

Twentieth Century Settlers in the Blackstone Valley

Museum of Work & Culture, Woonsocket, Rhode Island

Rhode Island: State of Immigrants

The population of the United States soared during the last quarter of the 19th century because of an extraordinary influx of immigrants. Although the native-born still outnumbered foreigners, by 1900 Rhode Island had the highest proportion of immigrants of any state in the country. In the Blackstone Valley, immigrants in Lincoln, Central Falls, and Woonsocket made up nearly 50% of the population.



Amanda Ilda Senecal Bousquet, 1920s,
courtesy of Deborah A. Bousquet

Many earlier immigrant groups considered themselves “American” and didn’t welcome the new wave of newcomers who flooded the Blackstone Valley at the turn of the 20th century. They saw the new immigrants, particularly the French Canadians who continued to come in the early decades of 20th century, as competitors in the workplace.



Workers at the Lafayette Worsted Company, Woonsocket, c. 1940,
courtesy of Rene Tellier

Residents of English and even Irish descent felt threatened by the new immigrants. People of British ancestry had lived and worked in the Blackstone Valley since the 17th century, and the Irish arrived en masse in the 1820s to help build the short-lived Blackstone Canal, with more coming to escape the potato famine in the 1840s. By 1889 when James McCarthy, an Irish descendant from Providence, Rhode Island, established McCarthy’s Department Store in downtown Woonsocket, the group had gained social status.



British American Field Day, Woonsocket, 1911, courtesy
of Shirley I. Reichenberg

French Canadians had initially crossed the Canadian border to work in the New England mills during the U.S. Civil War, with significant Quebecois immigration continuing through the 1920s. However, they were not the only immigrants to settle in the area during this time.



Le Francois Teaming & Trucking Company, Woonsocket,
c. 1915-16, courtesy of Michael A. Hebert

Perhaps surprisingly, as the Blackstone Valley became more ethnically diverse it expressed a more distinctive, “American” identity. The pluralism of the streetscape reflected the diversity of owners, workers, and customers living in the area; taken together, they personified the American idea of *e pluribus unum*: out of many, one.