

# Introduction

When French explorer Samuel de Champlain famously clashed with the Iroquois in 1609 near today's Ticonderoga, it was not the last incursion of French speakers into territory that became northern New York. There has been a French presence in the state since the colonial period, fueled by different waves of immigration. The largest influx of francophones took place from 1830 to 1930, the century before the United States applied immigration restrictions to continental migrants. Existing studies of French-Canadian immigrants in the United States have focused on the large industrial centers of New England, with little attention paid to the rural mill villages or to the borderlands shared by Québec and the northeastern states, including New York. Unlike previous works, this community study of Plattsburgh, New York, examines the evolution of a rural village into a French-Canadian population center of upstate New York.

The Five Nations of the Iroquois League controlled much of what became New York State at the time of Champlain's expedition. When Champlain joined forces with the Huron, the Ottawa, and the Montagnais to confront the Iroquois, they traveled along the large lake native peoples had named *Canaderi Guarante*, "the lake that is the gate of the country." A mapmaker and the lake's first European explorer, Champlain renamed it after himself. As a result of his 1609 expedition, the French laid claim to much of northern New York. They built—more than a century later—Fort Saint-Frédéric (today's Crown Point) in 1732 and Fort Carillon (today's Ticonderoga) in 1755, and they granted seigneuries on both sides of the lake. The French lost control of the Champlain valley in the French and Indian War, during which the Iroquois sided with the British against the French, a war that culminated with the British conquest of New France in 1760.<sup>1</sup>

When American rebels invaded British North America in 1775–1776, upwards of 150 French Canadians sided with them but had to leave after the failed invasion. In all, an estimated 1,800 French Canadians and Acadians helped the Americans in their war for independence from the British. The New York legislature in 1789 granted lands along Lake Champlain to French-Canadian refugees as compensation for supporting the Patriots. At the same time, it granted lands to the children of Acadian exiles, the French speakers who were deported from the Maritime colonies during the French and Indian War because they would not swear an oath of unconditional loyalty to the British crown. As a result of the land grants, approximately 250 French-speaking Acadian and Canadian families settled in northeastern New York by the early 1800s.<sup>2</sup>

French speakers were not the only recipients of land. The State of New York also offered grants to English-speaking veterans of the Revolutionary War. Parcels unclaimed by veterans were sold to individuals like Zephaniah Platt, originally of Poughkeepsie, one of the earliest settlers of what became Clinton County, located in the northeasternmost part of the state and bordering British North America. Drawn to the region by timber lands, iron-ore beds, and waterpower sites along the Saranac River, Platt received the Patent of Plattsburgh in October 1784. In 1815, Plattsburgh became incorporated as a village, following another military conflict between the Americans and the British, the War of 1812–1814, during which the Battle of Plattsburgh was fought on Lake Champlain.<sup>3</sup> As these historical examples illustrate, Plattsburgh and the Lake Champlain region stood at the nexus of important international events.

Beginning in 1816, steamships on Lake Champlain moved between Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu in Lower Canada (now the Province of Québec) and Albany, New York, helping to facilitate the migration of French Canadians to lands formerly under French control. Plattsburgh, from its early settlement, was a diverse community, as families brought different ethnic and religious traditions. Those who came from the south tended to be English or Dutch Protestants, while those from the north were mostly French-Canadian Catholics. The French Canadians who settled in the vicinity of Plattsburgh by the early 1800s largely worked in the lumber industry and established farms.<sup>4</sup>

The Rebellion of 1837–1838 in Lower Canada precipitated another migration of French Canadians to Plattsburgh. After the unsuccessful revolt against the tight controls of the British Empire, exiled *Patriotes* (who borrowed symbols from the US Revolution) migrated to New

York and Vermont to avoid imprisonment or hanging. Of the leaders, Louis-Joseph Papineau went to Albany, Ludger Duvernay to Rouses Point, and Robert Nelson and Cyrille Côté to Plattsburgh. Although the US government chose to remain neutral, and Papineau advised against organizing an attack, Nelson and Côté persisted. In February 1838, they crossed the border at Alburg, Vermont, with 600 men and established in Napierville the Republic of Lower Canada. But the *Patriotes* were chased back into the United States and US authorities disarmed them. Charged with violating neutrality, Nelson and Côté were acquitted by a jury and resumed their hostilities against British rule. A number of *Patriotes* returned to Lower Canada after the amnesty of June 1838, while others remained in the United States with Nelson and Côté to form a secret society called the *Frères-Chasseurs* (Hunters' Lodges) to continue agitating for and fomenting political change. In November 1838, Nelson and Côté led another invasion of Lower Canada, this time with 2,000 men, but it also failed, and they retreated to the United States. The *Patriotes* subsequently dispersed throughout the United States, some as far west as California and as far south as Louisiana, while most moved to states in the Canada-US borderlands region, such as Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Vermont, and New York.<sup>5</sup>

Médard Hébert and Pierre-Paul Desmarais settled in Plattsburgh, where they established a grocery store. Local accounts suggest there were other French Canadians who chose to stay in Plattsburgh following the rebellion. They were not farmers but urban dwellers who included artisans, “former clerks, merchants and factory workers [who] went into our flouring mills, sawmills, tanneries, glass factories and into many other fields of endeavor,” writes Roswell Hogue.<sup>6</sup>

Local sources also suggest that the migration of French Canadians to Plattsburgh increased after the Rebellion of 1837–1838.<sup>7</sup> These migrations were part of a larger movement of people during the century from 1830 to 1930, where upwards of one million French-speaking Canadians emigrated to the United States. After the uprisings ended, the emigration of French Canadians to the United States was not tied to political causes or strife. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Québec experienced such demographic and economic challenges as a growing rural population that lacked sufficient access to arable land, indebtedness incurred with the specialization and mechanization of agriculture, and an urban industrial development that did not proceed at a rapid enough pace to absorb the province's surplus rural population. These conditions

produced unemployment, prevented advancement, created distress, and precipitated their emigration. Most francophone immigrants ended up in such northeastern industrial centers as Lewiston and Biddeford, Maine; Manchester, New Hampshire; and Lowell, Lawrence, and Fall River, Massachusetts, as well as the mill towns and mill villages of the Blackstone River Valley in Massachusetts and Rhode Island and of the Quinebaug River Valley in Connecticut.<sup>8</sup>

Less known are the migrations of French Canadians to New York State or to the Midwest and West.<sup>9</sup> Plattsburgh, New York, therefore presents an interesting community study. French-Canadian immigrants constituted at least one-third of Plattsburgh's population in the mid-1800s.<sup>10</sup> It lies just 60 miles south of Montréal, the largest French-speaking population center in North America. As a French-Canadian demographic cluster in the rural borderlands of upstate New York, Plattsburgh offers some fascinating contrasts with the textile mill centers of New England.

Among other themes, this community study highlights processes of acculturation and assimilation in US society. Plattsburgh's French-Canadian immigrants and their Franco-American descendants became integrated in US society in ways that occasionally differed from their counterparts in other northeastern communities. A central argument of this book is that, unlike in many of the industrial centers of New England, interethnic cooperation rather than conflict served as the prevalent pattern in upstate New York from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries.

This study also sheds light on the evolution of the Canada-US border over historical time. It considers how the border, a relatively porous construct to 1930, became politicized over time, affecting the populations on either side. In the same vein, this work demonstrates how international events between Canada and the United States played out at the local level, particularly those that had bearing on the French-Catholic identity of the Plattsburgh community.

This monograph similarly contributes to American religious history, in which Catholics have often been viewed as outsiders. As it sheds light on the history of Catholicism in the United States, which has largely excluded French-Canadian Catholics, it traces the evolution of religious establishments in the borderlands region. Through the extensive use of sources from religious and other archives that have rarely been tapped by scholars, this book provides considerable insight into the inner workings of Catholic institutions. It teaches us a great deal, for example, about the labors of priests, nuns, and brothers, many of whom were immigrants, as

it explores the movement of religious personnel across the Canada–US border—a topic that has attracted little historical attention. The women and men religious who emigrated from Canada to found and staff Plattsburgh’s Catholic institutions were not all French-Canadian descendants but also consisted of individuals of Anglo- and Irish-Canadian descent as well as natives of France. This work particularly looks at how they shaped the French-Canadian population of Plattsburgh.

This study highlights the significant contributions of lay and religious women in creating and supporting Catholic establishments. It also teaches us much about gender relations within Catholic institutions. The women religious who conducted schools and hospitals had access to professional positions and authority that many lay women did not. Sometimes this brought them into conflict with priests and bishops in the Roman Catholic hierarchy. As early feminists (who probably would not have recognized themselves that way), the nuns who served in Plattsburgh blazed trails that later opened pathways to lay women.

Finally, in the contemporary period, much political and journalistic attention focuses on the large, mostly Catholic, groups that cross the southern US border. This study looks at Catholic migrations across the northern US border in an earlier period of time, thus providing a historic perspective to aid in our understanding of the present. Transnational Catholic migrants helped shape local, regional, national, and even international history by their activities in Plattsburgh and beyond. In short, the history of Plattsburgh’s Catholic migrants forms part of the larger narrative of the US immigrant experience.