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Jean E. Barker

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Cape Verdean- Americans: A Historical Perspective of Ethnicity and Race¹

By Jean E. Barker

Marilyn Halter, in her study of the Cape Verdean experience in America, stated:

In the rural areas, racial divisions were not so pronounced as in the cities. As long as Cape Cod Cape Verdeans “stayed in their place,” associating with their own kind in their own sectors, a semblance of cooperation and tolerance between groups was maintained. But true acceptance and an end to discrimination on the basis of color has been a long, slow, ongoing process.²

In rural Harwich, Massachusetts, this “semblance of cooperation and tolerance” seems to have existed from the very beginning between Cape Verdean immigrants and the townspeople. Town records indicate, for the most part, that the citizens of Harwich officially accepted the Cape Verdean self-designation as “Portuguese.” Prior to 1902, except in two or three cases, the two clerk left the category for race blank as he did for other residents of Harwich when registering the marriages of Cape Verdean immigrants. Two facts may have made this easier. First, all Cape Verdean immigrants were issued Portuguese passports. Second, the earliest settlers came from the Island of Brava, where the people were lighter in color. Brava, having had no sugar plantations, had a smaller slave population than the neighboring islands of Fogo and Sao Tiago, whose people began to emigrate in the late 1890s.³

After the turn of the century, the term “Portuguese” was often used on Harwich town records to describe the race of Cape Verdean immigrants. It was not until the 1920s that the Harwich town clerks discontinued the use of the term “Portuguese” as a racial designation and followed the state and federal guidelines, describing Cape Verdeans as “mulatto” in the record of marriages. However, the terms “mulatto” and occasionally “Portuguese” continued to be used until 1971 when the practice of noting a person’s race was discontinued entirely.⁴

Before the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v Ferguson* (1896), which recognized de jure segregation in the United States, there was no category for recording the race of a child when registering a birth in Harwich. Between 1897 and 1902, the town clerk recorded only



two babies as mulatto, omitting any designation for all other babies. With a change of clerks in 1902, the designation of Portuguese was initiated for Cape Verdean babies until the mid-1920s, when the terms dark, light, olive, mulatto, and Portuguese were substituted. Julia Ramos, a Cape Verdean midwife in Harwich, used the term “Portuguese” almost exclusively until the 1920s, when she occasionally used “malada” and “molato” when recording the race of the babies she delivered. Dr. John P. Nickerson of Harwich recorded almost all Cape Verdean babies he delivered as “Portuguese.” In contrast, Dr. E. S. Osborne of West Dennis recorded them as white, Portuguese, black, and colored.⁵ In 1922 the town discontinued the practice of listing Cape Verdean births separately in the annual reports, as had the *Harwich Independent* in 1919.⁶

The people of Harwich were certainly conscious of the racial factor in these early years, as indicated by the references to the “white” students in the segregated school debates of 1905. They did not refer to Cape Verdeans as Negro or colored, even when some expressed great prejudice and argued emotionally in favor of a segregated school. Although prejudice was certainly directed against Cape Verdeans, it was probably not entirely due to their mixed racial background. Without denying the existence of racial prejudice, it is important to note that much of the rhetoric of the early decades of the century reflected the anti-immigrant bias of the time. There was a great wave of nativism which swept the country at that time and was directed against foreigners in general, particularly the “new immigrants,” who appeared to threaten the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant vision of America.

In 1922 the *Harwich Independent* celebrated its fiftieth birthday and in an article noting the changes which had occurred during that half century, the editor wrote that the town had witnessed “the advent of foreign nationalities...filling the places of manual labor.”⁷ During

the decades of Cape Verdean immigration, the *Harwich Independent* made many references to Afro-Americans, but never equated the racial background of Afro-Americans with the racial background of Cape Verdeans. In 1900 the paper reported on a concert in Harwich by a quartet of “colored singers” from Tuskegee Institute in Georgia; it reported on the lynchings of “Negroes” in various parts of the country; and in 1932, it reported a story about the escape of a “colored” prisoner from the Nantucket jail. In 1929, there was also the reprint of a picture with its caption from another newspaper which identified Sweet Daddy Grace as “a Portuguese negro minister.”⁸ However, never did the *Harwich Independent* make any reference which indicated that they did not accept the self-designation of Cape Verdeans as “Portuguese,” a designation which stressed their foreign rather than their racial identity. In fact, the only time there was any reference in the paper to the racial background of any town residents was in the 1905 separate school debates when there were references to the “white” students.

Early press coverage by the *Harwich Independent* consistently referred to Cape Verdeans as “Portuguese.” Coverage of the Cape Verdean purchasing of homes and later bogs, the funeral of a young child, the accidental shooting of a teenage girl by her brother, all use “Portuguese” as the sole designation of Cape Verdeans.⁹ This continued description implies an overall sense of a people regarded as outside the mainstream, as foreign, but never classified or confused with Afro-Americans. Examples of such descriptions range from a reference to the “Portuguese section of Island Pond cemetery” to “Our Portuguese contingent are at the railroad station daily with beautiful bunches of this early Spring flower (Mayflower),” or “Influenza is not sufficiently stamped out in the Portuguese localities to lift the ban from the schools.”¹⁰

Such descriptions contribute to the picture of two separate worlds co-existing, but not merging. We derive from these multiple references and descriptions what Marilyn Halter described as a “semblance of cooperation and tolerance” based on the reality that Cape Verdeans lived in their own sectors and were “staying in their place.”¹¹ Harwich Cape Verdeans had created a social world of their own and therefore experienced little blatant discrimination. When asked directly, most of those interviewed agreed that when discrimination existed, it was subtle. In Harwich, Cape Verdean immigrants were successful in rejecting attempts to classify them solely by race. They succeeded in substituting an identity which was accepted by the town that was based on ethnicity and race rather than on race alone.

The pattern of news coverage which reflected the existence of a separate community existing alongside the larger community very gradually changed as Cape Verdeans became more integrated into the larger community. One early factor which contributed to their integration was World War I. In June 1917 the *Harwich Independent* reported that the Board of Registrars had

enrolled 117 Harwich men who were eligible for the draft, “including about 20 Portuguese.”¹² Instructions were given for the draft form which required registrants to list their race, place of birth, citizenship, or intention to become a citizen. Additional updates on the status of the draft noted that some Cape Verdeans were ineligible because of their alien status.

Some Cape Verdeans, such as Frank Raneo, John Raneo’s father, enlisted and used their military service to earn their citizenship. John Raneo explained:

My father was in the Second Field Artillery of Massachusetts...a non-segregated unit...Like all the Cape Verdeans in Harwich who enlisted at that time, he was listed as Portuguese and white, which cause a lot of problems depending on the color of the skin.¹³

In fact, Frank Raneo died in 1933 in a veterans hospital from lung complications resulting from his wartime service.

When the first Harwich boy was claimed as a victim of the war, a Cape Verdean classmate, Albert Gomes, was one of his pallbearers, and when the town raised a sixty-four star service flag over Exchange Hall in August 1918, there were three Cape Verdean men represented by stars. There was no reference to anyone being “Portuguese” when the town honored those who had served in the military, including many Cape Verdeans, with a day in the park and a celebratory dinner.¹⁴ Military service appears to have been a vehicle whereby native-born Americans recognized the commitment of many immigrants to the United States. The shared wartime experiences helped contribute to the growing acceptance by many of the immigrant groups.

As with other immigrant groups, the public school system accelerated the Americanization of the children. There were never any special references to the ethnicity of Cape Verdean children when they merited news coverage for academic, athletic, or other school honors.

By the late 1920s and 1930s, there were very few references to the “Portuguese” in the *Harwich Independent*. Most news coverage omitted any ethnic designation, as in the report of Joseph Ramos’ killing of a 6’3” copperhead, or in the 1931 article titled, “Harwich Boy Re-Enlists” which proudly announced that Abel Gomes, who was home on leave, had re-enlisted in the Navy after completing two tours of duty.¹⁵ There were still occasional references to the “Portuguese,” but news coverage and personal recollections of Cape Verdean-Americans after the mid-1930s indicate that Cape Verdeans in Harwich, if not fully accepted and free of discrimination, had successfully begun the “long, slow, ongoing process” toward full and complete integration and acceptance.¹⁶

As previously stated, Cape Verdean immigrants in the United States worked to establish their own unique ethnic identity in an effort not to be grouped with Afro-Americans. On the Cape Verde Islands they were

Portuguese citizens and identified as Portuguese. In the United States they persisted in stressing their identification as Portuguese, claiming the right to self-designation rather than accepting one imposed by an exceedingly race-conscious society. As one immigrant stated: "We are not black, we are Portuguese. We know we have black in our blood, and white."¹⁷ In the turn-of-the-century United States any amount of African ancestry guaranteed an identification by society as "Negro," complete with its history of slavery and discrimination. Cape Verdean immigrants appreciated the compounded difficulties they would endure as immigrants if classified solely by race.

Cape Verdeans, by establishing their own communities, eased the adaptation process to a society which was increasingly antagonistic to both immigrants and blacks. They consciously worked to avoid the consequences of being identified as black, preferring to be identified by their ethnicity rather than by their race. Cape Verdeans consciously identified themselves more with other immigrant groups from the small villages and farms in Catholic, southern Europe than they did with Afro-Americans. Eugene Texeira, when describing the Cape Verdean customs concerning courtship and marriage, stated:

If you married, you were married, that's your wife. It was strict in that time. It was the same all over Europe, Italy or any place. If a girl got married, her husband has to be the first one she knows.¹⁸

Similarly, when Tina Raneo explained the hard times experienced by Cape Verdeans during the Depression years, she likened their experiences to those of other immigrant groups, like their Italian neighbors, with whom her family shared a slaughtered pig.¹⁹

Cape Verdean immigrants in Harwich were successful in establishing a separate community with self-designated cultural identity as Portuguese, distinct from the culture of Afro-Americans. They found a community where jobs and affordable land were available and where they could co-exist in a community which maintained a "semblance of cooperation and tolerance."²⁰

By the 1930s the years of heavy immigration were over. Restrictive legislation enacted in 1921 and 1924 which became fully operational in 1929, severely limited the number of immigrants allowed to enter the United States. In addition to a dwindling number of immigrants, the Depression and the war in Europe also contributed to the dissolving of close ties with the Islands. Employment, the educational system, military service in World War I, all worked toward affirming the identity of the first and second generation Harwich Cape Verdeans as Cape Verdean-Americans. Although Cape Verdeans in Harwich still retained many of the characteristics of their cultural heritage, such as living in predominantly Cape Verdean neighborhoods, socializing, for the most part, with other

Cape Verdeans, enjoying traditional Cape Verdean foods and celebrations, and speaking Crioulo with the older folks, they were accepted as an integral part of the Harwich community.

The integration and assimilation into community life, however, does not deny that discrimination and prejudice continued to be part of the Cape Verdean immigrant experience. All those interviewed believed that when discrimination in Harwich occurred, and it did occur, it was expressed subtly, rarely overtly. For those who moved outside the area, however, there was no recognition for them as a distinct cultural entity; they were judged on race alone. The examples of racism, prejudice, and discrimination cited by those interviewed illustrate clearly the ludicrousness of the race system in the United States.

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Betty Pina recalls vividly her anger in high school, when the editor of the school paper wrote an article suggesting that those speaking a foreign language on school property be reprimanded and prohibited from doing so in the future. Being the only students in the school who occasionally spoke in another language, Betty and her Cape Verdean friends were angry. "But, that didn't stop us. We went as a group to him and told him we would do what we had to do and then take the consequences from the principal."²¹ She also recalls that most of the Cape Verdean students chummed around together, not mixing socially very much. "As young children in the school, we would congregate among ourselves."²²

When asked about any personal memories of discrimination in Harwich, Eugene Texeira stated:

There was nothing wrong here. We don't stand for that. On the job we eat together, joke together, deal with each other man to man.²³

Yet, when he travelled to Florida, after having lived in the northeast for several years, he was exposed for the first time to a segregated society. Ignorant of local customs, he horrified a black shoeshine man by hopping into the chair and requesting a shine. Fearful of the white reaction, the shoeshine man begged him to get out of the seat before trouble erupted.²⁴

World War II was a consciousness-raising experience for many of the Harwich Cape Verdean men. Outside the small area of southeastern Massachusetts, the Cape Verde Islands were unknown and most Americans classified anyone with black ancestry as black. Many Cape Verdean men, assigned to all-black units, experienced overt discrimination for the first time. Some, like Betty Pina's

husband, Rufus, served in all-white units.

In 1941 John Raneo volunteered for the Air Corps, hoping to fly. Enlisting locally, he encountered no problems for he was Portuguese. However, to the racially-conscious Air Corps of 1941, there was a problem. As Chief Raneo stated, "They didn't know what to do with me."²⁵ He remained in Springfield, Massachusetts earning promotions, but not an overseas flying assignment. Eventually he was assigned as an officer in charge of black infantry troops. It was in Georgia that he experienced blatant racial discrimination for the first time. With the perspective of time and a strong sense of self-worth, Chief Raneo related, with amusement, the wartime confusion over his identity.²⁶

During the 1960s and 1970s it became increasingly difficult for many Cape Verdeans to maintain their non-black identity. Many young Cape Verdeans, like many young black Americans at that time, developed a pride in their African heritage. To many American blacks, the insistence by some Cape Verdeans of their cultural distinctiveness appeared to be a form of racism.²⁷ After Cape Verdean independence in 1975, it was difficult for many older Cape Verdean-Americans to identify with Africa rather than Portugal. When asked how they identified themselves, several of the older people interviewed answered, "We are Portuguese."²⁸ None of those interviewed denied their African heritage, but all asserted the importance of their distinct cultural heritage as Cape Verdeans. Belmira Nunes Lopes expressed the feeling of so many Cape Verdeans about their proud and distinct heritage in her statement:

We should not be lumped with any other groups—we are not Puerto Ricans, we are not Afro-Americans, we are not Mexicans, we are Cape Verdeans...I want people to recognize me for what I am. I guess I am just proud of what I am, and I do not want people to think that I am anything else...How can I deny that I have African blood in me? It is evident...Nevertheless, I want to be recognized as a person with a distinct culture. It is a blend of many races and many cultures dominated by the culture of Portugal...It is the basis from which Cape Verdeans are going forward and asking to be recognized as a minority group.²⁹

Notes

¹This article is based on an excerpt of the author's master's thesis entitled, "Cape Verdean Immigrant Experience in Harwich, Massachusetts." (University of Massachusetts: December 1993).

²Marilyn Halter, *Between Race and Ethnicity: Cape Verdean Immigrants* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 123.

³*Official Record of Marriages 1848-1889.*

⁴*Official Record of Marriages 1890-1950.*

⁵*Official Record of Births, 1848-1895; Official Record of Births 1896-1950; Record of Births, 1915-1930.*

⁶*Annual Report for the Town of Harwich 1922; Harwich Independent*, February 12, 1919.

⁷*Harwich Independent*, August 22, 1922.

⁸*Harwich Independent*, August 21, 1900; October 13, 1932; October 2, 1929.

⁹*Harwich Independent*, September 19, 1893; May 8, 1894; March 20, 1907.

¹⁰*Harwich Independent*, November 19, 1913; March 24, 1912; October 23, 1918.

¹¹Marilyn Halter, *Between Race and Ethnicity*, 123.

¹²*Harwich Independent*, June 6, 1917.

¹³*Harwich Independent*, August 29, 1917; John Raneo, interview with author, May 28, 1993.

¹⁴*Harwich Independent*, June 27, 1917; August 18, 1918; September 3, 1919.

¹⁵*Harwich Independent*, August 27, 1930; August 26, 1931.

¹⁶Halter, *Between Race and Ethnicity*, 123.

¹⁷Eugene Teixeira, interview with author, June 14, 1992.

¹⁸*Ibid.*; Raneo, interview.

¹⁹Raneo, interview.

²⁰Halter, *Between Race and Ethnicity*, 123.

²¹Betty Pina, interview with author, April 29, 1992.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Teixeira, interview.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Raneo, interview.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Deirdre Meintel Machado, "Cape Verdean Americans," in *Hidden Minorities: The Persistence of Ethnicity in American Life*, Joan H. Rollins (Ed.) (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), 243.

²⁸Teixeira, interview; Louis Fernandes, interview with author, 14 June 1992.

²⁹Luisa Maria Nunes, *A Portuguese Colonial in America: Belmira Nunes Lopes* (Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review Press, 1982), 202, 203.

Jean E. Barker, a 26 year resident of Harwich, Massachusetts, teaches geography in world cultures.