

lafayette in salem



by lou mandarini



Left: Hamilton Hall's main ballroom, where the Exploring Franco-American symposium will be held. Right: An illustration of Lafayette above the mantel surveys The Lafayette Room in Hamilton Hall. Photos by Lilly McCre

If you were to ask any Salem resident how to get to Lafayette Street, chances are overwhelming that he or she would answer in five seconds flat — complete with pointing, gesticulation and maybe even a map.

But what if you were to ask that same Salem resident to tell you something — anything — about the fellow with whom Lafayette Street shares its name? Chances are equally overwhelming that, unless you fortuitously happened upon a Salem State University historian, you'd get more than your fair share of blank stares.

In an effort to remedy that commonly-shared historical knowledge gap about the Marquis de Lafayette, 22 organizations from around the region are holding a gala celebrating the 255th anniversary of the American Revolu-

tionary War hero's birth on September 7 at Salem's Hamilton Hall.

Une Fete pour l'anniversaire du Marquis de La Fayette is going to be a night to remember. Complete with dessert crepes, French cheeses and, of course, a champagne toast, the evening dedicated to the French hero features a Lafayette impersonator and a keynote speech by Francois Furstenberg, chair of the University of Montreal, called *When the United States Spoke French, Trans-Atlantic Politics, Land and Diplomacy in the Age of the Revolution*.

To prepare for such an extraordinary event, a thumbnail historical sketch is in order:

Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier — known as the Marquis de La Fayette, or "Lafayette" for short — was a French aristocrat and

general who served alongside George Washington in the American Revolutionary War. In addition to brokering increased military and financial support from his native France, Lafayette served with incredible courage and distinction in numerous battles, including at the Siege of Yorktown where he was instrumental in containing and defeating British forces.

Lafayette's heroism earned him a major degree of celebrity throughout the United States, including — in particular — here on the North Shore.

Although Lafayette returned to France almost immediately after the Revolutionary War in 1781, he returned to the North Shore in 1784 and visited several communities, including Marblehead and Salem. According to Salem historian Jim McAllister in a

2005 *Salem News* piece, after rallying and making rum toasts in Marblehead, Lafayette “offered warweary Marbleheaders the hope that their losses might be a ‘hundred-fold repaired by all the blessings of peace.’” Later in that 1784 trip, Lafayette was feted in Salem at — you guessed it — Chestnut Street’s Hamilton Hall, where the celebration overflowed until Lafayette’s departure at 4 a.m. In his toast at that celebration, according to contemporaneous news reports, Lafayette said: “The Town of Salem...may the elements conspire to her prosperity.”

To Alan Hoffman, President of the Massachusetts Lafayette Society, the 1784 tour was something of a prequel to a much grander celebration of Lafayette that would occur some 40 years later in the run-up to the Nation’s 50th birthday when then-President James Monroe invited Lafayette back to the United States for a “Grand Tour.”

To say that Lafayette received a rock star’s reception during his 1824-1825 “Grand Tour” in America is an understatement. In the modern imagination, one would probably have to go back to Dwight D. Eisenhower after World War II for an analogue to the kind of fervor that greeted Lafayette, whose “Grand Tour” lasted more than a year and took him to every state in the nation.

At the beginning of the tour, Lafayette travelled from Boston to Portsmouth and visited Lexington, Concord and Marblehead before stopping in Salem on August 31, 1824. McAllister writes, “At Washington Square, the Marquis was met by more than 1,000 rain-drenched schoolchildren, each wearing a picture of their famous guest.” Hoffman explains that these pictures the schoolchildren wore were called “Lafayette Ribbons,” and were common throughout the country during the tour. Also common, says Hoffman, were wooden arches, covered in flower garlands, and carved with tributes to Lafayette.

In his book about the journey to America, here’s how Lafayette’s personal secretary, Auguste Levasseur, described the trip to Salem:

“At the entrance to the city, we were received by the magistrates, and by a numerous cavalcade of citizens; several military corps were drawn up on each side of [Lafayette’s] way, and his entry was announced by salutes of

artillery and the chiming of the bells. In spite of the rain, which fell in torrents, the streets were entirely filled with the crowds that rushed towards him, and uttered their benedictions. We passed through the town on foot, in order to go under a great number of triumphal arches decorated with emblems and inscriptions. Upon one was ‘Honor to Lafayette! Honor to him who fought and shed his blood for the peace and happiness we enjoy.’ on another, ‘In the light of our adversity, though didst aid us, in the day of our prosperity, we recall thy services with gratitude.’”

Hoffman also points to the September 1, 1824 edition of the *Salem Gazette*, which wrote of that day’s events in Salem: “We believe the occasion called out more good feeling, unalloyed with recollections that could diminish its effect, than any other than has been witnessed in this place.”

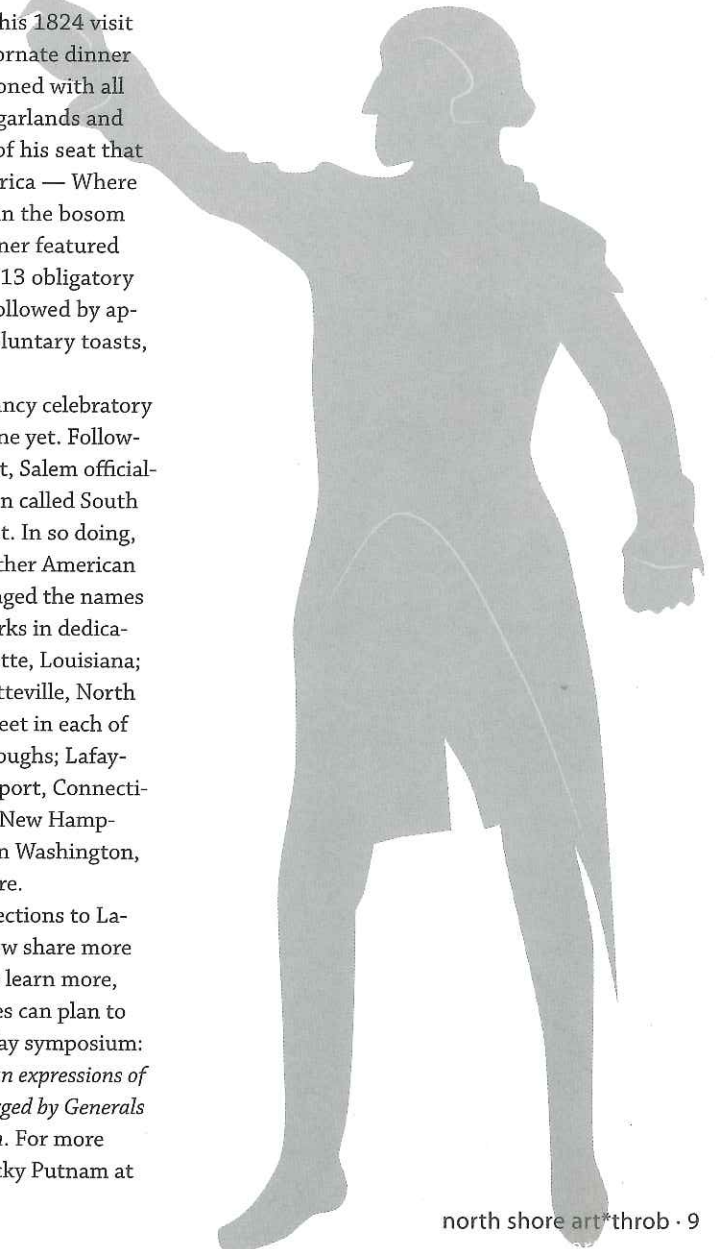
Lafayette capped off his 1824 visit to Salem with another ornate dinner in Hamilton Hall, festooned with all manner of flowers and garlands and an inscription in front of his seat that read: “Lafayette in America — Where can one better be than in the bosom of his family?” That dinner featured the common custom of 13 obligatory toasts to Lafayette — followed by approximately 50 more voluntary toasts, according to Hoffman.

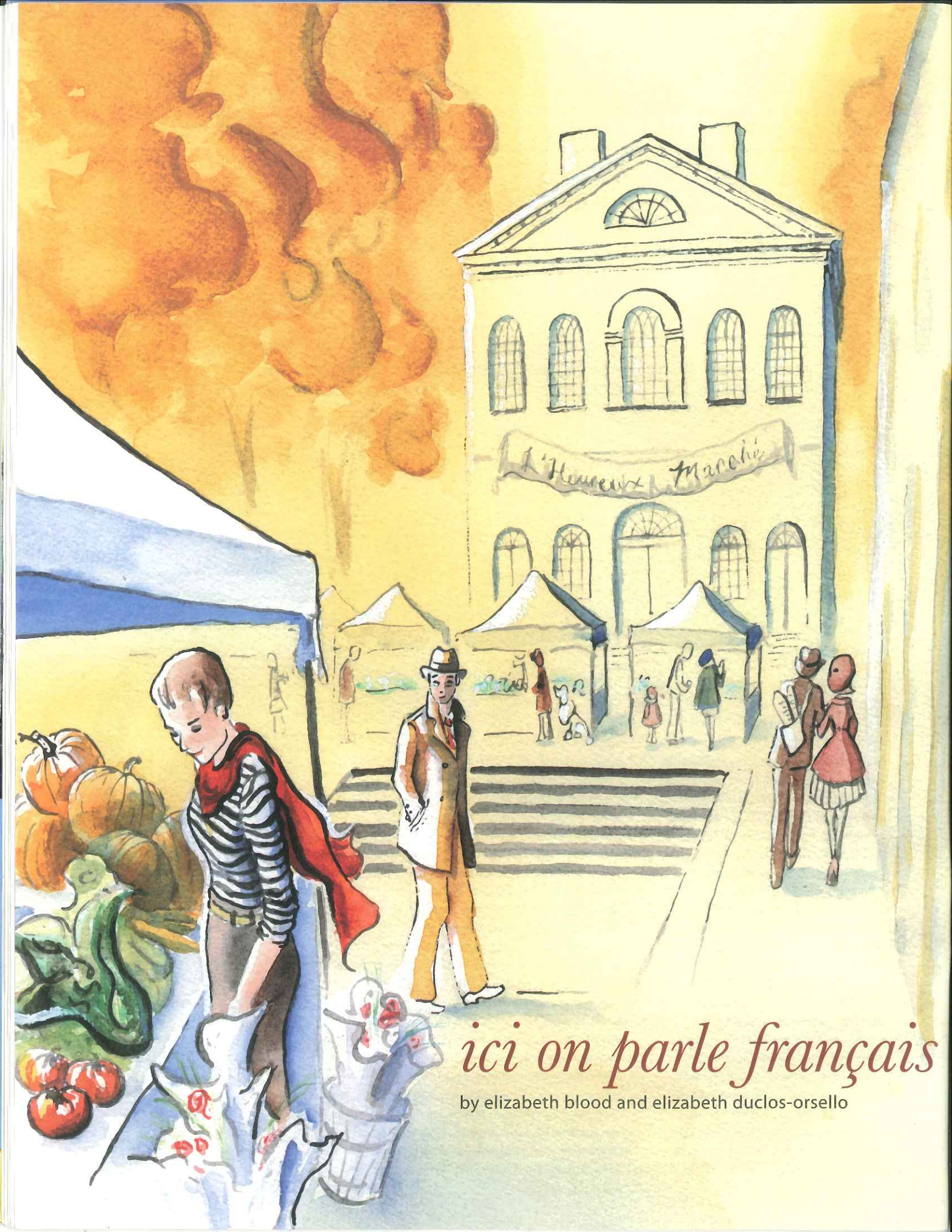
But, even after that fancy celebratory dinner, Salem wasn’t done yet. Following Lafayette’s 1824 visit, Salem officially changed what was then called South Street to Lafayette Street. In so doing, Salem joined a host of other American cities who similarly changed the names of locations and landmarks in dedication to Lafayette: Lafayette, Louisiana; Lafayette, Indiana; Fayetteville, North Carolina; a Lafayette Street in each of New York City’s five boroughs; Lafayette Boulevard in Bridgeport, Connecticut; Mount Lafayette in New Hampshire; Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C.; and quite a few more.

When stopped for directions to Lafayette Street, we can now share more than mere directions. To learn more, North Shore Francophiles can plan to attend next year’s two-day symposium: *Exploring Franco-American expressions of art and friendship first forged by Generals Lafayette and Washington*. For more information, contact Becky Putnam at

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ici on parle français

by elizabeth blood and elizabeth duclos-orsello

While outsiders might view Salem merely as a place to see witches, celebrate Halloween and visit the house made famous by Nathaniel Hawthorne, those of us who live here — even those who didn't grow up in this place — can be proud that Salem is much more complex than that. We live in a seaside locale built by many different cultures. We are a city who speaks English and Spanish, but also Polish, Russian, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese, Arabic, Creole, Armenian, Wolof, and yes, in Salem we speak French.

French speakers are active in Salem's social scene — and we're not just talking about the busloads of Québécois tourists who can be heard speaking French in shops and restaurants all over the city from Easter through Thanksgiving. The Richelieu Club of Salem and the Richelieu Nord de Boston (a separate women's group) are social organizations that each hold monthly French-speaking dinners at the Hawthorne Hotel.

Both clubs were established in the 1960s to preserve and promote the French language in the Salem community and to raise money for local charities. The clubs have expanded to include French speakers from a variety of backgrounds, blending Franco-American, Belgian, Swiss, French and other Francophiles who have learned French in school or through their travels.

There is also a new wave of French-speaking immigrants in Salem — those from African countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burkina-Faso, Ivory Coast and Senegal, as well as those from Haiti, who blend their own vibrant cultures with their French-speaking heritage.

The first group of French-speaking immigrants, and the largest, were French-Canadians. To discover the origins of this group's role in Salem's cultural history, walk out to the lighthouse at Pickering Wharf. The massive white building complex across the water leaves many wondering why anyone would build an office park in such a prime waterfront location. Shetland Park, as it is known today, was once the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company, also known as the Pequot mill for the brand of cotton sheets manufactured there. The mill, which opened in 1839 and closed in 1953, is what drew many thousands of French-Canadians to immigrate to Salem in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Workers at the mill generally lived in the surrounding Point neighborhood (then called "La Pointe"), which was primarily a French-speaking neighborhood well into the mid 20th century. All of the corner shops and local establishments that

now boast signs in Spanish were once places where owners and clients spoke French. Luciana's Bistro, the latest incarnation of the little restaurant with a wooden bar and a pretty pressed-tin ceiling at 75 Congress Street, was once the Les Canadiens bar, one of many places where French-speaking mill workers would go *prendre un verre* after a long day's work.

Deschamps Printing, the printer of *Art*Throb*, started in the first decades of the 20th century as the printer of the city's French newspaper, *Le Courrier de Salem*. The company is still located on lower Lafayette Street and is still owned and operated by the Deschamps family. The Palmer's Cove Yacht Club was founded in the 1930s by Franco-Americans. The Seaport Credit Union, founded in 1926, was created with the support of the leaders of the two French parishes to assist the French-speaking community.

A French-heritage Catholic church still thrives in South Salem's Castle Hill neighborhood, where many Franco-Americans also settled at the turn of the 20th century. Sainte-Anne's Church at 290 Jefferson Avenue offers a special mass in French each spring on the feast of Saint Anne.

For those of us who were not born and raised

in Salem — who came here as young professionals or transplants from other parts of the country or other parts of the world, the city's historic sites and public monuments recall primarily the enduring legacies of the English immigrants who first settled the Native American village of Naumkeag (think Puritans and witches) and their Anglo-American descendants (sea captains, Samuel McIntire, Nathaniel Hawthorne).

Countering this historical narrative written in the public spaces, monuments and architecture of the city, we also see a vibrant Latino community centered around the Point neighborhood and lower Lafayette Street — with restaurants, businesses, churches and community organizations established by a more recent wave of Spanish-speaking Salemites. What we don't see as much are markers of the many other waves of immigrant cultures that have contributed — and continue to contribute — to the city's cultural heritage. There are some traces to be sure: Italian restaurants on Washington Street, a Polish Deli, an Irish pub...but harder to find are clear references to the French-Canadian and Franco-American communities who have made significant contributions to the city's past and to its present. This history is all but hidden in this urban landscape. Hidden, that is, in plain sight.

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CLOSE-UP

Inspired by this article and the movie at the center of our photo spread, *Breathless* by Jean-Luc Godard, guest illustrator Dana Martin has creatively mixed Salem's French history with this 1960s French masterpiece to produce the cover and illustration that accompanies this article. Notice the sign on Old Town Hall and the fruit stand: hommages to the French market that once occupied the first floor. The newspaper on the cover is also an allusion to *Le Courrier de Salem*, Salem's French newspaper that was printed by Deschamps Printing, a press started by a French family that today prints this very magazine.



Dr. Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello is Associate Professor and Coordinator of the American Studies Program in the Interdisciplinary Studies Department at Salem State University. Her research expertise is in 19th and 20th century American immigration and ethnic history and literature. She has presented research on Franco-American immigration and history at regional and national conferences, offered K-12 teacher workshops, and consulted with area museums on public programming. She is also a member of the Richelieu Club of Salem.



Dr. Elizabeth Blood is Chair of the Department of Foreign Languages and Associate Professor of French at Salem State University. Her current research focus is on North American francophony, including Quebec and Franco-American New England. She has presented research on Franco-Americans at regional and national conferences for French professors, has published a French textbook, and is currently writing a book on Quebec. She is also Vice President of the Richelieu Club of Salem.

Spotting French influences

The monument in Lafayette Park — the tall granite statue in the triangular patch of grass and trees just across from the big church building — is called La Victoire du deuil (Mourning Victory) and was donated to the city of Salem by the parishioners of St. Joseph's Church in 1947 when the then-new international-style church opened its doors. St. Joseph's parish served the French-Canadian immigrants and their Franco-American children who settled in the Point neighborhood near the mill. In 1914, just prior to the Great Fire that destroyed the old brick church and decimated the entire Point neighborhood, there were 16,000 French-speaking parishioners registered at St. Joseph's, one of two French parishes in the city.

The statue, designed by Norman Nault, a Franco-American native of Worcester and a graduate of the Harvard University School of Architecture, honors the 2,105 Franco-American parishioners from St. Joseph's parish who served in WWI and WWII, and its dedication in 1947 was an event that bespoke the centrality of Franco-Americans to both Salem and the region. The crowd of more than 7,000 at the dedication ceremony included the curator of the Museum of Modern Art from New York City, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. and Mayor Edward Coffey. Donors who sponsored the statue included all of Salem's major companies — Sylvania, Hytron, the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company and the department store Almy, Bigelow & Washburn — as well as many of its prominent citizens.

Joseph Pelletier, a well-respected lawyer, parishioner and leader of the fundraising team, made the following remarks at the dedication ceremony: "... All nationalities have played their part in the establishment of the United States. This monument will strongly attest to our devotion, to our patriotism, and to the sacrifices of Americans of French descent. May it always be an inspiration to the youth of our city and an example of tolerance and equality."

Old Town Hall, the oldest public structure in Salem, built in the early 19th century, was originally designed to house a marketplace on the lower level, with meeting space upstairs. A well-known meat market called Subway Market, owned by an enterprising member of the L'Heureux family, opened its doors out from the lower level into Derby Square where food stands and multilingual shoppers gathered daily through the early 20th century. Today, of course, it's the location of our summer and fall farmers' market.

The 1830s building that houses the restaurant 43 Church once hosted lectures by the greatest thinkers of 19th-century America and was the place where Alexander Graham Bell demonstrated his new invention. By the 1960s, the lyceum building was in a state of disrepair and, like many historic structures in downtown Salem in that era, was scheduled for demolition. Urban decay, suburban sprawl and the opening of the North Shore Mall nearly caused the collapse of the inner city. A Franco-American woman named Joan Boudreau, who served for many years on the city's redevelopment commission, used her life savings to buy the lyceum and to turn it into a French restaurant. She was the owner/chef of the restaurant through the 1980s when it was sold to the Harrington family. Boudreau's bold move to establish a restaurant in an urban neighborhood in decline likely not only saved the lyceum building but also helped to turn around the downtown area, making it the foodie-friendly place we know and love today.

There are numerous ways in which many of us have unwittingly connected with Salem's French-Canadian past. French-speaking citizens of Salem opened the first food stands and amusements for wealthy leisure-seekers in the Willows in the 19th century; built three French schools including the Sainte-Chrétienne Academy, which is now Salem State University's upper south campus; and helped to create a little Halloween festival to draw tourists to the city — a festival we now call Haunted Happenings. And, to top it off, our police station is named for Robert St. Pierre, a Franco-American who grew up in the Point neighborhood and served as police chief in Salem for 25 years.

The story of the Franco-American community is not the story of one ethnic group achieving economic success, moving to the suburbs and being replaced by a new ethnic group with its own language, traditions and ways of shaping the city's culture. Franco-American businesses continue to thrive in downtown Salem alongside other ethnic groups. Soucy Insurance (founded in 1907), Levesque Funeral Home (founded in 1910), Deschamps Printing (founded in 1916), Delande Lighting (founded in 1918), Pelletier Awning (founded in 1923), Raymond & Michaud Oil (founded in 1934) and Bernard's Jewelers (founded in 1934) are just a few of the many family-owned and operated businesses that have contributed to the economic resilience of the city through many changing times.