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Community Formation in Old Town, Maine 1835-1930: Endogamy and Natal Origin Among the Acadians

Marcella Harnish Sorg

Introduction

Although it is an important and even critical component of Franco-American history, research on the Acadian immigrants to New England has lagged behind work on French Canadians. Even in community studies such as those by Hareven on Manchester, New Hampshire,¹ by Early on Lowell, Massachusetts,² and my own earlier studies of Old Town, Maine,³ Franco-Americans are frequently treated as a homogeneous aggregate. In some studies of Franco-American communities the assumption is made that all originated from Quebec. Although this is sometimes warranted, in fact, Acadians from the Maritime Provinces formed a significant population throughout New England. The work done recently by LeBlanc on the Acadians of Fitchburg represents an important step in bridging the gap in our knowledge of the New England Acadian heritage.

Perhaps the single most important factor limiting historical research on New England Acadians is the difficulty in identifying them. Although they differ in ultimate geographical origin, in language, and in custom, these distinctions become increasingly blurred after the mid-eighteenth century, and especially after the

¹ Tamara K. Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship Between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

² Frances H. Early, "The French-Canadian Family Economy and Standard-of-Living in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1870," *Journal of Family History* (Summer 1982), pp. 180-199.

³ Marcella Harnish Sorg, "Genetic Demography of Deme Formation in a Franco-American Population: 1830-1903" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1979).

1755 expulsion. Besides their mobility and intermarriage with French Canadians, as illustrated by Craig's research on Madawaska,⁴ the process of adaptation to the New World over the centuries has modified both language and custom.

So the question will return again and again to haunt our historical research: Who is the Acadian? Is she the person who is directly descended from original Acadian settlers around the Bay of Fundy, but who calls herself only an American? Or is he the direct descendant of the early settlers of the St. Lawrence, who is only partly Acadian by descent, but who calls himself Acadian? There is no easy answer. If we use surname analysis, we will miss many who are fully Acadian on their mother's side. If we use genealogy, we will miss those who have become fully assimilated to the Acadian culture, but who may not be biologically Acadian. If we use place of birth in a migrant community, we may miss those who are second generation, or who happened to have been born in a non-Acadian location. The best approach is probably a combination of methods as well as a good knowledge of a particular community's history.

Background

In this article I will be looking specifically at the Franco-American population of Old Town, Maine and its relationship to the primarily Acadian Madawaska population in the upper St. John River Valley along the Maine-New Brunswick border. Family reconstitution of the Old Town community which I did in the late 1970s, and the family reconstitution done by Beatrice Craig for the Madawaska population have been used in studying the rather significant migratory links between the two groups.

The connections between the two communities are to be expected, given the establishment of railroad links after the 1850s. Old Town was one of the earliest towns to receive French-Canadian or Acadian immigrants in New England; a community began forming in that area during the 1830s. Many of the earliest migrants came either from, or at least via, the upper St. John Valley. In the nineteenth century, the "pull" factor to the Old Town area was almost exclusively due to the lumber industry; textile

⁴ Beatrice Chevalier Craig, "Family, Kinship and Community Formation on the Canadian-American Border: Madawaska 1785-1842" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maine at Orono, 1983).

manufacture came in around the turn of the twentieth century.

Immigrants to Old Town were similar to other New England-bound migrants in that they came in family groups. Although a large portion of the French population consisted of single men involved in seasonal labor, those men often had relatives in town, or they later brought families to the area. Single women came with other single women to work as domestics, or with their parents. Married women tended not to work outside the home until the arrival in the area of textile and shoe factories in the early 1900s.

The Old Town French population during the nineteenth century was remarkably fluid, with only about 25% of the census population remaining for ten or more years. This mobility reduces the efficacy of family reconstitution techniques in answering questions about the "unstable" migrants. Nevertheless, we often have enough information to link such earlier migrants with their communities of origin, including Madawaska.

Methods and Results

Family reconstitution was done for the entire Old Town area French population (Old Town, Orono, Bradley, and Milford), using record linkage techniques including: parish marriage, baptism, and death records, 1848-1900; civil birth, marriage, and death records, 1830-1900; federal manuscript census records, 1840-1880 and 1900; and a parish census of 1903-1907. Orono was included until it formed a separate parish in 1880; Milford and Bradley were included in the entire study period. In addition, the parish marriage records for 1900-1930 were analyzed, but were not included in the record linkage process.

The first part of the analysis focuses on the marriage patterns among Acadians from Madawaska who migrated to the Old Town area. I utilized the birth place of the bride and groom as well as the birth place of their parents if known.

As mentioned above, the use of birth place has a number of problems. There is a high degree of ambiguity in the Old Town records during the nineteenth century. It is not rare to find an individual's birthplace listed variously as New Brunswick, Madawaska, and/or Grand Falls. A further complication is the fact that "Madawaska" is a town on the St. John River's southern

side, a county of New Brunswick on the river's northern side, and a term for the region including both sides of the valley. I included in my study any that indicated a birthplace of Madawaska or any of the parishes or towns on either side of the upper St. John Valley. Obviously, this excludes Acadians from other areas from this part of the analysis.

Beatrice Craig's research has described the characteristics of the people who tended to migrate away from Madawaska to Old Town. I will build on the results of her work and support the idea that the Madawaska Acadian migrants experienced an assimilation to a regional Franco-American culture followed by an assimilation to the Anglo culture of the area. This assimilation process is still taking place in the Old Town area.

The families who migrated from Madawaska were a biologically mixed population consisting of French Canadians and Acadians. On the other hand, those who had resided in the Madawaska area long enough and who had married into the community were likely to be culturally Acadian. Madawaska, however, was used as a "way station" for many migrants from the St. Lawrence Valley to New England. Thus some Old Town in-migrants who listed towns in Madawaska as their birthplace were simply children of French Canadians who stayed in the St. John Valley a short time.

During the period 1860-1900, Old Town marriage records sometimes, but not often, listed the birthplace of the bride and groom. Table 1 shows the distribution of the marriages in which Madawaska was listed as a birth place for one or both spouses. This method underestimates the actual number of Madawaska area spouses since many marriage records did not include birth place. The top line presents the total number of marriages between persons with French surnames, with and without a reported birth place. The second line shows the number of marriages recording one or both spouses as born in the Madawaska area. The percent involving a Madawaska spouse increased from 10% in the 1860s to 27% in the 1890s due to two factors. First, the marriage records are more complete for the 1880s and 1890s than for the 1860s and 1870s. Second, there is an actual increase in the number of Madawaska migrants in the 1890s compared to earlier decades. Thus, although migrants from the Madawaska area began coming to the Old Town area as early as 1835, they continued to form a steady proportion of the in-migrant population in succeeding decades, their numbers peaking during the 1890s. On average,

Madawaska-related marriages constituted at least 16% of all marriages among French-named spouses.

Endogamy is a term that refers to marriage within some socially defined boundary. Exogamy is the term referring to marriage across that boundary. Endogamy usually characterizes populations that prefer to marry within their own group. This research addresses the question of whether Acadians from the Madawaska area preferred to marry others from that area, or whether they sought out marriage partners who were simply French-speaking. If the latter is true, it would have produced some reduction in the intensity of the Acadian cultural identity. Given the heterogeneity of Franco-American origins within Canada and Acadia, one might expect that Franco-Americans would have had to create a new cultural identity anyway—one that was appropriate for an urban, industrial environment, one where speaking French was important and whether one was French Canadian or Acadian much less important.

Table 2 shows the marriage patterns for the 103 Old Town area marriages involving one or both spouses from the Madawaska area from 1860 to 1899. Just under a third, 28%, involved couples where both bride and groom were from Madawaska. In 33% of the marriages one spouse was from Madawaska, and the other was recorded as being from "Canada." From the pattern of records in the Old Town area, it is most likely that "Canada" refers to French Canada or Quebec, but there is no way to be sure in every case.

Over 90% of the marriages during this period involved couples who were both French-surnamed. This indicates a clear marriage preference for endogamous marriages within the French-speaking community. On the other hand, the data presented in Table 2 show a range of variation of marriage choices within the Franco-American community. For example, migrants from Madawaska were just about as likely to marry someone from Quebec, Old Town, or "other" as they were to marry a fellow migrant from Madawaska. Although important, endogamy among Madawaskans is not the predominant pattern during the period 1860-1899.

But what about the 1900s? During the period 1900-1930 the marriage records specify the town of baptism for virtually every bride and groom. This offers the chance of checking the assumptions mentioned above; for example, the period 1900-1909

might be expected to be fairly similar to the period 1860-1899. Table 3 shows the results of the analysis. Marriages involving at least one spouse from Madawaska constitute 15 to 19% of marriages, very similar to the previous decades.

The number of endogamous marriages between Madawaska spouses drops drastically, however, from 28% in the period 1860-1899 to 0% to 11% from 1900-1929. The greatest proportion of marriages after 1900 are between Madawaska-born in-migrants and Old Town-born Francos.

At first I suspected that these Old Town-born spouses might be children of Madawaska in-migrants. However, during the period 1900-1909, the marriage records also list parents' birth places. Only 24% of the Old Town-born spouses had one or both parents who were Madawaska-born, suggesting a level of endogamy between people of Madawaska origin (first and second generation) somewhat less than the 28% estimated for the nineteenth century.

An analysis of the overall Old Town Franco-American population marriage patterns from 1900 to 1929⁵ is summarized in Figure 1. Near the bottom of the figure, the percent of local ethnic endogamy is shown. This includes marriages between French-surnamed spouses born in Old Town only; it ranges from 17% during 1900-1909 to a high of only 27% during 1915-1919. The middle sector of the figure includes marriages either between two in-migrants or between a native and an in-migrant. The shaded sector at the top of the figure represents the percent of ethnic exogamy. This includes marriages between French-surnamed and non-French-surnamed persons.

A preference for French-surnamed spouses is clear throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, including two-thirds or more of marriages. However, there is an obvious trend from a high of 87% in the first decade to only 68% between 1925-1929. The turning point seems to be at about 1920.

For this transitional time during the early twentieth century, there was an exceptional diversity of birth places recorded for

⁵ Marcella Harnish Sorg, "Contrasting Local Ethnic Endogamy with Natal Origins: Is Language the Key?" Paper read at the University of Maine Franco-American Faculty Seminar: "Franco-American Studies: A Social Science Approach," 1980.

spouses (those involving at least one French-surnamed spouse). Table 4 summarizes the pattern of natal origins for in-migrants marrying in Old Town between 1900 and 1929. Out of 866 marriages involving 1742 individuals, 770 or 44% of the spouses were born outside of Old Town. These 770 in-migrants were born in 170 different towns. The majority, 54%, were from Canada, with the majority of these from New Brunswick.

Table 5 displays the most important in-migrant sources. It includes only towns that contributed five or more migrants during the period. The major contributors, sending twenty-five or more, include: Orono, Caribou, Van Buren, Chatham, Petit Rocher, and St. Leonard, the latter four of which are primarily Acadian. People from towns in the upper St. John Valley constitute a full 41% of the in-migrants from the 394 sources itemized in this table, and 21% of the 770 in-migrant spouses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Old Town, Maine, during the period 1860 to 1930, was an important destination for migrants from the primarily Acadian settlement of Madawaska, as well as other Acadian communities in New Brunswick. Marriages involving persons born in the Madawaska area averaged about 15 to 18% of Old Town Franco-American marriages through the study period. However, endogamy between persons born in Madawaska constituted a minority of Madawaska in-migrant marriages. The overall marriage patterns suggest that, although community/region of origin was important, it was not as important as linguistic factors in marriage choices. However, it does appear that region of origin was more important before than after the turn of the century. Before 1900, about 28% of marriages involving Madawaska natives were with each other; after 1900 they averaged only about 7%, slightly higher if one includes children of Madawaska natives.

The Madawaska region has always had a strong Acadian cultural identity, despite the influx of in-migrants from Quebec. To some extent, therefore, the Acadian cultural identity is directly associated with Madawaska natal origins. The diminishing importance of regional origin in determining marriage choice after 1900 probably reflects a decrease in the importance of Acadian ethnic identity as well. This change in values was followed about twenty years later by a sharp decrease in the

importance of Franco-American status in the choice of marriage partners; ethnic endogamy dropped from 87% in 1900 to 68% by the 1920s.

If one can generalize from these findings to other New England Franco-American communities with strong Acadian components, one can hypothesize the existence of a growing regional Franco-American ethnic identity to which in-migrants were assimilating during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This process of assimilation would have diluted cultural differences between Acadians and French Canadians. This initial phase was then succeeded, just after World War I, by a sharp increase in assimilation to the Anglo culture. By 1930, the change in values, reflected in marriage choices, would have affected about a third of all Franco marriages and probably would have begun to have a noticeable effect on family life.

Although the Acadian experience in New England was a distinct component of Franco-American history, it may have been more similar than different from the French-Canadian experience, especially after 1900. That is, the experience included two levels of assimilation, one following the other. In some sense, then, there was a loss of cultural identity on two levels, resulting in a complex social and psychological response. One might expect to find an intensification of resistance to loss of ethnic identity paralleling these changes, especially just after 1920. Little is known, however, of the effects of assimilation to a regional francophone identity and the dilution of specifically Acadian (or French-Canadian) values that accompanied it.

The difficulties in obtaining historical information about these Acadian Franco-Americans are great. Efforts to identify the Acadians by surname, by genealogy, or by birth place all have weaknesses, weaknesses also inherent in the present study. These should, one hopes, present a challenge to others and stimulate further research.

[This article first appeared in a French translation as "La formation d'une communauté à Old Town, Maine, 1835-1930: endogamie et origines natales parmi les Acadiens," in the French Institute's publication entitled *L'Émigrant acadien vers les États-Unis: 1842-1950*. It has been reviewed by the author for inclusion in this volume.]

Table 1

Proportion of Old Town Franco marriages involving known
Madawaska-born migrants, 1860-1899

	1860s	1870s	1880s	1890s	1860-1899
Total number of Franco marriages with or without recorded birthplace of spouses	84	164	198	192	638
Total number of Franco marriages recording one or both spouses born in the Madawaska area	10	14	28	51	103
Percent	12%	9%	14%	27%	16%

Table 2

Marriage patterns of Madawaska-born Old Town in-migrants,
1860-1899

Both spouses from Madawaska area	29 (28%)
One spouse from Madawaska area, one from "Canada"	34 (33%)
One spouse from Madawaska area, one from Quebec	6 (6%)
One spouse from Madawaska area, one from New Brunswick	8 (8%)
One spouse from Madawaska area, one from Old Town area	12 (12%)
One spouse from Madawaska area, one from place other than above (France, Ireland, Italy, New Hampshire, or other Maine town)	14 (14%)
TOTAL	103 (100%)

Table 3.

Marriage patterns of Madawaska-born Old Town in-migrants,
1860-1929

	1860-1899	1900-1909	1910-1919	1920-1929
Total number of Franco marriages	638	116	250	370
Total Franco marriages with one or both spouses from Madawaska area	103	21	39	57
Percent of Franco marriages with Madawaska spouse	16%	18%	16%	15%
Both spouses from Madawaska area	29 (28%)	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	6 (11%)
One spouse from Madawaska area, one from "Canada"	34 (33%)	—	—	—
One spouse from Madawaska area, one from Quebec	6 (6%)	0 (0%)	5 (13%)	1 (2%)
One spouse from Madawaska area, one from New Brunswick	8 (8%)	0 (0%)	3 (8%)	7 (12%)
One spouse from Madawaska, one from Old Town area	12 (12%)	21 (100%)*	24 (62%)	29 (51%)
One spouse from Madawaska, one from place other than above	14 (14%)	0 (0%)	5 (13%)	14 (25%)
TOTAL FRANCO MARRIAGES WITH MADAWASKA SPOUSE (S)	103 (100%)	21 (100%)	39 (100%)	57 (100%)

* Of these 21, only 5 had one or both parents who were born in Madawaska.

Table 4.

Natal origins for Franco in-migrants marrying in Old Town
1900-1929

Number	Percent	Source
59	35%	Maine towns
48	28%	New Brunswick towns
32	19%	Quebec towns
6	4%	Nova Scotia towns
5	3%	Prince Edward Island towns
13	8%	Massachusetts towns
7	4%	Other New England towns
92	54%	Canada
78	46%	U.S.
170	100%	Total number of towns

Table 5.

Towns contributing five or more in-migrants to
Old Town Franco marriages, 1900-1929

Source	Town	Number
Maine	Acadia	5
	Augusta	5
	Bangor	12
	Brewer	5
	Caribou	37
	Fairfield	10
	Frenchville	7
	Kingman	6
	Lewiston	11
	Orono	58
	St. David	5
	Skowhegan	5
	Van Buren	55
	Waterville	9
	Winn	5
New Brunswick	Cape Bald	12
	Chatham	30
	Grand Sault	10
	Kent	5
	Petit Rocher	29
	St. Anne de Madawaska	8
	St. Hilaire de Madawaska	6
	St. Leonard	30
Prince Edward Island	Mt. Carmel	5
Quebec	Cacouna	14
	Lac Mégantic	5
"Madawaska"	(probably Madawaska, ME)	5
TOTAL		394

Figure 1

Changes in ethnic endogamy among
Old Town francophone natives and in-migrants, 1900-1929

