

Brazil's Onze de Junho: A Place Popular in Song

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On 11 June 1865, the Brazilian navy, engaged in the Triple Alliance War against Paraguay, scored a decisive victory in the Battle of Riachuelo under the command of Almirante Barroso.

This having been Brazil's most significant battle in enemy waters, a number of streets, monuments, ships, and marine clubs were named Riachuelo, Almirante Barroso, or Onze de Junho.

The Battle of Riachuelo (Marinha do Brasil)

One of the latter was a square in Cidade Nova, Rio de Janeiro, hitherto known as Largo do Rocio Pequeno. The name Rocio Pequeno had been given it to distinguish this plaza from Rocio Grande—today's Praça Tiradentes.

Dom João VI in 1808
(Biblioteca Nacional)

In 1808, when the Prince Regent of Portugal (later the king Dom João VI) transferred the royal court to Rio de Janeiro following the Napoleonic invasion of Portugal, Largo do Rocio Pequeno was an uninhabited space at the western edge of the city.

The local populace used to throw trash and excrement there (as it did on the beaches and in every other open space).

At the time, Rio was surrounded by numerous lagoons, mangrove swamps, and marshes. A large mud flat, called the Mangal de São Diogo, extended west of Rocio Pequeno.

Upon arrival in Brazil, the Prince Regent began confiscating private properties for the crown. He first installed himself in the Viceroy's palace (now Paço Imperial) in the city center but was soon incommoded by the noisy environment.

Five years earlier, a wealthy Portuguese merchant by the name of Elias Antônio Lopes had built himself a house on a country estate called Quinta da Boa Vista, located in São Cristóvão, well beyond the city limits (see the location on a map of modern Rio).

The house is said to have been the best in Rio de Janeiro. Fearing, perhaps, that his estate might be confiscated outright, Lopes placed it at the disposal of the monarch, who made it his residence, compensating the merchant with several titles and important official posts.

Dom João resided at Quinta da Boa Vista until 1821, when he returned to Portugal. Many of the Portuguese nobles and high functionaries who arrived with the prince also settled in São Cristóvão, which came to be known as the Bairro Imperial. (the Palácio de São Cristóvão now houses the Museu Nacional).

Since the Mangal de São Diogo separated the new palace from downtown Rio, a lengthy boat ride in Guanabara bay provided the only connection between the two.

Dom João had a road of stone (Caminho do Aterrado) laid across the mud flat, reducing the distance between São Cristóvão and the city center to four miles, traversed in approximately half an hour by carriage.

Lanterns were installed at 50-meter intervals for illuminating the prince regent's passage at night, and Caminho do Aterrado became known as Caminho das Lanternas.

In 1811, the uninhabited area along this road, extending west from Campo de Santana (today's Praça da República) to São Cristóvão, received a legislative boost.

All two-story buildings constructed within two years of the law's enactment were exempt from taxation for ten years. If they had more than two stories and façades with more than five doors or windows, the tax exemption was extended to twenty years.

Single-story houses were discouraged, being considered a detriment to the beauty of the city. Many sumptuous houses quickly went up with their requisite slave quarters, and an urban district was established, which came to be known as Cidade Nova.

Palácio de São Cristóvão (Câmara dos Deputados)

Unlike the congested old center of Rio, Cidade Nova had spacious lots, open spaces, and straight, wide streets.

Largo do Rocio Pequeno became its commercial square. Small business owners and their employees settled in the area, many of them Portuguese immigrants.

In 1846, a "gondola" service was inaugurated. The "gondolas" were light, horse-drawn public conveyances with fixed routes, the first line running from Largo do Moura to Rocio Pequeno. The cost was 6 vinténs.

In the late 1840s, some improvements were made to the square, including the planting of casuarina trees and the erection of a neoclassical granite fountain commissioned in 1848 from the French architect Auguste-Henry-Victor Grandjean de Montigny (1776–1850).

The fountain served as the square's centerpiece and was designated a landmark in 1938. In 1943, when Praça Onze was being torn down to make way for Avenida Presidente Vargas, the fountain was relocated to Praça Afonso Vizeu, Alto da Boa Vista.

Barão de Mauá

By the early 1850s, the area around Largo do Rocio Pequeno began to be developed in earnest, thanks to the enterprising energy of Irineu Evangelista de Souza, the Barão (later Visconde) de Mauá.

Having received the concession to supply gas illumination to Rio de Janeiro in 1851, Mauá built gas works on rua Senador Eusébio, one of Rocio Pequeno's two major streets, which also served as the main arteries connecting the Zona Norte to the city center until they were supplanted by Avenida Presidente Vargas in 1944.

The neoclassical gas works building still exists in large part as the headquarters of the Companhia Estadual de Gás. The Museu do Gás can be found at the same location, now Av. Presidente Vargas.

In March 1854, the gas works began operation, and within three years were supplying energy to thousands of street lamps and homes, not to mention three theatres.

A month following the opening of the gas works, Mauá inaugurated the first railroad in Brazil. By 1858, trains were

running through Cidade Nova, connecting the city center with the suburbs.

The central railway station, Estação D. Pedro II, was built across the road from Campo de Santana, quite close to Largo do Rocio Pequeno.

Also in 1854, Mauá began construction of the Canal do Mangue, which, when completed in 1858, would drain the Mangal de São Diogo and clear new lands for development.

By 1859, the first streetcar (bonde) line was circulating through Cidade Nova. In 1869, six years after the square was rebaptized Praça Onze, the borders of the Mangue canal were planted with palm trees.

In 1871, the first public school was opened in Praça Onze, and the following year a second bonde line was added, making the Cidade Nova a hub of public transportation.

The cheap lands and easy access brought industrial manufacturing to the area, and with them factory workers, often recent arrivals from Europe.

Small public functionaries, largely mulattoes who found the area pleasant and affordable, settled here in large numbers. By 1872, Cidade Nova was one of the most populous districts in the capital.

The census of that year counted 26,592 inhabitants there—almost 10% of Rio's total population of 275,000—of whom 3,836 were negros and 1,396 were slaves.

The imperial reign had elevated the status of São Cristóvão and stimulated the birth of the upscale Cidade Nova. With the demise of the Empire, both these districts lost their social cachet.

In 1888, slavery was abolished in Brazil. The following year, the Republic was proclaimed. Abolition brought a flood of Afro-Brazilians into the capital, the vast majority of them poor and in need of cheap housing.

At the same time, affluent new districts were being developed in the Zona Sul, and the well-to-do residents of Cidade Nova migrated into those fashionable neighborhoods, leaving behind empty mansions.

Almost overnight, the Praça Onze area was transformed into a working-class neighborhood, its formerly elegant buildings now housing factories and the communal residences known as casas de cômodos or cortiços.

The area was not only cheap but conveniently located near the port. This became a major source of employment for the former slaves, many of whom became stevedores.

Thus, in the latter decades of the 19th century, Praça Onze and its environs became the Little Africa of Rio.

At the same time, the district received a significant influx of Jewish immigrants from Europe. By all accounts, the two populations lived side by side without much interaction or lasting effect.

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