

Early Franco-Americans of Brunswick, Maine: An Investigation of the U.S. Federal Census 1840-1900

by David Vermette

It is estimated that nearly one million French-speaking Canadians relocated to the New England states of the U.S.A. between 1840 and 1930. The peak of this immigration was the 60-year period between 1870 and 1930, triggered by a post-Civil War industrial boom that pulled immigrants from Québec and Atlantic Canada at the same time that economic difficulties back home made emigration an attractive proposition. What started as a trickle, beginning directly after the failure of the Canadian Rebellions of 1837 and 1838, became a flood in the decades before and after 1900. Textiles, one of the core industries of the late 19th century boom, was powered largely by the French-speaking newcomers from the North. New England mill towns from Waterville to Woonsocket quickly developed neighborhoods known as “little Canadas” where French-speakers lived in an annex of French-Canada among spindles and smokestacks.

In one such town, Brunswick, Maine, textile mills appeared as early as 1809, but it was not until the Cabot Manufacturing Company was formed in the 1850s that the town’s textile mill became a major employer. The growth of the French-Canadian population in Brunswick began to accelerate after the Civil War, most likely as a result of an expansion of the mill in the mid-1860s. By the early decades of the 20th century the Franco-American population was approximately 40 percent of the town. *But what can be known about the earliest French-Canadian immigrants to Brunswick? Can the growth and progress of this community be measured and what can we learn from this exercise about the formative years of a Franco-American community?*

I will use the U.S. Federal Census between the years 1840 and 1900, as the basis of an investigation of the early Franco-Americans of Brunswick. We could use many other sources to learn about them, but our exercise will be to confine ourselves, as far as possible, to the census in order to extract as much information as we can from these records. With a mobile population like the early Franco-Americans a decennial census misses a great deal of activity. Therefore, this is not an attempt to name the definitive “first” Brunswick French-Canadian families; it is an investigation of a set of sources, a finding of fact.

Anyone who has worked with the early manuscript census records is aware of their limitations. First of all, one is at the mercy of what the subject, himself or herself, knew. By no means is all of the information given by a subject accurate. One is also at the mercy of the census taker and the limitations of his penmanship and his accuracy in hearing and transferring the information to paper. To make matters worse, the ink on some of the old documents has faded into obscurity. With respect to the Franco-Americans, there is an added difficulty – the language barrier. Frequently, the French names are mangled beyond recognition by the Anglophone census takers. In the mid 19th Century the French names are almost always altered to fit English models. The use of “mill names,” by which French-speaking immigrants would translate their family names from French into English (Leblanc became White, Racine became Root, Boisvert became Greenwood, etc.) was also a common practice, throwing the researcher into confusion regarding who was a French-speaking newcomer and who was not. Therefore *interpretation* is the best word to use to describe the process of extracting information from these documents. Having offered these *caveats*, let us begin the investigation.

1840

We will begin with the generally accepted date for the start of the epoch of French-Canadian immigration to New England: 1840. In fact, French-Canadian immigrants in such towns as Waterville, Maine were visible as early as the 1830s. An examination of the 1830 census for Brunswick reveals that there were 11 individuals classified as “*Aliens – Foreigners Not Naturalized.*” However, no case can be made that these immigrants were French-Canadian. The year 1830 is too early to discern the signs of their presence in Brunswick.

Were there Canadian immigrants in Brunswick in 1840? As we would expect, given the fact that the textile business had yet to prosper in Brunswick at this date, there are still *no clear* indications of *any* French-Canadians in Brunswick in 1840. Almost all of the names we encounter in the 1840 Federal Census of Brunswick, Maine are easily recognizable Yankee names (Hopkins, Kent, Litchfield) including many that had long histories in the area (Dunning, Snow, Varney).

There are three families, those of Simon Lubea (*Labbé?*), John Plant (*Plante?*) and Susan Proule (*Proulx?*), whose names we might construe as French-Canadian, but there is not sufficient evidence to convict the suspects. The 1840 census gives very little information, beyond the names of the heads, and the

numbers and age ranges of the members of the household. There are no data at all about birthplace or national origin. However, examining the size of the families of our 1840 suspects, and their occupations, there's no evidence that these families were early examples of the pattern of French-Canadian immigration and settlement that emerged later in Brunswick. Apart from a small number of African-Americans, the 1840 census draws a picture of Brunswick as a very homogeneous town where, one suspects, there had been very little demographic change for some time. This would shift dramatically over the next 60 years.

1850

The 1850 U.S. Federal Census provides the complete names as well as the place of birth of all of its subjects, allowing us identify Canadian immigrants. In this census we observe that virtually the entire population of Brunswick in 1850 (as in 1840) was born in Maine or in a nearby New England state. We do find among them five families of Canadian origin, two of them clearly related.

Three of these families I judge to be of British or Irish extraction. The first of them we encounter is the Davidson family in *dwelling 197*. Samuel Davidson, 40 and his wife, Ann, 31, were born in New Brunswick. They have five children, Alfred M., Sarah E., John W., Mary and Daniel, all born in Canada.

We also find the two related families of Samuel Lube, 53, Laborer and his wife Lydia, 50. Their children, Thomas (17), Elizabeth (15), John (10), William (8) and Mark (5), like their parents, were born in Canada. A separate family group in the same dwelling includes Levi Lube, 22 – most likely the son of Samuel – his wife, Rachel, 21 and, I would venture, an older relative living with them, Mary Bruce, 80. Rachel and Mary were born in Maine. Lube is a known Irish name, which, along with the suspiciously English first names of the children of Samuel and Lydia Lube, and the fact that Levi Lube married a Mainer at such an early date, persuades me that these families are not French-Canadian. Also, in the mid-19th century literacy was much more widespread among the English-speakers of North America than it was among their French neighbors. The fact that all of the Lube household (including the 80-year-old relative) is literate is further evidence that these families are of British Isles descent. To settle the issue, I used naturalization records to trace these Lubes to Harpswell, Maine in the later 19th century; the evidence there convinces me that the Lubes were English-speaking.

There's a strong similarity between the *Lubee* name and the *Lubea* name from the 1840 census, but there's not enough evidence here to make a connection between the two. After having looked at thousands of French-Canadian families in census records, my instinct is that these *Davidsons* and *Lubees* are not of French extraction.

However, on *page 94* of the manuscript census, living together in *dwelling 671*, we find the following two families (names spelled as in the manuscript):

- Mitchell Blay, 50, Laborer
- Mary, 50
- Francis, 16, Laborer
- Peter, 11
- Delia, 10
- Alvenia, 8
- Horace, 6

- John Demouy, 53, Laborer
- Mary, 26
- Mary, 6
- Margaret, 2

With the exception of little Margaret Demouy, aged 2, all of these individuals were born in Canada.

I interpret the names of the first family listed above as follows: *Michel Blais*, *Marie*, his wife, and their children *Francois*, *Pierre*, *Delia*, *Albina*, *Horace*. *Demouy* is an ancient French name. Although, in the North American context it is usually associated more readily with the French of Louisiana and the Gulf Coast region, the French name and the Canadian origin persuade me that this family is *Québécois*. I interpret that whom we have here is *Jean Demouy*, his (second?) wife *Marie*, and their daughters *Marie* and *Marguerite*. I also notice that, unlike most of the adult inhabitants of Brunswick, the adults in these two families are illiterate, again, more typical of 19th century *Canadiens* than Mainers. In fact these two families are the only ones in Brunswick in 1850 which include more than one illiterate adult. (Besides these two Canadian families, there are only six other illiterate adults in Brunswick at this time.) I also notice that neither the *Blais* nor the *Demouy* families may be found in Brunswick ten years later in the 1860 census. (N.B. *On the controversial topic of literacy in 19th century Québec*

see Yvan Lamonde, *Histoire Sociale Des Idées au Québec, 1760-1896* [Québec: éditions Fides, 2000], esp. 154.)

These two French-Canadian families, more or less transient laborers living together in a single dwelling, display a pattern that begins to be repeated hundreds of times over the next several decades. Whether these two families had any connection with the families that followed or not, in them we can observe the first beginnings of demographic and cultural change.

Summary Statistics for 1850

Total Population of Brunswick	4977
Franco-American Population	11
Franco-American Population as a Percentage of the Total Brunswick Population	0.2%
Percentage of Brunswick Franco-Americans born in the USA	18%
Number of people per dwelling in the Franco-American community	11

1860

In the U.S. Federal Census for 1860 we find four continuous pages – pages 13, 14, 15 and 16 – recording the residents of eight contiguous dwellings inhabited by 13 families from “Lower Canada” (Québec). The occupation of all but a few of the employed members of these families is “*factory operative*.” The best explanation is that these four pages record the residents of boarding houses associated with the recently formed Cabot Company textile mill and that most of these *Canadiens* are employed there. Below is a complete list of these early *Canadien* residents of Brunswick, with the names spelled as they appear in the manuscript census. My interpretations of the names are in parentheses. All of these people were born in “Lower Canada” unless otherwise noted. I have also provided the gender of the individual, since it’s difficult to tell by the names in some cases.

P. 13, dwelling 110

Family 118

- Flivia Bushua (*Flavien Bourgeois*), 46, M, Factory Operative
- Zoia (*Zoë*) 38, F, Factory Operative
- Donela, 19, F, Factory Operative
- Edward (*Edouard*), 18, M, Factory Operative
- Julia (*Julie*), 15, F, Factory Operative

- Euneo, 13, M, Factory Operative
- Arzella (*Exilia*), 11, F, Factory Operative
- Davis, 8, M
- Hüge (*Hugh*), 6, M
- Lewis (*Louis*), 4, M, b. in Massachusetts
- Addie, 1, F, b. in Maine
- Thomas Wilmott (*Thomas Wilmette*), 20, M, Factory Operative

Family 119, (page 14)

- Joseph Lagacy (*Joseph Lagacé*), 49, M, Day Laborer
- Mary (*Marie*), 47, F
- Joseph, 26, M
- Justin, 24, M, Shoe Maker
- Arameda (*Aramede*), 22, F
- Borzille (*Basile*), M
- Carrie, 18, F
- Palpeda, 14, F
- Frances (*Françoise*), 11, F
- Lewis (*Louis*), 9, M
- Aritean, 8, M
- John, 4, M

Dwelling 111

Family 120

- Lewis Goodbee (*Louis Godbout*), 50, M, Day Laborer
- Ellen (*Helene*), 47, F
- Octa (*Octave*), 23, M
- Predan (*Prudent*), 22, M
- Mary (*Marie*), 20, F

Family 121

- Joseph Benway (*Joseph Benoit*), 23, M, Factory Operative
- Eliza (*Elise*), 3 months, F, (b. in Maine)
- Ellen Goodbee (*Helene Godbout*), 19, F
- Eliza (*Elise*), 17, F, Factory Operative
- Zebo (*Zenon*), 14, M, Factory Operative
- Frances (*Francoise*), 12, F
- Victoria (*Victorine*), 10, F

- Roseanne, 3, F, b. in Maine
- Eugene, 1, M, b. in Maine
- Mary Lagacy (*Marie Lagacé*), 6, F

Family 122

- Oliver Seyman (*Olivier Simon* or *Simard*), 51, M, Factory Operative
- Angeline, 46, F
- Aldo, 19, M, Factory Operative
- Mary (*Marie*), 17, F, Factory Operative
- Joseph, 13, M
- Charles, 11, M
- Victoria (*Victorine*), 9, F
- Dillano (*Delina*), 8, F, b. in Massachusetts
- Sophia (*Sophie*), 6, F, b. in Massachusetts
- Frances (*Francoise*), 3, F, b. in Maine
- Dempsey, 6 months, b. in Maine

Dwelling 112 (page 15)

Family 123

- Lewis Hart (*Louis Déhêtre*), 27, M Factory Operative
- Emma, 23, F
- Elizabeth, 6, F, b. in Massachusetts
- Matilda (*Mathilde*), 2, F, b. in Maine

Dwelling 113

Family 124

- Peter Doane (*Pierre Dion*), 21, M, Factory Operative
- Rosilla (*Rosalie*), F, 19

Dwelling 114

Family 125

- Alexander Dufrá (*Alexandre Dufresne*), 43, M
- Angeline, 40, F
- Lena, 18, F, Factory Operative
- Adeline, 16, F, Factory Operative

- Levi, 14, M
- Lewis (*Louis*), 12, M
- Joseph, 10, M
- Walter, 8, M
- Razena (*Regina*), 6, F
- Alfred, 2, M, b. in Maine

Family 126

- Benjamin Dufrá (*Benjamin Dufresne*), 28, M, Factory Operative
- Mary (*Marie*), 36, F, Factory Operative
- Alexander (*Alexandre*), 15, M, Factory Operative
- Paul, 13, M
- Exist (*Exeor?*), 10, M
- Regina, 7, F
- John (*Jean*), 4, M, b. in Massachusetts

Dwelling 115

Family 127

- Peter Prescott (*Pierre Precour*), 58, M, Day Laborer
- Amelia (*Elmire*), 22, F, Factory Operative
- Lydia, 28, F, Factory Operative
- Maria (*Marianne*), 16, F, Factory Operative
- John (*Jean*), 14, M
- Mary (*Marie*), 12, F
- Dorothy, 10, F
- Georgiana, 8, F
- Zephrie (*Zephirin*), 6, M
- Victoria (*Victoire*), 3, F

Dwelling 116

Family 128

- Mitchell Mino (*Michel Minaud* or *Migneault*), 37, M, Day Laborer
- Susan (*Suzanne*), 37, F
- Joseph, 16, M, Factory Operative
- Charles, 15, M
- Eugene, 13, M
- Michael (*Michel*), 13, M

- Dillano (*Delina*), 11, F
- Adeline, 11, F
- Zeb, 7, M
- Paul, 5, M
- Lucy (*Lucie*), 3, F
- Peter (*Pierre*), 1, M

Family 129 (page 16)

- Dominic Gerta (*Dominique Gauthier*), 46, M, Factory Operative
- Cecela (*Cecile*), 38, F
- Julia (*Julie*), 18, M, Factory Operative
- Alfred, 16, M, Factory Operative
- Levi, 13, M
- Semo (*Simon*), 11, M
- Joseph, 9, M
- Adelin (*Adeline or Madeleine*), 7, F,
- Luke (*Luc*), 2
- Emma, 8 months
- Narcis Gerboy (*Narcisse Guerbois*), 18, M, Factory Operative

Dwelling 117

Family 130

- Francis Langdon (*Francois Lanctot or Lantagne*), 41, M, Factory Operative
- Sophie (*Sophie*), 41, F
- Sophia (*Sophie*), 15, F
- Joseph, 13, M
- Eliza (*Elise*), 11, F
- Lenore (*Elinore*), 9, F
- Regina, 7, F
- Mary (*Marie*), 5, F
- Joseph, 3, M
- John (*Jean*), 7 months, M, b. in Maine

Family 131

Living in dwelling 117 we also find the Daniel Humphreys family all of whom were born in Maine.

It is obvious from the unintelligibility of many of them that the census-taker was encountering names he had never heard before. It is a good indication of the presence of French-Canadians in a 19th century New England mill town if one finds in the census names that are *neither* French *nor* English. It was easy enough for the census taker to write “Peter” for *Pierre*, but what was he to do with *Cyprien*, *Leocadie* or *Hermenegilde*?

I have sympathy for these early census takers. Today, we have easy access to the sounds of languages other than our own: radio, TV, films, CDs, the Internet, etc., none of which, of course, existed in the 19th century. In venturing into the mill boarding houses to collect data, the census-taker enters a foreign world, where he hears sounds he’s likely never to have heard before. It’s most likely that he does not know how to read or write French, and even if he did, he’s writing for English speakers only. On the side of the French population, we must conclude that they lived in a world where even “*what’s your name?*” was too complicated a question. Something as fundamental to one’s identity as one’s *name* could not be comprehended by the dominant culture.

Based on the obviously fractured French, I am convinced that the French-Canadians in Brunswick in 1860 included the *Bourgeois* (family 118), *Lagacé* (119), *Godbout* (120), *Benoit* (121), *Simon* (122), *Dufresne* (125), *Minaud* (or *Migneault*) (128), and *Gauthier* (or *Gaudias*) (129) families. In fact, although only a couple of them remained in Brunswick in the coming decades, these families are the germs of what will become a significant French-speaking enclave in coastal Maine.

The Prescott family (127) might appear at first glance to be English-Canadian, but the following Federal Census in 1870 reveals that Peter Prescott is actually *Pierre Precour*, a known *Québécois* family name. The same census tells us that the name of the woman called “Aemilia” here is actually *Elmire*.

It is more difficult to reach a conclusion about the ethnicity of the Langdon, Hart and Doane families. There was a Yankee family in Maine called the Doanes, but there was a *Dion(ne)* family in Brunswick at an early date. As regards the Langdon family (130), arguing on the Anglo-Saxon side is the fact that they have their first names intact, they have a recognizable British surname, and they live in the same dwelling with a Yankee family, the Humphreys. However, they also seem to have two sons named Joseph (if both Josephs *are* their sons) and it was common among French-Canadian families of the time to name their sons Joseph followed by another name by which the child would generally be called, e.g. brothers might be named Joseph-Henri, Joseph-Albert, and Joseph-Benjamin. “Langdo” is a known Anglicization of

Lanctot, and it seems a small step from Langdo to Langdon. Similarly, I can't be sure if the Hart family (123) is of French or English extraction. I do know that there was a French family named *Dehartes* in Brunswick at an early date, and I tend to think that this is an indication of their presence. It is also known that Hart was a mill name for *Jolicoeur* and *Francoeur*.

We note that for most of the members of these families, the place of birth is given as "*Lower Canada*" (*Québec*). The same census-taker records the birthplace of a very few other individuals scattered about the town, who appear to be of English-Canadian origin, as "*Canada*" (including the remnants of the Lubees family whom we met in 1850). Among all of the inhabitants in the town, only these families of factory operatives have their origins in "*Lower Canada*," a term that was strongly associated with the French-speaking inhabitants of the British North American provinces. One exception to this rule is a couple we find in *dwelling 141*, living with the remnants of the Lubees – a Joseph Janell (*Janelle*), 29, "millman," and his wife Lucy (*Lucie*), 28, both born in "Canada." *Janelle* is a recognizable Acadian name, and here we also have an unambiguous connection to millwork. I have numbered the "Janells," as well as the "Doanes," "Langdons," and "Harts" among my calculations of Franco-Americans.

There are several things to notice about our group of "*Lower Canadian*" families. First of all, with the exception of the *Janelles*, the entire French group in the town lives in a handful of contiguous dwellings. We see that some of these families have children who were born in Maine as well as in Canada, while some have young children born in three places: Canada, Maine, and Massachusetts. This suggests that these families were mobile; we might speak of them as *migrant workers*.

Contributing to this characterization, the census also tells us that several of these families owned Real Estate worth as much as \$2000, a considerable sum in 1860. Given the transient nature of these families, and the fact that I believe we are looking at the residents of mill-owned housing, or boarding houses closely tied to the mill, I doubt that the Real Estate they owned was in Maine. I believe that here we find evidence of a well-documented phenomenon: a family would own a farm in Québec and work a portion of the year in the New England factories or mills to earn the capital to keep the family farm back home afloat. That many families moved repeatedly between Maine and Québec is a demonstrable fact in the Brunswick Franco-American and other mill town communities.

We also notice that some of these families are clearly related. *Joseph Benoit* appears to be married to *Helene Godbout*, and this family also has a young girl, *Marie Lagacé*, living with them, no doubt having some relationship to the *Lagacé* family living next door. This pattern of immigrating with extended family groups was another common element of the French-Canadian diaspora in New England.

We also see here the evidence of child labor, with children as young as 11-years-old working as factory operatives. In the coming decades, even younger children will be employed at the Cabot Mill in Brunswick. Census records which include large French families, with as many as ten or twelve family members, from the parents to their eight and nine year old children, working in the same mill or factory, will become commonplace in Brunswick and elsewhere in New England over the next half-century.

On the other end of the age range, I notice that these early Franco-American families were led by men who were not particularly young by 19th century standards. The patriarchs of these families tended to be in their 40s and 50s. Did these middle-aged men find themselves with large families whom they were unable to support by means of the family farm in Québec? Did they come to the mill towns of the USA in their middle age in an attempt to re-establish the family farm back on a firmer financial footing? This is speculation with regard to these specific families in Brunswick – but it would make sense and it fits a pattern seen elsewhere in Franco-American New England.

What we do observe is that, by 1860, we have the first beginnings of a *permanent* French-Canadian community in Brunswick. One finds the *Dufresne*, the *Benoit*, and the *Precour* families still present ten years later in the 1870 census for Brunswick. Families by the name of *Godbout*, *Déhêtre*, *Gauthier*, and *Dion* also had an early presence among the Brunswick French. With the Dufresnes, Benois, and Precours, however, we are able to observe the very same French-speaking families in the 1860 and in the 1870 censuses. This is a first for Brunswick.

Summary Statistics for 1860

Total Population of Brunswick	4723
Franco-American Population	118
Franco-American Population as a Percentage of the Total Brunswick Population	2.5%
Percentage of Brunswick Franco-Americans born in the USA	11%
Number of people per dwelling in the Franco-American community	9

1870

In the U.S. Federal Census for 1870 for Brunswick there are ten and one-half consecutive pages of French names. There are, by this point, more than 65 French-Canadian families in Brunswick. The Franco-American population, at over 400, has grown fourfold since 1860. The census is explicit that almost all of these people over the age of 7 years work in the cotton mill. By 1870, almost one out of every ten Brunswick residents is a French-Canadian textile mill worker or a family member of one of them.

One notices here, for lack of a better term, the ghettoization of the French population. In 1870, there are only three identifiable French-Canadian families that live apart from what must be the company housing of the Cabot Mill: the family of Thomas “Ruiz” (*Ruest*), and two families with the same surname, *Choquet*, who work for the Maine Central Railroad. The picture painted by the 1870 census is of a population of several hundred, in a town of several thousand, that lives together in a body, that speaks a different language, and that works according to its own rhythm – that of the mill. It is easy to imagine that the French group at this time lived lives that were totally separate from the main body of the town.

Based on the birthplaces of their youngest children, we detect signs of continued mobility in this group. The family of *Joseph Benoit*, which we remember from 1860, now has a new member, *Joseph (2)*, 5-years-old, born in Rhode Island. This means that in 1860 we find the Benois in Maine; in 1865 a new baby is born in Rhode Island, but in 1870 we find the Benois back in Brunswick. The fact that we find various children among the French-Canadian group born in Canada, as well as in several other New England states, suggests itinerant mill-working families. We can imagine that they were accustomed to moving where millwork was available and where they might earn the best wage.

Despite the mobility among this group, in 1870 we find families that will become permanent residents of Brunswick. We find men and women who will become naturalized U.S. citizens and families that will spawn several generations of descendants, some of whom still live in the Brunswick area almost a century and a half later.

Among this group we find the following family names. This is not an exhaustive list. A small number of the names I haven't yet deciphered.

- Baptiste
- Baribeault
- Beauregard
- Belanger (“Baker”)
- Benoit
- Blanchard
- Blouin
- Boucher (“Bushey”)
- Bousquet
- Brisbois
- Bruneau
- Brunel
- Charland
- Coulombe (“Columbus”)
- Déhêtre
- Desjardins (“Gardiner”)
- Dion(ne)
- Droulliard
- Dubois (“Atwood”)
- Dufour
- Dufresne
- Dupuis
- Fortin
- Gamache
- Girard
- Godbout
- Godfois
- Grenier
- Hamel
- Labbé (“Libby”)
- Leblanc
- Lamarque
- Lemay
- Letarte
- Marcotte
- Martin
- Mathurin
- Michaud
- Morency
- Morin
- Normand

- Paiement
- Paquet
- Precour
- Racine
- Rousseau
- Sainte-Marie
- Silvain (“Silver”)
- Simpson
- Theriault
- Tremblay
- Trudeau
- Vandal

Summary Statistics for 1870

Total Population of Brunswick	4687
Franco-American Population	415
Franco-American Population as a Percentage of the Total Brunswick Population	9%
Percentage of Brunswick Franco-Americans born in the USA	8%
Number of people per dwelling in the Franco-American community	12

1880

The Franco-American population of Brunswick grew almost three-fold between 1870 and 1880. From about a dozen families in 1860, the French families in Brunswick now number in three digits. In total, Brunswick’s Franco community now numbers 1195 individuals. Between one-in-four and one-in-five Brunswick residents is French-Canadian, the vast majority of whom continue to be employed by the Cabot Mill.

During the 1870s and 1880s, it must have been the case that the arrival of new families from Québec was at least a weekly – if not a more frequent – occurrence in Brunswick. Possessing a core of families who had been in Maine for more than a decade, the connection with Québec was continually reinforced by newcomers from the North.

The local newspaper in Brunswick in the 1880s describes what it calls the “French Quarter” as consisting of tenement housing also called “the Cabot boarding houses.” These tenements dated back at least to the 1870s. (Elsewhere I have discussed contemporary accounts of [conditions](#) in these boarding

houses.) Not only does a single business, the Cabot Mill, employ more than one-fifth of the town, but it's likely that the Cabot Company houses nearly the entire French-speaking workforce, as well.

In 1880, the French-speaking population remains ghettoized in its worker housing in a discrete portion of the town – or perhaps two portions. We find the Franco-American population in the census split into two large groups of contiguous dwellings. Whether the entire “French Quarter” was grouped together, or whether the population was actually distributed in two groups, I haven't yet determined. In either case, in the census for 1880, we find about four pages of French-Canadian names in the first group and about twenty continuous pages of French names in the second.

In the first group (Enumeration District (ED) 24, pp 35-39), we find the following family names:

- Bernier
- Bouchard
- Boucher
- Brunet
- Caron
- Chamberland
- Couturier
- Dagenais
- Doucet
- Drapeau
- Dubé
- Fontaine
- Fortin
- Gagnon
- Gamache
- Gaudias
- Leblanc
- Leclaire
- Moreau
- Paquet
- Rousseau
- Saint-Gervais
- Saint-Pierre
- Tardif

Among this group we find one blacksmith, one clerk, one paper mill employee and one shoemaker. The occupation of *all* of the others who are employed outside the home is given as “*work in cotton mill*” or “*laborer.*” It’s likely that the cotton mill employed also the blacksmith and the clerk, and I suspect that “laborer” is a code for occasional or unskilled textile mill employees.

We find the following family names (not including names already listed above) in the second Franco-American group (*ED 25, pp 1-20*):

- Baribeault
- Belanger
- Benoit
- Berger
- Bernabé
- Bernard
- Bousquet
- Brassard
- Caouette
- Côté
- Coulombe
- Desjardins
- Desmarais
- Gagné
- Gaugere
- Godbout
- Hamel
- Hebert
- Kerouac
- La Plante
- Labbé
- Lachance
- Lambert
- Langelier
- Lebel
- Lemieux
- Letarte
- Levesque
- Marquis
- Martel
- Mathurin
- Michaud

- Morin
- Normand
- Ouellet
- Paiement
- Pelletier
- Plourde
- Quintal
- Racine
- Rochon
- Sainte-Marie
- Saint-Onge
- Saint-Ours
- Têtu
- Therrien
- Thibeault
- Vandal
- Vermette

Among this group, almost 1000 people, we find seven clerks at various retail stores, three house carpenters, two blacksmiths, two bakers, two dressmakers, two servants, one worker in a paper mill, one worker in a pulp mill, one worker in a box shop, one railroad worker, one stone mason, one shoemaker, one saloon keeper, one errand boy, one office boy, one peanut seller, one physician, and the parish priest.

Outside of these two main centers of the Franco-American population, we find one French young woman, *Marie Gamache*, working as a domestic servant to Benjamin Greene (*ED 25, p 30*), the local manager of the textile mill. We also find, outside the main body of the Franco-Americans, one individual and three families. There are the *Marcoux* and *Lavallé* families with the heads of household listed as “laborers.” In their case, judging from the rural area in which they seem to have lived, I believe these men were *agricultural* laborers. In between these two families we find *Henri Boucher*, marble cutter, aged 54 who lives by himself (*ED 25, p 32*). Finally, outside of town, there’s the *Pierre Gamache* family, (*ED25 p 50*) who have what looks like a family farm.

Out of a population of almost 1200, among those who work outside the home, only 39 people are *not* employed by the Cabot Manufacturing Company in 1880. In other words, *97 percent of the total Franco-American population works at the mill* and among this percentage we now see children as young as eight years old.

We also observe a high, for our period, of population density, with 18 people per dwelling among the Franco-Americans – double the figure for 1860. No doubt the size of a “dwelling” varied from one part of the town to another and from one house to another. Contemporary newspaper accounts of the tenements in Brunswick’s “French Quarter” describe some number of two or three story houses with 8 two-bedroom apartments in each. One of these apartments counts as a “dwelling” in the census.

The increase in population density between 1860 and 1880 is an indication of the acceleration of immigration during these years. Before they were able to rent an apartment of their own, new arrivals boarded their large families with relatives or with other French-speaking families, inflating the average household size. The demand among the Franco-American mill workers exceeded the supply of quality housing. Deteriorating conditions in the tenements would become a contentious issue in the town in the 1880s, ultimately remedied by infrastructure improvements as well as by home ownership among the Franco-American community. By the mid-1880s, the French population begins to expand away from the mill and into the town.

Summary Statistics for 1880

Total Population of Brunswick	5384
Franco-American Population	1195
Franco-American Population as a Percentage of the Total Brunswick Population	22%
Percentage of Brunswick Franco-Americans born in the USA	14%
Number of people per dwelling in the Franco-American community	18

1900

Unfortunately, the majority of the 1890 U.S. Federal Census was destroyed. This is a loss since we might have observed in its pages the growth of the Franco-American population into neighboring Topsham. Newspaper accounts inform us that by the early 1890s, a development populated by the French-speakers was built across the river from Brunswick in the town of Topsham. A bridge was constructed to allow the mill workers who lived in Topsham to commute, on foot, to their jobs at the Cabot Mill. Since the Franco-Americans of Topsham worked at the mill and were parishioners of St. John’s (the Franco-American church in Brunswick), they must be considered as constituting a unit with the Franco-American enclave in Brunswick proper. For the sake of

consistency, the figures cited below are for Brunswick only – they do not include Topsham.

Since the 1890 census is unavailable, we must turn to 1900, the final year in our survey, where we observe that the Franco-American population of Brunswick has more than doubled in the 20 years since 1880. The census is more explicit than its predecessors in identifying national origin. As in 1880, it asks for the place of birth of the subject and his or her parents but, for the first time, it distinguishes individuals born in “Canada-French” from those born in “Canada-English.” I have included in my calculations for 1900 all of the people in Brunswick who have at least one parent born in French Canada. This may seem too liberal a criterion, but in all but a very small percentage of cases a Brunswick resident in 1900 who has *one* French-Canadian parent has *two*. In fact, unambiguous instances of marriage between a Brunswick Franco-American and a member of any other ethnic group, at this date, may be counted on one’s fingers. If we were to exclude from our figures individuals born in the USA who had only one French-Canadian parent it would not change the balance of the statistics.

I count 2558 Franco-Americans in Brunswick in 1900. More than 2500 “souls” would be a significantly sized Parish in rural Québec in 1900 – a reality not lost on the *Québécois* elites of the period who first stigmatized and then tried to co-opt the Québec diaspora. By 1900, Franco-Americans are 38% of the population of Brunswick and a growing force. We also see in 1900 a much greater distribution of the Franco-American population than in previous censuses. The 1900 census makes a distinction between “*Brunswick Village*,” the central, commercial portion of Brunswick, roughly the area between Bowdoin College and the Cabot Mill, and “*Brunswick Township*,” which includes the outlying rural districts. In 1900, we can see that Franco-Americans, still largely concentrated in a core neighborhood near the mill, now live in a number of places all over the township, in the more rural areas as well in the Village.

By this point, many of the Franco-Americans have moved out of the mill housing and have bought property in the town. An 1885 article in the local newspaper reports that “the French Canadians” had “recently” purchased property and were beginning to build houses in the “northwestern part of the village.” The 1900 census provides the street addresses of its subjects and gives information about home ownership enabling us to observe the development of a Franco-American neighborhood in this corner of Brunswick Village. We can see that most of the Franco-Americans now live in the sections of the town between the mill and the Catholic Church on Pleasant Street. Many of the

Some of these streets were 100 percent Franco-American in 1900. For instance, the residents of Oak Street (where my 6-year-old grandfather is living with his family in 1900), about 150 people, are all – to a one – French-Canadian in origin. The 1900 census gives language data only for those people who are over about 10 years of age. Nearly 40% of Oak Street residents over the age of ten speak *only French*. The general pattern is that the men and their older sons, who worked outside the home, knew some English; the women and younger children tended to speak only French.

Franco-American homeowners rented apartments to other Franco families. We can now identify a Franco-American neighborhood in Brunswick in 1900, which included these streets:

- Cabot Street
- Bow Street
- Mill Street
- Gilman Street
- Oak Street
- Cumberland Street
- Swett Street
- High Street
- Cushing Street
- Dunning Street
- Union Street

Many Franco-Americans also lived on:

- Maine Street (the portion near the mill)
- Water Street
- Jordan Avenue
- Stetson Street
- Stone Street
- Mason Street



The Cabot cotton mill remains the largest single employer of the Franco-Americans, but, by 1900, the French group has diversified into many other occupations and trades, including a few in businesses of their own or in white collar jobs, as well as many more farmers and other types of laborers. We can picture, by this point, a population of newcomers from Québec, who aren't terribly different from their forerunners of 1870, and a more established generation of Franco-Americans, some of whom have lived in Brunswick for 30 years or more by 1900.

Although only a minority of the adult males have become naturalized U.S. citizens, those Franco-American residents who live closer to the mill, on Cabot, Bow and Mill Streets, are more likely to be Aliens; those who have moved just a little further into the town, although they are still a minority, include more individuals who have become naturalized U.S. citizens.

We can also observe very early beginnings of the integration of the Franco-American community into the wider stream of American life. For instance, at 47 Water Street we find the Leclaire family. The occupation for 21-year-old Peter Leclaire, is given as "*Soldier, Philippines,*" indicating that Peter fought in the U.S. Army in the Philippines conflict that followed the Spanish-American War. Franco-Americans from Brunswick would fight in several other

American wars in the decades that followed. We also find one Franco-American student at Bowdoin College in 1900, an Alfred Laferriere, who was born in Maine of parents from French-Canada. For the New England Franco-Americans, as elsewhere, institutions such as colleges and the military services will be homogenizing forces in the 20th century.

By 1900 we also see that Brunswick’s doors are open not only to the French-Canadian newcomers, but also to immigration from all over the world. In a 60-year period, Brunswick, like many other communities in the coastal U.S.A., was transformed from an almost totally homogenous Anglo-Saxon Protestant community to one that included residents born in China, Russia, Syria, Germany, and many other places around the globe. Typically, we see the newcomers living in the more densely populated Brunswick Village area, while the rural districts surrounding the town contain a more homogeneously Yankee population. There are pages in the 1900 census that reveal an Anglo-Saxon population that is as homogenous as it was in 1840; other pages show an almost equally homogenous French population; still other pages show a cosmopolitan town open to the “huddled masses” of the American imagination.

Summary Statistics for 1900

Total Population of Brunswick	6806
Franco-American Population	2558
Franco-American Population as a Percentage of the Total Brunswick Population	38%
Percentage of Brunswick Franco-Americans born in the USA	39%
Number of people per dwelling in the Franco-American community	8

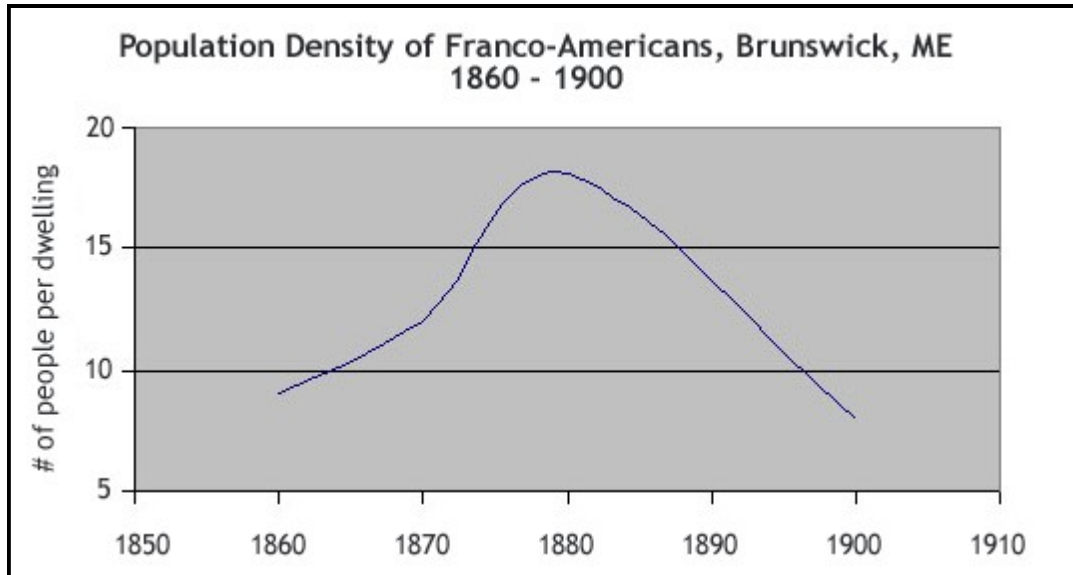
Conclusion

The development of the Franco-American population in Brunswick follows many of the trends associated with this group:

- A population concentrated on mill or factory work
- An early period of transience between Canada and the various New England States
- A slow trickle of immigration that becomes a flood
- The ghettoization of the population in tenements and enclaves
- The establishment of a permanent community through property ownership and, to a lesser extent, naturalization

- The beginnings of a diversification of occupations and participation in the wider currents of American life

In our survey we also observe that the numbers of Franco-Americans per dwelling (beginning our observations in 1860 with the start of a *permanent* Brunswick Franco-American community) describe a bell curve. This curve follows, I conclude, the trend of the volume of immigration accompanied by a shift from company housing to home ownership.



In Brunswick we are able to trace a number of the trends associated with French-Canadian immigration to New England and tie them to individual families. We are able to follow the growth of a Franco-American group from a few families up to the point in history where it is poised to become an approximately equal force with the established population of the town. We can observe both the beginnings of prosperity in this immigrant group as well as the limitations imposed by their socio-economic position and the industrial practices of the times.

Some 130 years later, some of the descendents of Brunswick’s early Franco-Americans still attend a Church, in the northwestern portion of Brunswick Village, richly decorated with French and Latin inscriptions. This church represents a portion of a New England (former) mill town that continues to a trace its northern heritage.

David Vermette, October 7, 2005, Revised June 4, 2012

Source: *Sixth through Twelfth Censuses of the United States, Maine, Cumberland County, Brunswick.*