

Insights into the Irish Community after the Civil War

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After the Civil War the marble quarries that had lain dormant became active again, employing up to 500 men, most of them Irish. After the war some of the larger estates in the present town were broken up into smaller lots for speculative purposes. In one case, a speculator sold as many as 30 lots and another sold as many as 25 at \$300 to \$400 each. Some of these houses were built as boarding houses or homes for the Irish quarry workers.

But the post boom in the marble industry would be short lived. A prolonged strike by the stone cutter's union brought work to a standstill. In 1872 one newspaper commenting upon the strike commented,

"A stranger visiting the marble quarries ...must be struck by the deathlike silence which now prevails, where a few short months since, the hillsides and rocks teemed....with busy life. But the merry music of mallet and chisel is hushed; the valuable machinery rusts and deteriorates for want of use...If the workmen, who in the height of their prosperity made exorbitant demands upon the sources of capital, and thereby brought about this misery to their families, have not long since seen their own folly, it would be in vain for us to demonstrate it."

The ensuing depression of 1873 created further misery.

The people who suffered the most were the Irish quarrymen. Stonecutters, some of them Irish, were highly skilled, unionized, and in great demand. Their job was to prepare the blocks of marble extracted from the quarries for sale. Unfortunately the semi-skilled Irish quarrymen were in not so great a demand. A layoff meant that they would be restricted to Eastchester.

It is easy to forget that the million or more Irish who made the migration to America during the potato famine of the late 1840's were Europe's poorest, most unskilled peasantry. They were utterly unfamiliar with the routines and demands of the alien culture into which they had been thrust. There was no previous immigrant group to blaze a path or at least offer some hint of how to act or what to do, put the Irish at a distinct disadvantage.

The first Irish to live in our town had to be tough. Back in Ireland Irish Catholics were rightly resentful of the English and Irish Protestants who monopolized power and wealth. The million or so Irish Catholic who boarded the famine ships to come to America were powerless victims of the British government' bureaucratic indifference and malevolence. When they arrived in America and in also in Eastchester they vowed not to suffer the same fate.

After the Civil War Irish Catholics faced open discrimination. The Irish were the last hired, the first fired. The Irish resented the vicious stereotypes and bigotry that many Protestants Americans unleashed upon the Irish who in newspaper accounts and political cartoons were

stereotyped as a permanent underclass. To use the words of the Irish American historian, Peter Quinn, Irish Catholics resented the disdain that “the descendants of the original settlers had toward the mass of newcomers who had little to recommend them beside the sheer force of their numbers and by the invasion of hordes of *Irish* foreigners who filled the almshouses and prisons.”

These prejudices were reflected in the media in describing the two areas of Eastchester where the Irish lived; present day Waverly Square and the other area was called Sebastopol (named after a slum ridden section of Russia during the Crimean War, 1854-1855) that today is located along Water Street north of Eastchester High School between White Plains Road and California Road.

A local newspaper, *The Yonkers Statesman*, reported that “there was probably no place in the country that contained so many thieves... slums infested with crime and corruption...pregnant with filth, noise, and obscenity... Many boarding houses of questionable character existed and the illegal sale of liquor became problems that defied solution... The working poor aided and abetted by the criminal element made it impossible for the police to stem the tide of crime. Clandestine cock fights and bare knuckled boxing matches took place... Unscrupulous landlords carried out all sorts of shady practices.”

In America the acceptance of the Irish did not develop quickly or without great hardship. The arrival of millions of Irish immigrants from a destitute, oppressed, and static society that initially did not understand American institutions created hostility. Many native born Protestants distrusted the Catholic Church and did not accept the hard living life style of the first wave of immigrants.

Irish Catholics in America and also in this town took refuge in the Catholic Church and each other. In Ireland they had been oppressed by the British. In America they faced discrimination in housing, jobs, and social interaction. The Irish were victims of cruel stereotypes.

What was happening in the town of Eastchester was the emergence of ethnic differences based on class, income, religion, and education. America was changing and so was our town. In the next article a singular event that took place between Eastchester’s richest resident and 300 Irish quarrymen will highlight this conflict.

Fifth in a Series of Articles on the Irish in Eastchester

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