

Therese Bilodeau, "The French in Holyoke, 1850-1900" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*  
Volume 3, No 1 (Spring 1974).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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# The French in Holyoke [1850-1900]

## Therese Bilodeau

America, in 1850, was a country in the midst of transition. She had just entered an era of industry about twenty years before. Cities were growing and people were moving to them, forsaking their rural heritage to find employment in an urban environment.<sup>1</sup> Jobs which paid good money were few and far between. Cash was an item to be diligently pursued and tenderly cherished. The superimposition of an industrial system upon an agrarian community overnight created a labor shortage in a land where labor should have been plentiful. This was due partly to the reluctance of some workers who had already established themselves, to take chances in a new and untried community. After all, there was a certain amount of independence on one's own farm.<sup>2</sup>

So, to make up for this lack of native and local manpower, foreign laborers were in demand. These were men, women and even children who would be willing to work for less pay, be satisfied with poor living conditions that were however, still better than those in their lands of origin, and could work a 12-hour day without complaint.<sup>3</sup> Europeans and Canadians moved to the U.S. during the latter half of the 19th century and settled in the eastern and northern industrial cities.<sup>4</sup> They concentrated in towns where they were needed most, towns where industry was expanding and where they could work as unskilled laborers or as strikebreakers.<sup>5</sup>

One of these towns was Holyoke, Massachusetts. Conceived in 1849, it became a city in 1863. By 1874, the majority of the laborers were foreign-born; the city had the largest percentage of foreign-born population of any community in the state.<sup>6</sup> It was incorporated soon after the Hadley Falls Company had completed the second dam across the Connecticut river

and successfully diverted its waters for manufacturing purposes. Many people still doubted the ultimate success of the water power company and when the canal system (of 3 levels and 4½ miles) <sup>7</sup> was built and extensive mills were established, there resulted a shortage of mill hands and operatives. News of this somewhat unusual situation spread all over the Connecticut valley in Massachusetts, in Vermont, and northwards into Canada.<sup>8</sup> Beginning with the end of the Civil War, large numbers of French Canadians began to drift south across the border to New England. The peak of this migration was during the decade after 1890. By 1900, there were almost 400,000 French-Canadians in the U.S., with ¾ of them concentrated in New England.<sup>9</sup>

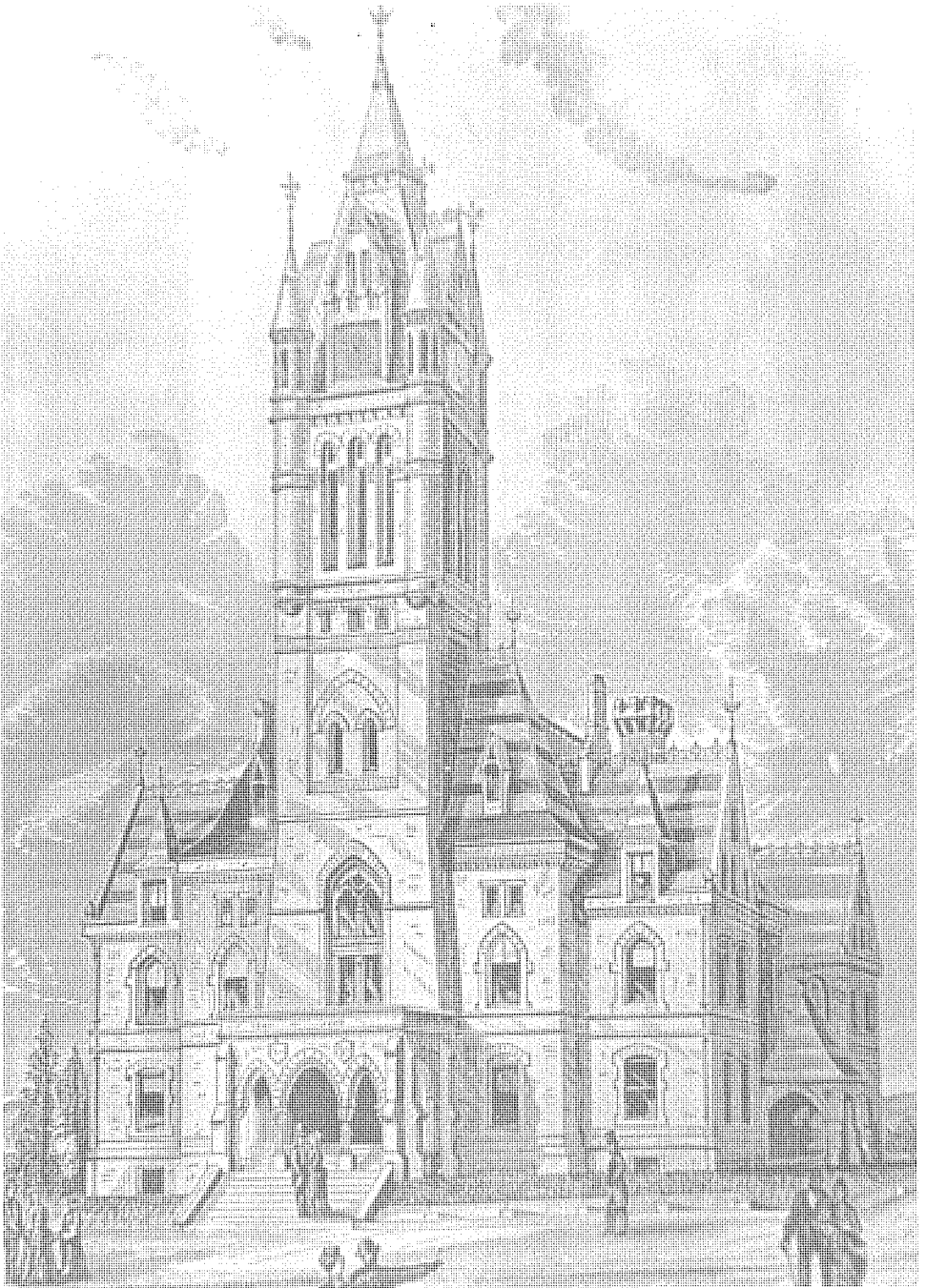
The first French-Canadians to come to Holyoke came in the mid 1800's. These five men were Narcisse Francoeur, Casal Viens, Furemence Hamel, Charles Provost, and Nicholas Proulx, and their families. They settled in Holyoke and one of them, Nicholas Proulx, found employment with Lyman Mills.<sup>10</sup> (This name 'Proulx', was later Anglicized into 'Prew' by a Rev. John S. McCoy.)<sup>11</sup> In 1853, Jones S. Davis, for many years a well-known figure in Holyoke, became agent of Lyman Mills. That same year, he commissioned Proulx to return to Canada to arrange for the importation of a considerable number of people.<sup>12</sup> He was told to recruit skilled workmen when possible, but strong, industrious men were always useful and desirable, and could be employed to do the ordinary, repetitive chores in the mills. Women and girls were particularly desired because some of them were highly skilled in needlecraft and their deft fingers could easily pick up the knack of handling the fine thread in the mills; they would soon become expert weavers.

Proulx had a long covered wagon especially constructed for his mission. He also took along another horse and wagon for his passengers' luggage. With this gear, he traveled from village to village, telling of the good life to be had in Holyoke. The return trip must have been a colorful sight. The long wagon contained about 45 girls while 7 or 8 men and boys walked along outside or took turns riding in the baggage wagon. Food was carried from home and they camped out at lonely farms or at cross-road schoolhouses. All in all, Proulx is estimated to have brought more than 500 persons across the border. Lyman Mills paid him at the rate of \$4 to \$5 per person, plus transportation charges. He offered the same service to Hampden Mills and soon he had the two companies bidding against each other with a consequent increase in his commission. Once this job was finished, he entered the wood and coal business and later into real estate. He accumulated a considerable fortune and became widely known and respected.<sup>13</sup> However, he was not well-received by the Canadian government, which was opposed to the departure of citizens for America. A \$500 fine was levied on Proulx, for a slight technicality, changing horses over the border. Lyman Mills paid the fine.<sup>14</sup>

These immigrants did not leave their homeland on an impulse or a whim. Since 1837, Quebec had not been able to support the growing population. The harvests were scanty due to soil erosion, failure to rotate crops and inadequate fertilization. With the size of families increasing, the size of farms decreased because many fathers divided their lands among all their heirs. In several generations the result was small farms which could not support a family. Young people, whose fathers did not leave them farmlands, were forced to look elsewhere for their livelihood. It was difficult to obtain good land in the vicinity of one's old village, and land in the more remote parts of the province, although abundant, was in the hands of speculators who charged high prices. There was also a decline in the lumbering operations along the tributaries of the St. Lawrence River, which accounted for some of the immigrants. Another reason for emigrating was the unwillingness on the part of many of the sons of proprietors and merchants to step down into the class of common laborers. Then there was always the lure and promise of higher wages in the States.<sup>15</sup>

The majority of them did not intend to remain in the United States. They hoped to save enough money to return to Canada and establish themselves in business, or to send money to impoverished relatives back home. However, during the first 25 years, few returned permanently to their native homes. The success of one family had its influence on others back home and after Mr. Proulx, no personal inducement was necessary to get them to come south.<sup>16</sup> Their proximity to their homeland made the break not too severe and many immigrants made frequent trips back and forth across the border to visit friends and family. This constant flow of people kept open the lines of news and communications from Canada.<sup>17</sup>

These first immigrants who came to Holyoke were financially poor but they were willing to work long hours in the mills. They knew little of American customs and ways of life, so at first they were an easy target for designing people and overbearing employers. However, they readily adapted and were recognized as one of the more industrious classes of the region.<sup>18</sup> Once settled, they tended to stay on in their original sections within the city to a greater degree than did their neighbors, the Irish. They came from Canada with a peasant background and a lack of ambition for leadership and social status. They became the common laborers, taxpayers, privates in the army, mill workers, small merchants, or clerks in department stores. Their stolid temperament and acceptance of working conditions made them more acceptable to employers and factory owners than the more aggressive Irish.<sup>19</sup> They were obedient workers, willing to labor long hours for low wages and they cared little about joining American trade unions. They were even willing to put their children to work in violation of laws making schooling mandatory.<sup>20</sup>



HOLYOKE CITY HALL, from *Holyoke: Past and Present, 1745-1895*  
(1895). all illustrations in this article are from this source.

The city of Holyoke is a unique one among similar mill towns of the area. It is a by-product of factories. Unlike other towns, industry came first, then community. Lacking the ameliorating influence of residents already established, of traditions already founded and a pattern of living well outlined, Holyoke received a particularly heavy dosage of some of the worst evils of industrialization. Social problems became so acute that the city was ranked among the first in the country where living conditions were the most unfavorable. Housing conditions were very poor. In 1875, it was reported that "Holyoke has more and worse large tenement houses than any manufacturing town of textile fabrics in the state". There was little means of escape in case of fire. They were extremely overcrowded and dirty. Sanitary arrangements were far from satisfactory and the whole situation was extremely unhealthy.<sup>21</sup> At this point in time, typhoid spread and took a heavy toll, particularly among the French Canadians whose sanitary conditions were at their worst.<sup>22</sup> Tuberculosis also was prevalent but not as much as among French Canadians as with Irish, Poles, and others. It seems that racial susceptibility to tuberculosis has been recently found to be a more important factor in the spread of the disease than overcrowded living conditions.<sup>23</sup>

To these people, overcrowding was a necessity because they had to live within walking distance of the mills in order to work. The lack of transportation facilities and the low wages they received made it impossible for them to move to better and more expensive surroundings.<sup>24</sup> However, they never lived in community shanty buildings like the Irish. Finally the town fathers interfered and by 1870, "Frenchville", located near the dam, was a distinct and separate colony, marked off from the Irish settlement adjacent to it by an invisible but well-recognized line.<sup>25</sup> Before this, the first settlement had been made in Wards One and Two and nicknamed "Canada Hill".<sup>26</sup>

In 1853, Holyoke had about 700 people. The most populated district was "Tigertown", predominantly Irish. French settlers were looked upon with disfavor and their first few years were a bit uncomfortable. They were often insulted and attacked and frequently stoned. It was even dangerous for them to go out after dark.<sup>27</sup> Although kind to immigrants of their own nationality, they did not waste any cordiality upon each other. The Irish resented the fact that most French Canadians could speak little or no English. The French on the other hand pointed out that some Irishmen had such a broad brogue, it was difficult to pass it off as English. Then again the French became indignant when in 1870 the Irish Fenians did little to conceal their preparations for their invasion and conquest of Canada. The French however, had the last laugh when the Irish returned in shame.<sup>28</sup>

Another factor in the hostility between these two groups was the fact that the Irish took objection to the French custom of sending their children to work. To the Irish it seemed to imply an indifference to the welfare of their children.<sup>29</sup> Truant officers, aided by mill overseers enforced the law requiring work cards for minors. However there were continued attempts by French Canadian parents to falsify their children's ages and they insisted that their wages were necessary to keep the wolf from the door.<sup>30</sup> They also disapproved of their low standard of living. These "Canuks" who lived packed like mackerel in a barrel" were called the "Chinese of the Eastern States" by the State Commissioner of Labor in 1881. Some of this hostility died down when some returned to Canada and others formed naturalization clubs.<sup>31</sup>

One of the most important reasons for this dislike of the French was the competition they created for jobs, which had been scarce. How could a man maintain a decent standard of living when Canadians would work for 50 cents a day? They overcrowded the labor market and lowered wages even further.<sup>32</sup> When English and Irish workers went on strike, the French Canadian remained at work for as long as he possibly could and he showed no hesitation in taking the place of a dissatisfied employee who walked out on the job.<sup>33</sup>

One other crucial item in this conflict was religion. Instead of acting as a bond between these two nationalities, it only served as another antagonism. The Catholic Church was strong in Holyoke, stronger than in most New England cities of that size.<sup>34</sup> Most Irish and Canadians were Catholics. However, they had different opinions and views of how it should be practiced. To the French, religion was one of the most important aspects of their lives. It was the deepest expression of their culture. Back in Canada, life was intimately bound to the church. To these first immigrants, the Church meant home, village, customs, friends and family. It brought back memories and tenderness.<sup>35</sup> That is why they tried to recreate the same situation in their new home. They believed that the use of national languages and traditions strengthened the church. By using the resources of religion and the Church, national mores and manners could be maintained. The Irish feared that French priests would begin moving in and taking over Irish parishes. They wanted the French to speak English, after all, this was America, not France or Canada.<sup>36</sup>

By the end of the century, the better educated among them came to adopt a more critical attitude towards religion. The pronouncement of the priest was no longer considered to be infallible nor was it always unquestioningly accepted on all matters. There grew instead a willingness to look at all sides of a question even when it tended to go over to the Protestant view. The Irish were appalled at this and felt that the French were being too lax in their faith. On the other hand, the French felt that the Irish were too shallow in theirs and too ready to accept anything unthinkingly. Some of this

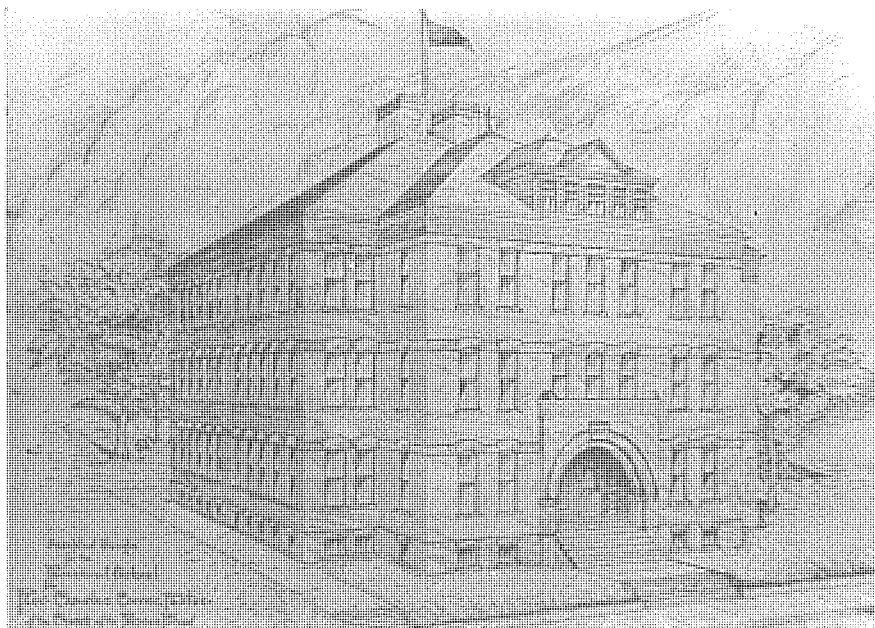
tolerance probably continued to develop later with the increase of intercourse with American non-Catholics and as a result of their alignment in politics with the Protestants in opposition to the dominant Irish.<sup>37</sup> They were known to support any candidate who would oppose the Irish.

As a group, the French were less able to assimilate than their neighbors the Irish or the Germans. Their heritage was one of submission to the conditions of life in a working world. Although many immigrants became naturalized citizens, it took longer for them to become Americanized. Theirs was not a rich culture.<sup>38</sup> They were descendants of Frenchmen who had come to Quebec in the 1600's. They spoke a form of French and lived according to the customs which dated back to the days of Louis XIV, mixed in with the changes which had taken place during their long years in North America.<sup>39</sup> They read local French newspapers, and celebrated their own holidays, as well as New Year's and the feast of St. John the Baptist. Outside of the church, they had little pleasure.<sup>40</sup> Their philosophy was to work hard, go to Mass, save money, bear children and originally they intended to return to Canada. They sought to live together in the community and to keep strong their national, religious, social and ancestral roots.<sup>41</sup>

Life revolved around the family, then the Church, and next the parochial schools.<sup>42</sup> Upon arrival in Holyoke, the only church available to them was St. Jerome's in an English-speaking Irish parish. The French immigrants would have little to do with it and gave "poverty and ignorance of English" as excuses for not attending services. The bishop saw their resistance to being assimilated into Irish parishes and not wanting to lose them completely, he decided to incorporate ethnic divisions into the parish system. The final event to precipitate this step was the discovery by Irish Catholics in 1869 that several French girls were receiving instruction in English in a Protestant church.<sup>43</sup>

The first French services were held in a rented hall on High Street. In 1869, a frame chapel was erected on the corner of Park and Cabot Streets. This was to be the scene of one of Holyoke's worst tragedies. On a May evening in 1874, the little church was filled with people attending vespers on the feast of Corpus Christi. A slight breeze blew one of the lace draperies against a lighted candle and within seconds the whole interior of the church was in flames. A panic ensued and in their rush to escape, the single stairway at the entrance gave way under all the pressure and resulted in more fatalities. In all, it was estimated that about 72 lives were lost, but many were saved by the bravery of some Irish boys playing ball in the vicinity. After the fire, the people worshipped in convenient halls, until the completion of Precious Blood Church, erected on the same spot in 1876.<sup>44</sup>





PRECIOUS BLOOD PAROCHIAL SCHOOL

In 1890, a second church was built in the northern section of the city on the corner of Maple and Prospect Streets. It was a large building which besides serving as a church, also contained a school and a convent. This was Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church.<sup>45</sup> These two parishes were divided in 1905 to form a third, in Ward One, Immaculate Conception. By this time, Precious Blood had 4,000 members, Perpetual Help had 3,500 and Immaculate Conception had 3,000.<sup>46</sup>

Their services were distinct from those of Catholics of other nationalities in that, save for the Latin used in the Mass, French was the only other language employed. The emphasis was on music and the use of Gregorian chants appealed to their aesthetic sense.<sup>47</sup> They even had their own cemetery, four acres on the Granby plains. Located outside the city limits, it was still to all intents and purposes, a local institution.<sup>48</sup>

Concerning education, widespread illiteracy in Canada did not seriously trouble anyone. In the U.S. however, education was a necessity. By sending their children to public schools, they would not receive any instruction in their religion and if they attended the parochial schools, they would forget their French. Therefore, a new system of education was required: a french-speaking parochial school.<sup>49</sup> Here the aim was not only to provide "book learning" but also to form the child's character and interest in good citizenship. In addition to the subjects taught in public schools, the child also had to acquire a thorough understanding of French and of his religion along with etiquette and deportment. Discipline was also more severe than it was in public schools. Besides this they also had the advantage of being taught by nuns, women who had abandoned worldly pleasures to devote their lives and energies to educating their pupils.<sup>50</sup> The Grey Nuns from Canada were in charge and by 1880, some 500 French Canadian children were accepted who would attend only for the legally required twenty weeks. These children had to go to public schools.

Inevitably, opposition arose to this kind of education. Some said it was un-American, and that it was a means of segregation along racial lines. For these students who were being taught in French, no direct means of being Americanized existed. It was also noted that the Sisters, who had been educated in Canada, were unfamiliar with U.S. history and so it was not taught. The opponents also insisted that the teaching of English, science, and math was below the level of that taught in public schools. Those in favor of French parochial education protested that the education was exactly the same as in public schools, plus their schools taught French. They also added the fact that they were saving the taxpayers about \$51,000 a year. Gradually, resistance disappeared. By law, the School Committee had the duty of making sure that private schools were kept up to public school standards and of seeing that teaching was done in English. However, French Canadian labor had become an important factor in industrial Holyoke and so employers came to realize that if the French Canadian laborer was to stay, he had to be able to bring with him his church and his school. The school committee could do little or nothing, so in 1878, the French school was accepted as part of the school system since English was taught in one session.<sup>51</sup>

Outside of family and church, the French had few activities. But they did form several organizations. The first of these was *L'Union St. Jean Baptiste*, established in 1872. In 1900 it allied itself to *L'Union St. Jean Baptiste d'Amerique* which consisted of all French societies in New England. Some others were *L'Union Canadienne*; *La Ligue du Sacre Coeur*; *Cour Mont Royal des Forestiers*; *Les Artisans*; *Heptasophs*; *Le Cercle Rochambeau*; *Le Club de Naturalization*; the *Club Guilmant*; plus other musical, literary and other clubs.

In 1889, several influential French citizens of Holyoke, under the leadership of Pierre Bonvouloir got together and organized the City Co-operative Bank, a co-operative loan association.<sup>52</sup> Chartered by and always conducted in the special interest of the French people of Holyoke, it acquired a high standing and became known as a safe, substantial concern, capably directed and worthy of the patronage of anyone who would avail themselves of its membership.<sup>53</sup>



The French also began their own French newspapers. The first one was *Le Defenseur*, a weekly paper. The second was *L'Annexioniste*, a daily. Neither had a very long life. By 1902 there was only one left. *La Presse*, a semi-weekly.<sup>54</sup> Probably some of the reasons for the small success of these newspapers were that they depended for support on people who were often illiterate, who had lived in small towns where news spread by word-of-mouth, and who, if they wished, had access to journals published in Quebec.<sup>55</sup> So they were not too apt to invest their hard-earned money in newspapers, a superfluous luxury.

To illustrate how the numbers of French Canadians increased through the years from 1850 to 1900, the following chart has been prepared.<sup>56</sup>

YEAR	TOTAL	FRENCH	
1855	4,639	40	0.86
1870	10,733	1,731	16
1880	21,915	4,902	22
1890	35,637	7,046	19
1900	45,712	6,991	15

When the French Canadian immigrants first arrived in Holyoke, they were disliked, mistrusted and looked down upon. Through dint of hard work and perseverance, they became more admired and respected. Due to their loyalty to their families, church and language, to their thrift, their ruggedness, generosity of spirit and their warmheartedness, they were finally accepted.<sup>57</sup> Many of these families were to grow and become influential citizens and controlling agents for good in the business, social, professional and political life of the city of Holyoke, Massachusetts.<sup>58</sup>

#### NOTES

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3 "Planned as Dream City of Tomorrow. What of Holyoke's Future?," May 14, 1939, ms found in vertical file in Springfield Library, p. 3.

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- 33 Hansen, *The Mingling*, p. 181.
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- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 370-371.
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- 42 Kurnz, *The French in America*, p. 82.
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- 46 Scrapbook no. 28, found in the Holyoke Public Library, p. 96.
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- 51 Green, *Holyoke*, pp. 301-303.
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- 58 Copeland, *Hampden County*, pp. 109-110.