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# THE FRANCO-AMERICAN ORPHANAGE

*Immigrant Community and the Development of the  
Modern Welfare State, 1908-1932*



Classroom of "orphans" circa 1920. [1]

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# INTRODUCTION

**I**N 1908, OWNERSHIP of the Frederick Ayer Mansion in Lowell, Massachusetts passed from a millionaire investor to a community of immigrant workers. This change corresponded to the industrial city at a moment of social reckoning. At the time that organizers from St. Joseph's parish fundraised to buy the property from the Ayer's estate, living conditions and wages had degraded to abject lows. This sprawling fortress—four stories tall, complete with stained glass, pillars, and 67 rooms—was a testament to the fortunes amassed in local mills and, subsequently, became a home for the children of mill workers. In place of an elaborate house, the French-Canadian church established an orphanage for the care and education of children with working families. The Franco-American Orphanage (FAO), first a manor and then a childcare facility, can be considered emblematic of the dual versions of Lowell created by industry in the 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Lowell's orphanage was the result of local activism and can be understood as a formalized structure of mutual aid. Financially, the FAO was symbiotic with its community, both catering to and supported by the immigrant population of the city's Little Canada. Founders intended that the institution to provide short- and long-term childcare services for families; in remembrance of this objective, board members articulated, "In those days, orphans did not receive any special consideration by the civil authorities and the burden of education and caring for those unfortunate children fell on the shoulders of relatives."<sup>2</sup> By situating the FAO within the legacy of American mutual aid, this paper asserts an alternative interpretation of the orphanage in which the institution

was the product of grassroots collaboration rather than philanthropy in the patronizing sense. This reconceptualization of the institution deviates from an individualistic narrative of progress to one where the contributions of working families are central. As expressed by the original theorist of mutual aid, Peter Kropotkin, in 1914:

*The leaders of contemporary thought are still inclined to maintain that the masses had little concern in the evolution of the sociable institutions of man, and that all the progress made in this direction was due to the intellectual, political, and military leaders of the inert masses. [...] The creative, constructive genius of the mass of the people is required whenever a nation has to live through a difficult moment in its history.<sup>3</sup>*

Ordinary people were responsible for the existence of the FAO. Notably, a donation campaign in 1914 to pay the \$30,000 mortgage exceeded its goal by nearly \$10,000 and owed its success in large part to the contributions of other immigrant groups.<sup>4</sup> In following years, the orphanage accepted increasing numbers of children with Irish, Italian, and Syrian backgrounds. The FAO was at once an institution rooted in its immigrant community, dedicated to the preservation of French-Canadian heritage, and instilled with an ethos of multiculturalism. As such, the orphanage can serve as a crucial case study in grassroots organization.

In a broader context, social relief that was built up from the grassroots had a long-standing effect on the landscape of American welfare. In line with scholarship by Matthew Crenson and Peter Fritzsche (1998), this paper bolsters their claim that "welfare echoed charity and its child-centered character recalled the institutional purpose of the orphanage itself," positing that orphanages were the foundation, functionally and ideo-

<sup>1</sup> This paper relies upon archival documents translated by the author from the original French. Additionally, the character of the orphanage was assessed through several interviews of a former resident by the author. "Cultural Resource Inventory - History of Ayer Home incl. Photos," Box 1 Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History.

<sup>2</sup> Most influential in plans for the FAO was Reverend Joseph Campeau, who considered the orphanage his "dream." For most of the FAO's early life, board members were active members in St. Joseph's Parish and/or local businessmen while the daily activities of the orphanage were run by women. "Fr. Campeau brings Grey Nuns to Orphanage," Box 1 Franco-American Orphanage School collection, Center for Lowell History.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London: Heinemann, 1902. Reprint, Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2012), 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Donations varied in size and originated entirely from the Greater Lowell area. "Album Historique: Paroisse St. Joseph Lowell, Mass. 1916," Box 1 Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History.



The Ayer Mansion turned orphanage at an unknown date. The original 1859 house, the extension built in 1913, and the grotto for religious ceremonies are visible. [2]

logically, for subsequent developments in public relief.<sup>5</sup> Jessie Ramey (2012), in the same vein, emphasizes the agency of working-class people in establishing institutions thereafter absorbed into governmental structures. “Families were active participants in the history of institutional childcare, making decisions and choices that affected the development of early social welfare,” Ramey notes.<sup>6</sup> It is this process, wherein governmental structures are based in the charities that precede them, which creates the decentralized, variable systems of welfare coined by Alan Wolfe (1977) as a “franchise state.”<sup>7</sup> Michael Katz (1986) adds that “the boundaries between public and private have always been protean in America. The definition of public as applied to social policy and institutions has never been fixed and unambiguous.”<sup>8</sup> The FAO exemplified this ambiguity; it was at once a private organization and one that received funding from the Massachusetts government for acting on its behalf. Institutions such as the FAO were the product of mutual aid and later, to varying degrees, absorbed into the state. Mutual aid and American welfare

have in this way a historically porous relationship.

While immigrants created the model for community assistance in Lowell, top-down governmental reform aimed to discriminate against immigrants deemed unassimilable into white society. In Massachusetts, policymakers espousing eugenic and nativist beliefs were instrumental in dismantling generalized institutions of relief and replacing them with specialized institutions of rehabilitation. Reorganization of the welfare state relied upon an ideological dichotomy between “deserving” and “undeserving” paupers, with the latter subject to new apparatuses of policing. This paper highlights the interrelation of ideology and structural implementation as articulated by John Mohr and Vincent Duquenne (1997), who state:

*Most historical accounts of social-welfare institutions suggest that (1) the institutional logic of relief is composed of two elements—a system of differentiated relief practices (outdoor relief, the poorhouse, etc.) and a system of symbolic distinctions consisting of various*

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Crenson and Peter Fritzsche, *Building the Invisible Orphanage: A Prehistory of the American Welfare System* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 325.

<sup>6</sup> Jessie Ramey, *Child Care in Black and White: Working Parents and the History of Orphanages* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Wolfe, *The Limits of Legitimacy: Political Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism* (New York: Free Press, 1977). For further reading on decentralized welfare vis-à-vis orphaned children, see: S.J. Kleinberg, *Widows and Orphans First: The Family Economy and Social Welfare Policy, 1880-1939* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: The Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 2.

*normatively defined categories of the poor, and that (2) these two systems are mutually constitutive in the sense that changes in one corresponds to and constitutes changes in the other.*<sup>9</sup>

Contradiction, therefore, was built into the Massachusetts welfare state of the 20th-century. From the top down, legislators and social workers organized systems of relief in accordance with racist objectives and, from the bottom up, immigrant workers established mutual aid societies that were later integrated into the state. Immigrant communities were responsible for many of the earliest forms of assistance; simultaneously, the emerging welfare state was shaped by policy work steeped in contempt for immigrants themselves.

In Lowell, the FAO existed as a community-funded childcare service. Despite the mainstream conception of the orphanage, the FAO was an institution that provided temporary care for children with living families. This paper's analysis of administrative documents and over 3,000 orphan records determines that (a) approximately 97% of children at the FAO had family members paying dues and (b) 55% of orphans stayed at the institution for less than one year. "Orphans" were not forgotten nor parentless children. Immigrants, already the engines of economic growth for Lowell's industries, were at the forefront of bold initiatives to survive within harsh industrial conditions.<sup>10</sup>

These are the strands worth following from the single orphanage in Lowell. The first section of this paper investigates the political context of the FAO from local and national perspectives, delving into currents of eugenic thought that interwove 20th-century social work. An examination of Massachusetts legislative documents, notes from state committee meetings, and contemporary literature points to a conception of poverty that was the basis for enduring governmental reform. The second section details the situation of immigrants in Lowell, including the health crisis brought on by industrial poverty, the history

of French-Canadian presence in mill work, and the social networks that sustained the community during economic upheaval. Third, a statistical analysis of over 3,000 orphan records at the FAO between 1908 and 1932 reveals the function of the orphanage in the lives of Lowell's working people. Orphan ethnicities, parental occupations, city origins, and length of stay shed light on New England's mill city at a moment of significant change.

## LICENTIOUS MOTHERS AND MENACING CHILDREN

### *Political Context of the Orphanage*

**A**T THE TIME of the FAO's founding, Massachusetts was in the process of constructing its welfare system. Within the span of 60 years, Massachusetts established a State Reformatory for Juveniles (1847), several schools for "feeble-minded" children (1848), the State Board of Inspectors (1851), the State Board of Charities (1863), a Massachusetts Infant Asylum (1867), a State Primary School for Dependent and Neglected Children (1866), the State Board of Health (1879), an Industrial School for Girls and for Boys (1908), and along with many others. Specific categories of people—such as "juveniles" or "feeble-minded youth"—were relegated into institutions for rehabilitation.<sup>11</sup> Simultaneously, facilities that catered to broad swaths of the population, including almshouses, were in the process of dismantlement. A federal report in 1921 understood this process as:

<sup>9</sup> John W. Mohr and Vincent Duquenne, "The Duality of Culture and Practice: Poverty Relief in New York City, 1888-1917" in *Theory and Society* 26, no. 2/3 (New York: Springer, 1997), 313.

<sup>10</sup> Statistics calculated by author from financial records and over 3,000 admission records dated 1908 to 1932. The 97% of orphans with paying family members was calculated from figures dated the year 1920. Despite inconsistent records of orphans paying and not paying dues, the 1920 statistic appears representative of the FAO between 1908 and 1932. "Compter de l'Année," Box 3 Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History; "Recorded Meetings of the Members of the Executive Committee of the Orphanage," Box 3 Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History; "Admission Records," Box 4 Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History.

<sup>11</sup> United States Children's Bureau, *Child Care and Child Welfare; Outlines for Study* (Washington: Federal Board

*Increasing differentiation and classification of those requiring care, together with the tendency toward centralization under State control of provision for these classes, and the use of the family home instead of the institution as a means of providing for dependent, neglected, and certain classes of delinquent children.<sup>12</sup>*

Classification of welfare recipients for the purpose of separating, specializing in, or denying care was foundational to Massachusetts reforms throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Paupers were divided into official categories:

*The poor are of two classes: first, the impotent poor, in which dominion are included all who are wholly incapable of work, through old age, infancy, sickness, or corporeal debility. Second, the able poor, in which denomination are included all who are capable of work, of some nature or other, but differing in the degrees of their capacity and the kind of work of which they are capable.<sup>13</sup>*

It was the understanding of this 1821 report that the “evils” of poverty originated from the “difficulty of discriminating between the able poor and of apportioning the degree of public provision to the degree of actual impotency.”<sup>14</sup> In the same vein, an 1866 annual report from the Massachusetts State Board of Charities asserted that “it is better to separate and diffuse the dependent classes than to congregate them,” while providing instructions for a “system of observation” in which to “collect all the valuable facts” necessary for classification.<sup>15</sup> In Lowell, politicians regularly made distinctions between the “worthy poor” and their unworthy counterparts, fretting for the “idlers” who took advantage of state provisions. Mayor James B. Casey expressed, “the giving of aid [...]

as an injury is not only worked upon the family, but to the community as well.” The objective of the state board, Casey emphasized, was to ensure that charity only went to paupers with no potential of self-sufficiency. Methods of differentiating care were contingent on the idea that some paupers were intrinsically unworthy.<sup>16</sup>

This conception of poverty was the ideological foundation of the orphanage. A resolution from the Massachusetts Board of Charities in 1864 warned of “the unfavorable influences of [adult paupers], which, if a child be long subjected to them, will always haunt his memory,” and surmised that reform was only possible for children. By 1895, Massachusetts had become the first state to switch to a foster-care system that placed children into rural families; such a move was justified by fears for the “contaminating influences” of “licentious mothers.”<sup>17</sup> Reiterated in 1906, the Massachusetts State Board of Charity and Lunacy pushed for “the separation of the children at [the] institution from the more or less contaminating influences of the adult inmates, most of whom are from the lowest strata of life.” Adults coded as “immoral” were disproportionately those from immigrant and working-class backgrounds.<sup>18</sup>

Anti-immigrant sentiment was not incidental to welfare reform, but deeply integral to its design. In explicit language, academic studies linked the “importation of foreign laborers” to “dependency among adults and children,” and asserted as fact that “low class laborers, generally of foreign birth or descent” have “menac[ing]” children.<sup>19</sup> A professor from the University of Colorado warned of both the “army of immigrants” and “army of human energy among the ranks of the orphan population.” A “clear line of demarcation,” he suggested, was the only solution to this problem.<sup>20</sup> The psychologist G. Stanley Hall remarked in 1916 that “from the standpoint of eugenic evolution alone

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for Vocational Education, 1921).

**12** United States Children's Bureau, *Child Care and Child Welfare; Outlines for Study*, 1921.

**13** Massachusetts Legislative Committee, *The Josiah Quincy Report of 1821 on the Pauper Laws of Massachusetts, Written for the Massachusetts Legislative Committee* (Boston: Massachusetts Legislative Committee, 1821).

**14** Massachusetts Legislative Committee, *The Josiah Quincy Report of 1821 on the Pauper Laws of Massachusetts, Written for the Massachusetts Legislative Committee*, 1821.

**15** Massachusetts Board of State Charities, *Second Annual Report, January 1866* (Boston: Massachusetts Board of State Charities, 1866).

**16** Hon. John F. Meehan, *Inaugural Address to the Lowell City Council* (Lowell: Buckland Publishing Company).

**17** David Wagner, *Ordinary People: In and Out of Poverty in the Gilded Age* (New York: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 17, 28.

**18** Massachusetts State Board of Lunacy and Charity, *Twenty-Eighth Annual Report* (Boston: Wright and Potter Printing Co. State Printers, 1906).

**19** William H. Slingerland, *Child Welfare Work in California: A Study of Agencies and Institutions* (New York: Special Agent Department of Child-Helping, Russell Sage Foundation, 1916), 195.

**20** Robert A. Davis, *Mentality of Orphans* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1930), 164, 198.



Beds for children in the interior of orphanage, unknown date. [3]

considered, [certain immigrant groups] are mostly fit for extermination in the interests of the progress of the race,” and was quoted in a study by the Russell Sage Foundation on orphan children.<sup>21</sup> Echoed in governmental reports, officials expressed that immorality was “inherited,” and assessed that “vice and crime” were “forced upon [orphans] by those whose blood courses in their veins.” Definitions of worthy and unworthy paupers, upon which hinged the creation of entire governmental entities, were steeped in white supremacist convictions.<sup>22</sup>

To this point, a committee formed in 1851 entitled the Massachusetts Board of Commissioners in Relation to Alien Passengers and State Paupers conflated the threat of homeless paupers with immigrant residents. The intention of this organization was to “ascertain the names of all forei-

gners [...] and also procure all such further information in relation to age, etc. [...] in order to identify them in case they should hereafter become a public charge.”<sup>23</sup> Following suit, 1852 witnessed the criminalization of vagrant paupers and systemic deportations of the homeless; no less than 7,005 paupers were deported from Massachusetts between 1870 and 1878.<sup>24</sup> Adjacent to welfare, the expansion of a diagnostic apparatus saw to the practice of psychiatric evaluations and the collection of personal data in asylums and prisons—not dissimilar from processes for pauper classification and the record-keeping of vagrants. The carceral state was formed in tandem with welfare.<sup>25</sup>

Amid these national trends, Lowell in the early 20th century operated as a self-contained welfare apparatus. In the years leading up to the federalization of

**21** Slingerland, *Child Welfare Work in California*, 38.

**22** Massachusetts Senate, *Report of Committee on Public Charitable Institutions on Visits to Several Public Charitable Institutions Receiving Patronage of the State*, no. 79, (Boston: Massachusetts Senate, 1851).

**23** Massachusetts General Court, *An Act to Appoint a Board of Commissioners in Relation to Alien Passengers and State Paupers*, May 24, 1851, chap. 347, (Boston: Massachusetts General Court, 1851).

**24** Massachusetts General Court, *An Act in Relation to Paupers Having No Settlement in This Commonwealth*, May 20, 1852, chap. 275, (Boston: Massachusetts General Court, 1852).

**25** New York Board of State Charities, *Twenty-first Annual Report of the New York State Board of Charities: Special Report of the Standing Committee on the Insane in the Matter of the Investigation of the New York City Asylum for the Insane* (New York: New York Board of State Charities, 1887); Massachusetts Commissioner of Mental Diseases, *Annual Report of the Massachusetts Commissioner of Mental Diseases for the Year Ending November 20, 1924: Report of Director of Social Service* (Boston: Massachusetts Commissioner of Mental Diseases, 1924).

welfare in the New Deal, Lowell assumed responsibility for impoverished children and adults within its boundaries. In 1901, for example, the city invested a total of \$46,791.45 in relief, including expenses for ambulances, food, medicine, surgeons, and coffins.<sup>26</sup> The following year, Lowell allocated \$4,605.21 for the support of 98 orphans. Expenditures for dependent children ranged between \$1.25 (per orphan, per week) at St. Peter's Orphan Asylum and \$7.00 (per orphan, per week) at the Children's Hospital in Boston. Interestingly, Lowell's charitable budget made accommodations "on account of Lowell's paupers residing [elsewhere]," with payments totaling \$68.28 to Beverly, \$482.25 to Lawrence, and \$542.28 to Boston in the year 1902.<sup>27</sup> This system of localized responsibility can be understood as incentivizing the tracking and policing of paupers, particularly with programs geared toward behavior modification. In this way, the framework for Massachusetts' state welfare system predated the "big bang" of Roosevelt's New Deal and was initially a localized process.

Contradiction was built into the DNA of Massachusetts welfare from the beginning. The fundamental tenets of welfare—in which poverty was both a charitable cause and a moral failing to be discouraged—were locked in existential conflict. As Michael Katz (1984) has explained in his research on almshouses:

*Built into the foundation of the almshouse were irreconcilable contradictions. The almshouse was to be at once a refuge for the helpless and a deterrent to the able-bodied. It was to care for the poor humanely and to discourage them from applying for relief. In the end, one of these poles would have to prevail.<sup>28</sup>*

Development of the welfare state was shaped by conflicting and discriminatory conceptions of care. Demographic anxiety underpinned moves toward centralization and classification. Specialized institutions of rehabilitation replaced generalized institutions of relief

in order to omit care to low-income, non-native populations. As a result, immigrants in Lowell relied upon their own community networks to build systems of assistance.

## THE FINEST MILLS AND THE DIRTIEST STREETS

### *Economic Context of the Orphanage*

**T**HE INTERRELATION OF industry and immigration remains key to understanding the economic context for French-Canadians in Lowell. As early as the 1840s, mill recruiters scoured depressed areas of Quebec for inexpensive labor, attracting wage-earners with the promise of opportunity and personal betterment. A ten-day strike following the reopening of Lowell mills after the Civil War further accelerated recruitment in Canada. By 1900, 24% of all cotton mill workers nationwide were French-Canadian New Englanders; workers with at least one French-Canadian parent comprised 44% of textile operatives at this time.<sup>29</sup> The dimensions of French-Canadian identity in the U.S. were, from the beginning, economic in addition to cultural. In a presentation to the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics, the editor of the newspaper *Le Travailleur* elucidated this connection:

*The Canadians are peaceful, law-abiding citizens; and they accept the wages fixed by the liberality, or sometimes the cupidity and avarice, of the manufacturers. [...] Canadians have been great factors in the prosperity of manufacturing interests. Steady workers and skilful [sic], the manufacturers have benefited by their condition of*

**26** Lowell City Council, *Auditor's Sixty-Sixth Annual Report of the Receipts and Expenditures of the City of Lowell, Massachusetts. Together with the Treasurer's Account and the Account of the Commissioners of Sinking Funds for the Financial Year Ending December 31, 1901* (Lowell: Buckland Publishing Company, 1901).

**27** In turn, Lowell received funding from neighboring municipalities for their claimed paupers. Lowell City Council, *Report of the Secretary of the Overseers of the Poor for Lowell, January 1, 1902* (Lowell: Buckland Publishing Company, 1902), 24.

**28** Michael B. Katz, "Poorhouses and the Origins of the Public Old Age Home," in *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly. Health and Society* (Hoboken: Wiley, 1984), 118.

**29** David Vermette, *A Distinct Alien Race: The Untold Story of Franco-Americans, Industrialization, Immigration, and Religious Strife* (Montreal: Baraka Books, 2018), 98-111.

*poverty to reduce wages and compete favorably with the industries of the Old World.*<sup>30</sup>

Upon arrival to Lowell, French Canadians faced deteriorating working conditions, living conditions, and nativist backlash. Public officials who referred to French-Canadians struck a careful balance between demonization and appreciation of their contributions. Simultaneously, immigrants were a “horde of industrial invaders” and “indefatigable workers” supporting the city’s most lucrative industries. Condemnation and exploitation were not opposing forces but two sides of the same coin. David Vermette (2018) demonstrates that the degradation of industrial conditions coincided with the shift from Yankee women to immigrants as the principal source of labor in Lowell. The defamation of French Canadians, such that they were referred to as “sordid” and “an inferior race,” was both symptomatic of and justification for the inhumane environment in which they lived.<sup>31</sup> Vermette explains,

*It was the othering of the distinct, alien races in the mills that made possible this dehumanization, the identification of human beings with interchangeable machine parts. Care and empathy extended to those within the tribe and French-speaking Catholics of Quebec were not members of the Yankee tribe.*<sup>32</sup>

Downstream, poverty wages and the retraction of mill-subsidized housing had created a health crisis. In 1882, the Lowell Board of Health reported that the French-Canadian neighborhoods of Little Canada were an “unwholesome quarters” where “sanitary

laws [were] grossly violated. As a result, “many of these innocents [have] died from lack of nourishment, care, cleanliness, and pure air.”<sup>33</sup> Two years prior, the Lowell Daily Citizen described the city as having “the finest mills and the dirtiest streets,” marked by foul odors and animal matter. In 1881, a physician visiting Little Canada found “the family and borders in such close quarters, that the two younger children had to be put to bed in the kitchen sinks.”<sup>34</sup> At this time, Lowell’s Little Canada constituted the second densest neighborhood in the country after Ward 4 of New York City. The precarity that French-Canadian immigrants experienced was most evident in their heightened mortality rates; between 1890 and 1909 the likelihood of French-Canadian children passing away before the age of 5 ranged from 14% to 18% compared to 3% for native children. In 1890, adult French-Canadians experienced more than double the 15% mortality rate of their non-immigrant counterparts. The stakes for mutual aid societies in Lowell were demonstrably high.<sup>35</sup>

Shared culture was the foundation for facilitating intra-community relief in Lowell. By 1880, French-Canadians in New England had founded 63 parishes, 73 national societies, and 37 French-language newspapers, often directly and indirectly involved with charitable causes. By 1908, 133 parochial schools attending to 55,000 students had been instituted.<sup>36</sup> As the artist Alfred Laliberté has articulated: “the parish school remains the cornerstone of our national *survivance* in the United States. We can have parishes, societies, newspapers, and efforts of all kinds, but if our children do not attend parochial schools, we [will] lose all that.” Survival was a matter both literal and cultural.<sup>37</sup>

**30** *Le Travailleur* was a French-Canadian newspaper based in Worcester, Massachusetts. Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, “Resolve Relative to a Uniform System of Laws in Certain States Regulating the Hours of Labor,” in *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics*, chap. 29 (Boston: Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor).

**31** David Vermette, *A Distinct Alien Race*, 207, 250. Notably, the degradation of working conditions at this time coincided with an overall increasing population of immigrants in Lowell. Statistics compiled by the Lowell Board of Trade report that 40% of the city’s population circa 1916 was native born. The remaining 80% of residents were of either foreign or mixed heritage. Lowell Board of Trade, *Digest of the City of Lowell and its Surrounding Towns* (Lowell: Lowell Board of Trade, 1916), 5.

**32** Lowell Board of Trade, *Digest of the City of Lowell and its Surrounding Towns*, 116.

**33** George Frederick Kenngott, *The Record of a City: A Social Survey of Lowell, Massachusetts* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1912), 68-71.

**34** Yukari Takai, *Gendered Passages: French-Canadian Migration to Lowell, Massachusetts, 1900-1920* (New York: Peter Lang Publications, 2008), 50.

**35** Statistics calculated from survey data. Children’s ages ranged between 1 and 5. G. Frederick Kenngott, *The Record of a City: A Social Survey of Lowell, Massachusetts* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1912), 68-71, 133-34.

**36** Frederick Kenngott, *The Record of a City: A Social Survey of Lowell, Massachusetts*, 108.

**37** Alfred Laliberté, “L’école paroissiale,” in [Rev. Adrien Verette] *La Croisade Franco-Américaine* (Manchester,



Interestingly, Little Canada was an enclave notable for its French-Canadian roots and internal demographic diversity. Yukari Takai (2008) finds that the neighborhoods attracted workers of various backgrounds; a former resident recalled, “Everyone spoke French, including several families with names such as O’Beirne, O’Flahavan, Moore, Murtagh, Thompson, O’Brien, Lord, Sawyer, Thurber, Sigman, Tumas, Protopapas, Brady, and Grady.”<sup>38</sup> It is this complexity—that the city was a place where immigrants could affirm their identities, be absorbed into other identities, and one where cultural heterogeneity was celebrated among the workers—which offers a glimpse of a multicultural ideal specific to Lowell. Before instituting the FAO, the Grey Nuns were certain to include the clause: “while the orphanage is essentially Franco-American, we will not exclude other nationalities.” Children from Italian, Irish, and Syrian backgrounds were accepted throughout the subsequent decades.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the development of the FAO as a mutual aid organization was in many ways the mirror inverse of restructuring that occurred at the state level. The orphanage was established to be specifically French-Canadian and later expanded to cater for a more general, diverse population; Massachusetts policymakers, on the other hand, worked to restrict access to more specific and narrowly defined categories of paupers. American relief, in this way, has historically been a site of contestation and contradiction. The FAO may have been the pride of French-Canadians, but it was also a resource made deliberately available to anyone who needed it.

## ORPHANS WERE NOT PARENTLESS

*Inside the Franco-American Orphanage*



THE FAO CAN be conceptualized as both a mutual aid society and an agency operating on behalf of the emerging welfare state. As early as 1910, the FAO received funding from the Massachusetts Bureau of Charity that ranged between \$300 and \$700 annually and amounted to approximately 1–2% of the orphanage’s income. Between 50–80% of the institution’s revenue was derived from “child’s pensions” paid by the orphans’ families. Payment varied according to means; of the 291 children in 1920, 188 paid \$3 per week, 84 paid \$2.25, and 19 paid nothing. As stipulated in the Grey Nuns’ contract, “if an unknown orphan is admitted to the orphanage, Monsieur le Curé of [St. Joseph’s] parish would pay his pension [...] to be reimbursed by the parishioners.” Contributions through *Oeuvre du Pain*, the fundraising initiative, peaked in 1923 at \$5,567.12 and dropped to an all-time low of \$99.55 in 1933.<sup>40</sup> Orphan families, the French-Canadian community, and the state of Massachusetts account for the FAO’s survival at a time of economic recession and depression. The term “charity” ascribed to the orphanage understates both its proximity to the state and the contributions of ordinary people to its success.

A statistical analysis of the FAO’s admission records dating 1908 to 1932 further illuminates the institution’s role in the community. Information including the orphan’s birthday, parental occupations, home address, ethnicity, date of entry, and date of departure was dutifully recorded by the Grey Nuns when available.<sup>41</sup> As depicted in **Figure 1.1**, most orphans had French-Canadian heritage despite minor diversification in the 1920s. Between 1908 and 1920, a considerable 97% of orphans were French-Canadian compared to 85% between 1920 and 1932. **Figure 2.1** examines the representation of orphans from industrial cities, with exactly 69.7% from Lowell and the remainder with ties to Lawrence and Haverhill. In total, 94% of children were born in Massachusetts.<sup>42</sup>

N.H.: L’Avenir National, 1938), 256.

**38** This was likely because of Little Canada’s proximity to local mills. Takai, *Gendered Passages*, 55.

**39** “Correspondence of Grey Nuns 1908” Box 1 in Franco-American Orphanage/School collection at the Center for Lowell History; “Admission records,” Box 4 of Franco-American Orphanage/School collection at the Center for Lowell History.

**40** “Compter de l’Année,” Box 3 Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History.

**41** The FAO remained at full occupancy every year between 1908 and 1932. There was an expansion of the orphanage’s facilities in 1913 that can account for a surge in orphans cared for by the FAO. This coincided with both a deadly pandemic and the first world war; Statistics calculated by author from admission records 1908–1932. “Admission Records,” Box 4 Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History.

**42** To further the conversation on industrialization and immigration as interrelated processes, it is worth noting

Demonstrated in **Figure 3.1**, the plurality of parental occupations for children at the FAO were mill workers and journaliers (“day workers”). Most interestingly, the 3% of orphans with “none” parents—including those listed as “dead,” “unknown,” or “unemployed”—reveals that 97% of orphans, the overwhelming majority, had living and working parents.<sup>43</sup> The documented durations-of-stay for orphans at the FAO, depicted in **Figures 4.1 and 4.2**, bolster this discovery. Between 1908 and 1932, over half—55%—of children were dropped off and picked up within the span of a year. Approximately 78% of orphans resided at the FAO for less than 3 years. The average length of stay was 21 months compared to the median of 9 months. Most orphans at the FAO (a) had living, working parents, (b) were financially supported by their families, and (c) returned to their families after a temporary leave. This is a reconceptualization of what it meant to be an orphan in the early 20th century.<sup>44</sup>

In the case of a Syrian workman, George Alias, a decision was made to keep his son Philippe and daughter Eva at the orphanage for 22 days. Edmund Pinard, a carpenter in a nearby neighborhood, dropped off and picked up his son Joseph three times between 1926 and 1931. The three sons of Emile and Rose Duchanne, similarly, stayed for a two month stretch in 1930 and for a four-month stretch the same year. Parents, it is clear, were not abandoning their children. The FAO provided a service for surviving industrial life.<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSION

**T**HE FAO IN Lowell was an organization inseparable from its industrial context. This paper’s discovery that orphans were supported by families and given temporary reprieve at the institution can reconceptualize the

meaning of early 20th century charity. The FAO is analogous to contemporary systems of mutual aid and can demonstrate the indirect, localized mechanisms by which the Massachusetts state distributed relief. The myth of orphanages as repositories for abandoned children remains an outdated stigmatization of working-class parents; indeed, this paper outlines the ways in which orphanages were resources created by neighborhoods in collaboration with each other. Furthermore, the centrality of immigrant identity—both as the framework for organizing within working communities and as a site of backlash by nativist intellectuals—to the development of American welfare is posited to be a significant dimension of analysis and one that merits future research.

The FAO is proof of the interdependent relationships that defined the French-Canadian community in Lowell. As has been articulated by a former resident of Lowell’s Little Canada:

*The Population was so big in Little Canada that the blocks were real[ly] close. But all families got along beautiful[ly] and we were all French people. [...] Everybody helped everybody, which is not done nowadays like it was then, but people that had the money—if one needed help that means they would get together and they would come over and help. [...] If you look back to it, I still think I’d like to be there.*<sup>46</sup>

The FAO demonstrates the self-determination of French-Canadians within a context of structural inequality. As Richard Santerre (1993) has put into words, “people found emotional sustenance, psychological security, and a sense of meaning in Little Canada of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.” This meaning and security was built from the bottom up by working families.<sup>47</sup> ♦

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that the mill cities of Haverhill, Fall River, Lawrence, and Lynn were locations with large immigrant populations; “Admission Records,” Box 4 Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History.

**43** Journaliers worked primarily in seasonal and temporary job. Additionally, between 1908 and 1932, only 22 children were placed into adoptive care. This was primarily to other family members. “Admission Records,” Box 4 Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History.

**44** “Admission Records,” Box 4 Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History.

**45** “Admission Records,” Box 4 Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History.

**46** C.L., “Little Canada,” *oral interview*, May 3, 1975, typewritten transcript. Center for Lowell History, French-Canadian Oral Histories, 5, 22.

**47** Richard Santerre, *La Paroisse Saint-Jean-Baptiste et les Franco-Américains de Lowell, Massachusetts, 1868-1968* (Manchester, N.H.: Editions Lafayette, 1993), 43-44.

**Figure 1.1 Orphan Ethnicities**

1908-1912	1913-1917	1918-1922	1923-1927	1928-1932	% Overall	
384	1010	703	550	473	96.0%	Fr. Canadian
0	11	10	11	20	1.6%	Irish
0	0	3	35	10	1.4%	American
0	15	15	59	33	0.1%	Italian
4	17	6	76	63	3.9%	Other

*The "Other" category represents the small number of Syrian and Belgian children at the orphanage. [5]*

**Figure 2.1 Top City Origins of Orphans**

1908-1912	1913-1917	1918-1922	1923-1927	1928-1932	% Overall	
277	627	634	404	311	69.7%	Lowell
11	93	4	19	15	4.4%	Lawrence
14	24	12	47	10	3.3%	Haverhill
1	13	4	31	57	3.3%	Salem
4	43	12	8	33	3.1%	Lynn
8	6	5	22	7	1.5%	Boston

[6]

**Figure 3.1 Top Parental Occupations of Orphans**

1908-1912	1913-1917	1918-1922	1923-1927	1928-1932	% Overall	
136	249	109	142	106	36.1%	Mill workers
121	189	75	42	72	24.2%	Day workers
16	57	37	22	24	7.6%	Machinists
22	24	23	31	16	5.6%	Carpenters
8	33	11	32	16	4.9%	Shoemakers
8	21	6	12	18	3.2%	Painters
0	21	7	9	27	3.1%	Clerks
2	7	6	21	5	2.0%	Metalsmiths
1	5	3	12	18	1.9%	Drivers
13	2	3	23	25	3.2%	None

*"Day Workers" consisted of seasonal and temporary laborers, primarily working in mills, construction, and agriculture. The "None" category signifies the number of parents designated as "absent," "unemployed," "sick," "deceased," or "handicapped." Note: not all parental occupations are represented on the table. Other professions include electricians, grocers, farmers, bakers, barbers, and plumbers. [7]*

**Figure 4.1 Length of Stay at Orphanages (Percentages)**

1908-1912	1913-1917	1918-1922	1923-1927	1928-1932	Total	
5.2%	14.9%	13.8%	8%	8.9%	10.6%	5+ years
0.6%	8.6%	18.5%	10.3%	14.9%	11.6%	3-5 years
21.4%	4.8%	32.5%	24.5%	28.1%	22.7%	1-3 years
14.5%	8.3%	11.8%	18.7%	14.5%	13.7%	6-12 months
17.9%	14.3%	6.3%	15.7%	12.3%	12.7%	3-6 months
41%	49.5%	17.5%	23%	21.7%	28.6%	<3 months

[8]

**Figure 4.2 Length of Stay at Orphanage (Mean and Median)**

1908-1912	1913-1917	1918-1922	1923-1927	1928-1932	Total	
11.2	20.4	28.4	19.7	21.6	21.4	Mean
3	3	21	9	12	9	Median

Units in months. [9]

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## Image and Figure Sources

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- [2] Box 12 of Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History.
- [3] Box 4 of Franco-American Orphanage/School collection, Center for Lowell History.
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