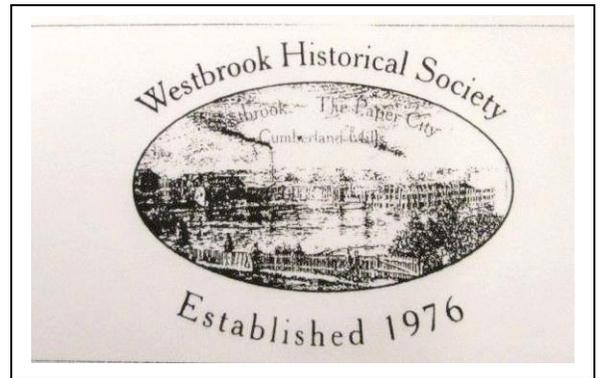


# Westbrook Historical Society

**"A Society That Preserves the Past"**

**Winter 2021 Newsletter**



## Catholics in Westbrook

From St. Hyacinth Parish Chronical

One of the Catholics known to have come to Westbrook was John Graham. He arrived from Canada in 1854, and is said to have found two other Catholic families here on his coming. This John Graham had a son, John like his father, born here in Westbrook. He returned to Canada with his family for a short time, but finally settled in Westbrook, where he died, in 1900, at the age of 87.

The tax-lists of the period reveal a growing number of Catholic names. Names of some of the families who have left descendants here are: John Brown, Thomas Cragan, Thomas Doolin, David Stack, Patrick Welch. Most of these came to Westbrook from Portneuf in Quebec, as a result of recruiting by an agent of the Warren Mills.

The building of the Grand Trunk Railroad, put into operation in 1854, had occasioned the employment of young Canadians, who thus became familiar with these parts and with the opportunities open to them because of the building industries here.

The older inhabitants tell of a cloudburst which was followed by such a flood in the river that a large section of the shore tumbled into the stream. The obstruction had to be cleared in a hurry; the urgency sent someone to Canada for men to help. Young men accepted the offer. A few of these men, later took up their residence in Westbrook, and here they have remained. Regis Labrecque, for instance, went back to his home after working in that emergency, married, and settled here afterward with his family. He had thirteen children, all of whom were living and joined in the celebration of the Golden Wedding of their parents on Bridge Street.

So it is that the first French-Canadians found their way to Westbrook, the Perrins, the Levesques (Bishop), Labrecques, Poitras, Harnois come to mind as early examples. Their numerous descendants are well known. These original Catholic settlers had to go to Portland for Sunday mass and the ministrations of religion, and they walked as there was no other recourse. In later years, they liked to tell how many of them carried their foot gear in their hands, a large part of the way, to save shoe leather; how they carried a lunch along when they intended to receive Holy Communion, and had their breakfast on the way back.

John Graham Jr. told the writer that he remembered hearing about mass celebrated at Cumberland Mills in the house of John Brown, this would be in the 1850s – 1860s, and quite probably Father DeRose of the Cathedral staff, at the time, was the celebrant. Be that as it may, we know that Father Pensardin of Biddeford made a visit here, July 21, 1872, and that he said Mass in the Warren Block, at the corner of Main and Bridge Streets. The records of St. Joseph's in Biddeford bear testimony to that effect.

He made other visits at odd times, but the building of St. Joseph's Church demanded all of his attention and he was obliged to relinquish the Westbrook mission to the priests of the Cathedral in Portland.

The Catholics here were increasing in numbers. In 1873, Brigham Hall, almost opposite Bridge Street, was leased and furnished as a chapel: pews were rented and installed. Once Confirmation was

administered in that chapel by Bishop Healy. Among those confirmed that day was Mary Lefebvre, later Mrs. Michel Levesque. Different priests ministered to our people: Father Bradley, soon to be made the first Bishop of Manchester, Father Lee, Father Linehan.

In 1877, funds were collected to purchase a Brown Street house and a parcel of land large enough to accommodate a church. A small cemetery was opened behind the church and on Easter Sunday, in the unfinished church, mass was celebrated. Because of the fast-growing Catholic population, a larger church was built with an addition for a sanctuary and sacristy. The church was dedicated on August 22, 1879. Membership at the time was numbered at 175 families.



### Reasons to immigrate from Quebec to Maine:

The quality of life in Quebec was stark. Transportation was difficult because of a lack of good main roads, and homes rarely had conveniences of the day, such as glass windows and brick chimneys. Cash money did not exist as we know it. Nearly all purchases were made by bartering goods. The average French-Canadian only received two years of schooling, limiting the opportunities each person had to better his own life. Unlike the bustling prosperity found in American communities, which flourished and prospered after initial pioneer hardships, daily life in the French-Canadian villages revolved around survival.

In 1837, they rose up in armed revolt against the English-run government because "Upper Canada" (Ontario) was being treated far better than "Lower Canada" (Quebec). The revolts were crushed by government troops and the leaders were hanged or imprisoned.

At about the same time as the revolts took place, the textile mills of New England were beginning to expand as demand for factory-made cloth increased. French-Canadians jumped at the opportunity to leave their drab life in Quebec. Between 1840 and 1860, approximately 20,000 French-Canadians immigrated to the United States. The English government and the Catholic church were dismayed by the exodus, but no serious attempts were made to halt the flood of immigrants.

With the completion of the Grand Trunk Railroad between Montreal and New England in the 1850s, the immigration swelled to even larger numbers. The French-Canadian immigrants became the main labor source for the textile mills of New England. During the 1880s, 1902, and 1920s, all periods of expansion for the textile industry, the total number of immigrants may have reached several hundred thousand. Franco-Canadians also came to farm the fertile lands of New England and to cut the timber needed to build the growing number of American ships and homes.

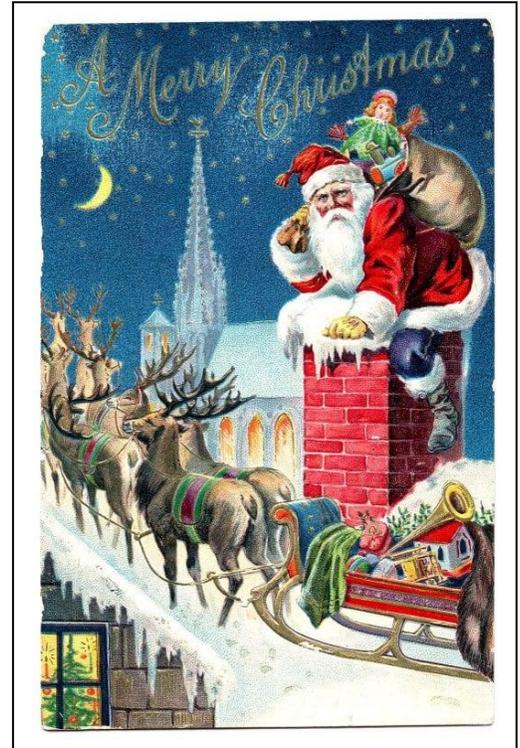
## New England's First Christmas Celebration in Maine May Have Been First in America

By Laura Morrill Brewer in December 19, 1937 newspaper article

It was Dec. 25, 1604 – some 334 years ago that a band of stalwart men sat down before the first Christmas feast in the State of Maine – the first in New England and possibly in the whole of the United States. It was on the Island of St. Croix – “Isle of the Holy Cross” – some 16 miles below Calais. Earlier in the year Samuel de Champlain and Sieur de Monts had discovered the island and had decided that it was the ideal spot to make a settlement. Consequently, the company of Frenchmen, headed by De Monts and commissioned to establish a permanent settlement in the New World, had landed on the St. Croix Island and made preparations to spend the Winter. They were the participants in this first Christmas observance.

Typical Maine winter snow had come early that year and this Christmas Day saw Maine gripped in the throes of a typical Maine Winter. The ground was covered with a thick white blanket; ice was frozen on the river; and the chill north winds shrieked menacingly across the bleak island. But the extreme cold could not penetrate the solidly built shelters nor dampen the ardor of these fun-loving Frenchmen; if anything, it added to the snug comfort and warmth of the open log fire; helped the party to relish the roast venison, toasted acorns, along with some champagne and delicacies from the Mother Country brought forth for this auspicious occasion. It is recorded that this Christmas Day's celebration was fittingly opened with solemn church services in the chapel. There was a Catholic priest and a minister in the party and it is possible that two services were held, one for each faith. The services we are sure were well attended by all of the members of the curiously composed group of 79 men, who came from all walks of life. We are told that there were nobles from the Royal Court, villains from the French prisons, adventurers, scholars, Protestant Huguenots and staunch Roman Catholics. All dwelt together in apparent peace and understanding.

The religious services concluded, the company indulged in feasting and merry-making. An important feature of the entertainment was the reading of the first edition of the colony newspaper, “The Master William”. Incidentally this newspaper, which was written by hand instead of printed, is generally believed to have been the first newspaper published in America. So here we have the State of Maine laying claim to the first Christmas celebration in New England and possibly in the United States, as well as to the first newspaper in the land. “The Master William” contained the gossip and doings of the colony, enlivened we may well suppose, by many a joke on individuals in the group. We may well imagine the fun and laughter as each one found himself the butt of some good-natured joke. There was but one copy of the paper and that was handed around from one to the other to be read aloud, and we are told



that a good many pleasant hours were spent perusing the columns of this strange newspaper with many exciting stories. But to return to the Christmas celebration, which lasted all day. Following the sumptuous feast, the party gathered in the large hall before the blazing log fire to exchange anecdotes and incidents of their colorful careers. We are sure that many of the group was surprised to find the king planning a settlement in Acadia. It is only natural that Champlain's services should be sought as pilot and navigator of the expedition which had as the ultimate purpose the grounding of a French capital in the New World.

When the voyagers reached the New World, they sailed but a few miles up the river of the Etechemins, when they spotted a small island surrounded by rocks and shoals. The spot was selected as the ideal location for the new settlement, and the company put into the harbor and prepared to make permanent quarters. A line of palisades was constructed on the north end of the island; shelters were constructed; a storehouse was built and a well and two garden plots laid out. By the end of the summer months the work had progressed so rapidly that Champlain sent part of the company back to France with favorable news of the colony, and with orders to bring back supplies and more settlers in the following spring. Champlain himself remained with but one ship and seventy-nine men to spend the winter. It was this group that celebrated their first Christmas in the New World so royally. Today a suitable marker commemorates the De Monts Colony and still reserved are the quaint old maps and fascinating accounts of the St. Croix Colony as recorded by Champlain and Marc Lescarbot. Maine owes to them a debt of gratitude for were it not for the records and accounts they made, we of the present generations would undoubtedly be in ignorance of this first Christmas celebration about we have just read, on soil away back in 1604.

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### **GIANT WALKING SERVICE MAN SIGN – On the National Historic Register One of the memorable heritage pieces left by Allerton Hawkes**

At the corner of Bridgton Road and Hardy Road stands the giant walking serviceman, the area's biggest landmark and once the home of Hawkes TV, which was started in 1955 by Allerton and Barbara Hawkes, and ran until December of 1989.

In 1946, long before the giant serviceman walked the corner, Allerton and his father, Amos Hawkes, with the help of Freddy Gowen moved and erected Ern Hardy's sixty-foot windmill water tower which was moved down to the corner from the spring behind Ern Hardy's house. Allerton attached an antenna to the top of the tower and ran a wire from there to the top of a cupola on his father's barn and to try his luck at amateur radio transmitting. While still in Westbrook High School, transmissions were good enough to reach his neighborhood friend's radios and play their favorite records. Allerton wasn't happy with just a local audience so he kept improving his transmitter until he could reach Foster's Corner in Windham and Morrill's Corner in Portland. His early radio days came to an abrupt end when his father found out it was more than just an ordinary crystal set that he had built.

In 1948 and 1949, Allerton would run a radio repair shop at the corner by the name of Artisan.



In 1953 he would use the windmill tower to mount a TV antenna to receive two Boston television station. After the television business started in 1955 Allerton wanted a sign for the company that would stand out and catch the public eye. He wanted something similar to the large Sandman Hotel sign in south Portland, a motion sign like that of the Universal Laundry on Congress Street in Portland and the colorful sign like the Pratt-Abbott sign in Portland. With these four things in mind for a sign - large, moveable, colorful and personable and with the ideas from a book on signs that belonged to Roland Borduas, Allerton came up with his design. The sign would be made up of I-

beams, formed galvanized sheet metal, mechanical motor driven parts, and electrical contacts and lights. The sheet metal was formed with the help of George Burnham, the gear driven parts were designed by Don Rogers and the painting of the sign was done by Eddy Gaudet. The construction was underway in the spring of 1962 by Allerton, his father, Amos and Dale Lewis. The sign was made up of 400 eleven-watt bulbs flashing in an arrow like pattern. The giant walking serviceman sign would be completed in December of 1962. The serviceman actually never moves his legs, but both arms swing and his left leg is bent up, giving one the impression that he does walk. When Al and Barbara closed their business in 1989 the sign was turned off but still stands as a marker for passing motorists.

Local businessman Bill Umbel recently purchased the property and is working to restore the sign to compliment Lenny's Pub that he recently opened in the Hawkes Building.

Al was well known as a country and bluegrass musician and in 1980 was entered into the Maine Country Music Hall of Fame. He performed throughout the United States and even held a gathering of musicians at his home on Hardy Road in Westbrook and invited the neighbors.

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### **MCLELLAN'S STORE**

McLellans's opened a store on Main Street in Westbrook in the early 1920s and people often referred to it as the "Five & Dime Store". F. W. Woolworth came to Westbrook in the early 1900s. Woolworths was forced to vacate their location and moved in next to McLellan's These stores competed against each other with apparently enough business for both

### **McLellan's To Close – American Journal 10/16/1996**

McLellan's has Notified Henry Gagnon, its landlord, that it will not renew its lease at 855 Main Street, Westbrook, which expires January 30, he said yesterday.

The McLellan department store has been a fixture in downtown Westbrook for a half century or more. It is the only wide-variety retailer in the city center.

Its next-door neighbor, Day's fine jewelers, moved out earlier this year and was replaced by a rent-to-own furniture chain.

Gagnon said McLellan's sales volume has dropped recently but still is above average. The lease calls for a base rent, plus a bonus rent when sales go above the base. Sales have been above the base for 10 years, he said.

McLellan's parent company has been reorganized under bankruptcy laws and appears to be doing well under the reorganization plan, Gagnon said.



Across the street, CVS has agreed to pay \$200,000 for city land, the land cleared when the Westbrook Urban Renewal authority tore down the three-story brick Scates Block about 20 years ago. It plans to build a new store there vacating its store at 924 Main Street.

Next to the Scates Block site, Rite Aid will be moving out when it moves to its nearly-complete new store in Cumberland Mills,

further east on Main Street.

McLellan's manager in Westbrook said yesterday that he had not heard about the store's closing but would be looking into it.

### **Curtain is Falling on McLellan's Store – American Journal January 1, 1997**

The manager of the Westbrook McLellan store said Monday that he expects the store's last day in business to be Monday or Tuesday January 6 or 7.

He said the store is not having a closing sale, but many items are reduced by 30 to 50 percent with Christmas items 75 percent off.

He has heard that another McLellan store in Maine that was scheduled to be closed will stay open, after its landlord cut the rent by \$20,000 a year.

He said he has told his company of the vacant former Rite-Aid store in Westbrook but hasn't heard if McLellan's has contacted Rite-Aid about the space.

He said a start-up Maine-based five and ten chain has leased former Rite-Aid stores he knows of, at Mill Creek and in South Portland.

### **\$77,000 Loss in Westbrook Fires – Portland Press Herald February 15, 1934**

5 Firemen Are Injured, Two as Ladder Topples

Others Suffer From Smoke and Frostbite – McLellan, A & P and Woolworth Stores Destroyed as Blaze in Business Section, Believed Out, Breaks Out Anew as Firemen Battle Flames in Brackett Street Dwelling – Portland Sends Help.

Fighting their second general alarm fire at 4:50 o'clock this morning, within three hours of the time the first was thought to have been extinguished, Westbrook firemen were obliged to divide their forces and call for aid from Portland when they discovered from the roof of the burning building upon which they were working, that the first fire had broken out anew. The third general alarm in 10 hours was rung at that time.

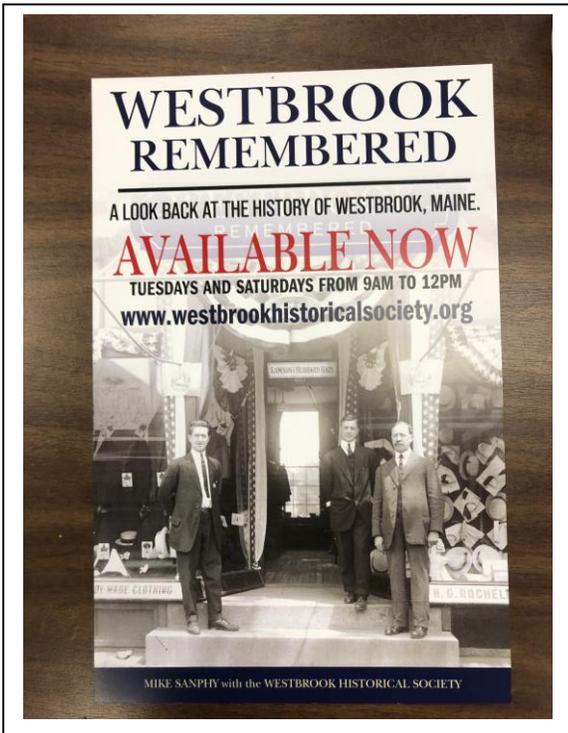
The fire last night in the McLellan building, in the heart of the Westbrook business section is believed to have started from the explosion of an oil burner. It raged fiercely for more than two hours after it was discovered shortly before 7 o'clock Wednesday evening. Firemen threw tons of water into the basement from nine hose lines. When the fire was finally under control water stood five feet deep in the basements of the three stores and the McLellan store had been destroyed, although the A & P store and the Woolworth stores had escaped the flames. Some damage had been caused in these two by smoke and water.

At midnight, more than five hours after the fire was discovered, the floor of the McLellan store fell in at 1:30 a.m.

Chief Edward A. Reny was satisfied that the last of the flames had been extinguished.

### McLellan's Sign in Sidewalk Outside the Door on Main Street

The original sign in the sidewalk in front of McLellan's former location (now Full Court Press) was showing wear and tear and Deb Shangraw decided to replace it with a new replica copying the old one. Deb is a member of the Westbrook Historical Society and has been instrumental in preserving some of its history. Not only did she take it upon herself to replace this sign, she has prepared is working with the owners of the building where the Underground Railroad site was located and has developed a historical sign and obtained their permission to place it on their building which is now the site of Westbrook's House of Pizza. The unveiling will take place when the Blue Note Park reopens after the renovation there is done.



### Amazing Sales of Westbrook Historical Book by Michael Sanphy and the Historical Society.

The Westbrook Remembered Book has over 200 pages of black and white and colored pictures with accompanying text describing old Westbrook. Take a trip down memory lane into the past. The shipments came in in 50 book lots and sold out quickly. The printer had problems with their binder which spread out delivery and each lot was sold out as soon as it arrived.

Many people planned to use them as Christmas gifts.

Read about the buildings – some no longer there – the businesses, and the people who played a part in the history of the city. Thanks to all who helped make this such a successful project!

### *President's Message*

Hello everybody. As we come to the end of 2021, I want to wish all a Merry Christmas and a positive coming year. The sale of Westbrook Remembered books has brought many more people into the Historical Society. It is always good when members stop in and chat a bit. I have had the honor of autographing many of the books.

We will be holding our first meeting of the new year in February on the first Wednesday at 130pm and hope to see many of you there.

During the past year I worked on putting together the just published Westbrook book. I drew on my huge collection of negatives and glass slides which I had collected through the years. Many of the prints came from the Marshall Studio which was located on Main Street over Day's Jewelry store. It is nice to share my collections with interested people and hear their remembrances of our old city – most of them pleasant. Sales are amazing and comments are very favorable as the pictures are sharp and the writing just enough to pull up old memories.

I look forward to seeing you in the upcoming year.

**Again – Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!**  
*Sincerely, Mike Sanphy, President and Author*

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Officers: President- Mike Sanphy , Vice President- Roberta Wyer Dutton Morrill , Secretary- Lorraine Glidden,  
Treasurer- Tom Clarke      **Open Saturday and Tuesday mornings from 9 am to noon.**  
Our website: [www.westbrookhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.westbrookhistoricalsociety.org) – gives a fascinating outline of the Collections, Research  
Library and Exhibitions of the Society. Maintained by Donna Conley

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