he didn’t tell anyone else—not even his mother—that he was leaving. So, over there, he is ‘Slater the traitor,’ and here he is ‘the father of American manufactures.’”

Visitors to the Old Slater Mill National Historic Landmark also learn that, contrary to popular myth, he didn’t accomplish that alone. The Blackstone River, which runs 48 miles from Worcester, Massachusetts, through Pawtucket, ultimately emptying into Narragansett Bay, was already powering valley farms, cottage industries, and artisans’ workshops during the colonial era. Landing in New York in 1789, Slater heard about promising efforts in Pawtucket (a hub for the region’s best ironworkers, mechanics, and carpenters) to advance existing spinning jennies; he traveled there to meet prominent Quaker and businessman Moses Brown, and quickly

La Survivance
Preserving French-Canadian history in Woonsocket, Rhode Island

The Museum of Work & Culture tells the story of French-Canadian immigrants who worked in Woonsocket, a bustling Rhode Island hub of industrial mills. By 1920, the community made up 70 percent of the city’s population, and had developed its own churches, parochial schools, shops, and newspapers. “I’ve heard people say that their parents were born here and lived here and never spoke English,” says museum director Anne Conway, “because their entire lives could be conducted in French.”

The museum, operated by the Rhode Island Historical Society, is housed in a former textile mill dating to 1914, and makes use of that architecture in a simple replica of a factory floor. Lifelike statues are bent over looms and mule spinners as the roar of machinery, via audio recordings, fills the room. “The noise was sometimes unbearable, people became deaf,” says Conway. “They developed diseases from breathing the constant fabric and cotton fibers flying through the air. Opening windows was never an option because they didn’t want to dry out the thread; it might break.” Recorded stories from former workers also address the awful heat, filth, and sweat, long work hours with no breaks, and constant rushing to keep pace with, fix—or clean—the dangerous machinery. On a Monday morning, “You’d press the buttons to start the machine and hear ‘clk, clk, clk,’” recounts one person. A rat caught in the machine. “You’d see the blood come out. You had to clean the whole machine down now.” Displays also help explain the textile-production process and pay rates, and invite children to test their fine-motor skills to see how well they would have performed as machine laborers.

Another exhibit, honoring the community’s first Roman Catholic church, features a partial scaled replica of the 1870s Victorian-Gothic Precious Blood Church and its chapel. upstairs, a recreated school classroom, circa 1928, features figures of a nun and priest, and highlights efforts to preserve French-language parochial education.

La Survivance, a traditional expression reflecting French Canadians’ fight to preserve their language, faith, and culture amid a disparate migration, but to the wider immigrant stories still heard today.

—from NELL PORTER BROWN

Exhibits reveal grueling work on dangerous mill machinery, and how parochial schools helped French Canadians preserve their culture.