

Encyclopedia of American Immigration

Portuguese Immigrants

Country of Origin: Portugal and its maritime provinces

Regions of Primary Settlement: New England, Mid-Atlantic and West Coast states, Hawaii

Time of First Arrivals: 1630's

Peak Immigration Period: Late nineteenth to early twentieth century, late twentieth century

Significance: Portuguese immigrants who have come to the United States have mostly clustered in the New England and mid-Atlantic states, Northern California, and Hawaii. Most of the earliest Portuguese immigrants came from Portugal's island provinces in the Atlantic Ocean--the Azores, and Madeira. More recent immigrants have come directly from the Portuguese mainland. With a long seafaring tradition, the earliest Portuguese immigrants engaged in whaling and fishing and later moved into manufacturing and agricultural fields.

Portugal's deep maritime traditions prompted Portuguese explorers to navigate throughout the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. The Portuguese were among the earliest European settlers of the New World. A Portuguese expedition along the Atlantic coast of North America identified and named the island of Labrador in 1498. Two years later, Portuguese navigators explored the eastern coast of South America, where they settled Brazil, which received the largest proportion of Portuguese immigrants in the Western Hemisphere. Portuguese immigrants originated not only from the Portuguese island provinces of the Azores and Madeira but also continental Portugal.

Most Portuguese emigrants to the New World settled in Brazil, but two small Portuguese communities arose in colonial British America during the mid-seventeenth century. Formed in New York and Rhode Island, these communities were populated mostly by Sephardic Jews. However, the first person of Portuguese descent known to have settled in what is now the United States lived in Maryland in 1634. Significant numbers of Portuguese immigrants would not arrive until two centuries later. As whale oil grew in importance as a fuel during the early nineteenth century, Portuguese seamen from the Azores and Madeira settled in Rhode Island and Massachusetts to participate in the flourishing American whaling industry. The abundance of cod fish off North America's Atlantic coast also attracted Portuguese fishermen.

Meanwhile, Portuguese seamen who worked in the Pacific established small settlements in Hawaii, Alaska, and California. The gold rush that began in California in 1849 attracted a ten-fold increase in Portuguese population of the northern region of the state between 1850 and 1860. California's development of a fish-canning industry also attracted Portuguese immigrants. During the nineteenth century the numbers of Portuguese immigrants were sufficient to establish several Portuguese mutual benefit societies in various cities. In 1877, the first Portuguese newspaper, the *Jornal de Noticias* (news journal), appeared in the United States, prompting the

appearance of several other such publications in the next decade.

Rise, Fall, and Revival of Immigration

By the turn of the twentieth century, tens of thousands of Portuguese immigrants were arriving in the United States every year and expanding the communities already established in New England, the mid-Atlantic states, and California. However, their numbers are difficult to establish precisely because immigrants from the Azores and Madeira were not always recorded as Portuguese, and even immigrants from Portugal itself were sometimes recorded as having come from Spain. Moreover, many Portuguese immigrants arrived clandestinely, declaring no nationality.

On the eve of World War I, approximately 150,000 persons of Portuguese descent lived in New England. Working mainly in textile mills, they formed the second-largest Portuguese population in the Americas after Brazil. On the opposite side of the United States, California's Portuguese population was expanding from the San Francisco Bay Area into the San Joaquin Valley, where they helped to work the rich farmlands. Some Portuguese who had settled in Hawaii moved to California, but those who stayed on islands remained both numerous and influential.

By the twentieth century, Portugal was one of the poorest countries in Europe, and after the mid-1920's, the country was additionally burdened by a fascist regime that would remain in power for half a century and later become mired in debilitating wars against independence movements in Portugal's African colonies. Consequently, many Portuguese were motivated to emigrate to North America, but U.S. restrictions on immigration after World War I limited the numbers of Portuguese who could enter the United States to only a few hundred per year. Those who did enter the country during the postwar years came principally from mainland Portugal. During the decades after World War II, Portuguese immigration quotas were raised, and one hundred thousand Portuguese immigrants between 1950 and 1970.

By 1980, the U.S. Census registered more than a million Americans of Portuguese descent. Several American universities had Portuguese studies centers, and Americans of Portuguese descent were making contributions in all walks of life. Among the most famous Portuguese Americans was John Philip Sousa, who led the U.S. Marine Corps Band during the early twentieth century and composed such popular patriotic songs as "Stars and Stripes Forever." Others are Supreme Court justice Benjamin Cardozo and poet Emma Lazarus, whose verses from the sonnet "The New Colossus" are engraved on a placque at the foot of the Statue of Liberty.

Edward A. Riedinger

Further Reading

Baganha, Maria Ioannis Benis. *Portuguese Emigration to the United States, 1820-1930*. New York: Garland, 1990. Examines the earliest waves of Portuguese immigrants and their settlement and occupation patterns along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

Higgs, David. *Portuguese Migration in Global Perspective*. Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1990. Places the history of Portuguese immigrants to the United States in the context of their global diaspora after the fifteenth century, with

attention to Brazil, Africa, and Asia.

Mira, Manuel. *The Forgotten Portuguese*. Franklin, N.C.: Portuguese American Historical Research Foundation, 1998. Offers a clearer role of the Portuguese in the United States as a minority ethnic group overshadowed by much larger groups such as the English, Germans, Irish, and Italians.

_____. *The Portuguese Making of America*. Franklin, N.C.: PAHR Foundation, 2001. Highlights the contributions of Portuguese immigrants to American society.

Pap, Leo. *The Portuguese-Americans*. Boston: Twayne, 1981. Broad study of Portuguese immigrants and their descendants that defines their unique character and achievements in the United States and compares them to those of other immigrant groups.

Wiarda, Iêda Siquera, et al. *Handbook of Portuguese Studies*. Philadelphia: Xlibris, 1999. Annotated guide to works in the humanities and social sciences dealing with Portugal and the Portuguese-speaking world, providing detailed background materials on immigration.

Williams, Jerry R. *In Pursuit of Their Dreams: A History of Azorean Immigration to the United States*. North Dartmouth: Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 2005. Traces the conditions in the Azores that prompted so many to emigrate to the United States and the factors determining their decisions regarding where to settle in this country.

See Also: Brazilian immigrants; California; California gold rush; Economic consequences of immigration; Economic opportunities in America; European immigrants ; Massachusetts; Occupations and incomes of immigrants; Push and pull factors; Rhode Island; Spanish immigrants.