

*Early shrimp
boats at the docks
near Hanover
Square. Courtesy
Golden Isles Arts
& Humanities
Association*



Portugal Comes to Brunswick

By Leslie Faulkenberry

In 1918, World War I ended, and the arrival of most Portuguese fishermen in Brunswick, followed by their families, began. Theresa Martin, pillar of the Portuguese community in Brunswick, said that her mother had always expressed the opinion that perhaps the most damaging impact to her native land was not actual combat from the war, but diseases spread from the rotting human and animal corpses left in the battlefields. She was correct, at least in part. The tragedy of war was widespread, as it is in all wars.

This was the last war in Europe in which horses were heavily used, with the onset of trench warfare, machine guns and barbed wire creating barriers to the classic horse cavalry charge. Although they were still useful in transporting materials and supplies to the fronts (more reliable than the newly developed trucks on muddy country roads), horses represented a significant source of casualties in World War I. Whether its carcass was a carrier of disease or not, the fact remains that in a confrontation with a machine gun, a horse will be at a most definite disadvantage and recovering its body would not be high on the priority list for human soldiers. As for human casualties, the task was formidable for areas damaged by combat. Quite simply, the development of modern weapons and machinery created a dilemma of having an unprecedented number of people killed in a concentrated area at one time. Those who were left to attempt to bury the dead were often elderly, infirm or starving. It was a perfect breeding ground for disease.

Portugal was originally neutral in the war, but its historic alliance with Britain, and the aggressive actions of Germany against Portuguese commercial and maritime interests, led to its joining force with the Allies. Although Portuguese troops were some of the most over-utilized, exhausted soldiers in the war, no major battles were fought on Portuguese homeland soil. (Portuguese provincial holdings in North Africa were involved in the fighting.)

Outbreak

Another factor favoring immigration from Portugal to Brunswick was the Spanish influenza pandemic, which spread among healthy young adults as its primary demographic of mortality. One theory suggests that the mobility of soldiers from the war, plus the malnourishment and combat stress of the battlefield, contributed to the deadly power of the strain that sickened younger people. The virus responsible for the pandemic is very similar in molecular structure and infection patterns to modern H1N1, with the same target populations.

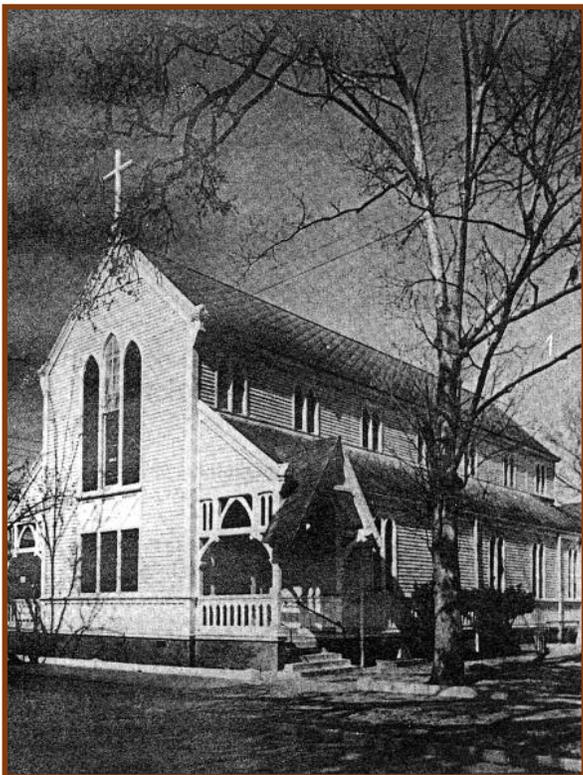
Thus, Mrs. Martin correctly pointed out, families were eager to send their healthy young men to America, where the entire disease outbreak cycle was over in about 9 months total as opposed to the 2-year first and second wave of the pandemic in Europe. Elders, mothers and young children were left at home in Portugal. When the fathers and young men were established and had earned enough money to provide a home and purchase a fishing boat, or a fractional share of a communally owned vessel, they sent for their families. Although this pattern of immigration was not uncommon among Europeans from the 19th century onward, it was instinctively the best course of action to remove many of the most vulnerable population (healthy adults, from 18-40) from the most intense outbreak of the virus and leave those who were least affected (children and the elderly) behind.

The first Catholic Church building on Hanover Square. Courtesy of the Downtown Development Authority

Delicacies From the Sea

As was the custom of many immigrants, the Portuguese newcomers settled in concentrated neighborhoods in the city, living close together and offering support to one another, and to newcomers. They settled primarily on and near Hanover Square. From there, they could walk to the docks where their boats were kept, near the George Street access to the port area. The park also offered them a familiar home-village-like gathering place to congregate in the evenings. The proximity to the Catholic Church was another advantage.

Portuguese fishermen of Brunswick are credited for the majority of effort in making shrimp a desirable menu item in the late 1910s. Although shrimp had been eaten, even desired as a delicacy, since ancient Roman times, the difficulty of harvesting enough of them at one time to become a viable catch made them somewhat obscure to inland markets. At the turn of the 20th century, the largest shrimp, called "prawns," occasionally appeared as part of gourmet fare. Crabbers and other commercial net fishermen discarded shrimp as a nuisance, referring to them as "sea worms." John Silva, an enterprising Portuguese fisherman



from Brunswick, caused a stir among his peers when he first pulled some shrimp from his nets, boiled and ate them aboard his boat. The taste was universally appealing, the trend caught on and soon, the men from Portugal were busily selling their new creation—shrimp already boiled and salted—all along the eastern seaboard.

This was a case of demand and supply springing up nearly simultaneously with technology. Dragging heavy nets for shrimp requires a vessel to have significant horsepower, an extremely strong metal supporting structure on board, called a “boom,” and a ready source of ice to preserve the catch both onboard and at the dockside. The vessels themselves needed modification, and the innovations demanded both knowledge and skill. Who would be a better candidate for this challenge than the Portuguese, with their centuries of seamanship and fishing expertise?

As a seasonal item, wild-caught shrimp were considered a delicacy, and shrimpers had to find a way to build familiarity and educate the palate of potential customers. The approach to this new market differed according to the national customs of the brokerage house purchasing and processing the catch. In the beginning, the Portuguese fishermen who owned their own boats and also opened dockside processing facilities called “fish houses” always sold shrimp pre-cooked. The tasty salted seafood became a favorite in bars, a component of the famous “free lunch” offered to patrons to encourage the purchase of alcohol. More cautious than their American-born counterparts in the business, the fish houses owned by Portuguese families tended to transport their catch to market in their own trucks, often driving all night to reach the major fish market on Fulton Street in New York.

Gerald Beach, son of local sheriff Lewis Beach, started a brokerage and processing business in 1924, which later became King Shrimp, and even later, King & Prince Seafood, one of Brunswick’s major employers. Beach bought what was called “green shrimp,” or unprocessed shrimp, from local fishermen and froze the product after deheading, possibly also peeling and deveining, but without cooking. He also gambled more heavily on innovation, attempting to move larger amounts of the product to market at one time by hiring a boxcar, packed to the doors with shrimp encased in ice. This was a risky undertaking, resulting in one especially memorable occasion when the boxcar was unavoidably sidetracked during bad weather, leaving the shrimp to spoil. Mr. Beach endured the total loss of both product and transportation costs. Hearing this, the Portuguese companies in Brunswick felt justified in staying smaller and controlling all aspects of the product, from the sea to the wholesaler. After all, they were relative newcomers to the country and even more recently arrived in Brunswick. They had no backup system to absorb loss; they had only each other and hard, hard work.

Perfect Timing

The success of the Portuguese community in Brunswick owes its existence to that curious, delicate synchronicity that creates the character and tone of a city. All the factors had to come into being at the historically correct time.

At the end of World War I, the Portuguese people were shocked to discover the desperate state of returning prisoners of war and other soldiers, many whom of had been gassed by the Germans. Although the country had not sustained the infrastructure damage that other European countries suffered, Portugal had supplied a disproportionate number of soldiers who were trapped in battle situations where they served for longer times without relief, reinforcement or backup than any other nationality involved in the war on either side.

Much of the country's critical maritime industry had been damaged while coming to the aid of their British allies. The nation's wealth had taken a major blow with losses in North African colonial holdings, and suddenly, the future looked bleak for young people as well as men in early middle years. The urge to emigrate arose from that lack of opportunity and resentment about the treatment of their country's soldiers at the hands of their allies. It was not so much a loss of patriotism as it was a loss of optimism and a search for opportunity. Making a living from the sea was never going to be easy, but perhaps in America, new ways could be found to make it better.

The Spanish influenza pandemic was another catalyst for immigration, but it could easily have been a detriment to the newcomers upon arrival. In Europe, the disease went through 2 complete cycles, with the secondary outbreak claiming far more lives than the first. As previously mentioned, young people in the prime of their lives were most likely to suffer and possibly spread the disease to others. These individuals were precisely the slice

Portuguese fishermen, founders of an industry in Brunswick. Circa 1925-30. Courtesy Golden Isles Arts & Humanities



of the demographic pie arriving on the shores of the United States right as a decline gripped many sectors of American economy. The arrival of many of the first Portuguese fishermen in Brunswick coincided with the onset of the second, more virulent resurgence of the pandemic worldwide.

Since Spain had retained its neutrality in the war, it had no military censorship, and therefore reported openly on the advance of

the disease throughout its population and beyond. For its troubles to communicate freely with the rest of the world, Spain received the dubious distinction of having its name linked to the illness. Careless generalization of geographic knowledge frequently interchanged Portuguese and Spanish identities to unfamiliar parties, and the newcomers to Brunswick were vulnerable to being regarded as carriers of the "foreign" disease. Accordingly, it is possible that other communities would have been unwilling, possibly even hostile, to a new immigrant influx from what was reportedly a disease-ravaged part of the world.

It is greatly to Brunswick's credit that the fishermen from Portugal were warmly welcomed. As always, the city was true to its unique personality of accepting new ideas and new people without the prejudice for which many small Southern towns are, unfortunately, known. Indeed, several local leaders whose influence was critical in the city's emerging post-Reconstruction prosperity were former Union army officers, sick of conflict and searching for a new start. The Portuguese were not only free of any Civil War baggage, but in fact, they represented an opportunity for the city's recovery from yet another financial downturn in the first quarter of the 20th century.

Italian fishing communities throughout the United States received the Portuguese warmly upon arrival. A large number of the immigrants settled along the New England coastline, but Mrs. Martin recalled stories from her grandfather and other families that the cold climate made them miserable. A significant contingent moved to Fernandina, Florida, and prospered as strikers, captains and other members of Italian boat crews. After a time, the Portuguese had saved enough to purchase their own boats and establish a home to which they could bring the families left behind in the old country. Rather than going into competition with those who had sheltered them and smoothed their paths in the new world, the men from Portugal sought out a receptive community where the fishing was good and the weather was warm. Brunswick did not have a large number of Italian families in residence at the time, so the newcomers would be completely on their own. They assimilated quickly, never asking for nor expecting accommodation from the local populace. English was learned, although some families still required their children to maintain fluency in Portuguese and spoke it exclusively at home.

The immigrants had a unique advantage when they arrived in Brunswick. They represented new business development for the suffering port. The strong westward expansion to California from 1870-1900, with its attendant need for new railroad service, had peaked, then dwindled, taking Brunswick's proud status as the nation's #1 exporter of railroad ties down with it. The damage done by the War Between the States had been, in large part, repaired. The marketplace encountered a drastic drop in demand for southeast Georgia's mainstay forest products, such as turpentine and other resin by-products. The devastating boll weevil infestation of the late 1919/early 1920s period virtually destroyed the cotton crops in Georgia, depriving the local port of yet another opportunity to export regional goods.

The Port of Savannah was able to make infrastructure improvements that the Port of Brunswick could not fund, and what remained of its former proud dominance sailed up the coast to Chatham County. In Brunswick, World War I had provided only a brief boost to the local economy's shipbuilding industry. The local port facilities quickly fell idle, and the city urgently sought new users for its dock space.

Enter the Portuguese fisherman, eager to establish themselves on the empty docks of Brunswick, innovative and gratified to find a verdant, clean, accessible small community with the people as warm as the climate. The city apparently never gave a thought, at least publicly, to the possibility that the arrivals might bring a new strain of Spanish influenza

with them. Through hard work, creative thinking and a centuries-old knowledge of their craft, the fishermen created a new seafood market which opened doors for thousands of

local workers who came after them, catching, processing and selling shrimp to the world.

Love for their new country prompted sons of these immigrants to join the United States military promptly when World War II began. Extended family members arriving from Portugal shared treasured customs, such as the Blessing of the Fleet, which arose from Lady Fatima Day observances. The traditional cuisine, vigorous hospitality and deep faith of the Portuguese blended

seamlessly with Southern sensibilities.

All in all, it is the portrait of perfect timing, admirable character of a city, and a resulting win-win situation.

"THE PRICE OF FREEDOM, LEST WE FORGET"
Killed in action W.W.II



Lewis Romiera



Eugene Cutinho



Manuel Manita

American patriots from the Portuguese community in Brunswick. Courtesy Golden Isles Arts & Humanities Association