

## French Canadians in the United States<sup>(1)</sup>

The Canadian French are a virile, hardy people spread from the Gulf of Mexico to the Laurentians and from the Atlantic to the Pacific. They are the descendants of pioneers who labored to convert this continent from a wilderness into cities and farms. Sterling qualities, faith in religion, retention of language, loyalty to family, and support of parochial institutions have been fundamental factors in their survival. Proud of their French ancestry and loyal to their traditions, they constitute an excellent element in the evolving American people. They are warm hearted and generous, especially in the support of causes such as churches, hospitals, schools, and other institutions which they maintain by voluntary contributions; and yet they are noted for frugality and ability to exist on very little.

The experiences of these people in the United States have not always been of the happiest. On October 15, 1896, Professor MacDonald wrote in the *Nation*:

As a class, the New England French are treated considerably in public because of their votes, disparaged in private because of general dislike, and sought by all for the work they do and the money they spend. (2)

Rightly or wrongly, the French Canadian still feels that this is the attitude of people towards him in the United States. (3) It is well to bear this thought in mind from the outset, because it has had an influence on the retention of Canadian institutions, and explains numerous questions which have arisen concerning them.

### NUMBERS AND DISTRIBUTION

Exact figures of the number of French Canadians in the United States are impossible to obtain, and estimates do not agree. The *Guide Officiel Franco-Américain*, which is prepared by a staff of investigators, gives approximately 2,949,394. (4) Another source estimates by important states as shown in Table 1. They may be said with safety to number between 2,500,000 and 3; 000,000 souls.

Table I <sup>(5)</sup>

California .....	72,000
Connecticut .....	80,000
Illinois .....	200,000
Louisiana .....	600,000
Maine .....	132,000
Massachusetts .....	370,000
Michigan .....	145,000
New Hampshire .....	122,000
New York .....	145,000
Rhode Island .....	122,000
Vermont .....	52,000
Wisconsin .....	36,800
Total .....	2,076,800
Total U.S.A. ....	2,500,000

In general, the French Canadians are found in New England, the Middle West, the Mississippi Valley, and Louisiana. In Louisiana, where the French constitute a third of the total population, they are divided into two groups: (1) the Creoles, who are descendants of the early French garrison, and (2) the Cajuns, or descendants of the Acadian exiles, fellows of Evangeline, the far-off cousins to the inhabitants of New Brunswick. Only the latter may be classified as Canadian French.

### **MIGRATIONS AND SETTLEMENTS**

French migrations into the United States from Canada have occurred over almost two centuries. They were preceded by the arrival from France in 1623 of several Huguenot families who landed in Manhattan, and by several more in 1652 who landed at Bedloe Island. During the seventeenth century a group of Frenchmen settled in Boston, leaving as their most celebrated monument Faneuil Hall. Still others migrated to Virginia, Maryland, and Rhode Island. The French Canadians, when they did move southward, entered into a land in which people from France were already living.

Two causes for these migrations seem to have been prevalent over the years. The first was the French struggle for survival both in Quebec and in Ontario. This war of survival was waged chiefly against the English and Irish, and whenever it became too severe, French migrations into this country took place. The second and more prevalent cause was the lure of better jobs and better economic conditions in the United States for which the inducements and advertisements of northern American industries were responsible.

Chronologically the most important influxes were the following: The first was the exile, between 1755 and 1785, of about 4,000 Acadians to Louisiana, where they joined the original French garrison. In 1763, when Canada was transferred to Britain, many other Frenchmen moved into Maine and Vermont. When the Revolutionary War was terminated in 1783, about 12,000 Canadian French were already living in the Mississippi Valley. The first sizable group to enter the United States after the Revolution came to Boston in 1811 in order to make their fortunes in the romantic land to the south of the old homeland. In 1837, oppression in Canada drove still more into this country. After that and until the opening of the American Civil War, there was a small but steady flow of migrants across the border. During the four years of our Civil War the French Canadians contributed at least 14,000 men to the Union cause.

But the real movement, and the one which set the French Canadians apart from other nationalities, took place between 1860 and 1890. During those thirty years many thousands answered the call of northern New England and New York industry, chiefly the woolen industry, and left St. Hyacinthe, Trois Rivières, Rimouski, Bellechasse, and la Beauce, to settle in that area. It is estimated that 1,500,000 may have migrated during that period. In 1920, in New York and New England alone there were about 1,290,110. During the prosperous period from 1923 to 1928 many thousands more were attracted to the United States. (6) On September 10, 1930 the border was closed to French migration.

For the most part, although the migrants had usually engaged in agriculture in Canada, once here they tended to settle in the industrial towns and cities where they preferred to work in the factories. This is particularly true of the East, especially of Maine, Vermont, New York, and New Hampshire. Thus the French populations in some of the principal eastern cities are substantial in size. The chief instances are Manchester, New Hampshire, with 35,000 French; Lowell, Massachusetts, with 20,000; Fall River, Massachusetts, with 30,000; and Woonsocket, Rhode Island, with 35,000. Similar proportions may be found in Lewiston, Maine; New Bedford, Holyoke, Salem, and Southbridge, Massachusetts; and Nashua, New Hampshire.

## **LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES**

The life of the average French Canadian in the United States centers about a few fundamental institutions. These consist of his family, the Roman Catholic Church and its parish to which he belongs, the school, the societies in which he has a membership, and the press. However, the greatest force operating for group cohesion is the Canadian French tongue.

The feeling described in the opening quotation of this article explains a tendency towards strong group loyalty. This may be explained by the philosophy which underlies the French Canadian's attitude towards the institutions of other countries. He believes that culture is a thing apart from a land and should not be confused with allegiance and political loyalty. The culture or soul of the Canadian Frenchman is something to be cherished and preserved wherever it may be found. He believes that by retaining his French individuality and tradition, with all they imply, he can make his greatest contribution to the country of his adoption. Thus it is that his institutions are like those of Canada, especially those of Quebec. He can swear loyalty to the United States in English with honesty and conviction; but he prays, writes, sings, and talks in French, delighting in his French ancestry and background. He explains that this is not to be interpreted as a state within a state, but that by conserving his customs, traditions, and language he enriches the community in which he lives. He is a moral force which cannot be absorbed.

### **Family**

In much of the literature pertaining to the French Canadians both in Canada and in the United States, one of the chief points of preoccupation seems to be survival. This has led the French Canadian to adopt in family matters a point of view diametrically opposed to that of his brother in France, who advocates small families. In Canada, with its climatic rigors and rule by an alien race, he has become convinced that survival depends upon large families. The famous example is the Dionne family. This idea he has brought with him to the United States, and large families are the rule. He describes them as patriarchal dynasties with a strong moral and social basis.

### **Church**

Next to the family in molding the French Canadian comes the church and the parish. He points with pride to the fact that the Church of Rome models his character and nourishes him in his spiritual and social wants. His parishes are modeled on those of

Brittany and Normandy. Up to the present the church has held a predominant position in most affairs of his life. There are approximately 243 French Canadian churches in the United States.

A brief glimpse at the literature of the French Canadians in the United States will show how far-reaching is the influence of the church. Take for example the excellent work of E. Hamon, *Les Canadiens-Français de la Nouvelle-Angleterre* (The Canadian French of New England). (7) It is dedicated to Cardinal Taschereau, the Archbishop of Quebec. Part I devotes four out of eighteen chapters to purely church matters, and scarcely a sentence of Part II can be found which does not refer to the church and parish either directly or indirectly. And lest it be objected that this work is of ancient vintage and the observation might not hold true today, the *Guide Officiel Franco-Américain*, which has been mentioned several times, devotes a majority of its pages to matters either wholly or partially religious, including an imposing list of the clergy, martyrs, bishops, and parishes, and extensive religious advertising.

It might be expected since the Irish and the French Canadians are both of the Roman Catholic faith that they would have been drawn closely together. This, however, is not the case, and the French have come to distrust their Irish brethren with an intensity which has led to grave religious difficulties, as evidenced in the Sentinellist Movement, which raged between 1923 and 1929 and involved efforts to remove Bishop Hickey of Providence, Rhode Island. (8) The French Canadian is religious, but insists on a church which is his own.

## **School**

Schools rank next in importance. Approaching the problem of survival with special emphasis on language and culture, it is not surprising that the Canadian Frenchman fears to entrust the education of his children to "strangers," especially where the school is unilingual and requires the child to learn a tongue different from that of his home and culture. Therefore parochial schools have been established throughout the country to meet elementary and secondary school demands. There are also a number of convent schools, which have as their function the training of girls in the ways of the French Canadian and of the church. To climax the educational structure, a number of institutions of higher learning have been established both in this country and in Canada. Three of these are Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts; St. Michel in Winooski, Vermont; and Mont Saint-Charles in Woonsocket, Rhode Island.

The following figures (9) are the most reliable obtainable at the present time: children in parochial schools, 141,212; parochial schools, 606; convents, 33; colleges, 10.

## **Associations**

French Canadian life is also intimately intertwined with a number of associations. Two of the earliest were the Société Lafayette and Société Jacques Cartier, both founded in 1848, the former in Detroit, the latter in St. Albans, Vermont. There are however, two chief organizations. One is fraternal, Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste, founded in 1850 by Gabriel Franchère, with large branches at Springfield, Massachusetts, Detroit, and Meriden, Connecticut, and now known as L'Union Saint-Jean-Baptiste d'Amérique.

The other is L'Association Canado-Américaine, founded in Manchester, New Hampshire, November 26, 1896, to tie the French in the United States and Canada together and to publish material which is of value to the understanding of the Franco-Americans and to further their interests. There are a number of other associations with specialized interests, for example, La Société l'Assomption, cercle des Étudiants, Association Professeurs Franco-Américain, Association Médicales Franco-Américaine, Ligue Civique, Légion Franco-Américaine, and others.

## **Press**

One of the chief influences in holding the French people together is their extensive press in the United States. It has been forced to yield somewhat to the influence of the American newspapers, but it has succeeded in retaining its individuality and French quality. J. Benoit maintains that the French press is superior in organization and activity to that of any other ethnic group in this country. The outstanding figure in the establishment of this press was Ferdinand Gagnon, whose work occurred during the period between 1860 and 1890. Some of the outstanding newspapers in the United States are *Courrier Franco-Américain* of Chicago, *Travailleur* of Worcester, *Le Messenger* of Lewiston, *Le Courrier des États-Unis* of New York, *L'Étoile* of Lowell, *L'Indépendent* of Woonsocket, and *L'Impartial* of Nashua. This is only the beginning of an extensive list. The greatest problem seems to be to find editors and managers who will meet the exacting requirements of their reading clientele. (10)

## **Transition**

The French Canadians are in the same state of transition as many other minority groups in this country. The professional people and those with higher local education are being subjected to the impact of their American environment, and in a number of instances there is evidence that they are growing indifferent in their French Canadian interests. Josaphat Benoit deplors their lack of fiery nationalism and complains of their apathy to things French and Canadian. He calls for union among them. (11) Here too, as among other minority groups, the second and third generations are less and less enthusiastic about the institutions of their forebears. The most serious problems seem to grow out of the lessening of interest in religion and language. English and Protestantism are making inroads on old and cherished institutions. In fact, it is possible that in spite of his high ideal to preserve his culture and language intact, the French Canadian may become amalgamated into the great American people. If this does take place, a colorful group, with its songs, stories, and lusty joy of living, will be lost to our civilization.

## **POLITICS AND THE WAR**

The French Canadians have held every position of major political importance in the United States with the exception of the presidency and a justiceship on the Supreme Court bench. Their political strength is not uniform throughout the country, but where they are densely settled, their influence is considerable. In Manchester, New Hampshire, for example, they are strong with an estimated 14,000 voters, and they control roughly about 45 per cent of the total vote of the city. It is inevitable, in view of what has been said, that such a group should tend to be politically unified and that it

should band together for political influence; yet in all fairness it should be observed that that influence has not been used to capture all the important political offices, which it might easily have done. On the other hand, the Franco-American bloc is a substantial power, not only in Manchester but throughout New Hampshire, and is of increasing importance in the other New England States.

It is impossible to be accurate in such a small space, but in general it seems that a little more than half of the present French Canadian population are native born. The older members of the community are not only more intent upon the retention of things French Canadian, but they are the ones who have difficulty in the matter of naturalization. There seems to be no serious question of naturalization.

As to the war, France is the mother country from which all Canadian Frenchmen or their forebears originally came, and their love for her is great.

Their hearts are sad in her hour of trial and they are united in their determination that when the war is over there shall not be a divided France, but that once again she shall rise in her former glory and might. But here their united determination ceases. They are divided between Vichy and Free France, and as has been expressed to the writer, they believe that until the United States takes a position exclusively one way or the other, the Canadian French in the United States will support the side of their personal choice.

As far as loyalty and support of the war effort are concerned, the Canadian French take the view that the United States has been attacked. They are supporting and will support to the fullest the war efforts of this country. The large number of French Canadians in the American forces during World War I has been duplicated by a similar number today. In industry and in the professions they are contributing their share for an American victory.

(1) The author is greatly indebted for much of the material used in this article to Adolphe Robert, president-general of the Association Canado-Américaine. He is also indebted to Father Charles Burque of Dover, New Hampshire, for guidance and help.

(2) Quoted in the foreword by Adolphe Robert in *Les Franco-Américains peints par Eux-Mêmes* (Montreal: Editions Albert Levesque, 1936), p. 11 errata.

(3) In spite of the length of time the French Canadians have been in the United States, information concerning them is limited. Their principal library, says Professor Ham, remains "virtually unknown." E. B. Ham, "The Library of the Association Canado-Américaine," *Modern Language Notes*, LII, 7 (Nov. 1937), pp. 1-3. It is the Bibliothèque Lambert of Manchester, N. H. There is a second library at Woonsocket, R. I, the Collection Mallet.

(4) Providence: Guide Franco-Américain, Inc., 1940. Published in the table "Statistiques Vitales et Religieuses," p. 1.

(5) See Wilfrid Bovey, *The French Canadians Today* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1939), p. 349.

(6) For figures and estimates see *Guide Officiel Franco-Américain, op. cit.*, and Josaphat Benoit, *L'Âme Franco-Américaine* (Paris: Jouve et Cie, Editeurs, 1935).

(7) Quebec: N. S. Hardy, 1891.

(8) A study of the two sides of this question will give a valuable insight into the French relation to the church and the significance of the church to the French. For conflicting and significant points of view see J. Albert Foisy, *The Sentinellist Agitation in New England* (Providence: Providence Visitor Press, 1930) ; and Elphège J. Daignault, *Le vrai Mouvement Sentinelliste en Nouvelle-Angleterre (1923-1929) et l'Affaire du Rhode Island* (Montréal: Librairie Déom Frère, 1935).

(9) From *Guide Officiel Franco-Américain, op. cit.*, introduction.

(10) Here see the excellent work of Maximilienne Tétrault, *Le Rôle de la presse dans l'évolution du peuple Franco-Américain de la Nouvelle Angleterre* (Marseille: Imprimerie Ferran & Cie., 1935).

(11) Benoit, *op. cit.*, conclusions.

Source : Thorsten V. Kalijarvi, "French Canadians in the United States", in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 223, September 1942, pp. 132-137. Professor Kalijarvi was the executive director of the New Hampshire State Planning and Development Commission. Some typographical errors have been corrected and the text has been slightly reformatted.