**French-Canadian Immigrants**

Most French Canadians migrated to New England from the province of Quebec. Specifically, the area known as the St. Lawrence Lowlands. Climate is very important to the development of an agricultural economy and this region brought several challenges. While Quebec has amble precipitation, only the southern parts of the lowlands is warm enough for farming.

The nineteenth century Quebec farmer, similar to their New England neighbors, tilled the soil, planted, and harvested according to the age old system with no change. They did not use manure or any kind of fertilizer, turned over the top soil with a shallow plow, sowed unclean and unimproved seed, allowed weeds to grow everywhere, and knew nothing about crop rotation. Quebec farmers were also infested by insect pests and suffered the effects of blight. All these factors contributed to a 70 percent drop in the provinces production of wheat, the chief cash crop, between 1827 and 1844. When efforts were made to introduce the potato, a similar disaster occurred by the potato blight.

Even though the harvesting was not growing the population was increasing at great numbers. In 1851 the French Canadian population was close to 670,000. With farms no longer able to support the growing population and little money to purchase or improve tillable land a crisis developed in the province. When a population expands rapidly and land declines in productivity people emigrate.

In 1850 the French-Canadian immigration to New England totaled close to 20,000 people. Sixty two percent settled in Vermont, mostly in the northern and western sections. An estimated 3,700 settled in Maine mostly clustered in Waterville, Orono, and Old Town. By 1860, an additional 12,000 new French-Canadian immigrants had reached New England. Many continued to live in the same areas, but important concentrations moved to central Massachusetts in the area around Worcester. Others moved to Blackstone Valley in Rhode Island, and along the Merrimack Valley including Manchester, New Hampshire. Many Franco-Americans were engaged in a variety of occupations, but in southern New England towns a large number were recruited as contract laborers for the textile mills.

What caused an explosion in French-Canadian immigrants following the Civil War can be traced back to twelve Boston merchants who started the Boston Manufacturing Company. This group included members of the Appleton, Cabot, Lawrence, Lowell and other Brahmin families. Thy started a large integrated cotton mill for mass production of cloth. The first mill was located in Waltham, Massachusetts in 1815. The period between 1830-1850 brought an extraordinary development of industry in New England. They manufactured cotton and woolen textiles, boots, and shoes. Cheap water power was of primary importance in this development. Major rivers of southern New England provided ideal conditions for creating a manufacturing region.

Before the Civil War the textile industry employed mostly unmarried girls and recruited local people from farm communities. By the mid 1840s as greater demand was made on mill operatives, American born employees began to abandon this kind of work. Their places were filled by Irish immigrants. As the Irish began to desert the mills, and the post war boom in textiles, factory managers began increasingly to draw on the abundant labor force from Quebec. There was a dramatic increase in the Franco-American population, particularly in southern New England, in 1870, 1880 and 1900.

The proximity of New England and the availability of cheap, rapid transportation by rail were major contributing factors to the Franco-American immigration. The French Canadians were the only major ethnic group to have immigrated to the United States in any significant number by train. By 1900, Massachusetts included half the entire Franco-American population, while southern Maine and New Hampshire shared the remaining half equally.

In 1878 Honore Beaugrand, published Jeanne la fileuse, the first Franco-American novel. The story was an account of an immigrants voyage to a New England mill town. The main character was a sixteen-year-old orphaned heroine, Jeanne, who is living with her foster family, the Dupuises. They travel from Montreal via train to reach Fall River, Massachusetts. The Dupuises open up charge accounts with the baker, butcher, and grocer, who send employees around each day to take orders and to deliver. Many French Canadians purchased items on credit. The tenements in company houses were said to be comfortable, and the modest rent was deducted for the family’s pay. The father and older children begin work at the Granite Mill. The younger children, ages twelve, ten, and eight, attend school twenty weeks a year. If they are not in school they find employment at the local mill.

Everyone rises early and arrives at the factory by 6:30am. A sixty-hour work week is the rule. Working conditions include domination by foreigners and strict supervision by foremen. A first-time worker must serve an apprenticeship at a reduced hourly wage rate. The family’s combined monthly income is low although the Dupuises pay off most of their debts the second month and start putting some of their earning into a savings account. Adjustment to life in Fall River would take close to three months. Mill workers would be paid on the average of $1.22 an hour. Children would receive between 28 cents to $1.00 an hour.

Franco-Americans would socialize among themselves evenings and Sundays. The Dupuises attended the Saint Anne's Catholic. The father would read the local French-language newspaper and was a member of the Societe Saint-Jean-Baptiste. Their son, Michel, belonged to a local Franco-American cultural organization. Jeanne sews and studies English in the evening while also finding time to give French lessons to a group of French-Canadian children attending public school. She eventually returns to Canada to marry her fiance, who has the responsibility of managing the family farm. Her brother Jules, moves to Fall River and starts a business of his own as a grocer. The elder Dupuis, saved enough money in three years to pay off their mortgage in Canada and also return home. It is apparent many of the French-Canadians transitioned to a better life in New England.

In 1890 Father Edmond Hamon, a Jesuit missionary who served ten years in French speaking parishes in New England wrote: