

FRANCO-AMERICAN SALEM



A brief history of French-Canadians and Franco-Americans in Salem, Massachusetts

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Photo: Former Salem resident Rene Cormier with French Sailors in the Point, circa 1942. (Photo courtesy of Rene Cormier)

INTRODUCTION

Although Salem today is most well-known for its Halloween festivities, witch hysteria, and famous American literary figures, it is also a city that has welcomed several waves of immigrants who have shaped its economic and social life and who continue to bring cultural and linguistic diversity to its streets.

One of the most important groups to populate the city in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were French-Canadian immigrants who came to work in area textile mills and leather and shoe factories. Between 1840 and 1930, approximately 900,000 French-speaking Canadians left Québec to find work in New England's factories and mills. In the first decades of the 20th century, French-Canadian immigrants from Quebec and their Franco-American children made up over 20% of the city's population, a significant percentage compared to other French-Canadian destinations in New England, and Salem was one of a handful of Massachusetts cities dubbed a *Petit Canada* or Little Canada.

As they did in other New England cities like Lowell, Worcester, and Fall River in Massachusetts, Woonsocket in Rhode Island, Lewiston in Maine, and Manchester in New Hampshire, the French-Canadians of Salem built churches and schools, started businesses and opened shops, created credit unions, newspapers, and social clubs. They became teachers, policemen, firemen, doctors and nurses, tradesmen, business people, professionals and politicians. They held on to French-Canadian traditions while beginning new traditions in their Franco-American families. They changed the city just as they themselves were changed by it.



Le Courrier de Salem was the city's local French newspaper, published in Salem from 1908 through 1950.

THE POINT

The neighborhood called *La Pointe* (the Point) was historically the most populous of the numerous French-speaking neighborhoods in Salem. Located east of Lafayette Street, from Leavitt Street to Peabody Street, this area was home to many Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company mill workers and their families. The St. Joseph's church and school were the center of the neighborhood's spiritual, social and cultural life. Large families lived in triple-decker homes and apartment buildings, some of which were owned by the mill. The streets were peppered with corner markets, variety stores, businesses, clubs and bars, such as the famed *Les Canadiens* bar which was located at 75 Congress Street.

In this neighborhood is the Palmer's Cove Yacht Club, founded in the 1930's by two Franco-Americans on the site of the Dumas Coal and Wood Yard. The Club still has many Franco-American members.

French was the first language of new immigrants and of their first-, second- and even third-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. 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 on limited budgets. Franco-American culinary traditions include a meat pie, called *tourtière*, and a pork spread called *cretons* or *gorton*.

Nearly the entire neighborhood, including the mill and the newly built brick church, was destroyed by the Great Salem Fire on June 25, 1914, at which time there were 16,000 people registered with St. Joseph's parish. Many families were left homeless by the fire; hundreds of people resided in tents on the Salem Common and in Forest River Park for months. About 10,000 people moved out of Salem in June of 1914. The neighborhood rebuilt, however, and the Franco-American community here thrived well into the mid-20th century. While Franco-Americans continue to cherish their French-Canadian roots, they have considered themselves Americans for many generations. Over 2,000 Franco-Americans from St. Joseph's parish served the United States military in World War I and in World War II. A monument located in Lafayette Park attests to this service and sacrifice. Hundreds of Franco-Americans have dedicated themselves to public service in the City of Salem, be it in local government, police, fire department, or public schools.



The mixed-use building at 75 Congress Street once housed a bar called Les Canadiens, frequented by many of the neighborhood Franco-Americans.



The final Saint-Joseph's Church, built in 1948 on top of the ruins of the 1913 brick church, was constructed by the Franco-American contractor Gourdeau. Gourdeau also built the bandstand on the Salem Common and many other impressive structures in Salem. This church closed in 2004.

In the 1950's, the Naumkeag mill closed and as the younger Franco-Americans left for education or professional opportunities, a new wave of Spanish-speaking immigrants began to move into the neighborhood. While today we still find some Franco-American residents and businesses, one is far more likely to hear Spanish in the streets rather than French and to find restaurants serving Caribbean specialities rather than Canadian.

LOWER LAFAYETTE STREET

Lower Lafayette Street was the main business district for the Point neighborhood and still remains a hub for Franco-American businesses. From Harbor Street to Derby Street, on both sides of Lafayette were a variety of businesses and offices, restaurants, shops, bars and clubs opened and operated by Franco-Americans.

In the early part of the 20th century, the neighborhood was anchored by two Franco-American owned hotels on the northern corners of Lafayette and Harbor Streets, the Lafayette Hotel and the Lincoln Hotel. Further up the street was the Canadian Klondike Club, a social club and dance hall founded by French-Canadian immigrants in 1895. Many balls, wedding receptions, and other events took place in this hall. The Klondike Club was located on the second floor of the beautiful building at 94 Lafayette Street. The club closed to the public in 1981.



A view of Lower Lafayette Street. The brick building at 94 Lafayette Street was home to many different businesses, ranging from a car dealership to a bowling alley. The Canadian Klondike Club occupied the second floor of the building until 1981.

Today, the two hotels have been converted into rooming houses, and many of the small businesses post signs in Spanish, but the story of Lower Lafayette Street is not the story of one immigrant group replacing another. It is the story of waves of immigrants blending together. A number of Franco-American owned businesses on the street, including Banville Optical, Deschamps Printing, and Soucy Insurance Agency have persisted into the 21st century. Nearby several more businesses, including Gagnon Shoe Repair and Delande Lighting have marked New Derby Street. Many of these are family-owned, opened in this neighborhood in the early 1900's had have been run by family members for generations. Deschamps Printing, for example, was founded in 1916, Soucy Insurance was founded in 1907, and Delande Lighting was founded in 1918.

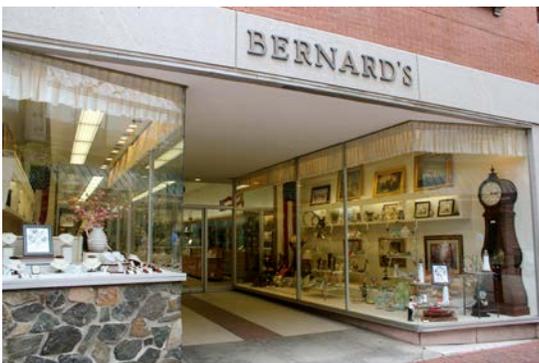
CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT

Most of Salem's Franco-American immigrants had agricultural roots in Québec and initially found low-paying jobs at the Naumkeag Mills and other nearby factories, but like other immigrant groups, Franco-Americans took advantage of the educational opportunities offered in Salem and many became professionals and business owners. Some established businesses in the Central Business District which served the needs of the general population. Among these entrepreneurs were members of the L'Heureux family who established the Subway Market, a spacious meat market that operated out of the basement of the Old Town Hall at the turn of the 20th century. The building dates to 1815 and was originally intended as a public market building, with offices on the second floor. Today, the entry doors to the market, located on either side of the main entry steps, have been bricked over, concealing this chapter in the building's history.



Salem's Old Town Hall was originally opened as a public marketplace. A Franco-American family operated the Subway Market in the basement of the building. The entry doors to the basement level have now been bricked over, concealing this chapter in its history.

The main shopping street in Salem was Essex Street, now a pedestrian mall partially closed to traffic. All the major department stores – Almy's, Woolworth's, and others – and many smaller retail shops were located here and flourished in the first half of the 20th century. In addition to clothing, jewelry, and other retail stores, Essex Street was the central banking area and the site of many theaters, cinemas, and restaurants. In the 1940's, these businesses drew about 40,000 shoppers per year. Many of the stores advertised to Franco-Americans in the *Courier de Salem*, running ads in French and boasting of sales assistants who could speak French to clients. Other Essex Street stores were owned by Franco-Americans. An example is Bernard's Jewelers. Raymond Tetrault co-founded Bernard's Jewelers with Bernie Goldberg in 1934, when the shop was established on Essex Street. Even after the big department stores and theaters closed, businesses with local ties, like Bernard's, remained open and survived several economic downturns to become local fixtures well into the 21st century.



Bernard's Jewelers on Essex Street is an example of the many family-owned Franco-American businesses that were established in the early 20th century and thrived in the central business district.

After the Naumkeag Mill closed in 1953, and the North Shore Mall opened on the outskirts of the city in 1958, many downtown businesses closed. Buildings were left empty and the central business district began to succumb to urban decay. This all changed in the 1970's when the city adopted a new approach to urban renewal. It was one of preservation, aiming to re-purpose empty downtown buildings in order to maintain and celebrate the historic heritage of the city. This was also the era when the city elected its first Franco-American mayor, Jean Lévesque, who served from 1973 to 1983. Another Franco-American, Joan Boudreau, who served on the city's Redevelopment Commission, helped to kick start this downtown revitalization by investing her own money to turn the 19th century Lyceum on Church Street into an upscale French restaurant by the same name. Her foresight led the way for today's culinary diversity in Salem's

downtown and saved a historic building from demolition.

Other Franco-Americans have had a more recent impact on the economy of the city. Bruce Michaud, CEO of the Salem Witch Museum located on the Salem Common, had an idea in the 1980's to create a small Halloween festival to draw tourists to the city. The idea caught on, and we now know of it as the month-long "Haunted Happenings" celebration that has vastly expanded the city's tourism market in recent decades.

SOUTH SALEM

As the population of the Point grew, French-Canadian families began to establish homes in the areas heading south on Lafayette towards Forest River Park and today's Salem State University. Flanking Lafayette to both the east and the west, these neighborhoods boasted single family and two-family homes and a diverse population. French speakers were never the majority, yet faith and language remained central to their identities. The families generally continued to send their children to St. Joseph's for grammar school and the parish built a satellite church, St. Theresa's Chapel, on Summit Avenue to facilitate attendance at mass and to provide spiritual care for parishioners now living up to a mile away from the Point neighborhood.



The Sainte-Chrétienne Academy was founded by French-speaking nuns in 1918. The buildings were later sold to Salem State University and became the upper South Campus.

Also in South Salem was the Sainte-Chrétienne Academy, established in 1918, on Loring Avenue. This all-female Catholic high school was operated by the Sisters of Sainte-Chrétienne, who taught at the St. Joseph's school from 1903 through 1925, when they were replaced at St. Joseph's by the Sisters of the Assumption. Many young women who attended elementary school at St. Joseph's or Ste. Anne's continued their education at Ste. Chrétienne's. However, the academy also admitted many talented young women from English-speaking schools in the area.

Businesses grew up in this new neighborhood, many of them strung along Lafayette Street. The St. Jean's Credit Union located at the corner of Lafayette and Loring, began as St. Joseph's Credit Union in 1908 and was originally located on Lafayette and Harbor streets in the Point neighborhood. Franco-Americans founded the first credit union in the United States, St. Mary's Credit Union in Manchester, New Hampshire, as a way to provide banking services and loans to Franco-American immigrants who were turned away by established banks. The St. Joseph's Credit Union was founded for the same reasons, at the insistence of the pastors of both St. Joseph's and Ste. Anne's parishes.

CASTLE HILL



Dube's Seafood, a well-known fixture on Jefferson Avenue close to Ste. Anne's church, has been owned by two Franco-American families – the Dubés and the Pelletiers.

Running along Jefferson Avenue from Loring to Wilson, the Castle Hill neighborhood covered ground on both sides of the gentle slope referenced in its name. The area, then with water views, boasted summer homes for the well-to-do in the 18th and early 19th centuries. By the time of French Canadian immigration, the water had been filled in and trains moved freight and people along rails laid at the neighborhood's eastern edge.

In Castle Hill, families had access to land for raising chickens and gardens for fresh produce. Men and women worked in a variety of industries throughout the city and children played in fields, and along the area's many lightly travelled roads. Winter found children skating and playing hockey on the two local ponds.

Like the other Franco-American neighborhoods in the city, Castle Hill, too, was anchored by its church. Ste. Anne's parish was established in 1901 with the completion of the church building. This wooden structure was destroyed by fire in 1982; the current brick edifice was completed four years later. The parish complex would come to have a rectory, a convent and school buildings. The number of children in the parish was large enough to necessitate two or three sites for grammar school instruction throughout its first half century. In these schools, classes were conducted entirely in French—except for English grammar. Without their own high school, grammar school graduates could attend St. Joseph's Academy, Salem High School or, for girls, Ste. Chrétienne's.

Family-owned neighborhood businesses thrived in this ethnic enclave as they did in the Point. Among these was Fontaine's Market, selling meat as well as general groceries out of two storefronts by the 1930s, one on either side of the hill. Dube's restaurant was established mid-twentieth century.

As was the case elsewhere in Salem and in the US, Castle Hill residents took pride in their identity as Franco-Americans. This is evidenced by the names inscribed on a monument to veterans of the two world wars which sits in a small park at the corner of Jefferson and Lawrence streets, on the site of a former St. Anne's grammar school building.



Sainte-Anne's parish was established in 1901 on Jefferson Avenue and offered masses in French for over a century.

THE WILLOWS



The entrance to the Willows park, a popular destination for restaurants and amusements since 1858.

Follow Derby or Essex streets to the east and both converge at the Salem Willows, a popular seaside destination for locals and tourists since 1858, when it became a public park. Once the Naumkeag Street Railway service laid tracks to the park in 1877, businesses began to proliferate. Soon filled with restaurants, food stands, casinos, carnival rides, a band stand, and other amusements, the Willows was the destination for leisure activities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

A number of the Willows businesses were owned by enterprising Franco-Americans, including concession stands, restaurants, and amusement rides. Many Franco-Americans also played in the Salem Cadet Band, which gave concerts at the Willows every

weekend during the summer months in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The current Memorial Shell bandstand, used today for Tuesday evening concerts in the summer, opened in 1965 and has also hosted Franco-American bandmasters.

Salem artist Tommy Gagnon, of Franco-American origin, won a competition in 2010 to paint ten large concrete blocks that line the picnic area in the Willows. Each with a different theme, the block entitled “Community” shows the name of the city flanked by two fleur-de-lys, a symbol of French heritage.



A reminder of Salem’s French heritage at the Willows park.