



French Canadian Immigration to Vermont and New England (1840-1930)

The Franco-American monument in Québec City lists 168 New England communities that were important migrant destinations, including twenty-one in Vermont. That list is nowhere near exhaustive.

By LESLIE CHOQUETTE

By the numbers, French Canadians are one of the most significant immigrant groups of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, surpassed only by the Irish, Germans, Italians, and Eastern Europeans. Between 1840 and 1930, almost one million French Canadians immigrated to the United States. Today more than ten million Americans—including one of every five New Englanders and Vermonters—are of French Canadian descent. How and why did they come?

Immigration to the United States was part of a larger pattern of French Canadian dispersion across the North American continent.¹ At the end of the nineteenth century, only 55 percent of French Canadians lived in the Province of Québec. Eight percent were scattered across

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the rest of Canada, from the Maritimes to British Columbia, while 37 percent resided in the United States, primarily in the Northeast (72 percent), but also in the Midwest (26 percent) and West (2 percent).²

Traditionally, historians have emphasized the negative when discussing the causes of French Canadian migration. Huge families led to rural overpopulation, they told us; backward farming techniques meant unrelenting poverty and debt. Like all stereotypes, this picture contains a grain of truth. Québec farm families were indeed large by today's standards. My own immigrant great-great grandfather, Joseph Hector Choquet, was one of six children. His father, Étienne Choquet, was one of ten, and his grandfather, Pierre Choquet, was one of seventeen, all with the same mother! We need to recognize, though, that big families were the norm in North America before industrialization because family farms required family labor. The birthrate in nineteenth-century Québec was actually "similar to general birth rates in other parts of Canada and in the United States."³ In fact, in 1871, Québec's birthrate was lower than Ontario's, even though most of Ontario's population was of British origin.

As for rural misery, here too the story is more complex. It is true that the best agricultural lands were fully occupied by the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Québec's transition to commercial farming caused farm size to increase and rural society to grow more stratified. Some *habitants* (farmers) benefited from the change, doubling their productivity and enjoying a good standard of living. Dairy farmers outside Montreal did particularly well. On the other hand, smaller farms were ceasing to be viable, whether in the St. Lawrence Valley or on more marginal lands to the north, east, or south. A large population of landless day laborers emerged, and the remaining smallholders found it increasingly hard to make ends meet. Migration, then, was less a product of rural backwardness than a response to agricultural modernization and change.⁴

The first wave of French Canadian immigrants, however, came not for economic but for political reasons. Discontent with the colonial government (Québec had been a British colony since 1763) culminated in the Patriot Rebellions of 1837 and 1838, which were particularly intense in the countryside around Montreal. Radical Patriots authored a Declaration of Independence calling for republican government, bilingualism, universal male suffrage, freedom of the press, and separation of church and state. Martial law was proclaimed in 1837 after a series of pitched battles, and the British army put down the rebellion by force. Twelve Patriots were hanged, fifty-eight were deported to penal colonies in Australia, and a thousand were imprisoned. Many more fled, on

foot or by horse and buggy, to the United States, especially nearby Vermont and New York.⁵ They would soon be joined by economic migrants, usually young men with a sense of adventure.

The Beaudry brothers were typical of these early French Canadian migrants. Born in the village of Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines outside Montreal, they were raised and worked on the family farm. Jean-Louis, who trained as a clerk and shopkeeper, opened a dry goods store in 1834. During the Rebellion of 1837 he was vice-president of Les Fils de la Liberté (the Sons of Liberty), a patriotic association committed to establishing a Canadian Republic. He fled to the United States to avoid arrest, as did his younger brother Prudent. Jean-Louis returned to Montreal after the rebellions, but Prudent headed south to New Orleans. He later came back to join Jean-Louis's Montreal-based import-export business, which took him often to Europe. Meanwhile a third brother, Victor, moved to California in the Gold Rush of 1849 and convinced Prudent to join him in San Francisco to take advantage of the boom. Their funeral firm, the first in California, still operates today. After losing his retail store in a fire, Prudent moved on to Los Angeles, where he made a fortune in real estate. Victor, always on the lookout for new opportunities, set up shop in the Owens Valley before becoming a mining entrepreneur in the Inyo Mountains. Until the Silver Rush faded in 1876, the lively boom town of Cerro Gordo was controlled by this savvy French Canadian merchant. Victor, though, would end up the least famous of the three. Prudent, after stints in Paris and Montreal, returned to Los Angeles in 1861 to supply the Army of the Potomac during the Civil War. He made yet another fortune in fruit growing and was elected mayor of Los Angeles from 1874 to 1876. He was outdone only by big brother Jean-Louis, who served as mayor of Montreal ten times between 1862 and 1885.⁶

The Civil War, which sent Prudent Beaudry back to California, was a watershed event for French Canadian immigration to the United States. This bloody conflict put four million men into battle and cost the lives of more than 600,000; it also triggered a mass migration of French Canadians that would last until the Great Depression. Nearly 20,000 French Canadians served in the Union Army between 1861 and 1865. They volunteered, either from their new homes in the United States, where tens of thousands already lived, or directly from Québec, where United States army recruiters plied their trade in defiance of British law.⁷

Soldiers and sailors were not the only French Canadians to reach the United States during the Civil War. The mill owners of industrializing New England, facing labor shortages caused by the draft, began recruit-

ing aggressively in the Québec countryside, where the lure of higher wages combined with the troubles of small farmers and landless laborers to launch a mass migration. The movement was facilitated by the railways, which connected the U.S. to Canada by the 1850s. By 1890, when immigrant Joseph Jobin wrote for his wife and younger children to join him and the two oldest boys in New England, it was possible to leave Québec City in the morning and arrive in Boston later the same day.⁸

Between 1860 and 1900, New England's French Canadian population jumped from 37,000 to 573,000, Vermont's from 16,000 to 45,000.⁹ Because of westward migration by Vermont farm families, the state's population would have declined in the nineteenth century without French Canadian immigration.

French Canadians also continued to migrate to other parts of the United States. Many tried their luck on the agricultural frontier, settling as far afield as St. Ignatius and Frenchtown in Montana, Coeur d'Alene in Idaho, the Red River Valley in Minnesota and North Dakota, Bourbonnais in Illinois, and the plains of Kansas. Not coincidentally, all of these areas had long been traveled by French Canadian fur traders. Throughout the American West, French Canadians became prosperous farmers, with nothing in their farming practices to distinguish them from their American neighbors. In the Midwest, they followed the lumber and mining industries into Michigan, where French fur traders had founded Detroit in 1701.¹⁰

In New England, many immigrants ended up in major industrial centers like Fall River, Massachusetts; Lewiston, Maine; Manchester, New Hampshire; and Woonsocket, Rhode Island. But French Canadians found their way to smaller towns and mill villages as well. The Franco-American monument in Québec City, a gift of Franco-Americans to the people of Québec for the city's 400th anniversary in 2008, lists 168 New England communities that were important migrant destinations, including twenty-one in Vermont.¹¹ That list is nowhere near exhaustive.

French Canadians in New England worked mainly in construction and in the rapidly expanding shoe and textile industries. Yet some continued to farm, particularly in Vermont, as Yankee farmers moved west, prompting one observer to write: "In some parts of Vermont one hears complaint of the extent to which they have taken possession of old and run-down farms, and established themselves where before scarce any foreigners could be found."¹²

Middle-class French Canadians also immigrated to take advantage of commercial and professional opportunities. In the late nineteenth cen-

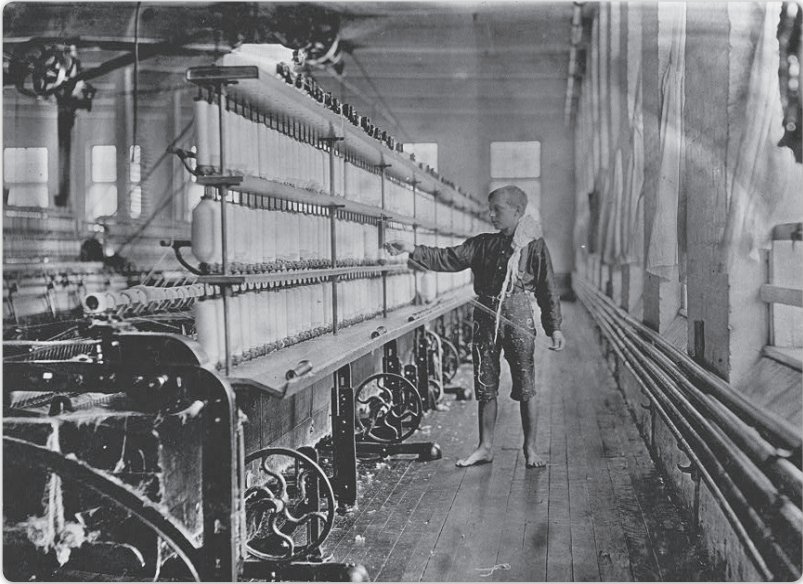
tury, they made up about 10 percent of all immigrants to the U.S., including the large contingent of entrepreneurs who founded and operated commercial ventures in cities like Burlington, Vermont.¹³ Joseph Jobin, mentioned earlier, was a trained accountant who knew English and owned a dry-goods store in Québec City. He sold the store to go to Boston with his two oldest sons in August of 1890. Within a month, all three had jobs in major department stores, and the family was ready to reunite. Marie-Flore Jobin, Joseph's wife, took the train south with six of the remaining seven children; one girl remained in boarding school in Québec.¹⁴

In Vermont, due to the state's diverse economy, French Canadians also labored in other economic sectors: the quarries, the railroads, the lumber industry, and the fabrication of wood products—the most important manufacturing industry in the state, producing everything from furniture and appliances to boxes, bowls, musical instruments, toys, and wood novelties.

After the Civil War, French Canadian immigration increasingly became a family affair, as it was for the Jobins, and this was equally true for working-class families. Oral histories, memoirs, and letters inform us that the decision to move was made as a family, with every member weighing in, and women often taking the initiative. Children sometimes earned wages in the factories, as documented in the infamous photographs by Lewis Hine. Destinations were chosen thanks to the presence there of family and friends.

Before long full-fledged networks linked communities on both sides of the border, a manifestation of the phenomenon known as chain migration. For example, immigrants to the Blackstone Valley, from Worcester, Massachusetts, down to Pawtucket, Rhode Island, often came from the Richelieu Valley in southern Québec and the St. Lawrence Valley east of Montreal.¹⁵ That is true of my great-great grandfather, Joseph Hector Choquet, who moved from Marieville, Québec, to Central Falls, Rhode Island. Before arriving in Rhode Island, however, Joseph Hector stopped off in Vermont. Around 1870, he married a Burlington woman of French Canadian ancestry, and their first child was born in Woodstock. Stepwise migration like this was common, and Vermont was often the first landing place due to its familiarity and proximity.

Chain migration was a two-way street, and it could link a French Canadian parish to more than one American community, as well as to other parts of Canada. Ozias Tancrède was born in 1855 in Sainte-Croix, a village about thirty miles west of Québec City. His two older brothers departed for farms in the Canadian West, but he traveled with



Mule-spinning room in Chace Cotton Mill, Raoul Julien, “a back-roping boy.” Has been here 2 yrs. see label No.730. May 7, 1909. Location: Burlington, Vermont. Photograph by Lewis Hine. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ncl2004001514/PP/>

his future brother-in-law to Brooklyn, New York, where they worked together as brickmakers. After one summer, he married and purchased a farm in Québec, only to return to Brooklyn the following summer. His wife Zénaïde was left in charge of the farm work while continuing to sew at home for a large shop in Montreal. Thus, it is no surprise that in 1881, the couple and their two-year-old son took the train down to Lewiston, Maine, where Ozias found work in a shoe shop and Zénaïde took in boarders. They sold their Québec farm to a neighbor the following year for five hundred dollars.¹⁶

For nearly a century, continental migration remained the preferred strategy of French Canadian families from all social backgrounds. According to historian Yves Frenette, “Geographic mobility was thus an important element of French-Canadian identity.”¹⁷ Why then did French Canadians abruptly stop immigrating to the United States in the 1930s?¹⁸

The primary factor was certainly the Great Depression, which hit the United States with even greater force than Canada. By 1932, some 12 million Americans were unemployed, between a quarter and a third of

the entire labor force. But French Canadian immigration never rebounded after the Depression either, both for economic and political reasons. After World War II, Canada's economic growth caught up with that of the United States, erasing the differential that had fueled the exodus. Meanwhile, nativist legislation in the United States had already closed the borders to immigrants, from Asia beginning in 1875, from southern and eastern Europe in the 1920s, and from Canada in 1930. After the imposition of quotas in 1930, French Canadians could only obtain a visa if they had steady employment and sponsors in the United States.¹⁹ A leading voice in Congress for restricting immigration had been Senator William Dillingham of Vermont (1900-1923).

Nativism in Vermont also took the form of the notorious eugenics movement. Governor John E. Weeks (1927-1931), "a tacit supporter of eugenics," was deeply involved in the Vermont Commission on Country Life, even chairing its Committee on Religious Forces.²⁰ In 1931, Vermont approved a sterilization law targeting "idiot, imbecile, feeble-minded or insane" persons. Along with the poor and the disabled, Native Americans and French Canadians figured prominently among the 253 victims, punished for representing "an insidious and continuous invasion" of Vermont.²¹

Several Québec historians have described immigration to the United States as "the major event of nineteenth-century French Canadian history."²² In contrast, American historians have often overlooked French Canadian immigrants in favor of those who came across the Atlantic during the same period. Yet the French Canadian contribution to American demographic and economic growth, particularly in the New England states, including Vermont, from the mid-nineteenth century up until the Great Depression, merits our renewed attention.

NOTES

This article is an expanded version of a paper prepared for the conference "French Connections—Franconnexions," at the University of Vermont, March 20, 2017, organized by UVM's Center for Research on Vermont and the Canadian Studies Program.

¹ For an illustration of this remarkable continental penetration at the level of a single family, see Mario Mimeault, *L'exode Québécois, 1852-1925. Correspondance d'une famille dispersée en Amérique* (Québec: Septentrion, 2013). The author follows the epistolary fortunes of nine Lamontagne siblings, children of a Gaspé lumber baron, as they dispersed across Canada (other parts of Québec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia) and the United States (New England, New York, New Jersey, Washington, D.C., Illinois, Michigan, California). One son, who first moved to New England (Manchester, Fitchburg, Lynn) to work in retail, even ended up in Paris after working for Pathé, a French movie company, in New York City.

² Yves Roby, *Histoire d'un rêve brisé? Les Canadiens français aux États-Unis* (Sillery, QC: Septentrion, 2007), 7; Jean Lamarre, *The French Canadians of Michigan: Their Contribution to the Development of the Saginaw Valley and the Keweenaw Peninsula, 1840-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), x.

³ John Dickinson and Brian Young, *A Short History of Quebec*, 4th edition (Montreal and Kingston, Ont.: McGill-Queen's, 2008), 110.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 137-142.

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⁵ In addition to *ibid.*, 162-168, see Allan Greer, *The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

⁶ Yves Frenette, *Brève histoire des Canadiens français* (Montreal: Boréal, 1998), 82; Lorne Ste. Croix, "Beaudry, Jean-Louis," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 11 (1881-1890), http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/beaudry_jean_louis_11E.html.

⁷ See Jean Lamarre, *Les Canadiens français et la guerre civile américaine (1861-1865). Une autre dimension de leur migration vers les États-Unis* (Montreal: VLB, 2008).

⁸ The Jobin Family Archive, French Institute, Assumption College, <https://www.assumption.edu/sites/default/files/JobinFinaldoc.pdf>.

⁹ Dyke Hendrickson, *Quiet Presence: Histoires de Franco-Américains en New England* (Portland, Me.: Gannett, 1980), 36. See also Yves Roby, *The Franco-Americans of New England: Dreams and Realities* (Montreal and Kingston, Ont.: McGill-Queen's, 2005).

¹⁰ Frenette, *Brève histoire des Canadiens français*, 82-83; Lamarre, *The French Canadians of Michigan*.

¹¹ The monument is in the Parc de la Jetée de Sillery, along Boulevard Champlain. The Vermont communities listed are Burlington, Winooski, St. Albans, Isle LaMotte, Newport, Swanton, St. Johnsbury, Rutland, Granitville, Vergennes, Barre, Bennington, Montpelier, Barton, Orleans, Essex Junction, Hyde Park, Lowell, Enosburg Falls, Island Pond, and Chimney Point.

¹² William McDonald, "The French Canadians in New England," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 12, 3 (April 1898): 264.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁴ The Jobin Family Archive.

¹⁵ Roby, *The Franco-Americans of New England*, 20.

¹⁶ Frenette, *Brève histoire des Canadiens français*, 90-91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90. My translation.

¹⁸ Only 12,000 French Canadians immigrated to the United States in the 1930s, compared to 150,000 in the previous decade. See Gilles Paquet and Wayne R. Smith, "L'émigration des Canadiens français vers les États-Unis, 1790-1940: problématique et coups de sonde," *L'Actualité économique*, 593 (1983): 446.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 452.

²⁰ Nancy L. Gallagher, *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999), 119.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 45, 185.

²² See Roby, *Histoire d'un rêve brisé?*, 7. My translation.