

# THE FRENCH IN RHODE ISLAND

*A Brief History*

Edited by

ALBERT K. AUBIN



# THE FRENCH IN RHODE ISLAND

*A Brief History*

Edited by

ALBERT K. AUBIN

Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Pamphlet Series

Published Jointly  
by  
The Rhode Island Heritage Commission  
and  
The Rhode Island Publications Society  
Providence, 1988

Published jointly by  
The Rhode Island Heritage Commission  
Robert B. Lynch, *Chairman*  
and  
The Rhode Island Publications Society  
Dr. Patrick T. Conley, *Chairman*

Copyright © 1988 The Rhode Island Heritage Commission  
All rights reserved  
Printed in the U.S.A.  
ISBN: 0-917012-97-6

*Published with a grant from the  
Rhode Island Heritage Commission*

Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Pamphlet Series  
Dr. Patrick T. Conley, *General Editor*

Cover photo: St. Jean-Baptiste Day parade, Woonsocket, ca. 1890.

This work has been researched and written under the auspices of the Franco-American Committee of the Rhode Island Heritage Commission. The actual compilation and editing of the narrative was performed with the assistance of a pamphlet committee consisting of the following scholars:

Albert K. Aubin, *Chairman*

Armand B. Chartier

Reverend Edward G. St.-Goddard

Robert P. Gaudreau

Yolande M. Riendeau

## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In 1975 and 1976, on the eve of the bicentennial observance, in my capacity as chairman of Rhode Island's celebration (ri76), I established eighteen ethnic heritage committees, consisting of recognized leaders of this state's major ethnocultural groups. One purpose of this move was to involve in bicentennial activities those ethnic communities whose contact with this country did not extend as far back as the Revolutionary era. I urged such groups to observe and commemorate the contributions they had made to the American and Rhode Island experience from the time of their arrival down to the bicentennial year. A much more important reason for establishing the ethnic heritage program, however, was to allow each group to present its unique contributions, customs, and folkways to its neighbors from other cultural backgrounds. Formulated under the premise that knowledge promotes understanding and understanding begets brotherhood, the program was designed to break down the ethnocentric barriers and antagonisms that hindered us from achieving that lofty motto and goal—*E pluribus unum*, one out of many.

The one task assigned to each group upon its formation was to write a brief interpretive account of its Rhode Island experience—its motives for migration, areas of settlement, cultural survivals, and economic, political, and social activities—together with an assessment of its contribution to the development of our state. Though some efforts are more sociological, subjective, anecdotal, or selective than the neat, precise historical narrative that I envisioned, each of these pamphlets in its own way makes a valuable statement to all Rhode Islanders and provides a useful self-evaluation for the group that is the subject of analysis.

After the bicentennial's expiration, the concept of an ethnic heritage pamphlet series was kept alive by the Rhode Island Heritage Commission and its tireless chairman, Robert J. McKenna. Albert T. Klyberg of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Dr. Hilliard Beller of the Rhode Island Publications Society, and, especially, the authors of the various essays have also labored to bring this project to fruition as their contribution to the 350th anniversary of the founding of the state. No historical enterprise could be more appropriate for this 1986 celebration than a recounting of the toil and the triumph of our diverse peoples: From American Indians to Southeast Asians, we are Rhode Islanders all!

Patrick T. Conley

## PREFACE

This is a story of a brave and gentle people, a people who conquered a world from the savage wilderness. With their wives, *les filles du roi*, the early settlers, *les habitants*, built homes and proceeded to develop a continent for their children and descendants.

This pamphlet is intended for the general public and for students of all ages. It is a brief review of the many contributions of the French to the state of Rhode Island. Through their cultural traditions and customs, the French have made and continue to make many important contributions to the state and to western civilization in general.

Shortly after the discovery of America by Columbus in 1492, French explorers sailed along the eastern seaboard. Later they mapped or colonized thirty-one of the nation's present states and most of Canada, except for regions where the Russian, Spanish, Dutch, and English empires had settlements (that is, the extreme northwest, the southwest, and the thirteen original American colonies).

During the early colonial period the French Huguenots established a small farm settlement in the East Greenwich area, but it was destroyed shortly afterwards by unscrupulous land speculators and unsympathetic townspeople. The Revolutionary era saw a French military presence in Newport and Providence, where six thousand French soldiers joined with American forces in an alliance which would lead to the defeat of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781. Later, French Canadian settlers in the Blackstone Valley contributed to the early growth of the Industrial Revolution, which in turn led to the great migrations from Quebec.

The vast economic development of the New England textile industry, which included the flourishing mills of Rhode Island, drew large numbers of French Canadians south of the forty-fifth parallel after the Civil War. The ever-increasing demand for labor in these new factories, along with the development of railroad transportation, brought tens of thousands of French Canadians to Rhode Island during the period from 1865 to 1910.

In their early efforts to establish themselves, either temporarily or permanently, the new settlers had to overcome all kinds of adversities. Resisting assimilation into the general population, French Canadians successfully established their own institutions, including churches, schools, newspapers, and various social and mutual-benefit societies.

Through their hard work and perseverance, the French have accomplished a great deal. Many have moved from the ranks of unskilled labor to positions of great responsibility and influence. Many have entered the professions. In politics the French presence has been almost as strong, despite the fact that Franco-Americans have not typically shown an interest in influencing large groups of people; their concerns, rather, have tended to be more parochial and individualistic. With their dedication to their culture, the French have preserved their language, their traditions, and their heritage through two, three, and even four generations in the United States.

It is with a growing sense of urgency, however, that we must note also that the viable French communities of the past are now in a period of profound change. Whether these communities remain distinct ethnic entities or simply become part of the nebulous mainstream of American society is a matter of great concern to those of us who are active in Franco-American affairs.

I would be remiss in not thanking those who have made this work possible. The Pamphlet Committee members who volunteered to prepare this booklet were most helpful in identifying specific material for inclusion. Dr. Claire Quintal of Assumption College offered valuable comments and recommendations. Dr. Patrick T. Conley, Dr. Hilliard Beller, and Paul Campbell of the Rhode Island Publications Society provided helpful editorial services. Lionel Frappier, vice president of l'Union St. Jean-Baptiste, and William H. Janowski, executive director of the Rhode Island Heritage Commission, were strong factors in bringing this endeavor to fruition. To them, my heartfelt thanks.

It is recommended that those who are interested in obtaining additional information on the culture, heritage, and history of the French should visit the American-French Genealogical Society, 151 Fountain Street, Pawtucket, Rhode Island; the Mallet Library, l'Union St. Jean-Baptiste, 1 Social Street, Woonsocket, Rhode Island; the Association Canado-Américaine (ACA), 52 Concord Street, Manchester, New Hampshire; or the Institute of Franco-American Studies at Assumption College, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Albert K. Aubin, Ed.M.  
Chairman, Pamphlet Committee

## Historical Overview

The first French contact with Rhode Island occurred in 1524 when King Francis I sent the *Dauphine*, captained by Italian navigator Giovanni da Verrazzano, to explore the Atlantic coast. Enchanted by the beauty of the area and by the friendliness of the Native Americans, Verrazzano spent two weeks on or near its shores, naming Block Island "Claudia" and Newport "Refuge." European politics did not allow full advantage to be taken of this early exploration, however, and there were no further links between France and Rhode Island for more than a century and a half.

In 1686 forty-five Huguenot (French Calvinist) families established residence in a section of East Greenwich still called Frenchtown. They took refuge in America when King Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, a royal decree of 1598 that had granted them religious toleration. The settlement ended unpleasantly in 1691 after a controversy concerning legitimate ownership of the land, and few vestiges of it survive. Throughout the next several decades more Huguenots immigrated to Rhode Island, though never in large numbers. These were more successful than their predecessors in setting up permanent residence. Included among these immigrants were such prominent colonial Rhode Islanders as Gabriel Bernon, a man equally devoted to commerce and religion, who was instrumental in the founding of Newport's Trinity Church and who is remembered also because Bernon Village, later a part of Woonsocket, was named after him. Another notable Huguenot immigrant was Henry Marchant, selected as one of Rhode Island's delegates to the Continental Congress. Marchant played a leadership role in the fight to secure Rhode Island's ratification of the federal Constitution.

In July 1780, residents of southern Rhode Island were afforded a

most unusual sight, as the flag of France was seen flying on Point Judith. This was the signal that the area was secure for the landing of the French force, those six thousand weary troops commanded by the Comte de Rochambeau, who had just spent seventy interminable days crossing the Atlantic to help us in our struggle for freedom. In a broad sense the flag and the troops offered concrete proof that the king of France had been serious in agreeing to the "Traité d'Amitié et de Commerce" with the United States in February 1778.

Other French—including volunteers—had preceded Rochambeau, among them the Marquis de Lafayette. Indefatigable, totally committed to the cause of American freedom from the very start, Lafayette was a frequent visitor to Rhode Island during his countless missions throughout the colonies. Another early arrival was the Marquis de Malmédy, who was appointed a brigadier general by the Rhode Island General Assembly. In the summer of 1778 a French fleet under the command of Admiral d'Estaing had engaged in a combined land-sea effort to dislodge the British from Newport. This campaign, called the Battle of Rhode Island, was the testing ground for the newly consummated Franco-American alliance. But by far the most significant assistance was brought by General de Rochambeau and fleet commander Admiral de Ternay, for it was their troops and sailors who helped achieve the final American victory at Yorktown in 1781. Sadly, the French admiral was not present for the British surrender, as he had contracted a severe fever during the encampment at Newport and had died in December 1780. He is buried in Newport's Trinity churchyard.

This eleven-month presence of the French in Newport was much appreciated and long remembered by the local population. The behavior of the troops was exemplary, the opportunities for intercultural communication were numerous, and long-standing distrust of the French as effeminate Papists was dissipated. The townspeople, especially the women, would not soon forget the gaiety of the balls given by the officers or the glitter of the town's social life during that long winter, which was so greatly enhanced by the presence of so many French aristocrats. Some would cherish yet another memory, that of George Washington visiting Rochambeau at Newport in March 1781, along with the pageantry associated with the commander in chief's visit and the sight of both generals walking leisurely together through the streets in the evening. The origin of Roman Catholicism in Rhode Island is also associated with the French at this time, since Mass was celebrated by French chaplains during the encampment and a few members of Rochambeau's army

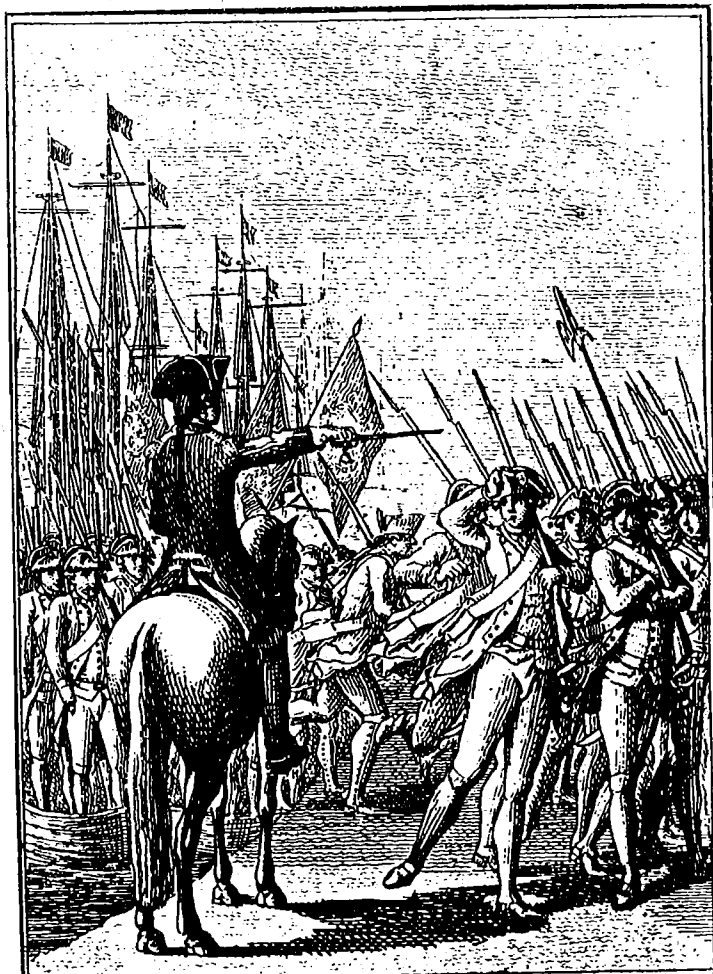
later settled on Aquidneck Island, thus laying the foundations for a Catholic community.



*Lafayette was the most famous of the many French volunteers in America's war for independence. He fought in the Battle of Rhode Island and at Yorktown. In 1824-25 Lafayette made a triumphal return to America, during which he visited the state house in Providence. This photo shows a commemoration of that visit and a presentation of Lafayette's portrait by the Franco-American Heritage Commission of the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission.*

It is also noteworthy that the presence of the French army on American soil was conducive to the development of tolerance. In 1784, as a result of French aid and the benevolent French occupation of Newport, the General Assembly rescinded the 1719 law that had barred Catholics from voting and holding political office in Rhode Island.

But Rhode Island's French connection was to become even more permanent in the nineteenth century. François Proulx and his family are considered the first French Canadian immigrants to settle in Woonsocket—indeed, in Rhode Island—thereby initiating a trend in 1815 which would last for nearly a century. While there were few immigrants between the American Revolution and the Civil War, it is estimated that over 35,000 French Canadians arrived in



*Landung einer Französischen Hülfis-  
Armee in America, zu Rhode Island.  
am 11<sup>ten</sup> Julius 1780.*

*This contemporary engraving shows the landing of Count Rochambeau's forces at Newport in July 1780. After an eleven-month stay in Rhode Island, these troops marched to Yorktown to fight in the decisive battle of the American Revolution.*



*Henry Marchant of Newport and South Kingstown, a scholar of French Huguenot descent, was a leader in the drive to secure Rhode Island's ratification of the United States Constitution. For his efforts, George Washington nominated him as Rhode Island's first federal district court judge.*

Rhode Island from 1860 to 1910 and another 22,000 from 1910 to 1930, when economic depression, especially in textiles, dramatically curtailed the flow. These immigrants took part in American life from the start, as shown by the fact that fifty-six Franco-Americans from this state joined the Union Army to fight in the Civil War.

The major reasons for the French Canadian exodus from the north were largely economic, since the agricultural and industrial policies of the Canadian and Quebec governments did not yield adequate employment opportunities for a fast-expanding population. When the immigrants arrived in Rhode Island, they were viewed with some suspicion and were subjected to a certain amount of prejudice. This distrust, amounting to animosity in some cases, had to be countered with proofs of loyalty to the United States—wartime enlistment was one such proof—and with repeated

demonstrations that one could be both Franco *and* American. At the same time, the new settlers were making every effort to preserve their French language and culture, often maintaining formal and informal contacts with Canada and in some cases even with France. Behind this effort was a doctrine long preached by Franco-American religious and lay leaders, the doctrine of *survivance*, which called for resisting assimilation and preserving the religion, language, customs, and traditions of the Franco-American people.

The large-scale exodus from Canada continued for approximately seven decades (1860-1930), many immigrants being drawn primarily to the expanding textile mills of the Blackstone and Pawtuxet valleys. In time there came to be large French populations in at least a dozen centers: Woonsocket and its environs of Slatersville, Manville, Albion, and Ashton in the upper Blackstone Valley; Pawtucket and Central Falls in the lower Blackstone Valley; the West End and Olneyville neighborhoods of Providence; Warren; the Pawtuxet Valley villages of Phenix, Natick, Arctic, and Centerville, now all part of West Warwick; Georgiaville and Esmond in today's Smithfield; and Centredale, Marienville, and Lymansville, all in North Providence. Also in time—although quite often this required more than one generation—some immigrants moved from the mills to other occupations in the arts, the Church, education, law, medicine, science, business, and government.

In politics, the career of Aram J. Pothier (1854-1928) remains unsurpassed by any Franco-American of Rhode Island. Having immigrated to Woonsocket at the age of sixteen, Pothier learned English while he learned the banking profession, became mayor of Woonsocket in 1894, and in 1908 was elected governor of Rhode Island, an office to which he was repeatedly reelected. A successful banker and politician, Aram Pothier also left an enviable record as an industrialist, having founded or cofounded several mills, thus creating employment for thousands, while helping to transform Woonsocket into a thriving industrial center. Doubtless it was because of such men as Aram Pothier that Josaphat Benoit, the longtime mayor of Manchester, New Hampshire, could write: "Rhode Island is the state where the Franco-Americans of New England have become most famous in politics." Between 1908 and 1914 Pothier was elected governor for five consecutive terms, and he was elected again in 1924 and 1926. In all, he served nine years and two months as chief executive, the longest tenure since the adoption of the present constitution in 1843. Pothier's story is that of the young and ambitious immigrant who overcame all obstacles on his way to success.



*Aram J. Pothier was the state's first great Franco-American political leader. He served as governor from 1909 to 1915 and again from 1925 to 1928, when he died in office. His gubernatorial tenure of nine years and two months is the longest of any chief executive since the adoption of the state constitution of 1843.*

Of all Rhode Island's notable Franco-Americans, Napoléon Lajoie, a baseball player, has gained the greatest renown. Lajoie—"the Big Frenchman"—was born in Woonsocket in 1875, the son of French Canadian immigrants. His baseball accomplishments made him a national sports attraction for a generation and the idol of Franco-American youth. Beginning his professional career in Fall River in 1896, he soon ascended to the major leagues, where he immediately became a star. Over a twenty-year span, during which he played second base for three major league teams, Lajoie compiled a lifetime batting average of .339. He led his league in batting three times, his .422 average in 1901 being the second highest in modern major league history. An excellent fielder and a swift runner, he also





*Woonsocket-born Napoléon Lajoie has been called "the Rhode Island male athlete most proficient in his chosen sport." A member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, second baseman Lajoie compiled a lifetime batting average of .339 during twenty major league seasons.*

proved his managerial ability as player-manager of the Cleveland Indians from 1905 through 1909. Lajoie was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1937, its second year of existence, having been preceded in this honor by only five baseball immortals.

Limitations of space do not permit more than a passing mention

of the ethnoreligious controversies that took place in Woonsocket in the 1920s. The best known of these struggles was one called *la Sentinelle*, a controversy that sent shock waves throughout New England and French Canada. The *Sentinelle* dispute dealt chiefly with questions of parish autonomy in the management of parish funds, as opposed to the central diocesan administration of those funds. It also raised questions about control of Mount St. Charles Academy and about the bishop's right to levy taxes for the construction and maintenance of high schools where rapid assimilation of immigrants would take place, especially since English would be the language of the classroom. Then, as now, there were no easy answers—certainly no answers which might have been universally accepted. As the *Sentinellistes* saw it, one's cultural heritage need not be incompatible with one's faith, but could actually serve to strengthen it; nor did one's faith require blind submission to the Church hierarchy. The clergy itself was divided, as experts in canon law from Quebec, Montreal, and Rome were pressed into the service of the opposing camps. Theological warfare—and a war of nerves—dragged on into the late 1920s, and sixty-five men were excommunicated before relenting.

Whether this vehement conflict of ideas and loyalties accelerated or slowed down the "Americanization" of the Franco-Americans will probably never be established. It does seem clear, however, that Franco-American awareness and group consciousness have never been greater than they were in the 1920s and 1930s—that is, during those very years when the group was polarized—and during the immediately ensuing years, when a semblance of peace was restored.

The story of the French in Rhode Island from the 1870s to the World War II era is revealed to a certain extent by the growth of Franco-American institutions. Of these, none were more important than the national parishes, especially the older ones. Precious Blood, Woonsocket, founded in August 1872, was the pioneer parish and a cornerstone of French culture, and it has played a central role in the history of the Woonsocket French. In Central Falls, Notre-Dame, founded in 1873, is the site of the first Franco-American-built church in the diocese to be completed by French Canadian immigrants. St. Jean-Baptiste, West Warwick, whose magnificent 1880 church was built to resemble churches in Quebec, has been the matrix of French culture in the Pawtuxet Valley. Until recently, these and twenty other French national parishes have remained close to the hearts of the people, for they were built with the small contributions of the immigrant mill workers rather than with the large gifts of the

wealthy. In the Franco-American community, the parish has played an enormous role in both the religious and social lives of its people.

Individualistic yet clannish, Franco-Americans have worked collectively to develop other impressive institutions as well. One of these is l'Union St.-Jean-Baptiste, founded in 1900 and headquartered in Woonsocket because of the city's preponderantly French character. This organization continues its work of defending and promoting the Franco-American cultural heritage through a number of educational and charitable programs. Today it is the nation's largest mutual-benefit society for Americans of French descent.

In 1915 Notre-Dame Parish opened the Central Falls Credit Union, which functions to this day for the economic benefit of the citizens of the lower Blackstone Valley. The parish was also responsible for the building in 1925 of Notre Dame Hospital, which continues to minister to all with a wide range of medical care and a twenty-four-hour ambulatory service.

Founded in 1933 in Woonsocket, the Club Marquette has been involved in a broad variety of charitable, educational, political, and cultural activities. Its most visible achievement, however, was the creation in 1944 of the Marquette Credit Union, an institution patterned after Quebec's well-known *Caisses populaires Desjardins*. In 1985 the Marquette Credit Union had assets in excess of 139 million dollars and a ten-story office building which dominates the Woonsocket skyline.

Other active and prominent organizations include Pawtucket's Le Foyer, a Catholic men's social club established in 1936; the American-French Genealogical Society; the Alliance Française; and la Fédération Française du Rhode Island. But the vitality of institutions such as these must not lure us into unrealistic optimism. Assimilation has made devastating inroads since World War II, and this trend threatens the eventual loss of a collective Franco-American cultural identity.

In the 1980 federal census, a French ethnic background was claimed, in whole or in part, by 178,705 Rhode Islanders out of a total state population of 947,000. A French Canadian background, listed separately, was claimed by 27,835. Although some duplication in the two categories must exist, these ancestral claims place those of French heritage at or slightly above the 200,000 figure, making them Rhode Island's second largest ethnocultural group. In that census the Irish tallied 210,950, the English 194,386, and the Italians 185,080.

## Immigration, Settlement, and Achievement

Before the Civil War, French Canadian migration was usually of a seasonal nature. *Habitants*, or peasant farmers, would go south for a few months to work on the farms of Vermont and upper New York State or in the lumber camps of Maine and New Hampshire. This pattern of earning needed money and then returning to Quebec was common during the first half of the nineteenth century.

A few French Canadians did travel as far south as the budding industrial centers of Massachusetts and Rhode Island during this period. In 1815 the Proulx family arrived and settled in the Woonsocket area of Rhode Island, and soon other French Canadian families were also settling in the Blackstone Valley. By 1846 Woonsocket and the mill villages along the river to the south included 332 French Canadians among their population.

During and immediately after the Civil War, the textile industry's rapid growth provided the impetus for a tremendous influx of French Canadian immigration into Rhode Island. The Civil War itself, the low status associated with mill work, and the westward migration of the native population each contributed to the development of an acute labor shortage. Seeing the chance to cope with this problem by obtaining a hardworking and readily available labor force, millowners sent agents to the Province of Quebec to engage workers and bring them into Rhode Island under contract.

These overtures were being made at a time when the *habitants* were extremely susceptible to the idea of emigrating for a better life. The motive for migration was economic, for in Canada the *habitants'* traditional values and mores kept them out of commercial and industrial activities, while at the same time their economic status—



In 1815 François (Fanfan) Proulx became the first Rhode Island-born child of French Canadian parents. By the time of his death in 1884, he had become one of the civic leaders of Woonsocket's rapidly increasing Franco-American community.

based on farming, lumbering, and trapping—was beginning to decline. Furthermore, by 1870 hardly any land was available in Quebec to accommodate the growing French Canadian population. It was not uncommon, for instance, to find families of sixteen, seventeen, or even twenty children. This high birth rate forced many to migrate from the Province of Quebec, for *la Belle Province* was simply unable to support her growing population. Farming, which was the real basis of the French Canadian economy, was not profitable and held little inducement for them to stay. Work in the fields was very hard, yet the harvest from the exhausted soil was scanty.

Since the farm demanded very long hours from the entire family, it usually left little time for the children's intellectual development. Few were able to attend more than three or four years of school, and some received no formal education at all. The children were needed on the farm to assist the family economy. The need to survive preempted the "luxury" of an education, and as a result many *habitants* remained illiterate throughout their lifetime.

Unable to read a newspaper and too poor to travel, many of these people knew little of what went on in the world beyond the boundaries of their own village. Only those fortunate enough to come from a fairly prosperous family received the chance to further their education in the city, where the girls could attend a *couvent* run by the nuns and the boys a *séminaire* run by priests. Graduates of such schools usually had the opportunity to enter into a profession or the religious life.

Religion played an important role in the daily life of everyone, rich or poor, *habitant* or professional. The church was generally located in the center of the village and was the focal point of all activity, with the *curé* as the guardian of his flock. The *habitants* felt secure knowing that their religion kept them united, and this in turn helped to preserve their unique French Canadian ethnic identity.

When we take into account the *habitant's* hard work with little reward, his poor living conditions, his lack of educational opportunities, his inadequate representation in government, and his general dislike for Canadians of British stock, we can begin to understand why these people were attracted to "the land of opportunity" which lay south of the forty-fifth parallel.

The reception of the first wave of French Canadians who migrated to Rhode Island in the 1840s and 1850s was not cordial. The established residents of English ancestry disliked these newly arrived people because of their religion, their customs, and their language. Much of this resentment was channeled through a nativist

movement known as the Know-Nothing party. This group was composed of Protestants who both hated and feared Catholics in the United States. They believed that the Irish, French Canadians, and other Catholic groups would one day unite, multiply, and eventually turn the nation into a Papist-controlled state. During the mid-1850s the Know-Nothings won key positions in the federal, state, and local governments. Although the political movement had died out by the time of the Civil War, its philosophy of hatred and prejudice would linger well into the twentieth century.

Even the Catholic Irish-Americans were not immune from such intolerance. In the late nineteenth century an ethnocultural rift developed between the Irish and the French Canadians concerning religious, economic, and linguistic issues.

As a result of such antagonisms, the early French Canadian arrivals in Rhode Island were under tremendous pressure to change their distinctive traits. Many did in fact anglicize their names and change their religion, for prior to the 1870s there was no significant number of French Canadian priests or professional people to assume a leadership role in protecting the group's cultural identity. Once new names were adopted, they were retained and passed on from generation to generation.

Despite the initial wave of resentment, the first French Canadian immigrants found that the standard of living in New England was well beyond their expectations. These few immigrants became the prime impetus for the great movement of French Canadian people across the border. The following letter typifies the kind of correspondence newcomers to Rhode Island sent back to their relatives in the Province of Quebec:

The pay is good, Basile. We work from sunrise to sunset, but on Sunday the mills are closed and it is like a church holy day. The work is not hard. I am in the cotton mill. Some of the children are working and we make more money than we can spend. Let me know what you decide, and if you want to come I will speak to the foreman.

The tales of prosperity spread like wildfire, and thousands were soon immigrating from Quebec to Rhode Island. Between 1860 and 1910, over 35,000 French Canadians entered the state. The majority were attracted to the Blackstone Valley area, where the textile mills were flourishing and the opportunities for work were plentiful.

The millowners of Rhode Island were extremely pleased with the French Canadians as a source of labor and therefore put aside their initial antagonism and apprehension. Not only were the *habitants* tireless and dedicated workers, but they would frequently

accept lower wages than other workers demanded, and they also went on strike less often, for the leaders of their local communities—most notably their priests—advised them to be law-abiding. The French Canadian workers' failure to join in labor disputes increased the antagonism between them and their fellow Yankee and Irish workers, who did participate in strikes, and their willingness to accept less money for their labor further exacerbated this hostility.

One of the most scathing attacks upon this French Canadian attitude toward work came from the pen of the state labor commissioner of Massachusetts, Carroll D. Wright. In his 1880 annual report he stated:

With some exceptions the Canadian French are the Chinese of the Eastern States. They are a horde of industrial invaders, not a stream of stable settlers. These people have one good trait. They are indefatigable workers and docile. To earn all they can by no matter how many hours of toil . . . and to take out of the country what they can save: this is the aim of the Canadian French in our factory districts.

This prejudiced view of the French Canadians put into words the feelings of many Irish and Yankees about these new immigrants from the north.

Several reasons lay behind the mutual distrust between the French Canadians and the Irish. First and foremost was the language barrier. Since many French Canadians had come to Rhode Island only for economic reasons, with the intention of returning to Canada, most never bothered to learn English. Job competition was also a major factor adversely affecting Franco-Irish relations.

In addition, the two groups differed markedly in their views of religious authority and parish finances. Under the French Canadian system, the *curé* and an appointed parish council had control of all finances. Parishioners regarded their *curé* as a father and guardian who always had their best interests at heart. As a result, church matters in Quebec were run locally. Accustomed to dealing directly with their pastor, who could be approached at any time, the French Canadians did not accept the highly centralized Irish power structure in which the major emphasis was placed on the bishop's authority and very little control existed at the parish level.

These initial differences between the French Canadians and the Irish were magnified to the point where almost all contacts between the two Catholic immigrant groups deteriorated into conflict.

The hostility that the French Canadian immigrants encountered served only to strengthen their determination to maintain their identity and heritage. Although at first they lacked the time, the finances, and the leadership necessary to undertake this monumental

task, by the 1880s there were a large number of priests, doctors, merchants, businessmen, and journalists available to supply these needs, and the effort to develop a French Canadian sense of unity, direction, and purpose was well under way.

To accomplish this aim, a number of social organizations were formed during the period from 1870 to 1900. These included French Canadian churches, parish schools, newspapers, and a multitude of fraternal, mutual-aid, and religious associations. All of these played a major role in stabilizing the French Canadian's life during this very difficult time.

By 1895 definite centers of French Canadian influence were established and easily identifiable in Rhode Island. The largest concentrations of French Canadian stock were in Woonsocket (12,000), Central Falls (6,000), Centerville and its environs in present-day West Warwick (6,000), Manville (3,500), Providence (3,075), Pawtucket (3,000), Harrisville (1,800), Warren (1,725), Natick (1,700), Slatersville (1,300), Georgiaville (1,289), Pascoag (925), and Albion (500). In just these thirteen settlements we can account for over 42,000 of the 46,000 Rhode Islanders of French Canadian birth or parentage estimated to be living in the state by 1895.

Rhode Island's French Canadian immigrants displayed a penchant for settling either in small factory towns and villages or in the so-called French Canadian sections of the larger cities. They were drawn there by the booming textile industry, which employed not



The textile mills of the Blackstone and Pawtucket valleys attracted the bulk of those French Canadians who migrated to Rhode Island. Shown here in this turn-of-the-century photo are French Canadian mill hands who lived in the vicinity of the village of Arctic.

only single men but whole families, including even the children. Neither age nor sex was a fundamental consideration in the mills; there was work that a child could do, and no laws existed to bar even the youngest from working in factories. The French Canadians further tended to form compact groups and recreate the life they had once known in Quebec, so much so that these centers of settlement soon became known as "little Canadas."

A stranger could easily recognize these neighborhoods by their distinctive characteristics. Reflecting the geographical structure of Quebec's rural villages, the church was usually the nucleus of the area. In the immediate vicinity of the church were the school, the rectory, and the convent. Not too far away there might be a grocery store, a drugstore, and perhaps a hardware store, all owned and operated by French Canadians. These businesses, whose customers all knew one another, often served as social gathering places where men and women could chat about the daily occurrences in the neighborhood. The French Canadian club, which offered a variety of diversions, would also be found nearby.

Walking a few blocks farther away from the center of the neighborhood, one would find the residential section, with its three- and four-story tenement houses, where the majority of the French Canadian factory workers lived. Parents often occupied the ground floor while their married children boarded upstairs with their families. Little children played in the yards, on the sidewalk, and in the streets, always speaking French among themselves. Since the "little Canadas" were generally located near the textile factories, this meant that for all practical purposes one could go to work, to school, to church, to buy provisions, and to socialize all within walking distance of the home.

The French Canadian parish church was literally and figuratively the center of all the "little Canadas." To properly gauge its importance, one must recall the role that the church played in the *habitant's* life back in Quebec. This life was primarily rural, and the church and the family were the two most powerful forces that molded it. The *habitants'* small villages, situated amid a vast wilderness, made their residents frugal and diligent, parochial and isolated. The most influential persons in these communities were the male family heads and the local *curé*.

When the *habitants* migrated to Rhode Island, they found a very different kind of life. The French Canadian leaders were quick to realize that association with the English Protestants and the materialistic way of life in the cities could cause the irreversible loss

of ethnic identity. To combat this trend, they formed an American equivalent of the Quebec village—a French Canadian parish.

All the important facets of the French Canadian heritage were vulnerable in this early period—religion, language, culture, ultimately even the family itself. If the transplanted *habitant* was to survive as a French Canadian in this new atmosphere, there would need to be continued close association and mutual support between the parish church and the family.

By 1895 eight distinctive French Canadian parishes had been established in Rhode Island. These churches played an extremely important role in the lives of the early immigrants. As one knowledgeable observer has stated, "The church meant home, the village in the Province of Quebec, French-Canadian customs, relatives, friends; the church gave vent to all that complex of feelings tied up intimately with home."

The most notable example of the traditional *curé-fondateur*, or parish leader, was Monsignor Charles Dauray, the longtime pastor of



The most renowned of the pioneer French Canadian clergy, Monsignor Charles Dauray served the Franco-Americans of Rhode Island from 1872 until his death in 1931.

Precious Blood Parish in Woonsocket. His career is actually representative of the history of the French-speaking population of Rhode Island from 1870 to 1930. Not only was Monsignor Dauray the moving force in the establishment of two French Canadian parishes (Precious Blood and Notre-Dame), but he was also the spiritual leader and spokesman for French Canadians in all of Rhode Island.

Once the French Canadian parishes were established, a second major objective was to secure the continuance of the French faith, language, and customs through parish schools. Before these schools existed, parents had to send their children either to public schools or to Irish Catholic schools. Because of the language barrier and cultural differences, many French Canadian students found it difficult to keep up with the rest of their class, and they were frequently the butt of their schoolmates' prejudice. As a result, a number of these children actually preferred work in the mills to formal schooling.

The pastors of the early French Canadian parishes quickly saw the dangers inherent in this situation. Unless French parochial schools were established, the entire fabric of the French Canadian identity could come apart. Everywhere was repeated the old adage: "He who loses his language loses his faith." With this battle cry, the parishioners gave their wholehearted support to the establishment of French Canadian parochial schools and helped make them a reality. These schools, where both French and English were taught, were one of the most important means of instructing future generations in the religion, language, and heritage necessary to preserve and perpetuate their French Canadian identity.

The French Canadian press played a large role in the struggle to maintain the identity of the French Canadians in the United States. The dominant interests and most widely discussed items in these papers were the preservation of language, religion, and group identity. From the beginning the French Canadian press realized that its primary purpose was to preserve the group's culture and to serve as an educational medium, explaining the American governmental system and customs to a people who were new to the United States.

The establishment of French Canadian newspapers in Rhode Island was sporadic. The first publication was *L'Etoile*, founded in 1873 in Woonsocket by M. Desmarais. Its first number was also its last. For twenty years thereafter many newspapers were attempted, but all of them failed. It was only with the 1895 founding of *La Tribune* by Adelard Lafond in Woonsocket that Rhode Island had a truly representative French Canadian newspaper. *La Tribune* was

also the first French Canadian newspaper in the United States to commence publication as a daily.

\* \* \* \* \*

During the decades from 1900 to 1930, the economic, political, and social gains made by earlier French Canadian immigrants were consolidated as Rhode Island's French Canadians spread beyond the bounds of the "little Canadas" established earlier and made their presence felt in the larger community.

By this time most French Canadians had learned to speak English, the majority had become American citizens, and an entire generation was soon to emerge which had been born and raised in the state of Rhode Island. These second-generation French Canadians owed their allegiance to one country, the United States of America, while still retaining a love for the language, the religion, and the traditions of their mother country. They were truly bilingual and bicultural.

Eventually the combined exposure to a new economic life-style, other types of social institutions, and a relatively higher standard of living altered the French Canadian's traditional social system to the point that by the fourth decade of the twentieth century we see the emergence of a distinct subculture, one that came to be called Franco-American.

French was still the primary language in the early Franco-American family, but contrary to the practice in Canada, English was often learned as a second language. This change represented just one aspect of assimilation, a social process that also affected the family structure, education, occupation, social and physical mobility, and community organization.

The majority of the Franco-Americans still labored as semiskilled workers in manufacturing, primarily as weavers and spinners in the cotton and woolen mills, but an increasing number were drawn into other occupational specialties ranging from those of the small entrepreneur to the professions. Each Franco-American community soon developed its own ethnic businesses—clothing and shoe stores, family grocery and variety stores, plus an array of other community enterprises—and eventually a large professional class of Franco-Americans emerged in such fields as medicine, dentistry, and law.

The Franco-Americans not only gained social acceptance but made political gains once they organized properly. As early as the

1880s Ferdinand Gagnon, in his paper *Le Travailleur*, wrote that the French Canadians would be protected as a group if they sent representatives to the legislature or to political offices on the municipal level. He encouraged them to seek naturalization and then vote for French Canadian candidates.

The rank and file of the French Canadians in the late nineteenth century had not yet developed a keen interest in politics, but their leaders, recognizing that the French Canadians were here to stay, encouraged their countrymen to seek the rights and privileges of American citizenship as quickly as possible. Until 1888 the Rhode Island constitution required that a foreign-born citizen own real property in order to vote and hold office, whereas the native-born were exempt from this landed requirement.

The political affiliations of the early French Canadians were usually those of their employers, the industrialists of Rhode Island, with whom they shared a common economic interest. Since most of the employers were Republicans, the French Canadian voted Republican. The Irish, on the other hand, were Democrats at this time, and they were making a move to gain control over that party in Rhode Island. The resentment between these two ethnic groups naturally helped to keep them estranged politically, especially when the Republicans began to give French Canadians a place as candidates on their ticket.

Evidence that the Franco-Americans had arrived politically was abundant by the turn of the present century. For fourteen years of the period from 1894 to 1920, the office of mayor in Woonsocket was occupied by five Franco-Americans. However, the greatest Franco-American achievement in politics occurred when Aram J. Pothier held the governorship of Rhode Island from 1909 to 1915 and again from 1925 until his death in office on February 28, 1928. Other high-ranking Republicans of Franco-American stock during this era of Republican affiliation included Emery J. San Souci of Providence (lieutenant governor, 1915-1921; governor, 1921-1923) and Felix Hebert of the Pawtuxet Valley (U.S. senator, 1929-1935).

In the depression decade of the 1930s, the Franco-Americans changed their political affiliation as the textile industry declined and the economic bond with their employers became strained by hard times and labor unrest. With the Sentinellist movement in eclipse and the Irish displaying greater tolerance, a decisive Franco-American shift to the Democratic party took place. This shift was spearheaded by politician and novelist Albéric A. Archambault of West Warwick, the first Democratic state chairman of French

Canadian descent, and Lieutenant Governor Felix A. Toupin of Woonsocket.

In the years since the 1930s, the Democratic state leadership has included such distinguished Franco-Americans as Armand H. Cote, secretary of state (1941-1957) and lieutenant governor (1957-1959); August P. La France, secretary of state (1959-1973); Philip W. Noel, governor (1973-1977); and Roger Begin, general treasurer (1985- ). Franco-Americans have been also well represented on the national level, first by Congressman Aime J. Forand (1937-1939, 1941-1961), the reputed "Father of Medicare," and then by Fernand J. St Germain (1961- ), the congressional authority on commercial banking and longtime chairman of the House Banking Committee.

## Woonsocket:

### A Typical French Community

One Rhode Island area that was strongly affected by mass migrations was a series of small mill villages on the Blackstone River in the northern part of the state. This locale had originally been inhabited by Indians, who had given it the name Woonsocket ("thunder mist"). Its first European settlers were the Arnolds, who established a sawmill at the falls in the late seventeenth century. The community slowly grew as more English settlers arrived and made Woonsocket their home.

In the early nineteenth century, non-English immigrant groups began to make their presence felt also. The first of these immigrants to arrive in noticeable numbers were the Irish, who came seeking relief from poverty and oppression in Ireland. By 1860 they were the largest ethnic group in the area. It was during the Civil War period that the French Canadians, the group that would supplant the Irish as the dominant influence in Woonsocket, left their unproductive farms in Quebec and began arriving in Rhode Island in substantial numbers.

These two immigrant waves were instrumental in shaping the Woonsocket we know today. Although other groups also played an important part in the city's growth, none had the lasting impact of the French Canadian and Irish citizens in the formation of this community. These two ethnic groups, though similar in their working-class status and Catholic faith, played different roles in the development of Woonsocket because of their different modes of adjustment to American life.

Throughout the city's history, the fate of the French Canadians has been tied to the fate of Woonsocket's mills. From their earliest



migration as recruits for the local textile factories, Woonsocket's French Canadians have been mainly employed in the manufacturing sector of the economy. Mill work was not an easy life during the early days. It meant long hours, monotonous tasks, and low wages. For many French Canadians this working life began as early as age nine or ten and ended forty or fifty years later. It was not uncommon to find people who had spent most of their lives employed in the same factory.

The 1930s and 1940s represented the peak of Franco-American culture in Woonsocket. Numerically, the French represented 70 percent of Woonsocket's 50,000 residents in 1930; nearly 35,000 people identified themselves as French Canadian in ancestry. Since this 70 percent represented a potent voting force, Woonsocket's political scene in the 1930s was dominated by French Canadian politicians, the most outstanding of whom was independent mayor (and former lieutenant governor) Felix Toupin. In the following decade the principal political personality was Mayor Ernest Dupre, whose election campaigns included speeches in impeccable French. Franco-American aldermen, councilmen, and state representatives were also common in the thirties and forties, and districts such as the Fifth Ward were generally acknowledged as solidly French Canadian. This situation made Woonsocket the launching pad for the careers of several Frenchmen who made their mark on state and national politics.

The most obvious evidence of French Canadian culture in the thirties and forties was in the daily lives of ordinary citizens. Most French Canadians had maintained close emotional ties to Canada and still communicated with relatives in Quebec. For many Woonsocket families, vacation time meant a trip to visit relatives in Canada.

French Canadian culture was naturally continued here in the United States. The most evident sign of this culture in Woonsocket was the preservation of the French language. Spoken, sung, or read, the French language continued to play a major role in the lives of French Canadians. Children spoke French before learning English, and many later spoke English with a trace of a French accent. This bilingualism was maintained through parochial schools, which were attended by almost all French Canadians. Students in these schools received instruction in French in such subjects as religion, Canadian history, and French grammar. Thus these students learned to speak, read, and write both languages. But for many, education ended at the elementary level or shortly afterward, for helping to support the family was often emphasized more than continuing one's education.

In 1924 Mount St. Charles, a Woonsocket Catholic preparatory school, was opened, offering still another institution dedicated to instilling pride in French Rhode Islanders. Although "the Mount" was from its formation caught up in a swirl of controversy over its designation as a diocesan high school, and was therefore abhorrent to the *Sentinellistes*, it must be emphasized that from the very start the school has been clearly identified as a Franco-American academy, ably directed and staffed by the Frères du Sacré-Coeur, many of whom were trained in Belgium.

The textile industry, so long the mainstay of Woonsocket's economy, began a slow decline in the 1920s. The industry was briefly bolstered by World War II production, but the 1950s and 1960s proved economically disastrous for Woonsocket. Many textile plants found it more profitable to relocate to the South, and with the so-called "Southern Exodus" of these plants, unemployment among Woonsocket residents rose to a high of 32 percent, causing many to seek employment outside the city. As workers dispersed to jobs elsewhere, the French Canadian character and culture of the city also declined, for residents who sought employment outside Woonsocket were less likely to continue to speak French than those who continued working in local mills.

Woonsocket's most notable French Canadian neighborhood, Social, was drastically altered both by out-migration and by the flood that was unleashed by Hurricane Diane in 1955. This area also became the target of an ambitious urban renewal project that caused the destruction of its French Canadian-oriented business center in the Social flatlands. Many of the Social district's residents joined others in the developing region of East Woonsocket, where the language of the old neighborhood was not as common.

The late sixties and early seventies saw the end of the traditional parochial school system. Hit by the lack of clerical teachers, increasing costs, and decreasing enrollment, the city's parochial schools joined to form a regional school system, the first of its kind in Rhode Island and the model for other regional systems in the Diocese of Providence. Thus, parish ties—which had been so important to the early French Canadians—were also weakened, and parochial schools no longer served as centers to preserve the language and culture of French Canada. In short, as Woonsocket moved rapidly into the seventies, it seemed that modernization and the quest for progress would eradicate much of the community's colorful French Canadian heritage.

## Religion

In 1780 the first two recorded public Catholic Masses in the state were celebrated in Newport by Father de Glesnon, the chaplain of the French army under Rochambeau, and in Providence by Father de la Poterie, a French priest. Both Masses were celebrated in French.

Despite these pioneering episodes, the actual organization of the Franco-American church in Rhode Island had to await the mass migration of French Canadians in the Civil War decade. Stating the case for a special French religious need in an 1869 article, Bishop Louis de Goesbriand of Burlington, Vermont, declared that "Canadians need missionaries from their own country. They need separate churches. God, in His Providence, desires that nations be evangelized, at least in general, by apostles who speak their language, who understand their customs and attitudes." At the time of Goesbriand's remarks, a few Franco-American parishes had already been established in New England—St. Joseph's in Burlington, founded in 1851, being the oldest—but the bishop's initiative sparked the widespread founding of national parishes throughout the region.

Although the first French national parish in the Diocese of Providence, St. Anne's in Fall River, was founded in 1869, when the Providence diocese included the area now covered by the present Diocese of Fall River, the first Rhode Island French parish—Precious Blood, Woonsocket—was not begun until 1872. Another early foundation, St. James in Manville, began in 1871 as a territorial parish under the guidance of Father James A. Fitzsimmons, but it evolved into a French Canadian parish by 1874. Other early French national parishes were established at St. John the Baptist in the Pawtuxet Valley village of Centerville (January 1873), at Notre-Dame in Central Falls (September 1873), and at St. Charles in Providence (February 1874).



*Precious Blood, established in 1872, is Rhode Island's first Franco-American parish. Its church, completed in 1881, became the religious and cultural citadel for the Franco-Americans of Woonsocket.*



*This is the original church of the parish of Notre-Dame-du-Sacré-Coeur in Central Falls. Built under the direction of Father Dauray and dedicated on October 2, 1875, this wooden structure was Rhode Island's first Catholic church completed and occupied by French Canadians.*

The fact that these parishes were established more than a decade after the beginning of large-scale Canadian migration posed a problem for the earliest French settlers, who were confronted upon their arrival by what amounted to an Irish national church. The Irish immigration, in general, preceded the French influx by a quarter of a century, and the Hibernians had already established a church system before their Canadian coreligionists arrived. Thus the Canadians had no choice but to attend *la Messe* at the "Irish" church. This was especially true in the three great centers of Canadian migration to Rhode Island—Woonsocket, Pawtucket-Central Falls, and western Warwick.

In Woonsocket, the original parish was that of St. Charles Borromeo. By 1866 this parish had enough French-speaking communicants so that Bishop Francis Patrick McFarland decided to give them a parish of their own. He planned a church of St. Joseph of the Village of Woonsocket, with the Reverend Eugene Vygen, a French-speaking Belgian, as its intended pastor. Together with the bishop, the vicar general, and two trustees, Father Vygen filed papers for incorporation. But these plans caused problems for the Canadians: first, they wanted a Canadian, not a Belgian, as pastor; second, they wanted lay control of the parish, in accordance with their Canadian experience. The bishop, of course, opposed local control, and so he stopped the formation of this parish and instead sent Father Lawrence Walsh, who spoke fluent French, to minister to the Canadians at St. Charles. Father Walsh continued this work until 1872, when Precious Blood Parish was formed to better serve the French community.

In the Pawtucket-Central Falls area at this time, all Catholics attended St. Mary's Parish, whose pastor was the Reverend Patrick Delaney. In 1872 Father Charles Dauray, a young but ailing Canadian priest from the Diocese of St. Hyacinthe, came to Rhode Island to recuperate at the Central Falls home of his brother, Hypolite Dauray. On a visit to St. Mary's, the young priest obtained Father Delaney's permission to say Mass there. The French people of the area flocked to these Masses to hear sermons in their own language, and their enthusiasm so impressed the new bishop, Thomas F. Hendricken, that he persuaded Father Dauray to stay "a little while longer." In September 1873 Dauray founded Notre-Dame Parish in Central Falls. Eventually Dauray's "little while" amounted to fifty-seven years of service to his adopted diocese—a span terminated only by his death in 1931.

The third area of early Canadian settlement exhibited a similar pattern of religious development. The original parish in what is now West Warwick was the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (presently St. Mary's) in Crompton. The Irish pastor, the Reverend James Gibson, aware of the great number of Canadians attending his church, petitioned Bishop McFarland early in 1872 for an assistant who could speak French. In response, the bishop assigned a Belgian, the Reverend James Berkins, to the parish. When Father Berkins did not appear for his scheduled French service one Sunday, the leaders of the Franco-American community assembled that very afternoon and decided to ask for the formation of their own parish. The new bishop, Irish-born Thomas Hendricken, granted the request and acquired the services of the Reverend Henry Spruyt, a recent arrival

from Holland who was fluent in French, as the founding pastor of St. John the Baptist Parish in Centerville (today's Arctic).

The question naturally arises as to why the Franco-Americans required their own parishes. At the risk of oversimplifying, one could give the answer in a pithy French saying: *Qui perd sa langue, perd sa foi* (He who loses his language loses also his faith). Certainly the need for *survivance* was the impetus behind the founding of such parishes; and although this view about the connection between language and faith may be questionable sociologically, it accounts for one indisputable fact: of all the American ethnic groups, at least up until now, the French have clung to their language the longest. There are still areas of the state—the Lincoln village of Manville and parts of Central Falls and Woonsocket—where French is heard throughout whole neighborhoods. When the liturgy of the Church changed to the vernacular, most of the Masses in the traditionally French parishes went from Latin to French. Most recently, however, this linguistic *survivance* is weakening as more and more parishes either abolish French-language Masses or leave just one early-morning "token" French Mass.

The bishops and leaders of Quebec were alarmed when Canadians, in ever-increasing numbers, began migrating south to New England—fully one third of the Province of Quebec eventually migrated. Church leaders were concerned about the Protestant ethos in the United States and the influences their people would confront. They also felt that the *émigrés* were being slightly traitorous to both their country and their Church merely for the sake of material well-being.

If one examines the culture shock of immigration from the perspective of the newly arrived Franco-Americans in New England, one can sympathize with their situation. These immigrants found themselves in churches in which a foreign tongue was spoken. The people of those parishes, and most of the priests, did not understand the culture and customs of the Canadians; the seats were all rented out to the parishioners who had built these parishes, and so the Canadians had to stand at the rear of the churches; and the original parishioners resented these newcomers, who insisted on speaking French. This uncomfortable situation explains the need for French national parishes. Canonically, there are sixteen such parishes in the Diocese of Providence, but there are also many territorial parishes which are basically French and even have French Masses.

Fittingly, in 1972, just a century after the first halting steps were taken to found Rhode Island's first French national parishes, Louis E. Gelineau, a priest from Bishop Goesbriand's diocese of Burlington,



*In 1972 the Diocese of Providence got its first bishop of French ancestry—Louis E. Gelineau, a native of Vermont. In this December 1976 ethnic heritage celebration held at the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul, Bishop Gelineau leads a Franco-American chorus in song.*

Vermont, became the first Franco-American bishop of the Diocese of Providence. His episcopal motto, "Rejoice in Hope," appropriately reflected the feelings of the state's large Franco-American community. After 122 years of Irish-American prelates, that devout religious group now had "one of its own."

In the nineteenth century, the various Councils of Baltimore— assemblies of the nation's Catholic bishops convened to discuss the situation of the American Church—stressed the need for Catholic schools to "protect the children from secular and Protestant influence" because of anti-Catholic attitudes in the public schools. Such hostile influences were doubly felt by the children of French Canadian immigrants. Not only were Protestants inimical, but the English-speaking Catholics were often just as unfriendly, and so the French perceived a need for their own parochial school system from grammar school to college.

The French may have trailed their Hibernian brothers and sisters in the matter of building churches, but not in that of building schools. When the Diocese of Providence initiated a drive to build Catholic high schools in the 1920s, the French interpreted this to mean "Irish" Catholic high schools, and many were vehemently opposed to the idea. Since the Canadians had an adequate school system throughout the state, especially in the Blackstone Valley area, they did not want to contribute to a parallel and possibly "Irish" school system. Thus some ultranationalists launched the traumatic Sentinelle Movement, which pitted many French Catholics against Bishop William A. Hickey and his "Irish" institutions.

Despite such divisive experiences, the French school system served the Church well. It both preserved Canadian culture and eased the way of the immigrants into the American system. Most schools adopted the plan that had been suggested by Monsignor Dauray of Woonsocket. Father Dauray directed that his schools be bilingual: for half the day, subjects were taught in French; for the remainder of the day, classes were held in English. Thus Father Dauray transformed, albeit gradually, a French Canadian institution into a Franco-American one.

In order to run efficient bilingual schools, pastors had to acquire the services of nuns and brothers who, if not actually French, were at least bilingual. A remarkable case in point was the teaching staff at St. Charles in Woonsocket, where a group of Irish Sisters of Mercy spoke and taught in French. In most parishes, however, French religious orders were recruited either from Quebec or directly from France. Some of the more well known were the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, the Religious of Jesus-Marie, the Presentation of Mary Sisters, the Sisters of St. Anne, the Sisters of the Holy Union of the Sacred Hearts, and the Sisters of Ste-Chretienne. All of these congregations are still vital elements in the school system of the Diocese of Providence. In addition, there are two congregations of French Canadian sisters who do domestic work in some French rectories—the Sisters of St. Joan of Arc and the Sisters of Our Lady, Queen of the Clergy.

Though our focus is properly on the large French Roman Catholic community in Rhode Island, it must be observed that not all French settlers were of the Catholic faith. Rhode Island is famous for its colony of Huguenots, who initially settled in 1686 in the area of East Greenwich called Frenchtown following their expulsion from France. The Huguenots were French Calvinists who suffered much at the hands of Louis XIV of France, particularly when this monarch revoked the Edict of Nantes, which had granted French Protestants

freedom of religion. With this liberty removed, approximately a quarter of a million Huguenots left their homes in France and migrated to other countries.

Among these colonial migrants was the family of Gabriel Bernon, who, together with the Leroy, the Tourtellots, the Tourgees, the Ayraults, and others, went to Newport in search of religious freedom after being forced to abandon the Frenchtown settlement because of hostile neighbors. Bernon converted to Anglicanism and helped to establish Trinity Church in the City by the Sea. Soon he moved to Providence, where he became a founder of King's Chapel, now the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John. This cathedral still displays some of Bernon's possessions. His house lot across the street from St. John's is now the site of the Roger Williams National Memorial.

## Arts and Letters

When we consider the impressive artistic and literary achievements of Rhode Island's Franco-Americans, certain names and dates stand out with especial prominence. One such date is 1885, for that year marked the foundation of Woonsocket's Cercle National Dramatique, a literary and theatrical organization whose goals were to develop, in young and old alike, a taste for the theater and a love for the French language and French literature. These goals were pursued by a variety of means, including lectures by such distinguished visitors as the French Canadian historian Benjamin Sulte and receptions for statesmen of the stature of former Quebec Premier Honoré Mercier, who visited Woonsocket in 1893. During the early years of this century, St. Jean-Baptiste Parish in West Warwick had a flourishing theater, the Odeon, which became a major performing arts center in the region. This theater often featured Molière plays produced by the parish's pastor, the Reverend Joseph R. Bourgeois.

Indeed, the Franco-Americans of Rhode Island have contributed significantly to music and the performing arts. Eben Tourjée (born in 1834 in Warwick) was the founder of the world-famous New England Conservatory of Music in Boston (1867), as well as of several smaller music schools and academies in Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts. He was descended from the Frenchtown Huguenots who migrated to Rhode Island in 1686. Calixa Lavallée, composer of the Canadian national anthem, "O Canada," lived for a time in Woonsocket. He served in the Civil War with the Fourth Rhode Island Regiment and was wounded at Antietam. Later Lavellée became musical director of the Grand Opera House in New York.



*Eben Tourjée (1834-1891), one of America's most prominent nineteenth-century musicians, was a native of the Pawtuxet Valley. In 1867 Tourjée founded Boston's prestigious New England Conservatory of Music, an organization that he guided until his death.*

Among twentieth-century luminaries is J. Ernest Philie (1874-1955), an organist and composer who spent years at Precious Blood in Woonsocket. Philie is best remembered for a cantata, "Les voix du passé"; a waltz, "Sous l'azur étoile"; several masses and motets; patriotic songs such as "Le Pays"; and a chorus, "Fantasia." Unjustly forgotten is Chambord Giguère, born in Woonsocket in 1877, a master violinist who achieved international renown before retiring in the 1930s. Alfred T. Plante (1897-1970), a Woonsocket organist, music director, and composer, is better remembered. The founder of l'Orphéon Sainte Cécile, a male choral group specializing in Gregorian and polyphonic music, he composed a "Mass for Mixed

Voices," several hymns, waltzes, minuets, and a "Suite française" for piano. Plante was also a music teacher in great demand.

René Viau (Pawtucket-born in 1903) was a competent organist at age ten, gave piano concerts from age thirteen, studied at the Juilliard School and at the New England Conservatory, and became the organist and music director at various Rhode Island parishes, including St. Jean-Baptiste in Warren and Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes in Providence. In 1931 he became the organist of Notre-Dame-du-Sacré-Coeur in Central Falls. Besides giving concerts throughout the northeastern United States and Canada, he was a founder of the Club Chopin Jr. in Providence, the Club Beethoven in Woonsocket, the Woonsocket Symphony Orchestra, and the Vocal Art Society of Central Falls.

Hervé Lemieux (born 1907) earned the title of music director at Notre-Dame-de-la-Consolation Church in Pawtucket at the age of twenty-one. Later, with Albert Vandal, he founded the Gais Chanteurs, a group of male singers whose extensive repertoire covers the entire range of French and French Canadian vocal music from classical to popular and folk.

Also widely known and admired is Dr. C. Alexander Peloquin, composer and choirmaster at the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul



*Dr. C. Alexander Peloquin, one of Rhode Island's premier present-day musicians, has gained a distinguished reputation as conductor, composer, and organist. He sits at the massive organ of the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul, a church where he has performed as organist/choirmaster since 1950.*

in Providence. Recognized above all for his rousing, joyous religious compositions, of which "Lyric Liturgy" is an outstanding example, Dr. Peloquin has devoted his life to answering a fundamental and self-posed question: "How can I serve the community, how can I serve my fellow man, with visions of beauty?" One of the landmarks in his career was his service as music director for His Holiness Pope John Paul II during the pontiff's visit to the United States in 1979.

Lorenzo de Nevers (born in St. Elphege, Quebec, in 1883) is one of the best known of Franco-American artists. Accepted at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris (1902), he spent ten years studying under the master art teachers of the day. His love for art sustained him during several difficult years following his return to America, as his work went unappreciated and his talent misunderstood. Restless, he lived alternately in Montreal, New York, Woonsocket, and Central Falls, doing church decorations to earn a living but remaining always in touch with the world of beauty in response to his true calling. Of his nearly three thousand paintings, many are religious in nature, such as his "Sainte Face," which now hangs in the Vatican, while others are portraits of Franco-American notables or of international figures. His paintings of Spain's King Alfonso XIII and President Franklin D. Roosevelt have been singled out for special praise.

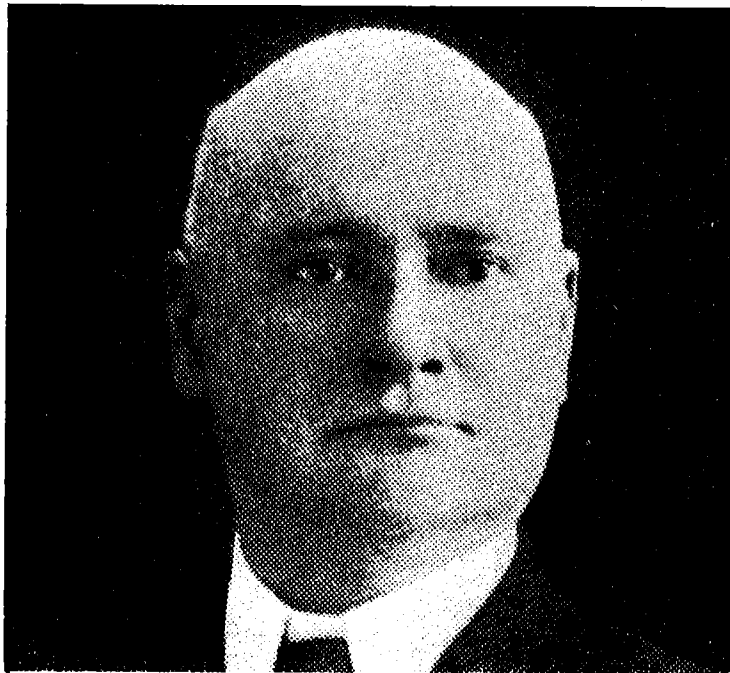
The French-language newspapers pioneered in the creation of a Franco-American literature. As early as the 1870s Woonsocket and Central Falls had their own French-language press, although too often these underfinanced papers were short-lived. Other journals, such as *Le Courrier Canadien*, enjoyed a longer existence, thanks to the energetic dedication of editors like Dr. Gédéon Archambault, whose articles repeatedly reflected his concern for the economic and cultural betterment of French Canadian immigrants.

*La Tribune*, founded as a daily in 1895, served the Franco-American community for four decades, both in times of tranquility and during years of controversy. This newspaper attracted many talented writers, including the ascerbic Olivar Asselin and J.-L. K. Laflamme, a formidable polemicist who often thundered against the assimilationist tendencies evident everywhere. Like its later rival *La Sentinelle*, *La Tribune* favored the expression of ideas and adopted a strong posture of advocacy. The continued use of the French language and the need for Franco-American clergy, parish schools, and fraternal benefit societies were constantly stressed by both newspapers.

As shown by their literary history, the French are fond of ideas, discussing, attacking, and defending them with passionate intensity.

This trait was evident in Rhode Island's Franco-American press and in a number of locally published strident and polemical works. Sentinellist stalwart Elphège J. Daignault's *Le vrai mouvement sentinelliste en Nouvelle-Angleterre*, for example, refutes J. Albert Foisy's apologetic *Histoire de l'agitation sentinelliste en Nouvelle-Angleterre*. Three generations after the famous 1920s controversy, both works still move the reader, and they are still essential for an understanding of the Franco-American heart and mind.

Other noteworthy achievements by local Franco-American writers include the election of Blanche-Yvonne Héroux of Providence to the Rhode Island Short Story Club at the turn of the century, a difficult feat, since the club, open solely to professional women writers, was an avowed Anglo-American society. Later, judge and political leader Albéric Archambault of West Warwick published *Mill Village*, one of the first English-language documentary novels about the French Canadian immigrants and their post-Civil War settlement in New England.



*L'Union St.-Jean-Baptiste d'Amérique, founded in Woonsocket in 1900, is the nation's foremost Franco-American cultural organization. Elie Vezina served as the Union's secretary-general from 1911 until 1941 and guided the society during its formative years.*

In poetry, important works have been penned by Rhode Islanders Gabriel Crévier, Rodolphe-Louis Hébert, Claire Quintal, and Paul P. Chassé. To date, however, virtually the only attempt to collect these scattered poems has been made by Professor Paul P. Chassé in his *Anthologie de la poésie franco-américaine de la Nouvelle-Angleterre*, published as a contribution to the national bicentennial observance.

Several other literary fields have also benefited from local Franco-American contributions: Thérèse and Lucien San Souci of Woonsocket compiled the famous *Guide franco-américain* in 1946 and also edited *Le Phare*, an independent magazine which appeared in the late 1940s and early 1950s; Dr. Ulysse Forget published *Onomastique franco-américaine*, a notable genealogy; Mathias Harpin has related the history of the Pawtuxet Valley in several anecdotal works, including *Trumpets in Jericho* and *Patterns on the River*. The Reverend Georges Bissonnette's *Moscow Was My Parish* and David Plante's *The Family*, a novel of Franco-American life, both enjoyed a national audience. Plante has subsequently expanded his work into an imposing trilogy.

Rhode Island played a transitory role in the lives of two other French Canadian writers as well. Rémi Tremblay (1847-1926), a journalist, novelist, and poet, emigrated to Woonsocket with his family at age twelve. After fighting for the North in the Civil War, he eventually returned to Woonsocket, where he married and worked in journalism and other occupations. He is best known for his Civil War novel, *Un revenant* (1884). Edmond de Nevers (1863-1906), a historian and essayist who wrote the masterful *L'avenir du peuple canadien-français* and *L'âme américaine*, spent the last several years of his life in Central Falls, where he died on April 15, 1906.

The foregoing is merely a partial listing, but it should substantiate the contention that Rhode Island's Franco-Americans have made an appreciable contribution to both American culture and their own.



## Epilogue

The French minority in Rhode Island makes up approximately 19 percent of the total population. Despite early deprivation, this group has contributed substantially to the development of the state in many areas of endeavor, especially the arts and sciences, religion, politics, sports, and economic life.

The fear of assimilation once forced the Franco-Americans to establish their own institutions to protect and preserve their culture and identity. Nonetheless, from generation to generation Franco-American Rhode Islanders have been consistently able to make worthy contributions to the culture of their adopted homeland.

One basic question confronts the present student of Franco-American culture: Can the French heritage be maintained, or will the Franco-American eventually be absorbed into the mainstream of American life? The facts suggest that the Franco-Americans may have peaked as a national group between the 1930s and the 1950s. The evidence at times appears to be incontrovertible: the language is dying out in many families; the French parochial schools are disappearing; the newspapers are all but gone; the unifying influence of the Catholic religion is waning; the extended family unit suffers from economic mobility and intermarriage; the various ethnic enclaves have been dispersed.

Yet all is not lost. There is evidence of a reawakening of the same desire and spirit that was once so prevalent in the earlier "little Canadas." Franco-Americans must commit themselves, individually and collectively, to participate in the various opportunities for cultural survival that are still available. If we wish to preserve the best of our proud heritage, we must act now. If we are to maintain our cultural roots, we must live in consonance with the Quebecois motto, *Je me souviens*—"I remember"—and adapt. That is the challenge of the future.

## Suggested Reading

- Association Canado-Américaine. *Les Franco-Américains peints par eux-mêmes*. Montreal, 1936.
- Bacon, Raymond H., and Martin Crowley. *Boomtown on the Blackstone: An Industrial History of Woonsocket*. Woonsocket, 1976.
- Barkan, Elliott Robert. "French Canadians," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom. Cambridge, Mass., 1980, pp. 388-401.
- Belanger, Albert A. *Guide officiel des Franco-Américains*, several editions. Providence, 1899-1940.
- Belisle, Alexander. *Histoire de la presse franco-américaine et des Canadiens-Français aux Etats-Unis*. Worcester, Mass., 1911.
- Bonier, Marie-Louise. *Débuts de la colonie franco-américaine de Woonsocket, Rhode Island*. Framingham, Mass., 1920.
- Bonsal, Stephen. *When the French Were Here*. Garden City, N.Y., 1945.
- Braut, Gerard J. *The French-Canadian Heritage in New England*. Hanover, N.H., 1986.
- Casanova, Jacques-Donat. *America's French Heritage*. Quebec, 1976.
- Chartier, Armand B. "A Selective and Thematic Checklist to Publications Relating to Franco-Americans." *Contemporary French Civilization*, 2 (1978), 469-512.
- Chassé, Paul P. *Anthologie de la poésie franco-américaine de la Nouvelle-Angleterre*. Providence, 1976.
- . "Rhode Island's Franco-Americans," in *Our Pluralistic Society*. Somersworth, N.H., 1973.
- Chevalier, Florence. "The Role of French National Societies in the Sociocultural Evolution of the Franco-Americans

- from 1860 to the Present." Doctoral dissertation, Catholic University, 1972.
- Chinard, Gilbert. *Les réfugiés huguenots en Amérique*. Paris, 1925.
- Conley, Patrick T., and Matthew J. Smith. *Catholicism in Rhode Island: The Formative Era*. Providence, 1976.
- Daignault, Elphège J. *Le vrai mouvement sentinelliste en Nouvelle-Angleterre, 1923-1929, et l'affaire du Rhode Island*. Montreal, 1936.
- Dion-Levesque, Rosaire. *Silhouettes franco-américaines*. Manchester, N.H., 1957.
- Doiron, Gerald. "The French-Canadian Migration into Rhode Island." Master's thesis, University of Rhode Island, 1959.
- Ducharme, Jacques. *The Shadows of the Trees: The Story of French Canadians in New England*. New York, 1943.
- Faucher, Albert. "L'émigration des Canadiens-Français au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle: Position du problème et perspectives." *Recherches Sociographiques*, 5 (1964), 217-317.
- Fecteau, Edouard. *French Contributions to America*. Methuen, Mass., 1945.
- FitzPatrick, Edward J. "Eben Tourjée's Rhode Island Roots." *Rhode Island History*, 36 (1977), 80-91.
- Foisy, J. Albert. *Histoire de l'agitation sentinelliste en Nouvelle-Angleterre, 1925-1928*. Woonsocket, 1928. English version: *The Sentinellist Agitation in New England, 1925-1928*. Providence, 1930.
- French, Lawrence. "The Franco-American Working Class Family," in *Ethnic Families in America*, ed. Charles Mindel and Robert Habenstein. New York, 1976.
- Gatineau, Felix. *Historique des Conventions générales des Canadiens-Français aux Etats-Unis, 1865-1901*. Woonsocket, 1927.
- Higonnet, Patrice L. R. "French," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom. Cambridge, Mass., 1980, pp. 379-388.
- Jones, Howard Mumford. *America and French Culture, 1750-1843*. Chapel Hill, N. C., 1927.
- Kennedy, Ambrose. *Quebec to New England: The Life of Monsignor Charles Dauray*. Boston, 1948.
- Lamaire, Herve. *The French Language in New England*. Washington, D. C., 1963.
- Landry, Thomas M. *Mission catholique et française en Nouvelle-Angleterre*. Quebec, 1962.

- Lavoie, Yolande. *L'émigration des Canadiens aux Etats-Unis avant 1930*. Montreal, 1972.
- Lessard, Camille. *Canuck*. Lewiston, Maine, 1936.
- Loughrey, Mary Ellen. *France and Rhode Island, 1686-1800*. New York, 1944.
- Paquet, Gilles. "L'émigration des Canadiens Français vers la Nouvelle-Angleterre, 1870-1910: Prises de vue quantitatives." *Recherches Sociographiques*, 5 (1964), 319-370.
- Paula, James S., ed. *The French in America, 1488-1974*. Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., 1975.
- Perreault, Robert B. *One Piece in the Great American Mosaic: The Franco-Americans of New England*. Lakeport, N.H., 1976.
- Podea, Iris S. "'Quebec to Little Canada': The Coming of the French-Canadians to New England in the Nineteenth Century." *New England Quarterly*, 23 (1950), 365-380.
- Rumilly, Robert. *Histoire des Franco-Américains*. Montreal, 1958.
- San Souci, Lucien, and Thérèse San Souci. *Guide officiel des Franco-Américains*, 14th ed. Woonsocket, 1946.
- Schlarman, J. H. *From Quebec to New Orleans: The Story of the French in America*. Belleville, Ill., 1929.
- Schraver, Edward, ed. *The French in New England, Acadia, and Quebec*. Orono, Maine, 1973.
- Sorrell, Richard S. "The Sentinelle Affair." Doctoral dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1976.
- . "Sentinelle Affair (1924-1929)—Religion and Militant Survivance in Woonsocket, Rhode Island." *Rhode Island History*, 36 (1977), 66-79.
- . "Sports and Franco-Americans in Woonsocket, 1870-1930." *Rhode Island History*, 31 (1972), 116-126.
- Therriault, Mary-Carmel. *La littérature française de Nouvelle-Angleterre*. Montreal, 1946.
- Thomas, A. P. *Woonsocket: Highlights of History, 1800-1976*. Woonsocket, 1976.
- Truesdell, Leon. *The Canadian-Born in the United States, 1850 to 1930*. Toronto, 1943.
- Wade, Mason. *The French-Canadians, 1760-1967*, rev. ed. 2 vols. New York, 1945. French version: *Les Canadiens-Français de 1760 à 1960*. 2 vols. Montreal, 1963.
- . "The French Parish and Survivance in Nineteenth Century New England." *Catholic Historical Review*, 35 (1950), 163-190.
- Waldman, Deborah Anne. *Transcultural Folk Song Survival: Active and Passive Bearers of French-Canadian Folk Song Tradition in Woonsocket, R.I., and Adjacent Towns*. Providence, 1976.

Wessel, Bessie Bloom. *An Ethnic Survey of Woonsocket, Rhode Island*. Chicago, 1931.

Williams, Steven Robert. *Language and Social Structure: Bilingualism and Language Shift in Woonsocket R.I.* Providence, 1976.

Zoltvany, Yves F. *The French Tradition in America*. New York, 1967.

## Picture Credits

Cover: St. Jean-Baptiste parade (1890), Rhode Island Historical Society (RIHS), RHi X3 1234.

Lafayette: Photo by Louis Notarianni (1976), Patrick T. Conley Collection.

Landing of French troops: From *Calender oder Jahrbuch für 1784*, RIHS, RHi X3 1057.

Marchant: Portrait, RIHS, RHi X3 6074.

Pothier: *Rhode Island Manual* (1912).

Lajoie: RIHS, RHi X3 5751.

Proulx: From Patrick T. Conley and Matthew J. Smith, *Catholicism in Rhode Island: The Formative Era* (1975).

Mill workers: From Mathias P. Harpin, *The High Road to Zion* (1976).

Dauray: From Ambrose Kennedy, *From Quebec to New England: The Life of Monsignor Charles Dauray* (1948).

Precious Blood Church: From *Guide officiel des Franco-Américains* (1931).

Notre-Dame Church: From Kennedy, *Quebec to New England*.

Gelineau: Photo by Louis Notarianni (1976), Patrick T. Conley Collection.

Tourjée: Portrait, RIHS, RHi X3 6073.

Peloquin: Photo courtesy of the *Providence Visitor*.

Vezina: From *Guide officiel des Franco-Américains* (1931).