Corner of Water & Grove Street

Early colonial history of Waterville, Maine

The English were the first Europeans to inhabit this area. In 1754 General John Winslow and his soldiers built Fort Halifax and 11 families settled at Taconnet Falls in Winslow, which at that time included the west side of the Kennebec River, today’s Waterville. Prior to that time, Native American Indians migrated through the region during certain seasons. One of their burial grounds was located near the Hathaway Creative Center.

By 1777, development was such that the first of several dams was built to power sawmills, grist mills, and other small industries. A small shipyard built in 1794 operated for the next 56 years on the present site of the Hathaway Center parking lot. On June 23, 1802 the west bank of Winslow was incorporated into a separate town called Waterville. Most of its first settlers were of Scotch-Irish-English descent, but there were a few French Huguenots as well, among them Dr. Stephen Thayer. It was not until the late 1820s that French-Canadians from Quebec came to live in Maine.

The Museum in the Streets

focuses on the French-Canadians, the largest ethnic minority to settle in Waterville during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The “Museum” tour will walk you through the heart of their community, an area in the south end of the City commonly called “The Plains,” which runs from the Hathaway Center to the end of Water Street and west to, but not including, Silver Street. It was here that the earliest French-Canadians settlers worked, lived, shopped, played and worshipped. This was very much a self-contained community, with its own French dialect, its bilingual schools, a variety of stores, a movie theater, bars, a sports center and French churches, both Catholic and Protestant. Among other sites, you will see the original home of Jean Baptiste Mathieu presumably the first permanent French-Canadian settler in Waterville and his wife, Sarah Dostie, who came here from Beauceville, Quebec in 1827 and settled in their Water Street home in 1831. The 1830 census shows some 20 French-Canadians (1% of the town population) living here. By the time of the Civil War (early 1860’s) their numbers had grown to 544 (12.5%). In 1851, they built their first Roman Catholic Church, St. John’s at the east end of Grove Street, which was replaced some twenty years later by the new, larger, more centrally located St. Francis de Sales, on Elm Street. They saw Peter Bolduc open his business in 1862, the first store to be operated by one of their own. Prior to the early 1870’s over 85% of Waterville’s French-speaking population had come from just two small towns in Beauce County, Quebec, Beauceville and St Georges. With the expansion of the Lockwood Cotton Mills and new industries flourished, there was a veritable rush of immigrants from Quebec coming to Waterville to find work and a better life. By 1890 the combined French-Canadian (immigrants) and Franco-American (native born descendants) population had grown to 3,228 or 43% of the city’s population, a percentage that has remained virtually unchanged to this day.
Immigration

Edgar R. Poulin

South End Arena King Street

Right side of the Street
Workers at Lockwood Cotton Mill

Left side of the Street
Businesses of Water Street

Right side of the Street
Edgar R. Poulin

Left side of the Street
The "Mayor" of Water Street

Right side of the Street
Home of first French Canadian Settler

Left side of the Street
Notre Dame Parish

Right side of the Street
The Second Baptist Church