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# RECOVERED VOICES, NEWFOUND QUESTIONS

FAMILY ARCHIVES AND  
HISTORICAL RESEARCH

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**THE FERREIRA-MENDES PORTUGUESE-AMERICAN  
ARCHIVES: DOCUMENTING A COMMUNITY'S  
STORY THROUGH FAMILY ARCHIVES**

**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. There was a history that was undocumented and often brushed aside as being insignificant by the community itself. This paper explores how family/personal archives found at the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American archives at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, can be used to not only study the settlement of Portuguese-Americans, but also allow for the study of the local community. These records have allowed the Archives to establish itself as the only known American institution that actively documents and preserves Portuguese-American heritage, and that uses a community development philosophy to engage with the Portuguese-American community.

**Keywords:** Portuguese-American; community archives; family archives; personal archives

**RESUMO:** Apesar de os Luso-Americanos se concentrarem em algumas cidades urbanas e industriais do nordeste dos Estados Unidos, onde têm sido um dos grandes grupos étnicos há mais de um século, eram vistos, até recentemente, como invisíveis e sem poder nas comunidades onde se estabeleceram. A sua história não foi documentada e muitas vezes foi ignorada pela própria comunidade Luso-Americana, que a considerava insignificante. Este ensaio explora a forma como o Arquivo Luso-Americano Ferreira-Mendes da Universidade de Massachusetts Dartmouth pode ser utilizado para estudar não só o estabelecimento de Luso-Americanos no País, mas também as comunidades locais onde se inserem. O espólio que o Arquivo mantém é o único de que tenhamos conhecimento que documenta e conserva activamente a herança Luso-Americana, partindo ao mesmo tempo de uma filosofia baseada no desenvolvimento comunitário como ponte para o diálogo com aquela comunidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Luso-Americano; arquivo comunitário; arquivo familiar; arquivo pessoal

## Establishing the archives

The Portuguese have immigrated to the United States in substantial numbers for approximately one hundred and fifty years. They established settlement patterns in the East and West coasts, with one of the largest concentrations gathering on what is informally known as the South Coast of Massachusetts, specifically in the neighboring cities of Fall River and New Bedford<sup>1</sup>. Thus, it is not unforeseen that the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (UMass Dartmouth), created in 1960, has a long history as a source of post-secondary opportunities for Portuguese-Americans, and that it has been involved with Portuguese culture and language since its inception<sup>2</sup>.

The groundwork for what is now known as the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American archives (FMPAA) was laid in 1975 with the donation to the university's library 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, in conjunction with the reinvigoration of the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture (CPSC) in 1996, and the hiring of a new Archives and Special Collections librarian, saw an increase in the collection of documents associated with the presence of the Portuguese in the United States. As the materials increased, the idea for an archive dedicated specifically to the Portuguese-American experience took hold. However, it was not until 2004 that the idea was presented to the university's administration by the CPSC in collaboration with the Archives and Special Collections department of the Claire T. Carney Library<sup>3</sup>.

The idea evolved, and an active fundraising campaign aimed at establishing an appropriate space on campus was spearheaded by the director of the CPSC, Frank Sousa. In 2005, Otilia Ferreira made the lead gift to the fundraising campaign, thereby receiving naming rights to the new archive. She chose 'Ferreira-Mendes,' the moniker by which her father, Gil Affonso Mendes Fer-

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<sup>1</sup> WILLIAMS, 1982: 48-51.

<sup>2</sup> GIFUN, 2007: 231.

<sup>3</sup> SA; FARRAR; PACHECO, 2011.

reira, a Portuguese-American radio pioneer, was known among his large radio audience for over forty years<sup>4</sup>.

With the physical structure proceeding, the University and Library undertook the second step that was required to have a proficient archive: qualified professionals to staff its operations. In 2007, Professor 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 FMPAA 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 collections; collection development; and the provision of reference and outreach services. It was also decided that the FMPAA would operate as part of the part of Archives and Special Collection Department, which functions as a unit of the Claire T. Carney Library. With all these pieces in place at the time of its dedication in September of 2009, the FMPAA embarked on its mission to document, preserve and promote Portuguese-American culture and history<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the general purpose of the FMPAA is essentially no different than that of other ethnic archives: “The principle underlying their creation was the preservation of an interrelated, comprehensive body of material which would record all facets of the history of the local community”, with the FMPAAs “community” being spread throughout the United States<sup>6</sup>.

The FMPAA operates under the concept that it is doing “ethnic archiving”, an idea described as “the objectives and processes involved in documenting the immigrant and ethnic experience in the United States”<sup>7</sup>. And to this end, has implemented the following vision statement that guides not only its collecting policy but also its public program and outreach activities:

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<sup>4</sup> SA; FARRAR; PACHECO, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> SA; FARRAR; PACHECO, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> GRABOWSKI, 1985: 387.

<sup>7</sup> DANIEL, 2010: 83.

The Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese American Archives serves as a central repository for collecting, preserving and providing access to manuscript and archival material documenting the history of the Portuguese in the United States. As an intellectual center for the study and exchange of information pertaining to the history of all Portuguese-Americans, the Archives will help promote wide-spread understanding and appreciation of Portuguese history and culture (FMPAA document).

Essentially, the nature of the documents it collects must be specifically related to Portuguese-Americans, or if one is to use the model set forth by Joel Wurl, the archives operates under the guidance of ethnicity as provenance<sup>8</sup>. One may substantiate this statement by looking at the explanations that two of the principal archival theorists gave to provenance. T.R. Schellerberg described provenance as means to enable “an archivist to deal with records collectively, to treat records from a given organic source or a given organic activity as a unit, to deal with groups and series instead of single record items or single record volumes”, the “organic source” for the FMPAA being the ethnicity of the individuals who have created and gathered the materials<sup>9</sup>. Or if one is to use Hilary Jenkinson’s much narrower definition, provenance is stated as being “the place from which Archives come”, whereby the “place” is one’s ethnic background<sup>10</sup>. This conceptualization of provenance continues the archival assumption that adherence to the principle allows for the protection, and thus the integrity or truth, of the message that the records transmit, regardless of their format or physical form, a concept that is crucial to the FMPAA for it is “the Portuguese” telling their own story; and allows for an expression of provenance not as singular but as having multiple points of origin<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> WURL, 2005: 67-69.

<sup>9</sup> SCHELLENBERG, 1965b: 39.

<sup>10</sup> JENKINSON, 1922: 80.

<sup>11</sup> REILLY, 2005.

## Family and personal archives as a marker of ethnicity

By exploring the concept of ethnicity as provenance, it is possible to link family and personal archives — what the FMPAA defines as the records created by private individuals during their everyday activities — to one’s concept of ethnicity and one’s place in the history of the ethnic/cultural group that one believes one belongs to. Interestingly, it is rarely the first generation of immigrants that sees or understands the value of their archival activity. Marcus Lee Hansen best described this disconnect as a situation where “the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember.” His thesis predicted that the third generation would become interested in the immigration past of their grandparents and would take steps to record their history<sup>12</sup>, and not surprisingly it has been the second and third generations that have donated much of the personal/family collections to the FMPAA.

Unfortunately, the personal papers of everyday individuals have not historically been understood to have intrinsic value as only the records of “notable persons” were thought worthy of being preserved<sup>13</sup>. In addition, much like the early United States-based ethnic historical societies, the Portuguese-American community still believes that the primary concern of the FMPAA should be to tell the Portuguese-American story in a positive light, with emphasis on the immigrant pioneers and the lives of the “great men”<sup>14</sup>. The “great men” are thought to be evidence of how much the Portuguese have contributed to the building of the United States as a nation of immigrants, while the “pioneers” are presented as evidence of a long, established and stable community. Sadly, the FMPAA currently faces the problem that while it can successfully get the donor community to understand the power of the historical record in telling the Portuguese-American story, individuals still find it difficult to comprehend that the FMPAA needs to collect, publish and interpret its collections through the lens of a historical narrative that is truthful and does not shy

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<sup>12</sup> DANIEL, 2015: 1.

<sup>13</sup> DANIEL, 2010: 84.

<sup>14</sup> DANIEL, 2015: 9.

away from difficult topics or periods in Portuguese-American history<sup>15</sup>. Staff of the FMPAA consistently reinforce to the community the same concepts that were expressed by Antonio Rodrigues: studying an immigrant group not only contributes to the knowledge of the group itself, but also contributes towards the immigration and social studies research. And while his research is focused on the Portuguese in South Africa, the same holds true for Portuguese-Americans, as these studies can include analysis of the group, their arrivals, their adaptation and contribution to the United States, their home life, and their social, economic and political problems that have been and may continue to be faced<sup>16</sup>. There is no better source of primary materials to conduct these studies than through family collections.

This is not to say that the FMPAA exclusively collects family papers, however; it is conscious of the fact that “The records of ethnic organizations and leaders represented an important aspect of the immigrant experience, but neglecting anonymous individuals and families exposed archivists to the same accusation elitist bias”<sup>17</sup>, therefore, it has identified the following items as priority:

- *Family papers and papers of Portuguese-American individuals and families* including items such as letters, diaries, professional papers, speeches/lectures, photographs, films, videos, audiotapes, memoirs and reminiscences, scrapbooks, photo albums, business records, and legal documents;
- *Records of cultural, religious and civic organizations* such as churches, political organizations, community groups, voluntary associations, special event organizations, professional associations, and economic interest groups;
- *Business records* for businesses that were owned by Portuguese-Americans or specifically targeted services to the Portuguese-American community;

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<sup>15</sup> DANIEL, 2015: 9,

<sup>16</sup> RODRIGUES, 2017: 31.

<sup>17</sup> DANIEL, 2010: 87-88.

- *Oral histories*, as the Archives accepts oral history interviews relating to the Portuguese community if legal releases have been secured or a reasonable attempt can be made to secure them;
- *Newspapers and serials* from the Portuguese press in the United States, including original newspapers, microfilmed versions, born-digital versions, and versions which have been digitized;
- *Ephemeral collections* (such as posters, programs, photographs, newspaper articles) *that document an event of historical or cultural value* to the Portuguese-American community.

## **Family and personal archives in the FMPAA**

As of October 2018, the FMPAA holds just over 30 collections that it identifies as being personal and/or family collections. While the content of these collections varies in scope, geographic and date extent, for the most part they include photographs, correspondence, and genealogical records and are generally focused on the mid to late twentieth century. This paper will focus on four of the 30 collections that demonstrate the varied research that can be accomplished beyond that of the traditional “genealogical” research that is usually considered to be the primary focus of family and personal archives.

### **MC 64 — Furtado family correspondence**

This collection was purchased by staff of the FMPAA and is assumed to have been kept by family members of William and Arthur Furtado, brothers who were native to New Bedford, Massachusetts, and who both served in the navy during World War II. The collection consists of 100 letters, postcards, telegrams and other correspondence written and received by the brothers, as well as some other ephemeral items related to Furtado family members. The collection is an excellent resource for those studying WWII and the individuals who served, and surprisingly, although the letters are written in English, they shed significant insight into the feelings and strong affinity that the two

brothers had for their Portuguese-American heritage. Both brothers write of not being surprised that their mother sent them care packages that included *chouriço* and *linguiça* and of finding and connecting with other Portuguese-American individuals whom they were serving with! It is these small bits of information that allow a researcher to piece together what it was like to be a second- or third-generation Portuguese-American during WWII. In addition, the correspondence provides firsthand accounts of everyday life on a navy ship and documents quite well the feelings and difficulties that were faced by family who corresponded with the brothers and worried for their safety.

Additional research beyond the collection tells us that William received the American Theater Medal and World War II Victory Medal; was a musician in the navy orchestra and played at the inauguration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He eventually went on to become a teacher and guidance counselor until his retirement. His brother, Arthur, was a firefighter. Both remained in the New Bedford area and, sadly, both passed away in 2002.

#### **MC 148 — Dennis Rezendes Azorean ancestral and personal life collection**

Dennis Rezendes was the child of an immigrant father and a first-generation immigrant mother, who was raised in Fall River, Massachusetts, and was a product of local schools. In his autobiography *Looking Back to the Future: A personal journey* (volume 2), he stated that “The greatest gift I received from [my teachers] was learning how to learn, to explore the unknown and to use the knowledge not only for my own betterment but also for others”<sup>18</sup>.

One of the largest family and personal collections in the FMPAA, this treasure trove of materials, relates to Mr. Rezendes’ personal life, his career in administration as well as his and his wife Jacqueline Beau Rezendes’ work in hospice care. The collection is composed of materials related to his genealogical research, the various endowments he supported and contains correspondence, photographs, books, certificates (birth, marriage and death), personal items and writings. Within the collection are materials relating to family mem-

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<sup>18</sup> REZENDES, 2008: 500.

bers: Michael Rezendes; Cheryl Rezendes Rulewich; Shane and Seth Bohart and their children. Originally donated to the FMPAA due to Mr. Rezendes' keen interest and extensive research on his family's genealogy, the collection was enhanced when the FMPAA archivist was able to explain to Mr. Rezendes that *all* of his personal and professional papers had historical and enduring value, and as such, should be donated. As an example of the positive feedback from Mr. Rezende's, at the request of the archivist he annotated each of the several hundred photographs in the collection with the name of the individuals in them and the location (and when possible) the circumstances in which the photographs were taken.

While the collection provides valuable local history information, specifically related to the city of Fall River, and genealogical information related to the Rezendes family, the hidden research jewel is found in the extensive documentation that was donated related to hospice care in the United States. Mr. Rezendes and his wife were both founding members of the National Hospice Organization (now known as the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization), and the materials related to this period in their lives includes original meeting notes, memos, photographs, annual reports and conference programs, and notes related to the early and groundbreaking work that the organization was undertaking on a national level. He stated that "The experience also gave me a greater understanding of how precious every life is from birth to death. I have also learned the real meaning and power of love."

### **MC 154 — Antone Felix papers**

Antone Felix's estate donated his personal and professional papers shortly after his death as they believed that his collection not only shed light on his personal accomplishments but also provided invaluable information about the genesis of the teaching of Portuguese at UMass Dartmouth. The collection is comprised of various teaching tools (such as syllabi, tests, worksheets, and lesson plans), Portuguese-language curriculum related books, newspaper articles, slide and artifacts that were used by Felix in the classroom.

Felix was born to parents of Azorean descent and was quite proud of his locally obtained education: a graduate of New Bedford High School, a Bachelor of Science from Boston University, and two master's degrees (a Master of Education from Bridgewater State College and a Master of Arts from New York University). In addition, he completed course work at Harvard University, the Universidade do Rio Grande do Sul (Porto Alegre, Brasil,) and the Universidade de Lisboa. He began his career as a teacher at New Bedford High School, where he taught Portuguese. Then, he went on to become a Professor of Portuguese at what was known at the time as Southeastern Massachusetts University (SMU), where he received the title Professor Emeritus upon his retirement in 1992. While teaching at SMU, he also served as principal of De Valles Evening School for a five-year period.

His professional accomplishments were quite varied and included chairing the sub-committee that drafted the proposal for a 'Portuguese Learning Center' which was accepted in the spring of 1973, resulting in the Center for the Portuguese Speaking World (CPSW), and subsequently served as its director for several years. The CPSW would become one of the precursors to the existing Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. He was a prolific public speaker to many local Portuguese cultural organizations, as he routinely gave talks and slide presentations on the Portuguese author Luís de Camões and Lusophone Africa. In addition, he coordinated the first *leitör* from the Instituto de Alta Cultura, began the Summer Study in Portugal Program for students, and was a significant force in the creation and growth of the Portuguese-language book collection at what is now known as the Claire T. Carney Library at UMass Dartmouth, with his contacts and donations of books, magazines, and newspapers from Portuguese government agencies.

#### **MC 165 — Frances Sylvia Gracia papers and Portuguese-American collection**

Frances Sylvia, while born in Fall River, Massachusetts, was raised in Little Compton, Rhode Island where her family had deep Portuguese-American roots. Her collection is comprised of her life's work and passion: the docu-

mentation of the Portuguese-American community she felt was held in low esteem by the “Yankees” they worked with/for and who were their neighbors. She expressed that the more she learned and grew older, the more she refused to “be cowed or to maintain a respectful silence” (*Portuguese Times*).

In contrast to “traditional” family/personal collections whose emphasis is on the daily lives and accomplishments of the donating family, in the case of the Gracia collection it consists of hundreds of documents that record the history of the Portuguese in the United States, with an emphasis on the Portuguese in New England, specifically the south coast of Massachusetts. Ms. Gracia documented small local organizations and events, and the records related to this aspect of the collection are often the only known documentation about the organizations and events. In addition, she donated her extensive genealogical research tracing the history of her family, as well as a significant number of personal documents such as photographs, ephemera, newspaper clippings, correspondence, and the research that ultimately resulted in her various publications. Her passion and interest in the Portuguese-American community led to her authoring *Early Portuguese Settlers in Little Compton, Rhode Island* (1974) as part of the Little Compton Tercentenary (1675-1975), the establishment of the “Portuguese Room” at the *Little Compton Historical Society*, being a founding member of the Portuguese American Historical Foundation of Fall River and a prolific member of the American Portuguese Genealogical & Historical Society.

The four collections listed in this article, while only a sample of the total holdings of the FMPAA, are but one example that although second- and third-generation Portuguese descendants more often than not do not speak Portuguese and have immersed themselves in American culture and society, they still have an inherent feeling of pride and interest in their ethnic roots and cultural heritage<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> RODRIGUES, 2017: 35.

## Community engagement

Historically few collections have been donated to the FMPAA (or Archives and Special Collections in general) without the existence of a long-term relationship. This relationship occurred either directly between the staff and the donor, or the staff and a community member who then facilitated the gift from the donor. This model of collection growth is not sustainable, nor does it allow for targeted collection development. Specifically, it prevents engagement and places the FMPAA outside the community, thereby distancing itself from being a natural point of contact for primary historical information on Portuguese-Americans.

Thus, the FMPAA functions under a collaborative model with both the cultural and academic Portuguese-American community. This model is loosely framed by the research of the *Working Together Project* (information on which can be found at <http://www.librariesincommunities.ca/>) and the concept of community archives<sup>20</sup>. Although the *Working Together Project* was centered on research about social inclusion in library services, its “toolkit” is a valuable guide for any information or heritage professional who intends to work closely with communities that have been traditionally excluded and discouraged from active engagement and participation in the preservation and telling of their story. The FMPAA archivist regularly adapts the methodology described in the toolkit to her activities with the community, specifically as they relate to relationship building. The Oregon Multicultural Archives (OMA) investigation team from the Research and Innovative Services Department, in their “Research & Innovative Services Report”, made several similar recommendations to the OMA to further engage internal and external stakeholders<sup>21</sup>. It must be noted as well that these are not revolutionary ideas, as Daniel writes that as early as the 1960s and 1970s Rudolph Vecoli made recommendations on how to garner and gather the fragile and scattered documents that told the story of the turn-of-the-century immigrants, a generation that was dying and had gone undocumented. Of primary importance to Vecoli was that archivists

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<sup>20</sup> GILLILAND; FLINN, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> CHAU; NICHOLS; NILSEN, 2009: 10.

be in the field in order to interact with ethnic organizations and leaders and involve them in the decision-keeping process<sup>22</sup>.

For as successful as the relationship building aspect of the collaborative working model may be, it does not suffice as a means of community engagement, and in fact it brings to the forefront the need for the FMPAA to have staff who have “soft skills” such as empathy, interpersonal competence, and open-mindedness”, and to acknowledge that “People want to see themselves represented [...] and to have an opportunity to participate”<sup>23</sup>. This want for representation has been seen in the series of talks that the FMPAA has presented each semester for the last nine years. Topics have varied from academic research to programs that the community had shown interest in and subsequently requested, and it is not surprising that community attendance has been significant for those programs and events that showcase “their” history rather than formal presentations of research and literature.

The interest that the community has in these programs is directly translatable to the records that it believes to be “important” and often assumes the FMPAA only collects. This emphasis is on what have become “traditional” records collected by archives as a means of documenting ethnic communities, records that document “political activities, religion, business, labor, and social and cultural organizations”<sup>24</sup>; or what Schellenberg described as “notable” materials, worthy of being preserved<sup>25</sup>. It was because of this narrow view on what was believed to be “worthwhile” that the FMPAA proactively engages with its current and future donors, in participatory archiving, it “encourages community involvement during the appraisal, arrangement, and description phases of creating an archival record”<sup>26</sup>, specifically as it attempts to convey the message that every record is the evidence of an action and that the record has the potential to offer additional information outside of the expected<sup>27</sup>. The process of participatory archiving is difficult and one that the FMPAA

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<sup>22</sup> DANIEL, 2010: 86.

<sup>23</sup> *WORKING TOGETHER PROJECT*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> GRABOWSKI, 1985: 312.

<sup>25</sup> SCHELLENBERG, 1956.

<sup>26</sup> SHILTON; SRINIVASAN, 2007: 98.

<sup>27</sup> SWEENEY, 2008: 205.

does not always have success with, for every successful instance there has been multiple failures. There are commonly attributed to donors still preferring to do self-appraisal of the materials they intend to donate; and a difficulty in transmitting the message that social and cultural associations are not the only means to telling Portuguese-American history, and that personal archives of the “common” person are key in attempting to tell a more complete history of Portuguese immigration to the United States.