



There are presently about 275,000 Cape Verdeans and their descendants in the United States. These Cape Verdean-Americans are the products of the only "voluntary" African emigration to the United States. Most Cape Verdeans can trace their origins back to a particular village or valley on one of the ten small islands of the archipelago. This chapter

will discuss the historic link between the Cape Verde Islands and New England. Indeed, the United States has had an importance in the socio-economic history of the Cape Verde Islands that is surpassed only by that of Portugal.¹ The Islands were a part of the Portuguese colonial empire until 1975.



An interior village on the island of Sãotiago.



The village of Nossa Senhora do Monte, Brava, c. 1910.

According to historian Samuel Elliot Morison, Columbus stopped in the Cape Verde Islands in 1498 to take on provisions for his third voyage to America.² For centuries, many other mariners would do likewise. The Islands' location in the Atlantic—370 miles west of Senegal; 1200 miles from Brazil—made them a desirable haven for slavers, pirates, smugglers, and sailors of all kinds. By one estimate the Cape Verde Islands were the embarkation

point for some 28,000 slaves captured in Africa for shipment to the New World, between 1601–1700 alone.³ Although the importation of slaves to the Cape Verde Islands was decreasing as the seventeenth century wore on,⁴ the Islands continued to offer safe harbor for slavers, and many Cape Verdeans were active in the slave trade themselves. For example, Captain Quirino Pinheiro, a Brava sea captain of the nineteenth century, is said to have



Street in Nova Sintra, Brava, c. 1910.

brought hundreds of slaves to America. The naturalist Charles Darwin, who stopped in the Cape Verde Islands during his outward bound voyage on the *Beagle*, mentions that "a very pretty schooner came in this morning; it is strongly suspected that she is a slaver in disguise." When the *Beagle* put in at the Cape Verde Islands on her return voyage four years later, Darwin relates that, "After a most excellent passage we came to an anchor early in the morning at Porto Praya. We found lying there, as commonly is the case, some slaving vessels."⁵

Many of the slavers flew the American flag, for the United States allowed her ships to engage in the trade until 1808 and even thereafter would not allow the British navy to inspect her ships in England's efforts to abolish slaving. (In fact, the War of 1812 was fought over this very issue.) Later many American slave ships flew the Portuguese flag, often by having the necessary papers arranged in the Cape Verde Islands, because Portugal did not outlaw the trade until 1830.⁶

The merchants of Rhode Island and Massachusetts were quite active in the slave commerce. In 1708, Governor Cranston of Rhode Island reported that one hundred and three vessels had been built in that tiny colony between 1698 and 1708 and "in most cases made a slave voyage."⁷ In the mid-nineteenth

century a North Carolina congressman reminded the United States Congress "Massachusetts is the state more responsible under heaven than any other community in this land for the introduction of slavery into the continent, with all the curses that have followed it."⁸ Ships of Boston were still being seized in the 1860's by the United States Africa Squadron, based in the Cape Verde Islands, where slavers were taking refuge.⁹

Americans smuggling other wares had used the Islands as a convenient pickup and dropoff point since the early 1800's. After the War of 1812, Britain forbade American ships to put in at the English colonies of Sierra Leone and Gambia; therefore, hides and other goods were clandestinely shipped to the Cape Verde Islands where they were sold for a better price to American ships.¹⁰ In 1818, an American trader, Samuel Hodges, established a partnership with a Cape Verdean, Manuel Antonio Martins, whereby American merchandise was smuggled in African small craft to every part of the Atlantic coast of Africa.¹¹ From 1818 to 1827 Hodges served as the first U.S. Consul to Cape Verde, where he became a leading commercial figure. Merchants in Goree, Gambia, and Sierra Leone also sent their own vessels to the Cape Verde Islands to trade with the Americans.¹²



Watercolor of the Mansion of Samuel Hodges in Praia (1832), first U. S. Consul in Cape Verde.

Photo Peabody Museum Collection



The *praça* at Nova Sintra, Brava c. 1910. Each Cape Verdean village and town has a *praça*, the principal square which serves as the center of community life. Photo-M. S. C.

Capt. Salisbury Blackmer and his son William Blackmer of New Bedford, who were involved in the Cape Verde trade for decades, understood the Cape Verdean Crioulo language and were believed to be better acquainted with the islands than any other American merchants.¹⁴ Merchants in Salem, Massachusetts were also very much involved in the Cape Verde slave trade and left behind interesting descriptions of the island of Maio, the principal port of U.S. commerce.

The Governor, the Commander of the Troops and the Judges are all Negroes, the only white man that I saw on the island was the Collector. When I was first introduced to the Governor I found a bare-legged sentry marching backward and forward in front of his den with a rusty old gun with no lock to it. Afterwards, I saw 12 men exercising and I counted five out of the twelve that had no locks to their guns ... in fact any person that ever saw European troops must look upon troops as these with utmost contempt.¹⁵

American sea captains often showed complete disregard for the Portuguese authorities. They frequently left without paying the required port taxes even for the salt they had loaded. The Captain of the *Augusta* had no fear of the Governor of Maio. "As to his sending of soldiers he might do that if he chose for I had harpoons enough to arm all my people and that I would bid defiance to all the troops he could muster on the Isle of Mayo."¹⁶

On one occasion the British took control of what they believed to be a pirate ship in the harbor of Mindelo. Hodges complained to Secretary of State Henry Clay, for the ship was originally American, asking

for the protection of our commerce that a National Vessel occasionally cruise here, and on the coast of Africa, to protect the Commerce of the United States against pirates and certain British cruisers, whose Commanders respect no flag.¹⁷

However, in general, the American sphere of influence in Cape Verde was respected, if only because the Islands were not interesting enough to the English and French who had good ports on the West Coast of Africa. The *Augusta's* captain admitted, "Nothing but the poverty of these Islands prevents them from falling into the hands of the English or French, for I am sure one company of European troops could conquer the island of Santiago."¹⁸

In 1842, eighty-seven American merchant ships traded in the Islands as opposed to sixty-one Portuguese and thirty-six British ships.¹⁹ It is recorded that 338 American vessels stopped in the islands for salt between 1851-1879.²⁰ The merchant ships brought tobacco, flour, biscuits, rice, cod, port, ham, buttermilk, lard, soap, candles, cotton, paper, thread, cloth, shoes, rope, nails, tar, wood,

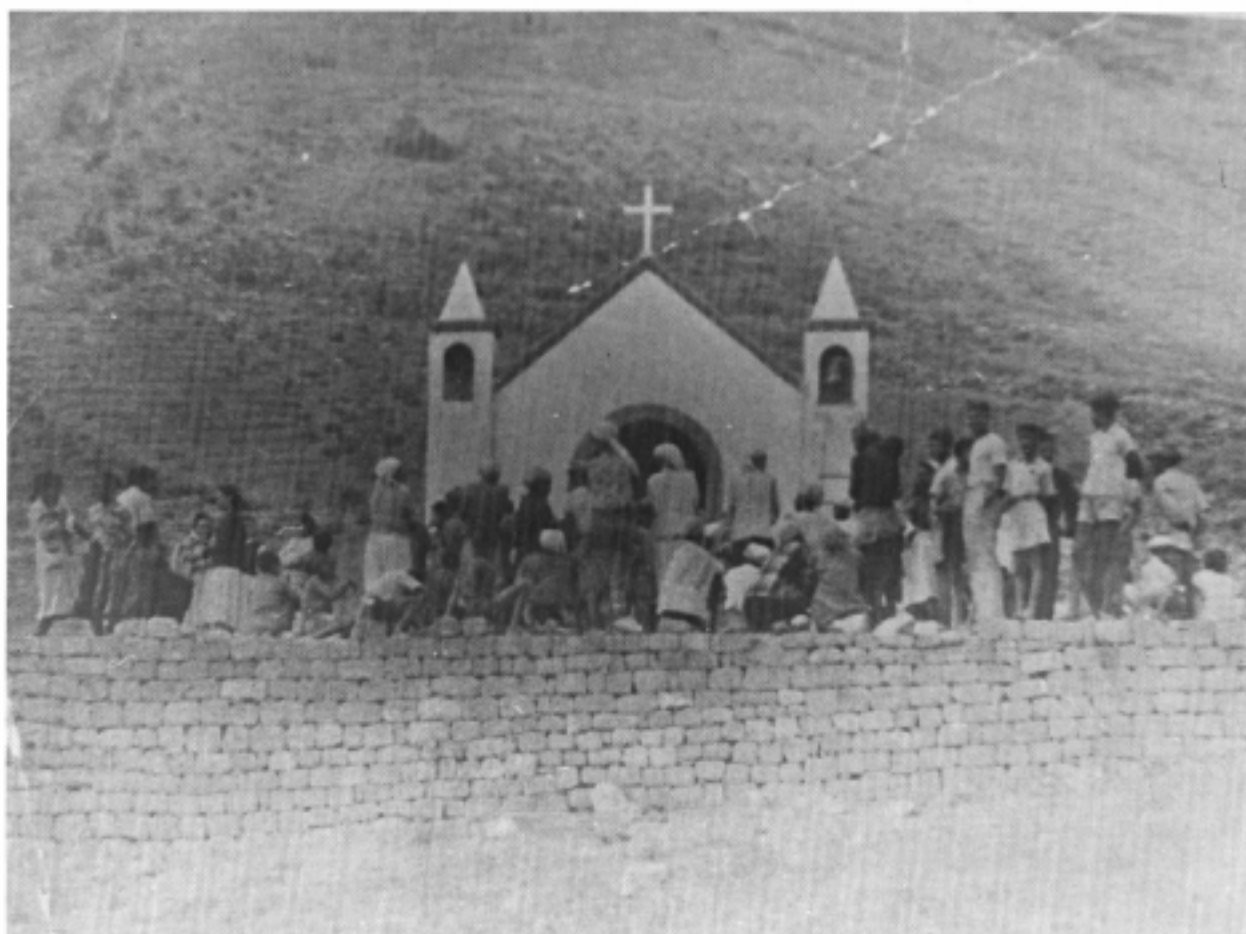
dishes, watches, and other manufactured goods from New England. Wooden shingles from Massachusetts still cover many houses in Cape Verde. The ships came from New York, Boston, Providence, Baltimore, Portland, New London, and New Bedford and were on their way to the West Coast of Africa, Madeira, the Azores, the Canaries, Brazil, or around the world to sell their wares.²¹ Sometimes they would not return for a year but usually they made fast voyages between the U.S. and the Cape Verde Islands with only a brief stop on the African West Coast after the British and French relaxed their trade restrictions.

In 1832, the ships began returning with tales of horrible starvation in the Cape Verdes. Capt. Ryder of the *Fredonia* out of Salem reported that men and women had been seen in the streets gnawing at discarded bones. The American Consul calculated that fourteen people were dying of starvation in Praia everyday, and the rest of the population was too weak to bury the dead. The Governor of the Islands sent a plea via Capt. Ryder, "For God's Sake, tell them to send us something."²²

Messrs. A. and P. Flint and Company of Boston offered to carry free food relief in their ship, the *Charles*. A committee of prominent Bostonians was organized and a Sunday collection made. People in Boston gave \$6,800; Portland (Maine) gave \$1,200; Newburyport, \$585.87; Charlestown, \$250; and cotton factory workers in Ipswich contributed \$32.20. The ship sailed with 600 barrels of mackerel, potatoes, flour, bread, beef, pork, rice and corn consigned to the U.S. Consul and the Governor.²³ Other cities also took heed of the misery in the Cape Verde Islands. New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore collected \$25,000 to send eight thousand barrels of flour and meal.²⁴

The ship *Citizen* arrived from the Islands reporting that the magnitude of starvation was not exaggerated.

In Brava and Fogo the distress was most calamitous; within a few months, two hundred persons had perished there by famine and such was their abject condition that even a worm-eaten biscuit was caught at with avidity, and the blessing of Heaven invoked upon the donor.²⁵



Church of the Navigators, Brava



Street in Nova Sintra, Brava. c. 1910.

Despite aid from the United States, 30,000 out of a population of 300,000 died of starvation. St. Antão was the worse affected where 11,000 died out of a population of 26,000.

Passing American ships responding to the Islanders often left part of the ship's supplies behind. The log of the *Citizen* records "Sailing on, in due time we sighted the Cape

Verde Islands and came to off St. Anthony. Boats were sent in shore for certain supplies, but found the people in a destitute condition by reason of a severe drought. We obtained little from them and instead, gave them some things from the ships stores. Making but a short stay here, we fell away before the fresh northwest trade winds."²⁶



Street in São Felipe, Fogo. c. 1910.

In 1855, Antonio Martins, then U.S. vice-consul in Mindêlo, wrote to Commodore Crabbe of the African Squadron that 30,000 people were living on banana stalks and the carcasses of dead animals and that as a result of the crop failure on S. Nicolau 10,000 would die on that Island.²⁷ Lt. Washington Bartlett of the sloop *Jamestown* brought back a letter from the Bishop of the Cape Verde Islands to Archbishop John Hughes of New York and informed the American public that death was imminent for many unless help arrived from the United States.²⁸

After hearing Bartlett, members of the New York Corn Exchange appointed a committee to collect funds and provisions and arrange for sending the aid; \$5,800 was immediately raised in New York.²⁹ The citizens of Alexandria, Va. sent 500 bushels of wheat and the Corn Exchange of Baltimore sent

\$1,045 to New York.³⁰ Still more money was raised through Portuguese-American merchants, the Catholic Church, and the YMCA. On July 24, 1856, the *New Hand* arrived in Cape Verde with 400 barrels of corn and other provisions.

Martins wrote, "I cannot properly express my feelings of gratefulness for the extraordinary efforts made in behalf of this suffering people, or my admiration at such disinterested benevolence. It is impossible to calculate the number of lives that will be saved by this most timely arrival of food."³¹ Some food was also received from the Canaries, the African coast, and Brazil.³² Sufficient rains came during the summer of 1856 to yield some crops but a fourth of the population had perished in two years due to cholera, small-pox, and the famine. The limited money in the Islands had



Working the *salinas* or salt works on the island of Sal, c. 1910.

been exhausted in importing food. The Governor had collected all the hard currency in the Islands to send boats to the African coast to buy rice.³³ The U.S. consul remarked that trading in Cape Verde was almost nonexistent,

as salt was the only commodity left which the Islands had to export.³⁴ By the late nineteenth century Cape Verde's principal export to the U.S. was her own young men. Their story is told in the following chapters.