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# **As I See It: Worcester deserves Notre Dame: An urgent plea against demolition**

By Jeff Cronin  
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If Worcester loses Notre-Dame des Canadiens, future residents - in 10 years, in 100 years - will look back in disbelief that the city failed to save a building of outstanding grace and beauty.

Writing in 2003 in "The City in Mind: Notes on the Urban Condition," author and social critic James Howard Kunstler identified in his book two American cities in which urban renewal from the 1960s had been an "atrocity": New Haven and Worcester. Entire streetscapes - over 400 buildings on 20 acres - vanished in downtown Worcester. The destruction halted at the edge of Worcester's Common.

It spared the monumental "mother church" of the French-Canadians in Worcester, L'Église Notre-Dame de l'Assomption, as it was dedicated, according to the Worcester Telegram September 16, 1929, the day after the dedication, and commonly known as Notre Dame des Canadiens (Our Lady of the Canadians). In the 1970s, the church narrowly escaped demolition during a second wave of urban renewal designed to reverse a failure of the first.

Worcester, along with Woonsocket, Rhode Island, was once known as the "Franco-American" capital of New England. Its community of immigrants from rural Quebec, about 35,000 in the 1920s, arrived in large numbers in the 1870s to work as artisans in the building trades, as day laborers, and in the boot-and-shoe factories. Living mostly near the downtown, they adhered zealously to the ethos of "la survivance" - the survival of the language, customs and Catholic faith of Quebec. On the altar cross of their "mother church" was an inscription familiar to French-Canadians throughout New England, "avant tout, nous soyons Canadiens ... la religion et la patrie n'oublieront jamais" (above all, we are Canadian ... religion and country will never forget).

The vacant and imperiled church of Notre Dame on Salem Square was consecrated in September 1929, just days before the collapse of the financial markets. Its completion fulfilled long-held aspirations of Worcester's French Canadians to have a church comparable to the magnificent French national churches of New Bedford, Lowell, Fall River, Southbridge, and other mill towns of New England. The third house of worship for this Worcester congregation, it was named for Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris and Notre Dame Basilica in Montreal.

Designed by Donat R. Baribault, a Springfield architect trained in Quebec, the basilica-like edifice has been an imposing presence on the east side of the Common. Its Romanesque design borrowed heavily from two of the major Roman-Catholic ecclesiastical buildings of the 1920s:

the Basilica of Ste. Anne de Beaupré outside Quebec City and the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. Framed in steel, the building has granite walls trimmed in limestone and cast stone, two slender towers, a roof of red clay tiles, and a multi-stage belfry, 109-feet in height. Acquired in 1882 for Notre Dame's predecessor church, the bell, which was cast by the Clinton H. Meneely Bell Company in Troy, N.Y., had "superb sound" and the words cast in relief, "J.A. Garfield, président des États Unis." It rang the traditional Angelus three times a day: 6:00 am, noon, and 6:00 pm. It could be heard nearly everywhere in the city.

With seating for 1,100, the church interior, 64 feet in height from floor to ceiling, was a "supreme example of decorative art" in "gold and gilt," as it was described in the French-language newspaper L'Opinion Publique just prior to the dedication. It had faux-marble walls with gilded accents, statues and bas-reliefs, richly colored stained-glass windows from Munich, an altar salvaged from an earlier church building, and beneath the rose window a spacious gallery for the organ and 75-member choir. Gonippo Raggi, an acclaimed Italian-born artist, who decorated over 100 churches on three continents, was responsible for two sizable paintings, stenciling, and murals. The "color and brilliance" of the church interior, and the overall grandeur of its liturgy, were valued traditions among French-Canadians, who perceived Irish-Catholic churches, influenced by New England Congregationalists, to be plain and unedifying.

Factory closings during the Great Depression, which led to the return many immigrants to Quebec, along with a rapid dissolution of French language and customs through marriage outside the Franco-American community, and post-war relocation to suburban areas, all dwindled the congregation at Notre Dame. A 1972 renovation obscured or removed most of the ornament and radically simplified the interior. The church, which once had seven masses on Sundays, held just one when it closed in 2007. Since then it has been unoccupied.

The day after dedication of Notre Dame, the Telegram in an editorial praised it as "...a new and beautiful addition" to the city, "lofty [and] serene." It commended "the pastor and its people" for their "effort and sacrifice. The result is worthy. The community is richer." Now, in 2018, not even 90 years later, the beautiful addition to the city, the great monument to the French-Canadian presence in Worcester - the building that enriched the community and continues to enrich it - is about to be demolished for no justifiable reason.

Despite the perception that the building can't be saved, just last month the owners, after professing an interest in selling the building, rebuffed offers from a team of five investors from Massachusetts and Connecticut with experience in rehabilitating historic buildings.

In 1963, The New York Times memorably lamented the imminent destruction of Pennsylvania Station with the message, "A city gets what it wants, is willing to pay for, and ultimately deserves." Once again, Worcester is about to confront what it wants and what it deserves - and whether its downtown, plagued for over 50 years with empty lots, will have another. Downtown Worcester will never be the same without Notre Dame.

*Jeffrey D. Cronin, of Jamaica Plain, has worked for 30 years professionally as a preservation planner for the cities of Boston and then Pasadena, California. His roots in Worcester stem from his father, who was born here of Irish-born parents who came to the city in 1890s.*