

Local History



Still alive in memory

Willimantic's St. Jean Baptiste Society, a French-Canadian Roman Catholic voluntary association, has practically been erased from the local public memory, but in the early 20th century, it was one of the largest organizations of its kind in New England.

Willimantic boasts the oldest Roman Catholic parish in Connecticut. Irish immigrants had founded it in 1848, but after the Civil War an influx of immigrants from Quebec swelled the bor-

ough's Catholic parish and population. Within a generation the French-Canadians outnumbered the Irish founders of the parish, and lobbied to form their own separate parish. However, St. Joseph's pastor, Belgian-born Florimond, held the increasingly diverse parish together, despite the keenness of its Irish members to divest the parish of its French Canadian members.

In consequence, the burgeoning Quebecois-born population

formed its own voluntary association, in which it could practice specific aspects of French Canadian Catholicism and culture. Nevertheless, they still remained



Tom
Beardsley

loyal to St. Joseph's parish and were ultimately able to conduct their own services in the French language at St. Mary's parish hall

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parish hall on Valley Street.

Willimantic's St. Jean Baptiste Society was founded on May 30, 1880, and 50 years later it published a pamphlet in celebration of this anniversary, which recounted the organization's early history. Unfortunately, the society's early records were lost and the history was reconstructed from the memory of those founding members still living, Messieurs Honoré Bélair, Salomon Bélanger, Alphonse Gélinas, Joseph Gingras, Norbert Rousseau, Théophile Potvin and J. O. Blanchette.

The St. Jean Baptiste Society evolved from the Saint John the Baptist day, a holiday that originated as a pagan celebration of the summer solstice. During the

reign of the French King Clovis, this pagan festivity was Christianized and became a religious celebration of John the Baptist. Saint John is known as the Precursor of Christ, the light of the world, and is represented by the summer solstice and bonfires.

After the conquest of New France by the British, the St-Jean-Baptiste Day celebration lost its importance, until 1834 when newspaper editor Ludger Duvernay (1799-1852) organized the first nationalist banquet in Montreal.

To be "nationalist" was to call for responsible government and a greater say by the French in the management of the Canadas. Moreover, a large number of English-speaking Montrealers took part in this nationalist banquet.

Duvernay, a French-Canadian journalist, was a printer by trade. He founded and edited *La Gazette des Trois-Rivières* (1817), *Le Constitutionnel* (1823), and *L'Argus* (1826) at Three Rivers, Quebec. In 1827, he and A. N. Morin founded *La Minerve* at Montreal, which became one of French Canada's prominent newspapers.

On June 24, 1834, Duvernay invited senior business and political figures to a banquet to discuss the future of the Canadian people and explore ways to affirm its identity, and thus founded the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society. The maple leaf was chosen as its emblem.

By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the annual celebration had grown and was celebrated with much fanfare

everywhere and large processions in Montreal and Quebec City. In 1925, the Quebec legislature declared June 24 a holiday. Five years later, the Willimantic L'Union de St. Jean Baptiste celebrated its 50th anniversary with a three-day long festival on June 16, 17 and 18, 1930.

The first notable event in the history of the Willimantic L'Union de St. Jean Baptiste occurred in September 1885, when Willimantic became the venue of the organization's first state convention, which was only the second in New England.

The first was held at Worcester, Mass., in August 1879. The Connecticut convention was the idea of Putnam's Dr. Larue. He met with delegates at Danielson in 1884, and they chose Willimantic as the convention site because it

was the most accessible and central town for all to reach.

The decision was met with joy in Willimantic, and a grand convention was carefully planned for Sept. 29, 1885.

The members of the Willimantic L'Union de St. Jean Baptiste promised to take care of the intellectual and material sustenance of all delegates.

For the latter, each delegate would receive a bowl of white pea soup in beef broth, followed by a dish of fricasseed onions with grilled ham steak. Finally, for dessert they received a maple croquette made with local syrup, which would be washed down with a draft of spruce beer.

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