

# The New England Three-Decker: An Immigrant's Home

by Janice Morrill

Lorraine Gauthier has lived in her family's three-apartment house at 33 Thomas Street in Southbridge, Massachusetts, for nearly all of her life. When she was born on the third floor of this three-decker, her grandfather, an immigrant from French Canada, owned the building. He passed it on to Lorraine's father, Theophile Dupuis, and to her Uncle Ludger, each of their families occupying one of the floors. Theophile eventually bought out his brother's share and finally sold the house to Lorraine and Edward Gauthier, who live on the first floor today. Her family's pattern of occupancy at 33 Thomas Street has typified that of other French-Canadians who purchased three-deckers in Southbridge and elsewhere in New England.

Three-deckers – wooden buildings of three apartments, one to a floor – have been staple housing in central Massachusetts towns like Southbridge and in many cities like Boston and Worcester since the turn of the century. The structure was originally an architectural response to the swelling working-class population of industrial New England, a group that needed affordable housing convenient to trolley-cars or within walking distance of the local mill or factory. The term “three-decker” (or “triple-decker”) probably derives from the resemblance that the three levels of rear porches on the earliest Boston versions bore to naval vessels. Distinctive to the region, the house type is so familiar to its residents that many people in Southbridge were surprised to learn that there are places where three-deckers were *not* built.

Though popular writers of the time spurned the three-decker as an eyesore and feared it as a fire hazard, the building marked a definite improvement over earlier forms of working-class housing. The availability of light and air from all four sides of each apartment was an advantage from the residents' viewpoint. For builders, the three-decker meant “stacking” three homes in a lot sized for a single-family unit. The three-decker, therefore, was a structural compromise between a tenement block and a single-family dwelling, more efficient than row houses, particularly where land costs were high. Some researchers contend that immigrant groups in Boston conceived of the three-decker as a less-than-ideal, temporary stepping stone en route – they hoped – to the coveted estate-like suburban or rural home.

In Southbridge today many of the three-deckers show the wear of numerous families that briefly rented them. Thomas Street is a long, quiet block of seven three-deckers and double versions called six-deckers. The dirt road and empty lots give the street a look of desertion, yet the buildings themselves reflect a gaiety suggestive of the lively place that this street once was. The large porches and exterior stairs of those three-deckers still retaining their traditional facade expand the sense of connection between indoor and outdoor and create a place that is conducive to visiting.

In earlier days the porch was a focal point for the three-decker, where residents were able to visit routinely with passersby, enhancing sociability within the neighborhood. Porches were useful as playpens, laundry rooms and areas to store wood or coal, but as such uses began to decline and the French social setting within Southbridge began to change, these neighborhoods and the porch itself became less purposeful. Later versions had smaller porches, and people began enclosing them partly or tearing them off as they deteriorated. Today's synthetic siding that fully encases some of these old buildings truly marks the end of an era.

Yet images such as the Gauthiers' place at 33 Thomas Street remain as a reminder of the success that the three-decker held in this particular town, especially among French-Canadians. Three-deckers became much more than stepping stones, for they accommodated the close family ties of this ethnic group. Traditional values are still active in Lorraine Gauthier's life, and her three-decker home remains the place where she is quite happy to stay. From her point of view, raising a large family on Thomas Street was ideal: Sacred Heart Church and the parochial school were close by, as were shopping centers and friends for a game of ball or cards. The American Optical Company, where she and her husband both worked, was less than a quarter mile away. Today, now that they are retired and their five children grown, she finds the apartment size more than ample and still appreciates the location. A cousin of hers rents one of the upstairs apartments, and a daughter lives in a three-decker just around the corner. Lorraine enjoys visiting with friends and regularly keeping an eye on her grandchildren.

In the early years on Thomas Street, which contains





Lorraine Gauthier dressed for her first communion, 1920s. Three-decker house in the background, which was across the street from #33, is no longer there. Photo courtesy Lorraine Gauthier

33 Thomas Street, side view. Unlike many Southbridge three-deckers, this one has a porch that extends down the side only. Photo courtesy Anthony R. Taylor





some of the oldest three-deckers in town, most of the first-floor residents owned the buildings, as the Gauthiers do today, and rented out the upper floors. Income from these upstairs apartments, or "tenements," as people in Southbridge call them, helped offset the cost of the mortgage, so that the three-decker brought homes within reach of many who could not otherwise afford to own them. Private ownership gave people not only a source of independence but also control over the building's care and maintenance. French-Canadians in Southbridge and beyond are famous for their tidiness, so it is easy to imagine the immigrant's motivation to take upkeep out of the hands of potentially indifferent landlords. To own a three-decker represented more than an accomplishment; it gave owners an enterprise, something to work on and share with family and tenants.

While the spirit of many of the three-deckers in Southbridge and elsewhere is now lost behind peeling paint and boxed-in porches, people like Lorraine Gauthier and her family still use these houses to fit their needs as individuals and as community members. When the Gauthiers posed for this June 1986 photograph, Lorraine had recently stripped the porch rails for a fresh coat of paint and was preparing to plant flowers along the length of the porch. The inside of their home was immaculately scrubbed and polished. Clearly this three-decker is not a way station to a better life. For Lorraine Gauthier and others like her the three-decker remains, as always, home.

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Lorraine and Edward Gauthier pose on the porch of their home at 33 Thomas St. Photo courtesy Anthony R. Taylor

#### *Suggested reading:*

Boston Urban Observatory. *Working Class Housing: A Study of Triple-Deckers in Boston*. Boston: Boston Redevelopment Authority and Boston Urban Observatory, 1975.

Krim, Arthur J. *The Three-Deckers of Dorchester: An Architectural Historical Survey*. Boston: Boston Redevelopment Authority, 1977.

Roberge, Roger A. "The Three-Decker: Structural Correlate of Worcester's Industrial Revolution." Ph.D. dissertation, Clark University, 1965.

Taylor, Anthony R. *Fitchburg Building Traditions*. Fitchburg, Massachusetts: Fitchburg Historical Commission (forthcoming).

Warner, Sam B., Jr. *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press and MIT Press, 1962.