PORTUGUESE SPINNER
AN AMERICAN STORY

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Even the sky shows the colors of the Azores on this sunny, spring morning in Fox Point, the acid aqua-blues of an Azorean summer. More colors of the Azores catch the eye in a parade winding down Wickenden Street. Children dressed in clean, cool white sparkle as the sun reflects off the silver crowns some carry in their small hands. Others holding brightly colored flags lead the marching beat of a brass band.

The wind plays with the banners—the yellow, white and blue of the Azores; the burgundy velvet and quilted white dove of the Holy Ghost. The colors, the flags, the band, the children and the crowns in this parade are part of a centuries-old Azores tradition, the Festa do Espírito Santo, the Holy Ghost Feast.

As the parade progresses through Fox Point, down the hill toward Nossa Senhora do Rosário, the Holy Rosary Church, one imagines the Portuguese community is waiting on this Sunday morning to embrace the colors at the church’s entrance. But there are not many Portuguese watching this parade. From the windows of a coffee shop, the non-Portuguese patrons—students, artists, professionals and assorted others—crane necks away from lattes and machachinos to gawk in bewilderment at the procession.

The more inquisitive go outside to get a closer look. “How cute,” says one girl with a nose ring and streaky blond hair. “I think it’s Spanish or something,” says a man in a sweatshirt. The coffee shop is located in what was once the heart of the Portuguese community on Fox Point.

The patrons are told that the parade is part of a ritual dating back to the 13th century in Portugal. They are told that the crowns held by the children represent Queen Isabel of Portugal who gave a feast for the poor of the Kingdom, in thanks to the Holy Ghost.

As the procession rounds the corner to the church, some of these spectators return to their drinks while...
others go home. They do not have far to walk. Most live in what were once the homes of Portuguese families in Fox Point.

This juxtaposition of tradition and change is typical in most urban communities. Neighborhoods never stay the same—shops come and go, characters that control the life of a neighborhood move away or pass away, community traditions important to one generation are rarely as important to the next. Over the past 40 years, Fox Point has been physically transformed by so-called “urban renewal” and by wealthier outsiders who have taken advantage of cheap rents in a “quaint” ethnic neighborhood.

Where exactly is Fox Point? Roughly, the boundaries are Route I-195 and the ocean beyond to the south, Gano Street and the Seekonk River to the east, with Brown University and the more affluent East Side of Providence wrapping around the west and to the north. But the specifics of these rough physical borders are constantly in dispute among longtime residents. Is it Benefit Street or Brook Street to the west; is it Power Street or Arnold to the north? Argue two Fox Pointers.

Residents talk about how big their neighborhood was before the arrival of students and urban professionals, before businesses catering to these newer residents displaced many older Portuguese storefronts. Today the neighborhood has shrunk to a small, five-square-block area around Ives Street, they say.

But Fox Pointers agree that the boundaries of their community have less to do with geography than with a sense of the spirit the Cape Verdians and Azoreans brought with them when they arrived; the spirit that developed along with the community over the years. As cousins and relatives joined family, as neighbors became like family in the tenements off South Main, the spirit grew. That spirit remains in spite of the changes.

A Legacy of Community

Portuguese from the Azores and the Cape Verde Islands began coming to Fox Point in the mid-to-late 1800s. Most traveled overland from New Bedford to settle in Providence; others arrived on boats and found affordable housing in what was then a largely Irish community. Living and working with family and friends, they settled into a neighborhood that was (and still is) worlds apart from its surrounding environs.

Fox Point was an immigrant neighborhood bordering the homes of Providence’s original blue-blood settlers such as the Browns, the Tillinghasts and the Powers. On College Hill, as Brown University students celebrated commencement ceremonies, down the hill the Portuguese were celebrating feasts. Because of Fox Point’s proximity to the India Point docks, many found work as fishermen, sailors and longshoremen. (In 1960, Interstate 195 was built, cutting Fox Point from the waterfront.)

With the packet trade, boats were constantly landing from the Azores and Cape Verde. Fox Pointers crowded the docks seeking news of the old country from the newcomers. Maria do Couto Tavares arrived in November 1928. Though snow covered the ground, the docks were filled with people craning to see relatives and hear news from the Azores. Among them was her husband

A young Cape Verdean girl and her family appear outside their South Main Street apartment on the day of her Holy Communion, circa 1940.
José who had made the trip from São Miguel a year earlier to find work and arrange for her arrival. They stayed with family in Fox Point before moving to their own home.

Fox Pointers have always looked out for one another, helping newcomers find homes and work and giving food and clothing to those facing hard times. When Azorean and Cape Verdean residents worked as migrant labor in the cranberry bogs and strawberry farms of Wareham and Falmouth on Cape Cod, they usually went together, worked together, lived together and then returned to Fox Point together.

A large Portuguese extended family

Roger Amaral, 27, grew up here and now works at the Fox Point Boys Club. His family emigrated to Fox Point from Vila Franca, São Miguel, before he was born, and most of his family still live here. “It was like a little Portugal; everybody stuck together. If a family was struggling, another family would help them out. If somebody got into trouble, people would go and help. Family, neighbors, it was just people sticking together,” he says.

Echoing these comments is Lori Silvia, 41, director of the Fox Point Senior Center, where old-time residents come to eat, talk, play bingo and cards, dance and reminisce. Of Azorean descent, Ms. Silvia grew up in Fox Point in a house with her mother, grandmother and uncle. “We used to play a game where we would go down each street and name everyone who lived in every house. We could do it for streets and streets. Everyone grew up together, we shared our lives. It was a family.”

An important member of the Fox Point “family” is Johnny Britto, a Cape Verdean man who runs the Fox Point Boys Club. Tall, with a crown of white hair, he can command a room with a simple look. Relaxed but vigilant in his chair at the Boys Club, he sees some children roughhousing; a boy shoves a girl off a chair. In mid-sentence, Johnny Britto looks up and stares. They stop. “It’s just a game, Johnny,” says one little girl. The boy, encouraged by her words, readies to push again. “Seems like a pretty rough game to me,” he says. That ends it.

Then Johnny is laughing with an adolescent boy who wants to coach a soccer game between younger children later that afternoon. The boy is talking up his qualifications as Johnny listens and kids. He does not talk down to the children, and one can see the affection and respect they have for him.

Johnny Britto has made a life of helping Fox Point’s less fortunate residents. “When we first came to Fox Point we struggled,” says Roger Amaral. “My father and mother working, with five kids, that’s a little tough.
My dad would drop us off at the Boys Club. Say we had a hole in our sock or sneaker, there goes Johnny to talk to somebody. ‘Hey listen, I have this family over here and they are struggling.’ Bang. At Christmas he would give us turkeys, food and presents. Johnny is like the Mayor of Fox Point.

“This past Christmas, I went with him,” Roger continues, “and we dropped off 15 turkeys. It’s just beautiful. A family has a fire in their house, everyone comes together to help them out. If you’re doing bad, people here help you get back on your feet.”

The plight of a little girl on a waiting list for a kidney brought out the best in Fox Point. She had lost her sight and was about to die. Although she was not from the neighborhood, her father was a regular at the Family Pub, a Fox Point tavern. The community put up posters entreating anyone who might donate a kidney to contact the hospital. One Cape Verdean man visiting Fox Point saw the posters and donated his kidney.

“The bond is not so much ethnic as it is Fox Point itself,” says Lori Silvia, who nonetheless recognizes the importance of being Portuguese in gaining acceptance. “Professional people, other outsiders were not so easily accepted, especially when they first started coming in.”

Although no place is completely free of racial or ethnic prejudice, Fox Point has been a place where racial distinctions have had minimal impact. Residents will use “Portuguese” to refer to all of the Portuguese-speaking populations in the neighborhood, while using terms like “Azorean,” “Madeiran,” “Continental” and “Cape Verdean” to make finer classifications referring to point of origin rather than racial identity. Naming the ethnic groups in the neighborhood, one Azorean man listed all of the above including “Cape Verdean” and then added “African-American.”

**Encroaching on the community**

How did this once-sprawling community get squeezed into a fraction of the old neighborhood? Many Fox Point homes were demolished in the construction of I-195. Well-intentioned efforts at urban development by federal, state and municipal governments caused more changes. The homes in Fox Point, some over 200 years old, were researched, and those granted historical landmark status were then revalued for the purpose of assessing taxes. Many could not pay the higher taxes and were forced to sell homes that had been in their families for generations. One Cape Verdean woman commented, “If putting a plaque [demarcating historical landmark status] on my
house means I can’t afford the taxes, then they can have their plaque back. A piece of wood with a date on it means nothing to me, but I’ve lived in this house all my life.”

Those not forced to sell took advantage of the tremendous profit to be gained. Homes bought for $10,000 were now being sold for $250,000. Others capitalized on the new found attractiveness of the neighborhood and remodeled their homes to accommodate numerous students. A family paying $200 a month for a house could rent to ten students for $1000 a month. (A Providence law, designed to help Fox Point, now prohibits the cohabitation of more than three unrelated persons in one apartment, but the law came late.) Many who rented to students in this initial period were shunned by their neighbors. Although most say the students are well behaved, others are bothered by loud, late-night parties, activity not usually seen in a working-class Portuguese neighborhood.

Brown University is now making efforts to discourage students from renting in the neighborhood on the grounds that the ethnic composition of the community should be respected. “This is like closing the barn door after the horse has been let out,” says Lori Silvia. Here and there lines blur; some longtime residents are students. Carla Galvão, whose parents own a Portuguese market on Ives Street, entered Brown in the fall of 1996. Several graduate students, both from the Azores and of Azorean descent, live here. By urging students to stay out of Fox Point, Brown University unintentionally implies that Portuguese members of that community would not be students.

The university contributes to the community in helpful and positive ways: student volunteers serve as tutors in the community center. The school helped build a community garden in an abandoned lot. The Fox Point Day Care Center was given a free year’s rent. The university is also the home of one of the world’s largest and most important centers of research of Lusophone history, diaspora and literature. Many Portuguese cultural events attended by the wider community are hosted there every year.

A walk down Wickenden Street today

The Portuguese stores, the people, the gossip and the community that once thrived on Wickenden Street are gone now, replaced by Japanese sushi bars, an Indian restaurant, coffee shops and upscale restaurants. Antique shops and art galleries cover the south end of Ives Street, and a cycle shop, boutiques of new and vintage clothing, a video rental store and smoke shops dot the rest of Fox Point. The stores on Wickenden Street, once the heart of this Portuguese and Cape Verdean community, now cater to students and wealthier professionals.
Not so long ago, one could stop at the Portuguese meat market, buy some chouriço and spend the next ten minutes talking to friends and laughing over the latest community gossip. Stop at Lisbon Dry Goods and learn that someone's cousin needs a job, and did anyone know where he might find one? Stop at the Portuguese linen store and discover your son skipped school. He was, of course, caught by one of the many watchful eyes that looked out for others.

The center of the community is now Ives Street. At one end is the Fox Point Elementary School, the Community Center, the library, the Boys Club, the Senior Center, the Health Center. Traveling north one encounters stores such as the Eagle Market, a Portuguese grocery store that sells cheese from São Jorge and videos of toureadas (bullfights) from Terceira; the Silver Star Bakery, a Portuguese padaria featuring massa sovada (sweet bread), pap secos (rolls), pastry and the best croissants in Providence; also Cardoso Travel, a Portuguese travel agency where one can find the cheapest flights to the Portuguese world. Although an occasional store may be found among the Portuguese stores, Ives Street is solidly at the core of contemporary Fox Point.

Other Portuguese stores in the area include a meat market, a general store, and two Portuguese-owned liquor stores, but the changes are evident here as well. At the Central Meat Market, signs announcing Portuguese sausage and food items are written in both Portuguese and Spanish. One of the workers is from the Dominican Republic. The meat market serves a broad clientele, including the large Providence Hispanic population. The ability to communicate in Spanish helps business.

Most residents who sold homes or left to pursue other opportunities moved to the large Portuguese community in East Providence; others moved to outlying cities including Pawtucket, Cranston and Warwick. But leaving the neighborhood does not mean leaving the community—once a Fox Pointer always a Fox Pointer. Fox Point's Portuguese church with its Portuguese Mass, Nossa Senhora da Rosário, recently added a large parking lot in order to accommodate the majority of parishioners, former residents, who live outside Fox Point.

The Boys Club also sees a lot of traffic from outside Fox Point. Fathers who went to the club as children now bring their own children to spend time with Johnny Britto as they once did. The Senior Center also attracts former Fox Pointers who come back to socialize with old friends. Fox Pointers from all over Rhode Island attend social events, and proceeds help the community center and other charities. A highlight of summer is the annual reunion in which members of the Fox Point community, past and present, come back to eat, drink, laugh with old friends and reminisce about the old days.

"I was born here. I haven't always lived here, but my heart has always been in Fox Point," says Yvonne Smart, of Cape Verdean descent, who works as head librarian at the Fox Point branch of the Providence Public Library. Ms. Smart, too, regrets the losses of a changed neighborhood. "Up until this year, Fish monger Antonio Cabral (left) from Pawtucket is selling mackrel he caught this morning with Antonio Vieira. Both Antonios fish off a friend's small 22-foot boat out of Sandwich just outside the canal in Cape Cod Bay. "This is about the last day for mackrel," he said. "After this we'll fish for pollock. We sell the fish here and in the shipyard (neighborhood)."
three elderly immigrant Cape Verdean men would stand across the street from the school every morning. They were very proper, they would tip their hats to me and I loved it because they would watch the kids in the school to see that nothing had happened to them—watching the kids crossing the street and always keeping a quiet presence. Unfortunately the two have passed away. You just don’t see that anymore.”

For most members of the Fox Point family, it is impossible not to think about the way things were, but some are more accepting of the changes than others. “There are many different people in this neighborhood now—Indians, some Hispanics, even some Russians, but everyone gets along. It’s not the same as it was. Things do change. There is nothing you can do about that,” says Roger Amaral.

Echoes of the past are seen in the present in the brown, wrinkled faces of two black-clad widows walking arm in arm down Sheldon Street; in the Christmas turkey Johnny Britto and Roger Amaral bring to a struggling family; in the voice of Yvonne Smart as she recom-
Miguel Moniz is working on his Ph.D. in anthropology at Brown University. His thesis will examine the issue of repatriated Portuguese living in the Azores. He is widely published and has given presentations on Portuguese feasting and festivals, and on Azorean and Azorean-American identity. His current projects include a forthcoming chapter on wage-earning Portuguese-American women.

"I would like to thank the many people of Fox Point who opened their lives to me, especially Roger Amaral, Johnny Britto, Lori Silva and Yvonne Smart." – Miguel Moniz

The chic, clean, collegiate look has spread to upper Wickersen Street.

An elderly Ives Street resident takes the time to clean the sidewalk and gutter in front of her house.

Joseph D. Thomas photographs