Portuguese a great force in Fall River

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By MARC MUNROE DION Herald News Staff Reporter

FALL RIVER — Of all the ethnic groups that give this city its unique flavor, only the Portuguese have had two chances to change the city.

Like other ethnic groups. the Portuguese came in the late 1800s, many of them working in Bedford's whaling industry, others finding work in Fall River's cotton mills.

But unlike the French Canadians, the Poles, the Italians and the Lebanese, the Portuguese were to come again. streaming into the city in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. changing Fall River as no group

of immigrants had before. The key to that wave of Portuguese immigration lies in

national immigration policy. The National Origins Act of 1924 was a piece of legislation

whose intent was decried as racist even in its own time. That act placed a quota of immigrants on every nation. and quotas were heavily weighted toward Northern Europeans and against Southern and Eastern Europeans and Asians.

The stated goal of legislators passing the act was to keep the same ethnic balance in immigration that was reflected in the national

census of 1920. Prior to the Immigration Act of 1965, immigration quotas were set by nation, with Britain, Germany and Ireland accounting for 70 percent of all immigrant visas issued for Europe, Asia and Africa. Southern and Eastern Europeans, Asians and Africans were admitted to the United States only in small numbers.

The quota system had an immediate effect Portuguese immigration to the United States and to Massachusetts. In 1913, 9,002 Portuguese immigrated to Massachusetts. In 1928, that number

dropped to 202. The passing of new immigration laws in 1965 coincided with economic hardship and dictatorship in

Portugal — notably in the Azores, those Portuguese islands that long provided the southeastern

Massachusetts Portuguese immigrants. Nationally, results whose population

were stunning. In 1965, 2,100 had been declining Portuguese immigrated to United the States, In 1970. number of new immigration the was 13,291. In 1965, the city of Fall River recorded 42 Portuguese immigrants. In 1970, the city received 700 Portuguese.

For an aging

industrial city whose population had been declining for much of the century, the effect of new immigration was positive, immediate and immense. Fall River would never be the same.

The new immigrants crowded into the city's numerous garment shops and they saved their wages to buy property. Numerous oncederelict tenements were restored by these hard-working immigrants.

According to a news story from 1973, Portuguese immigrants often borrowed the money to get to America. News accounts from the time estimate that a typical immigrant family of four had to go about \$2,000 in debt to get to America — that money paying for plane fares, visa fees and setting up a first apartment.

Working off the debt could take a while. Wages in the garment industry, which employed many immigrants, averaged \$67 a week. Others arrived with even less.

The new immigrants revitalized a Portuguese community that hadn't received a great number of new immigrants since the early part of the century.

Portuguese restaurants. bars, churches, social clubs. civic and cultural organizations and the great religious feasts were all revived by the

newcomers. Today, when both political and economic times are better in Portugal, immigration from that country is a trickle once again, but Fall River has been transformed into a city where Portuguese-Americans are the majority and where those immigrants and their descendants are the moving force in the city's life.

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Life in the Portuguese community often centered around its predominately Roman Catholic faith. Like other immigrant groups, the Portuguese built churches in the neighborhoods where many of them settled — in their case, the Bedford Street area. Above is the original St. Anthony of Padua Church, which was built in 1911, seen in 1936. The church was rebuilt in the 1960s by a second wave of Portuguese immigrants. At right, Portuguese immigrants hoist the American and Portuguese flags during a religious procession in 1985.