

Speaking notes of
THE UNDERSECRETARY OF THE PRESIDENCY FOR EXTERNAL RELATIONS
Release of the anthology

“The Dabneys: a Bostonian Family in the Azores (1806/1871)”

New Bedford Whaling Museum, 16 february 2013

First and on behalf of the President of the Government of the Azores, Vasco Cordeiro, I would like to greet all of you attending this launching of the english version of the Anthology, *The Dabneys: A Bostonian Family in the Azores, 1806-1871*.

Let me also start my brief statement by thanking the Luso-American Development Foundation, in the person of its executive council member, Mário Mesquita, for the honorable invitation to participate in this event.

I also greet our hosts this afternoon, the New Bedford Whaling Museum, in the person of its President, James Russell, as well as all the Mayor of New Bedford, Jonathan Mitchel, and the sponsors of the *The Dabney Days* events.

In the context of a ceremony that we should rightly perceive as a tribute to the relationship between Portugal and the United States, particularly between the Azores, Faial and Horta and New England, I salute in particular the presence of the Ambassador of Portugal in the United States, Nuno Brito, as well as of the Mayor of Horta, João Castro.

Stressing from the outset the undeniable importance of the presence of the Dabney family in the Azores for nearly a century, and its pioneer work in the development of transatlantic relations at the

institutional, commercial and economic levels, but also – *and not least important* – in the context of the social and emotional interaction between the two sides of the Atlantic, I would like to specially greet the members of the Dabney family who honor us with their presence.

Finally, in these opening words – *but not least relevant* – I would like to address the authors of this magnificent and exhaustive work, which began with the Anthology in its Portuguese version and is now renewed by a publication prepared for the American audience.

So, allow me express our recognition to Prof.^a Maria Filomena Mónica and to Dr. Paulo Silveira e Sousa for the success of a work of considerable interest to the Azores, highlighting the careful selection of texts and the comprehensive explanation of their historical background, as well as the certainty that the end result fully attains the ultimate goal of the Anthology – allow the general public to have access and read about the *Dabney*, thus providing a well-deserved dissemination of those important texts.

It is certainly not easy to convey the relevance of this publication in the scope of these remarks.

Actually, in the simple and familiar language of the letters between the Dabneys, their diaries and private notes – *and notwithstanding the more formal content of the institutional messages, inherent to the consular representation* – one finds several dimensions of social life, of the economy and of politics on both sides of the Atlantic, during an extended period of time.

These are unique episodes and very particular visions of exceptional decades of our common History, seen from the perspective of an "American family in the Azores," which leaves no one indifferent.

For an example of this, see the quite personal reference of Emmie Dabney to "*the supreme honor*" of a dance with "*Emperor*" Dom Pedro, or the apprehension of Charles Dabney Jr., in Boston, when he wrote to his mother, on the context of the beginning of the American Civil War, stating his "*terrible anxiety about*" his country and that he thought "*a lot about Faial and the peace and quietness that he would have in this place.*"

Among many other examples, we were particularly impressed by the detailed accounts of the everyday life of the Dabneys and of their friendship with well-known figures of the history of the Azores, of Portugal, of Europe and America – *in so many fields of action, from natural sciences to literature and, of course, politics* - who we get to know through the description of moments of conviviality and friendship of the time.

Reading this anthology – *similarly to what the Dabneys did at the end of the century with the photographs they took of "their" city of Horta, of Faial and other islands* – is indeed moving for the "portraits" and "pictures" that we are successively presented with, for the richness of the stories and for the unique vision that is displayed throughout the decades.

John Bass Dabney – *a true entrepreneur, we would say nowadays* – chose to settle in Horta, firstly, because the Portuguese political context was favorable to his commercial interests, but above all, because this Azorean city had the best and most suitable natural harbor and because Faial was already, since the XVIII century, the

base of fruitful transatlantic trade, which the Dabneys would deepen, develop and dominate for a long period.

Central throughout the text – *and I say this with obvious pride* – is the description and praise of the natural wonders, not only of Faial, but also of the various islands and localities of the Azores, which were undoubtedly considered "*favored by nature*".

On the other hand, the positive evolution of this family's feelings towards Faial and the Azores, as well as to their people, is also evident.

The accounts of John Bass's early days are, actually, loaded with ethnological and anthropological observations, also influenced by natural prejudices, unfamiliarity and comparisons to other realities and cities.

But a family feeling towards a great emotional proximity develops particularly in Charles William's period.

This feeling is actually clearly translated in the words of Roxana Dabney: - In her notes, she refers to the islands as "*our Azores*" and, in 1867, she states in a letter that "*we all agree that we would probably not be happier anywhere else.*"

Similarly, the relationship with local elites and the integration into social habits – *like food, birthday celebrations and festivities* – reflect an evolution, starting from the initial reluctance, along with the adaptation difficulties of the first generation, to the discovery of common interests and to an intense social and family interaction.

So, in the final period of this “long stay” in the Azores, the focus is set on the accounts of meetings, visits, parties and on the exchange of knowledge, for instance, in the field of botany, with “gentlemen farmers” from the islands such as António Borges, José Jácome Correia and José do Canto.

Through the eyes of the Dabneys, we witness, in fact, the nineteenth-century social evolution of the islands, the growing wealth and education of the “*morgados*” (firstborn sons), and even the ennoblement of the commercial *bourgeoisie* of the islands.

On the other hand, in what concerns the economy, we follow the evolution of a century in the Azores clearly marked by two periods:

The first one, of openness and growth, is linked to the "cycle of orange trade," in Faial equally connected to the Pico wine and to whaling activities.

In this context, the Dabneys were key partners in the economic activity and in establishing trade links not only on the US, but also in the Atlantic area of Macaronesia (Madeira and Canary Islands) and as far as South America and Europe.

So, the Dabneys are effectively pioneers of transatlantic relations not only because they exported oranges, wine and whale-derived products, but also because they imported what the islands much needed.

As John Bass well summarizes, "*a big part of the things that people want from abroad is almost exclusively provided by the United States, such as planks, wood beams, wax, rice (...) and, therefore,*

they all pass through my hands," a fact that allows him to "have a key role on this island."

The second period, from mid-century, is by contrast marked by the decline and corresponds to the progressive withdrawal of the Dabneys until their final departure in 1892.

In this context, it is, nonetheless, interesting to note that the accounts of the final years included in this Anthology (i.e. before 1871), despite an anticipation of 20 years in relation to the final departure of the family, already express the reasons for the departure and the approach of a new cycle for the Azores.

In fact, we see the expression of the economic decline of the cycle that marked the presence of the Dabneys in the Azores through some references, here and there, to the decrease in the number of the boats that arrived in Faial.

And in truth, the diseases of the vineyards and orange groves, from the 1850s, represented a blow to the export activity of the Azores, as well as the technological development of the steamers which needed fewer stops to refuel and, when they did it, they increasingly chose the port of Ponta Delgada.

Not indifferent to this finding, Charles W. Dabney sought to intervene, on the one hand, to prevent the decline of his activities, namely through the construction of an artificial harbor in Horta, and on the other hand, trying to anticipate what would be the next period of the island of Faial - a landing point for underwater telegraph cables.

In this sense, his words on the late 1870's are revealing of his efforts: - "*I might have done something for Faial concerning the harbor and the cable.*"

In both cases, he would not see these developments materialized during his lifetime, but Charles Dabney was definitely not passive in what regards the internal dynamics of the Azores. On the contrary, he pursued to intervene in the defense of his island and of his city.

It is, therefore, very interesting to take a closer look from a political point of view – *which is not always direct or apparent in the texts* - at the evolution of the role of Faial and Horta in terms of its "Atlantic centrality," of the "peripheries of the archipelago," and of the "periphery of the Azores in the Portuguese context.

In fact, in the beginning of the XIX century, the administrative division of the islands was a claim of the then peripheries of the archipelago, of both São Miguel and Faial, which wanted to participate in government effectively and defended the division of the Azores into three administrative units.

But Horta and Ponta Delgada, at least since the end of the 1830's, also disputed between them the way to have better conditions for the development of commercial activities, namely by the construction of an artificial harbor.

And the truth is that Charles Dabney became actively involved in this dispute in favor of Faial.

As we can see in a particularly demonstrative account from as early as 1838, "*the construction of a harbor has been a pet project of the*

inhabitants of this island," but "they were discouraged from continuing with it (...) by the inhabitants of São Miguel" who "made a subscription to pay for an engineer" to survey the construction site.

Dabney tells us that, once he learned that the British engineer Sir John Rennie had finished the job in Ponta Delgada, he sent "*a small and fast schooner with an envoy*" to invite him to come and work in Faial. When he was prepared to accept the invitation, "*the envy of the inhabitants of S. Miguel stopped him from doing so.*"

Charles Dabney did not give up, but the truth is that the construction of the artificial harbor of Ponta Delgada began in 1862, with the one of Horta only beginning in 1876 and lasting until the early XX century.

Moreover, on these final pages, we witness the recognition of local authorities, particularly through the 1863 "*tribute of the Senate of Horta and of other gentlemen from Faial to Charles W. Dabney*" concerning "*the very important services provided*" by him and by "*his much esteemed family during the various political crises and periods of distress experienced by the people of Faial*" which "*cannot be over praised.*"

So – *and before we finish* – we cannot forget the action of Charles W. Dabney towards the most disadvantaged people, in particular, during the crises of mid 18 hundreds, known as times of great famine, not only in the Azores, but also in Portugal.

In fact, Dabney, on several occasions organized the shipment of food from the US, at cost prices, to feed the starving populations, as well as many other examples of its philanthropic actions.

In truth, as the decades passed throughout the XIX century, progress was slow in coming to the Azores. Rurality, territorial dispersion, poverty, dependency on external and uncertain markets and the lack of a transport network, as well education, did not change, which led to discouragement and immigration of several thousands.

Therefore, it was also through emigration to the United States – *in particular onboard the whaling vessels* – that another fundamental dimension of this profound relationship that unites the Azores to the United States began: the presence of emigrant communities and of the descendants of emigrants from the Azores.

This is, I think, a fundamental and guiding principle of these decades of accounts contained in the Anthology – on one hand, the particularities and specificities of the Azores, in so many levels, and, on the other, the entrepreneurship and dynamism of some businessmen and traders, as well as the difficult situation of the populations.

So, to resume, in 1892, when the Dabneys for ever departed from Horta, we were effectively at the end of a cycle.

In Portugal, in 1892, society was in deep crisis – a moral, political and financial crises, which ultimately led to the downfall of the monarchy in the early twentieth century.

But, also in 1892, the Azores witnessed the introduction in the Portuguese Courts of a proposal for the autonomy of the districts submitted by Aristides Moreira da Mota, a federalist-inspired

initiative which was unsuccessful but paved the way for the establishment of the first Autonomy in 1895.

The dream of these nineteenth-century Azoreans would only be definitely enacted with the establishment of the Political and Legislative Autonomy of the Azores in 1976, but these pioneers were undoubtedly the ones who paved the way to the progress and well-being that was only possible to build decades later.

In Faial, in the year after the departure of the Dabneys, Horta finally became a lading point for submarine cables, with the subsequent establishment of several companies, stimulating the local economy in decline and opening a new cycle in the history of Faial.

This anthology is, therefore, a book of many stories inside History and, above all, a celebration of friendship between the United States and Portugal, between New England and the Azores, and between Boston and New Berford and Horta.

The importance of the presence of the Dabney Family in Horta, during much of the nineteenth century is undeniable, and its legacy remains visible today in the memory, as well as in the architecture and in so many other dimensions, particularly of the island of Faial.

The geostrategic importance and the leading role of this island and its Bay, which welcomed the Dabneys, are, on the other hand, also unquestionable.

The Azores, Faial and Horta assume their relationship to the Sea as their vocation, along with their position in the Atlantic as a privileged stage for the development of the transatlantic relation.

This has been the case since the Age of Discoveries, passing through the "Dabney century", renewed, from the steamships era to telegraph communications and to the first seaplanes that crossed the Atlantic.

Above all, Horta and the Azores - as New Bedford, Boston and New England -, always remain as a safe harbor and anchorage for sailors and boaters, on both sides of the Atlantic.

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