

# Cape Verdeans in the Cranberry Bogs

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Adapted from *Between Race and Ethnicity: Cape Verdean American Immigrants, 1860-1965*.

(Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, 1993).

The people of Fogo are known as rugged farmers, and they brought this robustness and passion for the land to their work in the Massachusetts cranberry bogs. Yet, while the cranberry industry became dependent on Cape Verdean immigrants, very few became owners of bogs. For the most part, the bog workers remained seasonal laborers, residing off season in urban areas, primarily New Bedford and Providence.

There were exceptions to this pattern, however. A few of the Cape Verde Islanders were able to purchase wetlands and convert them into cranberry bogs. Those immigrants who did manage to become property owners in the cranberry region in many ways come closest to realizing the possibilities of the American Dream, while still maintaining the continuity of rural life that is their heritage.

For the rest, cranberry picking may bring up pleasant memories of bonfires and dewy mornings, or of storytelling and record-breaking scooping. But more likely, it is a reminder of backbreaking toil for low pay, of ruthless overseers, of poor health and inadequate housing that gave a minimum of reward to them and a maximum of profits to the bog owners.

All the hardships characteristic of migrant labor



This Cape Verdean American harvests cranberries from a bog in Carver, Massachusetts.

Photo by Ron Barboza

were experienced by the Cape Verdean bog workers. However, in comparison to factory work, to congested city life, to unemployment and discrimination in employment, the weeks of the cranberry harvest were a welcome change for many. Not only were these former peasants able to work the land again, but the wages they could accumulate during a good season would be sufficient to take them through the cold winter months, with some extra to send back to the old country or, perhaps, to make the return trip themselves. The money would also be used to bring other family members here to the United States. For those whose entry into this country came via the whaling industry, cranberry picking was an immediate

way to earn some hard cash. The former whaler Joseph Ramos recalled: "Whaling was dirty work, a nasty job. We didn't make any money whaling because they deducted [deducted] everything — food, clothing.... It was a form of passport. So three days after I got off the ship, I was picking cranberries. On the *Wanderer*, I made fourteen dollars for one year. Then, on the *Margarett*, with the same crew, I made sixteen dollars for six months. In the cranberry bogs, I made \$130 for six weeks. I paid \$30 for board and came to New Bedford with \$100."