

# French Canadians in New Hampshire

## Century of Immigration to America (1820-1924)

- Emigrants economically motivated; farming difficult due to barren soil and short growing season; between 1763-1871, French-speaking population of Quebec from 60,000 to over 1 million: compounded challenge of providing for everybody; 1827-1844, Quebec's wheat production dropped 70%; also hit by a potato blight
- Unique in that most came by rail to New England; didn't displace New Englanders but replaced those who headed west (some 800,000); hundreds of thousands came between 1860's and 1920's; arrived between the Irish and the Southern and Eastern Europeans; though many recruited by mill agents, no guarantee they wouldn't be let go; would move to another town, go back to Quebec, head west, perhaps several moves before settling
- By 1860, 32,000 French Canadians in New England; by 1890, over 50,000; in 1900, French Canadians made up 1/3 of workers in New England textile mills

## French-Canadian Immigrants

- By 1840, 250 French Canadians to NH; 1850-60, 1,350; 1870, 4,700; 1870-80, over 15,000; by 1900, 76,000 French Canadians living in New Hampshire; 60% of textile workers were French Canadians
- Some worked in lumber camps in northern New England; others went to Epping, Gonic, Hooksett, Pembroke, to work as brickmakers to build cities and factories
- Most to the textile mills and other factories; often, one or two male family members to US to find work; boarded with other immigrants until financially stable and sent for family; teens and children often worked to supplement family income; extremely strong family ties; households often included at least one boarder, allowing families to save for a home; some saved enough money to go into business or a profession; others rose to supervisory positions in the mills
- In 1894, a city directory, *Le Guide Canadien-Français de Manchester*, identified 91 milliners; most of the work done at home where women could care for young children at the same time

## French Catholic Church

- Parish focal point of French Canadian existence; provided identity
- Clashed with Irish-dominated church hierarchy; issues included non-French-speaking priests, Irish forms of worship, parish autonomy; hierarchy looking for cultural conformity among Catholics in response to nativist claims that church was foreign institution
- In Suncook a priest, Rev. Davignon, instrumental in calming hostilities between Yankees and French Canadians by establishing authority with support of Suncook's most respected French Canadian businessmen and professionals; some persons became local advocates for French Canadian cultural survival; had risen to their positions on basis of ability to interact with Yankees and speak English
- In Lebanon, friction between French Canadians and Irish population over control of Sacred Heart Church; as French Canadians became predominant, the Irish, who had built the church, lost ruling power and hostility grew
- In Manchester, a resident priest assigned in 1871 for French population of 2,500; Fr. Joseph-Augustin Chevalier oversaw building of St. Augustin Church, dedicated in 1872; by 1924, 8 French parishes; provided social services to sick, aged, orphaned, needy; La Caisse Populaire Sainte Marie, or St. Mary's Bank, started by Father Pierre Hevey and group of men in 1908; to prevent parishioners from wasting money and help them build homes and businesses; became first credit union in US

## Education

- Night classes in English and American culture offered for mill workers between 1890 and 1930; offered classes in Americanization as well as basic skills
- Around 1900, 4 of 10 parochial schools in New England taught in French; more than 50,000 students; often staffed by teachers from Quebec; tuition charged
- Schools long on discipline; religious education a large role; students had holidays and holydays off; in Manchester, French parishes set up schools; first true convent school in NH, Villa Augustina, established 1916 in Goffstown
- In 1904, priests from France established the College de l'Assomption (Assumption College) in Worcester, MA, a French-language college similar to the classical ones in Quebec

## Other French-Canadian Institutions

- Network of religious, cultural, linguistic institutions lasted until after WWII; laid foundations for active cultural life; gave mill towns of New England a French character, portions of which still exist today
- 11 journals regularly published by societies in New England in 1900; indicative of group's cohesion; newspaper in Nashua, L'Impartial, published from 1898 to 1964; L'Avenir National of Manchester survived until after WWII; journalists reckoned among leaders of community
- L'Union Saint-Jean Baptiste, largest Franco-American mutual benefit society, founded in 1900; another was l'Association Canada-Americaine, founded in 1896; both had branches in Canada and US; helped with transition of immigrants to American life; also helped to preserve language and culture; held social gatherings; provided burial expenses and, in some cases, sickness and accident benefits to members for a small monthly payment
- In Manchester, where language and prejudice kept French Canadians from the city's cultural and recreational centers, clubs organized to meet expressive needs: ex., Le Club Dramatique Canadien-Francais de Manchester, NH (1870), La Bande Canadienne, the "City Band," (1874); naturalization clubs to help in americanization: ex., The Jolliet Club (1884), the Cercle National, Club Lafayette; military guards: ex., the Lafayette Guard, 143rd Regiment of Franco-American Volunteers of the US Army(1887)

## FYI

- Constant cultural reinforcement due to continued migration and remigration and being able to visit homeland; acculturation thereby slowed: ex., French language persisted more than others due to traditionally firm determination of Quebecois, after British conquest, to keep their language alive; ex., one of the lowest naturalization rates of any American ethnic group; ex., rate of intermarriage by French Canadians very low during period under study; by 1930, still far from merging with rest of US population
- French Canadians enlisted in Union army during Civil War; many served in place of sons of Yankee farmers; war caused shortage of help in textile mills, which spurred more French Canadians to cross the border
- Notable poet, journalist, and historian, Leo Levesque, born in Nashua in 1900; published five books; best known for two collections of poetry, Les Oasis and Et L'Amour est Venu

## Early History of French Canadians in America

- French Canadians fought in the War of Independence, many with the Americans; Britain disallowed those who helped the US to go back to Canada; Congress set aside land, “Refugees’ Tract” on Lake Champlain, as gift to any French Canadian who had fought for the US in the War of Independence

## History of French Canadians in New Hampshire Communities

- Many to Nashua after Civil War to work in cotton mills which were expanding and needed workers; became the predominant ethnic group in Nashua, making up most of mill workers; lived in two sections, called “French Village” and “French Hill”; churches built to serve each section: Saint Louis de Gonzague, dedicated in 1873; Saint Francis Xavier in 1898; by 1910, of 8,962 foreign born, 54% were French Canadians
- To Manchester to work in the Amoskeag mills, which paid the highest wages in town; family was principal working unit at Amoskeag; women made up more than half of the work force there; by 1882, 10 French Canadian families lived on the west side of the Merrimack River; by 1890, 45.5% of population was foreign born with French Canadians the largest group, 28%
- On May 11, 1909, tensions between French Canadians and Greeks in Nashua resulted in death of French boy; group of French Canadians teasing and throwing stones at Greeks; French boy grabbed one, who chased the boy into an alley, stabbed him; sentenced to four years in prison, but released early because believed he acted in self-defense; Greek community raised money to send him back to Greece
- By 1870 in Suncook, most of mill operatives French Canadian; late 1870’s, early 1880’s, intense Yankee-French Canadian conflict; examples include when French Canadians tried to defend convicted French Canadian murderer and another when they struck against temporary reduction in mill wages; French Canadian voters became an important power bloc in Suncook, constituting majority after 1900 and electing French Canadian candidates to most of town offices

- In Lebanon, after the Great Fire of 1887, woodworking finished as major industry; woolen mills opened, became main support for town's economy for next 75 years; at peak, 3 mills ran 3 shifts, employing about 1,000; blend of immigrant workers from Italy, Ireland, Finland, Russia, Poland, England, and Quebec; 52 Canadian-born residents in 1860; 211 by 1870; town located on railroad line connected to Montreal and other Canadian cities; by 1910, about 930 of town's 5,500 residents, or 17%, were immigrants, and more than 700 of newcomers from Canada; most French Canadians settled in neighborhood nicknamed "Le Petit Canada"; many worked, worshipped, and did business only with French Canadians; tendency to cling to old language and resist assimilation caused antipathy between French Canadians and Protestant Yankees in Lebanon; to avoid this, some French Canadians Americanized their names

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