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Census data shows stark divisions

Part two of three

The federal census undertaken every decade provides a way for historians to explore the social and economic conditions of a particular era.



Tom Beardsley

A look at Willimantic's 1880 census reveals stark social and ethnic divisions among the women living on Temple Street, a thoroughfare demolished in 1974, and Jackson Street. Yankees mainly occupied Temple Street, but the female occupants of Jackson Street, or "Cork Alley" and "Canucktown" were of primarily Irish and French-Canadian origin.

The majority of females on Temple Street lived with their husbands or parents, but four women there ran boarding houses for women working in the local mills.

Boarding also provided an important means of income on Jackson Street. Those boarding on Temple Street were mainly Yankee mill girls, but those at Jackson were primarily Irish and French-Canadian in birth and ethnicity. However, the Irish were moving across town, and two spinster sisters from County Cork were making a good living on Yankee Temple Street.

Catherine and Frances Goldsborough, age 48 and 45, were the only Irish-born residents on Temple Street. They ran a laundry business from their premises, and employed a live-in housekeeper, 17-year-old Connecticut-born Edith Manning. An occupational breakdown of Temple Street's women reveals that the mill did not play a large part in their lives.

Fifty-two percent "kept house," 35 percent worked in the mills, 18 percent were dressmakers and seamstresses, 3 percent were domestics/housekeepers, 2 percent took in boarders and there was one hat maker. However, just a few hundred yards away, it was possible to detect further changes in the borough's ethnic pattern.

A short walk from Temple to Jackson Street back in 1880 meant a journey into a new country. There were no longer any New England accents heard; only Irish brogues, and a few French accents were detectable. In a stroll southwards down Jackson

7in 1880, a "top of the mornin'" greeting at the junction of Peru and Jackson, would have to be replaced by "Bonjour, mon amie" by the time the junction with Prospect had been reached. Census analysis reveals that the majority of French-Canadians resided in Willimantic's "lower village" which was also known as "Sodom." Accordingly, just as the Goldsborough sisters had climbed up the social ladder by moving into Yankee territory, French-Canadian women was taking their place in the Irish section of town.

One family, the Fennettes, represented almost 30 percent of Jackson Street's Canadian community. Joseph and Leocadie, age 38 and 35, lived with their seven children and four relatives.

The two eldest sons, ages 14 and 15, worked at the Willimantic Linen Co., the other five offspring were of school and pre-school age. Onezime Dupuis, age 50, was Joseph's uncle, 21-year-old Joseph Duprez was a cousin and 18-year-old James Lefebvre was Leocadie's brother.

In 1878, the state of Connecticut conducted a survey of immigrant groups, which revealed each group's fertility rates. The French-Canadian women of Windham, although outnumbered by the Irish, were producing a greater number of offspring and a ready made labor force.

However, there were no French Canadian female mill workers living on Jackson Street in 1880. The Quebecois women were from a higher social scale. Peter Perry, an Anglo-Canadian, had married French-Canadian Mathilde and worked as a dry goods clerk and they had two boarders, a 24-year-old physician, Raymond Chagnon, and a 27-year-old laborer, Napoleon Michaud.

Joseph Peltier was an illiterate



The junction of Union and Jackson streets pictured in 1950 reveals how the 19th century Irish settled in cheaper tenements located near the railroad tracks.

wood dealer and his wife Louisa "kept house." John Lusignon was a carpenter whose wife, Helene, kept house for another carpenter, Edward Lavalley. French-Canadian residency on Irish Jackson Street and Jackson Place in 1880 signals a degree of upward social mobility for them.

Nevertheless, Jackson Street

was primarily the home of Willimantic's Irish population in 1880. We will explore "County Cork in miniature" next week.