

The Packet Ships

Packet ships, or Brava Packet Ships, referring to the Cape Verdean island of Brava, were a distinctive feature in the history of Cape Verdean emigration to the United States. For most immigrants to the United States, the decision to leave their own nation and live in the US meant abandoning their former lives with little chance of returning, considering the substantial cost. At the height of their use, the packet ships maintained a link between immigrants and their families and friends still living in Cape Verde.

In the nineteenth century, the whaling and sealing ships based in the Northeast, particularly in New Bedford and Nantucket, Massachusetts, stopped in Brava in Cape Verde to resupply. They often arrived without a full crew, hiring Cape Verdeans in Brava at lower wages. Some of these men eventually settled in and around the whaling ports of New England, with the highest concentration settling in New Bedford. Beginning around 1860, as the sealing and whaling industries declined, many Cape Verdeans bought the old whaling ships to use as packet ships linking New Bedford, Providence, Nantucket, and Cape Verde (Coli 5). The term “packet” refers simply to any vessel that carries mail, freight, and/or passengers.

The first packet ship to sail to Cape Verde was Antonio Coelho’s *Nellie May*. He carried a crew of fifty people at a price of \$15 each to travel to Cape Verde. Unfortunately, the first voyage included several harrowing incidents including a captain who died of a heart attack and a first mate who knew nothing about navigation. After forty-five days, the *Nellie May* at last reached Brava. The return passage took twenty-eight days (Almeida). The length of the voyage would never become particularly constant and could take as little as two weeks or as long as two months (“Ernestina”).

Though the first Cape Verdeans to emigrate to the U.S. were largely young men, families began to emigrate, as well, for three reasons. First, the opportunities for labor were changing. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the cranberry and textile industries in the Northeast increasingly demanded cheap, unskilled labor. Migrants who might have worked only seasonally before now brought their families and settled more permanently in the United States. Additionally, in the first decade of the twentieth century, frequent drought plagued Cape Verde’s agricultural production. The third force that would accelerate

immigration was the legislation that would reduce the quotas for immigrants of most nationalities. These Immigration Acts, of 1921 and 1924, returned quota levels to ratios corresponding to immigration rates in 1890, thereby drastically slowing immigration rates from most countries, save those in western European nations. For Cape Verdeans, the change meant having to make a more definitive choice between two homes. Whereas before the packet ships left open the possibility of returning to Cape Verde, the Immigration Acts made the possibility of returning to the United States uncertain. Many Cape Verdeans chose, therefore, to remain in the United States because of the greater possibilities for employment and the higher wages.

Another crucial service of the packet trade, which was, throughout its history, largely Cape Verdean and Cape Verdean-American owned and operated, was its ability to transport remittances from the United States to Cape Verde. Remittances were not only financial; clothing and other goods were also sent home via the packet ships. Remittances to Cape Verde then and now make up a substantial portion of the Cape Verdean national income. In the 1990s, they accounted for almost half of national income. Furthermore, according to the *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Cape Verde*, “The influx of American dollars into the islands not only meant a difference at a subsistence level, but its effect fueled the Cape Verdean economy as a whole” (47). During the Great Depression, remittances decreased substantially, but they were only completely interrupted during the Second World War (Almeida).

The last packet ship to make the journey between Cape Verde and the U.S. was the *Ernestina*, which made its last commercial trip in 1965. The *Ernestina*'s history speaks to the sort of ship that was generally used as a packet. Under the name *Morrissey*, the ship was used as a fishing vessel off the coast of Gloucester, MA and Nova Scotia, Canada. In the Second World War, the *Morrissey* was employed in secret missions monitoring submarines under the Arctic. After the war, at berth in Staten Island, the *Morrissey* caught fire, and was therefore scuttled deliberately to preserve the ship, only to be raised and sold to Henrique Mendes of Cape Verde. In 1982, the government of Cape Verde returned the *Ernestina* to the United States “as a gift and symbol of cooperation” (“Ernestina”). The ship now resides in New Bedford, but makes an annual short trip to India Point Park in Fox Point on July 5, the Cape Verdean

Independence Day.

A ride on the packets ships, whether on the *Nellie May* or the *Ernestina*, was always an adventure. Yet, as Coli and Lobban write, “On the steamships the passage was usually faster, but the passengers on these vessels were treated more like third-class human cargo.” The packet ships permitted Cape Verdeans to manage their own transportation and general transition between Cape Verde and the United States. The ships prolonged the connection for many Cape Verdean immigrants between the place of their birth and the country which, largely for economic reasons, would become their home.

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