

# DISCOVERING SALEM'S FRENCH-CANADIAN AND FRANCO-AMERICAN HERITAGE

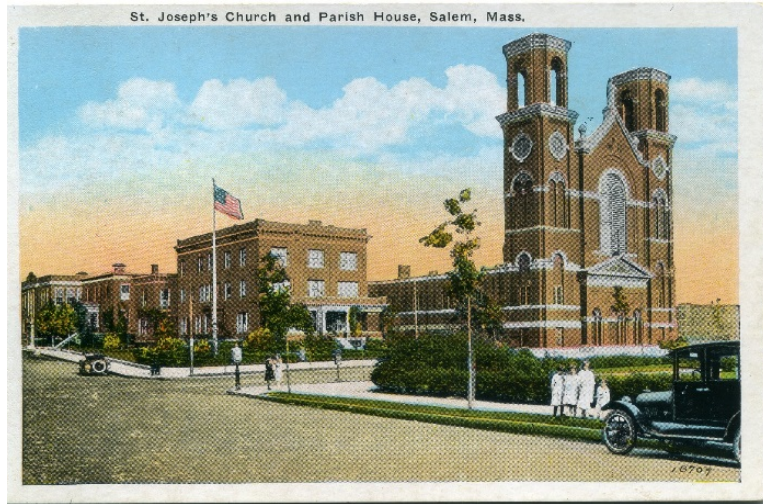


*While Salem is most well-known for its infamous witch trials and for famous Anglo-Americans like Nathaniel Hawthorne, cities are not static monuments to one time period. They are dynamic and change over time, being shaped by many different types of people who choose to call a place home. On this tour, you will learn about one of these groups, descended from French-Canadian immigrants, and the impact they have had on the city's physical, cultural, social and economic growth.*

*Start your tour across the street from 135 Lafayette Street.*

## 1. Site of former St. Joseph's Church (135 Lafayette Street)

This site was the home of St. Joseph's Parish from 1884 until 2013, when the church was demolished and the mixed-use building at 135 Lafayette was constructed. The original 19<sup>th</sup>-century wooden church was replaced by a magnificent brick structure that was completed just before the Great Fire of 1914 (see photo left). On the eve of the fire, which started June 25 of 1914, there were 16,000 French-speaking parishioners attending St. Joseph's church. The church was destroyed in



the fire, but parishioners vowed to rebuild and continued to worship in the church basement (the only safe structure) until funds were raised for a new church. The imposing white International Style church, which replaced the brick one, opened its doors in 1948. The statue of St. Joseph that adorned the center spire of the 1914 had survived the fire. It was buried on the grounds when work began on the 1948 church. In 2013, the statue was disinterred and ceremoniously reburied in the courtyard behind the mixed-use building that now stands at 135 Lafayette Street. Facing 135 Lafayette, to the left stands the parish rectory, or "Presbytère," built in 1917 in the Second Renaissance Revival Style. You can still see the French inscription above the door.

***Cross the street to take a look at the rectory, then continue to the corner and turn right on Harbor Street.*** On the right, behind the rectory, you will see the entrance to the parish school with "École St. Joseph" inscribed above the door. These are mere traces of the St. Joseph's parish, which was the center of the spiritual, social and cultural life of the surrounding French-speaking neighborhood for well over a century, from its founding in 1873 to the closing of the parish in 2009.

***Continue down Harbor Street, and turn right on Salem Street.*** As you walk, notice the buildings in the neighborhood. Are they mostly apartments, multi-family homes, or single-family homes? What materials are they made of? Is the neighborhood residential only or are there businesses? What kind of businesses? ***As you reach the corner of Salem and Dow Streets,*** notice former headquarters of the St. Jean Baptiste Society (there is an inscription on the building above the New York Food Market). Organizations like the St. Jean Baptiste Society played an important role in educating the community about citizenship and naturalization and organized cultural and social events to bring the community together. ***Turn left on Dow Street. Continue down Dow Street to Congress Street,*** noting again the different types of housing on the left and right sides of the street. Turn left on Congress Street and stop in front of 75 Congress Street.

## 2. "La Pointe": The Point Neighborhood

This neighborhood was a predominantly French-speaking area from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the 1970's. Drawn to Salem from French-Canada by plentiful factory jobs, many initially settled in this neighborhood, tucked in between the St. Joseph's church and the Naumkeag Cotton Mill. A densely populated area dotted with small shops catering to the French community, here is where many Franco-Americans lived, worked, shopped, played and socialized. Small-scale markets and other businesses occupied the first floor of many buildings, with residences above.

The photo here was taken by Emile Devoe, a popular Franco-American photographer whose studio was on Congress Street. You can see how the neighborhood was anchored by the mill at the top of the photo and the church (this is the 1948 church) at the bottom. (Photo courtesy of Armand Devoe, private collection)





This neighborhood, along with its church and mill, was completely destroyed by the Great Fire of 1914. The photo to the left, courtesy of the Salem State University Archives, shows that only chimney stacks and a few household items survived the flames. Miraculously, there were no deaths, but 15,000 people were forced to evacuate their homes and 1,800 buildings were lost. The community, undaunted, quickly got to work on rebuilding. After the fire, building codes required the use of brick, a less flammable material, for any large buildings. If a property owner wanted to reconstruct with wood, codes limited the building to two and a half stories.

By the end of the 1920's, this neighborhood was largely completely restored, and people got back to living, working, and playing here. French was the first language of new immigrants and of their first-, second- and even third- and

fourth-generation Franco-American children. Children attended the parish school, where French-speaking women religious offered half-day instruction in English and half-day in French. The neighbors all knew each other, and children played in the streets and at what is now the Palmer Cove Park, rumored to have been built upon piles of debris from the fire. One of the most common memories of Franco-Americans raised in this neighborhood is the smell of pork cooking in almost every kitchen as mothers and grandmothers worked to feed large families with Franco-American favorites like *tourtière*, a pork pie, and a pork spread called *cretons* or *gorton*.



Today, the small corner shops, bars and restaurants that once catered to the Franco-American community have today been replaced by Latino markets, bars and restaurants serving the Spanish-speaking community that has expanded in this neighborhood since the 1980's. The building at 75 Congress Street is a good example. Now a popular Latino restaurant, it once housed the well-known "Les Canadiens" bar, one of many local watering holes that catered to the French-speaking population. The Franco-American community took great pride in rebuilding. If you look closely, you will note decorative brickwork around windows and doorways, cornices, fanlights, columns, and other embellishments. Many of the buildings in this neighborhood, particularly in the areas along Lafayette street near the site of the old St. Joseph's church and around what is today Lafayette Park, still proudly bear the names of the Franco-American families who built them. Inscribed over the entryways are names like Audet, Napoleon, Gagnon, and Martel and at ground level one sees cornerstones boasting build completion dates of 1915, 1918 or 1920. You may also note plaques on buildings citing the year the buildings were constructed. Due to its architectural uniqueness and importance to the cultural history of the city, the Point neighborhood was designated a National Historic District in 2014. Current efforts to celebrate the neighborhood's multiethnic composition include the murals of the Punto Urban Art museum that you have perhaps seen in the area and an annual gathering of Franco-Americans who lived here.

***Continue down Congress Street to the corner of Congress and Peabody Streets***, staying on the left-hand side of the street. Across the street, you will see the entrance to Shetland Park, an office complex that was once the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company (also called Pequot Mills). This mill, along with other local tanneries and shoe factories, drew thousands of French-Canadians to settle in the city of Salem in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their labor helped fuel the Industrial Revolution here and in other cities throughout New England. Ethnic enclaves like the Point neighborhood were often called "*Petits Canadas*" or "Little Canadas."

***Continue past Peabody Street and turn left into the pedestrian walkway that runs along the water. This Salem Harbor Walk will curve to the right and take you to Derby Street. Cross Derby Street and follow Central Street up to the corner of Central and Charter Streets.***

### **3. The Old Salem Police Station**

Public buildings in Salem are not often associated with the Franco-American community. The brick Colonial Revival building at 17 Central Street was designed by local architect John Gray and built in 1913. Today it houses condominiums, but it served as police headquarters until 1992 when the Robert M. St. Pierre Police Station opened on Margin Street, named in honor of the Franco-American Chief of Police who grew up in the Point neighborhood and served the city of Salem for 25 years. Former mayor Jean Levesque, who also grew up in the Point neighborhood, served the city from 1973 to 1983. The Jean A. Levesque Community Life Center opened in Salem in 2018. Both are examples of many second- and third-generation Franco-Americans who have contributed to the growth of the city as civic leaders and public servants.



As generations of Franco-Americans settled into life in the United States and gained access to postsecondary education, many were called to public service, working as teachers, fire fighters, lawyers, judges, police officers, and city workers. Still today, many of the names you will encounter among workers in our schools and government offices are of French origin as Franco-Americans continue to play a vital role in public life in the city.

*Continue up Central Street to the corner of Central and Essex. You will be on the Essex Street pedestrian mall.*

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 Styles et Nuances : Vous pourrez choisir janté le style et la nuance que vous avez dans l'idée.  
**En Vente Vendredi Matin à 8.30**  
 Nul vendu sur mémoire.—Pas d'échange.—Chaque vente est finale.  
 Commercia Canadiens qui seront heureux de vous servir avec la plus grande courtoisie: Mlle Alpha St-Hilaire, rayon des Costumes et des Manteaux; Mme L. Lebel, rayon des Corsages; Mlle Marie Thibodeau, rayon des Mouchoirs; Mlle Maria Roy, rayon des Bijouteries; M. J. Gagnon, rayon des Sales; et Mme Côté, rayon des mousselines.

#### 4. Essex Street Pedestrian Mall

In the 1930's and 1940's, Essex Street was the center of Salem's busy commercial district. Around that time, there were about 40,000 residents in the city, but the many department stores, theaters, banks, and businesses here attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors per year from throughout the North Shore. You can still see the Almy's clock on the pedestrian mall, installed by the Almy, Bigelow & Washburn store, and faded ads for other department stores on some of the brick facades.

While serving the general population, many businesses catered to the French-speakers of Salem with advertisements in the local French-language newspaper, *Le Courrier de Salem*. The ad to the left appeared in a 1916 edition of the paper. The stores hired special sales assistants who spoke French to better serve the community.

With the closing of the mill in the 1950's and the construction of the 128 highway and the North Shore Mall outside of town, this central business district fell on hard times. Many of the large stores closed their doors, but a number of established businesses owned by Franco-Americans persisted. Bernard's Jewelers, founded in 1934 by Raymond Tetrault Sr., is an example of one of many longstanding Franco-American family-owned businesses that were established in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Originally located at 137 Essex Street and later 179 Essex Street (now part of the Peabody Essex Museum property) the store remained on Essex Street for 80 years. In the central business district today, you will still find many businesses owned by Franco-Americans and employees of Franco-American descent.

*Go left on Essex Street and then turn right on the pedestrian path just after the Salem Five ATM. This path will take you to Church Street, next to Turner's Seafood Restaurant.*

## 5. Turner's Seafood (Former lyceum and Lyceum Restaurant)

The building at 43 Church Street was erected in 1831 as the permanent home of Salem's lyceum—an institution offering public lectures by leading luminaries on topics of the day. Famous men such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglass, John Quincy Adams and Henry David Thoreau spoke here. Alexander Graham Bell also conducted the first public demonstration of the telephone at the hall in 1877. But the building has a connection to the Franco-American community much later on. With the economic changes brought on by suburban expansion in the 1950's and 60's, the central business district of Salem began to decay. By the 1970's, the empty lyceum building was slated for demolition.

That is when Franco-American Joan Boudreau, who later served as Chair of the Salem Redevelopment Authority, led the downtown revitalization movement by using her life savings to purchase the structure and renovate it, creating The Lyceum, a popular upscale French restaurant that opened in 1970.



Boudreau was chef and manager for a decade and one of the early advocates for revitalization of the downtown area. This restaurant has changed owners several times during the past decade but is still part of the thriving food scene in downtown Salem. Salem's urban renewal and economic rebirth since the 1970's have also been tied increasingly to cultural tourism thanks in no small part to another Franco-American, Biff Michaud, CEO of the Salem Witch Museum and one of the founders of Haunted Happenings, which is now a hallmark of Salem life each October.

While most Franco-American families in Salem had humble beginnings, working in factories and doing manual labor, subsequent generations took advantage of opportunities to become entrepreneurs, business owners, and professionals, and their work has contributed to the revitalization of the city over the past fifty years.

*Turn around and go back down the footpath to Essex Street, this time crossing Essex and heading down Derby Square towards the Old Town Hall. If you have time, enter the building to visit the free exhibit on the history of Salem. There is a section on the Great Fire of 1914. Next, go around the building to look at the other side from the marketplace square.*

## 6. Old Town Hall

Dating from 1816-17, The Old Town Hall is the oldest surviving municipal structure in Salem. It is a wonderful example of the Federal Style and portions are attributed to both renowned Boston architect Charles Bullfinch and renowned Salem architect and carver, Samuel McIntyre. Since its opening, the second floor has been used for public gatherings, a tradition which continues to this day. The first floor was designed as a public market, a purpose it served into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, there was a meat market called the "Subway Market" located in the basement of the building and owned and operated by the L'Heureux family. The L'Heureux family owned a number of buildings in the Point neighborhood, and descendants still owned properties there well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In their "downtown" meat market, patrons could buy all manner of meat products, including the pork that was common in much traditional Franco-American cuisine. The market's two doorways were on the Front Street facade, flanking the central door. They have since been filled in and today the only clue is the newer brick visible on the lower portion of the building next to the stairways. The main floor is now home to the Salem Museum, but the annual Salem Farmer's Market held here recalls the building's original use.



*Head towards Front Street, crossing the marketplace square from the Old Town Hall, and you will see Klop Alley, another pedestrian street with a variety of restaurants (including the famous Lobster Shanty), shops and artist studios. Head down Klop Alley to New Derby Street, turning left on to New Derby. At the traffic light by the fire station, cross*

*New Derby Street and head up Lafayette Street towards your original starting point. Stop, however, in front of 94-96 Lafayette Street.*

## 7. Lower Lafayette Street



This section of Lafayette Street, from New Derby to Harbor, served as the main business district for The Point neighborhood, replete with offices, restaurants, shops and bars owned by and catering to members of the Franco-American community. At the center of the stretch was 94-96 Lafayette, a grand brick building originally constructed as a garage and rebuilt following the 1914 fire. Beginning in the 1920's this was the home of The Canadian Klondike Club, a French-Canadian social club that occupied the second floor. Large windows overlooked the second floor ballroom where countless dances, wedding receptions and other festivities took place. Over the years, the building has been home to a variety of businesses and is now the headquarters for the North Shore Community Development Coalition with a restaurant on the ground floor. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Lafayette Hotel and the nearly block-long yellow-brick Lincoln

Hotel faced each other on the corner by Harbor Street. Both were owned by Franco-Americans. While many of the street-level facades on the east side of Lafayette now boast Spanish names, reflecting the changing ethnic makeup of this historic neighborhood, Lower Lafayette is still home to a number of Franco-American-owned family businesses with names like Soucy, Deschamps, Gagnon, and Bainville. This blend of cultures and names speaks to the ongoing and critical role immigrants have played and continue to play in Salem's economic life.

*Continue up Lafayette Street to Lafayette Park and find a spot in front of the granite statue at the park's center.*

## 8. Monument to Veterans from St. Joseph's Parish

The monument in Lafayette Park, across the street from the former site of St. Joseph's church, honors the memory of the 2,105 Franco-American parishioners from St. Joseph's who served in WWI and WWII. Erected in 1947 and entitled "*La Victoire du deuil*" ("Mourning Victory"), the granite statue was designed by Franco-American Norman Nault of Worcester. The central figure, with a sword presented "at attention," mourns for lives lost. Joseph F. Pelletier, a prominent lawyer and parishioner of St. Joseph's spoke the following words when presenting the statue to the Mayor of Salem as a gift to the city from the St. Joseph's parish in 1948: "*Ce monument attestera puissamment de notre dévotion, de notre patriotisme, et des sacrifices de nos Américains de descendance française. Puisse-t-il toujours être une source d'inspiration pour la jeunesse de notre ville et un exemple de tolérance et d'égalité*" (Translation : This monument is a strong testament to our devotion, to our patriotism, and to the sacrifices of our Americans of French descent. May it always be a source of inspiration for the youth of our city and an example of tolerance and equality.)



*We hope you enjoyed this tour, designed by Dr. Elizabeth Blood and Dr. Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello of Salem State University in conjunction with countless Franco-Americans from Salem who have shared their memories and their family stories with us. More information about the Franco-American community in Salem can be found on the French-Canadian Salem website: [www.frenchcanadiansalem.org](http://www.frenchcanadiansalem.org)*