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## The Franco-Americans of Maine: A Historiographical Essay

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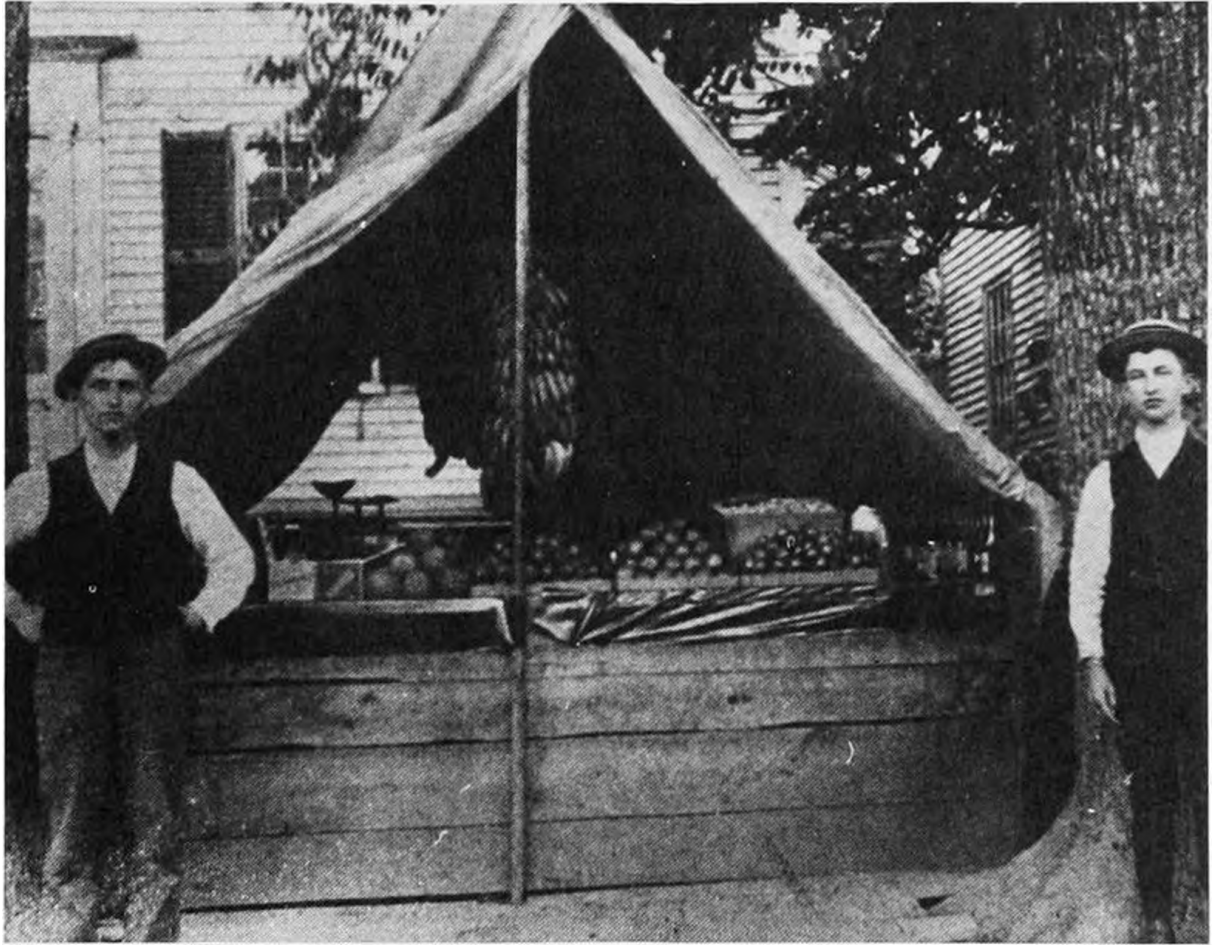
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THE FRANCO-AMERICANS OF MAINE:  
A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

The history of Maine's Franco-Americans, now perhaps 25 to 30 percent of the state's population, parallels, with some variations, that of the rest of New England.<sup>1</sup> Immigrants from Quebec began to come into Maine before the Civil War to work in the woods, on farms, on the developing railroad system, and elsewhere, some returning, increasing numbers staying. From the Civil War on through the early decades of the twentieth century, hundreds, then thousands more arrived to take jobs in the mills of Maine's increasingly industrialized cities and towns, Lewiston, Biddeford, Waterville, Augusta, Brunswick, and Old Town among them. Here, too, they settled in "Little Canadas," coped with popular prejudice and with religious, educational, urban, and economic problems, and struggled for "survivance" in a society dedicated to the Americanization of the ethnic groups of the period. The Maine Franco-American communities found leadership in the Catholic church, in growing numbers of professional and business men, in newspapers such as *Le Messenger* of Lewiston and *La Justice* of Biddeford, and in a variety of clubs and organizations. As elsewhere, the years after World War I brought declining immigration from Quebec, continued assimilation, and, in more recent years, a renewed interest in the Franco-American ethnic heritage.<sup>2</sup>

The historians of those French Canadians who came to Maine from Quebec were churchmen, journalists, community leaders, and academics, French and English. Their focus, apart from the community as a whole, was on parishes, language, politics, organizations, and the various problems of "survivance." They gave increasing attention to statistical methods and sociological analysis. Many studies of Maine's Franco-Americans, even some technical linguistic articles, have included historical sketches.

The period from the late nineteenth century to World War I saw a variety of approaches to studying the Franco-



An earlier photo of the young Morin brothers, Lawrence and Frank, who managed the successful Old Town grocery store on our front cover. Old Town Historical Museum Collections, courtesy C. Stewart Doty.

Americans. One of the earliest was Edward Sheldon's "Some Specimens of a Canadian French Dialect Spoken in Maine." Sheldon, then an assistant professor of romance languages at Harvard, in 1877 had done somewhat limited research on the language of French Canadians in Waterville. He identified the area where they lived as "The Plains" and commented on a Waterville dialect which he thought might be Acadian.<sup>3</sup> A better known writer, William MacDonald, a Bowdoin faculty member, in 1896 gave a balanced and varied if occasionally controversial, picture of Maine's French Canadians in the 1890s which included statistics for the principal centers of the French population.<sup>4</sup> A somewhat different account for the same period is contained in the historical album of the parish

of St. Peter and St. Paul in Lewiston, published by the Dominicans in 1899. More comprehensive than later such "album souvenirs," it contained brief histories of Lewiston and Auburn and of the immigration from Quebec, with sketches of French-Canadian leaders in the church, in educational institutions, and in the Dominican order.<sup>5</sup>

The early 1900s found rising determination among Maine's leading Franco-Americans to publicize what they saw as an important, if unrecognized, role in the state. Some of them also wished to prove to a Catholic church whose hierarchy was still dominated by Irish clerics that the French in Maine were numerous enough to have their own churches and church leaders. Two significant publications provide examples of this effort. The first was the landmark census of Odule Laplante, first published in *Le Messager* in 1908. Laplante's tables, organized by counties and parishes, gave figures, still generally recognized as accurate, for Franco-Americans then living in Maine.<sup>6</sup> The second publication was *Franco-Americans of the State of Maine* (1915), compiled by R. J. Lawton. Basically a collection of short biographies with pictures, intended to show "the achievement of the Franco-American citizens of Maine," it also contained a historical sketch going back to Maine's early explorers, then considered part of the "French presence."<sup>7</sup>

Newspaper articles and an occasional parish publication continued to draw attention to Maine's Franco-Americans in the 1920s, but it was not until the late 1930s and 1940s that scholarly interest began to revive. Two writers, Edward Ham and William Locke, both with Bowdoin connections, helped to renew the study of French language and history in the state. Ham, a Bowdoin graduate, son of a Bowdoin professor, in the late 1930s published a number of articles on French national societies in Maine and New England, on journalism, and on the libraries of the Association Canado-Américain of Manchester, New Hampshire, and the Union St. Jean-Baptiste d'Amérique of Woonsocket, Rhode Island. He urged researchers to use these outstanding facilities and to make a more systematic

and balanced study of the Franco-Americans.<sup>8</sup> William Locke, at one time a Bowdoin faculty member, made a careful analysis of French Canadian dialects in Brunswick. He also included in his "The French Colony at Brunswick, Maine" (1946) and his *Pronunciation of the French Spoken at Brunswick, Maine* (1949) a comprehensive look at the history and the social and economic problems of the Brunswick French, based on careful research in government and parish records.<sup>9</sup>

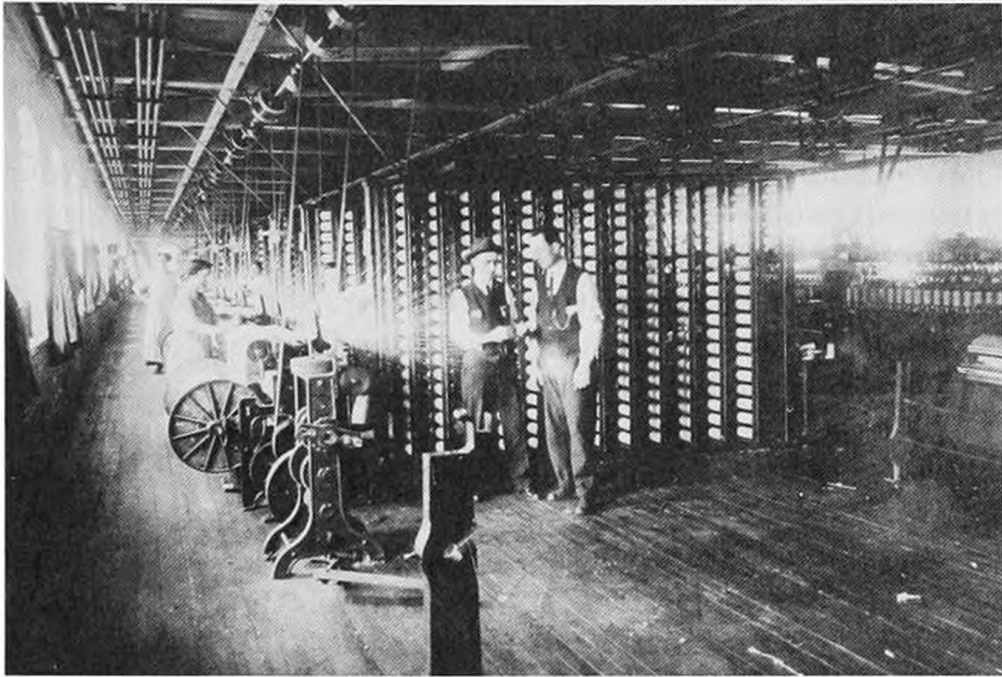
The next decade saw a number of theses and an occasional article with Franco-American themes. They covered a variety of topics, including immigration and language, the political history of Lewiston, social, economic, and political developments in Old Town, the Franco-Americans of Brunswick, and folklore, politics, journalism, and the Franco-American community in Waterville. The Catholic church also received attention, with a thesis on the Ursuline Order in Maine, an article on the parishes of central and southern Maine, and William Lucy's *The Catholic Church in Maine* (1957), which contained chapters on both the Acadians and the Quebec French.<sup>10</sup>

Both popular and scholarly studies on Maine's Franco-Americans, like those on the French elsewhere in New England, were affected by the growing social unrest of the 1960s and 1970s. They also reflected a feeling that the pace of assimilation, so long controversial, had now in fact caused a loss of the French language, traditions, and even the place of the Catholic church in French life which might become irreversible. One result was a more structured effort to address these problems.

Once more, Bowdoin played a role. Research by Bowdoin faculty member David Walker produced *Politics and Ethnocentrism: The Case of the Franco-Americans* (1961), and "The Presidential Politics of Franco-Americans" (1962), followed by Steve Beale's "Minority Group Politics in Maine" (1964), and Michael Guignard's "The Franco-Americans: The Relationship Between Ethnic Identification and Political Behaviour." (1969).<sup>11</sup>

In 1961 and 1962 two NDEA institutes designed for Franco-American teachers of French were held at Bowdoin.

## THE FRANCO-AMERICANS OF MAINE



Pepperell mill scenes. The mills on the Saco River and their French-Canadian workers have been the subjects of several important local histories. York Institute Collections.

They were chaired by Gerard Brault, who was to become one of the most productive Franco-American scholars. Especially worthy of note were his article, "The Franco-Americans of Maine" (1972), and his later book, *The French Canadian Heritage in New England* (1986).<sup>12</sup> Michael Guignard, who completed a Ph.D. thesis on the Franco-Americans of Biddeford in 1976, wrote later articles and a book, *La Foi-La Langue La Culture: The Franco-Americans of Biddeford, Maine* (1982), the most thorough study of Biddeford's French.<sup>13</sup>

Other researchers were also at work in these years. Two who made major contributions both in methodology and in the use of historical materials were the geographers Ralph Vicero and James Allen. Vicero's thesis on the immigration of French Canadians to New England in the late nineteenth century (1968) and Allen's on the Catholics in Maine (1970) were both followed by articles important in Maine's Franco-American historiography. Allen's "Migration Fields of French Canadian Immigrants to Southern Maine" (1972) and "Franco-Americans of Maine: A Geographical Perspective" (1974)<sup>14</sup> together with Vicero's doctoral thesis and his article on the 1908 census of Odule Laplante, helped point the way for much later research and writing in this field.<sup>15</sup>

Historians and specialists in the social studies continued through the early 1980s to be attracted to Maine's French centers. Lewiston, with its large Franco-American population, was a focal point of research and writing. While some of the publications sponsored by the Lewiston Historical Commission in the early 1970s were primarily urban histories, they also dealt with Franco-Americans as part of Lewiston society. The principal authors of this series were James Leamon of Bates College and the journalist Charlotte Michaud. The first two pamphlets were Charlotte Michaud's *Historic Lewiston: Franco-American Origins* (1974), with a section by James Leamon on "Little Canada and Vicinity," and Leamon's *Historic Lewiston: A Textile City in Transition* (1976). A third pamphlet by Geneva Kirk and Gridley Barrows, published in 1982, covered Lewiston's government.<sup>16</sup>

Lewiston's French also provided in this period subjects for a number of theses and articles on language, political parties, and on *Le Messenger*. Most recent and most thorough of the articles was Yves Frenette's "Understanding the Franco-Americans of Lewiston" (1986). Frenette stressed the need for an approach different from that of earlier writers who were either preoccupied with "survivance" or who wrote from the perspective of social history. Needed was an analysis of urban factors in the environment of the Lewiston French, of their increasing stability, and of their rising class distinctions.<sup>17</sup>

The Waterville, Augusta, and Old Town French communities have been studied less frequently than those of Biddeford, Lewiston, and Brunswick. Albert Fecteau's 1952 thesis, mentioned above, is still the most detailed account of the Waterville community as a whole. Stanley Mathieu's thesis on the *Waterville Sentinel* (1965), and the article by Martha Crane and Tom Schulhof on name-changing patterns (1970) provide some additional information on Waterville.<sup>18</sup> On Augusta, the most extensive source is Maurice Violette's book, *The Franco-Americans: A Franco-American Chronicle of Historical and Cultural Environment: Augusta Revisited* (1976). William Thompson's "Ethnic Identification: a Survey of the Franco-Americans in Augusta, Maine" (1975) uses Augusta subjects but with a very specialized sociological focus.<sup>19</sup> The Old Town French have had even less attention. Mary Jo Devitt's 1949 thesis was only incidentally concerned with Old Town's Franco-Americans. Marcella Sorg's "Genetics of Deme Formation in a Franco-American Population, 1830-1903" (1979), while a product of thorough research, concentrated on the problems indicated in the thesis title.<sup>20</sup>

The 1980s have seen the revival of an older method of research, that of the oral interview. Three recent writers have made good use of that technique. C. Stewart Doty, professor of history at the University of Maine, in *The First Franco-Americans: New England Life Histories from the Federal Writers Project* (1985), includes several 1930s interviews from Old Town.<sup>21</sup> Dyke Hendrickson, a journalist, in his *Quiet Presence:*



.... *The True Stories of Franco-Americans in New England* (1980), has sketches of several Maine Franco-Americans.<sup>22</sup> James Searles, a teacher at the Hyde School in Bath, in *Immigrants from the North: Franco-Americans Recall the Settlement of Their Canadian Families in the Mill Towns of New England* (1982), effectively combines history and student interviews with older Franco-Americans.<sup>23</sup>

A recent feature of the Franco-American historiography has been the publication of anthologies, conference proceedings, and other opportunities for the printing or reprinting of writings on the subject. Madeleine Giguère, professor of sociology at the University of Southern Maine, one of Maine's leading Franco-American specialists, has made a substantial contribution with her population studies, her bibliographies, and her editing of two volumes of *A Franco-American Overview*. This collection makes available both for the scholar and for the general reader a wide variety of writing on New England Franco-Americans, those of Maine among them.<sup>24</sup> Claire Quintal, professor of French at Assumption College and director of the college's French Institute, has provided in the Institute's conferences an annual forum in whose regularly published proceedings many Maine authors appear.<sup>25</sup> A somewhat different type of publication is the bilingual monthly *FAROG Forum*, first published in 1973. Edited by Yvon Labbé, director of the University of Maine's Franco-American Centre, the *Forum* carries original articles, reviews new books and theses, and publishes reprints of Franco-American writings.<sup>26</sup>

A review of the books, articles, and theses about those Maine citizens whose origins lie in Quebec might lead to the conclusion that they need little more study. That is not the case. This is a people who for many years have been undergoing major changes both within their own society and in relation to the communities around them. Much remains to be done in basic research on such subjects as political, religious, labor, and urban history, social mobility, and population movements. All of these topics and others will need new research, the updating of older publications, and the application of current historical methodology and new viewpoints.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Much of the extensive literature on the Franco-Americans of New England has reference to or chapters on Maine. With a few exceptions, this historiographical article is concerned only with those books, articles, or theses whose chief focus is on Maine's Franco-Americans of Quebec ancestry. It does not cover the Acadians of the St. John Valley, who have a somewhat different history.

<sup>2</sup>For a recent account of the immigration and later history of Maine's French Canadians, see Gerard J. Brault, *The French Canadian Heritage in New England*, Hanover, N.H., University Press of New England, 1986, chs. II, III, V. Other books and articles cover the immigration and the early 1900s, but there are few general histories of the more recent years.

<sup>3</sup>Edward S. Sheldon, "Some Specimens of a Canadian French Dialect Spoken in Maine," Modern Language Association, *Proceedings*, III, 1887, 210-218. Sheldon reported that his main informant on dialect was a servant girl in his father's house in Augusta, Maine.

<sup>4</sup>William MacDonald, "French Canadians in Maine," *The Nation*, LXIII (Oct. 15, 1896), 285-286. See also his "The French Canadians in New England," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, XII (April, 1898), 245-279, reprinted in Madeleine Giguère, ed., *Franco-American Overview*, Cambridge, Mass., National Assessment and Dissemination Center, 1981, III, Part 1, 1-22.

<sup>5</sup>Paroisse Saint-Pierre et Saint-Paul, Lewiston, Maine, *Paroisse Canadienne-Française album historique*, Lewiston, Me., Les Pères Dominicains, 1899.

<sup>6</sup>Ralph Vicero, "The Franco-Americans of Maine in 1908: The Census of Odèle Laplante," *Recherches Sociographiques*, XII (Sept.-Dec., 1971), 373-377; James P. Allen, "Franco-Americans in Maine: A Geographical Perspective," *Acadiensis*, IV (Autumn, 1974), 32-36, reprinted in Madeleine Giguère, ed., *A Franco-Américan Overview*, III, Part 2, 82-112. For a contemporary account, see "Les Franco-Américaines du Maine," *La Revue Franco-Américaine*, II (1909), 200-209.

<sup>7</sup>R. J. Lawton, comp., *Franco-Americans of the State of Maine*, Lewiston, Me., Royal Press, 1915.

<sup>8</sup>Edward Ham's role in stimulating a revival of scholarly interest in the Franco-Americans has been recognized by, among others, Yves Roby's article in this issue and Claire Quintal's commentary in "Un Québec émigré aux États-Unis: Bilan démographique," Claude Savary, ed., *Les rapports culturelles entre le Québec et les États-Unis*, Québec, Institut Québécois de Recherche sur la Culture, 1984, 139-143. For the pertinent Ham articles, see the bibliography below.

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<sup>15</sup>Ralph D. Vicero, "Immigration of French Canadians to New England: A Geographical Analysis," Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1968; and "The Franco-Americans of Maine in 1908; The case of Laplante" (1971).

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<sup>25</sup>For citations of these conference proceedings, see the conference papers listed in the bibliography below.

<sup>26</sup>With the suspension of Maine's French language dailies, the *FAROG Forum* remains the state's only regularly published newspaper devoted to the concerns of Franco-Americans. Popular articles are published from time to time in the *Maine Sunday Telegram*, the *Lewiston Journal*, and other newspapers. For appreciations of the *FAROG Forum*, see Dean R. Louder, "La Franco-Américainie, 1968-1984," unpublished manuscript, 1984; Gerard J. Brault, "The Franco-Americans of New England: Recent Developments," *Mid-Atlantic Journal of Canadian Studies*, I, (Spring, 1986), 16, 17, and Robert R. Perrault, "Survol de la Presse Franco-Américaine," in Claire Quintal, ed., *Le journalisme de langue Française aux États-Unis*, Quebec, 1984, Le Conseil de la Vie Française en Amérique, 1984, p. 26.

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(FRANCO-AMERICANS)

—OF THE—

(STATE OF MAINE)

U. S. A.

—AND—

THEIR ACHIEVEMENTS

Historical, Descriptive  
and Biographical

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