

Remembering New Bedford's Portuguese Navy Yard and Shanty Town

The Portuguese have a long, prominent role in the development of western civilization, the New World, and progress of the nation. There is hardly a facet of the planet's history that this tiny nation did not have some influence over. So, it should come as no surprise that the Portuguese also had a central role in the development of this region in general, and specifically New Bedford.

By the 15th century the Portuguese were known as some of the greatest seafarers, whalers, fishermen, navigators, cartographers, and shipbuilders, so it was simply a matter of time before they began to migrate to the whaling capital of the world. Here is a spot on earth where not only were there major opportunities available, but in an area where they specialized and excelled. They were so refined in this area that it is not uncommon to find children as young as 11 years of age on a whaling vessel. It's almost as if it is written in their DNA!

As the 16th century opened its eyes, the Portuguese were already colonizing parts of South America and poking their noses around New Foundland and Labrador, even claiming it for the crown. What funded much of these explorations was proselytization, but as momentum was achieved they began to establish industries and trade. They began with cod as a commodity, but eventually established sugar cane plantations which in turn created a massive demand for labor for which the slave trade was established. Slavery and the treatment of natives while attempting to convert them were two of the darkest moments in humanity and Portugal's history.

Today Brazil is home to 110 million people of Portuguese ancestry. Pretty impressive considering that Portugal itself only has 11.5 million people. America claims 1.5 million people of Portuguese ancestry, the largest communities centralized in Metro Boston (195,000+), Greater New York/New Jersey/Connecticut (130,000+) area and San Francisco (124,000+). Massachusetts is home to almost 300,000 people of Portuguese ancestry (beat only by California) with most communities in East Cambridge, Lowell, Taunton, Fall River, Dartmouth and of course New Bedford. The majority of the population in the New Bedford area were Azorean and when the whaling industry died, the next waves of immigrants sought construction and unskilled labor.



*Wider Shot of Shanties –
Courtesy of the N.B.
Whaling Museum*

In that latter part of the 19th century and the when the 20th century was just getting its legs under it, there was a wave of Portuguese to New Bedford and it is here that brings us to the point of this particular article. The whaling industry begun to peter out and sputter to a conclusion leaving many of Portuguese descent searching for a means to support their families and put food on the table. Having the aforementioned predilection for the sea, DNA “profile” and having a long storied history of navigation, ship building, and sailing it was a no-brainer that the population gravitated to the waterfront. The poorest began to build shanties, or crudely

built shacks at the edge of the waterfront, particularly at the foot of Potomska Street. A modest shantytown developed and was dubbed the “Portuguese Navy Yard.”

Not only did being at the edge of the water remind them of home, history and past glory, but this is where all the industry was. If labor was needed they were ready. If ship repairs, building or containment was needed they were available. They could also fish, quahog, and trap lobster and crab; anyway to generate revenue. They could jump at the smallest of jobs and make enough to feed their families and that has always been a priority of theirs.

Unfortunately the Hurricane of '38 not only was disastrous for the area, it was catastrophic for the Portuguese Navy Yard. It was completely and totally wiped away. As happens with many events of history, they are overshadowed by relatively greater events and swept away often almost disappearing. A symbolic second hurricane if you will. These images which were generously provided by the New Bedford Whaling Museum and Spinner Publications are the only photos of the Portuguese Navy Yard that are known of. Surely someone, somewhere in an attic, cellar, or dusty photo album there are some forgotten treasures. By all means, if these images stir your memory and you have anything related, please share them!

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