

Thousands mark 200 years for Haiti's flag

By Gary Witherspoon, Globe Staff, 5/19/2003

An estimated 50,000 people marched, sang, and danced down Blue Hill Avenue yesterday from Mattapan Square to Franklin Park for the annual Haitian-American Unity Parade, which this year marked the 200th anniversary of the creation of the Haitian flag.

Abigail M. Gabriel, 6, a student at the Sumner School in Roslindale, stood on the sidewalk wearing a red, white, and blue hat, with a Haitian flag wrapped around her shoulders.

Accompanied by her cousin, Monnestume Saint-Cyr, 42, Abigail said she enjoyed the colorful floats and the music played by small bands or blasted from car stereos. "I swing the flag. I march," she said bashfully, when asked what she liked about the festivities.

Another onlooker, Simone Marcelin, 50, of Cambridge, bounced in place as a band moved by, and she led a small group of Haitian natives in singing "Haiti Cheri."

State Trooper John J. Staco, who gave the crowd estimate, said the parade watchers started gathering around noon along the mile-long route, which stretched from Mattapan Square to Talbot Avenue and required police to close off northbound traffic for about three hours. "The crowd started getting in early, trying to get a good seat," Staco said.

Official 2000 US Census data count 43,819 Haitians in the Boston statistical area. The number accepted by neighborhood leaders, however, ranges between 70,000 and 80,000.

Parade participants and speakers included representatives from Mayor Thomas M. Menino's and Senator John Kerry's offices, City Councilor Charles Yancey, state Representative Marie St. Fleur of Boston, Haitian Counsel General Clausel Rosemberg, and the parade's grand marshal, Dr. Jean Perez Nazaire. Eno Mondesir, 48, chairman of Haitian-Americans United Inc., which organized the parade, said, "The focus this year is unity and patriotism." But he acknowledged that much of the celebration was about the flag, which decorated thousands of T-shirts and cars along the parade route yesterday.

The flag has a blue and red rim, with a palm tree in the center surrounded by flags and cannons, symbolizing, among other things, the island country's fight for freedom. Its banner, "L'Union Fait La Force," translates, Mondesir said, as "In Unity There is Strength."

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