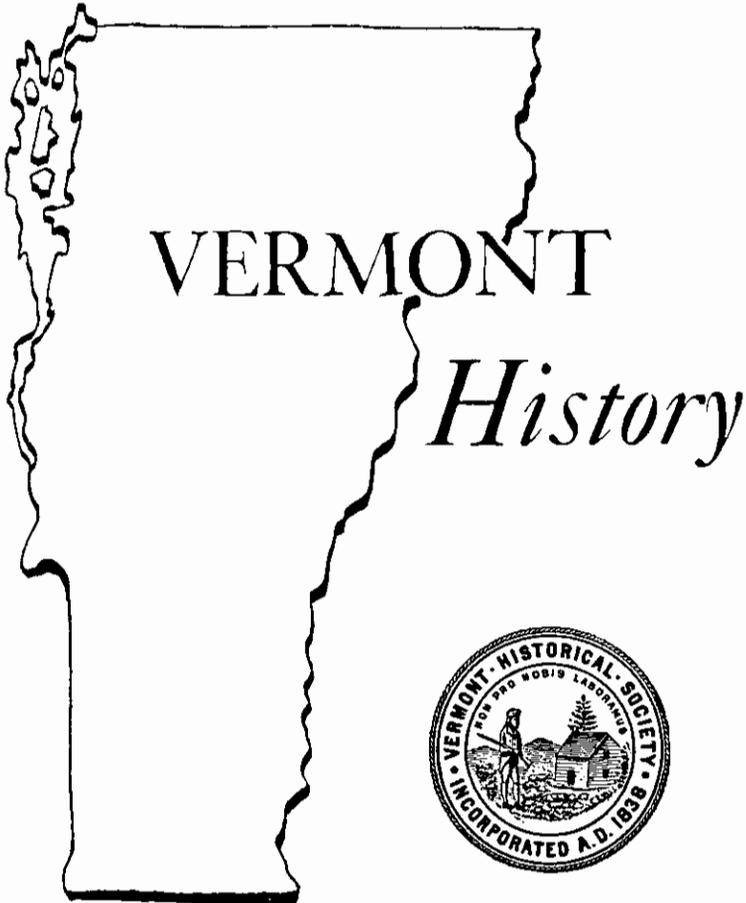


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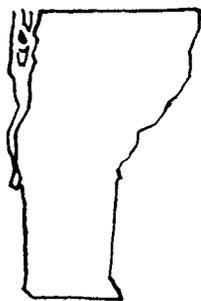
The PROCEEDINGS of the
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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These French-Canadians were craftsmen . . . and had come to the Burlington area to practice their trade. Among these Canadian workers were seventeen carpenters, ten shoemakers and fifteen masons . . .

Opportunity Across the Border: The Burlington Area Economy and the French Canadian Worker in 1850

By BETSY BEATTIE

The Winooski River, flowing westward from the Green Mountains into Lake Champlain, forms the dividing line between the towns of Burlington and Colchester. In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, the river was also the focus of early industrial development, which tied the two communities together economically while it separated them physically. About five miles from the mouth of the Winooski, the riverbed drops, creating a natural waterfall, which entrepreneurs harnessed with dams to power several manufacturing concerns. By 1850 these businessmen had built a flour mill, a sawmill, a chair factory, and a cotton mill on the south, or Burlington, side of the falls, and a woolen factory and iron foundry on the north, or Colchester, side. Burlington capitalists had financed the construction of these industries, and at mid-century they still had capital invested in all of them. Two bridges connected the towns, reinforcing their economic interdependence; until 1863, residents of Winooski Falls (the Colchester village on the north side of the river) even used the Burlington post office.¹ According to Vermont historian T. D. S. Bassett, Burlington and Winooski in 1850 formed a “double-town,” the two being “separated only by political boundaries.”²

To the French Canadians who settled in Burlington and Colchester during the first half of the nineteenth century, the political division between the two towns had even less meaning. These immigrants had come to the region seeking employment, and most of them found it where there were areas of industrial development and urban growth. It is likely that some lived in one community and worked in another, like young Augustin

Davignon, a Winooski resident who helped build Burlington's Unitarian church in 1816.³ Others, like the cooper Bruno Peppin, moved from one town to the other as job opportunities changed.⁴

The most powerful bonds that linked the French Canadians of Burlington and Colchester, however, were their cultural differences and their numbers. In 1850 they represented less than 15 percent of the region's population, and, as French-speaking Catholics living in an English-speaking, Protestant area, they formed a single enclave that crossed town lines. French Canadians from the two towns attended the same church and, in the course of the 1850s, would establish shared social institutions. The French Canadians of the region defined their community along ethnic rather than political lines; their early history, like the bridges they crossed, spans the Winooski River.

FRENCH CANADIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE BURLINGTON AREA BEFORE 1850

French Canadians who settled in the Burlington area, in one sense, were reclaiming their old land, for northwestern Vermont had once been a part of New France. Long before the Seven Years War the French had realized the strategic importance of Lake Champlain to the defense of their colony and had built a series of forts on its banks and islands. In 1666 Pierre de St. Paul, Sieur de la Motte, a captain in the French Carignan Regiment, directed the construction of Fort Sainte-Anne on the island named in his honor, Isle La Motte.⁵ In the 1730s the French extended their military presence further south and constructed two more fortifications, Fort St.-Frédéric and Fort Carillon, at the lower end of the lake near what is now Crown Point. They then laid claim to the lands on either side of the lake north of the forts. To strengthen their hold on this territory the French government divided the land into seigneuries similar to those established elsewhere in New France and encouraged their development.⁶ In 1734 the area that now includes both Burlington and Winooski became a seigneurie called La Perrière.⁷

As the history of New France attests, however, the granting of seigneuries seldom led to serious attempts at settlement, and at the time of the British Conquest in 1760 most of northern Vermont was still wilderness. Outside of a few scattered villages, such as the one near what is now Swanton, the French presence was negligible.⁸ Ironically, it would not be until after the American Revolution that French Canadians would come to settle the area in any significant numbers.

From the late 1700s until the 1820s immigrants from Quebec traveled up the Richelieu River into Lake Champlain and to Vermont where they settled along the Champlain lowlands. The geographer Ralph Vicero

described these immigration patterns as “irregular in character and insignificant in number.”⁹ However, as early as 1817 Bishop Plessis of Quebec felt that there were enough French Canadian families along Vermont’s lakeshore to assign a priest, Pierre Marie Mignault, to minister to their needs.¹⁰ The bishop also recorded in his journal that there were about one hundred Catholics living in Burlington.¹¹ Most of these Catholics were probably French Canadians, which would signify a sizeable immigrant settlement for a town of 2,111 persons.¹²

French Canadian immigration into Vermont began in earnest in the 1820s and 1830s. A succession of bad harvests in Quebec combined with the soil depletion and growing population pressures on seigneurial lands forced both single youths and families into the state seeking employment. At first the timber trade and seasonal labor attracted most immigrants to the Burlington area.¹³ In these years there was still virgin timber in Vermont woods, and, until 1837, the loading point for Vermont lumber shipped through Quebec to Europe was at Winooski Falls.¹⁴ According to W. S. Rann in his history of Chittenden County, as early as 1826 a small village of about forty houses stood at the crossroads of what are now Main and Allen Streets in Winooski, and many of its residents worked “getting out spars and square lumber for the Quebec market.”¹⁵ The name given this community, French Village, reveals both the presence of French Canadian immigrants and their attraction to the lumber trades, which many had learned in Quebec. Rann also described the area around the village as having cultivated fields, an indication that there was available farm work as well.¹⁶

Information about individual immigrants living in and around Burlington in these years is scarce, but what there is suggests that even in the 1820s and 1830s French Canadians pursued a broader range of occupations than simply lumberjack or farm laborer. Historians of the area such as David Blow and Father Jean Audet, Winooski’s first Catholic priest, have compiled several sketches of early French Canadian settlers. Among these settlers were Augustin Davignon, the young man who had come in 1816 to work on construction of Burlington’s Unitarian church; Joseph Niquette, who was employed by the Lake Champlain Steamboat Company; and Peter Villmaire, a mason who helped build the first woolen mill in Winooski in 1836.¹⁷ These skilled laborers and others like them found the Burlington area an ideal place to live and work. Since the opening of the Champlain Canal in 1823 both Burlington and Winooski Falls had been alive with the building of new industries such as the Champlain Glass Company and the Burlington Mill Company.¹⁸ Such skills as ship-building, stone and brick masonry, and carpentry were in great demand. In some cases, especially in the construction of textile mills, these im-

migrants helped to build the factories that would employ later generations of Quebec émigrés.



As craftsmen, French Canadian émigrés used their construction skills for buildings like this woolen factory at Winooski shown here in a late nineteenth century stereopticon view.

In the last two years of the 1830s another type of French Canadian immigrant arrived in Burlington and other Vermont towns. This immigrant did not come with skills to sell to an employer but with an idea to sell to the Vermont citizenry. The failure of the rebellions in Canada had forced over 1000 exiles, mostly political radicals and members of the *Patriote* movement, into the United States to avoid arrest for treason. It is apparent from contemporary accounts that several, perhaps many, of these political refugees spent time in the Burlington area. Father Audet, who had ministered to many of the first French Canadians in Winooski, wrote that Francis LeClair, Sr., a Quebec émigré and Winooski farmer, offered his house as a safe haven to a number of these exiles and their families, including, in Audet's words, "les Duvernay, les Bouchette, les Bouthillier,

les Blanchard, les Marchesault, les Maillet” and others.¹⁹ These members of the *Parti patriote* used their time in Vermont to arouse interest among both Yankees and French Canadians in their cause: the overthrow of British authority in Canada and the establishment of a popularly elected government based on the liberal principles of the French and American revolutions.

Among these refugees the most important publicist of *Patriote* ideas and, at the same time, the one most influential in Burlington’s French Canadian community was a young journalist, Ludger Duvernay. It is not clear when he first came to the Burlington area; apparently he traveled around Vermont and New York throughout most of 1838 observing American institutions and trying to drum up support for another armed insurrection against British authority.²⁰ After this second attempt at rebellion failed Duvernay settled somewhere near Burlington, and, on August 7, 1839, he began publishing the *Patriote Canadien*, one of the first French Canadian newspapers printed in the United States.²¹

The *Patriote Canadien* expressed the liberal beliefs of its publisher. Throughout its pages were articles praising republican institutions, championing freedom of religion, and urging opposition to British rule in Canada. Scattered among the political arguments, however, were numerous glowing descriptions of the social and economic conditions of the Burlington area. In Duvernay’s view, Burlington had little poverty, a thriving economy, a lively intellectual life, a high literacy rate, healthy farms, fertile soil, and a remarkably egalitarian social structure. “Every person holds the same rank,” he claimed with obvious approval.²² While these observations may have been colored by his desire to win support for his cause and sales for his newspaper, they also reveal some of the attractions of Burlington to both Quebec *habitant* and *Patriote*. Economic opportunity, good farmland, and the appearance of social equality could not fail to tempt the dispossessed and the downwardly mobile professional alike. Duvernay was also enthusiastic about the employment available for young *saissoniers* and even commented on the benefits of having Canadian women work in the woolen mill at Winooski Falls. In textile mills, he argued, these young women could earn good wages while learning skills that would be valuable to Canada in the future.²³

Duvernay’s optimism about Burlington’s future contrasted sharply with his own situation. His paper was a financial failure, lasting a mere six months. The rose-colored vision of American opportunity depicted in its pages masked his own financial problems, and the death of his son added to his personal misfortune. In spite of his political beliefs he was also homesick for the land and culture he had left in Quebec. Like most of the exiled *Patriote* leaders, he returned to Canada soon after the

Canadian government issued a general amnesty to participants in the rebellions.²⁴

Although he only lived in the Burlington area for about three years, the young journalist made an impact on the French Canadian community that far outlasted his brief stay. He played an important role in building religious and cultural institutions for the immigrants.²⁵ Although it is more difficult to assess the influence of his newspaper on the community, it is also likely that some literate émigrés read and digested his republican ideas and thereby gained a clearer understanding of the American political system. The seeds of their understanding would germinate slowly within the larger French Canadian population but eventually would bear fruit in the form of active participation in local and state government.²⁶

To the newly arriving *Québécois* immigrant, however, a job, not a political voice, was the immediate concern. Most had left their homes out of economic need and chosen to come to the Burlington area specifically because of its employment opportunities. The region continued its economic expansion, and the landless and adventuresome continued their southward migration to take advantage of that growth. By 1840, according to the calculation of one contemporary observer, there were over a thousand French Canadians in Burlington, Colchester, Essex, Shelburne, and other Champlain Valley towns.²⁷ Between 1840 and 1845, several more families arrived in Winooski, attracted by its growing manufacturing sector.²⁸ Meanwhile, the continuing decline of Quebec's timber and shipbuilding industries during the 1840s sent immigrants to the Burlington area to find similar employment.²⁹ All together, Ralph Vicero has estimated, over 60 percent of the French Canadians who migrated to New England in the course of the decade came to Vermont, and, of those, more than 78 percent settled in Grand Isle, Franklin, Chittenden, and Addison counties. By 1850 the largest concentration of French Canadians in the state—well over 1000—lived in Burlington and “the neighboring town of Colchester (containing the village of Winooski).”³⁰

THE WATERSHED YEAR: THE BURLINGTON-AREA ECONOMY IN 1850

French Canadians had come to Burlington and Winooski in the first half of the nineteenth century because of the progress and economic growth of the region. The construction of the Champlain Canal had opened shipping and passenger travel from Canada to New York City. Burlington, benefitting from its good natural harbor, had developed both a lively shipping trade and a sizeable shipbuilding concern. Local businessmen had invested in the manufacture of such products as textiles and glass. Wholesale houses flourished. Retail trade was expanding. Irish immigrants and native sons and daughters from Vermont farms joined the French

Canadians and came to the area seeking work. Between 1840 and 1850 alone the population of Burlington doubled, from 4,271 to 7,585. Then, on December 18, 1849, an event took place that irrevocably changed the economy of the region and affected employment opportunities as well. A train that had travelled from Boston via Rutland arrived in the town of Burlington. One week later another train route was completed that connected Painesville (now Essex Junction), Vermont, with Rouse's Point, New York, on the Canadian border. The second half of the nineteenth century would be the era of the railroad, but in 1850 it was not yet clear what role Burlington would play. To some in the community, the coming of the railroads seemed to bode more ill than good.³¹

One major problem was the routing of the new railroads. The Rutland Road had built its line only as far as Burlington. Any goods shipped from Boston to Canada via Burlington had to be transferred from the train to a boat, which carried the cargo to Rouse's Point. Then another crew had to reload the shipment onto a Canadian train.³² Meanwhile, the Central Vermont Railroad carried its cargo to Canada directly and, thus, more efficiently, but it bypassed Burlington altogether. Joseph Amrhein, in his economic history of the region, has pointed out that Burlington's competitive disadvantage in shipping hurt not only its carrying trade but also its industrial development, which depended on cheap transportation for the purchase of raw materials and the shipment of goods to larger markets.³³

Burlington's mercantile trade was to suffer from the impact of the railroads in a different way. After the Champlain Canal had opened shipping lanes to New York City, Burlington became a major distribution point for goods sold to the Vermont market. A number of wholesale firms had been established that sold goods to other parts of the state. After the completion of rail lines, however, freight trains could stop at many Vermont towns along their routes, allowing the merchants in these towns to buy goods directly and avoid the middlemen in Burlington.³⁴

The arrival of the railroads in the Burlington area coincided with certain other economic shifts that further clouded the future of the region. Chief among these was the changing nature of the lumber trade. By the middle of the 1840s the best timber in Vermont was logged out, and major lumber operations had moved to more promising territory in northern Maine, Canada, and the American West. Winooski Falls, once a busy center of logging and timber rafting, closed its operations in 1837. If the Burlington area was to remain in the lumber trade at all, it would have to be in a new capacity, and in 1850 that capacity was not yet certain.³⁵

The final economic blow to the region at mid-century was the closing of the Burlington Mill Company in November of 1850. This textile opera-

tion, which had opened in 1835 on the north side of the Winooski River, had been the pride of the entire region and a shining example of its potential as a manufacturing center. The Burlington Mill Company, Incorporated, the corporate body that owned the factory, had bold plans in 1835 that included the “manufacturing of machinery, the purchase of mill sites and the erection of mills in Chittenden County.”³⁶ By 1840 progress toward these goals was impressive. The company had built a sawmill, machine shop, a plaster mill and furnace, a dam, a canal, two boarding-houses, and a seven-story brick factory that produced woolen broadcloth. The mill employed about 150 operatives. Financial troubles haunted the operation almost from its inception, however, both because of tariff reductions on textiles and overcapitalization of the project. It failed, reorganized, and changed hands, becoming the property of a group of Boston investors.³⁷ After a brief period of success producing supplies for the army in the Mexican War, in 1849 it again faced financial problems. By the end of the following year the operation failed again, putting over 400 employees out of work.³⁸ Many doubted it would ever reopen.³⁹

Despite the serious problems that plagued the Burlington area economy as the second half of the nineteenth century began, there were signs of underlying economic stability. While the railroads hurt the wholesale trade, they also stimulated retail trade, which grew as trains brought more tourists to the region.⁴⁰ Although the larger Burlington Mill Company was in financial ruin, the smaller Winooski Cotton Mill, built in 1845, continued to produce fabric in spite of a New England-wide depression in the cotton industry between 1845 and 1850. The mill employed only seventeen operatives at mid-century but it did not close, and when, in 1852, a fire destroyed the old wooden factory building, it still had the resources to build a new, three-story, brick structure.⁴¹ Even the Champlain Transportation Company, whose shipbuilding and ferry operations faced direct competition from the new railroad passenger service, survived and, in 1850, had a work force of 104 employees.⁴²

Overall, however, the road to industrialization was slow and bumpy for the Burlington region. In 1850 it was not yet certain whether other ventures similar to the Burlington Mill Company could succeed. Local investors lacked the resources and know-how to run them successfully, and until the completion of an extensive railroad network, factories in more remote areas of the United States, like Burlington, could not compete with those closer to large population centers. In fact, during this period most manufacturing in both Burlington and Winooski was pre-industrial in nature.⁴³ Groups of skilled craftsmen still produced small items—shoes, boots, tinware, wheels and barrels, for example—using little division of labor or power-driven machinery. The arrival of the first train

from Boston in November of 1849 was a harbinger of economic changes to come, but at mid-century the Burlington-area economy still had more of the flavor of the 1830s than of the 1870s.

THE FRENCH CANADIAN WORKER AND HIS FAMILY, 1850

The nature of the region's economy determined the nature of the French Canadian population that settled in Burlington and Colchester. Because the large majority of these immigrants had come to find employment, the type of job available determined who would settle where, who would stay, and who would move on. Quebec émigrés were rarely entrepreneurs. They did not create economic opportunities but took advantage of those they found by matching their skills with communities having the appropriate available employment. The Burlington area—growing but still largely pre-industrial—evidently offered the type of employment these immigrants sought, for, as Table 1 reveals, in 1850, there were about 1400 French Canadians living in Burlington and Colchester, and they made up nearly one seventh of the total population of the region.⁴⁴

TABLE 1

French Canadian Population of Burlington and Colchester, 1850

<i>Town</i>	<i>Total Population</i>	<i>French Canadian Population</i>	<i>French Canadians as % of total</i>
Burlington	7585	890	11.7
Colchester	2575	507	19.6
Total	10,160	1397	13.8

French Canadians were not the only immigrants in the area, however, or even the most numerous. Hundreds of thousands of Irish, forced off their lands in the late 1840s after a potato blight had destroyed their major food source, had been coming to the eastern United States and Canada for three years. The Burlington area, though remote from the Atlantic seaports of either country, had received its share of this influx. Some had come to Burlington as part of the railroad crews who had laid the track for the Central Vermont and Rutland railroads. Others had followed the paths of many French Canadians: down the St. Lawrence from Quebec City, up the Richelieu and into the Lake Champlain valley. By 1850 there were 2453 Irish-born immigrants and their dependents in Burlington and Colchester. They constituted nearly 25 percent of the area population.⁴⁵

It is difficult to determine what effect these predominantly unskilled immigrants had on the employment opportunities for French Canadians. Their arrival may well have depressed wages for semi- and unskilled labor, especially after the railroads were completed and railroad crews were left

without work. In 1850 the average daily wage of an unskilled laborer in Burlington was only \$.75.⁴⁶ As there are no comparable wage statistics for 1840, it is impossible to say whether \$.75 represents a decline across the decade. Other indicators of labor supply, in fact, suggest that the arrival of the Irish did not pose a serious economic threat. The annual cost of poor-relief for Burlington actually declined from 1848 to 1850 (from \$4,056 to \$3,208), which suggests that, barring a change in criteria for selecting recipients of funds, the rate of employment rose in the intervening years.⁴⁷ Two probable causes of this increase in employment were the discovery of gold in California in 1849 and the continuing attraction of good farmland in the Midwest, both of which lured native Vermonters out of the state. In fact, according to Amrhein, “by 1850 emigration from the state was coming dangerously close to balancing immigration.”⁴⁸



In the last decades of the nineteenth century Winooski became a major textile manufacturing center providing employment for thousands. This 1890 photograph shows the lower dam at Winooski Falls with the woolen mills in the background. Interestingly, few early French Canadian immigrants worked as textile employees.

The Irish, who had arrived in great numbers during the late 1840s, were desperately poor and had little but their brawn and determination to offer an employer. They usually became unskilled laborers who worked in quarries, on railroad crews, wherever strength and numbers were needed.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the French Canadians had migrated over a more than fifty-year period, and although many of them also had arrived nearly penniless, they had learned from friends and relatives what employment was available and where to find it. An analysis of the dif-

ferent occupations mentioned by French Canadians in the 1850 census reveals the broad range of employment skills that the *Québécois* immigrants brought with them. At mid-century the French Canadian work force in Burlington and Colchester consisted of 316 individuals who were employed in forty-nine different occupations, from merchant and lawyer to carpenter and shoemaker to day laborer and farm worker.

It is evident from the statistics that these French Canadian immigrants, while equipped with a variety of skills, were predominantly manual laborers rather than white collar workers (see Table 2).⁵⁰

TABLE 2

Occupational Status of French Canadian Males in Burlington and Colchester (combined), 1850*

<i>Type of Job</i>	<i>Number of French</i>	<i>% of total French</i>
Merchant	4	1.3
Professional	2	0.6
Small Business	8	2.5
Other White Collar (includes clerks)	3	0.9
Skilled Labor	120	38.0
Semi/Unskilled Labor	135	42.7
Farm Labor	40	12.7
Factory Worker	4	1.3
Personal/Domestic	0	0.0
Total	316	100.0

*The 1850 census does not include jobs held by women.

As a group they were by no means part of the business or professional classes of the region, which in the nineteenth century were virtual Yankee preserves. On the other hand, they were not an undifferentiated group of unskilled or factory laborers. One hundred thirty-seven men, or over 40 percent of the work force, held either skilled labor or white collar positions.

One surprising aspect of the occupational choices of these immigrants, especially in the light of the traditional view of French Canadians as mill workers, is that only four of them claimed to be textile workers. While some of the men who described themselves as craftsmen or day laborers may have been employed by the textile industries in the region, it does not appear that many were actually unskilled mill operatives. All those who claimed to be textile workers, of any ethnic background, appeared either on the first eighteen pages of the manuscript census for Colchester or within a range of nine pages of the Burlington census. This distribution suggests that most of the factory workers lived near each other and

close to the woolen and cotton mills that employed them. These twenty-seven pages included over 1100 residents and 264 men who listed some employment. However, of these 264 only thirty-six were French Canadian, of whom four were white collar workers, one was a farm laborer, one worked on the railroad, fourteen were craftsmen—carpenters, masons, coopers, shoemakers, and others—, four were factory workers, and thirteen were simply “laborers.” Even if every single “laborer” had been employed in the mills, the total number of male, French Canadian, unskilled textile workers would have been less than twenty. In an article about the French Canadians of New England based on the 1890 census, William MacDonald, a nineteenth-century economist, described the *Québécois* immigrants of his day as “an operative class.”⁵¹ In Burlington and Colchester at mid-century only a small minority of French Canadian male workers appear to have fit that category.

One reason for the lack of French Canadian men working in textile mills of the region is that, in 1850, there was still a pool of both native-born and Irish workers who were willing to take these jobs. Of the forty-four men who specified that they were cotton- or woolen-mill workers, twenty-nine were native-born, nine were Irish, two were English, and four were French Canadian. The fact that the majority of textile workers in the Burlington area at mid-century were native-born is not surprising; historians analyzing the make-up of the work force in other textile centers of New England have found the same pattern of employment for this period. Thomas Dublin, in his study of the mill workers in Lowell, Massachusetts, found that in 1850 only 29.4 percent of the operatives working in the Hamilton Mill were foreign-born, and only 3.4 percent were French Canadian.⁵² As late as 1860, in the Manchester, New Hampshire, Amoskeag Mills, James Hanlon found only a 12.2 percent foreign-born work force, of which nearly three-fourths were Irish.⁵³

Another reason that so few French Canadian men chose factory jobs may have been wages. Factory labor was the lowest paid work available in the Burlington area, and French Canadians were able to find more lucrative employment. The average wage paid to an adult male operative at the Burlington Mill Company was \$16.67 per month, or \$.70 per day for a six-day work week.⁵⁴ Even common day labor paid five cents more per day. Moreover, many of these French Canadians were craftsmen rather than unskilled laborers and had come to the Burlington area to practice their trade. Among these Canadian workers, for example, were seventeen carpenters, ten shoemakers, fifteen masons, and five each of bakers, blacksmiths, coopers, joiners, painters, and tailors. The average pay for a carpenter in 1850 was \$1.50 per day, or over double the daily wage for a male factory operative.⁵⁵ Given that wage differential and the array

of other opportunities available to them, it is not surprising that French Canadian males avoided factory employment.

Whether French Canadian women in 1850 also shunned factory work is more difficult to ascertain because the census did not include female employment and other available evidence is inconclusive. In 1840, for instance, Ludger Duvernay commented in his newspaper on the young French Canadian women working in the woolen mill, and the 1860 census, which included occupations of females, listed thirty French Canadian women as factory workers. Clearly, some Quebec immigrant women in 1850 also were operatives. However, if thirty women—the number working in factories for 1860—closely approximates the number working there ten years earlier, they would have represented only about 10 percent of the 300 female operatives employed by the Burlington Mill Company alone. Thus, it seems likely that in mid-nineteenth century Burlington and Colchester, French Canadian women were less likely than other women to work in factories, a pattern that would coincide with the apparent dominance of native-born operatives in the textile mills in this period.⁵⁶

French Canadians who came to the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century found factory labor far more appealing, especially in textile mills. Whole parishes from impoverished rural Quebec sometimes migrated directly to manufacturing communities of southern and central New England in search of steady wages and jobs that required little or no previous experience. One aspect of mill work was particularly attractive to these immigrants: it offered employment to women and children as well as to the male heads of households. *Émigrés* who had left Quebec seigneuries had always depended on the “family economy”—labor of every able-bodied family member—to operate their farms, so the idea of placing children in factory jobs seemed natural, even advantageous to them. Father E. Hamon, a Quebec priest who wrote about the French Canadian immigrants he met while visiting the industrial centers of New England in the 1880s, expressed the prevailing sentiment about child labor. “A large family,” he wrote, “is, in effect, capital which multiplies wonderfully in the States and which brings a comfort that these good people have never known on their lands in Quebec.”⁵⁷

To what degree French Canadians in mid-century Burlington, with their access to higher-paying jobs, preserved the traditional family economy is difficult to measure. The 1850 census does not include occupations either of women or children under fifteen. What sketchy information is available, however, suggests that the majority of these immigrant families did not depend on the wages of their wives and children for direct financial support.

First, evidence from the 1860 census reveals that few Burlington-area French Canadian women, and only one wife, worked in any capacity outside the home.⁵⁸ Of the 572 females, aged fifteen and older, only sixty-three, or about 11 percent, listed any occupation. These sixty-three women represented under 10 percent of the total number of French Canadian workers. By comparison, in 1898, according to MacDonald, 32,298 Quebec immigrant women in New England had outside employment and represented nearly 30 percent of the Franco-American work force there.⁵⁹ French Canadian women in Burlington and Colchester certainly contributed to the family economy through their work within the household; some also took in rent from French Canadian boarders. As a rule, however, they were not wage earners.



By and large census data suggests that French Canadian women embraced the sentimental ideal of domesticity portrayed in this stereoview entitled "Vermont Women" taken by F. G. Weller of Burlington in the 1880s. Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Vermont

Second, in 1850, of the fifty-six sons, aged fifteen through nineteen, who lived in Quebec immigrant families, only ten (or 17.9 percent) claimed to have outside employment. Since it would have been more likely for older children than younger ones to find work, it seems fair to assume that an even smaller percentage of children under age fifteen had wage-paying jobs.⁶⁰ In contrast, historian Frances Early, who has written about the French Canadians of Lowell, Massachusetts, reported

that in Lowell, in 1870, seven out of ten Quebec immigrant children between the ages of ten and fifteen were employed outside their homes.⁶¹ Peter Haebler presented a similar pattern of child labor in his research on the French Canadians of Holyoke, Massachusetts. He found 451 of these immigrant children, aged fifteen and under, employed in the textile mills.⁶²

An analysis of average family size also may reveal the level of dependence of a population on child labor. The family economy in both rural Quebec and industrial New England worked most profitably when families were large. More children meant more hands for farm work or more weekly pay envelopes, and the fruits of their labor more than compensated for the extra costs of an added family member. Frances Early, in comparing incomes to family size of Lowell French Canadians in 1870, found a direct correlation between the number of working children in a family and its standard of living.⁶³ Father Hamon described the typical Quebec immigrant family in a New England mill town as arriving "poor in earthly goods but rich in children" having "eight or ten children of different ages."⁶⁴ The impetus among these postwar immigrants to produce large families must have remained after they had settled in New England, for, according to Susan Trofimenkoff, in her chapter on Quebec emigration from *The Dream of Nation*, their population "was doubling every twenty-eight years from the birth rate alone."⁶⁵

In the light of both Quebec tradition and later French Canadian immigrant practice, the pattern of family size revealed in Table 3 is surprising. In 1850 the average French Canadian family had fewer than three children living at home. Furthermore, at no point in the stages of family growth was there an average of more than four children at home (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
Average Number of French Canadian Children Living at Home,
by Age of Wife—Burlington and Colchester (combined), 1850.

<i>Age of Wife</i>	<i>Number of Wives in Age Group</i>	<i>Total Number of Children at Home</i>	<i>Average Number of Children at Home</i>
Under 20	16	15	0.9
20 - 29	80	165	2.1
30 - 39	59	217	3.7
40 - 49	46	178	3.9
50 and over	36	77	2.1
Total	237	652	2.8

One possible explanation for the small size of these families is that the French Canadians who came to the region in this period left some of their children with relatives in Quebec until the children were old enough to

find employment. Tamara Hareven, in her study of the role of kinship in the working lives of Manchester, New Hampshire, textile operatives from 1880 to 1930, found that French Canadians did, in fact, leave younger children in Canada until they could be placed in the mills.⁶⁶ An analysis of the ages of children in Burlington-area French Canadian families, however, suggests that few, if any, of these earlier immigrants practiced such selective family migration. In 1850 there were 438 children under ten years old living in French Canadian families but only 236 children aged ten through nineteen. Therefore, there were nearly twice as many sons and daughters too young to be employed outside the home as there were children who might have been able to find jobs. These families must have survived on the wages of just one family member.

Thus, available information on both family make-up and employment suggests that a majority of the French Canadian families of mid-nineteenth century Burlington and Colchester had only one breadwinner, the father. In post-Civil War Lowell, Massachusetts, Early found that the standard of living among French Canadian families rose as more family members entered the textile work force, so large families, particularly with older children, were an economic benefit. In the single income families, however, a large number of children would have been a financial liability rather than an asset. While there is no direct evidence to suggest that these immigrants used any means of birth control, it is clear that many parents had a strong motivation to limit family growth. Furthermore, these couples were living in a new and liberating environment away from the pull of tradition and the exhortation of the Quebec clergy to have many children. In this new setting economic considerations could have become the primary concern, and they favored small families.

A further inducement for few children may have been the limits of available living space. Table 4 reveals that only about 10 percent of the

TABLE 4

Value of Real Estate Owned by French Canadian Heads of Families in Burlington and Colchester (combined), 1850.

<i>Value in \$</i>	<i>Number of French Canadian Heads in Families with Property of that Value</i>	<i>% of Total Number of French Canadian Family Heads</i>
No Property	236	88.7
0 - 500	14	5.3
600 - 1000	4	1.5
1100 - 1500	6	2.2
1600 - 2000	4	1.5
over 2000	2	.8
Total	266	100.0

families owned their own homes. Of these property owners, only twelve had real estate valued at over \$1000. Evidently, most Quebec immigrants who came to the region either had to rent living space or could only afford to buy modest houses for themselves. Fewer children at home meant fewer rooms to rent or more comfortable living in the small homes that some could afford to purchase.

The composite picture of the French Canadian worker which emerges from an analysis of census data for mid-nineteenth century Burlington and Colchester is that of a wage laborer of modest means. Most worked with their hands, some with special skills but others with only their strength to offer an employer. Some were carpenters, masons, coopers and shoemakers; others were day laborers, teamsters, carters and farm workers. Few owned property; even fewer owned real estate of significant value.

Yet, these immigrant workers, however poor, had a clear economic advantage over French Canadians who came, without skills, to work in New England manufacturing centers in the latter part of the nineteenth century. They left Quebec after agricultural and overpopulation problems had become serious but before the exodus from rural parishes had become a mass movement. They arrived in the Burlington area during a period of growth in the region but before industrialization was fully developed. The pre-industrial skills they had acquired on the farms, in the lumber yards, and in the cities of early nineteenth century Quebec were still in demand in mid-century Burlington so they could choose suitable jobs, and few were dependent on low-paying factory work or the wages of several family members.

These French Canadians also made choices about their personal lives, choices that represented a shift away from traditional Quebec values. Responding both to the socio-economic upheavals in Canada and the new economic realities of the United States, they ignored the counsel of their priests, first by leaving their ancestral homes and then by producing smaller families than had been the norm in French Canada. At mid-century it appeared that opportunity across the border would produce a distinct Franco-American culture in the Burlington area.

NOTES

¹ T. D. Seymour Bassett, "Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont, 1840-80" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1952), *passim.*; Ruth Etta Wright, *History of the Town of Colchester* (Burlington, Vt.: Queen City Publishers, 1963), p. 71.

² Bassett, "Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont," p. 264, p. 55.

³ Jean Frédéric Audet, *Histoire de la Congrégation Canadienne de Winooski au Vermont* (Montreal: Imprimerie de l'Institution des Sourds-Muet), p. 17.

⁴ Information on Bruno Peppin taken from the 1850 census for Burlington and the 1860 census for Colchester, Vermont.

⁵ Robert L. Picher, "The Franco-Americans in Vermont," *Vermont History* 28 (January 1960): 60.

⁶ J. Kevin Graffagnino, *The Shaping of Vermont: From the Wilderness to the Centennial, 1749-1877* (Rutland, Vt.: Vermont Heritage Press, 1983), p. 15.

⁷ Audet, *Histoire de la Congrégation Canadienne de Winooski*, p. 17.

⁸ Graffagnino, *The Shaping of Vermont*, p. 16.

⁹ Ralph D. Vicerio, "French Canadian Settlement in Vermont Prior to the Civil War," *The Professional Geographer* 23 (October 1971): 290-294.

¹⁰ For a discussion of early Roman Catholic missionary work with French Canadians in Vermont see Joseph N. Couture, "New England's First National Parish; or, The History of St. Joseph's of Burlington, Vermont" (M. A. thesis, St. Michael's College, Winooski, Vermont, n.d.), pp. 13-17.

¹¹ Joseph Octave Plessis, quoted in Couture, "New England's First National Parish," p. 14.

¹² Population figures taken from the 1820 census as listed in F. W. Beers, *Atlas of Chittenden Co. Vermont, from Actual Surveys* (1869; reprint, Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1971), p. 2.

¹³ Vicerio, "French Canadian Settlement in Vermont," p. 290.

¹⁴ Bassett, "Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont," p. 294.

¹⁵ W. S. Rann, *History of Chittenden County, Vermont* (Syracuse, N. Y.: D. Mason and Co., 1886), p. 561.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Audet, *Histoire de la Congrégation Canadienne de Winooski*, p. 35; David Blow, "The Establishment and Erosion of French Canadian Culture in Winooski, Vermont, 1867-1900," *Vermont History* 41 (Winter 1975): 59-74.

¹⁸ Joseph Amrhein, "Burlington, Vermont: The Economic History of a Northern New England City" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University School of Business Administration, 1958), pp. 191-194.

¹⁹ Audet, *Histoire de la Congrégation Canadienne de Winooski*, pp. 37-38.

²⁰ Stephen Kenny, "Duvernay's Exile in 'Balenton': The Vermont Interlude of a Canadian Patriot," *Vermont History* 52 (Spring 1984): 105.

²¹ Malcolm D. Daggett, "Vermont's First French Newspaper," *Vermont History* 22 (April 1956): 132-133.

²² Ludger Duvernay, translated by Daggett in his "Vermont's First French Newspaper," pp. 135-136.

²³ Kenny, "Duvernay's Exile in 'Balenton'," pp. 110-111.

²⁴ Daggett, "Vermont's First French Newspaper," p. 137.

²⁵ In the late 1830s Ludger Duvernay was instrumental in helping the French-Canadian community petition Bishop Fenwick of Boston to send a French-speaking priest to Burlington. The priest who came, Abbé François Ancy, did not remain in the city for long, but the French Canadians had learned an important lesson in seeking redress from church authorities for their grievances. In 1850 their renewed requests for a separate priest and church led to the founding of St. Joseph's church, Vermont's first French-speaking parish. See Couture, "New England's First National Parish," *passim*.

²⁶ The French Canadians of Colchester, for example, were active in town politics as early as 1852 when Francis LeClair was first elected selectman. In 1874 the town sent Charles Lafountain to the Vermont House of Representatives; he was the first state legislator of French Canadian descent in Vermont history. For a discussion of French Canadian political activity in Colchester see David Blow, "The Establishment and Erosion of French Canadian Culture in Winooski, Vermont, 1867-1900," *Vermont History* 41 (Winter 1975): 59-74.

²⁷ Benedict Joseph Fenwick, quoted in Ralph Vicerio, "Immigration of French Canadians to New England, 1840-1900: A Geographical Analysis" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1968), p. 91.

²⁸ Audet, *Histoire de la Congrégation Canadienne de Winooski*, p. 36.

²⁹ Leonard Dinnerstein and Frederick Cople Jaher, ed., *The Aliens: A History of Ethnic Minorities in America* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), p. 205.

³⁰ The second largest French Canadian settlement in Vermont was in Swanton, which had 573 *Québécois* residents. See Vicerio, "Immigration of French Canadians to New England," pp. 154-155; Vicerio, "French Canadian Settlement in Vermont," p. 291.

³¹ Rann, *History of Chittenden County*, p. 425.

³² There was no direct rail service between Burlington and Montreal until 1901. See Amrhein, "Burlington, Vermont," p. 131.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-131.

³⁴ The only wholesale business in Burlington to survive the arrival of the railroad was the coal trade, which grew in the later years of the nineteenth century as people switched from wood to coal to heat their homes. See Rann, *History of Chittenden County*, p. 425; Amrhein, "Burlington, Vermont," p. 162.

³⁵ Bassett, "Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont," p. 294.

³⁶ Amrhein, "Burlington, Vermont," p. 195.

³⁷ Burlington businessmen still had some capital invested in the Burlington Mill Company in the last years of the 1840s but apparently no longer held controlling interest in the enterprise. See Bassett, "Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont," p. 291.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 302a.

³⁹ For a brief history of the early years of the Burlington Mill Company (later the Burlington Woolen Mill company), see Amrhein, "Burlington, Vermont," pp. 195-198.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 174-186.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-203.

⁴⁴ These population figures are based on a count taken from the 1850 manuscript censuses for Burlington and Colchester of all the members of families having at least one parent born in Canada and who were French-speaking. To determine whether or not a Canadian-born person was French, I followed a series of steps. First, I determined if the surname was French, an Anglicized spelling of a French name (e.g. "Johndro" for "Gendreau") or an English translation of a French name (e.g. "White" for "Leblanc" or "Stone" for "Desroches"). Since there are English-speaking families with names such as "White" or "Stone," I then looked for a French given name such as Napoleon or Philomene among family members. If none of these procedures clearly determined the Frenchness of the name, I consulted a list of Anglicized names that appears in the records of St. Joseph's parish, the French Canadian parish in Burlington, to see if the name was included. This procedure, while careful, was not foolproof. When in doubt of the language of a Canadian-born person I assumed that he / she was not French-speaking, so these figures are underestimations.

⁴⁵ The count of Irish immigrants is also taken from the 1850 manuscript censuses for Burlington and Colchester and included the members of every family having at least one Irish-born parent. Families having a French Canadian father and Irish mother were counted as French Canadian; those with an Irish father and Canadian-born mother were counted as Irish.

⁴⁶ Amrhein, "Burlington, Vermont," p. 74.

⁴⁷ Bassett, "Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont," p. 338.

⁴⁸ Amrhein, "Burlington, Vermont," p. 67.

⁴⁹ Stephan Thernstrom, whose study of the laboring classes of Newburyport, Massachusetts, focuses largely on Irish immigrants, wrote: "The newly arrived Irish brought neither capital nor useful skills . . . Naturally, the newcomers found themselves confined to menial and ill-paid occupations." See Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 27.

⁵⁰ The categories of occupational status used in this analysis and the grouping of occupations into each status category are taken from those used by Mary P. Ryan in her study of middle-class families in early nineteenth century Utica, New York. See Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1845* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp. 244-245.

⁵¹ William MacDonald, "The French Canadians in New England," in *A Franco-American Overview*, ed. Madeleine Giguere, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: National Assessment and Dissemination Center for Bilingual / Bicultural Education, 1981) 3:10.

⁵² Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 139.

⁵³ James P. Hanlan, *The Working Population of Manchester, New Hampshire, 1840-1886* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1981), p. 132.

⁵⁴ For wages paid by the Burlington Mill Company in 1850, see Bassett, "Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont," p. 292.

⁵⁵ For the average daily wage paid to carpenters in 1850, see Amrhein, "Burlington, Vermont," p. 74.

⁵⁶ Thomas Dublin, in his study of the changing work force in the Lowell, Massachusetts, textile mills, has noted that as the number of foreign-born laborers in the mills increased, the percentage of women operatives decreased. In 1850 the Burlington Mill Company had a work force of 300 women, twice the number of men employed. If employment trends in Burlington area textile operations fit the pattern of those in Lowell, the high percentage of women in the mills suggests that most of the work force was native-born. See Dublin, *Women at Work*, pp. 139-141.

⁵⁷ Translation of "Une famille nombreuse est, en effet, un capital qui fructifie merveilleusement aux États, et qui procure un confort que ces braves gens n'avaient jamais connu dans les concessions de leur pays." See E. Hamon, *Les Canadiens-français de la Nouvelle Angleterre* (Quebec: N. S. Hardy, 1981), p. 16.

⁵⁸ The fact that only one French Canadian wife in Burlington and Colchester listed an outside occupation in 1860 is not surprising in light of recent findings on employment of married women among both French Canadian and other immigrant groups. According to the research on French Canadians in both Holyoke, Massachusetts, by Peter Haebler, and Lowell, Massachusetts, by Francis Early, even in the

post-Civil War years when French Canadians sent several family members to the textile mills, it was uncommon for wives or mothers to work outside the home. For example, Peter Haebler found that of the 710 female textile operatives in Holyoke textile factories, only 170, or 23.9 percent, were over age twenty, and presumably some of those 170 were single women or daughters still living at home. Furthermore, Elizabeth Pleck, in her article "A Mother's Wages," analyzed the employment patterns for married women among the Italians, Poles, Russians, Jews, Germans, and Irish in seven American cities in 1911. She found that for all these ethnic groups fewer than one of four wives had outside employment. See Francis Early, "The French Canadian Family and Standard-of-Living in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1870," in *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael Gordon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p. 491; Peter Haebler, "Habitants in Holyoke; the Development of the French Canadian Community in a Massachusetts City, 1865-1910: (Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Hampshire, 1976), p. 68; Elizabeth Pleck, "A Mother's Wages: Income Earning among Married Italian and Black Women, 1896-1911," in *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Gordon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), p. 496.

⁵⁹ MacDonald, "The French Canadians in New England," p. 11.

⁶⁰ According to Joseph Amrhein, the percentage of children under sixteen in the Burlington area work force was never very high, reaching only 3.5 percent at its peak in 1870. Meanwhile, in other New England communities, built around textile mills, child labor was far more common. For example, in her book *Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry, 1790-1860*, Barbara Tucker states that in the carding department at the Union Mills in Webster, Massachusetts, 83 percent of the textile operatives were between nine and fifteen years old. The Union Mills were typical of the textile operations along the Blackstone River in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, built by Samuel Slater and run on the family system of labor. In the family system, while the fathers worked outside the mills and the mothers worked at home, the children went into the textile factories and formed the bulk of the work force. See Amrhein, "Burlington, Vermont," p. 73; Barbara M. Tucker, *Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry, 1790-1860* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1964), pp. 139-146.

⁶¹ Frances Early's figures on child labor in Lowell, Massachusetts, are based on information taken from the 1870 manuscript census for Lowell. See Early, "The French Canadian Family Economy," p. 485.

⁶² Haebler, "Habitants in Holyoke," p. 68.

⁶³ Early, "The French Canadian Family Economy," *passim*.

⁶⁴ Translation taken from the following quotation by Hamon: "Un habitant, pauvre des biens de la terre mais riches d'enfants, se décide à émigrer aux États. Voici que la famille arrive dans un centre manufacturier, Lowell, Holyoke, Worcester, par exemple; avec le père et la mère il y a huit ou dix enfants de différents âges." See Hamon, *Les Canadiens Français*, p. 14.

⁶⁵ Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, *The Dream of Nation; a Social and Intellectual History of Quebec* (Toronto: Gage Publishing Ltd., 1983), p. 138.

⁶⁶ Anthony C. F. Wallace, in his discussion of textile workers in *Rockdale*, remarked on the high percentage of children, aged ten to twenty, who appeared on the 1850 census in the Rockdale manufacturing district in Pennsylvania. He attributed this high percentage to a form of selective migration in which families with teenaged children moved to an area specifically so that they could place these children in the mills. The effect of selective family migration practiced by the French Canadians in Manchester, New Hampshire, and of selective migration of whole families in Rockdale was the same: more older than younger children living in the community. See Tamara Hareven, "The Dynamics of Kin in an Industrial Community," in *Turning Points: Historical and Sociological Essays on the Family*, ed. John Demos and Sarane Spence Boocock (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 158-159; Anthony C. F. Wallace, *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), p. 36.