

This complex of Winooski buildings stood between Spring and St. Peter streets from the 1870s until they were razed in 1967. The front building was the convent for the Sisters of Providence of Montreal, with the school in the rear; St. Francis Church would have been off to the right. Thousands of children were educated in the French language here.

Collection of Joseph Perron

19th Century French-Canadian Immigration to Vermont *FROM HYPPOLITE PRUNIER TO FRED PLUMTREE*

Michael F. Dwyer

By the beginning of the twentieth century, one could see the architectural imprint of French-Canadian settlement on the cultural landscape of Vermont. French-speaking Catholics built monumental churches in Burlington, Winooski, St. Albans, Rutland, Newport, and St. Johnsbury, among other towns. Each of these parish communities has its own stories-within-stories of French-Canadians who struggled to maintain their language, identity, and culture within an English-speaking and, sometimes hostile, Catholic hierarchy. This physical evidence also points to a larger but somewhat hidden truth: that a significant number of Vermonters have French-Canadian ancestry whether they realize it or not. The 1990 federal census disclosed that twenty-nine per cent of Vermonters stated that “French,” or “French-Canadian” was one of their ancestries,

making them the largest single group in that census from whom ethnicity was claimed.¹

Emigration from French-speaking Canada to Vermont cannot be understood as a single monolithic movement: it has distinct phases, conditioned by when and where in Vermont the immigrant settled. Small numbers of French-Canadians began to drift over the border and along Lake Champlain after the American Revolution. Poverty pushed people out of Canada. Though France lost Canada in the French and Indian War, the “revenge of the cradle,” the high birth-rate among French-Canadians, created a surplus population of farmers that their native land could no longer sustain. Vermont, by contrast, needed seasonal or temporary workers in agriculture and the lumber industry. As historian Ralph D. Vicero noted, “For many years the movement was irregular in character and insignificant in volume.”² A turning point, however, came after the War of 1812, when more of these migratory workers brought their families with them and settled with more permanence, notably in northern Vermont. Catholic church records help identify some of these arrivals. In October 1815, Boston’s missionary priest, Rev. Francis A. Matignon, baptized more than a dozen French-Canadian children, from infants to the age of eleven, in Burlington.³

As Vermont continued to lose its native-born population in the 1830s and 1840s, Lower Canada supplied a seemingly inexhaustible supply of labor. For these French-Canadians who planted roots in Vermont, it is important to consider that the earlier their immigration, the swifter their assimilation among Yankee neighbors. They had to in order to survive, particularly in rural areas of central and southern Vermont where French-Canadians were more widely disseminated. This phenomenon is manifested through what happened in the transformation of surnames. Some names

Mos. 56 et 58 rue Church.

Aux Dames:

Nous ne pouvons nous astreindre la gloire d'ouvrir la seule magasiner dans le village; mais nous sommes convaincu que nous avons le plus grand et le meilleur assortiment de Marchandises Sélectionées du Field du Vermont, à des prix les plus raisonnables, comparant valeur pour valeur. Veuliez nous faire un appelle, afin de nous permettre de vous prouver le fait.

La J. W. McAulstan Cie.

Boston Store.

PROGRAMME

DE LA

SOIREE DRAMATIQUE et MUSICALE

PAR LE CLUB MAISONNEUVE DE WINOOSKI, VT.



Membres du Club Maisonneuve.

Samedi, le 26 Fevrier, 1898,
A LA SALLE CORPORATION, WINOOSKI, VT.

Portes ouverts à 7 Heures. Levee du Rideau à 8 Heures.

ALPERT & ROSENBERG,

Nouvelles Marchandises du Printemps Recues Chaque Jours.
NOUVELLES ETOPPES A ROBES, NOUVELLES SOIES, NOUVEAUX VELOURS, NOUVEAUX RIDEAUX,
NOUVEAUX TAPIS.

A program for an evening of drama and music, Maisonneuve Club, Winooski, Feb. 26, 1898. Gustave Lavallee is at center of the picture. Author's collection

became rough phonetic transliterations of what Anglos heard their French-Canadian neighbors say. These examples, from censuses and vital records throughout Vermont, have the original French name at left and the Vermont equivalent on the right.

Archambault	Shambo
Boucher	Bushey
Caron	Crone
Tétreau	Tatro/Rowe
Nicolas	Nicklaw
Benoît	Benware/Benway
Beausoleil	Bosley
St. Jacques	Jock/Jakes
Gingras	Jangraw/Shangraw
Beaupré	Boprey
Vincent	Benson

Other names were direct translations of a French word:

Boulanger	Baker
Courtemanche	Shortsleeves
Dufresne	Ash
Léveiller	Wideawake
Leroy	King
Lacroix	Cross
Létourneau	Blackbird
Boisvert	Greenwood
LaPierre	Stone
Prunier	Plumtree
Lefebvre	Bean
Ledoux	Sweet
Poissant	Fisher
Tranquille	Steady
Viens	Come

In this last grouping, these English-sounding names, after a generation or two, would eventually mask the French-Canadian identity of some Vermonters. A few census-takers had no idea of what to do with some names as they heard them; consequently, one man from Rupert was listed as Joseph Frenchman. John Battese of Hubbardton also lost his last name, leaving only his first name, the ubiquitous, *Jean-Baptiste*. Other examples from censuses show anglicization of the first and last name: For example, Narcisse Lussier became Nelson Lusha, Michel Davignon became Mitchell Devino.



A cabinet photo of Gustave Lavallee, Hector Huard Studio, Winooski, 1896. Author's collection



Insignia of Societe de St. Jean Baptiste, fabricated before the American branch, L'Union de St. Jean Baptiste was created in 1901.
Collection of Joseph Perron

When tracking individuals and families through census records, any part of the name could appear differently in successive censuses, yet they refer to the same person. Since Québec baptismal registers often record at least two or three first names for every child, and with almost every girl baptized as Marie, there is considerable variation among the listing of women in Vermont records. How a French-Canadian's name was written depended on who did the recording; many of the immigrants were illiterate. Another aspect of French naming practices that would have confused Vermonters were *dit* names—nicknames given as a suffix often used to distinguish two people of the same name. Even within the same generation of families like those of Paquet dit Lavallée or Brault dit Chaillot, one brother may choose the first part of the name and the other the second part. From these two examples emanated many garbled versions: Pockette, Lavly, Lovely, or Brow, and Shiette or Chiot—each trio of names referring to the same person.

Until the last third of the nineteenth century when many births went unrecorded by town and city clerks, baptismal records remain one of the most useful tools in ascertaining an immigrant's true name, yet among these records considerable surname variations exist attesting to whether the

priest spoke French. Only Québec priests maintained the precise formula that came from France of recording a full citation for every sacrament: a marriage record, for example, would have not only the names of bride and groom, it would have the full names of parents, their residence, names of the witnesses, their relationship to the bridal couple, and whether they could sign the register. By contrast, American priests would record only names of bride and groom, the witnesses, and name of the officiant.

Against this larger background, individual stories make statistics into real people. Two early immigrants, among an interrelated group from the environs of Chambly, Canada, seventy-five miles north of the Vermont border, were Augustin Davignon (1798–1859) and his brother-in-law André Brault dit Chaillot (1796–1867). They were living in the section of Colchester that came to be known as Winooski Falls, when they were listed as heads of household, one following the other, in the 1820 census.⁴ Names that followed theirs—Rolle, Robinson, Rice, and Washburn, were all Yankees. André, recorded as Andrew Brough in 1820, was listed as Andrew Shiotte in 1830, Andrew Chiette (1840). In the early 1830s, prior to the building of a woolen mill at the falls, Shiotte and Davignon purchased land in Colchester among Yankee neighbors. It was not a seamless transition for either side. As emigration from Québec continued to rise through the nineteenth century, denunciation from the French-speaking clergy grew in vituperation toward those who left Canada, calling them cowards, deserters, and renegades as they moved to a land characterized as a “vast Sodom.” More than differences in language and culture, when French-Canadians crossed into the United States, they entered an environment hostile to Catholics. Until a permanent Catholic church was established in Burlington, these two families made regular trips back to Chambly to have their children baptized. Augustin Davignon, known in Vermont records as Hueston Devino, clamored for a French-speaking priest and the establishment of a French church, yet among his nine children who lived into adulthood, two of his sons married Yankees. One of André’s sons married a woman born in Canada, the other did not.⁵

A small-scale exodus from Canada followed Papineau’s Rebellion of 1837–1838. Participants who took up arms against the British government became wanted men. One rebel, Toussaint Audet dit Lapointe, of Mont St. Hilaire, fled over the border with his wife and eight children. His time in Vermont was brief. St. Hyacinthe, Québec, church records show that by 1844 he returned when another child was born. Two of Toussaint’s children, though, remained in Benson, Vermont. Here the story gets more interesting. On January 16, 1847, his son Toussaint *Odet Jr.* was married to Emilie *Croto* [Croteau dit Vincent] by Rev. Azariah Hyde of Benson’s Unitarian Church.

Later that same year, Hyde also married Mary Audet (1831–1910) and Edward Bird (1829–1908). A marriage outside the Catholic Church not only would have been considered illicit, it often meant excommunication. In some but not all instances, a Protestant marriage might have been rehabilitated, i.e., blessed by the church. Eventually, that is what happened to Toussaint Jr. Within a year he returned to the eastern townships of Canada, where his eldest daughter, Rosalie, was baptized in 1848. Over the next fifty years, Toussaint Audet and his wife Emily moved frequently but ended their days as a three-generation family in Putnam, Connecticut.⁶

By contrast, Mary and Edward Bird's story has a stronger Vermont connection. Their marriage was not among the rehabilitated. Following the birth of their first child in 1848, the Birds left Vermont for the mills of Auburn, Massachusetts, where they were living at the time of the 1850 census. From there, the family moved to Putnam, Washington County, New York. Edward Bird is recorded there as a farm laborer in the 1860 census. By 1864, they returned to Vermont, settling in the Hortonville village in Hubbardton. Near the end of the Civil War, Edward made a life-changing decision: he accepted the town of Hubbardton's five-hundred-dollar bounty to fill the town's quota of soldiers. With that money, Mary Bird bought the house and farm where they lived for the remainder of their lives. Given their pattern of frequent moves before the Civil War, it is doubtful the Birds ever would have accumulated enough capital to buy property. Edward survived the war, and in 1876, became a naturalized citizen by virtue of his Civil War service. In 1892, he qualified for Civil War disability pension, which he collected until his death in 1908.⁷ As evidence of his break with the Catholic Church, five of his six children did not have Catholic weddings. Edward had turned his back on Canada.

One would not have found *Edward Bird* in any Québec parish record—in fact, he was born Antoine Loiseau, in Boucherville, along the St. Lawrence River, where all of his siblings remained. He came to Benson as a teenager, with his mother's brother, Léandre Casavant, whose name morphed into Lewis Casavaw. No evidence survives that anyone in this family ever went north again. Lewis is found in Edward Bird's household in Sudbury's 1880 census with the curious label describing him as Edward's “father-by-law.”⁸

Hundreds of other Canadian-born Vermonters served in the Civil War. Many remarkably detailed stories survive through Civil War pension files, and therein one learns details of the Lussier/Lucier family: a father and son who both fought, survived their wounds, and lived to old age.⁹ Charles Lucier (1826–1905), from St. Simon, County Bagot, left Canada in his late teens for work and marriage in New York State. Charles then returned to

St. Simon where his eldest son, Gilbert Lucier, was baptized in April 1847. This young family then settled in Alburgh by 1850. Sometime in the next decade, the Luciers embraced Methodism, never to return to the Catholic Church. Charles Lucier enlisted as a Private in Company K, Fifth Vermont Regiment; his son Gilbert, just 17, enlisted in Company F, Eleventh Vermont Regiment. Charles died in 1905 and his funeral was held at the Methodist Church in Jay.¹⁰

Gilbert Lucier has the distinction of being Vermont's last surviving soldier of the Civil War. He died at the age of 97 in Newport on September 22, 1944.¹¹ In nine Vermont censuses (1850–1940), Gilbert always claimed Vermont as his birthplace even though the record of his baptism shows otherwise. Was this a faulty memory or a conscious decision to affirm Vermont? Though he married a first-generation Vermonter, Lucy King, her family name only a generation before had been Leroy. With the Luciers joining and maintaining membership in a Protestant Church, they assimilated among other Vermonters to a much higher degree than they would have had they remained in a Catholic enclave.

Some towns, in the aftermath of the Civil War, had 15 to 20 per cent of their inhabitants born in Canada. A nativist backlash, which had started in the 1840s, never quite disappeared. In this vein, Rowland Robinson wrote:

“ . . . swarms of Canadian laborers came flocking over the border in gangs of two or three, baggy-breeched and moccasined habitants, embarked in rude carts drawn by shaggy Canadian ponies . . . they have become the most numerous of Vermont’s foreign population. For years the State was infested with an inferior class of people, who plied the vocation of professional beggars . . . ”

“They were an abominable crew of vagabonds, robust, lazy men and boys, slatternly women with litters of filthy brats, and all as detestable as they were uninteresting . . . ”

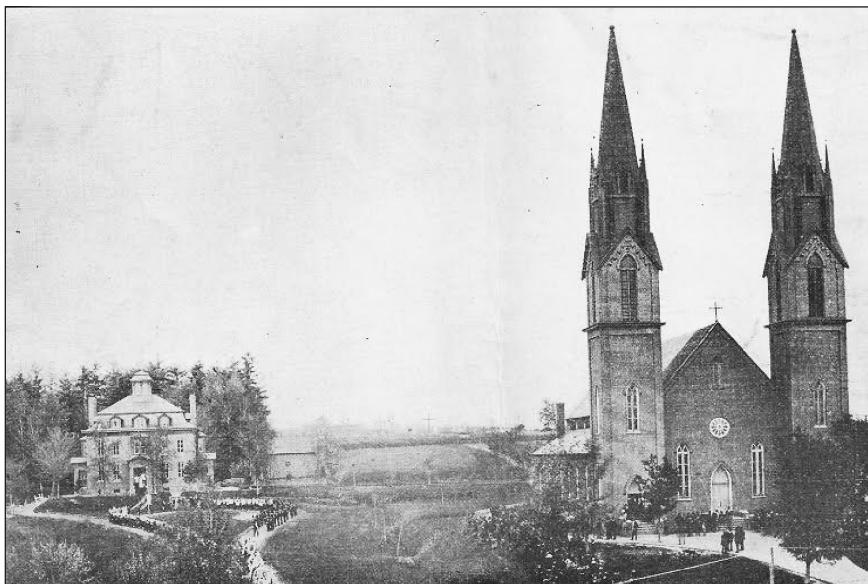
“The character of these people is not such as to inspire hope for the future of Vermont, if they should become the most numerous of the population.”¹²

A significant change in the demographics did not support Robinson’s fear of a French-Canadian takeover. Whereas in 1860, Vermont represented 44.3 per cent of the French-Canadian population of New England, by 1880 it had slipped to 16.1 of the distribution. Massachusetts now took the lead with almost 40 per cent of the Canadian-born population.¹³ As one example, Fred Plumtree, born Hyppolite Prunier, a Civil War veteran, lived in Bennington along with his ten children at the time of the 1870 census; but by 1880 the Plumtrees had moved to Holyoke.¹⁴ Reason for the shift:

the lure of larger textile mills and the thousands of workers needed to fuel the machines. Vermont simply did not have that kind of draw.

While French-Canadian organizations, like L'Union St. Jean Baptiste, a cultural and mutual-aid society, as well as Catholic sodalities, existed in Vermont, as they did in the other New England States, Vermont never possessed the population to warrant the regular publication of a French-language newspaper. St. Albans, Newport, Burlington, and Rutland had their “French” neighborhoods, but none had the same concentration that Winooski village developed after the Civil War. In 1868, Rev. Jean-Frédéric Audet, founded St. Francis Xavier Church, to serve the growing number of French-Canadian Catholics. Over the next forty-nine years he created a French-speaking bastion anchored by the church, convent, school, and cemetery, the largest single parish-owned property in the state.¹⁵

Winooski most closely approximates the “Petit Canadas” associated with mill towns like Biddeford, Maine; Fall River, Massachusetts; and Woonsocket, Rhode Island, but without blocks of tenements. In greater Burlington, one finds a variety of print media that attest to the widespread use of the French language. Contrary to the experience of a French-Canadian immigrant who emigrated fifty years before, Gustave Lavallée (1875–1931), a twenty-year-old blacksmith from Cap Santé, Portneuf County, Québec, arrived in 1895 to a familiar cultural environment in Winooski. Here he joined a network of relatives and friends who had



St. Francis Rectory and Church, showing a procession for the episcopal visit of Bishop DeGoesbriand in 1892. Winooski Historical Society

established themselves in the previous two decades. As a young man, Gustave participated in theatrical productions and musical reviews. He married at St. Francis Xavier Church, Claudia Lavallée, a millworker who had come from an adjoining village in Canada. When his wife died at 29 after giving birth to her third child, Gustave returned to Québec within a few years and married his wife's younger half-sister, Eugénie. Their seven children all remained in the area, found their spouses among other Catholic French-Canadian families, and most kept French as their mother tongue. Though trained as a teacher in Canada, Eugénie Lavallée never learned English but managed to live and function within similar network of family and friends until her death in 1973.¹⁶

For immigrants like Mme. Lavallée, her native language and her Catholic faith were intrinsically bound. Outsiders decried the clannishness and foreignness of French-Canadians. Polemics decrying the lack of French-Canadian assimilation persisted through the 1930s, when they became infused with the Eugenics Movement. Some writers proposed quotas, citing one of the problems with French-Canadians as "the fecundity of their race."¹⁷ Among the targets for these writers were Catholic schools where "state legislation in regard to private schools should be much more stringent than it is now." Their ideals and aims differed from those of "the native stock."¹⁸ Indeed, the Sisters of Providence of Montréal staffed an elementary school in Winooski since the 1870s to educate French-speaking population; the sisters continued to give half-day instruction in French until the late 1950s until a directive came from the bishop of Burlington that such instruction was no longer necessary. Winooski thus exemplifies the longest surviving pocket of French immersion in Vermont. While it would not have been difficult for most French-Canadian descendants in Winooski or Burlington to find their origins in Québec, other descendants had long lost their heritage in French Canada.

For many Vermonters today, especially with names different from their nineteenth-century forbears, it becomes an act of retrieval to access the language and culture of their ancestors. Would someone looking at Bennington's 1900 census, in isolation, realize that Paul Brooks was Guillaume Napoléon Paul Rousseau? As the wave of genealogical yearning sweeps across America, hundreds of people seek to retrieve their lost roots and connect to their ancestors who through deprivation or courage crossed Lake Champlain or drove a team over the Beebe Plains to pursue a better life. Vermont's history needs to be more inclusive of the various people who lived here in the past and who live here now. It is an unfounded stereotype to maintain that Vermont is only a place of village greens anchored by white-steepled Protestant churches. Indeed, as a result of other

immigrant groups, like the Irish, who brought their faith with them, the single-largest church denomination in Vermont has remained the Catholic Church. French Canadians in Bennington also had a separate school and a separate church. All over Vermont, alternative histories have yet to be written and ancestors rediscovered. Joseph-André Senécal, former director of the Canadian Studies Program at the University of Vermont, concluded “Vermont has stayed that mythic kingdom that Currier and Ives can come home to. Much of this pious infectious construct is dangerous and insidious. It blinds us to the nature of Vermont’s ethnic past . . .”¹⁹ □

1. Joseph-André Senécal, “Franco-Vermonters on the Eve of the Millennium: Tales from the 1990 Census,” Links, *Journal of the Vermont French-Canadian Society* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 8.
2. Ralph D. Vicero, “French Canadian Settlement in Vermont Prior to the Civil War,” reprinted in Madeleine Giguère, *A Franco-American Overview*, vol 4: New England (Part Two) Cambridge, Mass., National Assessment and Dis-semination Center for Bilingual Education, 1981, 167.
3. Matignon baptisms at Vermont-French Canadian Society website:
<http://www.vt-fcgs.org/PDFs/1815%20Burlington%20baptisms%20by%20Matignon.pdf>
4. 1820 U. S. Census, Colchester, Chittenden Co., Vt., p. 541.
5. Michael F. Dwyer and Susan L. Valley, “Augustin Davignon and André Brault dit Chaillot, Brothers-in-law of Winooski Falls, Vermont,” *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 170 (Winter 2016), 45–57.
6. Napoleon Jasmin household, 1900 U. S. Census, Putnam, Windham Co., Conn., p. 3A, E. D. 521.
7. Edward Bird, Civil War pension, appl. #894935, cert. #758083. An indication of Bird's assimilation into the community, none of those men who gave depositions for him, Cyrus Jennings, Charles Morgan, and James Hall, were French-Canadian.
8. Michael F. Dwyer, “The Path to Edward Bird: A Story of Identity, Assimilation, and Discovery,” *American Ancestors* (Spring 2012), 28–32.
9. Civil War pension files, Charles Lucier, appl. #611,749, cert. #387, 312; Gilbert Lucier, appl. #103, 800, cert. #75, 465
10. *Newport Express and Standard*, 3 Feb. 1905.
11. Howard Coffin, *Something Abides Discovering the Civil War in Today's Vermont* (Woodstock, Vt.: Countryman Press, 2013), 304.
12. Rowland Evans Robinson, *Vermont: A Study of Independence* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1892), 330.
13. Yves Roby, *Les Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle Angleterre, 1776–1930* (Sillery, Québec: Septentrion, 1990), p. 47.
14. Fred Plumtree, 1870 U. S. Census, Bennington, Bennington Co., Vt., p. 348B; 1880 U. S. Census, Holyoke, Hampden Co., Mass., p. 167.
15. Vincent Edward Feeney, *The Great Falls on Onion River: A History of Winooski, Vermont* (Winooski: The Winooski Historical Society, 2002), 73, 119.
16. Personal interviews with the Lavallée family, 1994–2001.
17. Robert C. Dexter, “The French-Canadian Invasion,” in *Aliens in Our Midst*, Madison Grant, ed. (New York: Galton Pub. Co., 1930), 75.
18. Ibid, 78.
19. Joseph-André Senéchal, “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois: Ethnicity and History in Vermont,” *Vermont History* 71 (Winter/Spring 2003), 66.