

I. Franco-American and Lebanese-American History and Organizations

The stories of the Franco-American and Lebanese-American in Waterville are not unlike those of many ethnic groups that settled in Maine. They came seeking economic opportunity, religious and political freedom, and, for some, adventure. Whatever the motivation, Franco-American and Lebanese-American immigrants made Waterville their home and prospered with the City itself. Over time, Franco-American and Lebanese-American institutions, customs, and cultures have been woven into the fabric of Waterville as surely as the lives of many Franco-American and Lebanese-American people have been spent weaving cotton and wool in the factories along the shore of the Kennebec.

The Franco-Americans¹

Franco-Americans began emigrating from Canada into Maine a few at a time in the early 1600's. The British expulsion of the Acadians in 1755 sent more Franco-American immigrants to the area. By 1830, the Kennebec Road, also known as the Canada Road, traced an old Indian Trail along the Kennebec, Dead, and Chaudiere Rivers to the St. Lawrence.

It was at this time that the first documented French Canadian settler came to Waterville. Jean-Baptiste Mathieu came down the Indian Trail in the early 1820's and began trucking food stuffs to lumber camps and villages between Bangor and Jackman. By 1827 he relocated his center of operation from Shirley to Waterville when he moved a wood frame building from Fairfield to the east side of Water Street in an area known as "The Plains."²

At that time, "The Plains" was a vast, thickly wooded areas with a few tiny clearings here and there for grazing. Whole sections up to what is commonly known as the "flat" were a sort of peninsula surrounded on the east side by the River and on the west by a narrow marshy stream which had its source at the further end of Pine Grove Cemetery. By 1830-1831, some 300 French Canadian families had settled in Waterville, most in "The Plains." Generally they were very poor. Some excavated and reinforced shelter in steep slopes as temporary homes. The most prosperous owned some domestic animals.

By 1833, the Kennebec Road became known as the Post Road because it was used to transport mail from Boston to Quebec. At that time nomadic behavior was a common practice of the

¹ This section is taken from The French Canadian Community of Waterville, Maine by Albert C. Fecteau, a Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History, Division of Graduate Study, University of Maine, June, 1952, available from the Waterville Public Library.

² In The French Canadian Community of Waterville, Maine, this house was identified as 134 Water Street.

immigrants. Franco-American men were hired to clear an extensive wooded area in Waterville, which in 1851 was to become Pine Grove Cemetery. Others were employed by the sawmills of W.W. Getchell and Smith & Meader, the "Shank Shop" near Messalonskee Stream where the power house stands, or by the Waterville Iron Works which was started in 1833. Some came to harvest hay or work in winter lumber camps or on spring log drives, river or lake steamers, or in canals, quarries, and brickyards. When they made enough money they returned to Canada to encourage their families and friends to come to work and settle in Maine.

When a stage coach was started along the Road in 1835, many Franco-American families began to emigrate to Skowhegan, Waterville, and Augusta. Most of those that came to Waterville settled in "The Plains" because in 1838 Frederick Pooler (Poulin) began subdividing and selling Pointe a Petit, which included much of the area, to his countrymen for a reasonable price. "The Plains" was largely one main street, Water Street, with a few lanes branching off north of Grove Street.

The nomadic pattern of migration was short lived in Waterville. By 1846, there is evidence of the first provisions for education in "The Plains." In the early 1850's, permanent settlement of a Franco-American community lead the Jesuit missionary, Father Jean Bapst, to build Waterville's first Catholic Church, St. John's, on Grove Street. Its location and capacity of 300 soon proved inadequate, as construction of the railroad in 1855 was a significant stimulus to business and employment and the Church was poorly situated for the large group of Franco-American railroad employees. In the 1860's, Peter Bolduc and Frederick Pooler (Poulin) opened Waterville's first grocery stores on lower Water Street.

The Civil War in the 1860's and the Industrial Revolution that continued in the years following the War created an even greater demand for workers in Waterville. But it was the construction of the Lockwood Cotton Mill in 1874 that attracted the greatest number of Franco-American immigrants. They were welcome workers -- readily accessible, willing to work for low wages, industrious, and uncomplaining.³ Agents were sent through the southern Quebec countryside to stimulate emigration and most of "la Beauce" (St. George, St. Victor, St. Come, and Beauceville) left unfavorable political and social conditions to seek vastly better conditions in Maine. "Thus the movement, which had been a trickle, turned into a flood."⁴ Immigration continued until 1896 when the first French Canadian Minister in Quebec came into power and a period of economic prosperity in Canada occasioned a slackening of the movement.

With the surge in immigration, the Franco-American community in Waterville flourished.

³ The French Canadian Community of Waterville, Maine, page 8.

⁴ The French Canadian Community of Waterville, Maine, page 9.

Almost every year after 1870 witnessed the establishment of new business shops, grocery stores, jewelry stores, and clothing stores in “The Plains.” By the turn of the century, “The Plains” had a flourishing business district equipped to meet the average family’s needs.

In early days, there were bitter feelings between the young men of “The Plains” and the young men of the Town. Most of the struggle stemmed from personal animosity and hatred that was short-lived. In time, it gave way to a more peaceful understanding which often resulted in warm friendships.

In addition to “The Plains,” there was a newer Franco-American settlement at the North End where the railroad car shops were established. Workers hired by mill agents and recruiters also found living quarters in large boarding houses or small cozy homes known as “maison de la compagnie,” which were mostly owned by the Lockwood Company. More workers sought apartments in the Bang’s estate, known as “cio a Bang” (Bang’s lot or field), which comprised a long row of tiny red-painted houses.

As with many immigrant groups, the Church was a critical element in the Franco-American community. It provided religious guidance, education, and social structure. By 1874, the old St. John’s Chapel had been moved to Temple Court for use as a school and a new church, St. Francis de Sales with a capacity for 600 parishioners, was constructed on the corner of Elm and Winter Streets. In 1884, the French Baptist, or Second Baptist, Church (commonly called “mi Haine” or meeting place) was constructed on Water Street facing Halde Street.

While some professionals, mainly doctors, were among the early immigrants, most were exceptionally poor, illiterate, and from large families. Wages were very low. Even the best weavers made only \$1 a day -- most earned only 25¢ - 50¢ day. Everyone had to work and children were spared little time for school. But by the end of the 1880's, increasing numbers of Franco-American children were attending public school and special classes provided by St. Francis in the afternoons and evenings. In 1888, St. Francis opened a parochial school and boarding home for the Ursuline nuns and students.

In 1881, French Canadians numbered 1,625 out of Waterville’s total population of 4,700. The Elm City had an expanding industrial structure, a good school system, and many churches. The prosperous, well-rounded town was on the verge of receiving its City Charter.

From the earliest years, Franco-Americans in Waterville formed religious, social, and financial societies. These societies, including among others la Societe de Bienfaisance Saint Jean-Baptiste de Waterville, Richelieu Lodge #4, Waterville Council #148, Knights of Columbus, Catholic Order of Forresters, La Societe des Artisans Canadiens-Francais, Macabees, L’Union St. Jean-Baptiste d’Amerique, Conseil Charland, L’Union St. Joseph Conseil Francoise, L’Association d’Epargnes de Waterville, and l’Assumption, provided the Franco-American community with services ranging from funds to assist sick members, widows, and children to social and mutual insurance benefits.

By the end of the 19th century, the French Canadian community was a partner in the cultural life of the City. Miss Martel, who started as a church singer in the late 1880's, became a concert artist and opera singer. A Franco-American band provided trained musicians for R.B. Hall's Military Band. The Boulette, a band of Franco-American musicians from "The Plains," formed to participate in the City's Centennial celebrations. Theater, which in the early days took its form as plays in private homes or semi-private halls, was confined for the most part to small groups and family circles. As the Franco-American population increased, drama and musicals took on a greater proportion and occupied a higher place in the social entertainment of the City with performances at Pomerleau and Pelletier Halls and sometimes at the Opera House.

Also in the 1880's and 1890's, French Canadians entered into Waterville's political scene. Frederick Pooler (Poulin), the "Father" of French politicians in Waterville, was elected to the Board of Selectmen in 1883 and again in 1887. He was on the City's first Board of Aldermen in 1888, overseer of the poor in 1889-1892, and on the Board of Education in 1898-1899. In 1902, he was elected to the Maine Legislature. Around the same time, Fred W. Clair opened a legal practice and went on to become City Clerk, City Solicitor, and Clerk of the Executive Committee of the Centennial Celebration. Thus began a long history of Franco-American involvement in City government, the Post Office, and the Police Department.

By the early 1900's, an annex was added to the old St. Francis school, Sacred Heart Church was constructed to serve the largely Irish Catholic community, and in 1910 Notre Dame Church was constructed in "The Plains" with a second parochial school operated by the Ursuline nuns. In 1912 Mount Merici, a boarding school for girls, was established on Western Avenue and by 1920, was expanded to include direction of the Notre Dame parish school. In 1928, St. Francis de Sales' School for boys opened under the tutelage of the Brothers of Christian Instruction. And in 1938, St. Joseph's elementary parochial school, also directed by the Brothers, was established.

Besides the Church, industry has been the single leading element with the greatest influence on the French Canadian community of Waterville. In addition to the early textile mills and Maine Central Railroad car shops in the North End, Franco-American immigrants worked for smaller industries including the Hollingsworth & Whitney Pulp Mill in Winslow, the Webber and Philbrick Foundry, the Furbish Sash and Blind Mill, FiberWare Co., and Noyes Stove Company. By the early 1900's Franco-American firms were scattered all over the City.

Today, the Franco-American community is fully integrated into the cultural, economic, and political fabric of Waterville as evidenced by the many French names of businesses and residents active in social, cultural, and political activities.