

New Bedford cultural perspectives: Where does the “Bathtub Jesus” come from?

Colloquially called the “Bathtub Jesus,” this common feature in yards throughout New Bedford is more accurately called a “Bathtub Mary/Madonna” front yard shrine, or a lawn shrine.

While it may be hard to believe that there are actually people who live on the South Coast in general and specifically New Bedford, that are not of Portuguese heritage, it’s true. Maybe I should have warned you to sit before you read that statement? Apologies.

Certainly, there are areas of the city where you can go and all the signs are in Portuguese, pull over and ask for directions and you may meet someone who only speaks Portuguese, and any a perusal of a phone book (do these exist too? Bigfoot might be carrying one) is a lesson in the massive variety of Portuguese surnames.

Having said that, having a Portuguese surname in the New World isn’t a guarantee that you speak the language and/or understand aspects of the culture from a historical perspective. So, if you already know, then there’s no need to read more, but you can certainly share your understanding and experience with those of us who don’t know.



As you likely know – or at least, any person who studies American, Portuguese, or SouthCoast history would know – the Portuguese are predominantly Catholic. In fact, their last census showed that Catholicism makes up 81% of the population. It goes without saying that they brought their religion with them. So even if you are Portuguese, or of Portuguese heritage, you may not be Catholic and might enjoy this little foray into Portuguese and/or Catholic culture.

The lawn shrine is a bathtub stood upright with half of it underground. Yes, there are actually companies who manufacture

lawn shrines. No, they aren't bathtubs. However, why pay for the shrine and the shipping when the land of opportunity is chock full of extra? You can either save a lot of money by visiting a landfill or salvage company or even better, gifted with one by someone who is replacing or tossing theirs.

This highlights the immigrant culture that arrived on America's shores with little to nothing. There is a monumental appreciation for a dollar, a meal, even some basic no-name clothing – when you have little. When I was growing up in the 70s and 80s – not the 1880s, the 1980s, you comedian – popular maxims existed like “You should eat everything on your plate because there are starving people in Ethiopia or China.”, “I make my kids do chores for \$5 a week so they will learn the value of the buck.” and “Though my son/daughter will inherit the business they will start with sweeping the floor.”

These and similar values were once common ones that immigrant families felt important to instill. Unfortunately, they have become uncommon values. No, I'm neither a pessimist nor a cynic – in fact, I consider myself a hopeless optimist, but simple, daily observation will bear this out.

That is perspective – to “see” things in a right, just or proper way. To instill the value of hard work, the “almighty” dollar, appreciate what you have no matter how little it is, et al.

Point being that this perspective is demonstrated with the oft scoffed at or ridiculed “Bathtub Jeebus.” It has entered pop culture and there is even a song