

French-Canadian Migrations, 1840-1870

Learning Activity

Learning Objectives

1. Build an interpretation of the past by making connections between primary sources
2. Think of immigration in terms of causes and effects and consider the role of networks
3. Use a case study to explain how and why immigrants came to the United States
4. Understand the unique experiences of French Canadians and their contribution to cultural diversity in the United States

Historical Context

From 1840 to 1930, nearly one million people from the Canadian province of Quebec settled in the United States. Most of these migrants spoke French, practiced the Roman Catholic faith, and came from rural regions where agriculture was the primary economic activity.

During and after the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865), French Canadians clustered by the thousands in large industrial centers like Woonsocket, Rhode Island; Fall River and Lowell, Massachusetts; Manchester, New Hampshire; and Lewiston, Maine. In those cities and many more, the migrants established distinct institutions that reflected their identity. Such institutions enabled French Canadians to maintain their culture over the course of generations. Franco-American culture, as we know it today, is still visible in some areas in the form of culinary traditions, music, historical commemorations, monuments, and festivals.



As we will see from the documents below, the migration to the United States began well before the Civil War. Israel Shevenell is a case in point. According to family tradition, as a young man, Israel traveled from his home in Compton, in what is today the province of Quebec, to Biddeford, Maine. He made the entire journey—approximately 200 miles—on foot! Although he returned to Compton, he eventually decided to settle permanently in Maine, where he and his wife Marie Louise Bélanger raised their children. Many other families crossed the border repeatedly, thus maintaining a connection to their place of origin.

Documents

1. Correspondence received by New York's *Evening Post* in 1843

"These Canadian French," said [a Vermont farmer], "come swarming upon us in the summer when we are about to begin the hay harvest, and of late years they are more numerous than formerly.—Every farmer here has his French laborer at this season, and some, two or three. They are hardy and capable of long and severe labor, but many of them do not understand a word of our language, and they are not so much to be relied upon as our countrymen; they, therefore, receive lower wages" . . . The family spoke with great sympathy of John, a young French Canadian, "a gentlemanly young fellow," they called him, who had been much in their family, and who had just come from the north, looking quite ill. He had been in their service every summer since he was a boy . . . The French have become so numerous in that region, that, for them and the Irish, a Roman Catholic church has been erected in Middlebury, which, you know, is not a very large village.

2. Article in *La Minerve*, a Montreal newspaper, in 1847

A friend who recently traveled to Albany, New York, informs us that on the steamboat he boarded there was a group of volunteers who were on their way to join the U.S. Army in Mexico, and that among these volunteers there were many [French] Canadians. Having learned this, Dr. O'Callaghan [formerly of Canada], who was a passenger, wished to find out for himself; he was thus introduced to three of these individuals and spoke to them at length in French.

The oldest of these three was a certain Pierre Forgues from St. Jean, Ile d'Orleans [near Quebec City]; he is a widower with two children in St. Jean. The other was a young man of 20, Dominique Lefebvre, whose parents live at the village of Tanneries des Rollands, near Montreal. We do not know the name of the third, whose family has resided for a number of years in Troy [New York]. Forgues was in bed, having been injured while falling from a cart several days earlier.

3. Testimony from the Canada's Select Committee on Emigration, 1849

Answers of clergy in the Diocese of Quebec to the committee's questions:

***To the 1st and 2nd.*—From information obtained from the travellers whom they have met, it appears that an immense number of families proceed every year to the American Union, especially to the States of New York, Vermont, Maine, and Illinois.**

Father Bédard of Kingsey:

***To the 2nd.*—The families generally go towards the Manchester and Lowell manufactories. The young men take different directions.**

Father Délage of L'Islet:

***To the 9th and 10th.*—In my opinion, the principal cause of the emigration of our fellow-countrymen to the United States, has been the difficulty of procuring new lands, added to the uninterrupted succession of bad harvests in the old settlements, and to the hope of a milder climate, an easier cultivation, and more abundant harvests in the country to which they emigrate, and which, from certain reports, perhaps a little exaggerated, they have been led to consider in a very favorable light; and if I had leisure, I would point out especially the want of agricultural instruction, which leaves the Canadian husbandman to follow an old routine which has more than exhausted the soil. I would also state the little encouragement as yet given to agriculture, to which, in my opinion, the Legislature have not paid sufficient attention.**

4. Reports of Migration to California, 1849

“Before leaving Canada, I learned that a large number of young people were preparing to go to California and had to begin their journey without delay to reach the line of Pacific-bound steamships that connects New York and San Francisco.” (A. J. Desrivieres)

“The number of emigrants to California is increasing and gold fever appears to be just beginning in Canada. Everyday our office is besieged by people seeking information about the marvel of the American Republic.” (Editors of *L'Avenir*, published in Montreal)

5. Ad in the *Montreal Herald*, 1853



Vermont Central Railroad.



WINTER ARRANGEMENT—1853.

Cheapest, Quickest and Best Route to Rouse's Point, Burlington, Bellows Falls, Keene, Fitchburgh, BOSTON, Worcester, Providence, Newport, Brattleboro, Vernon, Hatfield, Northampton, Springfield, Hartford, New Haven and NEW YORK.

The only Direct Route to Concord, Manchester, Nashua, Lowell, Lawrence, Boston, Worcester, Portsmouth, Salem, Portland, and Intermediate Places.

No change of Cars between South Montreal and Burlington.

FIRST TRAIN.—Leave South Montreal at 11:30, arrive at Rouse's Point at 1 (Dine), Burlington 4:15, Montpelier 5:50, Northfield 6:25 (Lodge), leave Northfield at 5:00, arrive at White River Junction 7:00, Concord 10:00, Lowell 12:00, Boston 22:45, Worcester 1:45, Bellows Falls 8:40, Springfield 11:00, New York 4:20.

SECOND TRAIN.—Leave South Montreal at 4:00, arrive at Rouse's Point at 6:55, (Lodge), leave Rouse's Point at 6:00, arrive at Burlington 7:54, Northfield 9:34, White River Junction 12:00, (Dine), Concord 4:30, Lowell 5:45, Boston 6:00, Worcester 7:00, Bellows Falls 1:15, Springfield 6:00, New York 11:50.

6. Excerpt from a report of Canada's Department of Agriculture, 1864

“You know that before the Civil War, every spring, going back to the years 1849 and 1848, when I was an agent of the Vermont Central Railroad between Montreal and Boston, I registered no less than 1,500 to 2,000 people going to Worcester [Mass.], Groton [Mass.], Manchester, Lowell, and all points of the New England states, to find work as bricklayers, etc., and there were undoubtedly as many going towards Troy, New York, or in that direction . . .

“Since the beginning of the war, this type of occupation has almost entirely ceased and a new era has begun for this class of workers. The need for soldiers in the United States was so great, and the enlistment bonuses so high, that men who had until then been employed to cut wood, etc., either accepted these bonuses or were drafted into the army. French Canadians became the preferred group to take the place of those native-born Americans.”



7. Pepperell Mills, Biddeford, ca. 1894

Construction of these immense brick buildings, home of the Pepperell cotton mills, began in 1848 and continued into the 1850s. The textile industry powered the local economy for generations.

8. Shevenell family in Biddeford as listed in the U.S. Census of 1870

244254	Shevenell Israel	44	m	w	truckman	3000	Canada
	— Mary	44	F	w	keeping house		Canada
	— Julia	20	F	w	works in cotton mill	v	Canada
	— Caroline	17	F	w	works in cotton mill	v	Canada
	— Levi's	14	m	w	working printing office	v	Maine
	— Israel	11	m	w	attends school		Maine
	— George	9	m	w	attends school		Maine
	— Mary	8	F	w	attends school		Maine
	— John	6	m	w	attends school		Maine
	— William	4	m	w	at home		Maine

Note: The census gives, in order, their household and family number followed by the person's name, age, gender, race, and occupation, the value of their real estate, and their place of birth.

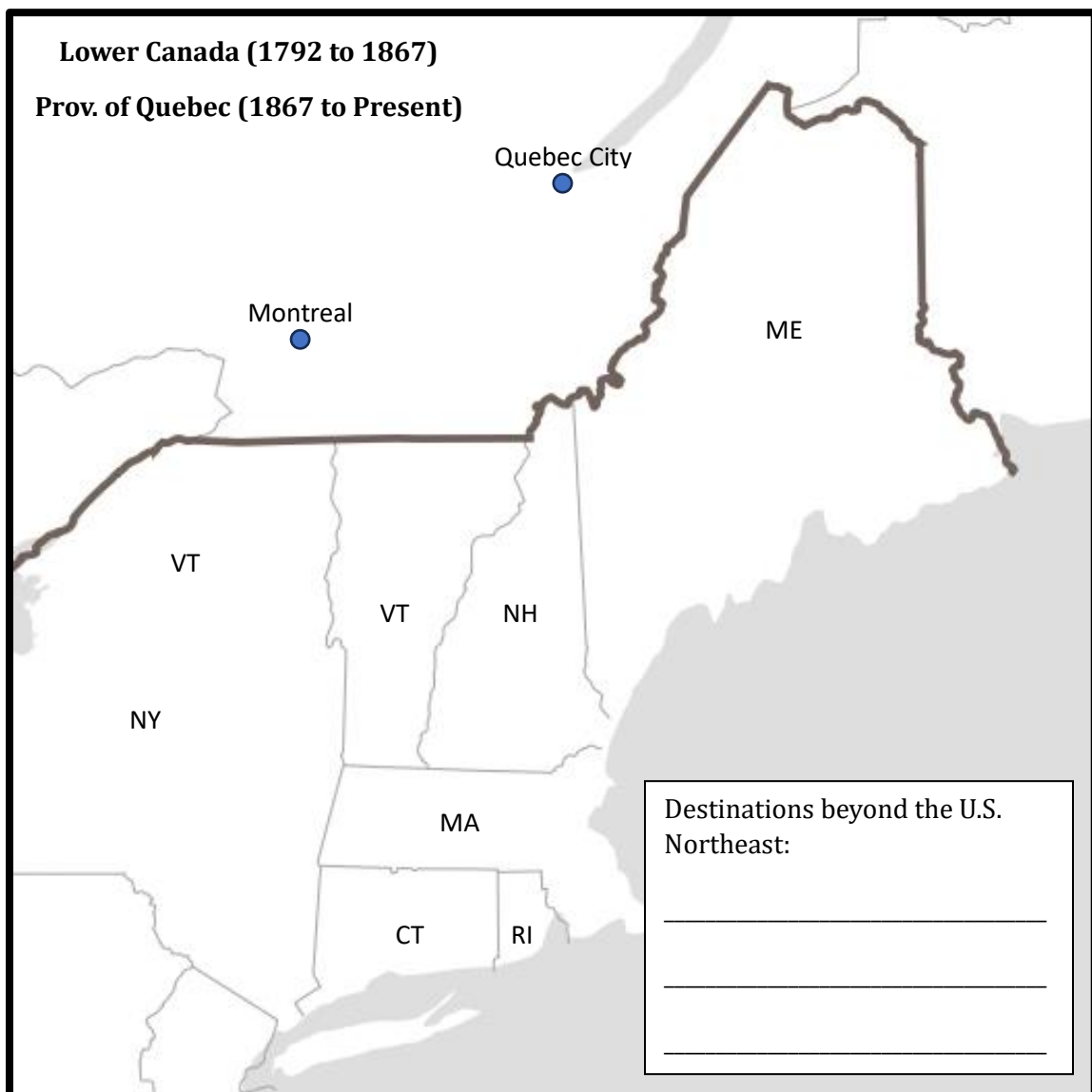
Questions

1. What might have motivated people to leave Quebec and settle in the United States in the 1840s and 1850? What type of work could they expect to find?
2. What means of transportation were available to them? What challenges could migrants expect to face while moving to the United States and then once settled in a new location?
3. In 1849, one witness of the Select Committee on Emigration explained that families went to factories in Manchester and Lowell, while men who travelled alone went elsewhere. Why did family groups migrate to factory towns? (Document 8 may yield clues.)

4. What changed in immigrant experiences from the early 1840s to 1870? Consider the way in which people traveled and the opportunities available to them.

5. What does the census tell you about the family life of the Shevenell household in 1870? (Get assistance from your teacher to decipher the cursive writing.)

6. Using an atlas or Google Maps, place all of the locations mentioned in the documents on the map below. For each location, place a dot and label it. Also trace Israel Shevenell's long journey on foot, which, by the way, took him through Vermont and New Hampshire. (You do not have to enter the stops listed in Document 5.)



Group Discussion

1. How do different types of sources (maps, newspaper articles, reports, census records, etc.) help us understand the past?
2. Many people in the northeastern United States still bear a French last name, though some were anglicized (e.g. Roy to King, Pelletier to Pelkey). Is there an immigration story behind your surname? Where did your ancestors come from?
3. How might the immigrant experience of French Canadians have differed from the experiences of Irish, German, and Italian immigrants who crossed the ocean and arrived in the ports of Boston and New York?

Sources

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Photograph

Pepperell Mills, Biddeford, ca. 1894, created by W. H. Parish Publishing Company, Maine Memory Network, Item 36592, <https://www.mainememory.net/record/36592>.

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