Lowell Immigration History Timeline
Robert Forrant - UMass Lowell

In 1930 “of the 100,234 people that then constituted the population of Lowell, 73 percent were foreign-born or of foreign parentage. Of the larger cities of the United States—those having a population of more than 100,000—only four exceed Lowell in the percentage of population foreign-born or of foreign parentage.”

Margaret Terrell Parker, Lowell: A Study of Industrial Development, 1940

1822 First Irish laborers begin digging Lowell’s canals.

1831 St. Patrick’s Church built of wood; then rebuilt of stone in 1853.

1836 April 1, City of Lowell incorporated. The City seal reads “Art Is the Handmaid of Human Good.”

1840s ‘Famine’ Immigration from Ireland commences.

1840s Irish workers begin working in the city’s textile mills.

1841 Louis Bergeron family becomes the first recorded French-Canadian family to settle in Lowell.

1843 Hugh Cummiskey, Irish immigrant, elected to the Common Council.

1850 Lowell is home to 40 textile mills, 10,000 looms, and 10,000 millworkers, producing 50,000 miles of cloth a year: largest industrial complex in the U.S., second-largest MA city. Population reaches 37,000; 27 percent are foreign born, mostly from Ireland.

1860 From then until 1900, approximately 600,000 French Canadians migrated to New England, many lured to the region by mill recruiting agents.

1868 St. Joseph's Church is founded to serve the growing French-Canadian community.

1874 Samuel P. Marin is the first French-Canadian to reach public office when he is elected to the City Council.

1875 French-Canadian immigrant Joseph L. Chalifoux opens his first clothing store. His family later opened the Chalifoux Block, then Lowell's largest department store.

1875 Samuel P. Marin built the first tenement block in what will become ‘Little Canada’.
1880 Lowell population climbs to 60,000; 39 percent are foreign born, largely from Ireland and French-speaking Canada.

1880s Arrival of Greek, Polish, Syrian, and Lebanese immigrants.

1882 John J. Donovan elected the city’s first Irish Mayor.

1890 Russian Jews begin arriving in Lowell in significant numbers. Portuguese immigrants start arriving and by 1916 number over 3,000.

1893 Israel Brotherhood Society (5¢ Club) is organized to provide medical care and death benefits for its members. They built a Jewish cemetery in Pelham, NH when denied a permit for one in Lowell.

1895 First Greek Orthodox service is held at Associate Hall. Washington-Acropolis Society started (Greek). Portuguese Benefit Society is founded. L'Union Franco-Americaine started.

1900 Lowell population 95,000; 43 percent foreign born, largely from Ireland and French-speaking Canada with slight increases from Poland, Russia, Italy, Greece, Lithuania, and Armenia.

1902 Anshe Sfard Synagogue ("Russian Shul") organized by Russian Jews. Ohabe Shalom Shul ("Litrac Shul") organized by Lithuanian Jews at 63 Howard Street. By the early 1900s the Hale-Howard neighborhood had kosher markets, Hebrew schools, four synagogues, and two newspapers.

1904 Holy Trinity Polish Roman Catholic Church founded. St. Louis de France parish founded in Centralville.

1905 142 Armenians in Lowell.

1906 Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church built.

1908 St. Anthony’s Church opens to serve the Portuguese community.

1910 Polish immigrants form the “Dom Polski” (Polish National Home Association) social club. Approximately 2,000 Poles live in Lowell, largely in Centralville.

1910 Lowell population is 106,000; 40 percent have at least one foreign born parent; immigrant numbers are growing fastest from Greece, Russia, and Turkey.

1911 First Lithuanian church is opened on May 31.

1913 French-Canadian businessmen and professionals found the Lafayette Club.
1918 5,000 Polish immigrants are in Lowell.

1918 International Institute is established by the YWCA in an effort to provide formal workforce development support for newly arriving immigrants. In its first year, with a small staff, 800 individuals were assisted. Within the first year, the Institute moved from the YWCA office on John Street to 25 Palmer Street. Throughout the Institute’s existence, its mission remained to be a friend to a stranger in this country.

1919 Syrian-Lebanese community opens St. George’s Antiochian Orthodox Church.

1920 Lowell population reached nearly 113,000; 34 percent of city residents were foreign born.

1920 The International Institute grew and added programs including camping trips, summer picnics, and exhibitions of clients’ hand crafts. The Institute helped form dozens of ethnic and recreational clubs, which helped clients successful integration into the city.

1920s Efforts in Congress to curtail immigration result in passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson–Reed Act), which placed strict numerical limits on who could be admitted from any country into the U.S. Mill employment continues a steady decline dating from the end of the First World War. By 1936 total mill employment stood at 8,000, just a little more than what it had been a century earlier. From the Lowell National Historical Park’s oral history collection, this is how one Polish-born worker described how her family survived the Great Depression: “during the summer, dandelion greens were our diet; during the winter we ate hard bread, sweetened with sugar if we were lucky. . . . On rare occasions we would sell something we owned to buy a little meat.”

1920 From now through the 1940s, Lowell’s textile industry declined, with companies moving to the South. City population peaked at 112,759. Manufacturing employment fell to 1870 levels.

1925 The International Institute held its first Homelands Exhibit and Festival to celebrate the diversity of Lowell’s ethnic communities, May 13 and 14.

1928 The International Institute celebrated 10 years in Lowell. Expenses for running the Institute for a month totaled $650.

1935 The International Institute became an independent non-profit organization with the purpose to promote the interests and understanding of the foreign-born peoples of Greater Lowell.

1939 ‘Slum clearance’ policies resulted in the demolition of numerous properties in the ‘Greek Triangle’ Acre.
1941  International Institute: individuals served, 1374; individuals assisted with citizenship applications, 972; visits made by staff at homes, hospitals and agencies, 669; total attendance at Institute gatherings, classes and clubs, 25,000.

1945  Dr. Paul C. Panagiotakos, first Greek elected to the Lowell School Committee.

1946  The International Institute moved from 25 Palmer Street to 222 Worthen Street.

1950  Population 97,249; 20 percent were foreign born.

1951  George C. Eliades, first Greek Mayor.

1954  John Janas, first Polish Mayor.

1961  The International Institute moved from 222 Worthen Street to 79 High Street. In 1964 the Institute added a function hall and library at 79 High Street, which was built originally as a private home.

1960s  Demolition of the city’s Little Canada and several other ‘immigrant neighborhoods’ begins.

1965  With passage of the Immigration and Naturalization immigration increased.

1970  Lowell population 94,280; approximately 10 percent foreign born.

1975  First Southeast Asian refugees settle in city, building toward the second-largest Cambodian American population in U.S. by 1990.

1978  Lowell National Historical Park formed.

1980  Federal Refugee Act passed, establishing a regular process of refugee admissions and resettlement into the United States.

1980  Population 92,418; 9 percent foreign born.

1984  Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association founded.

1985  First Buddhist temple founded.

1986  Hellenic Cultural Center opens.

1997  The First Southeast Asian Water Festival held.

1999  Rithy Oung elected to Lowell City Council, becoming the first southeast Asian elected official in the U.S.
2000  Population 105,167; 22 percent foreign born. Newly arriving families are coming from Brazil, West Africa, India, and Iraq.

2001  In 2001, the International Institute of Lowell merged with its Boston and New Hampshire counterparts to become part of the International Institute of New England network. Most programs and services from the Lowell office remain local in nature.

First African Festival celebrated in Lowell.

2010  Population 106,519; 25 percent foreign born. Newly arriving families are coming from numerous countries including Bhutan, Burma, Congo, and Iraq.

2014  November 4, Rady Mom elected MA state representative for the 18th Middlesex District, becoming the first Cambodian-American elected to the state Legislature.

2014  The International Institute of Lowell continues to provide vital services to newly arrived refugees and immigrants in the Lowell Area. Thus far in 2014, the Institute has resettled 320 refugees, of which 275 stayed in Lowell. The largest group resettled was from Iraq, with families also arriving from Somalia, the Congo, Burma, Bhutan and Afghanistan.

Institute works with approximately 1,000 individuals annually, most with status as a *refugee* or *asylee*. Among the organization’s 15 staff, five came to the U.S. as refugees. Services are offered in eight distinct languages.