

Blackstone: A Case Study in Immigration

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

The John H. Chafee
Blackstone River Valley
National Heritage Corridor



This lesson explores the immigration experience of the French Canadians, or Quebecois, who left Quebec in the late 1800s and early 1900s for the industrial town of Woonsocket, Rhode Island. The lesson addresses some of the reasons people emigrate, the challenges they face, the opportunities they discover, and the ways their lives are changed by their new environment.

This curriculum-based lesson plan is one of a thematic set on the Nineteenth Century using lessons from other Massachusetts National Parks. Also are:

[Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area](#)

The Fate of Liberty: The Role of Fort Warren in the Civil War

[Springfield Armory National Historic Site](#)

Springfield Armory: Technology in Transition

[Lowell National Historical Park](#)

Land Use in Lowell: Mapping Industrial Change

Included in this lesson are several pages of supporting material. To help identify these pages the following icons may be used:



To indicate a Primary Source page



To indicate a Secondary Source page



To Indicate a Student handout



To indicate a Teacher resource

Lesson Document

Link on the page to the document



[The John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor](#)

commemorates the birth of the American Industrial Revolution, how it changed the landscape of the valley, and how it transformed life in America. The Blackstone River Valley, its people, and its history serve as a case study for the history of the American Industrial Revolution. In the 1850s, when textile manufacturing had become well established in the valley and further growth required a larger labor force, agents for mill owners went to Canada to recruit new workers. This lesson explores the immigration experience of the French Canadians, or Quebecois, who left Quebec in the late 1800s and early 1900s for the industrial town of Woonsocket, Rhode Island. The lesson addresses some of the reasons people emigrate, the challenges they face, the opportunities they discover, and the ways their lives are changed by their new environment.

Enduring Understanding

Immigration involves making the difficult decision to leave the homeland and adapt to a new life in a new location.

Essential Question

What conditions influenced people to emigrate from their homeland in Quebec, and how were their lives changed by their relocation to Woonsocket, Rhode Island?

Content Objective/Outcomes	Language Objective/Outcomes
<p>The students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain how people and communities weighed the benefits and costs of emigrating from Quebec to Woonsocket. • Explain how new opportunities for work in the textile industry drew immigrants to settle in New England. 	<p>The students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze and interpret information from a play using oral persuasion techniques to support their arguments. • Identify and interpret evidence found in photographs and letters to form and support a point of view.

Number of Days: 2

Intended Grade/Range: 8-12

Resources/Materials**Historical Fiction:**

Play *Decision to Leave*, Immigrant Letters, included with this lesson

Primary Source Images:

Historic Photographs of Quebec and Woonsocket, included with this lesson

Website:

Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor at www.nps.gov/blac
Quebec history website at <http://www2.marianopolis.edu/quebec/history/index.htm>

Maps:

Maps of New England and Quebec for student reference
Outline maps of New England and Quebec included with this lesson (photocopied for each student).

Knowledge Required

To complete this lesson successfully, students will need some familiarity with the following topics:

- The early growth of industry in New England, particularly the Blackstone valley.
- The opportunities for employment in the growing industrial communities and the conditions in rural Quebec.

Students can find background information on both of these topics on the Blackstone website and the Quebec History website listed above.

Teaching/Learning Sequence**Launch:**

With the immigration of many Quebecois to the United States, life changed both for the immigrants and for those who remained behind. To explore some of these changes, students will use historic photographs to examine the differences between life in Quebec and life in the industrial city of Woonsocket. Students work in small groups to study photographs and then present their findings to the class for a larger group discussion.

Give each small group two photographs: 1) a Quebec scene and 2) a Woonsocket scene. **Lesson Document**

- Ask each group to list the differences and similarities between the two communities, based on what they can see in the photographs.
- Follow with a class discussion asking each group to present the top two similarities and the top two differences, in turn.
- Ask groups if they have additional items on their lists to add to the discussion.
- Draw some hypotheses for further exploration as the lesson continues.

Exploration:

To understand the choices and realities of those who chose to leave their homes and move to a new life in America, students will also need to explore the understandings and expectations of the immigrants.

Exploration Activity #1: Mapping.**Lesson Document**

This mapping activity sets the scene for the play, *Decision to Leave*, in Exploration Activity #2. The activity has been designed to give students a sense of the geographic “place” or setting for the action in the play and its relation in space to the family’s proposed destination, including the distances that immigrants had to travel. Students work on their own or in pairs. An unlabeled map (to duplicate for students) and a labeled map (as an answer key) are included in this lesson.

A. Ask students to locate and label the following places on their maps of Quebec and New England, using a map, globe, or atlas in the classroom or their textbooks as a reference:

Teaching/Learning Sequence

- All six New England states
- The province of Quebec
- The Blackstone and St. Lawrence Rivers
- The cities of Boston, Woonsocket, Montreal, and Quebec City

B. Using a ruler and the scale given, ask students to calculate (in miles and kilometers) the distances between the following cities:

- Quebec City and Woonsocket
- Montreal and Woonsocket

C. Assume that a small family group can travel fifteen miles per day on foot, with one horse and wagon to carry heavy items. Using the distances calculated in part B, ask students to calculate how many days it would take for the family to travel between the following cities:

- Quebec City and Woonsocket
- Montreal and Woonsocket

In a class discussion, ask students to imagine and describe the difficulties and challenges the families might have encountered along the way.

Exploration Activity #2: Decision to Leave. Lesson Document

Pass out copies of the play *Decision to Leave* and the letters *Losing the French Language* and *A Son in Woonsocket to His Mother in Quebec* to each student. Pose the following focus questions for students to consider while they are reading.

Decision to Leave: What kinds of issues must the two sisters consider as they discuss whether the family should emigrate?

Letters: What are the issues that concern the writers of the two letters?

Read the play and then the letters aloud in class, having students take turns. Then divide the class into groups of about six students to explore the decision to leave, as follows:

About the play: Ask half the students within each group to advocate for Simone's point of view and the other half for Louise's point of view. Allow students a brief period of time to discuss the following issues in their groups, with one student taking notes:

Teaching/Learning Sequence

- What is life in Quebec like during the time period of the play?
- What sources of information about the experience of emigrating do the sisters have?
- What do Simone and Louise fear they will lose if they leave Quebec?

Next, ask the groups to consider the letters, discussing the following questions:

- How do the letters support Simone's and Louise's concerns?
- What would the writers of the letters say to the girls if they could advise them?

After the small-group discussions, bring the class together. Ask each group to report their responses for each of the points above. Make a list on the board as students give them. Refer to this list to do the "Summary" activity below.

Summary:

Once all the arguments have been recorded, poll the students—who would go and who would stay? Ask individual students to explain which side's arguments he/she found most compelling, and why.

Assessment:

Travel Backpack

This exercise will help students understand the physical and psychological processes that people go through as they make a major life change, such as leaving their homeland to move to a new location and start over. Working in small groups, students put themselves into the “shoes” of immigrants, and put together a virtual “backpack” of items that they will need to bring with them to help them adapt to their new lives.

Present student groups with the following scenario: “Imagine you want to work as a game programmer. The only job available is located in another country, far away, where you do not speak the language. You must consider all the changes to your life, and the life of your family, that making this move will require. Furthermore, you can take only one large backpack with you. Everything of importance that you think you will need must fit inside. What will you pack in your backpack to help you in your new home?”

Each student in the group must contribute at least two items to the bag, and be prepared to tell the class why s/he made the selection. For homework, ask students to write an essay about the experience of preparing for moving to take a new job, including an explanation about the items chosen to take along and the reasons for their choices.



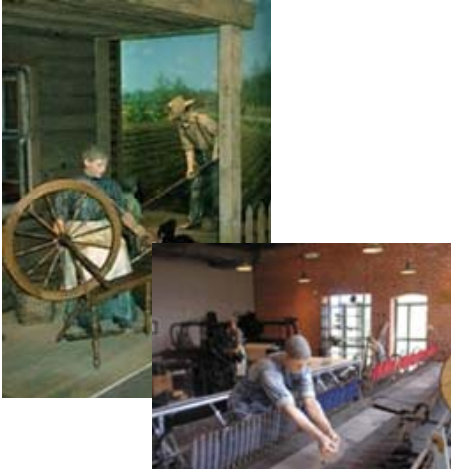
The Power of Place

Site Visit:

Have you ever stood on the spot where some historical event occurred and felt a sense of awe and inspiration? This is the power of place you can experience when you visit a National Park. These historic places provide us with opportunities to connect with the lives of the generations before us. The power of place is that it gives history immediacy and relevance. As historian David McCullough*states, "When you stand there, in that very real, authentic place, you feel the presence of that other time, that *history* in a way that would be impossible did it not exist."

The **John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor** stretches from the headwaters of the Blackstone River in Worcester, Massachusetts, to Narragansett Bay in Providence, Rhode Island. With mill villages, roads and trails, dams and mill ponds, agricultural and natural landscapes, ethnic and Yankee traditions in neighborhoods, languages and foods, plus scenes recalling the age of industry, the park examines how the Industrial Revolution changed the landscape of the Blackstone River Valley and transformed life in America. In the many towns along the Corridor, visitors can look for evidence of the people who emigrated to industrial America. What brought people to work and live here, and how were their lives changed? What of their culture did they bring with them that we can still see?

Unlike a traditional National Park, the National Heritage Corridor is almost a virtual park, composed of 24 cities and towns on 454 square miles of land in the watershed of the Blackstone River. The Heritage Corridor works in partnership with a variety of federal, state, and local agencies, along with many non-profit and private organizations. One of the many partners within the Blackstone Corridor is the Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, an interactive museum operated by the Rhode Island Historical Society. This museum presents the compelling story of the French Canadians who left the farms of Quebec for the factories of New England. In the museum, visitors cross the threshold of a Quebecois farmhouse, experience the shop floor of a textile mill, and listen to people tell their stories on the front porch of a triple-decker home. Students touring the museum can relive the immigrant experience through films, interactive audio presentations, "please touch" exhibits, displays including over 200 photographs, and



changing exhibits. A visit to the Museum of Work and Culture will reinforce the content of this lesson. It will provide students with an opportunity to walk in the footsteps of real immigrants, to experience a different time and place, and to see, hear, and feel what leaving one's homeland to move to another country would be like. Call the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission for further information at 401/762-0250.

The Museum of Work and Culture is located at:
The Museum of Work and Culture
Market Square
42 South Main Street
Woonsocket, RI 02895 Phone: 401-769-WORK or 401-769-9675.

**From "History Lost and Found," Journal of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Winter 2002.*

Connections to the National Curriculum Framework Standards:

National History Standards

NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

Era I

Standard 2C: Assess the connection between industrialization and immigration. (Analyze cause and effect relationships.)

Era 6

Standard 1B: Trace the migration of people from farm to city and their adjustment to urban life. (Appreciate historical perspectives.)

Historical Thinking Standards

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARDS

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

B. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.

G. Draw upon visual, literary, and musical sources.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

D. Consider multiple perspectives.

Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-making

E. Formulate a position or course of action on an issue.

Connections to the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework Standards:

History

HISTORY and SOCIAL SCIENCE

General Economic Skills

14. Explain how people or communities examine and weigh the benefits of each alternative when making a choice and that opportunity costs are those benefits that are given up once one alternative is chosen.

US History I Learning Standards

USI28 Explain the emergence and impact of the textile industry in New England and industrial growth generally throughout antebellum America.

B. the causes and impact of the wave of immigration from Northern Europe to America in the 1840s and 1850s.

English Language Arts

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS:

8.22 Identify and analyze main ideas, supporting ideas, and supporting details. (informational / expository texts)

13.21 Identify evidence used to support an argument. (literary texts)

ELPBO

ELPBO (English Language Arts Proficiency Benchmarks and Outcomes)

S.3.33 Identifies details that support a main idea in a literary or informational text that is heard.





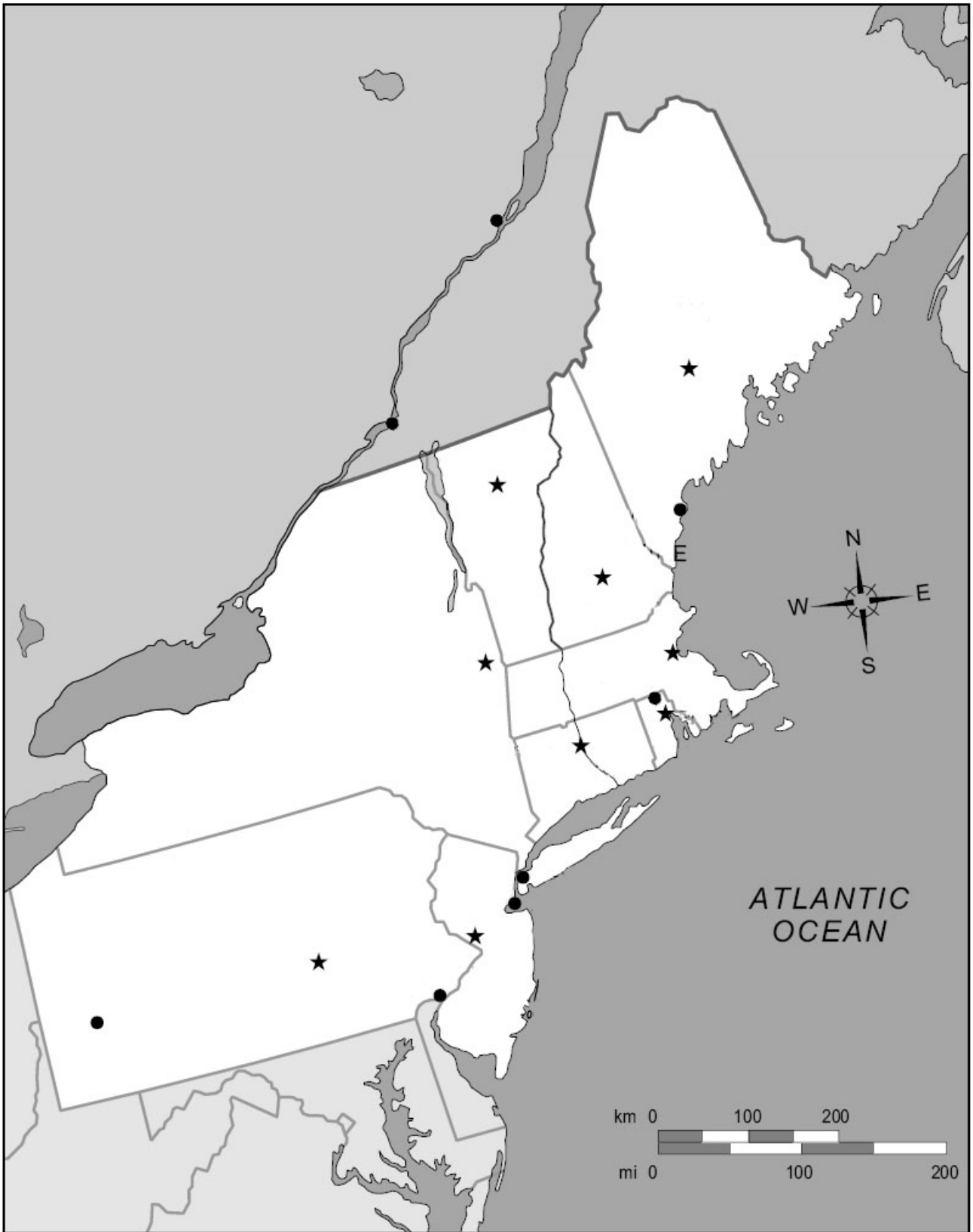


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Education Place: <http://www.eduplace.com>



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The Decision to Leave

By Raymond H. Bacon

(A script for the farm house at the Museum of Work and Culture)

The time: 1900

The place: St. Raymond, Quebec

The Opening Scene

Opening Scene: Early in the morning in rural Quebec (possibly in the village Of St Raymond.) A young girl (her name is Louise) opens the door of the farmhouse, stretches her arms, yawns and greets the day. As she is awakening she slowly looks about to the right and to the left. Upon observing the figures to her left she speaks to herself.

Louise: What a beautiful day! I see Papa in the field. As usual he was up before the sunrise and is already working. He must be so tired. Look at Ti Paul he must have been told that he has to help with the planting so he did not go to school. And Maman she is spinning the wool. I do hope that she makes me a pair of warm mittens for next winter. Oh those winters, it seems that as soon as the warm weather returns the cold winter is already waiting to come back.

(From around the corner **Simone** (Louise's sister) appears: She is about the same age as her sister and the two exchange morning greetings.)

Louise: Ah Bonjour Simone, you're up early this morning

Simone: Ah yes. I had to feed the chickens and gather the eggs for breakfast.

Louise: Did you sleep well last night?

Simone: Finally yes, but it took me a long time at first. I could hear Maman and Papa talking for quite a while. At times they were talking very loud.

Louise: Me too. I'm very concerned about what they were talking about. They seemed to be arguing with each other.

Simone: I know. It's the fault of Jean Boisvert and his ideas about going to work in the States.

Louise: Papa thought that he would like to go but Maman was not very happy about leaving

The Agent

Simone: That Jean Boisvert, did you know that he now works for some of the mill owners in Woonsocket? He calls himself an agent and recruits workers for the mill owners. He thinks that he's so important now that he lives in the States. He even changed his name to John Greenwood. Just who does he think he is?

Louise: Well I don't know Simone, he seems like a good enough person. Did you notice how well dressed he was? He bought that suit in the States you know. And did you see that gold watch he was wearing? I think that's because he has a good job in Woonsocket.

Simone: I think he wears that because it's part of his job. He wants to look prosperous. His job is to come back here in Quebec and hire workers for those mill owners. I don't think that he always tells the truth about life in Woonsocket. I'm sure that life there is not as easy as he describes it. Imagine, he tells us that we could earn more money there in a month than we can earn here in a year. He even said that we can earn more money than we can spend. That's very hard to believe.

Louise: Maybe it is ...but his speeches at the village square sound good. Did you notice how many people signed up to work after the harvest last year?

Simone: That may be true. ..but not all of them made it to Woonsocket. Remember the time when the workers were on the tram and were on their way to Woonsocket? How angry he was when another agent from another place, Fall River I think, offered them a better job there, Jean was fit to be tied when he lost almost half of his workers not to mention his commission.

Louise: That's true, but most did make it to Woonsocket and are still there.

Simone: I feel sorry for them, because they are in danger of losing their language and their faith.

A Question of Language and Faith

Louise: From what you say, I guess you believe everything that Monsieur le Cure preaches from the pulpit.

Simone: Louise! Don't talk like that! Of course I believe Monsieur le Cure. He is an educated and holy man. He is concerned about our souls. He sees what is happening almost every Sunday after Mass. Many of the parishioners are selling their furniture and household goods in order to go to the States. Their houses are boarded up and they leave.

Louise: Are you saying that when they leave they will no longer practice their Catholic religion?

Simone: Life in the States is not like life here in Quebec. Over there there are many cities filled with all kinds of people who speak only English. When that happens to a Quebecois it almost surely means that his religious ways will soon follow.

Louise: How can you say that?

Simone: Remember what Sister Marie Rose used to tell us at school? "He who loses his language, loses his faith."

Louise: *(In a fairly loud voice)* Voyons donc Simone do you really believe that? Sister only said that to frighten the children.

Simone.: Not so loud Louise. The younger children are still asleep. You don't want to wake them. And while we are talking about the children, what about if they have to go to school in Woonsocket. They will learn new things and forget all about their language and their heritage.

Louise: Don't worry about that. When our neighbors, the Bousquet's, came back from there last year their daughter, Pauline told me that there are new schools in the parishes where sisters from Quebec teach in French.

Factory Work in the States

Simone: Well, I don't know about that, but if it's true it's a good thing. The other thing that bothers me is working in those factories we hear about.

Louise: I'm not worried; after all, we work hard here on the farm. I'm not afraid of work.

Simone: But it's different in those factories. Last week the people in the village store were talking about a letter they received from their relatives in Woonsocket. It told about how work is in those factories. They said that all day long, for more than twelve hours you have to stand in front of a noisy machine. You can never leave until the workday is done. Some say that the work is also very dangerous. Some people have lost their arms when they got caught in those machines. They also hire children to do this work. I can't see Ti Paul, little Marie and the others doing this. I don't think I'd like that kind of work Louise.

Louise: I'm sure that it's not that bad. Oh those people in the village store all they do all day is gossip, talk politics and play checkers. Don't believe everything they say. Instead think about the money that we can make if we move to Woonsocket.

Simone: That's all you can think about Louise. I don't think that that would make us happy. Look at us here on the farm. We are a happy family aren't we? We are together. That's important to me.

Louise: That may be true, but every year it gets worse. You know what Papa said last fall. Every year we get less and less from the farm. The harvest has been poor for the last four years. He said it's because the land is not as rich as it used to be. Some day it will no longer be able to support us. Look at what happened to Baptiste's family. They lost their farm and had to go to the states to earn a living.

Simone: I'm sorry you brought that up, Louise; you know how much I liked Baptiste. I know that some day he will return and maybe buy his own farm.

Louise: That's wishful thinking. You know as well as I do that many young men have left Quebec and have never come back except to visit during the holidays. When we are of age to marry who will be left for us? I'm afraid that we won't have much to choose from.

Simone: When that time comes I'm sure that there will be many left who are still strong and true Quebecois who are willing to stay and make a good living for their families. After all we come from a people who are hardy and not afraid of hard work. Look at Papa and Maman they are good examples of that. Remember the stories they told us about the old days in Canada. How rough it was and how the people were able to succeed. That's who were are Louise, the descendants of those early Canadians. That s why I think Papa and Maman will decide to stay here.

Louise: Well, I don't know what Papa and Maman will decide. I only hope that they will make the right decision. In the meantime we had better go inside and prepare breakfast. You know how hungry everybody is when they come to the table. That's one thing that we can both agree on.

A Letter "Losing the French Language"*

March 28, 1921
St. Raymond, Québec

Cher Emile,

I received your letter telling me about how you liked your job and the city of Woonsocket. You know Emile that I am worried that if I go there to work I will have to learn to speak and understand English. I will find that very hard to do.

Remember when we were little and we attended the village school? The sisters told us that it was very important for us to keep our language because if we lost our French we would lose our faith. We have always been good Catholics and I would like to continue to be a good Catholic. I hope that you too continue to go to Mass on Sundays.

I have to talk to my wife, Louise, to see if we would be willing to leave our farm in order to go to the States. It is something that we have to decide together. Pray to God that we make the right decision.

Your loving brother,
Basile

* This fictional letter contains some true words and phrases that French Canadians actually used in their letters home.

A Letter

"A son in Woonsocket to his mother in Quebec"*

May 1906
Woonsocket, Rhode Island

Chère Maman,

There are many of us here who are trying to decide if we should go to work or return home to our farms in Québec. Most of us were encouraged to come here by Mr. Biosvert the agent of the mill owners. To be honest Maman, it is very hard work. We work twelve hours a day for five and one half days a week. The money is good but not like Mr. Biosvert told us. Remember he told us that we could earn more money at the end of a month than at the end of the year in Québec? He even told us we could earn more money than we could spend.

Monsieur Biosvert was very convincing when he spoke to everyone at the village square last fall. He sounded very good and the people put their trust in him. Many villagers signed up including my self.

As I told you before last fall before I left the farm, I was not afraid to work. But you said that it was different in those factories. You had heard in the village store that some had received letters from their relatives in Woonsocket. The letters told about how work is in those factories. They said that all day long, for more than twelve hours a day you have to stand in front of a noisy machine. You can never leave until the workday is done. Some say the work is also very dangerous. Some people have lost their arms when they get caught in those machines. They also hire children to do this. Now you couldn't see Ti' Paul, little Marie and the others doing this. Well, Maman, some of that is true. But as far as those people in the village store are concerned they don't know; all they do all day is gossip and talk politics and play checkers. The people here in Woonsocket are good hard working and church people.

Yes Maman they do leave. One reason is that every year it gets worse on the farm. You know what Papa said last fall. Every year we get less and less

from the land. The harvest has been poor for the last four years. He said it's because the land is not as rich as it used to be. Someday it will no longer be able to support us. Look at what happened to Baptiste's family. They had lost their farm and had to go to the States to make a living.

That's wishful thinking Maman. You know as well as I do that many families have left Québec and have never come back except to visit during the holidays. When I am of age, who will be left for me? I'm afraid that I won't find someone suitable to marry.

Well, I don't know what Papa and you will decide Maman. I can only tell you that life here in Woonsocket is not easy but it is rewarding. There are many things here that I did not even know existed while I lived on the farm. It is now getting late. I can hear the 10:30 trolley coming up the street and I can see the Opera House lights are being put out. I will have to go to bed soon because I have to get up early to work at the Social Mill. I hope that the decision you and Papa will make will be the right one.

Your loving son,
Justin

* This fictional letter contains some true words and phrases that French Canadians actually used in their letters home.