

French Canadian Emigration to the United States 1840-1930

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Between 1840 and 1930 roughly 900 000 French Canadians left Canada to emigrate to the United States. This important migration, which has now been largely forgotten in Quebec's collective memory, is certainly one of the major events in Canadian demographic history. According to the 1980 American census, 13.6 million Americans claimed to have French ancestors. While a certain number of these people may be of French, Belgian, Swiss, Cajun or Huguenot ancestry, it is certain that a large proportion would have ancestors who emigrated from French Canada or Acadia during the 19th and 20th centuries. Indeed, it has been estimated that, in the absence of emigration, there would be 4 to 5 million more francophones living in Canada today. Around 1900, there would scarcely have been a French-Canadian or Acadian family that did not have some of its members living in the United States. While similar patterns of emigration affected English Canada, Canadian historians have more or less ignored this phenomenon, largely because it was far more diffused, did not affect their society as much as Quebec was affected as it was more used to migration than French-speaking Quebec where "la survivance" was always a major concern, and, lastly, did not leave the enduring traces that French-Canadian emigration did. Simply put, English Canadians were less noticeable and assimilated far more rapidly into American society than did French-speaking Catholics.

Causes of French Canadian emigration to the United States

At the outset, two important points need to be established: the first one is that there are costs associated to emigration. These costs are economical, emotional and cultural. The economical costs are fairly easy to estimate as they are quantifiable. When individuals leave, assets have to be liquidated, often at a loss. Many material possessions have to be left behind. Packing material has to be acquired. Then there is the cost of transportation to their intended destination, and the cost of sustaining themselves during their travel. Lastly, there will be further costs of settlement, once the destination has been reached. The emotional costs are more difficult to estimate. To migrate often means to leave behind beloved family and friends with whom long association have forged strong emotional ties. To leave family and friends behind certainly meant to leave behind one's support system. It also always meant to forego the familiar surroundings of one's region

and ancestral home, the land that generations of their ancestors had toiled, the landscape that had defined their environment since birth. All migrants have to face these wrenching emotional costs, and they will frequently remember very fondly that which they have left behind. The cultural costs may also be great. If one immigrates from a region that has particular cultural characteristics, such as way of life, language, religion and traditions, that are quite different from the host society then one will have to adapt to a far greater extent than a migrant that would share many cultural elements with the receiving society. Thus, it is evident that the greater the costs, economical, emotional and cultural, the less likely one is to leave one's country for another. While the economical costs of French Canadians to leave for the United States might have been relatively small, the emotional and, especially, the cultural costs were quite high. They left behind a traditional rural society with strong family ties. They entered an industrial world, alien to them by virtue of its way of life, language and religion. Given these high emotional and cultural costs, it is surprising that so many French Canadians engaged in the migration process between 1840 and 1930. In fact, it would be normal to consider that French Canadians, who only find their language and religion dominant in a part of the continent, would be the least likely to engage in the migration process. Indeed, since the beginning of the 20th century, Quebec has had consistently the greatest rate of retention of its population of all provinces in Canada (for more recent statistics, see this table as well). These comments serve to highlight particularly the factors of causation for the emigration of French Canadians to the United States: if French Canadians were the people least likely to migrate from Canada, what severe problems impelled them to leave?

The second factor to raise is one that is familiar to historians and sociologists: immigration is the result of the interplay of *push* and *pull* factors. As mentioned above, if there are potentially considerable costs to migrate, then one engages in this process only when there are very serious reasons to do so. These reasons may be personal, economical, social, political. Historically, the great mover of large numbers of people has been poor or deteriorating economic conditions. When one's life is miserable, when one does not see a way to pull out of poverty, then one is literally *pushed* out of one's environment. In this respect, much discussion of the poor economic conditions in Quebec will be found below. If that is so, where should the migrant go? Sometimes, economical circumstances, or political restrictions, will limit the choice. However, there is no doubt that what will be the most attractive alternative, what will *pull* the immigrant, is the land around them that is the most prosperous. In this respect, it should be noted that in the 19th century, the United States emerged as one of the most industrialised and prosperous nations on earth. To the Québécois, the United States appeared as a vast Eldorado whose streets were literally paved with gold. These factors are explored further below.

While some French Canadians emigrated to the United States for political reasons, namely young men trying to evade military conscription during the First World War or rebels who had chosen to side with the American patriots during the American Revolution or who had participated in the Lower-Canadian rebellions of 1837-38, an overwhelming percentage of emigrants left for economic reasons. What were these economic reasons?

The fundamental underlying causes of French-Canadian emigration can be found in the

unequal levels of industrial development, and thus of standards of living, between Quebec and New England, or on a larger level, between Canada and the United States. The industrial gap, combined with structural problems which plagued Quebec's agriculture during the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, created an economic climate where thousands of French Canadians were pushed to emigrate in order to earn a living. Thus, we can divide the causes of French-Canadian emigration into two categories : those that *pushed* French Canadians to emigrate and those that *attracted* emigrants to the United States or, more fundamentally, the causes which are internal and those which are external to Quebec.

On an internal level, it must be noted that Quebec's agriculture underwent tremendous strains during the 19th century. In part, these difficulties were demographic. Indeed, throughout the century, Quebec experienced very rapid population growth. However, by the 1830's and 1840's, Quebec's most fertile farm land had been systematically occupied, leaving mostly peripheral regions open to agricultural colonisation, and thousands of landless farmers searching either for affordable, accessible and fertile land, or gainful employment. Between 1784 and 1844, Quebec's population increased by about 400 %, while its total area of agricultural acreage rose only by 275 %, creating an important deficit of available farmland. While not as dramatic, this trend continued between 1851 and 1901. Since Quebec was largely a rural society in the 19th century, agricultural problems were truly national problems.

After the 1850's, colonisation began in several peripheral regions. Slowly, French-Canadians began to farm in the Laurentians, the Saguenay-Lake St-John, the Lower St. Lawrence and the Matapedia Valley, certain forested or unexploited areas of the Ottawa Valley and the Eastern Townships, and, eventually as far north as the Temiscaming. In the last quarter of the 19th century, French Canadians would also begin to emigrate to Eastern Ontario, and, in smaller numbers, to Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Generally speaking, the regions of Quebec that began to be actively colonised in the second half of the 19th century suffered either from a lack of fertility, a difficult access to major markets, a short growing season, or a combination of all three factors. Thus, agricultural activity in these regions was quite arduous and often was largely oriented towards self-sufficiency and subsistence. For many, farming in these areas was only a part time activity. These farmers participated in an economy based on agriculture and forestry. Farming was often so unprofitable in peripheral regions that many would have to spend the entire winter, and part of spring and fall, working in the various primary stages of the timber trade. These seasonal jobs gave farmers access to desperately needed hard currency to develop their farms and ensure their subsistence but created long term patterns of dependency. Indeed, with timber barons being often the only major employers in many regions, farmers had little or no choice but to enter into a dependent relationship with them. Frequently, timber companies paid their employees with company scrip, lent money at very high interest rates, were the only market for the produce of local farms or monopolised the retail trade through company stores. They thus controlled the retail and purchasing price for goods, services, manpower and credit. The result was near monopolies that could have a virtual stranglehold over their region, notably, through debt

peonage. Both the farmer and the timber baron lived in a symbiotic relationship. The farmer needed the employment, and the markets created by the timber industry, while the timber baron relied on the farmer to provide the manpower and the produce needed to fuel his logging camps. While co-dependent, there is no doubt, given the plentiful supply of labour, as to who profited the most from this system. The farmer could not subsist without the timber trade while the relative poverty engendered by subsistence level agriculture provided the cheap labour which the timber baron needed to generate profit. Quebec historians have termed this relationship *l'économie agro-forestière*.

Aside from the obvious difficulties associated with this type of farming, agriculture in the more fertile and established regions also suffered from serious problems. For most farmers, credit, vital to agricultural expansion, technical amelioration, crop diversification and improvement of the livestock, was difficult to obtain. Before the creation and widespread expansion of *Caisses populaires* and the government farm credit system established in the 1930's, standard agricultural credit was difficult to obtain in rural Quebec. In the 19th century, and for a good part of the 20th, Quebec's banking network was vastly deficient, largely concentrated in major cities, and overwhelmingly anglophone. Banks that did have branches in rural parishes were few, frequently smaller French-Canadian institutions, regional in their scope, and had a smaller access to capital. Moreover, they tended to lend money not to farmers but rather to the local elite. Farmers frequently had to turn to local usurers for credit, with all the problems which usury entails. Claude Henri Grignon's novel *Un homme et son péché*, published in 1933, is a good illustration of this point.

The problem of indebtedness was of course related to the low productivity of the Quebec farms. There were various reasons for this state of affairs and historians have debated them for decades. These reasons will be discussed more fully elsewhere at the site. However, it should be noted that, ever since the beginning of the 19th century, Quebec was in a state of agricultural crisis that would truly only end with rural electrification, as well as with the large-scale development of the dairy industry and market gardening in the 20th century. Essentially, it should be borne in mind that until the onset of the 20th century, the vast majority of Quebecers lived on farms, when the climate, land base, and quality of soils suggested that this should not be so. Without proper alternatives, the people of Quebec were condemned to rural life. Without credit they could not improve their condition and, consequently, they fell increasingly into poverty. Historians Yves Roby and Jean Hamelin [*Histoire économique du Québec, 1851-1896*, Montreal, Fides 1971, p. 22] have estimated that the gross revenues derived from agriculture by Quebec farmers were, on average, \$230 annually. This was less than half the income that Ontario farmers derived from their land.

Thus, credit problems, and the poverty attending it, were an important motivator for emigration. Farmers all over Quebec would have to migrate to big cities in order to find work either to pay off their debts, or after their farms had been foreclosed. Furthermore, lack of credit hampered agricultural modernisation which, in turn, engendered un-dynamic, un-profitable farming. Overall, these factors combined to generate poverty even within the most fertile of Quebec's regions.

Poverty, overpopulation, debt and infertile soils pushed French Canadians off their land. However, external factors also attracted emigrants to the United States. Indeed, during the second half of the 19th century, Canada and the United States experienced rapid industrial growth. However industrialisation progressed far more rapidly in the USA while Canada's economy remained more dependent on primary economic activity. Moreover, industrial wages were generally higher in the United States than they were in Canada. Simply put, jobs were easier to obtain in the USA and at better wages.

Farmers who left their land were naturally attracted to the factories of the United States. Despite the fact that, around 1890, a greater share of the Quebec economy depended on industry than Ontario did, labour markets were saturated in the industrial agglomerations of Quebec and wages were low; work was much easier to find in the USA and wages were higher. Moreover, these factory jobs frequently required no formal skills or education and often would employ children and women. While this was true of light industry throughout Canada and the United States, it was especially true in the huge textile factories of New England where several members of a family could find work.

A majority of French-Canadian emigrants to the United States were from rural parishes and agricultural problems are at the root of the economic factors that stimulated emigration. However, a significant portion of emigrants were city-dwellers. Most of these emigrants left to find more stable, higher paying work in the USA. While for most, emigration usually meant proletarianization, some middle class French Canadians also emigrated. Priests, motivated by an apostolic zeal to safeguard the souls of their compatriots, but also seeking the higher standard of living which working class American parishes provided over rural or proletarian ones in Quebec, eventually followed the general movement south. Doctors, lawyers, grocers and a wide swath of Quebec society also emigrated, thus capitalising on the emigrant's tendency to ghettoise and patronise businesses and professionals who speak his language and understand his culture.

While emigration was often seen as a temporary solution to short-term financial problems such as debt or unemployment, for many the higher standard of living of the United States became difficult to forego. Many emigrants having left Quebec to avoid seasonal unemployment, or to save money in order to buy a farm or machinery, or to pay off their debts, found themselves unable to return home. While low paying factory work may seem miserable to some, it was a dream come true for many emigrants who had lived under far harsher conditions on Quebec farms or factories. For many farmers industrial work represented a successful social gain. American life was, for many emigrants, especially in the 19th century, their first real contact with the wonders of electricity, running water, a steady paycheck, and annual holidays!

The development of the railway stimulated emigration. As Eastern North America's railroad network became more complex and affordable, emigrating to the United States became simpler and cheaper. Indeed, while in 1840 a trip from Montreal to Vermont would have taken several arduous and expensive days in a cart, by the 1880's it would only be a question of a few dollars and hours.

Thus, the emigration of French Canadians to the United States was internally caused by demographic pressures, rural poverty created by indebtedness and a host of other ills related to the climatic and geographical characteristics of the province, low productivity of the farms, the developing agricultural crisis, the lack of suitable regions of colonisation, the insufficient level of industrial development to absorb the excess population and the low wages that inevitably attended such a catastrophic situation. Externally, the proximity of the New England factories that offered easy employment, good wages by Quebec standards, and the cheap and easy access through the rail system fuelled the migration.

Where did the emigrants go?

The railway also changed patterns of emigration. During the opening phases of the movement, roughly from the 1840's to the 1860's, emigrants tended to head for Northern New York State, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. They mostly sought work as farmhands, in lumber camps and in proto-industrial shops like the brickworks of Vermont. However, by the 1870's and 1880's, as industrialisation progressed in New England and railway ties between Quebec and the North Eastern United States became more solid, emigration patterns shifted from the States of Northern New England to the textile towns of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and, to a lesser extent, Connecticut.

Table 1
Distribution of French Canadians in New England, 1860-1880

State	Population in 1860	% of French distribution	Population in 1880	% of French distribution
Maine	7,490	20.0	29,000	13.9
New Hampshire	1,780	4.7	26,200	12.6
Vermont	16,580	44.3	33,500	16.1
Massachusetts	7,780	20.8	81,000	38.9
Rhode Island	1,810	5.0	19,800	9.5
Connecticut	1,980	5.3	18,500	8.9
Total	37,420	100.0	208,100	100.0

Source of the data: Ralph D. VICERO, *Immigration of French Canadians to New England, 1840-1900*, Ph.D thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1968, p. 275; as given in Yves ROBY, *Les Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle Angleterre, 1776-1930*, Sillery, Septentrion, 1990, p. 47

Table 2
Distribution of Franco-Americans* in New England, 1900-1930

State	Population in 1900	% of French distribution	Population in 1930	% of French distribution
Maine	58,583	11.3	99,765	13.4
New Hampshire	74,598	14.4	101,324	13.6
Vermont	41,286	8.0	46,956	6.4
Massachusetts	250,024	48.1	336,871	45.3

Rhode Island	56,382	10.9	91,173	12.3
Connecticut	37,914	7.3	67,130	9.0
Total	518,887	100.0	743,219	100.0

*Persons born in Canada, or in the United States of one or two French-Canadian parents. Source of the data: Leon TRUESDELL, *The Canadian Born in the United States*, New haven, 1943, p. 77; as given in Yves ROBY, *Les Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle-Angleterre*, Sillery, Septentrion, 1990, p. 282.

Emigration was thus largely centred on New England. Emigrants usually chose to move to towns and states relatively close to the Quebec section of the Canadian border. However, French Canadians living outside of Quebec also preferred to migrate to states adjacent or close to the Canadian border. Franco-Ontarians frequently moved to Michigan and Illinois while Franco-Manitobans and other Western French Canadians often opted for Minnesota and Wisconsin. Around 1900, Minneapolis and St. Paul contained a fairly large community of French Canadians. This pattern ensured that States like Rhode Island would prove more attractive to emigrants than New York City, the Mecca of immigration in America, Pennsylvania or California.

The focus of French Canadian immigration to the New England area particularly is also related to two factors raised at the beginning of this article when the cost of immigration was discussed. Given his poverty, the French Canadian emigrant could not afford to go very far. The farther the destination, and the greater the length of time one had to travel, the greater the cost would be. New England provided the greatest opportunity at the lowest cost. However, it also minimised the cultural costs. Given the reality that French Canadians would have great cultural costs in leaving Quebec, one can only understand their large-scale emigration in the 19th century as a reflection of the serious economic problems of the time and because of the geographical contiguity of New England to Quebec. Essentially, it could be argued, these emigrants did not really leave Quebec not only because they often thought of their emigration as temporary, as will be discussed below, or because they established themselves in "*petits Canadas*" that resembled very closely the geographical and social patterns of Quebec, but, as well, because, in a sense, all they were doing was to slightly enlarge the borders of French Canada. In this sense, there was little difference between settling into New England or into the Saguenay region.

The initial patterns of emigration to New England were reinforced by what has been termed *l'émigration en chaîne*. Family and parochial ties played an important role in stimulating and channelling emigration. Often, the emigration of an entire nuclear family would begin with the departure of a couple of its members who would sound out the general situation in a given town and then would send for the rest of their family. Cousins, uncles and nephews would often join the initial family before bringing their own relatives down, creating a pattern of settlement where family ties became the primary source of support and information in the United States. This pattern would often ensure that certain American towns would receive French-Canadian emigrants mostly from specific towns or parishes within Quebec. For example, the French Canadians of

Southbridge, Massachusetts, tended to come from Sorel and Saint-Ours. This pattern, familiar to sociologists, also served to minimise emotional and cultural costs of emigration.

Emigrants themselves became the primary vectors of emigration. Visits and letters home would often put French Canadians in Quebec in contact with American life. Upon their return to Quebec, whether temporary or permanent, emigrants frequently painted an idyllic vision of New England factory life and encouraged many of their relatives or neighbours to try their luck *aux États*. In visits home, the emigrant often spent lavish sums of money to impress his family and neighbours and to prove to them that he had become successful. In many rural parishes, the gleam of a gilded pocket watch, a store bought suit or dress and a few American trinkets clashed with the relative material poverty of the local inhabitants. Indeed, the expressions "*l'oncle des États*" [uncle from the States] or "*la tante des États*" [aunt from the States] developed in Quebec to describe any relative that was rich, whether that relative was from the United States or not! The emigrant often became the symbol of success, stimulating others to follow his path to industrial New England.

Economic conditions and the process of immigration

Emigration followed an ebb and flow pattern. Economic prosperity and boom in the United States would lead to an important rise in the number of emigrants while recessions would push French Canadians to remain in Quebec or, if they lived in the USA, to return to Canada. During the period that saw the greatest number of people leave Quebec, from 1860 to 1900, several booms and busts either slowed or sped up emigration patterns. From the end of the American Civil War to 1873 and during the beginning of the 1880's and 1890's, emigration reached a fever pitch, while from 1873 to 1879, for most of the 1880's and from 1894 to 1896, it slowed down.

Economic recessions would lead to wage reductions and unemployment. Thus, lower wages, and a congested labour market would make emigration a less attractive option for many. Moreover, strikes, which often occurred during recessionary periods, when wages stagnated or were reduced, could also push the emigrant to return to Quebec. While most emigrants tended to occupy low paying non-unionized jobs, they were sometimes affected by strikes among their better paid, skilled and unionized colleagues. In an era where unions were relatively weak, strike funds were insufficient and social security was almost inexistant, strikes could spell disaster for workers and gobble up their savings rapidly. They often impelled the emigrant to gather up his savings and return home, if only temporarily.

Indeed, French Canadian emigration was frequently not permanent. Roughly half of the 900 000 people who left Quebec would return after one or several stays in the United States. As we have seen, many emigrants sought only to stay long enough to accumulate savings that would be sufficient to pay off their debts or to acquire a farm or start a business. This issue is discussed further under the heading of *rapatriement* elsewhere at the site

Quebec's reaction to immigration

Although it was a temporary strategy for many, emigration was seen as a disaster by Quebec's elite who fought, unsuccessfully, to stop it. Approximately from 1840 to 1880, this elite perceived those who chose to emigrate as un-patriotic people whose departure would weaken French Canada by undermining its demographic position within Confederation. French-Canadian emigrants were presented as unhappy, exploited people who would lose their faith and language and be completely assimilated by American society. The clerical elite frequently misidentified the reasons for emigration laying the blame on the laziness of the emigrant or the extravagant desire for luxury of his wife. They were portrayed as weak people, incapable of effort or sacrifice, self-centred and inconsiderate of others. This negative characterisation reflects the great sense of loss that was felt by the community, and a futile attempt to cover up by pretending that it did not matter in any case. The classic example of this attitude is attributed to George-Etienne Cartier, the father of Confederation, who is reported to have said: "Laissez-les partir, c'est la racaille qui s'en va" [let them go, it's the riff-raff that are leaving]. Given this attitude, little was done to prevent this immigration, to address the real problems that caused it, and to provide the emigrants with the social, religious and cultural support they needed in the new communities they established in the United States.

However, from about 1880, Quebec's elite began to change its view of this emigration. The magnitude of the phenomenon was such, and the causes leading to it were so obvious, that the elite could not continue to stigmatise and stereotype these emigrants. They realised that assimilation was not necessarily a foregone conclusion for those who emigrated. When faced with the relative dynamism of many emigrant communities, they revised their vision of emigration. Indeed, it was during this period that the term « Franco-American » began to be used to designate French-Canadians living in the United States.

While the general phenomenon of emigration was still largely condemned as being a danger to French-Canadian society, Quebec's elite began to view Franco-Americans more favourably. For some traditional nationalists, such as Jules-Paul Tardivel, emigration was to be part of a movement to extend the boundaries of French Canada and of Catholicism. Franco-Americans could maintain their faith and language and could even be the backbone of an apostolic reconquest of Protestant North America. In such a view, French Canadians in the United States became an important element in the developing "messianism" of French Canada. However, cultural survival and expansion could only be guaranteed if the emigrant was well surrounded by French Canadian priests and institutions. Accordingly, hundreds of Catholic clergymen and nuns eventually left Quebec to serve in Franco-American communities. They ministered to the spiritual needs, established schools and hospitals, and created social institutions that mirrored the patterns of Quebec.

While Quebec's elite philosophised about the reconquest of the continent or the weakening of French Canada, they also sought to put an end to emigration through a variety of colonisation and repatriation schemes. The clerical elite, whose ideology was

heavily marked by agriculturalism, felt that emigration was fundamentally a rural problem and that the massive colonisation of new agricultural land would put an end to the phenomenon. They would call upon the government to stimulate the development of unexploited regions, and gave what aid they could to those who chose to farm in peripheral regions. Periodically, the provincial and federal governments would launch repatriation programmes that sought to establish Franco-Americans on farms in the Canadian West or in the colonisation regions of Quebec. These schemes usually met with mitigated success as many emigrants had no desire to return to the land or, in many cases, already owned land.

However, some of Quebec's elite, mostly liberal intellectuals and politicians, realised that emigration was both an agricultural and an industrial problem. For these people, industrialisation would put an end to emigration. They sought to stimulate foreign investment so as to develop the secondary and tertiary segments of Quebec's economy. They reasoned that it was industrial jobs and wages that had attracted emigrants to the United States and that French Canadians would stay in, or return to Quebec, if they could earn a living there. They sought to develop the transportation infrastructure so that Quebec goods gain easy access to markets. Such policies became the backbone of the Liberal governments from 1897 onward. Alexandre Taschereau, Quebec's premier from 1920 to 1936, was fond of saying that he preferred to import capital than export French Canadians. Indeed, this was the feeling of most people in Quebec at the time and that is partly why they continuously returned such governments to power, and kept them in place for long periods of time.

This dismayed traditional nationalists, such as Lionel Groulx, who saw industrialisation and the foreign control of Quebec's economy as a danger to French-Canadian society as great as was emigration. They argued that French Canada was an inherently rural society and that urbanisation and industrialisation would upset its traditional balance. Emigration was a disaster not only because it placed French Canadians in a foreign country but also because it exposed them to a foreign environment: the dangerous and dirty life of urban, industrial exploitation. The factory was as foreign to French Canada as was the United States.

Franco-Americans and the "Little Canadas"

While Quebec's clerical elite condemned the factory and the dangers of urban life, Franco-Americans adapted themselves to it in their own way. As patterns of emigration began to fill certain American towns with French Canadians, neighbourhoods began to acquire a French flavour. These neighbourhoods were called « Little Canadas » and life in them was predominantly French and Catholic. Around their local church and school, life appeared much the same as it was in some parts of Quebec. In these "Little Canadas", Franco-Americans could often speak French to their priest, grocer or doctor. This was especially the case as the number of French priests, most of them sent from Quebec, rose substantially as time passed. Father Hamon, in his 1891 study, had found that 175 French-speaking priests ministered to the French parishes of New England; the ratio of French priests to francophone parishioners was the highest in the diocese of Burlington,

in Vermont (1610:1) and lowest in the diocese of Providence which straddled Massachusetts and Rhode Island (2866:1) [[see the corresponding figures for Quebec](#)]. Given the concentration of French Catholics in urban centres, these figures were already rather good. Yet, over time they improved substantially. A careful examination of the *Guide officiel des Franco-Américains, 1927*, where the editor carefully listed every francophone priest found in the United States, tells us that there were 620 French-speaking priests in the same area Hamon had covered earlier. Some communities were especially well serviced in their national parishes. Plattsburg, New-York, had 8 Franco-American priests in 1927. Pawtucket and Woonsocket, both in Rhode Island, had 13 and 22 Franco-American priests respectively. Lowell, Massachusetts had 21 French-speaking priests. The number of French-speaking professionals, many of them educated in Quebec, also rose substantially and contributed greatly to providing services in French in many communities, and thus contributed to *survivance*. In 1927, there were 61 Franco-American doctors in Maine and 178 in Massachusetts. The community of Fall River had 8 francophone lawyers, 21 doctors, 11 dentists and 16 Pharmacists. Lowell had 45 similar Franco-American professionals. As the emigrants would slowly take over a factory, French sometimes became the language of work on the shop floor, and bewildered anglophone foremen sought to learn a few key French words and phrases to keep things running smoothly. All these elements contributed to slow down the rate of assimilation among Franco-Americans.

While Franco-Americans encountered some resistance in their attempts to withstand assimilation, notably from Irish-Americans who sought to maintain their relative hegemony over the Catholic Church in America, they were largely successful, for a time, in building impressive institutional and social networks. Around 1900, Franco-Americans were sufficiently numerous in New England to have their own French parishes, bilingual parochial schools, French newspapers and fraternal organisations. While many Franco-Americans were being assimilated before the 1930's, a steady stream of new arrivals from Quebec, and a dynamic though somewhat ghettoized community, ensured that their society would continue to thrive. Around 1900, a list of the twenty five North American towns containing the most francophones would have included Fall River, Massachusetts (33 000 Franco-Americans), [Lowell](#), Massachusetts (24 800), [Manchester](#), New Hampshire (23 000), and Woonsocket, Rhode Island (17 000). In these large cities, they frequently constituted a sizeable proportion of the total population, sometimes as much as 25% to 60%. The importance of these figures will be grasped when it is remembered that, if they are compared to the cities of Quebec, then Fall River was the third largest French Canadian city in importance, after Montreal and Quebec City; Lowell would be in fourth place, etc. In fact, in 1900, the New England area contained ten cities with a French Canadian population in excess of 10,000, while Quebec only had five, most of them barely above 10,000. During the same period, there were roughly as many daily French newspapers in New England as in Quebec; an author estimated that 195 Franco-American newspapers were founded between 1838 and 1910.

The French Canadian emigrant to New England was a factory worker, particularly in the huge cotton mills that dotted the area. In this respect, the French Canadian immigrants played a significant role in the industrial expansion of the New England area in the last

half of the 19th century. Some of these textile mills had as many as 10,000 workers and employment was often readily available, as upwardly mobile English and Scots moved out of the area and were replaced by the Irish, French Canadians, Southern and Eastern Europeans. In these factories, wages were low, although higher than in Quebec, and work related accidents were frequent. The heat created by the machines, and the proper lack of ventilation, was stiffening; the noise of dozens of machines all working at the same time was deafening and could be heard hundreds of meters away from the factories; cotton dust was everywhere and coated the workers' lungs. Working hours were long, from 10-12 hours a day, up to six days a week, and much of it was spent standing while keeping an eye on several machines. These conditions were commonplace at the time and not restricted to New England. The newcomers were frequently victims of discrimination, as immigrants with a different language and religion often were at the time. They were called "frogs", "pea-soupers" or Canucks. In this case, the national antipathy was compounded by the fact that French Canadians worked for lower wages, and sometimes were used as strike-breakers. They were blamed for keeping wages low and for resisting naturalisation. The classic pronouncement on this issue was in 1881, by Carroll D. Wright, Head of the Bureau of Statistics of Labor for Massachusetts who wrote that French Canadians were "the Chinese of the Eastern States" who had no interest in the American social and political institutions. The comparison with the Chinese, when one understands the very unfavourable view that North Americans had of them at the time, greatly offended leaders of the French Canadian community. Inter-marriage with people of other nationalities was not frequent, at least until the third generation.

The living conditions and the socio-economic status of the inhabitants of the "Little Canadas" were very poor. Based on the data presented by Father Hamon, in his book *Les Canadiens-Français de la Nouvelle-Angleterre*, published in 1891, the percentage of proprietors among Franco-Americans in 1889 was rather small in the large cities ranging from a low 4.2% in Manchester to a high of 21% in Worcester. Thus, as they rarely owned property, they lived in tenements that are described as lacking comfort and amenities, and usually far too small and overcrowded. Built around the most uninteresting part of the town, in shabby surroundings, the "Little Canadas" had a considerable population density, among the highest in the United States. Thus, one should not be surprised that health conditions were also poor. For example, in 1886 a diphtheria epidemic in Brunswick, Maine, killed 74 French Canadians, most of them children. A study conducted on the French Canadian population of Lowell, in 1875, indicates that about 52% were in very difficult economic circumstances. Another study of wages paid in the cotton mills in 1908 shows that French Canadian mill workers earned \$10.09 a week on average. This amount was between 5-25% lower than the wage earned by Irish, English or Scottish mill workers. Nor did the situation improve rapidly. Research conducted in 1935 in Newburyport, where about 1500 Franco-Americans lived, shows that, when the population is divided according to income into five different classes, 40% of French Canadians fell in the lowest category, another 23.8% fell in the fourth and 15.3% fell in the lower middle class category. Yet, what should be remembered is that, despite these miserable conditions, French Canadians continued to come to the United States until 1930. That fact is the truest testimony of the miserable socio-economic conditions that prevailed over much of French-speaking Quebec at the

time.

Franco-Americans were largely ghettoized. Nevertheless, they participated in American life. Father Hamon, in the study quoted previously, listed 103 French Canadians occupying public functions throughout New England in 1889. It should be noted that he applied a very liberal definition of the functions, listing such people as postmasters, tax collectors and Justices of the Peace. Still, the figure is large enough to allow us to nuance the Wright Report that claimed that Franco-Americans showed no interest in American civic affairs. Franco-Americans would join American fraternal organisations, play baseball and football and attend public high schools. Roughly 4000 of them fought for the Union side during the Civil War, and tens of thousands served their country during World War One and Two. Indeed, more Franco-Americans fought in the American army in the First World War than French Canadians did in the Canadian army. This fact was not missed by the Canadian government that advertised in the Franco-American press to recruit soldiers. While many Franco-Americans sought to preserve their language, culture and institutions, they could also be as patriotic and nativistic as contemporary native-born Protestant Americans.

The decline of the "Little Canadas" and the progressive assimilation of Franco-Americans

While Franco-American communities thrived around the turn of the century, and it was possible to live and work in French in several towns in New England until the 1940's, by the middle of the 20th century assimilation had largely run its course. The decline of Franco-America can chiefly be attributed to causes that were both external and internal to New England.

Externally, the demise of Franco-America can be blamed on the gradual decline and eventual end of French-Canadian emigration. Among the emigrant communities, new arrivals had always compensated for the losses sustained by assimilation, and allowed Franco-America to perpetuate itself. However, in 1930, during the opening phases of the Great Depression, the American government put a virtual stop to Canadian immigration by imposing severe restrictions on continental immigration and naturalisation (extra-continental immigration had been severely restricted from 1928 on). However, this was but the immediate cause for the halting of French-Canadian emigration. On a structural level, emigration ended because Quebec's economy and industrial structure grew at an unprecedented rate during World War Two and the postwar era. Simply put, as industrialisation sped up in the 1940's, there were enough better paid jobs available in Quebec to ensure that Quebecers did not have to leave the Province in droves to earn a living.

On an internal level, the decline of Franco-America can chiefly be attributed to the decline of the textile industry in New England and to the social rise of Franco-Americans. From the beginning of the 20th century to the mid-1930's the cotton industry of New England, which employed thousands of Franco-Americans, began to relocate to the states of the Southern USA, where labour costs were lower. The closing of a mill in a single industry town often forced Franco-Americans to return to Quebec and discouraged others

from emigrating there. Moreover, while the textile industry slowly moved south, Franco-Americans were slowly climbing the social ladder and leaving their lower paying jobs and tenement neighbourhoods to a new generation of cheap foreign labour composed of Greco-Americans, Polish-Americans, and Italian-Americans. This social ascent intensified in the 1940's and 1950's as postwar prosperity allowed many Franco-Americans to leave their tenements in the Little Canadas and move to a less crowded suburban life. This geographic dispersion broke the isolation of many Franco-American communities and hastened assimilation.

American life and culture seduced younger Franco-Americans who realised that assimilation was the key to social improvement. Those who attended American public high schools or were drafted in the two World wars were at a greater risk of assimilation. Franco-Americans, long accused of lack of patriotism toward the United States, joined the army in great numbers during the two world wars. For example, the small community of Salmon Falls in New Hampshire contributed 68 soldiers to the Great War even though the community only had 125 Franco-American families. The leaders of the Franco-American community supported conscription as a means to show their loyalty to the USA. Eventually, by the 1960's, French could only be heard spoken in New England by middle-aged and elderly people. Despite a certain cultural renaissance which began in Franco-America in the 1970's, under the impulse of the New Ethnicity movement, French is no longer a functional language in New England. The once strong ties of kinship that bound Quebec to French New England have loosened to the point of virtual collapse.

The legacy of French Canadian immigration to the United States

French Canadian emigration has left an enduring mark upon French Canada and New England. Historians have yet to accurately measure the cultural and economic impact of the repatriation of those who chose to return to Quebec. Aside from stimulating the economy by returning with their savings, these emigrants also carried a certain cultural baggage. They introduced new anglicisms like *facterie* (factory/*usine*) into the French Canadian language, and new dishes like the *pâté chinois* (shepherd's pie, called *chinois* because it had been encountered in China, Maine) into the French Canadian diet. The emigrant became one of the prime vessels of transmission for American culture within French Canada. They also helped project a very positive image of the United States in Quebec, in sharp contrast to the anti-Americanism that sometimes characterised English-speaking Canada. To this day this positive image has remained.

Emigrants also left their mark on New England. They strengthened its Catholic institutions and participated in its industrialisation process. The Credit Union movement in America began after Alphonse Desjardins helped Franco-Americans in several towns found their own *Caisses populaires*.

A good deal of research remains to be done on emigration and Franco-American life. Both French-Canadian and Franco-American societies offer insights into each other. Indeed, it is interesting to note that while French is, for the most part, no longer spoken in

Franco-America, the Roman Catholic faith there has remained strong. In Quebec the opposite has occurred. Each society has maintained an important pillar of survival and a backbone of French Canadian identity before the 1960's: language and faith. As historians in Quebec « discover » their forgotten relatives in the United States, they learn much about their own society, which has also undergone radical social changes in this century.

Note on sources

While there are still gaps in the research, the literature on this subject is considerable, of high quality and of great interest. This literature is available both in English and in French, from an increasing body of historians and social scientists with French Canadian roots in the United States, and from Quebec historians. Only a few are mentioned here as a proper bibliography would cover several pages.

A good bibliographical essay, unfortunately written nearly twenty years ago, is Gérard J. BRAULT, "État présent des études sur les centres Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle-Angleterre", in *Vie française, Situation de la recherche sur la Franco américanie*, Québec, 1980, pp. 9-36. The book contains a wide variety of analyses of interest to our subject. Indeed, the entire collection of the *Vie française* colloquiums is to be consulted; all are edited by Claire QUINTAL. Among these are *L'émigrant québécois vers les États-Unis: 1850-1920*, Québec, 1982, 122p. *Le journalisme de langue française aux États-Unis*, Québec, 1984, 162p. *L'émigrant acadien vers les États-Unis: 1842-1950*, Québec, 1984, 177p.

The best analysis of the emigration of French Canadians to the United States is Yves ROBY, *Les Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, 1776-1930*, Sillery, Septentrion, 1990, 434p. This book would deserve to be translated into English. Another general source of information is Gérard J. BRAULT, *The French Canadian Heritage in New England*, Hanover, University Press of New England, 1986, 282p. The Brault volume contains a very extensive bibliography on pages 241-264.

The best measurements of the phenomenon of emigration to the United States and of the methodological problems associated with this research have been made by Gilles PAQUET and Wayne SMITH, "L'Émigration des Canadiens français vers les États-Unis, 1790-1940: problématique et coups de sonde", in *l'Actualité économique*, Vol. 59, No 3, (september 1983): 423-453 and Yolande LAVOIE, *L'Émigration des Québécois aux États-Unis de 1840 à 1930*, Québec, Conseil de la langue française, 1979. Ralph VICERO, "Sources statistiques pour l'étude de l'immigration et du peuplement canadien-français en Nouvelle-Angleterre au cours du XIXe siècle", in *Recherches sociographiques*, Vol. 12 (1971):361-377. The data provided by Lavoie is universally used in the literature today.

A very useful short discussion of the causes of the emigration of French Canadians is found in Albert FAUCHER, "Explication socio-économique des migrations dans l'histoire du Québec", in *Royal Society of Canada, Transactions*, Series IV, Vol 13

(1975): 91-107. Another excellent study, by the leading expert on the subject is Yves ROBY, "L'évolution économique du Québec et l'immigrant (1850-1929)", in Claire QUINTAL, ed., *L'émigration québécoise vers les États-Unis: 1850-1920*, Québec, Conseil de la Vie française, 1982. The entire volume is full of incisive essays.

The shifting view of the elite of French Canadian emigration to the USA is analysed by Yves Roby in "Les Canadiens français des États-Unis (1860-1900): dévoyés ou missionnaires" in *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, Vol. 41, No 1 (Summer 1987): 3-22.

A useful beginning for examining French Canadians' views of the United States, particularly through its literature is Jacques COTNAM, "Americans Viewed Through French Canadian Eyes" in *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Spring 1977): 784-796.

The important *Sentinelle* issue that brought the French Canadians of Woonsocket to clash with their Irish Episcopacy over issues of *survivance* is discussed in R. S. SORRELL, "Sentinelle Affair (1924-1929) – Religion and Militant *Survivance* in Woonsocket, Rhode Island", in *Rhode Island History*, Vol. 36 (1977): 67-79. This issue is not discussed above as it will be dealt with separately in another text. A similar issue [Flint Affair] is discussed in Philip T. SYLVIA, The 'Flint Affair': French-Canadian Struggle for *Survivance*", in *Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (July 1979): 414-435.

All of the following studies contribute an element in understanding the Franco American society, way of life or socio-economic condition. Pierre ANCTIL, "L'identité de l'immigrant québécois en Nouvelle-Angleterre. Le Rapport Wright de 1882", in *Recherches Sociographiques*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1981): 331-360. Pierre ANCTIL, "La Franco-Américanie ou le Québec d'en bas", in *Cahiers de géographie de Québec*, Vol. 23 (avril 1979): 39-52. Pierre ANCTIL, "The Chinese of the Eastern States, 1881", in *Recherches sociographiques*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1981): 125-130. Iris Saunders PODEA, "Quebec to 'Little Canada': The Coming of the French Canadians to New England in the Nineteenth Century", in *New England Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1950): 365-380. Claire QUINTAL, ed., *The Little Canadas of New England*, Worcester French Institute, Assumption College, 1983. Bruno RAMIREZ, "French Canadian Immigrants in the New England Cotton Industry: A Socioeconomic profile", in *Labour/Le travailleur*, No. 11 (Spring 1983) 125-142. Bruno RAMIREZ et Jean LAMARRE, "Du Québec vers les États-Unis: L'étude des lieux d'origine", in *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, Vol. 38, No 3 (1985): 409-422. Jacques ROUILLARD, *Ah les États! Les travailleurs canadiens-français dans l'industrie textile de la Nouvelle-Angleterre d'après le témoignage des derniers migrants*, Montréal, Boréal Express, 1985, 155p. Richard S. SORRELL, "The *survivance* of French Canadians in New England (1865-1930): History, Geography and Demography as Destiny", in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (January 1981): 91-109. Martin TÉTREAULT, "Immigration et santé publique: Lowell, Massachusetts, 1865-1890", in *Canadian Historical Association, Papers*, 1985, pp. 29-44
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