Avila BOURBONNIÈRE (1847-1922)

Born in Montréal in 1847 to François-Michel Gaudry dit Bourbonnière and Catherine Vinet, Joseph-Avila Bourbonnière died in 1922 in that same city, after having lived in Lowell, Massachusetts for twenty years. Bourbonnière published his major works in the United States, in the city of Lowell, namely three editions of his *Guide français des États-Unis* published in 1887, 1889, and 1891. Married in 1870 in Saint-David-de-Yamaska, Bourbonnière became the father to eight children.

Responding to a call from leaders of French-Canadian immigrant groups interested in knowing their true numbers in the United States, Avila Bourbonnière was the first to undertake this task in the late nineteenth century with the publication of his first *Guide français des États-Unis*.

Many details about Franco-American immigrants can be found in his works: their way of life, the names of the merchants who spoke their native language, as well as the structures set up to serve them: their “national” parishes, parochial schools, social clubs, all of which contributed to the group’s ability to maintain their native language, their religion, and the values brought here from Canada.

In addition to his three *Guides*, Bourbonnière published *Les Canadiens-Français de Lowell, Mass.* in 1896 and *La mutualité, ce qu’elle a été, ce qu’elle est, ce qu’elle sera* in 1919, when Franco-Americans were establishing mutual aid societies: the Société Jacques Cartier in 1889 (first known as the Chevaliers Jacques Cartier d’Amérique, the group changed their name in 1919 to become the Société Jacques Cartier); the Association Canado-Américaine in 1896; the Union Saint-Jean-Baptiste d’Amérique in 1900; and the Société de l’Assomption, founded in
Fitchburg, Massachusetts in 1903 by and for the Acadian population (it eventually returned to its native country, with headquarters in Moncton, New Brunswick). We should not forget that certain local groups also merged with mutual aid societies in French Canada, such as the Société des Artisans.

In the introduction to his second *Guide*, Bourbonnière indicates the reason for his work:

To provide Franco-Americans with official statistics published in the interest of supporting the important religious and national causes of our compatriots in the United States. Our work has already generated good results; should it prove useful once again to everyone and produce the desired effect, we will have fulfilled our purpose. The greater goal is to make the Canadian cause known and to help promote it in the United States.

Avila Bourbonnière concludes by thanking Dr. Rodrigue Mignault, treasurer of the Société de Publications Françaises des États-Unis, for advancing “the funds needed to found and promote the great undertaking of the *Guide Français*.”

Bourbonnière’s *Les Canadiens-Français de Lowell, Mass.* was published in 1896 with support from the Union Franco-Américaine de Lowell, which Bourbonnière served as secretary. Once again, the author explains his objectives, specifically his “contributions to promoting the Canadian community of Lowell.”

The Union Franco-Américaine of Lowell, Massachusetts, founded in 1895, had the purpose of “bringing together the French-Canadians in the city to safeguard their interests through naturalization and to teach them about public and municipal affairs.” This society had the advantage of having in Bourbonnière a man proud of his French-Canadian heritage and capable
not only of praising the achievements of his fellow compatriots, but also of advancing their interests in their adopted country thanks to his position as assistant assessor of the municipality.

In *Les Canadiens-Français de Lowell, Mass.*, Bourbonnière strongly advocates for the naturalization of immigrants while deploiring “our sad divisions, our personal enmities that we are unable to put aside for the greater good of the community.” “One of the causes of our terrible political position,” he adds, is “the jealousy that is killing us.”

In 1896, after ceremonies honoring the Rev. André-Marie Garin, O.M.I., including the blessing of Saint-Jean-Baptiste Church of Lowell, Bourbonnière, organizer of the civic part of the celebration, wrote that there were 19,545 Franco-Americans in Lowell in a total population of 84,407 people. The Franco-Americans were grouped in 3,622 families, he added.

In the letter accompanying one of his guides that was gifted to Pope Leo XIII at the Vatican, Rev. F.X. Chagnon, a priest actively involved in the religious *survivance* of his parish, described Bourbonnière's work as follows: “It is the semi-official census of the French-Canadian Catholic population in this part of America.”

Having returned to Québec after spending many years in Lowell with emigrants like himself, Bourbonnière published two books in the city of Montréal: *Manuel pratique des ingénieurs mécaniciens* (1916) and *La mutualité* (1919).

Avila Bourbonnière fully deserves the thanks of the Franco-American community. He also deserves our praise because during the twenty years he spent with us, he succeeded in making the community of immigrants from French Canada and their contributions to their adopted country better known.

Claire QUINTAL
WORKS


-La mutualité, ce qu’elle a été, ce qu’elle est, ce qu’elle sera. Montreal: G. Ducharme, 1919. 185 p.


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