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'Traumatic': How Route 195 uprooted the Cape Verdean community in Providence's Fox Point

Like so many highway projects that cut through America mid-century in the name of progress, Route 195 has left a scar in Rhode Island.

Katie Mulvaney, The Providence Journal

Published 9:02 AM UTC Aug. 11, 2022 | Updated 12:02 PM UTC Aug. 12, 2022

To the Cape Verdeans, Fox Point existed through the 1950s as a robust, intimate community with unlocked doors, weekend dances, and pots of jagacida — beans and rice with hints of smoked paprika — bubbling on stovetops.

To city planners, urban blight, tenements and slums jumped to mind, literally paving the way for [government to seize buildings](#) and for [Route 195 to slice through the community](#), displacing Cape Verdean families and cutting the neighborhood off from the waterfront, according to Claire

Andrade-Watkins, who grew up on Planet Street before being ousted by the highway project as a teen.

“They pushed us out. The people who made the decision weren’t brown,” said Andrade-Watkins, an Emerson College professor and filmmaker whose work explores Cape Verdean history and African diaspora.



From left, filmmaker Claire Andrade-Watkins, Glynis Ramos-Mitchell and her mother, Cecelia "Dottie" Ramos at Ramos' home in North Providence.

KRIS CRAIG/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

In the early 1900s, Cape Verdeans, fleeing drought and the poverty of the 10-island archipelago, became the first sub-Saharan Africans to migrate voluntarily to America in search of work on the waterfront and factory jobs. Some found employment as longshoremen on the docks of India Point, others labored as domestics or opened stores.

Set on a jut of land where the Providence and Seekonk rivers converge at Narragansett Bay, Fox Point transformed into a bustling, self-sufficient community, with its shops, churches and wharves.

Displacement of a RI community

Many of the Cape Verdeans in the neighborhood were renters, says Andrade-Watkins. They were told when 195 was planned that their buildings would be torn down to make way for the highway, she recalled.

"We were never invited to the conversations," she said. "We didn't know what was happening. They only contacted the landlords. The highway actually cut the community in half."

"We didn't know until we got the pink slips, so to speak," observed Glynis Ramos-Mitchell, who once lived on Pike Street.

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According to an historical overview, community leaders formed a "freeway watch" to stem the decline in the area around the highway. Even so, 300 families, 172 homes, and 32 businesses were displaced, and two schools were demolished.

Before the highway's construction and completion in the 1960s, the Cape Verdean community stretched from Planet Street and South Main Street through to India Point Park. South Main Street rested at its heart, though it was dubbed "one of the worst slum areas in the city" by the Providence Redevelopment Agency in a 1951 report.

One person fought the urban redevelopment that saw triple-deckers and tenements make way for concrete and condominiums. Mamai Alves, who lived at 88 Pike St., refused to move, enlisting the help of her councilman. Her house was the lone home in that area to survive, only to be bought by the nearby Church of the Holy Rosary and torn down in 2007.



Cecelia "Dottie" Ramos holds a brick salvaged from the front step of the 88 Pike St. home of Mamai and Papai Aves in the heart of the Cape Verdean community in Providence's Fox Point. The lone house to survive the Route 195 construction, it was torn down in 2007.

KRIS CRAIG/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

Others in the community relocated to East Providence, Camp Street, Fall River or the "projects" in Providence, in some cases, cementing their trajectory in life, they said.

"The impact was definitely traumatic. It wasn't like there was a place for us to go. We had no place to go," said Ramos-Mitchell, who now serves as president of the Fox Point Cape Verdean Heritage Park Committee, an initiative focused on documenting and preserving the legacy of the once vibrant Cape Verdean community in Fox Point.

Other factors contributed to the demise of the once tightknit community, busy with barbershops, welcoming watering holes and grocery stores.

The Port of Providence operations shifted from current-day India Point Park to Fields Point, off Allens Avenue.

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Brown University also crept into the neighborhood beginning in the 1940s following reports that called the neighborhood "blighted" with junk shops and "few substantial businesses," Andrade-Watkins said. With that, property prices rose to levels residents could no longer afford.

On a mission to preserve the Fox Point neighborhood legacy

Andrade-Watkins has made it her mission to tell the story of this community, to leave a visual record for future generations through documentaries chronicling Fox Point life and its Cape Verdean legacy. Her films include "Some Kind of Funny Porto Rican? A Cape Verdean American Story" and "Working the Boats: Masters of the Craft," a series about Cape Verdean longshoremen and their union, Local 1329 of the International Longshoremen's Association.

"The heartbreak is pretty palpable," Andrade-Watkins said.

"Some Kind of Funny Porto Rican?": A Cape ...



She and others on the committee are pushing for the city to build the Fox Point Cape Verdean Heritage Memorial Park to commemorate the rich Cape Verdean legacy on the spot where the longshoremen of Local 1329 loaded scrap iron. It is a short distance away from the dock where the packet boats arrived

carrying immigrants from the Cape Verde islands more than a century ago.

A summer celebration: [Nation's oldest Cape Verdean celebration returns to Fox Point. What you need to know](#)



Local 1329 of the International Longshoremen's Association, founded in 1934 in Providence, was the first Black, predominantly Cape Verdean labor union in New England.

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This year, the community displaced by outside forces received recognition from the Providence Preservation Society. The group identified the Tockwotton Fox Point Cape Verdean Community as one of the city's Most Endangered Properties, noting "the loss of a neighborhood is not as simple as a wrecking ball."

The organization reflected on the gradual removal of the entire community through urban renewal, the city's growth as a college town, and through historic preservation practices that failed to "preserve people in place" themselves.

Instead, the group acknowledged contributing to the displacement by deeming buildings in the area historic and worth preserving during the highway's construction and redevelopment efforts. Doing so made the area more attractive to wealthy prospective buyers and drove up the prices. Longtime residents could no longer pay the rents.

"It is [crucial that moving forward preservationists work to intentionally protect human landscapes](#) as well as architectural ones, uplift community voices, and advocate alongside the community listening to and acting on the interests and needs they

Providence community history

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express," the Providence Preservation Society wrote.

"This is just the beginning, and our work must ensure that community in Providence is as valuable as its architecture," the group said.

For Cape Verdeans who treasured their lives and livelihoods in Fox Point, it's recognition that's at once long overdue and far too late. Like so many highway projects that cut through America mid-century in the name of progress, Route 195 has left a scar.

"We were the heart that had the arrow shot through it," Andrade-Watkins said.

Published 9:02 AM UTC Aug. 11, 2022 | Updated 12:02 PM UTC Aug. 12, 2022

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The road ahead for RI's highways: Increased capacity or fewer cars?

Amid calls for projects to reduce vehicle emissions, the RI DOT says public acceptance is not keeping pace and is taking a more "measured" approach.

Katie Mulvaney The Providence Journal

Published 9:33 am UTC Aug. 11, 2022 | Updated 9:48 pm UTC Aug. 12, 2022

Almost 15 years ago, the organization focused on making [Route 95 safer and more efficient from Florida to Maine](#) delivered a [dire message](#): Get off the roads or face car-clogged roadways, mind-blowing delays, and a dramatic rise in emissions in the decades to come.

The [I-95 Corridor Coalition](#) warned in a 2040 Vision for the region that continuing “business as usual” would come with grave consequences. It urged states to take action to invest in intermodal passenger and freight systems that get people and products off the highways and called for a tripling of transit ridership.

Now known as the Eastern Transportation Coalition, the group recommended increasing rail passenger ridership eightfold, while boosting freight rail by 20% to secure the long-term viability of the system.

Despite those [dramatic directives, climate and transportation interests](#) say Rhode Island has plotted a course that remains largely just that, “business as usual,” and bereft of the big thinking and action needed to reduce people’s reliance on cars and cut back on climate-choking emissions.

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