

## **French Americans**

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French Americans are one of the oldest ethnic groups in American society, having progressively formed an identity since their first arrival in America in the 16th century. Today, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, 9.3 million Americans report being of French ancestry, while only 152 thousand U.S. residents were born in France. Although not one of the most culturally visible or demographically significant of the American groups, French Americans have developed a unique culture, shaped by a prolonged history of immigration.

Despite a relatively small number of immigrants in comparison with other groups, the French have had a disproportionately large impact on American society and have played a crucial role in American history from the earliest colonial stages. However, French Americans remain one of the least documented American ethnic groups: few works have been devoted to the group, and most amalgamate French Canadian ancestry with French ancestry. This is further complicated by the fact that early migration patterns are not always easily categorized—such is the case of the Cajuns, the Acadians who left France to settle in the area that is now part of both present-day Maine and Quebec, and then migrated south to Louisiana. French Americans are defined here through the more direct path of American residents of French ancestry and their descendants.

While the group can sometimes be explained through waves of immigrants fleeing sporadic religious, political, or economic hardship in France—as was the case for the Huguenots under the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the *émigré* of the French revolution, or the 19th century French fleeing rural hardships—it can more generally be understood as a heterogeneous migration of individuals, trying their luck in varied pursuits in America. Consequently, members of the group frequently assimilated culturally, and the group is relatively heterogeneous.

Geographically, French Americans are dispersed throughout the United States. Early French migrants have traditionally settled in Northeastern regions of New England, as well as in Louisiana; both regions still have well-established French American communities. Newly arrived migrants, however, settle largely in urban areas, particularly in New York or California.

### **Early Exploration**

The first published appearance of the term ‘America’ was in France in 1507, in a cartographer’s treatise written in Saint-Dié-des-Vosges. Yet the French experience in America formally began with Verranzo’s 1524 exploration of the eastern coast for French King Francois I. Under commission from Francois I, Jacques Cartier then penetrated the continent through the Saint Lawrence River on his second voyage. In the area comprising

the present-day United States, French colonies were established at Charlesfort, South Carolina in 1562, and Fort Caroline, Florida in 1564. However, early settlement of the continent proved ill-fated as the colonies were abandoned due to poor internal leadership, lack of supplies from France, or conquest by other European powers. Some security was brought when Louis XIV recognized New France as a royal province in 1663. The subsequent colonial infrastructure, although relatively minimal, allowed for more reliance on the fur-trade managed by the *coureurs des bois* and the *voyageurs*, this in turn profited French interests by pushing the frontier westwards and southwards.

French Jesuits represented a powerful religious and politico-cultural force in the early French exploration, settlement, and colonization of North America. The Jesuits succeeded, albeit with only temporary success, to infiltrate the Native American tribes, to convert them to Catholicism and their allegiance to France. The earliest missions, between 1609 and 1625, were established in the northernmost regions of New France: Acadia, the Great Lakes, and the banks of the Saint Lawrence River. By the second half of the 17th century, however, relatively stable French Jesuit missions operated in Illinois and Wisconsin. The success of the French Jesuits may be attributed to their recognition of the tribal customs and understanding of Native American communities, an approach that contrasted strikingly with that of the English or the Spanish. Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf, for instance, recommended that the French missionaries dress and eat as the Native Americans, and missionaries commonly learnt the native languages, extended their diplomatic efforts to manage intertribal conflicts, and familiarized themselves with social matters. Far from being viewed as savages, the French approached the Native Americans as lost souls seeking first salvation and, second, subsequent cultural assimilation into French societal values. In exchange, Native Americans sought the benefits of allegiance to France—an allegiance that would help consolidate the territorial claims of France and the further settlement of New France.

### **Religious Emigration**

The uprooting of the French Protestant community by the Ancien Régime created a Huguenot Diaspora, which was partly present in North America. The royal intolerance toward Protestantism, which had already displayed itself by 1610 under the influence of Cardinal Richelieu, was greatly amplified during the reign of Louis XIV. In 1685, Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes of 1598. The Revocation severely restricted protestant religious freedoms and had the intended effect of dramatically reducing the presence of Protestantism in France. The policies limiting Protestant institutions, including temples and schools, combined with a campaign of violence that was perpetrated by the royal *dragonnades*, forced many Protestants to either convert under duress or seek exile in both the Old and New World. Among the destinations for emigrating Protestants in the Americas were New York, New Rochelle, New Paltz, Salem, Virginia, and South Carolina.

The number of French immigrants to America who fled religious persecution is unknown and is contested amongst 20th century historians. Jon Butler's *The Huguenots in America* consolidates multiple primary sources including census figures and naturalization lists to

estimate that the number of Huguenots who immigrated by 1700 was in the realm of 1500 to 2000. Similarly contested is the rate of assimilation of the Huguenots into New World society. While many Southern French Huguenots immigrated to French America, others immigrated to the English or Dutch colonies—thus in 1658 some Northern French settled in Dutch Kingston, while others settled in Staten Island or Salem. Butler advances the thesis that the Huguenots integrated their colonial communities with a fair degree of detachment from their immigrant peers. There was no strong or centralized form of worship or strongly organized New World French Protestant institutions. The immigrants intermarried and, by the mid-18th century, many second- or third-generation immigrants had assimilated into Catholicism. Contrary to this view, Robin Gwynn's *Huguenot Heritage* and Catherine Randall's *From a Far Country*, propose that the Huguenots either assimilated slowly or that they never assimilated, respectively. The later view supposes that the French Protestant influence on both colonial and post-revolution America is highly significant. From the social, political, and theological history of French Protestant immigration, can be traced the Protestant work ethic and the potential for self-reinvention. The genealogy of some of the individuals who have shaped U.S. history can be linked to early French Americans: Martha Washington, Paul Revere, and Alexander Hamilton are all descendants of this wave of French immigration.

### **The Politics of Empire**

Political developments, both in France and its empire, can be seen as having principally motivated French emigration from the end of the 18th century to the mid-19th century. Periodic immigration during this period should be considered simultaneously to the larger colonial context of territorial gains and losses, with their macro- and microeconomic and political causes and consequences. Although, on the whole, French immigration is rarely divided into waves due to the relatively minor magnitude of its collective phenomenon and the independent nature of its individual immigrants, four periods of 18th and 19th century political instability can nonetheless be seen as having promoted French immigration to America and the continuous formation of the French American identity.

First, the French Revolution encouraged noblemen, *les émigrés*, to flee the guillotines and seek refuge in the New World. Second, the 1791 slave revolt in Saint Domingue, in which the white population found itself outnumbered ten-to-one by slaves, as well as the independence of Haiti, forced thousands of surviving French plantation owners to flee to Louisiana and Cuba. Third, Napoleon's conquering of Spain, which led to anti-French riots across the Spanish world, instigated the emigration of 2,500 whites and 5,000 blacks from Cuba to New Orleans in 1809. Finally, the unrest of the Bourbon Restoration motivated both immigration and emigration between the United States and France.

By 1763 the extent of France's colonial possessions in the Western Hemisphere had largely diminished. The loss of Louisiana to Spain with the 1762 Treaty of Fontainebleau and the transfer of Acadia, Canada, and Cape Breton to England with the 1763 Treaty of Paris marked the loosening of the colonial grasp of France in the New World. Yet the

French presence in America was sustained by immigration responding to political instability abroad, and the sometimes forced, sometimes voluntary, integration of immigrants into a heterogeneous French America.

### **19th Century Immigration**

Before 1819, precise figures regarding immigration of the French to the United States are almost nonexistent. It was only in 1819 that a law forced ship captains to provide their passenger records at the port of arrival. Additionally, it was not until 1908 that returns were taken into account in the estimates, skewing figures particularly for small groups like the French.

Despite the lack of formal immigration records, it is possible to establish that a great wave of emigration from France occurred between 1817 and 1818, a few years after the abdication of Napoleon Bonaparte. At the time, demographic pressures, particularly the overpopulation of French rural areas and the scarcity of resources, forced many Frenchmen to leave their homeland and seek opportunities abroad. Indeed, when large cities could no longer absorb the incoming population, due to a slowing industrial sector, some decided to emigrate from France and, while most tried their luck in the French colonies, some left for the United States. Furthermore, regional policy may have lessened national ties and encouraged emigration: some regions such as the Basque country, the Pays de Caux (now the Havre), Aveyron, and Champsaur still practiced a custom of impartible inheritance, contrary to the rest of the county, where inheritance was shared equally amongst the children. Consequently, younger siblings in the family were more likely to emigrate than the elder child who may have been managing family estates.

To these domestic conditions were added international conditions that promoted immigration toward the United States. During the French Revolution of 1848, which established Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (or Napoleon III) as head of the 2nd Republic, many Frenchmen decided to leave, not only in order to avoid the economic crisis in France but principally to seek their luck in the Californian Gold Rush. French immigration to the United States also occurred at the beginning of the 1870s, when France lost the Alsace and Lorraine regions in the Prussian war. A large number of people chose to leave the regions in order to avoid Prussian rule. While most fled to the neighboring regions, the French colonies, or to Paris, a sizeable number of Alsatians, principally Jews, chose to immigrate to the United States.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, French-born U.S. residents increased from 54,069 in 1850, to 109,870 in 1860, and 116,402 in 1870; essentially doubling the number of French-born residents in twenty years, and this in spite of returns. Indeed, between 1820 and 1870 an estimated 245,812 French citizens arrived in the United States, but many returned to France. Emigration slowed during the last two decades of the century, and was characterized mainly by individual initiatives. The number of French emigrants remained constant during the remainder of the 19th century, reaching 104,197 by 1900. Until the 1850s, migrants arrived from many regions of France, but became more urban and

politically motivated after 1848. By the end of the century, they were more rural, came from a more limited number of regions, and had interests that were more characteristic of their region of origin.

### **French Americans in the 20th Century and Beyond**

Although a sizeable French American community was established by 1900, counting 104,197 individuals according to the 1900 Census, the group's growth and cohesion would be limited by the series of wars fought by France. World War I strongly reduced French immigration, to the point that Basque immigration almost completely stopped. Following the war, French emigration was discouraged as the reconstruction created a great demand for labor in France that was satisfied only with great difficulty, due to the human loss from the war and a decrease in population growth that France had been experiencing since the 19th century. By the time that the French reconstruction had almost completed, the United States limited immigration from France through the Immigration Act of 1924, by which only 3,000 French immigrants were allowed per year. World War II, however, saw an increase in French immigrants seeking a safe-haven from the rise of Nazism in Europe.

Although France did not experience as much of a brain drain toward the United States as did England, the 20th century did see many notable intellectual, artistic and entrepreneurial additions to the French American group. Amongst these, one can count the sculptor Gaston Lachaise, musician Edgar Varese, designer Raymond Loewy, painter Amedee Ozenfant, as well as multiple Nobel prize winners.

Cultural consciousness was stimulated by a series of diplomatic crises between the United States and France. The unpopularity of the Vietnam War and, to a lesser extent, President Charles de Gaulle's commentary on North American politics in the 1960s, as well as the 2003 Iraq War, brought into question the allegiances, sensitivities, and identity of the French Americans as a group that is distinct from the French and the Americans. The strengthening of the French American identity was particularly evident during the first half of the 20th century, during which bilingual elementary schools, Catholic institutions, and various other social grassroots organizations were formed. The awareness of the group became less pronounced during the second half of the 20th century, however, as many French American institutions closed and the impact of the French language in the United States trailed behind Spanish due to Hispanic immigration.

By the end of the 20th century, French Americans continued to form a group of relatively similar size to the start of the century. The 1980s U.S. Census found that 120,000 French Americans lived in the United States, largely in urban areas, particularly in California and New York.

## **French American Contributions and the Contemporary Scene**

Following the Guizot Law of 1833 and the Jules Ferry laws of 1881 and 1882, which made secular primary education accessible to all French citizens for free, French emigrants were generally educated, making their assimilation into American society relatively smooth and swift. Today, French Americans tend to be wealthier and better educated than the average American population. For instance, in 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, less than 8.4 percent of the French American population did not complete high school, compared to 14.4 percent for the national average, and 33.3 percent of French Americans had some college education, compared to 28.9 percent for the national average. In the same year, they had a median household income of \$52,483, compared to \$50,046 for the average population.

Although French Americans have settled in every state of the United States, newer immigrants have generally settled in regions other than the traditional French American bastions. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, French Americans born in France reside principally in the District of Columbia (17.4 percent), followed by Florida (6.8 percent), New Jersey (6.5 percent), California (6.4 percent), Hawaii (6.2 percent), Maryland (5.4 percent) and New York (5.3 percent). A similarly large proportion of this group resides in Puerto Rico (17.7 percent). These choices in destination contrast strongly with the traditional areas of French immigration. Nonetheless, French Americans continue to account for a significant proportion of population of these historical regions: Louisiana (15.1 percent), Maine (17 percent), New Hampshire (16.5 percent), Vermont (15.5 percent), Rhode Island (12.5 percent), Massachusetts (8.4 percent) and Connecticut (6.4 percent). Despite these geographical concentrations, however, French Americans are, on the whole, dispersed throughout the United States: 25 percent are in the Northeast, 23 percent are in the Midwest, 33 percent are in the South and 20 percent are in the West.

## **French Americans and Their Continued Influence**

Culturally, French Americans have maintained their influence through organizations and grassroots associations despite relatively minor immigration from France. In order to keep in touch with developments in the old country and to provide local news adapted to their audience, multiple French American newspapers have appeared in the United States. As early as the 18th century, periodicals such as the *Courier de Boston* and Philadelphia's *Courier de l'Amerique* appeared. Other newspapers were soon created: *Le Courier des Etats-Unis* in New York, *L'Echo de l'Ouest* in San Francisco, *L'Union Nouvelle* in Los Angeles and *L'Amerique* in Chicago. The 19th century saw the creation of multiple French American publications, particularly from Massachusetts and Louisiana. In 1889 the *New York Times* started publishing a weekly paper *Le Nouveau Monde*. From the 19th century to the present day, French Americans have formed organizations that have attracted both French intellectuals and American Francophiles. Indeed, in the United States, it became *de bon goût* to be able to speak and read French, as familiarity with post-Enlightenment French thinkers and philosophers was highly regarded. A notable example is the Alliance Française, which was established in several cities, including San Francisco in 1889,

Chicago in 1897, and New York City in 1907. The organization now promotes French culture and language through over a hundred chapters in 45 states. The 2010 Census reports that there are currently over 1.3 million U.S. residents who report speaking French at home.

The cultural impact of the French Americans has been much larger than could perhaps have been expected from their group size. The founding of cities, from Saint Louis to New Orleans to Boise, can be attributed to French American history. As a group, French Americans have helped shape American society by contributing *savoir-faire* and expertise in numerous domains, from agriculture and trade, to medicine and art. They have influenced American life by bringing French food, fashion, and also the language itself to the United States. At the same time, through the varied backgrounds of their immigrants as well as the identity crises raised by the occasional diplomatic conflict, they have developed a cohesive French American identity.

**Further Readings:**

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