

maisonneuve, A Quarterly of Art, Opinion & Ideas  
Friday, August 3, 2018

## For Whom the Bells Toll

By [Étienne Lajoie](#) Aug. 3, 2018



*Photo credit: Ted D. Conna.*

**In Worcester, Massachusetts**, workers in hard hats are assembled in an elegant Roman-Byzantine style church. As tall as it is narrow, the house of worship is topped with a distinctive, small dome. Across the street, the town's grassy main square gives office workers a place to meet for lunch and kids a place to play. But the church's signature spires are now a thing of the past; the workers, removing the windows and asbestos by hand, have started the long process of tearing down Notre Dame des Canadiens, the historic church for the town's French-Canadian population.

The church has already fallen into partial ruin: debris is scattered across the floor, interior paint is scratched, and the curtains have been removed from some of its confessionals. Built in 1929, it

was sold eight years ago to CitySquare, a developer who hoped to save the building by repurposing it. With no buyers in sight, they've begun the steady work of demolition.

Worcester has been developing rapidly: luxury condos were built on the church's block, property values have never been higher, in January the first Whole Foods Market opened, and Boston Magazine described its downtown as "the newest hot neighborhood within easy range of Boston." The demolition is part of the city's rejuvenation.

But to some locals, the church's razing means much more than a clean slate for urban renewal: instead, it forces a final recognition of the fact that in a span of a few decades, the imprint of a once distinct French-Canadian population has almost vanished in New England.

**For a long time**, Quebeckers and Americans had one thing in common: they agreed they would always be separate and different. "No one assimilates less than a Frenchman," read a nineteenth-century editorial in *Le Messager*, a French-Canadian newspaper in Lewiston, Maine. In a scathing editorial published in 1892, *The New York Times* agreed that the typical French-Canadian priest in New England perpetuated French ideas and aspirations through the French language "and place[d] all the obstacles possible in the way of the assimilation of these people to our American life and thought." The Times called the community a "mass of protected and secluded humanity." They were "almost as much out of reach as if they were living in a remote part of the Province of Quebec."

The newly arrived Quebeckers were well aware that the American mainstream expected them, like all newcomers, to blend in. That's generally been true of the US; most recently, President Trump said he would consider immigrants based on the "likelihood of successful assimilation and contribution." Even in 1892, though, as waves of immigrants arrived from across Europe and Asia, the French-Canadian motto of *Notre religion, notre langue, et nos moeurs* was seen to be "directly opposite to that which has made New England what it is," at least according to *The New York Times*.

Nineteenth-century Americans disliked French Canadians for reasons that also feel eerily familiar. They took jobs—"the objections are that he is a competitor in the labor field," Harper's wrote in 1893—and were willing "to work for lower wages." The French Canadians were grateful for their new home, but their new home didn't return the feeling: "the French-Canadian [is] 'queer' and 'curious' because he speaks French and is docile."

Despite criticism, despite their supposed docility, French Canadians thrived in New England. In Worcester, they built their church right on the city's Common, across from its city hall. Pointedly, they didn't build it in a working-class neighborhood like other Catholic communities; building centrally assured Notre Dame des Canadiens lasting visibility and gave the impression that the French-Canadian community was ever-present.

After a fire destroyed their first attempt in 1908—everything was lost in the flames except for the statue of the Virgin Mary and a painting of the Crucifixion—the French-Canadians rebuilt. Notre Dame des Canadiens, their second building, was even grander than the first. Inside, rays of light still slice through the coloured glass. A large steeple with a red cap—the same pale burgundy

that colours the roof—is one of three towers on the twin-spired building. When the church was active, its bell could be heard throughout the city.

The church's parishioners secured their culture in other ways: its altar boys, for example, attended École Sainte-Famille, the parish's elementary school. Down the street from the church, French Canadians bought medicine at Dr. Napoléon Jacques' pharmacy; in 1886, at 40 Front St., Louis Rocheleau, Charles Lalime, Horace Phaneuf and L. Philippe Petit opened a men's clothing store: Globe Clothing House. Specks of Québécois influence mushroomed across New England: Woonsocket, Rhode Island, a thirty-minute drive from Worcester, was home to ten thousand Quebeckers in 1920, comprising about 54 percent of the population. The neighbourhood around Notre Dame des Canadiens was home to approximately six thousand parishioners in 1929, with one historian writing that as late as 1980, Worcester County "had the largest number of single French ancestry persons of any New England county."

Now, French is kept alive by one of Worcester's new immigrant community—Haitians—in a church named after St. Joseph, also originally founded by French Canadians. But few of the descendants of the original French Canadian community can claim to speak any French.

**Worcester's unique industrial history** helps explain why the city was first sought after by Quebecois immigrants—and why their eventually culture faded. The city was male-dominated, explains author Susan L. Porter, an expert on Massachusetts history. In her 1996 book, *Women of the Commonwealth: Work, Family, and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts*, she writes that tradesmen such as blacksmiths, carpenters, stone workers and mill operators flocked to Worcester because it offered better pay than elsewhere. In mono-industrial towns like Lowell, a fifty-five minute drive northeast, many women were employed in textile mills, but cities like Worcester "discouraged a large female workforce," Porter writes. That meant that men without French Canadian women eventually began to marry local women.

In Worcester, for a while, it wasn't clear that intermarriage had helped sound a cultural death knell. Take the family of Charles Belisle, a former altar boy at Notre Dame des Canadiens. The first man in his family to leave Quebec was a shoemaker, and life at the time in New England was great. "At the time, French was the international language," said Belisle, now seventy-nine. "All of these kids were French, they also spoke English, and they had great jobs, so things were absolutely going swimmingly." His great-great-grandfather Alexandre and Alexandre's five brothers founded a very popular daily newspaper called *L'opinion publique* in 1893. Eugène Belisle, one of the brothers, was even named the American consul to Limoges, France, by President Theodore Roosevelt in April 1906.

Eventually, though, as its population grew, ties began to break apart in Worcester's tight-knit French-Canadian community. The culture's slow disappearance was also intentional, though—part of American policy. The flow of immigrants died down following quota systems imposed by the US, says Leslie Choquette, a professor at Assumption College in Worcester, such as the 1921 Emergency Quota Act, described by historian John Higham as "the most important turning point in American immigration policy." The act limited the number of people from a specific country allowed in a single year to three percent of the number of foreign-born persons of that nationality already in the United States. The policy was revised during the Great Depression, but it had

made its mark. “Without this supply of immigrants, the assimilation didn’t take a lot of time—one or two generations, and it was over,” said Choquette.

Laws were also put into place at the state level. In 1921, the same year the US government imposed the Emergency Quota Act, Republican State representative Frederick Peck introduced a law in Rhode Island “stipulating that private schools could not be certified unless there was ‘thorough and efficient’ teaching in English of all subjects offered in the public schools.”

Choquette points to the “three-generation model,” the theory of the American linguist and sociologist Joshua Fishman that there are three stages of language shift. The immigrant generation speaks their native language, the theory goes; the second generation becomes bilingual; the third generation loses the native language and speaks only English. Choquette, whose great-great-grandfather left Quebec in the 1870s, said she didn’t hear a word of French at home. École Sainte-Famille, where Belisle went to school, closed in 1957 because there was no demand for a bilingual education.

**That makes it all the more surprising**, in a way, that Notre Dame des Canadiens is even standing today. In another sense, it’s not surprising at all. For many decades after the French-Canadian community appeared to disappear, sometimes a threat to its existence would suddenly make it visible again.

In the early 1990s, an Irish bishop announced St. Joseph’s church would close and the church would be merged with Notre Dame des Canadiens, citing the first building’s deterioration. He didn’t expect the response: a sit-in that lasted for thirteen months. People maintained a twenty-four-hour presence inside the church, taking turns sleeping on the floor.

The protest was partly over the costs of the structural repairs to St. Joseph’s, in addition to the threatened destruction of Notre Dame des Canadiens. The local bishop at the time, Timothy Harrington, said he believed working-class French Canadians couldn’t bear the cost, and he was indeed “reluctant to impoverish the people of St. Joseph’s with a debt [he] did not feel [they] could handle.” Still, the diocese wasn’t happy about the protest. The takeover “shamed the city and shamed the diocese,” it proclaimed. The French-Canadian churchgoers stood firm. “I was brought up in parochial school to be obedient—except we were also taught to fight injustice,” one parishioner told *The New York Times*. “I’m having a problem right now with my religion,” said another. In order to hold on to the church, the community had to fight the church, and that meant presenting a united front.

Ultimately, the parishioners were found in contempt of court by a Superior Court judge in 1993, and they reluctantly left. When the parishioners exited the building, they were captured by a photographer holding their hands up to the sky. Some teared up, others had their eyes shut. They were rewarded three years later when, in 1996, the parish re-opened and was merged with Notre Dame des Canadiens.

Twenty-five years later, though, even the most dormant of French-Canadian identities seems nonexistent in Worcester. Compared to 1992, the church sale simply didn’t spark the same unity in the community, Belisle says. “The bishop already sold it; we give up,” was the thinking. One

of the town's councillors at large, Morris A. Bergman, says he recalled just one person—"somewhat of a historian on French-Canadian history"—questioning city council at a meeting. Jeff Cronin, a preservationist from Boston working to find a buyer for the church, sent emails to heritage groups and newspapers in Quebec, hoping that someone—if not a Franco-American, a Quebecker, he thought—would care enough about New England's French-Canadian heritage to help save the church. No luck.

In April, Choquette gave a conference to discuss the city's French-Canadian history and the church. Ted Conna, one of the church's main supporters, walked around with a petition to save it, investigating who had shown up. All the signatures he collected were from French Canadians in Worcester, but all were "more than eighty years old." A few students also agreed to sign, Choquette said, but they didn't seem interested. "For them, it was like, 'Ah, that's ancient history.'"

Later, I emailed Choquette to understand what the French Canadians' experience could tell us about immigration and assimilation. She sent me an article published by her colleague, John F. McClymer; in it, he writes that twentieth-century French Canadians dismissed the prediction by a state bureaucrat that the "complete assimilation with the American people is but a question of time."

The Quebeckers were complacent and stubbornly proud of their new parish: they contradicted their own leaders, too, who warned that "acceptance as Americans posed [great] danger since the price was renunciation of their religion, their language and their traditions." The idea during the original migration, as Charles Belisle's great-grandfather Alexandre wrote in his book of local history, *Livre d'or des Franco-Américains de Worcester, Massachusetts*, was to create a world in New England that resembled the one they left. But later, the province of Quebec increasingly encouraged them to come back. Quebec even created a repatriation program, but as McClymer writes, "few took up the province's offer and, by 1881, the policy had lapsed."

**Today, many American towns** and cities are pushing back against allowing immigrant communities to build symbolic structures. Zoning opposition to mosques, for example—like in Bayonne, New Jersey; Yonkers, New York and Sterling Heights, Michigan—is a fairly common phenomenon. Moreover, immigrant communities today arrive to a more secular society than the one that would have greeted them a few decades ago, as religion's influence fades overall in the US. Perhaps that makes it even harder to rally around—and ensure their kids and grandkids will rally around—religion. They may need to find a different way to make their new home their own.

In the end, this was also crucial to Worcester's history; one key always lay back at the church, even as other factors made their mark. The town's French Canadians slowly lost steam when it came to their Catholicism. In his local history, Belisle's great-grandfather wrote that parishes were especially important at first as they "reminded people of their native country and helped newcomers conciliate life with their new surroundings." With the church as their focal point, secularization doubled as a blow to their unity.

The developer that bought the church is a division of Hanover Insurance. In May, I asked Pamela Jonah, the spokeswoman for the project, if the company had any plan to honour the memory of the community that built it. “We certainly are respectful of those memories,” she responded, adding that Hanover Insurance is collaborating with the Archdiocese of Worcester to later donate, “if salvageable,” the bell and time capsule to recipients who’ll be able to handle them appropriately. At city hall, many “just think that the building has lived its time,” says Bergman, the city councillor. For his part, Charles Belisle is pessimistic—and not just about the future of the church. “My brother and I are the last ones [in the family] who will have a strong link to Notre Dame des Canadiens,” he says. “Unless somebody writes a book, and it probably won’t be me, all that stuff will be forgotten.”