

July 8, 2004

Dedicated to French-Canadian culture

Part two of two

By 1880 more than 1,500 of Windham's population of 8,000 consisted of men and women born in Quebec. In May of that year, 15 French-Canadian millworkers, merchants and tradesman formed a Jean Baptiste Society based on a voluntary association formed in Quebec during the early 19th century. The society held its first meetings in the basement of St.

J o s e p h ' s Church. Five years later, Willimantic's French Canadians formed a parallel organization, the Congres Nationaux des Canadiens-Americains du



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Connecticut, which is better known today as the Union des Franco-Americains du Connecticut.

The associations were dedicated to the conservation of the French-Canadian language, religion and traditions, but they also had a more practical basis, providing sick and death benefits for members in the days before Social

Security. Moreover, the Willimantic Jean Baptiste Society was devoted to encouraging and aiding its members to become American citizens to offset contemporary criticisms of French Canadians.

New Englanders commonly referred to the Quebecois as the "Chinese of the East" because of their nomadic existence, roaming from milltown to mill village, working long hours and for the lowest possible wages. However, this was not the case at Willimantic. The majority of French Canadians who came to the Thread City remained, and consequently Willimantic attracted many French Canadian conventions.

In September 1896, the St. Jean Baptiste Society of Willimantic welcomed the delegates of the Eleventh State Convention of the Congres Nationaux des Canadiens-Americains du

Connecticut to the Thread City. Willimantic's expanding Quebecois population led to the formation of a third society in 1903, the Woonsocket, R.I.-based Union St-Jean Baptiste d'Amerique, Council No. 74, Florimond, which operated in the city until 1969. A fourth society for women, which was part of the Union St-Jean Baptiste d'Amerique, was formed in 1904. The Council No. 113, Saint-Cecile operated until 1994. In recognition of the Florimond Council's organization, the Saint-Jean-Baptiste d'Amerique held its Third General Convention in the Thread City.

Beyond their important roles in the process of Americanization and in providing sick and health benefits, Willimantic's various French-Canadian societies provided a high level of civic training for their members, which prepared them for entry into state, town and city political positions

during the early years of the 20th century.

From 1918 until 1920, Pierre Laramee became the first St. Jean Baptist society member to represent Windham in the state legislature. He was followed to Hartford by Alphonse Chagnon (1923-25), Joseph Lefebvre (1929-38) and Cyril Lamoureux (1931-33). Moreover, Alexis Caisse, who was president of the society for 20 years, became the first French Canadian elected as city alderman.

In 1924, local grocery dealer Hormisdas Dion, who operated out of a large store on Ash Street, became Willimantic's first French-Canadian mayor and he was followed in 1936 by Pierre J. Laramee, who was the Thread City's mayor until 1942. Furthermore, Florimond Bergeron, Willimantic's mayor from 1950 to 1962, was also president of the Societe St. Jean Baptiste, and presided at its 75th anniversary in 1955.

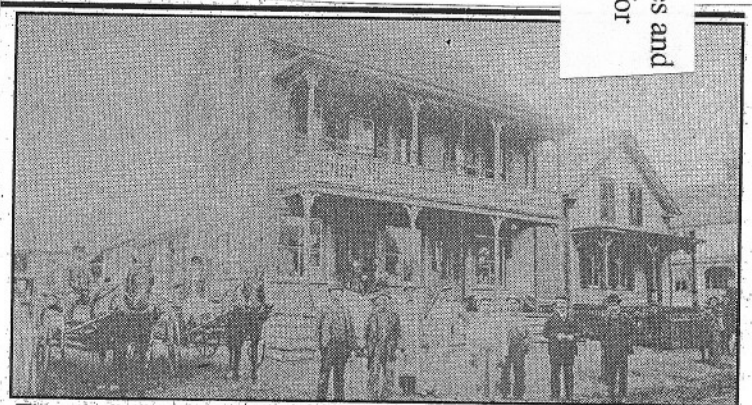
At the outset of the 20th century, the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society gave liberally for the building of St. Mary's Church and also donated several stained glass windows. Shortly after the church opened, the society celebrated its 25th anniversary on June 23 and 24, 1905, an occasion launched by a dance at Washburn Hall on Valley Street.

Once the new church was built, members moved their headquarters from St. Joseph's Church to St. Mary's Hall and future Saint-Jean-Baptiste meetings were held there.

The society's constitution required that the French language to be spoken at all meetings. This was also the case regarding all society dances, socials and plays held in the hall and in the Franklin Theater on Main Street.

Also, all songs were sung in French such as "Frere Jacques," "Les Irondale," and "Allouette." Furthermore, to ensure the language was spoken by the younger generation, the society made a generous annual donation to the parochial school to support the teaching of reading and writing in French.

The fire at St. Mary's School in 1953 unfortunately destroyed the society's records, its uniforms and memorabilia. However, this brief history of the society is based upon a history of Willimantic's French-Canadian societies compiled in 1937 by Morris Krug and William Flynn for the WPA's Federal Writer's Project, the Programme-Souvenir Cinquantenaire de la Societe de Ste. Jean-Baptiste de Willimantic, 1880-1930, supplied by Francois Gamache, and research undertaken by Albert J. Marceau.



The city's first French-Canadian major, Hormisdas Dion, second from right, in front of his Ash Street grocery store in 1906.

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