

Coming Full Circle: the Assimilation and Rejuvenation of the Franco-American Spirit in Maine

Introduction

In the 1930s and 40s, Lisa Michaud's family moved from Canada down to Maine. Lisa and the other Franco-American kids attended the same school like all the other American kids. However, when the Franco-American kids were in school, they talked to each other in English even when they all could speak French because the law forbade them to speak French. "Here you have children playing outside all together, their mother tongue is French, and they can't speak French," Lisa said.¹ At the same time, another Franco-American named Cer Soucy attended school elsewhere in Maine. At her school, she was treated as an "inferior individual".² "It was basically put by the English who were responsible for the great deportation of the Acadians [that] we were seen as second-rate citizens, and when we came here to Maine, we were treated as such, even in the 30s and 40s," said Cer Soucy.³ As Lisa Michaud and Cer Soucy's generation grew up and started their own families, there were only a few of them willing to teach the next generation to speak French because they wanted their children to be assimilated and speak English as fluently as Americans so that their children would not have to suffer what they had been through.

Maine had a rich immigration history, and the majority of immigrants were French Canadians. French Canadians had a geographical advantage, being closer to the border. There were several large-scale immigration waves of French Canadians in the 18th and 19th centuries. After the Seven Years War, many French Canadians escaped across the border to Maine to evade the British government under which they had been treated unfairly. Another wave of immigration from Canada occurred in the 19th century. Some immigrants came for industry-provided job opportunities in the United States during the Great Depression. The Franco-Americans brought their culture into this largely Protestant land which caused conflicts from time to time. The new immigrants

¹ Hannah Yechivi, "'The language connects us to our identity.' | Franco-Americans strive to keep the French language alive in Maine," *News Center Maine*, last modified June 2, 2011, accessed September 14, 2021, <https://www.newscentermaine.com/article/news/local/aroostook-county/the-language-connects-us-to-our-identity-franco-americans-strive-to-keep-the-french-alive-in-maine-acadian/97-92df9579-9d8c-452c-8e52-175329e98245>.

² Yechivi, "The language," *News Center Maine*.

³ Yechivi, "The language," *News Center Maine*.

experienced religious discrimination and many cultural difficulties, but in the end, they found a way to live on this land, which was to be assimilated over time and, in some respects, giving up their language and culture.

Immigration in the 18th and 19th Centuries

The first wave of French-Canadian immigrants came to Maine in the 1700s, as a result of the Seven Years War. In the early 1750s, the French tried repeatedly to expand to the Ohio River Valley, which led France into armed conflict with the British colonies. France seemed doomed from the beginning because the strength of the two sides was extremely mismatched. The English colonies contained, “more than 1,000,000 people, compared with the 70,000 of New France, and were prospering, with strong agricultural economies and growing trade ties with the West Indies and Britain.”⁴ This war soon spread around the world to India and the Caribbean. In the North American region, the war ended with France losing. “In 1759, as an expedition under General James Wolfe sailed up St. Lawrence and besieged Quebec, Sir William Johnson took Niagara, and John Forbes took the Forks of Ohio.”⁵ New France was caught in swiftly closing pincers, and in 1760 New France capitulated. By the terms of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, “all of French North America east of the Mississippi River was ceded to Britain, with the exception of the tiny islands of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon off Newfoundland.”⁶ By 1760, the French government had been expelled from Canada and left all its citizens under British rule.

New France was now one of the British colonies. Like most of the British colonies, New France had a royal governor who had the authority to call an assembly that was sent from Britain. However, even though New France was a British colony, the citizens who lived there did not have the right to vote or attend the assembly, and that was because most of the citizens were Roman Catholic, and not Anglican, the official religion of the United Kingdom, the British royal family, and the government. In 1730, the British government tried to make the Quebecois swear if not allegiance, at least neutrality in any conflict between Britain and France, but the

⁴ "Canada." *Britannica*. Accessed May 4, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Canada/The-French-and-Indian-Seven-Years-War>.

⁵ "Canada," *Britannica*.

⁶ "Canada," *Britannica*.

Quebecois' position was unstable. While previous British governors were relatively easy on the Quebecois, Governor Charles Lawrence was prepared to take drastic action.⁷

In meetings with Quebecois on Friday, September 5, 1755, Colonel John Winslow brought an important message from the Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia, Charles Lawrence. He announced, "That your Land & Tenements, Cattle of all Kinds and Livestocks of all Sorts are forfeited to the Crown with all other your effects Savings your money and Household Goods, and you yourselves to be removed from this Province."⁸

On a Sunday morning, British soldiers destroyed the dykes and burnt the houses and crops. They were ordered to capture as many men as possible from the Catholic churches. The soldiers threatened their families with bayonets when anyone resisted going with them. People prayed and cried but to no avail.⁹ The French Canadians were forced to go into exile in Maine and other states in the United States.

In the 1900s, there was another large wave of French-Canadian immigration to Maine. Because of a long history of discrimination against French-speaking citizens in employment and education under British rule and the difficulty of raising money to buy farmland in Canada, many went to the United States. French Canadians soon settled in the U.S. states bordering Canada, with the majority in Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Michigan, and New York. In 1930, a large population of Canadian immigrants rushed into the United States during the Great Depression for more job opportunities. In 1939, after Britain entered World War II, many Canadians were drafted into the army. Some Canadians hid in the United States in order to avoid conscription, while others came to the United States to find jobs in the expanding American war-based economy.¹⁰

In general, the first wave of immigration suffered from political and religious suppression in their homeland and came to America for refuge. Even though the Protestants and Catholics also had conflicts, the situation for Catholics in America was much better than under the suppressive rule in New France. The second

⁷ James H. Marsh, "Acadian Expulsion (the Great Upheaval)," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, last modified July 15, 2015, accessed May 26, 2021, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/the-deportation-of-the-acadians-feature>.

⁸ Myall, James. "From French Canadians to Franco-Americans." *Maine Memory Network*. Accessed May 4, 2021. <https://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/2122/page/3514/display>.

⁹ Marsh, "Acadian Expulsion," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.

¹⁰ William A. Paquette, "Canadian immigrants," *Immigration to the United States*, accessed May 26, 2021, <https://immigrationtounitedstates.org/402-canadian-immigrants.html>.

wave was based on economic motivation. The economic conditions of the Great Depression that spread to Canada made the situation of French-speaking citizens who had been discriminated against and unfairly treated much worse. In order to find employment opportunities, many French-speaking Canadians immigrated to America. These large waves of immigration increased the labor force in the United States, but also led to dissatisfaction among locals, because it made job competition relatively fierce.

Difficulties in the United States

French Canadians migrated to New England in search of new opportunities for themselves and their families, becoming Franco-Americans. These early Franco-Americans mainly kept the French part of their heritage alive because they spoke French at home. Many Franco-Americans settled in the industrialized parts of Maine, such as Lewiston, Auburn, and Brunswick. Many French Canadians settled on Mill Street in Brunswick and developed their neighborhood and churches. Unlike many other ethnic groups that immigrated to America, the Franco-Americans did not attempt to assimilate quickly but, instead, kept a distinct sense of culture. Franco-Americans did not assimilate because the Franco-American societies were fully self-sufficient. They “offered many benefits for paying members [people who donated money to churches and community]. Some of these opportunities included life and health insurance, scholarships, libraries, bulletins with activities, and libraries.”¹¹ Their almost self-sufficient and isolated society and their culture, like their language, religion and traditions, became the reason they were attacked.

Most French Americans follow Catholicism, which made them incompatible with the Protestants in the surrounding communities. Not only that, but they also had conflicts with Irish immigrants who were also Catholics. For the newly arrived French-Canadian immigrants, they could only go to worship in some Irish American Catholic churches at first. However, the Irish Catholic Church used Irish and English for worship,

¹¹ Emily Williams, "Brunswick's French-Canadian Heritage," *The Franco-American Connection*, accessed May 20, 2021, <https://www.francoamericanconnection.com/documents/Emily-Williams-essay.htm>

which made it difficult for Franco-Americans. Franco-Americans started their own diocese and that aggravated the local population.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the Diocese of Portland, led by Bishops Louis S. Walsh, became Franco-Americans' primary battleground. The New England bishops had overlooked qualified Franco-American priests when nominating Bishops Walsh to Portland. In 1906, the French-speaking population then objected to structural changes implemented by the new bishop. It appears Walsh was pursuing administrative and financial efficiency specifically at the expense of Franco-American religious institutions—by merging parishes or closing schools, for instance. He could do so, critics explained, because the legislature had entrusted all Catholic property in the diocese to the bishop of Portland in 1887. The introduction of this “corporation sole” system¹²

Irish Americans definitely did not want to see Franco-Americans have their own diocese. The Irish Americans not only resented the Franco-Americans' aloofness because the Franco-Americans took their jobs but also opposed using French in the parish and separate Diocese. Even though the Irish Americans resented the Franco-Americans, they still wanted their monetary donations to go to the Irish church instead of the new church the French were planning on building. They also feared that new waves of immigration were setting back Protestant Americans' grudging acceptance of Catholicism.

Franco-Americans also suffered persecution by the Ku Klux Klan. The KKK was not just an advocate for white supremacy, but a Protestant supremacy terrorist group as well.

The Klan's mere presence in the state forced many people to reconsider their political allegiances, including Franco-Americans. The 1924 *New York Times* article How Klan Figures in Maine Election reported that 'Heretofore the French-Canadians in those counties of this State in which they are most numerous have generally voted the Republican ticket, but on the anti-Klan issue raised by Mr. Pattangall they may not do so this year.' The Franco-Americans in Maine realigned their political affiliation to the Democratic Party based on local Democratic opposition to the Klan's rhetoric. Although the National Democratic Party did not support William Pattangall's opposition to the Klan, his position in Maine allowed Franco-Americans to realign themselves accordingly.¹³

The KKK often used violence and threats to influence politics, and they did the same to threaten the Franco-Americans to support conservative parties which deprived some French Americans of the right to express their opinions in politics.

¹² Lacroix, Patrick. "Franco-American Religious Controversies: The Corporation Sole." *Query the Past*. Last modified September 6, 2018. Accessed May 4, 2021. <http://querythepast.com/religious-controversies-corporation-sole/>.

¹³ Best, Erin (2019). The Klan Issue: How French Canadians Combated Nativism through 1920 Maine Local Politics. *Undergraduate Review*, 14, 38-44. Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol14/iss2/8

Franco-American families often sent their children to parochial schools to keep their culture and language intact because in 1919 a law that forbid any use of the French language in public school was established by the Maine legislature.¹⁴ This law made Catholic schools that belonged to the church a more appealing option.

To draw more Franco-American families to the parochial schools, some Catholic parishes stopped charging tuition and instead covered school costs through donations and by reorganizing their finances to allow for more money to be used in their schools. When this failed, parochial schools pushed on, but politicians attempted to pass legislation limiting their ability and influence throughout the 1910s and 1920s.¹⁵

The introduction of this law strengthened the Franco-American communities and thus hindered to assimilation.

Assimilation

Franco-Americans gradually lost their culture and language. The Catholic Church sustained the French language before the Franco-American population started to falter.¹⁶ Churches held important festivals for Franco-Americans to retain their culture. The most important feast was St. John the Baptist Day. St. John the Baptist is recognized by Catholics as the patron saint of French Canadians and of Franco-Americans as well since most of the Franco-American immigrants were originally from Quebec.¹⁷ Churches played an important role in the community, connecting those who spoke French, and creating a language environment so that French could be retained.

After the Great Depression and WWII, the power of the church lessened. During the Great Depression, many people lost their jobs and were forced to leave their communities in order to find jobs. Once they left the French-speaking communities, they used English most of the time to blend in with English-speaking neighborhoods and factories, and thus they had fewer opportunities to speak French. English rose to dominance in

¹⁴ The Klan Issue: How French Canadians Combated Nativism through 1920 Maine Local Politics. Undergraduate Review, 14, 38-44.

¹⁵ Best, Erin (2019). The Klan Issue: How French Canadians Combated Nativism through 1920 Maine Local Politics. Undergraduate Review, 14, 38-44. Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol14/iss2/8

¹⁶ Jessica Fillak, "In Maine, French Culture Experiences a Revival," *Frenchly*, last modified August 7, 2018, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://frenchly.us/the-decline-of-francophone-communities-in-maine/>.

¹⁷ "St. Jean Baptiste Day/ La St-Jean," *Franco-American Centre*, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://facnh.com/events/st-jean-baptiste-day-la-st-jean/>.

the U.S. in Post-World War II. Many Frano-Americans chose to leave their French communities to try to pursue a better life, and once they left, they abandoned their mother tongue.¹⁸

In 1881, the Cabot Mill Strike in Brunswick accelerated assimilation. Brunswick had a huge Franco-American population which had immigrated from Quebec. Cabot Textile Mill was the main workplace for most of the immigrants, many of whom were children. Some were only seven years old, and they worked in a filthy and dangerous environment. In 1886, Editor Tenney of the *Telegraph* editorialized,

What we have stated as to the conditions of affairs at the factory boarding houses on the east side of Main. St. near the cove, is enough to cause pestilence and we were not surprised on Saturday last when Father Gorman informed us that a good deal of sickness prevails among the French-Canadians working in the factories. He said that since the 1st of January he had buried more children than he had baptized and surely this is a sad state of affairs. Rev. Gorman attributes the present sickness to the said neglect of sanitary conditions in and about the houses which the Canadian people occupy. It is somebody's business to see that the sewers, cesspools, and privies are cleaned out and then, if sickness continues, a look must be taken at the interior of the dwellings; it is of no use to look further after the causes of disease than at the banks of the cove reeking with filth.¹⁹

On Aug. 12, 1881, the employees of Cabot Textile Mill went on strike because of the low pay and poor working conditions. In the short term, the strike worked, but in the long term, the strike led to the closure of the factory. Many Franco-Americans lost their jobs and were forced to move out of their neighborhoods to find new jobs in different places. Most of them moved out of town to other mill towns for employment opportunities and some of them even moved out of state. As the formal Franco-American workers walked out of the French-speaking community, they lost opportunities to sustain the French language because there were seldom French-speaking communities in other states, and rarely could they find a Catholic church that conducted mass in French. Therefore, English became the main language that Franco-Americans they used to integrate into their communities and gradually it became the main language of their life.

¹⁸Fillak, "In Maine," *Frenchly*.

¹⁹ Madeleine Giguere, ed., *New England*, vol. 3, *A Franco-American Overview* (Cambridge, MA: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, 1981),

Speaking French gradually became a disadvantage when it came to finding jobs, because the lack of English narrowed the business circle of Franco-Americans to other Franco-Americans, and it was difficult to deal with English-speaking locals. Lee, a Franco-American who immigrated from Quebec, noted that, "When my parents spoke English, they had a strong French accent that many people had a hard time understanding. It wasn't very well received."²⁰ Therefore, many Franco-American families would rather send their children to public English-speaking schools in order to secure better jobs. Using Brunswick as an example, many Franco-Americans moved out of French-speaking neighborhoods for better opportunities.

Some Francos had the French language literally beaten out of them in school, but others were encouraged by their parents to speak English. Jobs were often advertised with the caveat 'no French need apply,' and parents who wanted their children to have an alternative to factory work saw English as their means of social advancement. Children learned to hide their French accent, first on the playground, and later when they went for job interviews.²¹

Over time, when the Franco-Americans were no longer living in French-speaking environments, most of them gradually assimilated and lost their mother tongue and culture.

Conclusion

Now in the 21st century, many Franco-Americans are trying to retain their culture and language. French is no longer the central identity of Franco-Americans. With many first-generation Franco-Americans aging, many do not speak the language: "of those 5 years and older, who identified as Franco-American, only 12.3% of respondents said that they spoke a language other than English, presumably French."²² Therefore, the elders of Franco-American started social clubs in order to connect with their heritage. Franco-Americans also carried out various activities and French courses in Franco-American Centers in order to re-connect with Franco-Americans who had been distanced from Franco-American culture. With the influence of French-speaking refugees from Western Africa to Maine, French is undergoing a revival.²³

²⁰ Fillak, "In Maine," *Frenchly*.

²¹ James Myall, "From French Canadians to Franco-Americans," *Maine Memory Network*, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/2122/page/3514/display>

²² James Myall, *Franco-Americans in Maine: Statistics from the American Community Survey* (n.p., 2012), [Page 4], https://usm.maine.edu/sites/default/files/franco-american-collection/James_Myall_FATF_Report.pdf.

²³ Fillak, "In Maine," *Frenchly*.

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The Franco-Americans were part of the very early waves of immigrants to the U.S. They escaped the unfair treatment by the British government, and settled in Maine. They experienced various twists and turns in America: religious conflicts, and the threats of the KKK. Due to these, the Franco-Americans assimilated while losing their language and their culture. Churches and French schools that were built by Franco-Americans became part of the culture of Maine. The same is true for Franco-Americans, as Maine culture has also become the culture of Franco-Americans, like the La Kermesse Franco-Americaine Festival which celebrates French-Canadian heritage. These two cultures complement each other and form a unique Maine culture.

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