

Woonsocket and the Museum of Work & Culture

The [Museum of Work & Culture](#) is located in Market Square, an area central to [Woonsocket](#) (pop. 43,000) in its days as a viable mill town. The museum, which is housed in a former textile mill, opened in 1997 and is operated by the Rhode Island Historical Society.

Market Square developed around Woonsocket Falls, the largest drop (thirty feet) at any point on the Blackstone River. Economic activity in the area dates to the late 1600s when the first sawmill was built below the Falls. Water still plays an important part in Woonsocket, producing more than seven million kilowatt hours of electricity per year, powering the city's water and sewage treatment plants.

Market Square's heyday was the mid-1800s, when it was home to numerous mills, factories, and shops. The Blackstone Valley, which includes such former mill towns as Worcester, Massachusetts, and Pawtucket and Central Falls, Rhode Island, was at that time the industrial heartland of the United States. The Blackstone Canal, which linked Worcester and Providence, opened in 1828. Its construction was part of the area's economic boom and resulted in substantial immigration to the region. Later, the Providence & Worcester Railroad, which debuted in 1847, would supersede the canal as the dominant mode of transport in the Blackstone Valley.

Just behind the Museum of Work & Culture (MWC) is the Blackstone River and River Island Park. The MWC is so named because it presents not just the story of the textile mills that fueled Woonsocket's growth, but also the culture of the immigrant Québécois, who were the mills' principal workers. The theme of the MWC's permanent exhibition is *La Survivance*, which means not so much "survival," as "persistence and preservation." The MWC documents the struggle of the immigrant French Canadians to maintain their language, religion, and culture in their adopted home.

The museum is not overwhelming, and a visit can be accomplished in as little as thirty minutes. This is not to say that you can't profitably spend several hours at the MWC, but simply that the layout and technique of immersing visitors in various typical settings (mill floor, church, union hall) allows one to get a sense of the time and place of industrial Woonsocket relatively quickly. It's a great place for kids – they can see the actual machines used in textile production, and can sit at a desk in a mock 1920s parochial school classroom.

The MWC's *La Survivance* exhibit comprises the following sections, many of which feature audio.

The farmhouse (Quebec, about 1900). The immigrants did not come from Montreal or other cities, but almost exclusively from the countryside. In the 1800s, it was common for Quebec families to include a dozen or more children. The population pressure in rural Quebec, declining farm revenues, and discrimination in English Canada made the booming mill towns of New England a natural destination for Québécois unable to make a living from the land. Most of the immigrants had little if any formal education, spoke only French, and were used to the hard life of the farm. From the mid 1800s until the 1920s, there was a steady stream of Québécois immigrants to mill towns such as Woonsocket.

Church of the Precious Blood (partial replica of the oldest French Canadian parish in Woonsocket, founded 1874). The Québécois immigrants were overwhelmingly Catholic, and the church was dominant not just in areas of religion, but also language and culture. This part of the museum also functions as a theater and you can sit in the "pews" to watch a short movie. The mosaic on the wall was moved from Our Lady of Victories Church, another of Woonsocket's French parishes. The real Church of the Precious Blood is housed in an impressive 1881 building at 94 Carrington Avenue, about a half mile from the MWC.

Textile mill shop floor (about 1920). Mill life was highly regimented and the dictates of production and the clock were paramount. The Québécois were known to be obedient laborers who would work harder and for less money than their American-born counterparts. This part of the museum features a display of the "mule" used in textile production, as well as tools and miscellaneous items such as time cards. Next to this area is a display related to leisure activities, baseball in particular. Many of the mills had teams that competed with one another in industrial

leagues. The most famous Woonsocket baseball player was Napoleon (Nap) Lajoie, born to immigrant Québécois parents in 1875. A member of baseball's Hall of Fame, he played 21 seasons and still holds the American League record for batting average in a season (.422). Another Woonsocket Hall of Famer, although not of French Canadian descent, was catcher Gabby Hartnett, born in 1900. Much more recently, Woonsocket native Rocco Baldelli broke in with the Tampa Bay Devil Rays in 2003, and has subsequently played for the Boston Red Sox.

A porch and parlor of a triple decker apartment house (Woonsocket, 1920s). The classic Woonsocket dwelling, of which a number are still extant. Workers lived in close proximity to each other and their jobs, maintaining the ways of the old country in these densely settled ethnic enclaves.

The Slater Club (a mock board room, late 1920s). There isn't a huge amount to see here, but the audio presents the perspective of the mill owners and managers on textile production and the burgeoning labor movement.

Parochial school classroom (late 1920s). Until the 1920s, most Québécois children attended parochial schools in which the language of instruction was French. This model of a typical classroom captures the dual nature of the immigrant experience: a nun, who wears a habit and a large cross, stands next to the Quebec *fleur-de-lis* flag, while a portrait of George Washington stares at her from the wall. On the other side of the room, a Québécois priest stands next to the US flag. The audio warns the children to be good Catholics and obey the church.

Industrial Trades Union Hall (mid 1930s). This portrayal of a union hall documents the role of unions in obtaining higher wages and better conditions for the mill workers. The room is also used for occasional lectures and presentations, and features a video on the subject of organized labor in America.

La Survivance is an apt title for the MWC's exhibition. Québécois society of the time of the mass emigration to New England was very religious and socially conservative. While it was a challenge for the immigrants to resist assimilation, for a time this was accomplished and the ways of rural Quebec were reconstituted in Woonsocket, largely as a result of the influence of the Catholic church. For a number of years French was routinely spoken in the mills and throughout the city. By 1930, Woonsocket was considered the most French city in the US: 70 percent of the population had either been born in Quebec or was of Québécois ancestry.../include/thumb.php?id=221 At one time Woonsocket even had a French language daily, *La Tribune*, and one of Rhode Island's most famous governors was Quebec-born Aram Pothier, who died in office in 1928.

A large portion of Woonsocket's current population is of Franco-Canadian descent, and typical Québécois names like Fortin, Roy, Tremblay, Gagnon, and Levesque are common in the area. A massive mural on Main Street reads "Bienvenu à Woonsocket." Notwithstanding this greeting, the era of Woonsocket as an industrial boom town populated by immigrant Québécois is long gone. The decline began as early as the 1920s when the New England mills failed to keep pace with their Southern counterparts, which had newer machinery and lower labor costs. The Depression dealt a near fatal blow to textile production in New England; half of Woonsocket's mill workers lost their jobs in the 1930s. In the post-World War II era, the vast majority of remaining textile production fled to the South, from which it has now decamped to locations overseas. At the same time that Woonsocket's fortunes were declining, Quebec's economy was improving and its birthrate falling, reducing the population pressure in rural areas. Woonsocket and other mill towns no longer represented opportunity for the Québécois, and the stream of newcomers from north of the border dried up. Moreover, 1920s changes to US immigration laws limited the number of newcomers, including French Canadians.

In addition to the loss of fresh blood from the homeland, the French Canadians already in Woonsocket began to Americanize. This occurred not only because of the natural process of assimilation, but also because the tradition of educating Québécois children in French in parochial schools ended. The change came in 1922 when the Rhode Island General Assembly and Governor Emery San Souci, himself a Franco-American and a Catholic, passed a law mandating that Rhode Island children be educated in English in all basic subjects of elementary education. Given that the 75 percent of French Canadian children had until that point been educated in French, this was a massive shift. The debate over the new law, known as the Peck Act, divided the community. The local Catholic and French

Canadian establishments supported the Peck Act, while the "Sentinellistes" from *La Sentinelle*, a French-language newspaper, vehemently decried the legislation. The Sentinellistes were ultimately isolated when the Vatican intervened in 1928, ruling in favor of those who supported the Peck Act, and excommunicating the dissidents. The church retained a dominant role in the lives of Woonsocket's French Canadians, but over time, its influence waned, both cause and effect of the further assimilation of the Québécois.

The bulk of the MWC is devoted to the permanent exhibition, but there is one area for changing exhibits. These have included an examination of the quahogging industry, a display of antique toys, and a 25-year retrospective of jazz and blues music at [Chan's Fine Oriental Dining](#), a nearby Woonsocket restaurant.

In 2005 the Lt. Georges Dubois Veterans Museum opened at the Museum of Work & Culture. The museum's namesake was an Artillery Officer in the French army in WWI. He came to Woonsocket in 1922 as an executive for a French textile firm, and subsequently was an area mill owner.

The star attraction of the Veterans Museum is the Rhode Island Boxcar which formed part of the *Merci* Train, given by France to United States following WWII. The *Merci* Train comprised 49 box cars: one for each state with Washington D.C. and Hawaii sharing one. Each boxcar was packed with gifts from the citizens of France to show their gratitude to the US for aid given during and after WWII. The outpouring of French generosity was stunning; more than six million French families were involved, and thousands of gifts did not even make it into the boxcars.

The boxcars docked in New Jersey in February 1949 aboard the ocean freighter Magellan. Constructed between 1865 and 1885, the cars had originally been used for civilian purposes, but later saw service in both World Wars. Called "forty & eights" because they could hold forty men or eight horses, many American troops traveled on the boxcars on their way to the front. The Rhode Island car was accepted at Woonsocket on February 8, 1949, and carried to Providence with Governor John O. Pastore serving as engineer.

Once the initial hoopla died down, many of the states' boxcars, including Rhode Island's, were forgotten and fell into disrepair. The Rhode Island car, dedicated, "From the City of Cognac to the City of Providence, Rhode Island" languished for many years in Burlingame State Park and then in a Charlestown, Rhode Island junkyard. Eventually it wound up on a horse <http://www.wactc.wo.k12.ri.us/boxcar/boxhome.html> farm in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, having been purchased by Fred and Betty Tanner who'd learned of its fate from a 1995 article in the *Providence Journal*. The long process of rehabilitating the boxcar was spearheaded by French immigrant Jacques Staelen of North Smithfield, Rhode Island. The car was in very poor condition as it had been exposed to the elements for many years, and had also been burned and vandalized. The restoration of the car was helped by students at Woonsocket Area Career and Technical Center. The boxcar's wheels are gone, but aside from that, its exterior looks much as it did when it made its Rhode Island debut over half a century ago.

The inside of the boxcar has been fitted with audio and visual, which unfortunately was not operating on the day I visited. The AV simulates what it would have been like aboard the train: the speeding up and slowing down, the noise, and the snippets of conversation between soldiers. In addition to the boxcar, the modest Veterans museum has displays of uniforms, medals, and photographs. There are also a few of the gifts contained in the Rhode Island boxcar, as well as ephemera such as posters and music from wartime musicals. The museum walls feature murals depicting French railways during wartime, and provide a list of soldiers from Woonsocket killed in wars.

The Museum of Work & Culture fills a valuable function in keeping alive the story of the French Canadians who built Woonsocket, and whose descendants still form a substantial percentage of the local population. The museum also serves as a wonderful exposition of labor and industry in the Blackstone Valley, recording a time when New England textile production was vital to the regional and national economy.

If you wish to explore outside the museum, right next door is the 1830s Falls Yarn Mill building, and just up the road is the Hanora/Lippitt Complex at 1-15 Main Street, which dates to 1832 and is now an apartment house. Other spots of particular interest in Woonsocket include City Hall, Depot Square (home of the Providence & Worcester

Railroad's former station), and the 1920s [Stadium Theater](#).

Woonsocket City Hall at 169 Main Street is well worth a visit. The building was constructed in 1856 with an 1891 addition, and was the site of an 1860 speech by Abraham Lincoln. On the fourth floor is the mayor's office and a "[gift shop](#)" which is a glass case displaying such items as Woonsocket Christmas tree ornaments (\$8), candles (\$12), denim shirts (\$29.95), and spoons (\$3). More interesting than the trinkets for sale was a collection of gewgaws given Mayor Susan Menard by various organizations. These pieces are displayed in a bookshelf outside her office and include sundry hard hats, as well as baseball caps courtesy of the Veteran's Memorial Bridge and NatGun Wire-Wound Concrete Tanks, a clock from the U.S. Filter Corporation, a Cracovia Soccer Club sweater, and many, many, mugs including ones from Kiwanis and the Firemen's Relief Association. My favorite of these donated items was a pair of photos of celebrity impersonators Eddie and Anthony Edwards, posing as Elton John and Barbra Streisand. The Edwards are twin brothers from Las Vegas who have performed numerous times at the Newport Playhouse and Cabaret Restaurant, as well as at White's in Westport, Massachusetts.

Across the street from City Hall is the former Rhode Island Hospital Trust Building at 162 Main Street, which now serves as a DMV. It was constructed in 1930 as a smaller version of Providence's Hospital Trust building. It is the grandest DMV I've ever seen: the marble floors and high gold inlaid ceilings are more like a cathedral than a miserable tentacle of the state bureaucracy.

Just to the north lies Depot Square, former home of the Providence & Worcester Railroad. The 1882 depot building now serves as headquarters for the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor. Behind the station is the Harris Warehouse which was built in 1855, and designed with train tracks inside so that raw materials and finished goods could be loaded and unloaded in any weather.

Downtown Woonsocket, whose Main Street links Market Square and Monument Square, can be covered fairly easily on foot and includes these and other attractions. There is ample parking on Main Street, including a free city-owned lot, and this being Rhode Island, there are three wiener emporia within a five-minute walk of the museum: [New York Lunch](#) (8 ½ Main Street), Heritage Coffee Shop (66 Main Street), and [Main Street 2000 Restaurant](#) (114 Main Street).

If you wish to further explore Woonsocket, the [Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor](#) has produced a number of pamphlets featuring excellent walking tours of Woonsocket and surrounding mill towns. The Woonsocket tour begins in Market Square and River Island Park next to the Museum of Work & Culture. Brochures are available in the Visitor's Center at the entrance to the museum, and on the ground floor of City Hall. During the warmer months there are also [boat tours](#) on the Blackstone River. For a comprehensive and fascinating account of Woonsocket's history, culture, sites, and attractions (including a walking tour of Main Street) visit the site created by Woonsocket native and buff [Erik Eckilson](#). Finally, those keen to brush up on their French can tune into Woonsocket radio station [WNRI AM 1380](#) which has French language programs on weekends.

This article also appears on the [Quahog.org](#) website; a portion of it also previously appeared in the Montreal Gazette.