
Ideas and Suggestions for Further Research on Québec and *la Franco-américanité*

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I greatly appreciate the geographic license which has permitted my home state of New York, at least for purposes of this conference, to be part of New England. This is a significant gesture. I do, however, regret that the otherwise excellent map included in the program omitted Plattsburgh, « une banlieue de Montréal » and destination for more than a century of Quebecers migrating south and today tens of thousands shopping « southward ». As a geographic purist of sorts, I would like to gently chastise my colleagues in this room for using in the context of the migrations of peoples, vague words and phrases such as « up to Québec » and « down to New England », « en bas et en haut », « monter dans les Laurentides » et « descendre à Québec » for various locations and movements when north, south, east and west are much more meaningful and accurate.

I should now like to proceed with my presentation by asking some pointed questions. For example, we should ask at the outset: How are we defining assimilation in the context of *la Franco-américanité*? This topic has been referred to from time to time, but it has not always been clear to me in these discussions whether assimilation has meant only language loss or whether the term has or should be used in a broader cultural context. Can one still be considered Franco-American after the French language has been lost and particularly after all relationships have been severed with the heartland? Can a

bilingual American *sans racines*, who nevertheless has developed a thorough knowledge, understanding and *fierté* for Québec be considered Franco-American? Are Americans with roots tied directly to France as Franco-American as those with Acadian or Québec roots? *Et aussi, nous avons souvent pendant ce colloque employé le mot « nous » en discutant du Québec et de la Franco-américanité. Je vous pose la question suivante: Qui est « nous », dans le contexte de ce colloque? Is ethnicity an essential prerequisite? Quelles sont les « qualifications »?* I don't believe the answers to these questions are necessarily obvious.

Many studies of Franco-Americans and of *Franco-américanité* have been broadly based both geographically and thematically. Perhaps more attention could and should have been focused on the day to day life of Franco-Americans once in the United States. Have we exhausted research possibilities in the areas of communications with relatives, familial interchanges across the border, the degree to which Franco-American children were educated in Québec, the impact of Québec-based religious orders on life in Franco-American communities?

Do we have sufficient information on how the immigrants reacted and adapted to the new cultural and political environment during the critical early years? What were important influences during those years? Did daily routines, for example, remain unchanged from those *chez-eux* or were there immediate responses and alterations? How often were contacts made with relatives back home? In what contexts? What arguments were used to persuade friends and family members to join them? How were initial contacts established with non-Franco-Americans in their new communities? Did those of working age seek jobs immediately? Was money sent home? What proportion of the immigrants subsequently returned to the homeland and if so, how soon after they arrived in the U.S. did this occur?

More specifically, did the immigrants' diet change noticeably after they settled in the United States? Were there subtle changes in the French language they spoke? If so, might it be possible to establish a typology of these changes based upon the cultural and physical environments in which the migrants settled? Obviously, greater adjustments and accommodations would be expected in areas where the

local population was, for example heavily Protestant rather than Roman Catholic. These are complex and difficult research tasks to be sure, but ones worth considering.

I also suggest that the adjustments required in an urban industrial environment would be significantly different from those necessitated in a rural agriculture one, especially if, as was often the case, the French Canadians' traditions and roots were rural. Less profound perhaps, but still possibly a factor to consider, were climatic variations between the homeland and the destination, e.g. the Beauce and southern New England.

Remarks made at this conference along with current public awareness and research emphases have tended to concentrate on the diaspora far removed spatially from the home base. But, we know that sizeable swaths of territory stretching along the Québec-U.S. border from New York in the West to Maine in the East, were at the dawn of the mass migration in the mid 19th century, thinly settled, except for the towns of Plattsburgh and Burlington. These areas became important destinations and not merely stopovers, for thousands of francophone immigrants from Canada. In fact, while I don't have the data to prove it, I believe that the proportion of the present-day population tracing its ancestry to French Canada is greater in these border counties than it is in the more publicized Franco-American communities located in southern Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Connecticut. A glance at the telephone directory clearly illustrates this point. Despite the fact that a significant number of people anglicized their names during the past 100 years; for example, all of the « Woods » in our area were originally « Dubois ». But, that is another story. Perhaps these people have been considered too close to or in too frequent contact with the homeland, or were thought not to have made a permanent commitment to settle in the U.S. because of their proximity to friends and family back home, to have warranted much attention. It is worth noting as well that a number of the immigrants who settled in the Tupper Lake area of upstate New York were from *Acadie*, not Québec. Regardless, I would suggest that scholars consider studying the border areas more intensively and as soon as possible, before many of the original settlers, now in their 80s and 90s, *nous quittent*.

I would like to propose that researchers consider utilizing the geographic distance decay model to study the adaptation of Franco-Americans to their new environment and country. Can we assume that there was or is a predictable correlation between distance from the heartland, contact maintenance and the pace of assimilation? For a variety of reasons familiar to many in this room, this has not, in my judgment, necessarily been the case. This approach can be a useful one to prove or disprove this hypothesis in the context of the Franco-American community.

I would now like to use as an illustration, or case study if you will, of an area of the United States with which I am most familiar; namely, the border areas of New York from Lake Champlain in the East to Alexandria Bay in the West. Immigrants there, including French Canadians, were presented with two « environmental » choices upon arrival during the 19th and early 20th centuries. First, a rural agriculture in which they initially became workers and laborers and, subsequently, owners, settlers or partners. The rural community in which they settled was primarily English-speaking and Protestant and the population quite widely dispersed. For all of these reasons, initial interaction between immigrant and established settler was minimized.

The second « environmental » option available to the immigrant was the villages and towns, especially Plattsburgh. Here, many French-Canadian immigrants became factory workers, handymen, general laborers or domestics. This community was English-speaking and already densely populated by this time, having a sizeable Irish Roman Catholic population. Here considerably greater contact and sometimes conflict between the immigrants and their indigenous neighbors prevailed. This was, for the French-Canadian immigrant, a cultural and economic environment quite different from that of their compatriots establishing themselves nearby in the rural areas.

What impact did these immigrants, soon to be called Franco-Americans, have upon the environments into which they moved? What impact did these environments have upon them? How did they adapt? Are there relic features of their presence still remaining in the cultural landscape? Again, I use Plattsburgh, New York as an example to stir interest. It was not long before the French-Canadian population had

reached significant proportions. As a consequence, new Roman Catholic institutions were created and religious orders soon appeared in the community. These centered initially around *l'église Saint-Pierre* (now St. Peter's, where mass was still said in French until the late 1940s). Interestingly, conflict and competition arose between these immigrants and the Irish Roman Catholics already ensconced in the community. The latter, therefore, built their Roman Catholic church and other related institutions only two blocks away from Saint-Pierre. These two Roman Catholic religious communities maintain separate parochial schools to this day. This is another example when language, competitive economies and ethnic incompatibilities prevailed over religion.

Soon, a *carré canadien* comprised of little brick houses emerged near Saint-Pierre on streets such as Montcalm, Lafayette and Champlain. Most of these houses and streets still remain. At the turn of the century, a second French church run by an order of teaching nuns, Notre-Dame-des-Victoires (now Our Lady of Victory), was constructed on the expanding south side of town. Parish priests were francophone Québécois well into the 20th century. This meant that St. John's the Irish Catholic church, was sandwiched between two French-Canadian parishes in a relatively small space in the center of the city, a situation not unlike those described elsewhere in New England.

Important evidence, therefore, of the more than century-old Franco-American presence here is extensive. Even the local cemeteries provide such information as names, size of family, towns of origin, etc. There are numerous other examples. In sum, the impact of the French-Canadian migration to Plattsburgh and vicinity was and remains extremely significant.

It seems to me that a considerable amount of research to date has exhibited an urban bias, especially studies that have focused on the Northeast. This is perhaps understandable since French Canadians settled in greater numbers in urban areas. Better and more accessible records have also been available in these communities. Cities such as Lewiston, Maine and Manchester, New Hampshire, where Franco-Americans have been and still are heavily concentrated, are well known. Yet, numbers of Franco-Americans and French Canadians, as

suggested earlier, have been and are proportionately as great in some rural areas of the country as well. What I am suggesting is that interest in examining *la Franco-américanité* in areas where fishing, forestry and agriculture were and are significant occupations is relatively insignificant. A corollary, of course, is that such topics as education, labor, unionism and class structure have received attention because they are much more pertinent in an urban rather than a rural context. Topics that I will mention later, because they are relevant primarily in rural areas, have been neglected.

Further, we must be careful not to concentrate excessively on only some facts of the French-Canadian migration; in particular, certain periods, destinations and motivations. These foci, have in an historic sense, been weighted to the first 50-75 years: the motivations have been attributed overwhelmingly to overpopulation and/or the lure of the United States; the peoples involved were all Roman Catholic Quebecers; and the common destinations were mill towns in the Northeast. To concentrate too heavily on these topics and explanations is to ignore or camouflage other interesting aspects of the migration. For example, as we all well know, French Canadians have been migrating to the United States since the 17th century. In the vicinity of Plattsburgh, this had begun soon after the 19th century. In fact, documents now indicate that there were identifiable numbers of French Canadians in our area by the 1820s though some undoubtedly were itinerant workers and traders living only seasonally in the area. I recall last year finding quite by chance in a mission site in northern California several graves dating to the 1840s which had « Québec » connections. One, for example, was a Louis Dufour, whose epitaph read « A Frenchman from Lower Canada ». My point here is that significant numbers of French Canadians could be found throughout most of the North American continent *before 1850*.

Also to be remembered is the fact that Acadians also migrated to the United States during the 1800s (long after the *Grand Dérangement*). An Acadian community, for example, was located along the Québec-New York border, west of Plattsburgh; Québec, therefore, was not the sole source of French-Canadian immigrants. Moreover, we should remember that most Acadian migrants had heavier crosses to

bear than their Québécois cousins – greater geographic displacement from their heartland in the Maritimes, and secondly, a struggle to maintain, within the Franco-American community, a separate identity amidst the much more numerous and relatively influential immigrants from Québec.

A third group of immigrants, far less numerous and rarely mentioned, were the Huguenots and other francophones not of the Roman Catholic faith. In French Québec, they were a small religious minority within a linguistic majority, unwelcome at best and persecuted at worst. Some left Canada, therefore, as much for religious as economic reasons, choosing the lesser of evils; namely, to be a linguistic minority within a religious majority. They have not even been mentioned during this conference.

I would suggest to you that the personality, identity and impact of the Franco-American be examined more intensely. Important studies of a general nature have been published. Gérard Brault's work is a case in point. I believe, however, that more research at the micro or local level – case studies, if you will – are needed, such as the Desbiens report on Barre, and those discussed and suggested by C. Stewart Doty.

Within the cultural realm, one cannot ignore or deny the importance of Kerouac and a few others. Studies have already demonstrated this. But, I believe more attention could also be focused beyond the realm of literature into such areas as music (instruments, dance, composition, song modification resulting from local influence, and so on). What music remained popular? What contacts were maintained with musicians and music in the heartland? How well known are Franco-American songs other than *Un Canadien errant*?

Much more work can be undertaken in the area of graphics, especially maps. Robert LeBlanc has already made contributions in this area. Data, however, are available to depict graphically a variety of distributions including migrations and routes. How invaluable an historical and contemporary atlas of Franco-America would be!

In one sense, I would like to be optimistic about the survival of Franco-America. Through the efforts of many in this room, we have

witnessed recently an increased enthusiasm, involvement and vitality even among those people several generations removed from the heartland. This is particularly evident if we define this identity beyond language. In our area, once again for example, *la Franco-américanité*, relatively dormant until recently, is revitalizing. There has been a renewed pride, interest and positive attitude among the descendants.

Some of the elderly Franco-Americans have in a sense « come out of the closet ». I recall an incident that had a lasting impression on me soon after I arrived in Plattsburgh more than twenty years ago. While conversing with an elderly teller at a local bank, I detected what was a very slight French accent. Trying to be polite and wanting to please, I began speaking French. Her reaction startled me; she seemed horrified. She looked around suspiciously and in a low voice asked me not to tell anyone that she was in fact originally French Canadian. Sadly, she considered her heritage to be an embarrassment and degrading. She was not alone at that time in trying to camouflage, or even deny, her origins – an attitude fostered to some extent by a population locally that for a variety of reasons frowned or looked down upon immigrants in general and French Canadians in particular.

The negative attitude towards Franco-Americans and French Canadians has since decreased markedly. Indeed, enormous progress has been made. Local historical societies, for example, now tout the French-Canadian roots of their members and of the local population as a whole through presentations, publications and exhibits. Special conferences on related subjects have been held. A local genealogical group has been established with Franco-Americans playing dominant roles. Guest speakers have been invited to make presentations on a variety of subjects related to the local scene. These are in addition to the many speakers brought to the campus of SUNY-Plattsburgh through the Canadian Studies program.

An ability to speak French is now considered to be an asset, no longer to be scorned. Bilingual signs have appeared throughout the city of Plattsburgh, and French has become an increasingly popular subject in our schools. A number of meetings have brought together Quebecers and local people, and in other ways contacts across the border have been maintained and expanded. Last but not least, our

city and area businesses are striving to make Quebecers welcome in our area. French language training sessions are being held for service industry personnel. Marc Violette, a bilingual Franco-American from Maine, was hired several years ago by the local newspaper *Press Republican* primarily to cover the Québec beat; a very significant move.

We at the Center regularly receive calls from local people requesting information about Québec, desiring help in tracing ancestors and long lost relatives in Québec, exploring their cultural heritage or seeking suggestions for places to visit or dine in Québec. The number of local people attending our annual «Festival Québec» and other activities we organize on our campus that have a French-Canadian flavor and focus is on the increase. Peter Van Lent, a colleague at St. Lawrence University, has recently documented and recorded a wealth of stories and experiences from enthusiastic and willing, rather than reluctant, Franco-Americans in our area. The shame of having a Franco heritage has gone – the inferiority complex has now all but disappeared.

I currently serve on the Chamber of Commerce's Tourist Board. Our annual budget for tourism promotion in Québec has gone from \$0 to \$55,000 during the past three years. Special video spots have been prepared for French television in Montréal and advertisements have been placed in French newspapers, all to attract Quebecers to our area to shop, to spend time in our community, and to interact with «Plattsbourgeois». Bilingual signs now appear in many local areas, including those along major highways and routes into the city and signs outside shops in our malls. These are refreshing and encouraging indications of a new and positive attitude.

Returning once again to the Franco-American communities in the United States, I would like to recommend that additional attention be given institutions and groups such as the missionaries, the male and female religious orders, pilgrimage societies, the Knights of Columbus, and others so important to Franco-Americans.

As well, there are still a variety of topics related to the adaptation or assimilation of Franco-Americans that could be studied. I personally have been interested in the anglicization or change of French names. This seldom occurred when the immigrant crossed the border, contrary

to the belief in some circles. It was suggested years ago that because the immigrants were illiterate and the immigration officers unable to understand, French names were translated on the spot or recorded phonetically. Research undertaken by two of my students a number of years ago dispelled this myth, at least locally. They discovered that name changes were often made one or two generations removed from the migration. Some French names were translated (Dubois to Woods, as mentioned earlier), and there are many in this category; others involved minor modifications (Tremblay to Tromblee, Dubé to Dubai). Still other changes were much more interesting and creative. A neighbor by the name of Bezio, whom I had thought for years was Italian, confided recently that his original family name was Bisailon, anglicized by his grandfather in this «Italian» way. The name of a local furniture store, Barcomb's was originally Berthiaume. Finally, some names were changed to camouflage a Franco-American heritage (within a somewhat prejudiced society); others changed for more practical reasons. In any event, this is one topic, in my estimation, worthy of additional investigation.

I would like now to reinforce a suggestion that I had begun to develop earlier; namely, we could focus more attention upon the impact that the French-Canadian migration had in rural areas. So many questions need to be answered in this regard. What agriculture methods did they use? What crops did they grow? What type of livestock did they keep? Were these any different from their English-speaking neighbors? What impact did they have on the cultural landscape? What new features did they introduce (different house and barn architectural forms; the location and configuration of cemeteries; manses)? And, what of the relic and contemporary cultural landscape manifestations found throughout New York and New England? These include shapes of fields, fencing, town names (some spelled correctly, others, such as Point au Roche, incorrectly), family names and, of course, expressions and words, such as chowder (*chaudière*).

Additional study could be directed toward the immigrants themselves. Do we know much about the villages and farms from which they came and the routes they traveled and the use made of transportation to their ultimate destinations? Do we have accurate information about the migrants' economic status; size and type of

the migratory unit (entire families, only fathers, Lorenzo Surprenant types); age and sex; educational level (could they read and write?); social status before departure? Answers to these and many other questions would give us a clearer snapshot of the typical Franco-American ancestor.

What did these immigrants bring with them? Diseases? Domestic and farm animals? Musical instruments? Documents? Religious icons? Furniture? I don't know that we fully understand this part of the story, but the answers to these questions may still be available. Furthermore, has anyone yet determined or at least speculated as to what happened to the homes, apartments, farms and the fields that were vacated? If a house and a farm were owned or rented, all or in part by the migrant, were his shares sold or utilized by other family members or people in the community? Do we assume (because families often did not leave together) that the migration had little impact on the area of origin?

We should also delve more thoroughly into primary sources that may be available in order to paint a more complete picture of early Franco-American life. These include church and diocesan annual reports, lists of contributors and donors, church roles, business account books, school records, diaries and letters. What could they tell us?

Newspapers, both French and English, are very important since they reported people's reactions to change that was occurring in their midst. Sometimes, letters to the editor are especially useful because they often reflected the mood of the community. There is, alas, a problem. A colleague of mine, Andrea Beaderstadt, has for many years been interested in New England newspapers published during the 19th century. She has discovered that, most unfortunately, libraries in the area have tended to keep only English newspapers in their archives. The oldest French language newspapers, therefore, are very scarce.

Another primary resource I have found to be especially interesting is old postcards. About five years ago, I started to collect them. Antique buffs and garage sale groupies are well aware that these are bought and sold all the time. Less well known is the fact that thousands were written back and forth between relatives and friends in Québec

and New England, especially during visits. I have discovered that they can be incredibly revealing. They provide insights and personal impressions from the turn of the century onward on topics ranging from climate to diet to religious practices. I have been particularly interested in such things as vocabulary, grammar and spelling, and in the case of Franco-Americans, whether the vernacular was still being used.

I draw your attention to yet another aspect of Franco-American and Québec relations – the itinerant migrant from Québec. These are people who came, and still come, temporarily to the United States. The nature of some visits back and forth so common in the past have already been mentioned. But, there are many more. These include in an historical and contemporary context: the *voyageurs*, the *coureurs de bois*, trappers, loggers, peddlers, shoppers, suitors, business people, hockey players, coaches, barrel jumpers, skaters in ice shows, news and sports reporters, diplomats and, especially since 1965, pilgrims, students and tourists. Are not Old Orchard and Plattsburgh beaches merely seasonal extensions of the heartland?

It has been mentioned that secondary schools served an important role in maintaining contact and communication between relatives and the homeland. Religious orders in Québec operated schools throughout New England for Franco-Americans and others. Some students were encouraged to return to Québec to complete their high school studies. Robert LeBlanc's recent work outlines the extent to which this phenomenon occurred earlier in this century. On the other hand, wealthier Quebecers have for decades sent their sons and daughters to our schools, especially those operated by Québec-based religious orders, to learn English. Mount Assumption Institute in Plattsburgh operated by *les frères des Écoles chrétiennes* provides a classic example.

One last comment regarding the role that governments, academic programs, centers and institutes are now playing in the revival and flourishing of Québec-U.S. relations in general and *la Franco-américanité* in particular. For university level faculty and programs, the Canadian and Québec governments offer research grants, conference grants, course development grants, travel grants and other funds to host a variety of cultural events. In the nonacademic sphere, exhibits,

press conferences, publications and the like are common. Formal programs such as those at SUNY-Plattsburgh, the University of Maine and Assumption College are playing an important role in this process.

With regard to some of the suggestions I have made, there is a sense of urgency. C. Stewart Doty pointed out that invaluable resources within our midst most likely will not be with us much longer. They are the generation of Franco-Americans now over the age of 75 who still remember much of what we have discussed at this colloquium. They must be interviewed as soon as possible to preserve an invaluable wealth of knowledge and experience. *Mais il faut se dépêcher.* We must also reach out more to the community at large in the United States to share with them the importance and richness of *la Franco-américanité* woven into the historical and cultural fabric of that country.