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Census data reveals history of city

ethnic patterns

Part three of
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During the last two weeks, we have explored how census analyses can tell historians a lot about changing ethnic patterns within specific 19th century communities. For example, women living on Willimantic's Temple Street in 1880 were mainly Yankees.



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However, Irish women were joining them from Jackson Street, and French Canadians were moving from Sodom or the Cardinal Square area to replace the upwardly mobile Irish women, who had moved across the borough to live among the Connecticut Yankees. However, in 1880 Jackson Street, which included Jackson Place, was still predominantly Irish in nature.

Irishmen, of whom 41 percent were laborers and 14 percent were mill workers, filled 63 percent of Jackson Street residences in 1880. There were four carpenters, three stonemasons and two railroad employees. The remaining 17 were saloonkeepers, bakers, tin-smiths, harnessmakers, furniture dealers and cobblers. The children's varying birthplaces reveal that these Irish families had followed work across New England before settling in Willimantic.

The Irish women's occupations were not as varied as their husbands and sons. Of the employable women, 82 (44 percent) worked in the textile mills, 72 (40 percent) were keeping house, 15 were unemployed, eight were dressmakers and seamstresses, six were domestics and there was one cook and one dry goods clerk. Accordingly, 84 percent of Jackson Street's working Irish — women were employed either in the textile mills, or in the home and the majority of millgirls listed were boarders. Twenty-four households took in boarders, and women headed six boarding houses on the Street.

The census figures indicate how much the growing textile industry relied on female labor. Figures tabulated five years later, in 1885, show that the Willimantic Linen Co. employed 843 women, some 66 percent of their total workforce

at that time. Therefore, boarding this large Irish women workforce

was a viable means of income for six of the 11 Jackson women listed as head of household. Typical of this group was 52-year-old Mary Sheedy, who had six women boarders who all worked in the mills. Of these, four were single and two were widows.

One group of women living in this section of 1880 Willimantic did not take in boarders or work at the mill. The Roman Catholic Convent of Our Lady of Lourdes was situated on Jackson Street and the 10 Sisters of Charity therein did not escape the census takers.

They were all teachers, led by Mother Superior, 29-year-old Josephine Kerkers from Holland. The Jackson Street nuns hailed from England, Ireland, Canada and New York. The Rev. Florentine De Bruyker, from Belgium, and his assistant the Rev. Arnold Van Warach from Holland were also residents of Jackson Street and 43-year-old Irish housekeeper, Jane Howey, ably cared for the two priests.

In comparing the working women of Jackson and Temple, the Yankee-immigrant split is easily detected. Another striking feature is the rate of illiteracy among residents on Jackson Street.

More than 25 percent of the occupants could not read or write. Also, revealing their Roman Catholic faith none of the women on Jackson Street was divorced.

Moreover, Jackson Street's tenements and houses were more crowded. Combining the overall population of Temple and Jackson streets, the females outnumbered the males by 328 to 297 (52.5 percent), but only 36 percent of the Temple Street population was male.

This reflects the desire for less expensive female labor in the city's various textile factories. It was also notable that none of Jackson Street's French-Canadian women worked at the mill.

As the 19th century ended, the majority of Irish moved on and other immigrant groups, such as the Polish and Italians, replaced them, thus repeating earlier trends as women from these groups joined the French-Canadian women working in the local mills. Detailed analyses of the 1900 and 1910 censuses will also reveal the extent of these changing ethnic patterns within the Thread City.



A Jackson Place tenement house is pictured shortly before its demolition in 1972. This area of Willimantic was home to the borough's Irish population until well into the 20th century.