

WARTIME NEEDS CREATED R.I.'S LITTLE CANADAS

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Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

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Textile manufacturing had been the backbone of the New England economy for more than 50 years prior to the firing on Fort Sumter that initiated the Civil War. Tremendous pressure was put on this industry by the blockade of Southern ports, the primary source of cotton, and one of the first targets of the Lincoln government in response to the crisis.

As the war escalated, however, there was an ever increasing demand for uniforms, blankets and other textiles for the Union armies. Woolen manufacturers quickly responded.

"One of Rhode Island's first millionaires, Edward Harris built one of the largest mills up to that time," according to Ray Bacon, of the Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket. "The Privilege Mill was one of four mills in the city (of Woonsocket) by 1865." The mill owners soon found that they had an additional problem. Their workers were going off to war in unprecedented numbers.

"There was this influx of Quebec immigrants," Bacon explained. "The workers had gone to the war, so the woolen manufacturers hired agents to recruit workers from Canada."

More than 7,000 French Canadians (known as Canadiens) moved to Rhode Island by the end of the war, accounting for almost 10 percent of the state's population. Though initially recruited to work in the woolen plants, the immigrants were ubiquitous to all the war industries that were burgeoning throughout Rhode Island. In addition to Woonsocket, which even today counts nearly half of its population as being of French Canadian descent, large numbers settled in Providence, Warwick and Warren. They helped supply the Union forces with leather goods, armaments, metal tools and hardware, and even built two steam engines for the navy.

An estimated 100,000 Canadiens crossed the border during the war, but immigrants from Quebec were nothing new to New England. The Ballous, French Huguenots, settled in the area in the late 18th century and were pioneers in Woonsocket's textile industry. They began recruiting French-Canadian families in the 1840s who, because of their unique language and cultural heritage, tended to cluster into what became known as petits Canadas. One study found that of fifty-one families that emigrated from St. Prosper parish in Champlain County, twentyone settled in Woonsocket alone.

The Quebecois didn't just come to work in the mills. Spurred on by the publication of the French language version of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1853, Canada developed a strong abolitionist movement and became the final destination of the Underground Railroad that ferried runaway slaves to safety.

Ironically, the failure of the Lincoln administration to embrace abolition at the beginning of the war led many Canadians to support neutrality. Nevertheless, it is estimated that as many as 20,000 Canadiens may have served in the Union army. Although these numbers are not certain since many may have already been living in the U.S. and many more may not have been counted due to "Americanization" of their surnames, French was the official language of several New England regiments.

After the war, the influx continued as the petits Canadas and high wages (compared to what they could earn back home) acted as a magnet for the extended families that were still living in Quebec. By the end of the century, onethird of the population of Quebec, nearly a million people, would leave for the mill towns of New England.

Today, 17 percent of the population of Rhode Island claim French Canadian heritage, making the Ocean State the largest petits Canadas south of the St. Lawrence.

The Museum of Work and Culture features a hands-on experience of the immigrant experience. See www.ris.org/museumsmwc.html for more information.

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