Alexandre BELISLE (1856-1923)

When he died, the English-language newspaper in Worcester, Massachusetts, where Alexandre Belisle had worked his whole life, described him as one of the most prominent French-speaking citizens of the city.

Alexandre Belisle was born in 1856 in Sainte-Victoire, Québec and came to Worcester as a child with his family. As the eldest in the family, he had to leave school at the age of ten to work in one of the big shoe factories there. Twelve years later, he became manager of the newspaper Le Travailleur, whose founder-editor was Ferdinand Gagnon, a man described by Belisle himself as “the real creator of Canadian journalism in the United States.” After the unexpected death of Ferdinand Gagnon in 1893, Belisle founded his own newspaper, L’Opinion Publique, with his brother Eugène, while also working as an insurance broker. All the Belisle brothers (there were four of them) later joined forces to form the Belisle Printing and Publishing Company. Alexandre was president of the company throughout his life.

Alexandre Belisle was deeply involved as a citizen of his adopted city. He was elected to the City Council, the first Franco-American to reach this position. He served there for a four-year term, from 1888 to 1892. Appointed by the City Council to be director of the municipal library board for a six-year term, from 1905 to 1911, he became president of that same council in 1910, after having served as secretary for two years. During his presidency, he encouraged the construction of library branches in every part of the city. He also served as a board member for two banks in Worcester. He was a member of the Economic Club, the Worcester Continentals, the Worcester Historical Society, and the Worcester County Mechanics’ Association. Far from neglecting his Franco-American compatriots for his civic work, Alexandre Belisle also belonged to the Union Saint-Jean-Baptiste d’Amérique and the Association Canado-Américaine.
At his death, besides his three sons, he left three brothers: Eugène, United States consul in Limoges, France; Georges, a lawyer; and Hector, superintendent of public schools in the city of Fall River, Massachusetts.

During his entire life, Alexandre Belisle was dedicated to assembling all the documentation he could find relative to the history of the French in North America. During his many travels, he met with French-speaking journalists who, like him, worked to preserve the French fact in the United States. His house, which had two rooms filled with documents, became an outstanding library. Finally, in 1911, he was able to publish his masterpiece, a landmark piece on the history of Franco-Americans, to which he gave the following title: *Histoire de la presse franco-américaine et des Canadiens-Français aux États-Unis*. The book provides a wealth of information of all kinds, including “a history of newspapers published by French people in New York, Louisiana, and elsewhere.” It remains a useful resource, even today.

Not satisfied with having assembled and published this vast compilation, Belisle went on to publish, in 1920, a work documenting the professional, political, and social activities of Franco-Americans in the City of Worcester, a work he entitled: *Livre d’or des Franco-Américains de Worcester, Massachusetts*. In the preface to this book, Franco-American writer Corinne Rocheleau describes the author as a “tireless researcher and patient editor.” A rarity at the time, Belisle was invited to deliver a speech on French Canadians to the prestigious *Worcester Society of Antiquity* at the beginning of the century. Further, he collaborated with Charles Nutt, historian of the City of Worcester, by composing the biographies of the Franco-Americans who appear in Nutt’s voluminous *History of Worcester and its People* (New York, 1919).

Alexandre Belisle, who died in 1923, was able to make himself respected, not only by his compatriots, immigrants like himself, but – an even more difficult task – by those among whom
he and his family had settled. He earned his prestige by his own efforts. Let us pay tribute to those who overcame so many difficulties to become successful men.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


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