In 1934, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the legislation that created the U.S. National Archives, he stated that: “To bring together the records of the past and to house them in buildings where they will be preserved for the use of men and women in the future, a nation must believe in three things: It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment to create their own future.”

It gives me great pleasure to be talking to you today as the faculty director of the Ferreira Mendes Portuguese-American Archives, while in the floor below us workmen are busy building a state-of-the art facility to house our own growing collection of records documenting the experience of the Portuguese in the U.S. It gives me great pleasure because the activity below us and your presence here today to discuss issues of representation and citizenship among the Portuguese are a very concrete indication that you and the institutions you represent value the Portuguese-American past, and are actively engaged in the process of sustaining Portuguese-American heritage while weaving it into the fabric of our common American future.

We are living at a time of rapid change, characterized by great productivity, but also by great destruction. “To be modern,” wrote Marshall Berman, “is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, ‘all that is solid melts into air’” (Berman, 1988:15). One sign of this destructive process
is what French historian Pierre Nora calls the “erosion of memory,” especially the type of memory that used to provide traditional societies with a sense of the past and the materials of memory with which they fashioned their collective representation, their sense of history and identity. Nora argues that in the modern world there is no such thing as an objective past or history; that both are socially constructed through the actions of groups and institutions. “Our hopelessly forgetful modern societies,” says Nora (1989:8), organize the past through what he calls *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory of which archives are a prime example.

As repositories for various documents and cultural artifacts, archives provide primary sources of memory for individuals, communities and groups, who then transform them into history and representations of cultural identity. It follows then, that ethnic heritage, memory, history, identity and representation, are something that exists through the actions of those that appraise, select, preserve and interpret the fragments of culture that are used as signifiers—as representations of the group. But like other *lieux de mémoire*, such as museums and monuments, archives are usually established by the powerful to protect or enhance their position in society. Through archives, the past is controlled. Certain stories are privileged and others marginalized (Schwartz and Cook, 2002).

In a country of immigrants like the United States, how can relatively small groups like the Portuguese find their place in the dominant national narrative? How can they have some control over the way in which they are represented?

Fentress and Wickham (1992) argue that one of the most effective ways in which social groups can control their own representation is by taking an active part in collecting, preserving, interpreting and making available the raw elements of their own memory, that is, by creating their own archives. It was a similar conviction that led the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, under the direction of Prof. Frank Sousa and with the support of Chancellor MacCormack, to work toward the establishment of a Portuguese-American archive at UMD. In 1996 the Archives and Special Collections department initiated the process of collecting Portuguese-American documental materials like newspapers, records of organizations as well as photographs and papers of local politicians, educators, and authors. At the same time, the university launched an aggressive fundraising campaign aimed at building an appropriate facility to house those materials, and to acquire the staff and technologies needed to preserve them and make them available to the general public and the academic community. With the generous donations made by Portuguese-American
individuals, families, and firms and with the support of our leaders in the Massachusetts and Azorean government, in 2005, the University created an endowment that established the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives.

The establishment of these archives represents a clear sign of the collective belief that creating a structure dedicated to collecting memory objects associated with Portuguese-Americans will, as Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed, help us learn from the past so that we can gain in judgment to create a better future. Without pretending to be exhaustive, I would like to point out some of the ways in which the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives can help achieve this and other goals.

To individuals and families the archives will offer an opportunity to discover family and cultural roots and a chance to contribute to the collective representation of Portuguese-Americans by donating their objects of memory, like photos, passports, letters, diaries, etc. to the archives.

To Portuguese-Americans as a group, the archives provide a foundation for the collective understanding of who we are as an ethnic group and how we fit into the overarching narrative of U.S. history and culture. By structuring, framing and organizing Portuguese-American social memory, and producing knowledge and narratives based on the objects of memory contained in its collection, the archives will play a pivotal role in the continual construction of group identity, the shaping of our representation and the understanding of our culture in the public domain. In addition, the memories contained in the archives provide a basis for what Nietzsche (1994) called “will’s memory,” that is, the group cohesion needed to advocate for Portuguese-American interests within the larger society.

By documenting the experience of the Portuguese in the U.S., the archives are also playing a central role in documenting the history of the communities in which the Portuguese live, and participating in the sustenance, understanding and dissemination of local culture. At a more concrete level, the archives can also serve as a valuable resource to local schools by making available to teachers images, texts and voices that can be used to teach students about local and ethnic history, cultural diversity and citizenship. The same materials can also be utilized to foster tolerance and understanding; and to contribute to an enhanced sense of community.
At the university level the archives support the evidence-based research needs of UMD students and faculty working in the field of Portuguese-American Studies, including those in PhD program in Luso-Afro-Brazilian Studies and Theory.

But our aim is to reach beyond the confines of our university in supporting personal and scholarly research on the Portuguese-American experience. By utilizing electronic media to foster access and participation by the global community and by entering into partnerships with other institutions of knowledge and memory to exchange and share archival material, the archives will expand the amount and variety of information available to researchers. An example of these initiatives is the digitization of one of our major resources—an almost-complete run of the *Diário de Notícias*, a Portuguese-language daily published in New Bedford between 1919 and 1974.

Finally, a major role of the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives is to contribute to the growing body of knowledge about Portuguese-Americans by supporting the publication of research based on our collection, and by organizing exhibits, conferences, and colloquia like the one we are participating in today.

In order to fulfill these roles, the archives need your continued support. It also needs your participation in helping us expand our collections. I know that all the Portuguese-American political and civic leaders present here today, are still very young to think about donating their papers to our archives, but if you are as committed to the issue of Portuguese-American citizenship and representation as I believe you are, I hope that from now on, you will behave like a true archivist, saving every scrap of evidence of your participation in the political and civic process of our nation, with the intent of taking an active role in constructing the collective memory and history of Portuguese Americans, by later donating those materials to the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives.

**Bibliography**


