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# A Flavor of Haiti in Somerville

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A look at the Haitian  
community in  
Somerville and how it  
will be effected by  
the Green Line  
Extension Project

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Cassandra Barthelemy

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By  
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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	4
Acknowledgements.....	6
Introduction.....	7
Methodology.....	11
Brief History of Haitians.....	14
- Haitians in Haiti .....	16
- Present state of affairs in Haiti.....	21
- Haitians in America.....	22
The Haitian Community.....	24
- Community in Boston .....	27
- Community in Somerville .....	29
Moving on up to the East Side! We finally got a piece of the . . . Green Line .....	30
- Title explanation .....	30
- The Green Line Extension Project .....	31
Keeping the Culture Alive .....	31
- Highland Creole Cuisine .....	32
- Sunrise Caribbean Cuisine .....	34
- Blessing Caribbean Restaurant .....	37
- Fiesta Bakery.....	39
Lending a Helping Hand .....	41
- The Haitian Coalition of Somerville .....	42
- Other Haitian organizations in Somerville .....	46
Conclusions.....	47
Works Cited.....	48
Appendix .....	50

## Abstract

*“Piti, piti, wazo fe nich li”*

*Little by little the bird builds its nest. - Haitian Proverb*

*Unknown Author*

The Tufts University course Urban Borderlands is a community-based research seminar that teaches students about their surrounding neighborhood. It combines academic and observational learning in order to accurately document and record the history and development of the Cambridge and Somerville communities. This seminar has taken on this project since 2001 and it has been documenting the Latino communities in Cambridge and Somerville. Each year the seminar takes place, a different aspect of these two communities are analyzed.

This year Urban Borderlands, under the direction of Professor Deborah Pacini-Hernandez, looked at immigrant communities in Somerville's Union Square and Magoun Square. The purpose of this is to understand how immigrant groups in these areas and surrounding neighborhoods will be affected by the expansion of the Green Line into Somerville.

The Green Line Extension Project is a scheme of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) in coordination with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) (Green Line Extension, 2010). The purpose of the project is to extend the existing MBTA Green Line service from Lechmere Station through the northwest Boston corridor communities of Cambridge, Somerville, and Medford. This will also create an extension of the main line to College Avenue in Medford and a branch line to Union Square in Somerville. The

## A Flavor of Haiti in Somerville

hope of this project is to “increase mobility, encourage public transit usage, improve regional air quality, ensure a more equitable distribution of transit services, and support opportunities for sustainable growth in the corridor municipalities”.

My part in the Urban Borderlands project involves looking at the Haitian community in Somerville. I specifically looked at four Haitian food businesses that are all run by Haitian businesses. The purpose of doing this is to understand why Haitians have come to Somerville and why they are still there. This will the questions of how are Haitians prospering in Somerville. The reason for asking and attempting to answer these questions is so that the Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) can better plan for the future. The goal is to ensure that immigrant families and businesses that are already established in the Green Line extension zone do not get driven out.

## Acknowledgement

*“Sonje lapli ki leve mayi ou.”*

*Remember the rain that made your corn grow. – Haitian proverb*

*Unknown Author*

This report, titled “A Flavor of Haiti in Somerville” would not have been possible without the help of Professor Deborah Pacini-Hernandez. Without her help, I would have been extremely lost in terms of my research. She directed me and led me to the people and organization that helped to bridge the gap between the oral and statistical information.

My fellow classmates have also indirectly contributed to this report. The time spent in class every week helped me to get my thoughts and idea organized. The work that other students did also helped to inspire much of the work I presented in this report. I would like to thank Amatoga Jérémie specifically for helping me textualize my research with statistical information.

I would also like to thank Guerlince Semerzier who is a board member for the Haitian Coalition of Somerville. Without his insight and thoughtfulness about the Haitian community, this paper would be missing much information.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family, Highland Creole Cuisine, Sunrise Caribbean Cuisine, Blessing Caribbean Restaurant, Fiesta Bakery, and all affiliates of those four businesses.

## Introduction

As a person of not only Haitian descent but also a native of the country of Haiti, I tend to find myself drawn back to issues concerning Haiti and anything that has to do with Haitians in general. Part of the reason for this is because I would like for the country I came from to prosper so that people like me do not get forgotten as simply “those poor people”. It saddens me when I hear or read about the negative things going on in Haiti and the negative language with which people speak about Haitians. I believe that for every bit of news that brings sorrow there are a multitude of positivity that brings joy that does not get reported. By doing research on people like me and showing that good that comes from Haiti and Haitian people I think it would do much good in reversing the effects of ignorance and maybe even racism. This is part of the reason why I became interested in taking the Urban Borderlands course. I knew that it would give me an opportunity to be a voice, albeit a small voice, that would shed some light on the good in Haitians. Urban Borderlands is a course that I felt would allow me to explore a part of my larger community and see what Haitians have been doing in Somerville.

Urban Borderlands is a course that has been doing research for several years looking primarily at the communities in the city of Somerville. In doing so, the city of Somerville will be better equipped in catering to the needs of its large immigrant population. Due to my ancestry and my own interests I chose to study the Haitian community in Somerville. Not only would I learn a little bit more about where I am from but it would also shed some light as to the movement of Haitians in America and possibly why they came in the first.

When I first started thinking about what I would research in terms of Haitians in Somerville I talked to my mom about it. Her first reaction was to the large Haitian community in

## A Flavor of Haiti in Somerville

Somerville. Her surprise at the large Haitian population in Somerville raised a lot of questions as to why would this be a surprise. The more important question that my mom asked me was “Why are Haitians in Somerville?”

Coming from a Haitian family that has lived in Boston for two decades, the surprise at a thriving Haitian community in Boston is reasonable especially when there are an infinite number of resources for Haitian in the City of Boston. However, I did not realize that there could also be a thriving Haitian community in Somerville. My father on the other hand, who is a real estate agent, was not surprised at all. He told me that many of the Haitians that he helps to buy or rent homes choose Somerville as their destination. When I asked him why, he proposed that part of the reason might be the location of Somerville, which is far away from the larger city of Boston. It is widely known that the farther one lives from any city crime is less along with any other effects of living in a populated area. This may have been the reasoning for some Haitians that finally settled in Somerville. He also said that the city of Cambridge was also a place that attracted immigrants and thus living in Somerville was simply convenient.

With all the information that my parents were giving me the main question as to “Why Somerville?” slowly became the question that I wanted to answer, research, and write about in my paper. In trying to answer I thought that the best place to get information on the Haitian community in Somerville would be through food. As someone who is Haitian, I knew that food was something important that people came together for and reconnected with the motherland over. I then decided to focus on the four Haitian owned culinary businesses that are in Somerville. I believed that these restaurants would give me insight into why Haitians are in Somerville. Part of answering that question entails looking at the history of Haitians in Haiti and in the United States.

However, as any historian and anthropologist will confirm, it is near impossible to get the complete and full history of a people. I didn't realize just how difficult it would be but I remained on the path that allowed me to learn a little bit more about the Haitian community here in Somerville. If I could not fully and accurately answer the question of why Haitians came to Somerville, then I decided to at the very least to answer all other questions dealing with Haitians in Somerville. Of the many questions I had, I was able to find out what happened when Haitians came to Somerville. Being that Haitians are a black people, it is not a surprise but I was very saddened to learn that there was much racial tension between whites already living in Somerville and Haitians. Despite this and several other problems, I think that Haitians in Somerville have been successful and my interviews with four Haitians business owners attest to that.

As a result of much difficult but enjoyable learning through oral history, I will look at the various reasons for what happened that led Haitians to Somerville. In order to do this I will first have to give an account for where Haitians came from and how it came about that they came to America in my first chapter, *Brief History of Haitians*. I describe it as brief because it can never be a complete history. There will always be missing bits of information, which is why I term it as brief so as to emphasize that there is more that is not being said and written about Haitians.

I also briefly look at the current condition of the nation because it does give some insight as to why Haitians leave the country in the first place. In my second chapter I will step back and look at the Haitian community overall. In my third chapter I will illustrate the history of four successful Haitian business owners in Somerville. I believe that through these oral histories I will be able to give a clear portrait of the Haitians in Somerville. First I will look at the Haitian community in Boston and then Somerville. In my forth chapter I will describe the organization that was a result of not only the influx of Haitians in Boston and Somerville, but also the result of

## A Flavor of Haiti in Somerville

racial tensions. Lastly I will look at the Green Line Extension Project and what some people have said about the pros and cons in its attempt to make traveling more accessible for the Somerville community.

## Methodology

In order to be able to talk about a large immigrant population in Somerville I first needed to get to know Somerville. What better way to do that then by walking around? Professor Deborah Pacini-Hernandez wisely had the class conduct walking tours on the streets of Somerville. The city is very vibrant with several different nocks and crannies where people congregate the most. The two places we all explored were Union Square and Magoun Square. It was an enjoyable experience particularly for me because I got to see Union Square at night. Although this is not a good idea for taking pictures, it did give me a good idea of what goes on in Somerville at night. I saw that people liked to go out to eat at the various cultural restaurants. I walked by several churches, some of which didn't even look like a typical church, and the sounds coming from the churches indicated to me that there was a service going on. I saw people coming home, possibly from work, and people going out, possibly to a party or an event.

The city was just so alive and active at night that I am very glad I made the mistake of performing my walking tour at night. I obtained a different view than what my fellow classmates were able to get. I, however, decided to stick with everyone else for my second walking tour, which was of the Magoun Square area. Like Union Square, it is also very lively and active, even during the day. I was very fascinated by all the different types of shops that ranged from a jewelry store to a saloon, to a market, and even an acupuncture clinic. This area is a good representation of what Somerville is actually like, which is a mix of just about everything you can think of, oddly placed in between Highland Avenue and Broadway. Despite its odd location, it seems to work and continues to remain active.

## A Flavor of Haiti in Somerville

As for my specific interests, despite the beautiful jewelry and sweet smells of acai berry smoothies, I decided to focus on the four Haitian owned restaurants in Somerville. I wanted to find out about the Haitian community and the best way for me to do that was through oral history. I learned later on that is it one of just a few histories for Haitians. Nonetheless, I knew that most if not all of my information would have to come from others in the community through interviews and talking with as many Haitians in the community as possible. I chose to work with food because I believed that it would allow me to access one person who might have information on many different aspects of the Haitian community. I am fortunate that I am Haitian because it might have been difficult to gain the trust of a people that already have issue with anything that seems related to the government. In chapter one, I will go into detail more in terms of the relations that Haitians have had with the government in Haiti and how that sentiment could potentially continue even in the US. It is very suspicious when someone wants to do an interview with you and being able to articulate my intentions in Creole made things much easier.

After conducting four interviews with four different Haitian business owners, it seemed like I was stuck at a dead end. I had originally decided to look at education as the main reason for why Haitians chose to come to Boston and hence Somerville, by way of Cambridge, but I could not back that up. My interviews were with people who had educations that varied from a doctorate to simply a high school diploma. I thought that they would back up my thoughts that education was the driving force. Instead I learned that there are a number of reasons why Haitians came. Some of these reasons included political turmoil In Haiti, stability in the US for financial growth, and overall a better life than back home. I will also give a very specific account of how one family left the Haiti and prospered in Somerville.

With no thesis in sight, I asked my professor what I should do and she directed me to the Haitian Coalition of Somerville. This was a good move to make because I was able to speak to the son of a former general in Haitian Army. It was very insightful and in chapter four I will expand upon it in greater detail. From this interview I was able to really piece together a portrait of the Haitian community here in Somerville. It was a very long interview that helped to tie in all the information that was given to me from the other interviews that I conducted. All the information that I was able to gather is written down in the following pages and they were also presented alongside the presentations of what my fellow classmates studied about Somerville. The information that we all have presented will be of some use to the city of Somerville in understanding who is already here and also how they will be affected by the Green Line Extension Project.

In conclusion, the interviews and the transcription of the interviews we conducted allowed us to take a snapshot of the city of Somerville. This snapshot not only shows how far Haitians have come but also other immigrant populations in the city. It is a celebration of the diversity and cohesiveness of the communities. Despite the short timeframe of September 2010 to December 2010, to take this snapshot, I believe that it was done well and with the best of intentions. All our efforts would have been in vain if it were not for the many people that helped us along the way and directed us to a better understanding and appreciation of Somerville. Through our research and the research of those before us and those after us, I do believe that we have been able to help others learn more about Somerville and the diversity of its immigrants.

## Brief History of Haitians

*“Ouvriye vann zouti-l, men li pa vann metye-l.”*

*A carpenter [may] sell his tools, but he [cannot] sell his skills. – Haitian proverb*

*Unknown Author*

The history of Haiti, like any country, is very long. The earliest recording of anything that has to do with Haiti is when Christopher Columbus “discovered” Haiti on December 5, 1492 (Henderson, 1997). I write “discovered” because such claims can always be disputed and history is always incomplete. I put discovered in quotation marks because I want to acknowledge that someone else may have been the first to reach Haiti. Columbus was the first to claim that he discovered Haiti, which was called Hispaniola. Nonetheless, there is too much to cover in terms of the history of Haitians which is why this is brief.

I will begin this brief history with the presidency of François Duvalier, who was in office from 1957 to 1971 (Henderson, 1997). I chose this timeframe because it encompasses the Duvalier regime that catalyzed one of the many mass exoduses out of Haiti. His regime that was carried on by his son Jean Claude Duvalier was followed by the first democratically elected president. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was a Catholic priest, was president for just a short time before being thrown out by a military coup but returns, with the help of the US and UN military, to finish out his term in 1994 (Haiti, 2010). Once his term was over, Aristide fled Haiti.

René Préval, won the next election in a landslide victory, however his performance as president during the earthquake, just 11 months ago on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2010, was unethical. It took several days for the president to address the people in terms of the aftermath of the

earthquake. There are even reports that former US President Clinton was the one who “took him out of hiding” to address the people.

Since the earthquake, the country has been in misery, with a major flood caused by a passing hurricane and an outbreak of cholera (Donald, 2010). There was much speculation about the origin of the deadly disease, however it was discovered that it did not come from Haiti but a UN peacekeeper (Donald, 2010). As it stands right now, Haiti just had an election and the results are still up in the air. No one, of the 15 presidential candidates, has claimed victory.

## Haitians in Haiti

The country of Haiti was in a period of disorder when president, General Paul Magloire who led the country until December 1956, was forced to resign by a general strike. This left the presidency of the nation in turmoil for several months until September 1957 when Dr. François Duvalier elected President.

Dr. François Duvalier was the former Minister of Health, who had earned a reputation as a humanitarian working to stop the spread of various different infectious diseases (Haines, 1996). Despite his caring attitude toward people and their ailments, this quickly changed once he got into office. It has been said that his regime has been one of the most repressive and corrupt in modern history. His regime operated on the fear that the Haitian people had for his exploitation of vodou. The combination of violence, vodou, and a dedicated military police helped to carry out all of his plans for the nation. These people were under Duvalier's paramilitary police that was officially called the Volunteers for National Security (Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale – VSN) (Haines, 1996). To the people they harassed, they were known as the Tonton Macoutes, who was a Vodou monster. These men carried out political murders, beatings, intimidation and essentially made sure that no one got in the way of "Papa Doc", which is what Duvalier came to be known as.

His regime is responsible for an estimated 30,000 Haitian executions and disappearances (Haines, 1996). This was done with skill and craft that were combined with vodou. Duvalier was not a vodou priest but he publicly recognized Vodou and those that practiced it. His tolerance and great respect for vodou and his private devotion to Vodou rituals gained the respect of the vodou practicing minority. For those that didn't practice vodou, he put fear into their hearts

because of his great reported private knowledge of magic and sorcery. His knowledge and respect for vodou improve his popular persona among the common people and support amongst those in his military.

In terms of Duvalier's policies, he had strong intentions to end the rule of the mulatto elite over the nation's economic and political life. This hatred to light-skinned Haitians, who were known as mulattos, began the first wave of massive emigration out of the country in the 1960s (Haines, 1996). This is about the time when the first Haitians began arriving in the US. Those that were able to escape were not only lighter in skin tone but they were also the educated segment of the population. This virtually left no one to stand in Duvalier's way. However, to counter the backlash of the people, he made great efforts to aid black or darker skinned Haitians like himself. In this effort, he public works into neighborhoods that not only gave people paved roads, running water, and a sewage system, but this also gave people jobs. With the newfound stability that the people had been hoping for in sight, Duvalier declares himself "President for life" in 1964 (Haines, 1996).

This was not a long lived presidency because Duvalier died in April 1971 but passed the presidency onto his 19 year old son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, who became known as "Baby Doc" (Haines, 1996). Jean-Claude Duvalier was the youngest president in Haiti and his lack of knowledge and experience showed. The political and economic climate of the country continued to decline and Haiti ended up in worse shape than when "Papa Doc" took office. Due to his age, he was not ready to take on the great responsibility of running a country. He therefore indirectly gave the responsibility over to his mother, Simone Ovid Duvalier, who helped "Baby Doc" make all the decisions. However in 1980, "Baby Doc" married a mulatto by the name of

Michéle Bennett in a \$3 million ceremony that caused much uproar amongst the Haitian people because of the country's financial difficulties (Haines, 1996).

The administration of "Baby Doc" continued to go downhill. Once married into the family, Michéle Bennett had her husband force his mother go into exile because she was kicked out of Haiti. Matters only got worse when the country was hit with an AIDS epidemic. This led to Duvalier being forced by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to kill all the Creole pigs. Although this was done to prevent the spread of AIDS, it drove many Haitian farmers into bankruptcy because those pigs were their livelihood (Haines, 1996).

The people of Haiti had had enough and the tipping point came when in 1983, Pope John Paul II visited the country (Haines, 1996). Seeing the distress of the people, he condemned the regime. This for some was seen as a green light from the Pope to rebel against the government and in February 1986, "Baby Doc" was forced to resign. The army and the people forced him out of office and into exile. The country remained in great turmoil with the provisional military government running the country.

Efforts were made to democratically elect a president but riots and military coups prevented any progress towards democracy. In the attempted 1987 elections it was reported that up to 300 voters were killed by the military army. In response, President Carter wrote "Citizens who lined up to vote were mowed down by fusillades of terrorists' bullets. Military leaders, who had either orchestrated or condoned the murders, moved in to cancel the election and retain control of the Government" (Haines, 1996). However in December 1990 Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a Roman Catholic priest, won 67% of the vote to become president (Haines, 1996).

The Associated Press deemed it a fair election however Aristide's radical populist policies didn't sit well with the Haitian elite. This caused another military coup to ensue, the 1991 coup d'état, which has been speculated to have been supported by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Haines, 1996). Thousands were killed and another Haitian president was forced into exile. This time however the president was able to return. In October 1994, 3 years after Aristide was forced into exile, he was finally able to return. During the general election of 1995 Aristide's coalition, the Lavalas (Waterfall) Political Organization, won the election and René Préval became president by winning 88% of the popular vote (Haines, 1996). When Aristide was able to return to office, he finished out his term in February 1996 and the presidency was handed over to Préval. This was the first time in Haiti's history that a smooth transition, from president to former president, had ever occurred.

Despite this smooth transition, their friendship and partnership did not last long. In November 1996, Aristide formed a new political party, called the Lavalas Family, in opposition to Préval (Haines, 1996). Even though they won the 1997 election in the Senate, the results were thrown out by the government, which was still under Préval at the time. However, because of the split between the two men, the government continued to be disorganized.

In the 1998 presidential election, Préval dismissed legislators whose terms had expired and therefore decided to rule by decree. This is very similar to when "Papa Doc" declared himself "President for Life". This however was also short lived as the election of 2000 saw Aristide win the presidency again. It's been reported that he won more than 90% of the vote, on a turnout of around 50% according to international observers (Haines, 1996). This of course was contested by the opposition but Aristide was able to take office nonetheless.

This second presidency was also in much disarray with allegations that official that he appointed were involved in drug smuggling in Canada. Investigators discovered extensive corruption by Aristide. It had been reported that Aristide had stolen tens of millions dollars from the country but to date none of this has been proven. Aristide was eventually overthrown and some speculate that this was done with the aid of the US. Nonetheless, the government was then taken over by the Supreme Court under chief justice Boniface Alexandre (Haines, 1996).

All these events led to the rebellion of 2004, when thousands of Haitians revolted against the peacekeepers brought in by the UN. The rebellion led to major clashes between police and Aristide supporters. The country was in chaos and the UN peacekeepers were even accused of conducting a massacre against the residents of a town in Haiti called Cité Soleil in July 2005 (Haines, 1996).

The government however was able to collect itself and hold election, despite the violent atmosphere of the country. With only 51% of the vote, Préval was able win the 2006 elections (Haines, 1996). Civil unrest continued however but against rising food prices. These were for rice in particular, which is a staple food product for many Haitian.

### The Present State of Affairs in Haiti

The Préval presidency was tested however by a greater force than that of rioting citizens. The 2010 earthquake on January 12<sup>th</sup> that was recorded having a magnitude of 7 of a scale of 10 killed more than 300,000 people (Donald, 2010). The capital city of Port-au-Prince was completely leveled to the ground. Thousands have been reported to be homeless and millions more are starving. Due to the enormous number of death, mass graves were the only option for people.

The second disaster came when the dust settled and the spread of disease ensued. This was only made worse when the rainy season came about during the summer time. This caused mudslides and flood near where people had set up tents as makeshift home that were later called tent cities.

The most recent outbreak of disease has been cholera. Many have died because of the deadly infectious disease but it wasn't until December 7, 2010 that the origin of the disease was discovered. The Associated Press reported that a French investigation discovered that the disease came from a UN peacekeeper that was reported to have been Asian (Donald, 2010).

As of right now, the most recent election that took place in November 2010 is still being contested. No one has been able to successfully claim victory. Of the 15 candidates for president, all are still holding out hope that they have won. Préval continues to be president until a new president emerges.

## Haitians in America

The very first wave of Haitians to come the United States occurred soon after “Papa Doc” took office in 1957. Those that left were part of the elite and middle class segment of the population who wanted to get away from the oppressive Duvalier regime. Of those that were able to leave the country early on, some have been able to make considerable contributions to the US. For example, Jean-Baptiste Point du Sable founded the first non-indigenous settlement in what is now Chicago. The State of Illinois and City of Chicago even declared du Sable the Founder of Chicago on October 26, 1968 (Halter, 1995).

Haitians have continued to come to the United States since the “Papa Doc” regime began. There are reports that there is an estimated between 535,000 and 800,000 Haitians in total scattered throughout the United States. There is a significant Haitian population in South Florida, specifically the Miami community of Little Haiti. There is also a significant Haitian community in New Orleans, Louisiana that has many historic ties to Haiti that date back to the Haitian Revolution. New York City has the second largest population of Haitians, after Miami. The major areas of the Haitian community in New York City are in Flatbush, East Flatbush, and Springfield Gardens (Halter, 1995). There are also significant and active Haitian communities in Boston, New Jersey, Washington D.C., Providence, Rhode Island, Georgia, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania.

**Table 1. Total and Haitian Foreign-Born Populations, 1960 to 2008**

Year	Foreign born	Haitian born		
		Number	Share of all foreign born	Rank <sup>(a)</sup>
1960	9,738,091	4,816	0.0%	61
1970	9,619,302	28,026	0.3%	41
1980	14,079,906	92,395	0.7%	30
1990	19,797,316	225,393	1.1%	22
2000	31,107,889	419,317	1.3%	18
2008	37,960,773	534,969	1.4%	16

*Notes:* <sup>a</sup> Rank refers to the position of the Haitian born relative to other immigrant groups in terms of size of the population residing in the United States in a given census year.

*Source:* Data for 2000 from the 2000 census; data for 2008 from the American Community Survey 2008. Data for earlier decades from Gibson, Campbell and Emily Lennon, US Census Bureau, Working Paper No. 29, Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 1990, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC., 1999.

## The Haitian Community

*“Mèt do pa grate do.”*

*You cannot scratch your own back. – Haitian proverb*

*Unknown Author*

The Haitian community has sustained growth in the US since the administration of the first Duvalier, who is better known as “Papa Doc”. From this time in the late 1950s, Haitians have been coming to the United States and establishing communities that have kept their culture alive.

Haitians are one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the US according to the Department of Immigration and Naturalization. Their growing numbers in the US, specifically in the city of Boston and Somerville, have helped to create active organizations contributed to the well being of immigrants.

Haitians have been active members of the Boston and Somerville community, participating in all areas of the workforce and active citizenship. For this reason, I have dedicated this chapter to the Haitian communities in Boston and in Somerville. I will go into describe how these communities have been able to flourish and help the continuous flow of Haitian immigrants.

**Table 2. Occupations of Employed Workers in the Civilian Labor Force Age 16 and Older by Gender and Origin, 2008**

	Haitian foreign born		All foreign born	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Persons age 16 and older employed in the civilian labor force	168,032	181,587	13,630,931	9,505,339
Total percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Management, business, finance	6.7	4.4	10.7	10.4
Information technology	1.2	0.4	4.0	1.9
Other sciences and engineering	1.4	0.5	4.1	2.2
Social services and legal	2.4	2.8	1.1	2.0
Education/training and media/entertainment	2.9	3.7	3.4	7.1
Physicians	0.6	0.6	1.2	1.0

Registered nurses	0.4	7.0	0.4	3.4
Other health-care practitioners	1.8	6.2	1.0	2.9
Health-care support	2.9	27.2	0.6	5.4
Services	26.1	22.7	17.4	25.7
Sales	8.1	9.4	7.5	10.5
Administrative support	10.7	9.8	5.3	14.7
Farming, fishing, and forestry	0.6	0.1	2.6	0.9
Construction, extraction, and transportation	22.3	2.4	25.9	3.3
Manufacturing, installation, and repair	11.9	2.9	14.6	8.5

*Source:* 2008 American Community Survey.

Data provided by MigrationInformation.org

## Community in Boston

The Haitian community in Boston, which has been growing since the first waves of Haitian immigrants in the late 1950s, is about 50 years old as of 2010 (Halter, 1995). The city has been able to accommodate the Haitian community with its various and diverse socio-economic backgrounds, interests, and needs. Haitians in the Boston community include a variety of generations and individuals that from a 70-year-old man who arrived in the late 1950s to a 10-year-old third generation child who has never been to Haiti.

As Haitians spread throughout the Boston metropolitan area, they are in the process of becoming somewhat economically segmented, with the blue-collar, lower-middle-class population in places like Mattapan confronting different issues and challenges such as racism than the more white-collar, upper-middle-class families in other metropolitan areas.

The Haitian community in Boston has developed a strong organizational basis that has created various public and private entities that cater to the immigrant population. Not only have Haitians been able to establish themselves in Boston, but they have also become active in local politics. One in Haitian politician in particular, Marie St. Fleur, who is a State Representative in Massachusetts, has done much good for the Haitian people by giving them a voice.

The Haitian community has also been active in the business sector. They have been involved with a variety of well established businesses, including service for money transfer like Caribbean Air Mail (CAM). Haitians in Boston have also been successful in the food sector, with prominent names such as Bon A Petit. Haitian business owners have founded establishments through the Boston metro region. These businesses are visibly clustered in Mattapan and in Dorchester on both sides of Blue Hill Avenue.

## A Flavor of Haiti in Somerville

Some of the organizations that have been set up to help Haitians include the Boston Haitian Reporter, the Haitian Health Institute, Haitian-American United, Association of Haitian Women in Boston, Caribbean Air Mail (CAM) and many others. They not only assist Haitians in Boston but they also help the Haitian community stay connected with family back in Haiti. The evidence of this was great seen after the tragedy that occurred in Haiti when the country was hit with a 7 magnitude earthquake.

## Community in Somerville

The Haitian community in Somerville has been growing since the 1991 military coup that sent President Aristide out of Haiti. Many of Haitians that are now in Somerville first came to Boston and eventually in Cambridge. The overflow of Haitian in the city of Cambridge played a leading role in the growth of the Haitian community in Somerville.

Haitians settled in Cambridge, which is on the north bank of the Charles River, since the 1950s and 60s. The population in this area now numbers approximately 7,500 (Census, 2000). Consequently, the large Haitian population in Cambridge didn't influence the Somerville Haitian community until the early 1990s. Despite this the Haitian community in Somerville today is almost as large as the one in Cambridge.

As of 2010, however, the increasing costs of living in Cambridge and Somerville are beginning to drive out people of modest means. In the interviews that I conducted, I also found that living cost is what has affected their decisions to reside outside of Somerville. The result of the rising cost of living has been the relocation of many of the members of the Somerville Haitian community to the more affordable neighboring towns of Revere, Everett, and Lynn.

## Moving on up to the East Side!

### We finally got a piece of the . . . Green Line

*"Fòk ou bat tanbou-a pou tande son li."*

*You must beat the drum to hear its sound. – Haitian proverb*

*Unknown Author*

#### Title Explanation

The reason I titled this section “Moving on up to the East Side! We finally got a piece of the . . . Green Line” is because of the meaning behind its origins. The title comes from the opening theme song for late 70s early 80s American sitcom “The Jeffersons”. This was the longest running comedy with a predominately African American cast. The family is an upper middle class family that moved to the Upper East Side of Manhattan, which is one of the more affluent parts of New York City.

I chose this title because I think the Green Line will be a “move on up” for the people in Somerville because it will give them a greater access to Cambridge and Boston. It will also bring more people into the area. These are the thoughts of the four Haitian business owners that I interviewed. Not a single one expressed any fear or negativity about the Green Line Extension Project.

## The Green Line Extension Project

The Green Line Extension Project is an effort by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) to give Somerville better transportation. This decision has been long in the making and stretches as far back as 1962 when the *North Terminal Area Study* to “design a new transit alignment to permit a future branch extension (of the Green Line) to Somerville and communities northwest along the right-of-way of the Boston and Maine Railroad” (Green Line, 2010).

There are also environmental reasons for extending the Green Line into Somerville because of the high air pollution that is affecting the Somerville community as a result of major highways that go by the city. The Green Line Extension Project is an effort to reduce the air pollution by providing the community with an alternative way to access the nearby cities of Cambridge and Boston. As listed on the Green Line Extension Project website, their goals include:

- Improving regional air quality in a corridor containing Environmental Justice communities.
- Encouraging economic development and job creation by providing significantly improved transportation access to a key region of the Commonwealth.
- Addressing long-standing transportation inequities by extending MBTA light rail service to three densely-populated municipalities with high demand for public transit services.
- Supporting opportunities for smart growth initiatives and sustainable development.
- Reducing automobile congestion along the heavily traveled I-93/Route 38/Route 28/Route 16 corridors.

## Keeping the Culture Alive

One of the many ways that Haitians have been able to keep the culture alive in Somerville is through food. This is not unique to Haitians, as many immigrant groups communicate through food.

As the main focus of my research, I interview four Haitian business owners. The establishments that they owned were all in the food sector. Three were Haitian restaurants and one was a Haitian bakery. Through these interviews I was able to gain some insight into what the Haitian community in Somerville is really like and how it was able to flourish.

## Highland Creole Cuisine

*“Bonjou se paspò ou.” Hello is your passport.”*

My first interview was with Jean Rosmond Falaisé, who simply went by Rosmond. Rosmond is the co-owner of the Highland Creole Cuisine along with his sister. He is in his mid 50s and came to the US in 1982 and first lived in New York working for the state before coming to Boston. His sister heard of his complaints about the city because he was having a hard time working and going to school at the same time. He did not mention why or how she came to live in Boston but the she sister encouraged him to come to Boston because at the time there was a program with employers that paid for school as long as you were an employee. He left New York and stayed with his sister working two jobs and going to school at the same time. One of the places that he worked at was an American chain restaurant, Denny's restaurant in Lexington, MA and it was here that he got the idea that he could do it himself. He believed that if he put all the hard work into the restaurant, he should be the one benefiting from it so he talked it over with his sister. He felt confident enough about his cooking skills because he learned a lot from his mother in Haiti. Therefore, with the help of his sisters and two of his cousins, he was able to open Highland Creole Cuisine in June of 1993, which is located at 2 Highland Avenue, Somerville Massachusetts, 02143.

The place where he has been established since 1993 is a very large restaurant in terms of the number of people it can hold, which is roughly 64 people. It is the biggest Haitian restaurant in Somerville, as there are only 4 in Somerville in total. I visited the restaurant about 3 and each time there were always several people inside and I just never felt comfortable taking picture of people. There was not even an area that I could take at least one picture. One of the windows that

face the cash register is colored with Haitian artists advertising their performances. There were also posters of candidates for the Haitian presidency. The restaurant has another section to it that is simply occupied by tables holding folded table cloths. There are three flat screen televisions that broadcasted CNN the three times that I visited. It is well light and the three employees that were there when I visited all applied for the job and didn't know Rosmond before. All three and a few other cooks that I didn't see in the back have been with Highland since its beginning.

One interesting aspect of the interview was how he got the word out. Here is part of the interview where he talks about advertising:

"To tell you the truth, I did not do too much advertising for this place. When we first started, we started with just one radio station, but the reason that I trust in myself because once you do it right, once you do it good the word of mouth will go around and tell, then that's exactly what happened, one tell the other and that's exactly how Highland cuisine become one of the best Haitian restaurants, I would not say only that in Massachusetts, in Boston or the Boston area, or out of state, but throughout the US, Highland cuisine is one of the best Haitian restaurants around." (Falaisé)

## Sunrise Caribbean Cuisine

In my second interview, I interviewed the Ruben Pierre who is the owner of the Sunrise Caribbean Cuisine and the nephew of Rosmond Falaisé. His restaurant is located at 76 Middlesex Avenue in Somerville. It is also located around the corner from the Assemble Square Mall in the east Somerville area. When asked about the location of the restaurant, Ruben maintained that he loved the location because it is great for his business. There are never any complaints about parking and there are several bus stops to get there by public transportation. The restaurant itself sits about 25 people and it located next to Dunkin Donuts. When you first enter the restaurant, it is very bright because the paint on the wall gives off a very tropical environment. There are four large flat screen televisions. One is behind the counter that only advertises different services that businesses pay Sunrise to advertise. Two televisions were on sports channels, while the fourth was on NBC news when I visited. All the tables had cards that were displaying the American food that had recently been introduced into the menu. There are two entrances and one of them is handicap accessible. The bright colors and friendly faces make the place very comfortable. There are only four employees not including Ruben. His brother, his mother two waitresses that also take turns working behind the counter. Everyone working in the restaurant is Haitian but they all understand and speak English well.

The owner, Ruben Pierre himself is also a very interesting man. Even though there was already someone in his family in the food service, which would have made entering the business easy. He decided to pursue a different path. He came to the US in 1985 when he was about 12 years old. His family lived in Cambridge, where Ruben was part of the public school system. Due to his parent's passion for education that they instilled in all three of their sons, Ruben did well in school and attended Cambridge Ridge and Latin. Ruben was always very curious about

many things and dibble dabbled in many different crafts as they were offered to him in high school. This led him to aspire for a variety of different career path including architecture, medicine, and even culinary arts. After being inspired by the star of the Cosby Show, Dr. Huxtable who was an OB-GYN, he decided that he wanted to go to medical school and become a doctor. However in May 1996, he decided to help his mother out in the restaurant, forgoing the chance to go to medical school. He has been at 76 Middlesex Avenue in Somerville ever since.

One very interesting aspect of my interview with him is his take on education. His background with education led me to ask what he believed education meant to Haitians. This is the answer he gave me:

“When we come to this country, us as Haitians the number one thing is education. It starts at home. Our parents, they don’t care what you do as long as you have education. That’s the one of the things that has its ups and downs. I wasn’t able to play sports because my parents were so focused on education. I wanted to play in the NFL but the mentality of Haitians parents is that they didn’t bring you here to play sports but to get a good job and make money to support your family. Even though they didn’t speak English or check homework, it was the pressure that made me do what I needed to do so that I wouldn’t get kicked out of the house. All this to get the kids to understand that education was the most important.” (Pierre)

### Blessing Caribbean Restaurant

*“Si se Bondye ki voye. Li peya fre ou.*

*If it is God who sends you, he'll pay your expenses.”*

My third interview was with Fritz Richard, who is the owner of the Blessing Caribbean Restaurant. He runs the restaurant with his wife, who is the cook, two employed workers, and his son who comes in frequently to help out in the front. He came to the US in 1987. When he finished high school in Haiti, he went to live with his mother on the island of St Martin, where he met his wife. She herself was also born in Haiti but her Haitian family simply moved to St Martin. She happened to be working in a restaurant and it is there that the dream of having her own restaurant was born. When they finally moved to the United States, they were able to save and open up a restaurant in Orlando in 2007. They had family in Boston and traveled back and forth. The opportunity that Boston offered for growth and prosperity lead them to move to Boston and open up the Blessing Creole Restaurant that is now in Somerville in 2008. They, like the other Haitian restaurants use the term Creole to describe not only the food but where they come from. Creole is something that is a mixture of African, Hispanic, and European flavors. All these put together best describe the food that Blessing offers. They continued to show provide the mixture of flavors even when they recently got a new owner of the building, which is why the name of their restaurant changed from Bistro 509 to Blessing Creole Restaurant. Richard has a son and an older daughter who is already in college here in Massachusetts. His son helps out on occasion and his hope for the restaurant is to attract more people, even those from backgrounds that are not Haitian.

## A Flavor of Haiti in Somerville

One very interesting aspect of his background is the naming of the restaurant. He had recently changed owners because he was leasing the space. This change allowed him to give the restaurant a name that he really wanted. The previous name was Bistro 509 and that name was changed to Blessing Caribbean Restaurant. Although he did not speak about it, the cross necklace around his neck and the religious figurines in the restaurant allude to his religious back.

### Fiesta Bakery

My final interview was with the very charismatic William Pamphile, who is the owner of Fiesta Bakery in Somerville. He was born in Haiti and came to the US to finish his senior year of high school in Cambridge at Latin Ridge, the college preparatory public high school. It is not clear how he learned English, but he did have a relative that was already living in Boston. Also, I know that English is taught in Haiti to students in school because this where my parents learned English. Although he did not tell, I am guessing this is how he learned English.

He at first didn't like living in the US and went back and forth between Haiti and Boston finally decided to stay. After graduating from high school, he went to Bunker Hill Community College then went onto Northeastern University to receive a Bachelor's in managing consulting. He worked for a few years then decided to get into business when a friend was selling the business. He took the opportunity and has been the owner since 1997. He is not only the owner of Fiesta but also a student at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. This is a school for those seeking to become preachers in Christian theology. It is located in South Hamilton Massachusetts, with campuses in Boston, as well as Charlotte North Carolina and Jacksonville Mississippi.

One very interesting aspect of this interview with Pamphile is that he has made a conscious effort to get those who are not Haitian interested in Haitian bakery. Here is part of the interview that illustrates this:

"Well, uh, as you know we have to do, we have to work to make a living. Then we have to work to make a living and I always wanted to be an entrepreneur. I wanted to be a business man, you know; since I study business and

## A Flavor of Haiti in Somerville

I figure out, you know, let's find out what we need. What the community needs, the Haitian community, needs in the area. Even though we don't do the business for the Haitian community, we don't, my main target is: target everybody, not just Haitians. You'd be surprised to see the American people come here, the Chinese people, they ask for paté and akasan. They can pronounce the words because they get used with Haitian things and they pronounce the words "I need paté. I need akasan." You know, and, and so, you know, I try to attract customers. They like the product and that's the main idea. That's the key thing. I'm here to please customers. I'm here to attract them. This place is, soon we are going to do a complete renovation because it needs some work because 5 years ago it was ok. Now, we don't want the customers to see the same thing, same thing every day, you know. Customers like to see changes. The more change you bring, the more customers you will attract. I believe yes, we have to make money but at the same time we need to attract customers. And to attract customers, you need to do some expense. You need to spend some money.

## Lending a Helping Hand

*“Men anpil chay pa lou.”*

*Many hands make the load lighter.” - Haitian proverb*

*Unknown Author*

In this section I will describe the organizations that have helped Haitians to prosper. These organizations are in Somerville and in Boston. The majority of them were started as a result of not only the influx of Haitians in the city but also the difficulties that many Haitians had adjusting to the new city. These difficulties included overall health, mental health, housing, as well as vocational hardships. Without these organizations lending a helping hand to the Haitian community, many would not have been able to prosper as the Haitian business owners that I interviewed. That is the reason why I chose the quote above for this section. The meaning of it is clear but the message behind it is powerful and it is evident in the prosperity in the Haitian community.

## The Haitian Coalition of Somerville

*“Patisipasyon Se Fos”*

*Involvement Is Power – Haitian Coalition*

During the early 1990s when a military coup was forcing President Aristide out of Haiti and the country was in chaos, many Haitians fled the country. Many went to Miami in Florida, others went to New York, and some went Boston and the neighboring city of Cambridge, Massachusetts. In the wake of the influx of Haitians, a group of Haitian activists decided to do something to help the Haitian community that was steadily developing.

In 1992 these Haitian activists formed the Haitian Coalition of Somerville to serve thousands fleeing Haiti following a September 1991 military coup (Coalition, 1997). Since its establishment, it has been a visible force and advocate for the Haitian community. They provide several services for Haitians in Somerville and the surrounding cities and towns with legal aid, social services, voter registration and small business training.

They have continued to support the Haitian community independently since 1997 because of their strong support of the greater community of Somerville. The Coalition lives by their mission, which is to “To organize Haitians to improve their economic, political, physical and social environments in Somerville and its surrounding communities”.

To get a better sense of what exactly the Haitian Coalition of Somerville was all about, I decided to pay them a visit and interview former board member and current staff member

Guerlince Semerzier. Mr. Semerzier, who goes by Lince, which is pronounced like Lance, was nice enough to speak with me about the Haitian community in Somerville.

To put everything into context, I asked him to describe his background and how he came to be at the Coalition. He first began with the Coalition on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2010 in response to the earthquake that nearly wiped out the country. He wanted to get involved in the relief effort which the Coalition and the city of Somerville were deeply engrossed. He first started out as a volunteer because he had the time but when he got laid off from a state job as a project manager, he was able to join the board of the Coalition. Due to his active involvement, he was then able to join the staff of the organization.

Before getting involved with the Coalition he was a project manager for the state and received his education from Salem State College and Latin Ridge public school in Cambridge. When I asked how he came to be in Cambridge, he explained that his family lived there because it is where his father chose to live when he arrived in the 1970s. His father came to the United States around 1978 from Haiti a few years after the first Duvalier, “Papa Doc”, passed away. Lince, whoever wasn’t able to come to the US until January 1990 with a two of his siblings. His other siblings were already in the states and so was his mother. The process of getting the entire family into the US took several years, but they were all reunited in January 1990.

Lince continued his history by detailing how his father left the country because of disagreement with the government. Lince’s father was in the Haitian army as an officer, which made traveling to and from the US easier because he was able to get a VISA. This allowed his father to make contacts with friends in the Boston area simply to visit. After several visits and

the realization of the many opportunities Boston offered to immigrants, the decision was made to move to Boston.

By the time that Lince was able to come to be with his family in 1990, there was already a Haitian community in the Cambridge-Somerville area. From what he knew about the Haitian community, it began to grow from 1986 to 1990, which is right around the time that “Baby Doc” was forced out of office and the country was in turmoil.

The people that fled were primarily made of up middle class and many upper class citizens. The elite left because of the great racial tensions between dark skinned and light skinned Haitians. Dark skinned Haitians felt inferior to light skinned Haitians because they were not given the same opportunities because they were seen as people closer to their African heritage than their French heritage.

Lince believes that this racial tension is for the most part gone. As for those that came to Massachusetts, he maintained that Haitians settled primarily in Boston and in the Mattapan-Dorchester region specifically and also Cambridge. Somerville started growing in its Haitian population in 1991 after the military coup that ousted Aristide, which was the third major influx of Haitians to the Boston and surrounding areas. The first and second major influx came during the Duvalier regime of “Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc”. These major influxes were visible because of the boat people that washed onto the shores of Miami, Florida.

Lince explained that part of the reason for the support of the military coup that ousted Aristide was because he dismantled the army. For those that were in the army, it was an insult, however “everyone still had their guns”. The coup was in some respects a payback for taking

away the livelihood of the members of the army. Many of these people who were affected by the dismantling of the army fled the nation and also came to the US.

For those that came, the majority had sponsors, which were people who were available to get the newcomers onto their own feet. Without a sponsor or some type of support, it is very difficult to become independent and successful. Connections are everything because “it’s not what you know but who you know”. That phrase may not work in all instances but in the case of entering a new country, it is very much the truth.

When Haitians finally did start coming to Somerville, there were many problems that the new immigrants faced. Lince describes them as police discrimination, racial tension, and overall injustice even in schools. There were even reports of Haitians students being harassed in school with such racial slurs as “HBO”, which stood for Haitian body odor. There were many other racially charged comments, which included labeling Haitians as the originators of HIV/AIDS. This environment is what influenced the birth of the Haitian Coalition. Some of the results of this were Haitians being hired as teachers and police and even 911 police dispatchers to help translate for the growing Haitian community in Somerville.

### Other Haitian organizations in Boston

The Haitian community in Boston is also very large with even more organizations dedicated to the advancement of the immigrant group. These organizations serve the same purpose as the organizations in Somerville do. The goal is to connect Haitians with the resources needed so that they can prosper (Social and Medical, 2010). These organizations include:

- Haitian Multi-Service Center/Catholic Charities
- Association of Haitian Women in Boston (AFAB)
- Haitian American Public Health Initiatives, Inc. (HAPHI)
- Haitian Americans United (HAU)
- Haitian Artists Assembly (HAA)
- Haitian Health Outreach Project/Cambridge Health Alliance (serves the Greater Boston and Cambridge area)

## Conclusions

*"Paròl gen zèl."*

*Words have wings. – Haitian proverb*

*Unknown Author*

This research into the Haitian community has shown me that the Haitian people are not only resilient but that the greater Somerville community truly cares about its residents. The efforts made by the owners of the Highland Creole Cuisine, Sunrise Caribbean Cuisine, Blessing Caribbean Restaurant, and Fiesta Bakery would have all been in vain had they not received support from organizations like SCC and the Haitian Coalition.

The answers to the questions that I had at the beginning of this project are simple: Somerville gave the Haitian community a chance to succeed. These opportunities such small business programs to help immigrant established on their feet help support immigrant communities. These organizations give Haitians the opportunity to earn a living and live decently and better than back home in Haiti. Like my mother always tells me “it’s about progress and having a better life”. That is the reason why Somerville is so great for immigrant groups like Haitians. The chance to succeed and to make a life that is better than it was back home and better for your family than it was for yourself is the reason. The American dream is about to achieved in Somerville and the Haitian community is proof.

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## Appendix

### Contact Information

- Jean Rosmond Falaisé - owner

Highland Creole Cuisine

2 Highland Avenue

Somerville, MA 02143

(617) 625-8333

- Ruben Pierre – owner

Sunrise Caribbean Cuisine

76 Middlesex Avenue

Somerville MA, 02145

(617) 623-2992

- Fritz Richard – owner

Blessing Creole Cuisine

89 Broadway Street

Somerville, MA 02145

(617) 616-5623

- William Pamphile – owner

Fiesta Bakery, 316 Somerville Avenue

Somerville, MA 02143

(617) 623-7800