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## Conference brings to life immigrant experiences of Portuguese millworkers during the Spindle City's textile heyday

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FALL RIVER — One could hear the hum of the mental machinery as the crowd of 40 people gathered last week at Casa dos Açores da Nova Inglaterra, 232 South Main Street, to learn about the conditions where the fabric of the city's Portuguese community was made.

"The Portuguese community came to a place where they could get jobs, but it wasn't great," said Philip Silvia, a Fall River historian who has researched the topic extensively. "The jobs were there, but the wages weren't."

Silvia, an alum of Fordham University, traced the roots of Fall River's economic prosperity to Pawtucket and Slater Mill, where the Industrial Revolution began in the U.S.

Just as the Slater Mill site was selected due to its proximity to Blackstone Falls on the Blackstone River — straddling the border between modern day Pawtucket and Central Falls — with early industrialists finding the Quequechan River and its waterfalls a good source of energy.

The Spindle City's industry started around the War of 1812 and by 1877 Fall River would become one of the top industrial cities in the nation, according to Silvia.

"A little after 1877, we would produce more than Lawrence and Lowell combined," he said.

Portuguese, alongside French-Canadians and Poles, began to appear in the Spindle City towards the end of the 19th century. They would take jobs that paid very low, often required child labor, and would face ominous obligations to their employers.

"These people clothed the world, but they couldn't clothe themselves adequately," said Silvia.

One of the ways around this was that parents would create large families with whom they could pool their wages.

“You live in this world and need to survive so what’s the solution?” he asked the crowd, as he brought up an example of a family’s factory housing contract. “You have a lot of kids.”

Not only did this help pool resources, but often, at times, families would be forced to provide seven or eight members to work for the factories or face eviction from their housing.

The conditions also kept education rates amongst Portuguese in Fall River low and led to some of the highest infant mortality in the country at the time, with an infant mortality rate of almost 300 per 1,000 births in the early 20th century, according to Silvia.

This stands in stark contrast to other immigrant groups.

“Infant mortality amongst Cabo Verdeans in the cranberry bogs was much lower due to women being able to take their infants into the bogs with them,” said Frank Sousa, director of the SaabCenter for Portuguese Studies at UMass Lowell, who was present at the event.

António Teixeira, a member of Casa dos Açores, read a poem about his experiences as a Portuguese immigrant in Fall River in Portuguese. Afterwards, he commented on questions from the audience, including one that addressed the current political environment.

“This country was built by immigrants, both legal and illegal,” he said. “And I won’t say whether what this administration does is right or wrong.”

The event was part of the conference “Migration and Mill Work: The Portuguese Communities in Industrial New England” that took place over several days and was a success in the eyes of its coordinator, Miguel Moniz, a Massachusetts native and research fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences in the University of Lisbon.

“One of the most important things is not just to hear academics telling studies,” he said, “but also to hear the stories of the people telling them.”

The presentations made throughout the region focused on how the industrial economy affected Portuguese communities throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and is going to culminate in an anthology of articles written by the presenters.

“The next phase of the project is to edit a volume that tells the history of the Portuguese mill workers until World War II,” said Moniz.

Moniz said he hopes that the book will be published by Tagus Press by the end of 2018.

While it was clear that everyone present shared a love for Portugal, the modern immigrants there said that they did make the right decision in coming to the U.S.

“Yes, Portugal is beautiful,” said Teixeira, “but beauty doesn’t put bread on the table.”



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