of social construction, Fentress and Wickham (1992) contend that one of the most effective ways in which social groups can control their own history, identity and representation is by taking an active part in collecting, preserving, interpreting and making available the raw elements of their own memory, that is, by creating their own institutions of memory. That is precisely what the Portuguese in the U.S. did on September 18, 2009. On the afternoon of that sunny day, Chancellor Jean MacCormack of the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth cut the ribbon that inaugurated the opening of the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives.

It was a momentous occasion. Among the hundreds that attended the ceremony, were João de Vallera, the Portuguese ambassador to the U.S.; Portuguese-American, Massachusetts state representatives António Cabral, Michael Rodrigues and John Quinn; the Portuguese-American mayor of Fall River Robert Correia; other government officials from Portugal and the U.S.; UMD administrators, faculty and students; representatives of local and Portuguese media; and proud members of the Portuguese-American communities.

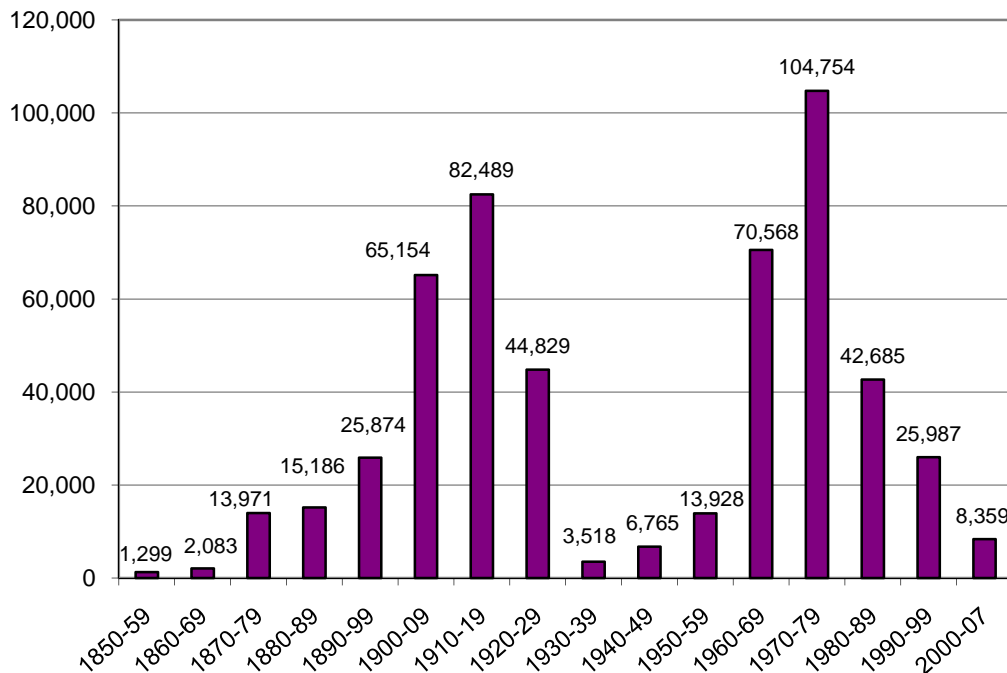
Chancellor MacCormack called the archives "an important milestone achievement" in the life of the university and an international resource for those interested in the history of the Portuguese in the U.S. Otilia Ferreira, daughter of Affonso Gil Mendes Ferreira, for whom the Archives are named, commented that, for her, as for most Portuguese-Americans, it was a "dream come true," a realization that, as Professor Frank Sousa, Director of the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture at UMD, stated, the Portuguese were finally being noticed after almost 200 years of invisibility. In his opening remarks, Professor Sousa, the driving force behind the Archives' project, pointed out that, besides being a way of remembering and paying tribute to those who came before us, the establishment of the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives contributed to "expanding the often reductive 'hard-working' label attributed to the Portuguese, by promoting [their] meaningful contributions to American intellectual and cultural life."

### **Overview of Portuguese Immigration to the U.S.:**

This celebratory tone was one which had not frequently used to refer to the Portuguese in the U.S. Despite having been in the U.S. since the late 19th century and being largely concentrated in a few urban industrial cities of the Northeast, where, until recently, they have been the major ethnic group, Portuguese Americans have remained largely invisible and powerless in their communities of settlement. This invisibility has been attributed to their low levels of education and a tradition of non-participation in political affairs (Moniz 1979, Smith 1974) as well as to an economical and social structure that limited their socioeconomic progress (de Sa and Borges 2009).

**Figure 1**

**Portuguese Immigration to the U.S.: 1850-2007**



**Source:** 2007 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics

Portuguese immigration to the U.S. occurred in two major waves (Figure 1). The first was associated with the country's industrial development at the turn of the twentieth century and peaked around 1920, with 82,489 persons arriving between 1910 and 1920. This immigration phase came to a halt in the 1920s with the passage of the National Origins Acts, which established a very low immigration quota for Portugal. This development resulted in a thirty-year period of immigration dormancy (Pap 1981) for Portuguese immigration. During this period, very few immigrants arrived in the U.S. and many returned to Portugal, some with their American-born children and spouses. Those who stayed remained primarily industrial workers on the East Coast and agricultural workers in California.

The second wave peaked around 1970 and was substantially larger than the first. Between 1970 and 1979, for example, 104,754 persons entered the U.S (Figure 1). It began with the passage of the Azorean Refugee Acts of 1958, which allowed families affected by the eruption of the Capelinhos volcano to settle in the U.S., but its major cause was the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which abolished the national quotas and introduced a system based on family reunification.

According to Williams (2005:112), the new immigrants were not very different from the earlier ones. Only two characteristics distinguished them: "education and a sense of nationality." The new arrivals had higher levels of education than their predecessors and thought of themselves as citizens of Portugal rather than of a particular village or island. However, as Williams himself pointed out, in terms of education, the difference was not that pronounced; it was merely a question of having no education at all or having four or fewer years of schooling. Just as their first-wave counterparts had been the least educated group arriving during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Banick 1971), with about a forty-percent

rate of illiteracy in 1920, so too those arriving after 1965 were among the least educated of that period. In 1980, for example, 38 percent of those who had arrived in the preceding 15 years had only a fourth-grade education or lower—the largest percentage of any immigrant group except for Laotians (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2008).

Second wave immigrants were also similar to their predecessors in terms of their geographical and occupational distribution. Since this phase of Portuguese immigration was based on the process of family reunification, with first-wave immigrants or their American-born descendants sponsoring relatives, once the immigration laws changed, the new immigrants tended to establish themselves in the communities of their sponsors and find jobs through relatives and acquaintances. Thus, although those arriving after the 1960s tended to prefer the urban centers of the Eastern Seaboard, and were more likely to settle around New York City than their earlier counterparts, to a large degree, existing patterns of geographical and occupational distribution were not significantly altered by their arrival (Williams 2005: 116-134). These conditions served to reinforce ethnic culture and stereotypes and contributed to making the Portuguese the least assimilated group of European origin in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Essentially, by 1980, while the majority of Americans of European ancestry had moved into the ranks of the middle class and become virtually indistinguishable from one another, the Portuguese remained primarily working class and were characterized by very high levels of spatial and occupational concentration as well as endogamy (Lieberson and Waters 1988).

However, during the last two decades of the century, the number of Portuguese immigrating to the U.S. decreased sharply, dropping from an average of 10,500 per year during the 1970s to 2,600 in the 1990s. This trend continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with only an average of 1,045 per year arriving between 2000 and 2007 for a total of 8,359 persons (Figure 1). At the same time, economic restructuring forced the Portuguese out of their traditional occupational niches in manufacturing and agriculture, while new immigrant groups with low levels of human capital took the least desirable jobs, thus allowing the Portuguese to move up the occupational queue. These immigration shifts and structural changes resulted in significant demographic, social and economic transformations among the Portuguese in the U.S.

Although positive from the point of view of social and economic integration, these processes are putting Portuguese ethnic identity and heritage in jeopardy. Aware of this development, a group of academic, political and community leaders, which coalesced around the University of Massachusetts in Dartmouth, have undertaken a number of initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting Portuguese heritage, while empowering Portuguese-Americans and strengthening their ethnic identity by connecting them to that heritage and to each other. The next section of this paper describes the history of that process, focusing on the development of the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives and its programs and initiatives, including an extensive digitization of Portuguese ethnic newspapers, which have been made available free online.

## **The development of the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives:**

September 18, 2009 was, indeed, a day for celebration--a celebration that was the result of years of effort and the contributions of many, coalescing around the teaching of Portuguese at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (UMD). Located in the town of Dartmouth in the State of Massachusetts, U.S.A., between New Bedford and Fall River, the two cities with the highest concentration of Portuguese in the U.S., UMD has been providing instruction in Portuguese since 1960. Responding to the demand for training in Portuguese language and culture that resulted from the surge in Portuguese immigration after the Capelinhos eruption, the university established an undergraduate major in Portuguese in the mid 1960s and, in 1975, founded the Center for the Portuguese Speaking World. The important role played by this center in fostering the teaching of Portuguese at the college and high school levels helped start UMD on the path to becoming the major site for the study of Portuguese language and culture in the U.S. These developments also attracted the support of the local community who saw UMD as a central agent for the preservation and promotion of Portuguese-American heritage. As a result, in 1975, the University's library received a gift of an almost-complete collection of the *Diário de Notícias*, a Portuguese-language daily newspaper published in New Bedford from 1919 to 1973. This gift, made by the daughters of the newspaper's last owner and publisher, João Rocha, along with the creation, in 1996, of the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, inspired the university library to collect other documents associated with the presence of the Portuguese in the U.S. As the number of materials increased, the idea for an archive dedicated specifically to the Portuguese-American experience began to develop. In 2004, the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, in collaboration with the Archives and Special Collections department of the Claire T. Carney Library, proposed the idea to the university's administration.

The proposal was enthusiastically received, with the project becoming part of a major effort to strengthen the growing Portuguese studies program at the university. That same year, the Master's Program in Portuguese, was established and three years later, in 2007, a doctoral program in Luso-Afro-Brazilian Studies. To bring the proposal to completion the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, under the leadership of its director Professor Frank Sousa, began an active fundraising campaign aimed at establishing an appropriate space for the growing collection and hiring qualified personnel to oversee its operations.

The response to these efforts was remarkable for a community often accused of placing little emphasis on education. In 2005, an endowment fund in the amount of \$1.5 million to support the activities of the archives was established, under the auspices of the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture. Ms. Otilia Ferreira, a retired teacher whose father, Affonso Gil Mendes Ferreira, was one of the founders of Portuguese-American radio back in the early 1930s, made the lead gift to the fundraising campaign, thereby receiving naming rights to the new archive. To honor her father's contributions to the promotion of Portuguese language and culture in the U.S., as well as his many charitable efforts to help fellow Portuguese, she chose "Ferreira-Mendes," the moniker by which Affonso Gil Mendes Ferreira was known among his large radio audience for over forty years.

Other contributors to the initial endowment fund included the Luso-American Foundation of Lisbon (FLAD); Anthony Andrade, founder and President of A&H Printing and partner in the Investment Firm Legg Maso; Frank B. Sousa, President of Colonial Wholesale Beverage; Luis Pedroso, President of Accutronics; Elisia Saab, co-owner of Advanced Polymers, Inc., a medical technology firm in New Hampshire; Maria Alves

Furman, a graduate of UMass Dartmouth and former Managing Director of Standish, Ayer & Wood, an investment counseling firm in Boston; and John Galant of H & G Structures of Clearwater, Florida. Of the \$1.5 million Endowment, \$500,000 was the result of matching funds from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Later on, the project received additional significant contributions from individuals, organizations and the governments of Massachusetts and the Autonomous Region of the Azores. Among these donations were an endowment from Mr. Edmund Dinis, former Portuguese-American lawyer, politician and owner of Portuguese-language radio station WJFD, to establish the Edmund Dinis Portuguese American Political, Legal and Public Service Collection; a grant from the Government of Autonomous Region of the Azores to support the archives and share digital resources; and an earmark from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to support the building of the Archives' home.

As initially proposed, the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives were to have their own facilities within the Archives and Special Collections department of UMD's Claire T. Carney Library. For this purpose, the University undertook the renovation and refurbishing of the mezzanine floor of the Library building, with construction beginning in 2007. After its completion in 2008, the Archives' state-of-the-art facilities consisted of extensive public and restricted areas, with rooms named after major donors. The public area includes the Prince Henry Society of Massachusetts, Inc. Reading Room; the Costa and Silva Families Vestibule; the William Q. and Mary Jane MacLean Gallery; and the Dorothy Santos Lobby. The restricted areas comprise a suite of offices, a processing room, and a climate-controlled storage vault. The latter is named for several individuals who have generously donated their personal collections and supported the renovation project, namely: The Dennis Rezendes Azorean Ancestral and Personal Life Collection; the Edmund Dinis Portuguese-American Political, Legal and Public Service Collection; the Frank B. Sousa Business and Entrepreneurship Collection; and the Carlton Viveiros Collection.

Along with the efforts to create the physical structures to house the new Portuguese-American archive, the University also invested in hiring qualified professionals to staff its operations. In 2007, Prof. Glória de Sá, a sociologist who studies the process of integration of the Portuguese into American society, became faculty director, assuming responsibility for the promotion of the Archives through publications, the organization of colloquia, fundraising, and community outreach activities. In 2009, Sónia Pacheco, a Portuguese bilingual-bicultural archivist, was hired to implement the plans for the development of the Archives, including the organization of existing primary source materials; collection development; and the provision of reference, cataloging, and outreach services. With all these pieces in place at the time of its dedication, the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives embarked on its mission to document, preserve and promote Portuguese-American culture and history.

## **Preserving and promoting Portuguese heritage, identity and representation in the U.S.:**

In 1934, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the legislation that created the U.S. National Archives, he stated that “To bring together the records of the past and to house them in buildings where they will be preserved for the use of men and women in the future, a nation must believe in three things: It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment to create their own future.” The response of the Portuguese-American Community to the creation of the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives shows that they too believe that by structuring, framing and organizing Portuguese-American social memory, and producing knowledge and narratives based on the objects of memory contained in its collection, the Archives will play a pivotal role in the continual construction of group identity, the shaping of Portuguese-American representation and the understanding of Portuguese-American culture in the public domain. Furthermore, it shows that the community believes that the memories contained in the Archives will provide a basis for what Nietzsche (1994) called “will’s memory,” that is, the group cohesion needed to advocate for Portuguese-American interests within the larger American society. Over the past few years, but especially since its dedication, the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives have been receiving a steady stream of materials donated by individuals and organizations eager to participate in the process of providing a foundation for the collective understanding of who they are as an ethnic group and how they fit into the overarching narrative of U.S. history and culture.

Although still at the incipient stage, the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives is already the largest repository of materials documenting the experience of the Portuguese in the U.S. National in scope, it contains papers of Portuguese-Americans who distinguished themselves in the areas of politics, business, arts, entertainment and literature; family photographs, scrapbooks, letters and oral histories which illustrate the collective experience of immigration, settlement and life in the United States; genealogical records; a collection of community newspapers and an assortment of books, ephemera, memorabilia and recordings documenting the group’s social history.

Among its most important holdings are the papers of Azorean-born author Alfred Lewis; the Luis de Figueiredo Côte-Real collection of *Açoriana*; the library and personal papers of Antone Felix, professor of Portuguese at UMD and founder of the Center for the Portuguese Speaking World; original runs and microfilms of newspapers like *Diário de Notícias*, *Portuguese Times* and *O Jornal*; “The Portuguese Around Us” and the Pedro Bicudo Newsreports video collections; and the American-Portuguese Genealogical and Historical Society Collection.

The major goal of the archives is making these rich and growing collections available to all who are interested in the history of Portuguese-Americans. Besides being open to the public during regular business hours throughout the year to accommodate the research needs of students and other individuals or groups carrying out academic or family research, the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives seeks to reach beyond the confines of the local community by utilizing electronic media and entering into partnerships with other institutions of knowledge and memory in order to exchange and share archival materials. An example of these efforts is *The Portuguese-American Digital Newspaper Collection*, a project that seeks to digitize and make available online and free of charge, all major Portuguese-American newspapers. Done in collaboration with the Center for Portuguese Studies, and

with the generous support of private donors, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Autonomous Region of the Azores, and the Luso-American Foundation, this initiative has already made available online 84,000 searchable pages of the *Diário de Notícias* (1919-1973). The newspaper website is available at <http://lib.umassd.edu/archives/paa/diario.html>. By the end of 2010, additional newspapers will be added to the site. Among them are *O Herald* *Portuguez*, published twice a year in Taunton by the archives' namesake Affonso Gil Mendes Ferreira, *O Colonial*, published in New Bedford in the early 1920s and 1930s and several titles from California, published in the early 20th century. The latter, were done in collaboration with the Portuguese Fraternal Society of America and are part the collection of the J. A. Freitas Library in San Leandro, California.

Another aspect of the Archives' efforts in preserving and promoting Portuguese heritage, identity and representation in the U.S. is through the organization of events and the hosting of various types of visitors. In the past twelve months, the Archives offered a variety of exhibits based on its collections or collaborations with partner organizations, as well as a wide range of presentations aimed at academic and non-academic audiences. Examples of these events include the exhibit "The Day of Portugal: Images from South Coast Portuguese Media," a lecture on "The Protestant Portuguese Community of Antebellum Illinois," and a genealogy workshop on "How to Find your Portuguese Ancestors." The Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives has also become a stop *de rigueur* for important individuals or groups visiting UMD or Southern New England, generating visibility and ethnic pride. Among recent VIP visitors were a group of representatives from various foreign universities, former FLAD president Rui Machette, Secretária Regional das Comunidades Rita Dias, the mayor of Ponta Delgada Berta Cabral, and former U.S. Senator Carol Moseley Braun.

By collecting, preserving, interpreting and making available the raw elements of Portuguese-American memory, the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives is playing a major role in shaping collective group identity among the Portuguese in the U.S. and contributing to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the group. Those who have materials or other resources that can enhance the Archives' ability to continue this ongoing process, can contact Sonia Pacheco, Archivist for the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese American Archives, by telephone at (508) 999-8695 or by email at [spacheco@umassd.edu](mailto:spacheco@umassd.edu).



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