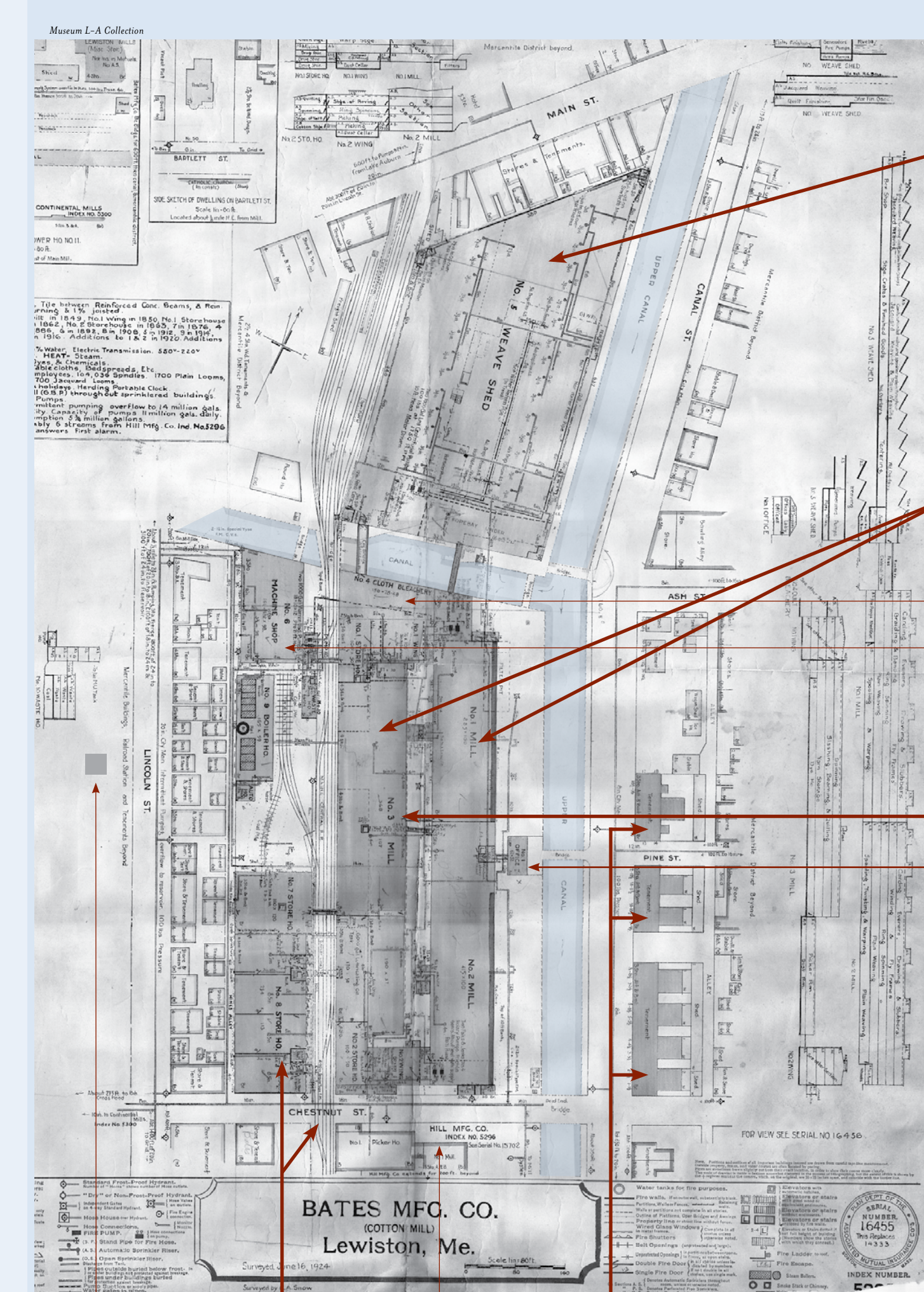




# Mills, Falls, and Migrants

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Plan of Bates Mill, 1924

The No. 5 Weave Shed contained hundreds of looms on the second floor. Goods were finished and shipped from the ground floor.

There were large weave rooms on the second floor of the Nos. 1, 2, and 3 Mills.

Bleachery and Laboratory

The Machine Shop

Cotton was cleaned and carded on the ground floor of the No. 3 Mill. It was spun into yarn and readied for weaving on the third floor.

Mill Superintendent's Office

The largest mills employed hundreds of women and men: spinners and doffers, weavers and loom fixers, dyers and bleachers. The work was exacting. Doffers might have to remove 250 yarn spools from spinning frames every seven to eight minutes; weavers tended more than a dozen looms at a time. Millwork required speed, skill, and an intimacy with some of the most advanced technology of the industrial economy.

Enterprises like the Bates Mill integrated the whole sequence of machines and processes that turned raw fiber into finished cloth. In one set of rooms, cotton was cleaned and carded; in another, it was spun into yarn and wound onto bobbins, then spools, then long warp beams. At the heart of the mill were great weave rooms where hundreds of looms, in long rows, produced sheets, bedspreads, or other goods.

Cotton arrived by rail and was stored in the No. 8 Storehouse

Company-owned millworker housing from top Bates Block, Hill Block and Androscooggin Block

By the 1910s, when the oldest of the workers interviewed for this exhibit were born, Lewiston had long been an industrial center. Textile mills stretched nearly a mile down the Androscooggin River; shoe factories dotted the upland streets of Auburn and Lewiston. Rail sidings crisscrossed the Twin Cities, bringing in cotton, wool, leather, and labor, carrying textiles and shoes to national markets.

It was the coming together of falling water and Boston money that made a milltown at just this bend of the Androscooggin. In 1850, inspired by the success of Lowell, Massachusetts, a group of investors led by Benjamin Bates bought land and built mills alongside the Great Falls. They hired laborers to dig the canals that carried water around the falls and under the mills, turning turbines that pulled belts that drove the looms and spinning frames. Their venture prospered: by 1900, eight different companies were producing cotton and woolen textiles in vast brick complexes between the canals and the river. Lewiston boomed as well, growing from a mill village of some two thousand souls in 1840 to a city of more than thirty thousand in 1920.

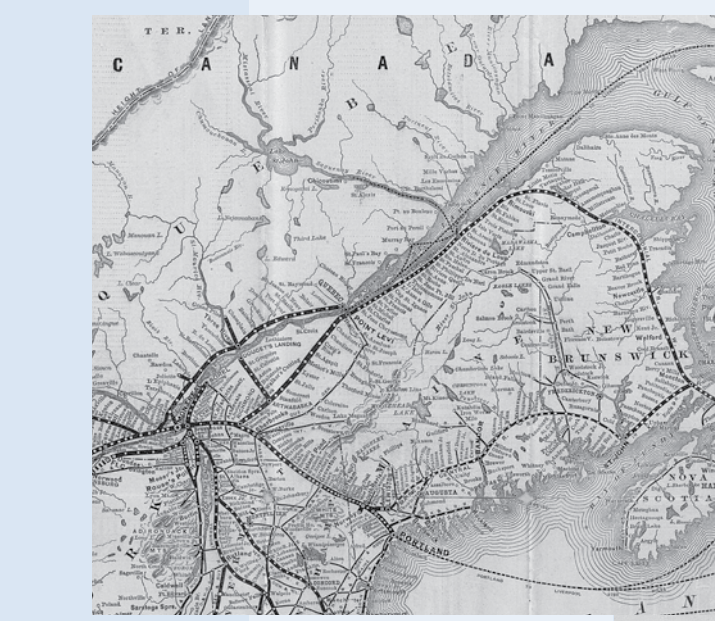
The growth of the mills and the growth of the city depended above all on immigrant workers. Benjamin Bates and his partners had initially hired Yankee farmhands to work the looms. Yet by the early 20th century, Lewiston's millworkers were mainly immigrants from rural Ireland, central Europe, and especially Quebec. Driven by a world-wide agricultural depression, these farmers and peasants were often scorned by native-born Americans as backward, illiterate, and unfit. Yet they brought tenacity and inventiveness to the workings of the mill economy. French-Canadians in particular wove their family bonds, ethnic identity, moral values, and language through the fabric of urban life. It may have been the coming together of falling water and industrial capital that first made Lewiston into a milltown. It was this third force—the flow of ordinary, resilient people—that made the milltown into a millworkers' world.



By the 1920s, Lewiston was an immigrant city. Seven out of ten residents (nearly twenty thousand) had a foreign-born parent or were themselves newcomers. And 75% of the foreign-born hailed from francophone Canada. French was the mother tongue of most Lewistonians until the 1960s, the everyday speech of the home, the street, and the shop floor.

The migration to Lewiston was shaped by two contradictory realities: the rural misery from which Canadian and other newcomers fled and the communal bonds that they brought with them. Even today, elders recall family stories of penury and even starvation driving their *papiers* and *mémories* to the mills, part of a global agricultural crisis that uprooted millions of migrants.

Yet Lewiston's immigrants were connected to the countryside by more than just the memory of want. As in most immigrant communities, patterns of chain migration transplanted kin and village networks; established settlers and labor recruiters sent news about jobs for hire and apartments to share. Holidays and summers meant family visits back to farms and villages in French Canada. Indeed many migrants saw themselves as temporary sojourners in New England, planning to return to Quebec when times got better.



Population of Lewiston	
1800	948
1820	1312
1840	1801
1860	7424
1880	19,083
1900	23,761
1920	31,791
1930	34,948
1940	38,598
1950	40,978
1960	40,804
1970	41,779
1980	40,481
1990	39,757



Most immigrants came to the Twin Cities through the Grand Trunk Railway depot, riding south from Quebec over the Androscooggin River to what is now Railroad Park. Stepping out on Lincoln Street, a newcomer would have confronted the peculiarly mixed cityscape of a riverfront milltown. Her first view would have been a row of tenements and a panorama of mills. To the left, the Libbey and Cowan Mills towered near the Falls; the Bates and Hill Mills loomed directly opposite; Camden Yarns and the Continental and Androscooggin Mills stretched downriver. Crossing the canal and walking uphill, she would have taken in the civic and commercial landmarks of Lewiston: mercantile blocks on Lisbon Street, the Carnegie Library, City Hall. Farther up, she would have seen the genteel homes and prosperous working-class streets on the far side of City (now Kennedy) Park. Most likely, however, she would just have turned right and walked into the tenement district near the river, already nicknamed Little Canada. She would probably have arrived with the names of kin or acquaintances in her pocket, familiar faces who might help find shelter and work.

“My grandfather and two brothers lived [near the] St. Lawrence Seaway, and there was a large family, I believe it was twelve siblings. And I guess the food and work was very difficult... they were actually starving, and they heard about the mills, ...one was twelve, I believe, one thirteen and one fifteen.

All three of them decided to go work in the mills, and I understand they took the Grand Trunk Railroad, they came to Lewiston and they settled over here to go work in the mills.” Fred Lebel

In many ways, the growth of Lewiston is a tale of contrasts and paradoxes. The mills were places of Yankee entrepreneurs and francophone workers, of sophisticated industry and clattering toil. The cityscape mixed grand churches, civic landmarks, and long brick mills—and the mills boasted their own monumental cupolas and bell towers. The city's founding industrialist, Benjamin Bates, also endowed the liberal arts college that bears his name.

Nowhere were the contradictions of Lewiston's story more evident than along the canals. It took back-breaking labor to dig and maintain them—largely the labor of Irish immigrants. Yet the millowners landscaped the canals as parks and greenways, symbols of Lewiston's civility and their own power over nature.

If water had the power to spin and weave, to make profit and progress, it could also overflow and destroy. Spring freshets regularly flooded the mill and tenement district, like the 1936 flood commemorated in the photograph at the top left of this panel. So too with the mill economy as a whole. It had the power to spin and weave, to create profit and progress—and then, without warning, to turn around and ruin businesses and millworkers. Today's elders grew up in such a ruinous time: the Great Depression.



“My father came here on a Thursday, and Monday morning he went to work at the Bates Mill....

He had received a letter from somebody that he could come over, that he would be hired right off. I think probably the person talked to the boss, you know, told him that they knew somebody that would come in....He sold his farm to come down here.

Didn't have a big farm, but...he said, I'm taking all that money to pay for the train and the transport of the furniture. He could have bought some new furniture over here, but you know, they didn't want to let go of nothing.” Irene Berube

