



The Milwaukee French

History in Milwaukee

Beginning in the seventeenth century, people of French ancestry played major roles in Wisconsin (and Milwaukee) history. They included French, French Canadians, and Metis people. The fur trade, which began in the 1680s, was well established in Wisconsin by the eighteenth century with fur posts across the state. The majority of workers in the fur trade were people of French ancestry, even though most of the fur trade companies across the country were owned by the British following the Seven Years' War (1754-1763).

Local notables

A major fur trader in Wisconsin was Jacques Vieau, a French Canadian with ancestry in Marseille, France (his great-uncle had been Governor of Marseille). Often called the “father of Milwaukee,” Vieau established a winter trading post atop a bluff overlooking the Menomonee Valley in 1795. His cabin was located in the area today known as Mitchell Park, on Milwaukee’s near south side. At the time of his arrival, a large number of Potawatomi, as well as some Sauk, Menomonee, and Fox, and a few Ho-Chunk were settled in the area.

Jacques Vieau was a classic *voyageur*—a man who spent part of his time in the French colonial settlements and the rest of his time among the American Indians with whom he traded European goods for furs. The voyageurs often took American Indian wives. Vieau was married to Angelique Roy, a half Menomonee woman who also had Potawatomi connections.

Vieau had many French-Canadian assistants during his tenure in Milwaukee. One was his son-in-law, a voyageur named Laurent Solomon Juneau. Juneau had married Josette Vieau in 1814, and by 1818 he’d become Vieau’s clerk in Milwaukee.

While Vieau eventually made his permanent home on the west banks of the Fox River at Green Bay, Solomon Juneau was becoming convinced by friends that Milwaukee was about to become the major center of trade in Wisconsin. In the 1830s Juneau platted the village of Milwaukee and settled there. He began selling plots of land in what was becoming known as Juneautown. He built Milwaukee's first store and first inn, and in 1837 founded the *Milwaukee Sentinel*.

“My family was from Normandy. Today you don’t see as much of the French culture around Milwaukee as you’d think, given that our first mayor, Solomon Juneau, was French. There is a park and statue devoted to him, but no one really discusses this. Jacques Vieau had a trading post in the Mitchell Park area. But we only think of Milwaukee as being this big German city.”

“My mother was from near Paris, a small town called Chalance Surmaine. The family had been there for several generations. And my father was from Algeria, and his family had been in Algeria for many generations. They met in France and they got married. My father was in the diplomatic service, and he got posted to Morocco. So, I ended up being born in North Africa. It’s kind of confusing. Now I’m here.”

“We always faced accusations of being collaborators with the Germans during World War Two and not backing some American international policies. I rarely go to a cocktail party where someone knows I’m French where I don’t have to respond to some remarks like, ‘Hey we rescued your asses in World War Two and World War One and where are you when we need help?’”

Quotes of French informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Juneau was elected the first mayor of Milwaukee and served from 1846 until 1847. He also became the city's first postmaster.

Place names for Vieau and Juneau include Vieau School and Vieau Park on Milwaukee's south side, and Juneau Avenue and Juneau Park on Milwaukee's north side. A monument to Juneau stands in the park (see photo).

Immigrants

Many early residents of Milwaukee County were descendants of the French, French Canadian, and Metis populations who settled in the area during the fur trading boom. Over the centuries others with French connections came from Canada, France, and French-speaking African countries, often to fill jobs in education. One of the largest waves of French immigration occurred immediately after World War Two when American soldiers brought home French brides. Smaller waves of French came to the United States in the late twentieth century to take professional positions at General Electric Healthcare in Brookfield and Johnson Controls in the City of Milwaukee.

Meet some of your past French neighbors



"A lot of French business people came to Milwaukee, and the biggest group is GE Medical. GE Medical has all of these technologically advanced people. They've been bringing in families, and they have big jobs. Most of them live in the Brookfield, western area. At one point, Brookfield Academy, which is a private school in that area, had to hire someone to teach the French children because the French personnel knows that they're not going to stay here forever. They want their children to have the French schooling as well as the American schooling. So, they hired someone to keep up with the French schooling of the children. This is a very new development. Now I would say that the French business people that are in this town are earning a living in fairly highly paid positions."

"I know some who go to church. I know some who are absolute atheists. Basically, the French people don't think much of the Church. Most of the French people I know, for them, church is not a consideration. But there are a lot, and also in this Francophone community that I mentioned, a lot of our Francophone Africans are very religious people. . . I go to a church sometimes with a cousin of my husband's. Everyone who comes to me speaks French. It's a kind of gathering place for the Francophone community. They say that the French here go to church for baptism, marriage, and death—and nothing in between."

Quotes of French informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

The Conrads

In 1933, the west side of a developed stretch of South 60th Street was all Conrads. Contiguous homes were owned by siblings Mary A. Conrad, Joseph P. Conrad, Katie J. Conrad, and Walter A. Conrad. And the presence of these homes suggested that this group owed a major debt to their father, Joseph B. Conrad.

Joseph B. Conrad was born in 1846 on an early homestead that his father developed on Hawley Road, not far from the family's later settlement. Joseph B.'s parents were both born in France. Early in his life he perfected his skills as a carpenter and opened a building contract business. He married Dora Mueller, the daughter of German immigrants, shortly afterwards, and the couple settled on National Avenue, probably in the Walker's Point neighborhood. There Joseph B. and Dora had children Lizzie, Katie J. Joseph P., Mary Ann, Tillie

J., Gertrude D, and Josephine. The two sons also became carpenters and joined their father's business. The business grew and was successful for over 35 years. At some point the contracting firm probably built houses for most of the Conrad children in today's Fairview neighborhood.

Joseph B. died in 1921 while still living on National Avenue. Only one of the six daughters ever married and none of the single daughters ever listed any occupation in the census records. In the 1930s, Katie J. Conrad was living with her sister Gertrude in a house owned by Katie. At the same time, Mary Ann was living with her sisters Josephine and Elizabeth in a house owned by Mary Ann. Joseph P. and Walter A. also owned their homes. The children's homes were all valued between \$5,000 and \$7,500 in 1930—well above the average for the time.

A few years after their father's death, Joseph P. and Walter A. left the building construction business. By 1930, Joseph was working as a laborer for a truck manufacturing firm. He had a wife Helen, and children Leonard, Laverne, and Ruth. Walter A. had also left the business, and by 1930 he was the foreman of (no doubt) the same truck manufacturing company where his brother worked. He had a wife Emily, and kids Walter, Claude, and Carroll.

The five single and apparently unemployed sisters probably lived off of inherited funds from their father and his business and may have been also helped by their brothers.

To most French immigrants, maintaining food practices and keeping the language were very important. They got together with other immigrants to keep up their French language skills and enjoy French cuisine and leisurely meals. Many also made sure they returned periodically to their homeland.

Where to observe French culture today

A major organization that unites people of French connections locally is Alliance Française of Milwaukee. Its mission is "to promote, share and enjoy the culture, language and friendship of the French-speaking world." Almost every day of the week the organization provides some kind of French conversation classes or gatherings.



"There were many years where there weren't many opportunities to practice the culture. And the people who were the most interested in trying to keep the culture alive were the school-teachers, and they needed a lot of help. Throughout the years, there has been a tremendous development of French-related activities in Milwaukee. Now, people meet at the Alliance Française for conversation, for classes, for cooking classes, for meetings. Most of the main French holidays are celebrated: Mardi Gras, the new wine in fall, Christmas. We have conversation groups in, I don't know, twenty areas. We have a group that meets once a month for a cultural lecture. And I would also like to extend a word to Francophone because we are also making big contact with the French-speaking African population. Here in Milwaukee we have contacts with the Senegalese community. . . We try to connect with other cultural activities within the community. We have been pretty successful attracting people. We try to keep on top of the news. . . . We're busy."

"I like the European culture here. I was in Dallas. I was in California. I like Milwaukee because it's very European: German, Polish, Italian, Irish, Swiss."

"Well, you know there is Bastille Days, which is a festival downtown. Otherwise there are a few parties where French people gather, like at Christmas there might be a few people somewhere. The Alliance Française organizes some parties. And then there is the French film festival, which is organized by UWM."

Quotes of French informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Alliance Française and the French Program of the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee also sponsor an annual French Film Festival on campus that is usually free to audiences. The event lasts over a week and offers up to twenty films.

An excellent place to experience everything French is during Milwaukee's Bastille Days, sponsored annually by the East Town Association. The free, four-day bash offers chef and wine demos, live music, an international marketplace, French and Cajun cuisine, roaming street performers, and its signature 43-foot Eiffel Tower replica offering hourly light shows. The event, held downtown in the vicinity of Cathedral Square, usually convenes in July. For exact dates and other information, see <http://www.easttown.com/events/bastille-days/>.



"If there is any engagement of policy [around French culture] it should be to try to save the French language in schools. Because I think more and more schools are eliminating the French programs, which I think is going to make the French studies very small. If the elementary schools stop teaching French, then the high schools will stop teaching French, and then nobody will be learning French anymore."

"For me, the most important thing is books and reading. I keep my French alive by reading books. I go to conferences in French and to the movies."

"You know, the ones that are doing well are the ones that have stayed French, and at the same time have accepted the other culture. The ones who keep comparing, after being here for thirty or forty years, and making generalizations that Americans don't do this, or they don't do that, these people are not happy. These people drive me nuts, so I try to avoid them. Most of the people I know have made a wonderful adaptation. They speak French, they try to get their children to speak French, they travel, they teach, and at the same time they are absolutely committed to the community of Milwaukee. I think these are the successful people."

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Meet one of your current French neighbors

Bérangère Brunier

Bérangère Brunier (or “B” for short) is a native of France. She earned a Master’s Degree in Human Resources from ESDES (*École supérieure pour le développement économique et social*), a business school in Lyon, France. The school is a member of the Conférence des Grandes Écoles organization which represents top French business schools that have proven academic excellence and selectivity in admissions. “B”

began work in the field of human resources and controlling. Later she met her current husband, a Wisconsinite, and moved to Milwaukee when the couple married. Her family remains in France.



“Moving to Milwaukee has been great,” Bérangère states. Here she enjoys opportunities to run, hike, bike, and ride horses. She’s also a fan of baking. But the move did not come without major adjustments--adjustments made easier through an internship with Alliance Française where she connects with others of French back-

ground and can practice her culture and language. “It wasn’t a total leap into the darkness because my husband is from here, but it is still moving across the ocean to a country I am still adapting to. And interning at the Alliance has been a great help to settle in and discover the non-profit world.”

When asked what she still does that is most typical of her cultural background, Bérangère Brunier refers back to her eating customs. “I guess the lunch break is probably still the French thing I do. I like to take one hour and not eat at my desk, so it is a real break and I feel more energized when I go back to work in the afternoon. And I drink lots of strong coffee of course.”

“The people think, especially here in the Midwest, in Milwaukee, French restaurant means expensive restaurant, fancy restaurant. My restaurant is not fancy. Its nice, but it’s not expensive in comparison with many other restaurants with a lot less class, a lot less service and quality. I don’t want to be pretentious, but I’m not in the tradition of what people believe about French restaurants. I am more affordable. I want to create the bistro like we see in France. The bistro is a simple restaurant on the corner in your neighborhood, where you have some specialty.”

“Their strength is, we have a lot of Americans who love the French language and the French culture. They love the country; they go on vacation. I know some people who have a living spot over there, because they love the culture. They go to Paris; they see something absolutely different.”

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References

Lackey, J. & Petrie, R. (2013) *Strolling through Milwaukee’s Ethnic History*. Milwaukee, WI: MECAH Publishing.