

# Mobility Potential and the Quality of Life in Working-Class Lowell, Massachusetts The French Canadians ca. 1870

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Volume 2, 1977

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt2art09>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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Cite this article

Early, F. H. (1977). Mobility Potential and the Quality of Life in Working-Class Lowell, Massachusetts: The French Canadians ca. 1870. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 2, 214–228.

## RESEARCH REPORT

# *MOBILITY POTENTIAL AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN WORKING-CLASS LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS:*

*The French Canadians ca. 1870*

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The purpose of this article is to report on some preliminary findings of a larger study, a social history of the French-Canadian community of Lowell, Massachusetts, in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. I have data from the United States manuscript census on members of the French-Canadian community which, taken in conjunction with other descriptive sources, allows for a speculative discussion concerning the quality of life experienced by ordinary French Canadians residing in Lowell in 1870.<sup>1</sup>

Lowell, at the close of the American Civil War in 1865, was a major industrial town and center for textile production. Only Fall River, Massachusetts, exceeded Lowell in the production of textiles

<sup>1</sup>I have coded all information contained in the manuscript census for Lowell in 1870 on all individuals born in Canada. I have also complete coded records for all non-Canadian born persons who in 1870 lived in households in which Canadians resided. My sample of French Canadians from this total data base numbers 1435 men, women, and children. The 1435 figure includes 197 children who were not born in Canada but had French-Canadian fathers. The approximate Canadian-born French-Canadian population in Lowell was 2000 in 1870 (see footnote 9). Therefore, my sample, subtracting the 197 children not born in Canada, represents about 62% of the total Lowell Canadian-born French-Canadian population in 1870. I also have complete census data for non-French Canadians who shared living quarters with French Canadians in my sample.

in the United States in this period.<sup>2</sup> Almost 40 percent of Lowell's workforce was engaged in manufacturing and mechanical industries, mostly related to textile production.<sup>3</sup> Although 65 percent of Lowell's populace of 41,000 was native-born in 1870, the majority of workers in the textile industry were drawn from the various, largely English-speaking immigrant groups resident in Lowell at this time: 22 percent of the total population was Irish, 4 percent was English, and 3 percent was from Scotland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, and "other." In addition, in 1870, 6 percent of Lowell's citizenry was Canadian, in large measure French Canadian.<sup>4</sup>

Lowell attracted many working-class people in the immediate post-Civil War years. In its annual report for the year 1866 the Ministry-at-Large of Lowell, a non-denominational charity organization, noted with consternation that in the past two years over 10,000 persons, many of whom were "utterly destitute," had entered the city in search of work. Many of the persons arriving in Lowell were "wretchedly poor" working-class people from other New England cities who were attempting to "better their condition."<sup>5</sup> The report continued with a statement that a significant portion of the newcomers were French Canadians. They were described in a highly unflattering manner:

They are nearly all Catholic, do not speak English, are in a low, sensual condition of life, and are less disposed than others to improve themselves. They are not so accessible to our influence. Not mingling freely with society, they do not catch the dominant spirit. The great hope is with the children, who, in our common schools, are readily acquiring our language and

<sup>2</sup>Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor, *Fourth Annual Report, 1873*, p. 280.

<sup>3</sup>Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor, *Census of Massachusetts: 1875. Vol. 1. Population and Social Statistics*, pp. 466-67. For a more in-depth discussion of the occupational structure of Lowell in 1875 see the paper which I presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, June 1977, in Fredericton, New Brunswick, entitled "French-Canadian Beginnings in an American Community: Lowell, Massachusetts, 1870."

<sup>4</sup>*Fourth Annual Report, 1873*, pp. 281-82. The percentages are mine, computed from the absolute numbers for each ethnic group as provided in the United States census. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870. Vol. 1. The Statistics of the Population of the United States*, pp. 386-87.

<sup>5</sup>*Twenty-second Annual Report of the Ministry-at-Large in Lowell (Lowell 1867)*, p. 4.

adopting our ideas and feelings, and will become teachers to their parents.<sup>6</sup>

The Ministry-at-Large evidently accepted, albeit grudgingly, that the French-Canadian influx into Lowell was not a temporary phenomenon. In this, the report was correct. In 1865 only a handful, perhaps 100 French Canadians, resided in Lowell.<sup>7</sup> By 1868 the number was around 1200.<sup>8</sup> A brief two years later, in 1870, the approximate number of French Canadians living in Lowell was 2000, 5 percent of the Lowell population of 41,000.<sup>9</sup> In the next three decades the French-Canadian population would increase to 15,000, accounting in 1900 for about 16 percent of the 95,000 residents of the city.<sup>10</sup>

The French-Canadian presence in Lowell in the latter part of the nineteenth century was part of a larger pattern of migration. Between 1860 and 1900 approximately 600,000 French Canadians migrated to New England.<sup>11</sup> By 1900 one in every ten New Englanders,

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Santerre, *Un Peuple et son Rêve: Saint-Jean Baptiste de Lowell, Massachusetts, 1868-1968* (Manchester, New Hampshire, 1977), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup>The total Lowell population has been rounded to the nearest thousand. *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870*, p. 386. There is no way of accurately determining the exact number of French Canadians living in Lowell in 1870. The manuscript census lists 2630 individuals as born in Canada but provides no other information which could be used to distinguish French from English Canadians. My census sample was chosen on the basis of name. Only Canadians with French-sounding surnames were included. A figure of 2000 is based upon Lowell marriage records. Investigating the marriage records for 1869 and 1870 reveals 201 Canadian-born individuals married in these years. If French and English Canadians are distinguished from each other using the criteria of surname and place of marriage (French Canadians had to be married in the French-Canadian parish, English Canadians could not be married in the French-Canadian parish), 150 or 75% of Canadian-born individuals married in Lowell in 1869 and 1870 may be identified as French Canadian. Thus, on the assumption that the marriage records were not overly biased in terms of age, 2000 of the total 2630 Canadians in Lowell in 1870 (that is, 75% of 2630) were French Canadian. However, it is important to keep in mind that 2000 is an inferred estimate only. The problem of identifying French Canadians in 1870 is dealt with in more detail in my larger study.

<sup>10</sup>Both the French-Canadian population, which in 1900 is listed separately from the English-Canadian population, and the total Lowell population have been rounded to the nearest thousand. U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900. Population, Part I.*, pp. 621 and 796.

<sup>11</sup>Ralph Vicero, "Immigration of French Canadians to New England,

or about 575,000 persons, was of French-Canadian stock.<sup>13</sup> Roughly one in every four French Quebecers was living in New England in 1900.<sup>13</sup>

French Canadians abandoned their homeland for economic reasons: the rural system could no longer provide livelihoods for many farmers' sons and Quebec industry was undeveloped. Soil-depleting farming methods combined with repeated subdivision of lands among the offspring of the large French-Canadian families had by mid-century destroyed the viability of the traditional Quebec agricultural system. Although Quebec land was available for colonization, this alternative was largely unsuccessful as most virgin farm land was located in remote areas of Quebec with inadequate transportation facilities.<sup>14</sup> To a large extent, therefore, French Canadians had little choice but to migrate. As noted in the report of the Seventh Census of Canada (1931), French Canadians were forced to settle in New England in this period "not in quest of a higher standard of living but to avoid a lower."<sup>15</sup>

The economic and demographic factors which pushed French Canadians out of Quebec were complemented by similar factors

1840-1900: A Geographical Analysis" Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1968, p.386.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p.2. "French-Canadian stock" in the United States census designates persons born in Canada whose mother tongue is French as well as persons not born in Canada who nonetheless report one or both parents as Canadian-born with French as the mother tongue.

<sup>14</sup>This is a rough estimate only. The French population of Quebec in 1901 was about 1,300,000. The total number of persons of French-Canadian stock in the United States in 1900 was about 850,000. If all persons of French-Canadian stock living in the United States in 1900 had resided in Quebec at this time the population of the province would have been 2,150,000. The number of persons of French-Canadian stock living in New England in 1900, 575,000, is roughly 27% of this 2,150,000; hence, the estimate that 1 in every 4 French Quebecers lived in New England in 1900. Canada. *Fourth Census of Canada, 1901. Vol. 1. Population*, p.352. Leon E. Truesdell, *The Canadian Born in the United States* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1943), p. 77.

<sup>15</sup>Iris Saunders Podesa, "Quebec to 'Little Canada': The Coming of the French Canadians to New England in the Nineteenth Century," in Leonard Dinnerstein and Frederic Cople Jaher, eds., *The Aliens: A History of Ethnic Minorities in America* (New York 1970), pp. 206-07, Vicero, "Immigration of French Canadians to New England," pp. 10-88, and Quebec, *Report of the Select Standing Committee on Agriculture, Immigration and Colonization*, Journals of the Legislative Assembly, Vol. 1, App. 12, 1867-68, *passim*.

<sup>16</sup>Cited in Podesa, "Quebec to 'Little Canada,'" p. 207.

which favored their settlement in New England. Southern New England was by 1865 experiencing rapid economic growth. Industrialization, well under way by the 1860s, created a stiff demand for workers in the textile and boot and shoe industries. Laborers were also needed in building construction and in canal and railroad work. The native and Irish-immigrant labor force present in New England in 1865 could not meet the labor demands of industry.<sup>16</sup> In increasing numbers, therefore, French Canadians responded to the lack of economic opportunity in Quebec by moving to industrial centers like Lowell in New England to procure work.

What do we know of the French-Canadian experience in towns like Lowell in this era? Despite the large number of French Canadians resident in New England by the turn of the century, their immigrant experience has to date been largely ignored in historical literature. Most of our knowledge comes from memoirs of French Canadians who were successful within the American context of socio-economic betterment — the “elite” — or from general histories of French-Canadian community development, written primarily from the perspective of *survivance*. The lives of ordinary French-Canadian immigrants have received scant notice. Since most of the literature stresses success (French Canadians who “made it”) and heroism (*survivance*), the story which emerges is progressive, cheerful, almost lyrical.<sup>17</sup>

How accurate is this very general but positive rendition of the

<sup>16</sup>Vicero, “Immigration of French Canadians to New England,” pp.391-93, and *passim*.

<sup>17</sup>See for instance, Jacques Ducharme, *The Shadows of the Trees* (New York 1943), pp. 141 and 221, where the author refers to “the charm and atmosphere” of the early years as well as to the “romance of heroic days.” Studies are now being undertaken, however, which are attempting to examine the French-Canadian experience more objectively. Vicero’s painstaking study (see footnote 11) exemplifies this new trend. Dissertations dealing with specific French-Canadian communities, French-Canadian political behavior, and the French-Canadian work experience have recently been completed or are in progress. Tamara Hareven’s work on the textile workers of Manchester, New Hampshire, when completed, will contribute much to our knowledge of the French-Canadian working-class experience. Some of her findings have already been published. See for instance, Tamara K. Hareven, “Family Time and Industrial Time: Family and Work in a Planned Corporation Town, 1900-1924,” *Journal of Urban History*, 1(May 1975), 365-89, “The Laborers of Manchester, New Hampshire, 1912-1922: The Role of Family and Ethnicity in Adjustment to Industrial Life,” *Labor History*, XVI (Spring 1975), 249-65.

French-Canadian experience? Until more is known of the life experiences of the ordinary French Canadians who migrated to New England in the second half of the nineteenth century, this question cannot be answered comprehensively. However, the research I have completed on members of the French-Canadian community of Lowell in 1870 allows for a partial answer. My findings demonstrate that for most Lowell French Canadians, life, in the first years of settlement in New England, while not exactly desperate, was rather grim. The romantic view of the early post-Civil War French-Canadian immigrant experience which is found in the conventional literature is not borne out in the case of Lowell.

In support of this contention I will discuss three main points which have emerged from my research: 1) Lowell French Canadians in 1870 were overwhelmingly working-class, primarily industrial laborers; 2) No *lay classe dirigeante* accompanied French-Canadian laboring people from French Canada to Lowell in the first years of settlement; 3) The vast majority of French-Canadian children over the age of ten were gainfully employed outside the home in 1870.

A striking 95 percent of the French Canadians gainfully employed in my sample of 1435 men, women, and children had working-class occupations in 1870. Eight of every 10 French Canadians had unskilled jobs; 7 of every 10 unskilled workers were employed in manufacturing establishments. French Canadians were also more likely than the population at large to be employed in manufacturing establishments and in occupations related to manufacturing. Roughly 7 of every 10 French Canadians were so engaged, as opposed to four of every 10 in the working population of Lowell as a whole.<sup>18</sup>

It is not surprising to find French Canadians, as new immigrant arrivals, on the lowest rungs of the occupational ladder in Lowell. However, when the occupations of men, women, and children are considered separately, it is revealed that while only 66 percent of men were unskilled workers, virtually all women and children were (97 percent and 96 percent respectively). The proletarian nature of the workforce in regard to women and children holds few surprises. But it appears significant that 25 percent of men were engaged as skilled craftsmen. The fact that another 8 percent of men escaped working-class occupations altogether is noteworthy. Most of these

<sup>18</sup>For a detailed discussion of the occupational structure of the Lowell French-Canadian community in 1870 see Early, "French-Canadian Beginnings."

men were either low white-collar employees, shopkeepers, or farmers.<sup>19</sup>

The finding that 1 in every 4 French-Canadian men held jobs as skilled craftsmen may prove significant in terms of eventual occupational mobility out of the working class for some individuals in this group. However, this can only be determined through a longitudinal study of the career patterns of men in this category who persisted as residents in Lowell over a number of years.<sup>20</sup> In the meantime, it does appear important that even in the early years of settlement in New England, a certain portion of French-Canadian men in working-class occupations were not obliged to work in factories and mills or as day laborers.

Within the small 8 percent non-working-class group very few persons were employed in what might be considered "service" or elite occupations. In my sample only 13 persons appear to fit this category — 10 persons engaged in wholesale or retail trade (shopkeepers) and 3 physicians. There were no lawyers, no notaries. Standard accounts of French-Canadian immigration stress the presence of a traditional transferred French-Canadian elite or *classe dirigeante* composed of physicians, pharmacists, businessmen, lawyers, and priests within the larger habitant-laborer immigrant population.<sup>21</sup> Lay representatives of such a cadre were evidently not present in the first years of largescale French Canadian settlement in Lowell.

The lack of a substantial commercial-professional leadership group within the French-Canadian community in 1870 was accentuated by the absence of a significant service-oriented low white-collar group. Only 12 were clerks, 2 were cotton mill overseers. Since French Canadians in 1870 were the only non-English speaking group in Lowell of any significance, we can hypothesize that in terms of everyday life, most French Canadians were required to speak some English: almost all employers, professionals, shopkeepers, landlords were non-French Canadians.

<sup>19</sup>Excepting 3 physicians and 1 inventor, all men in this 8% group of 37 individuals may be classified as low white-collar (14), shopkeepers (10), or farmers (9).

<sup>20</sup>A section of my larger study will deal with occupational mobility patterns for Lowell French Canadians, initially over one decade, 1870-1880.

<sup>21</sup>See Felix Gatineau, *Historique des Conventions générales des Canadiens-Français aux États Unis, 1865-1901* (Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 1927), p.10, and Robert Rumilly, *Histoire des Franco-Américains* (Montreal 1958), pp. 47-54.



The existence of a French-Canadian parish church, established in 1868 by the Oblates, served as a brake to this apparent assimilationist-oriented pattern of daily life. The parish priests, some of whom by the 1870s were French Canadian, were symbols of the traditional elite of French Canada. In Lowell they acted as intermediaries between the French-Canadian community and the population at large.<sup>22</sup> The institutional structures of the parish also helped to maintain *survivance* mentality among the parishioners.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the priests, an identifiable group of French-Canadian men were at this time active in the establishment of parish institutions such as benefit societies, charitable organizations, and parochial schools. Some of these men had been part of the "*petite population canadienne*" who had settled in Lowell before the Civil War.<sup>24</sup> Although the lives of these men have not yet been thoroughly researched, data collected to date indicate that already in 1870, by virtue of their prominence in parish activities and institutions, they represented a small leadership cadre within the French-Canadian community. Rather than a transferred elite from French Canada, however, the members of this group appear to have sprung from the general French-Canadian working-class population. Indeed, either in the census of 1870 or in the Lowell City Directory for the same year most of these apparent leaders reported working-class occupations such as blacksmith, carpenter, wireworker, labourer. Some were shopkeepers or clerks.

It will be important to study the lives of these men to discover their long-term role within the Lowell French-Canadian community. At present all that can be said with any degree of assurance is that in combination with the parish priests these men in 1870 appear to be fulfilling some leadership needs for the French-Canadian community despite their generally low socio-economic profiles.<sup>25</sup>

Although a traditional lay *classe dirigeante* cannot be identified within the French-Canadian population of Lowell in 1870, parish priests and a small, largely working-class leadership group did exist to help French Canadians adjust to their new home. However, priests and leaders could not put bread on tables nor roofs over the

<sup>22</sup>Santerre, *Un Peuple et son Rêve*, p. 30.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23, pp. 28-30, 35-37.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup>Many of the same names appear as charter members of parish organizations founded in the 1868-1880 period. Santerre, *Un Peuple et son Rêve*, pp. 17, 23, 28-30, 36-37. See also Lowell City Directories, 1872-1880, where Lowell societies (and officers) are listed.

heads of their compatriots. Evidently French-Canadian male heads of households were not single-handedly able to achieve this feat either.

The occupational data I have collected for 1870 demonstrate that virtually all adult French Canadians, with the exception of housewives, were gainfully employed outside the home.<sup>26</sup> This holds true for young adults of both sexes, 16 or older, whether they lived with their families or boarded with other families or in boarding houses. Moreover, an amazing 67 percent of children (133) between the ages of 11 and 15 in my sample were gainfully employed in 1870. Nine of every 10 of these children worked in textile factories where the work-week for children, by law, was 60 hours.

The standard story of the French-Canadian experience in New England in this era stresses that parents chose to send their children to factories at tender ages in order to enable the family to return to Canada within a few years with money to buy land or unmortgage a farm. Implicit in this "temporary sojourn" thesis is the idea of *free choice*: French Canadians did not need in a survival sense to have working children in their households.

Given the evidence at present available to me there are several ways to test this thesis. First, the amount of property held by Lowell French Canadians in 1870 may be examined. Second, comments made by the Ministry-at-Large for this period on the living conditions of poor working-class families in Lowell may be considered. Third, the standard of living and savings patterns of French-Canadian working-class families in various Massachusetts urban-industrial centers as reported in 1875 by the Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor may be assessed.

A mere handful of Lowell French Canadians possessed any property in 1870. Twenty-two men, 6 percent of all French-Canadian men in my sample, reported personal property to the census enumerator. Only 5 men, in addition to personal property, reported real property.<sup>27</sup> With a range of \$300 to \$4000, the mean personal property-holding for this group of 22 was \$1400. Only 2 of these men were unskilled workers; each declared \$400. The other 20 men were in skilled or above-skilled occupations: 8 shopkeepers, 2 cotton mill overseers, 1 physician, 1 inventor, 8 skilled craftsmen.

French Canadians were not amassing property in 1870. They were employed, however. What was it like to be a working-class

<sup>26</sup>Only 10% of housewives in my sample worked outside the home.

<sup>27</sup>The values of the real property reported: \$1500, \$3000, \$3000 (3 shopkeepers); \$3000 (inventor); \$1700 (carpenter).

family in Lowell around this time? The annual report of the Ministry-at-Large for 1871 supplies us with a depressing commentary on the quality of life for some working-class families, those identified as "the laboring poor."

Both men and women go to their work day after day with nothing but a few dry crackers and a little black molasses to eat, and sometimes with not so much as that. Frequently I have learned of their having gone to their work without a mouthful of anything to strengthen their failing energies. And there are those who never see a morsel of meat upon the table for weeks together. And they are driven to accept tenements at high rates in filthy streets and alleys, in uncomfortable attics or damp basements. Thus with poor food, uncomfortable houses and scanty clothing, their vitality is forced down almost to the freezing point.<sup>28</sup>

Again, in 1873 the Ministry described a typical day in the lives of Lowell's laboring poor.

The house is closed in the morning at 6 o'clock, — or is left in charge of a few little children, too young to go to the mill, — and not opened again except, perhaps, for a few minutes at noon, till seven in the evening. At that time, after a long hard day's work, there is but little energy left to cook up savory dishes, or to carefully mend all the little rents made in the children's clothing during the day.<sup>29</sup>

Since the Ministry reports make no ethnic distinctions in these descriptions of everyday life for certain working-class households, we cannot know from this source how many French Canadians experienced this kind of deprivation. However, since my findings show that 9 of every 10 French-Canadian wives were not employed outside the home, we may surmise that homelife was in certain respects more comfortable for members of working-class French-Canadian households than for members of other working-class households where the wife (and mother) was employed away from the home 5 or 6 days of the week.

Furthermore, it is doubtless significant that few French Canadians in 1870 and in the decade which followed requested assistance from the Ministry-at-Large.<sup>30</sup> Instead, French Canadians established their own charitable organizations.<sup>31</sup> Although records no longer exist for determining the amount of assistance French Cana-

<sup>28</sup>*Twenty-sixth Annual Report of the Ministry-at-Large in Lowell* (Lowell 1871), p. 15.

<sup>29</sup>*Twenty-eighth Annual Report of the Ministry-at-Large in Lowell* (Lowell 1873), p. 10.

<sup>30</sup>See Ministry-at-Large annual reports for these years.

<sup>31</sup>Santerre, *Un Peuple et son Rêve*, pp. 228-29.

dians were able to receive from these organizations, the fact that such societies were created indicates some ability of working-class French Canadians to finance their own charitable needs.

Most French-Canadian housewives managed to remain at home in 1870, and French Canadians were able to establish their own charitable organizations. In these two respects they were not representative of the most deprived members of Lowell's working class. But, like Lowell's laboring poor, French-Canadian families did send their children out to work at an early age. The survey on the standard of living of Massachusetts working-class families undertaken in 1875 by the Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor strongly suggests that French-Canadian children had to work in order for families to make ends meet.<sup>32</sup>

Twenty-six of the total 29 French-Canadian families interviewed had household heads who were unskilled workers.<sup>33</sup> Far from accruing savings through child labour, French-Canadian working-class families subsisted at a basic level only with the secondary earnings of their children. "Prosperity" depended upon the number and age of working children.

If a couple had several pre-working age children, securing basic necessities was all that could be achieved. Sometimes living costs actually exceeded income. For instance, in one such family the head of household was a labourer who also worked "at jobbing." He and his wife had 4 children between the ages of 1 and 9. They lived in a 3-room tenement which was small, "out of repair," and "poorly furnished." Although they ate meat or fish, potatoes and bread at midday, only bread, butter or molasses, and coffee or tea were eaten at breakfast and supper. The interviewer commented: "Family dresses miserably and looks haggard." Moreover, while the household head earned \$510 in 1875, the cost of living for that year was \$555.38.<sup>34</sup> This family was obviously living beyond its means.

<sup>32</sup>Interviewers reported on the following: occupation of household head, amount household head and other working members of the family earned per year (age and sex of secondary wage-earners specified), itemized yearly budget; description of diet, housing, clothing, general appearance of family members.

<sup>33</sup>Three of the 29 families were headed by skilled workers. Their standard of living was higher than those headed by unskilled workers irrespective of the number of secondary wage-earners. However since this group is so small it is difficult to generalize about the standard of living for these families. For this reason the interviews for this group are not considered here.

<sup>34</sup>Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor, *Sixth Annual Report, 1875*, p. 337.

Families with one or two younger children working fared better. One household head, who as a labourer in a mill earned \$385 in 1875, had two sons, ages 10 and 12, who contributed \$145 and \$120 respectively to the annual family income. Three younger children, in addition to the wife-mother, constituted the other members of this family. Although the parents and children dressed "poorly" and looked "pale and unhealthy," they lived in a 4-room tenement "with neat surroundings." Their diet had a few more extras than the family discussed above; sometimes pie or gingerbread appeared on the table at dinner or supper. But the interviewer noted that the family had to struggle to "keep out of debt." Although the family lived within its means, no savings were possible. The household head lost 6 days of wages because of sickness in 1875 which meant that members of the family "had to go without necessary clothing."<sup>35</sup>

Less depressing were the cases of working-class families with several children in which at least two older children contributed earnings to the family. In one such family of six, the head of household, an outdoor labourer, earned \$361 in 1875. His daughter, age 17, contributed \$302, and his son, age 15, \$220. Although this family had no savings at the close of the year, its members dressed well, ate balanced meals (meat twice a day as well as vegetables once a day), and lived in a clean, well-furnished, carpeted, 5-room tenement.<sup>36</sup>

While these interviews reveal a low standard of living among French-Canadian working-class families with unskilled-worker household heads, French Canadians do appear to have lived better than the laboring poor who were described by the Lowell Ministry-at-Large. Some families, however, fared better than others. This seems to be due to the stage of the family life-cycle in terms of age and number of working children. Those families with no children working or younger children working experienced the hardships and anxieties of daily deprivation; those families with at least two older children working were able to secure basic needs and thus live a more dignified, though still spartan, life. None of these families, however, had the choice of returning to Canada with significant amounts of cash in their pockets.

Occupational and property-holding census data, Ministry-at-Large descriptions, interviews with French-Canadian working-class families all point to a picture of French-Canadian immigrant life which was much less hopeful than would be expected from the

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 311.

standard works on the subject. Although for Lowell French Canadians this state of affairs might have been due in large part to their recent settlement in the town, there are hints that the situation for Lowell French Canadians would not change very rapidly in the next few years.

Child labour was evidently still quite common among Lowell French-Canadian working-class families in 1886.<sup>37</sup> Since working children could not receive much formal education, this continued pattern of child labour suggests that French Canadians would be slow to experience occupational mobility from one generation to the next. Further, a good part of the 1870s were tough depression years. Therefore, it appears unlikely that French Canadians would be able to set aside significant savings in this decade. At least in the early period, property-holding probably remained minimal.

In terms of social relations within the French-Canadian community, by 1880 the vague class outlines which appeared to have been developing in 1870 were more clearly etched. Two elite societies, *Le Cercle Canadien*, and *La Chambre de Commerce*, had been founded by this date.<sup>38</sup> By the mid-1880s class lines within the French Canadian community were becoming firmly drawn. Evidence of class conflict within the French-Canadian population could be found in editorials of *L'Etoile*, a Lowell French-Canadian newspaper, founded in 1886 by *Le Cercle Canadien*.<sup>39</sup>

Although a self-conscious elite was coming into being in these years, the vast majority of Lowell French Canadians were working class.<sup>40</sup> But were they, in 1880, the same working class? Scattered sources suggest a high rate of geographic mobility for many French-Canadian working-class people in this period.<sup>41</sup> Contemporary testimonies also suggest that French Canadians, when they found them-

<sup>37</sup>*L'Etoile* (Lowell), 30 September 1886.

<sup>38</sup>Santerre, *Un Peuple et son Rêve*, p. 36, and *The Lowell Directory, 1875-6*, p. 470.

<sup>39</sup>Significantly, one editorial fulminated against members of the lazy "*basse classe*" who, in sending their children to the mills instead of to parochial school, were forfeiting their children's future as well as the cause of *survivance*.

<sup>40</sup>Inferred from comments made on the Lowell French-Canadian population by French-Canadian witnesses in a special hearing relating to French Canadians in New England. See Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor, "The Canadian French in New England," in *Thirteenth Annual Report, 1882*, pp. 42-45.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 31. Gerard Blazon, "A Social History of the French Canadian

selves unemployed, rather than returning to Canada in the 1870s, chose to move to other industrial towns in New England.<sup>42</sup> When my 1870 census sample has been linked to the 1880 census it will be possible to discover the amount of population turnover in the Lowell French-Canadian community over a decade.

One further comment on the character of the Lowell French-Canadian population in 1870 may be made at this point which has important implications for the future of the French-Canadian family. An important theme in French-Canadian literature suggests the paucity of single French-Canadian women in industrial towns like Lowell in this era. Single men, accordingly, had to choose between returning to Canada to find a bride or, a more likely alternative, marrying an Irish Catholic. If a French-Canadian man married an Irish woman the children learned English rather than French, and French-Canadian ethnic identity in the next generation was lost.<sup>43</sup>

In Lowell single young French-Canadian women actually outnumbered single French-Canadian men. While roughly one-half of the adults in my sample were married, of the remainder, 56% were single women with a mean age of 22. It appears, then, that in Lowell single French-Canadian men were not pushed by circumstances into marrying Irish Catholic women. For a few years at least the survival of the French-Canadian family was probably not endangered.<sup>44</sup>

My statements about the character and development of the Lowell French-Canadian community in the 1870s are at present quite tentative. However, my findings for 1870 make a definite conclusion possible. Clerical and lay leadership, in conjunction with institutions of the parish, probably helped to smooth somewhat the transition from a peasant to a workingclass way of life. But the lives of most French Canadians in Lowell were not, at this time, easy. French Canadians worked hard but saved little. Many children as well as

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Community of Suncook, New Hampshire (1870-1920)," Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of New Hampshire, 1974, p. 60.

<sup>42</sup>Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor, *First Annual Report, 1870*, p. 222. Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor, *Thirteenth Annual Report, 1882*, p. 31.

<sup>43</sup>See for instance Louis Hémon, *Maria Chapdelaine* (Toronto 1938), Ringuet, *Thirty Acres* (Toronto 1940), and Jacques Ducharme, *The Delusson Family* (New York 1939).

<sup>44</sup>Lowell marriage records will help to confirm or negate my hypothesis of a low inter-ethnic marriage rate for French Canadians in the first years of settlement. See Early, "French-Canadian Beginnings," for a discussion of the use of these records in relation to studying Lowell French Canadians.

most adults spent a large portion of their waking hours away from the home, earning what they could in order to secure the basic necessities of life.

Investigation of the lives of ordinary French-Canadian immigrants has revealed the inaccuracy of the romantic portrayal of the French-Canadian experience, at least for the early years of settlement in one New England town. Further research must be undertaken which, in combining the sources and methodologies of traditional historical scholarship with those associated with the "new social history", will help us uncover a more objective view of the nineteenth-century French-Canadian immigrant experience.