



Historically Speaking

With Eastchester Historian
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A.T. Stewart and the Irish, circa 1870

Ironically, the closer that we get to the present, the more needs to be researched and studied about Eastchester's Irish heritage. Starting in the late 1840s, Irish Catholics fleeing the potato famine came to work in the Tuckahoe quarries. By 1853, Immaculate Heart of Mary became their church and Waverly Square was their center. In thought and action, the Irish in Eastchester could not have been much different from their fellow emigrants in the major cities of the Northeast. But as the children of the original Irish immigrants approached the 20th century, their lives, their occupations and their place in society changed.

But let us get back to what we already know. Still, in 1870, most of the Irish were unskilled quarrymen. Labor strife between stonemasons and quarry owners, ethnic tension between native born Americans and newly arrived Irish immigrants, and the unstable nature of demand for marble made the life of the quarryman a difficult one. The quarries were by far the major employer in the town. In good times, the industry employed between 300 and 500 men. A shut-down or even a slow down was devastating to the ordinary quarry workers who were semi-skilled at best.

When layoffs did occur, the quarrymen unable to find work were restricted to their neighborhoods adjacent to the quarries. Life became so tenuous during these periods of high unemployment that the Congressman William Stahnecker feared to go into the areas where the quarry workers lived. In 1869, the residents of Sebastopol came up with a solution. (The neighborhood was named after a slum-ridden section of Russia during the Crimean War, 1854-1855. Eastchester's

Sebastopol was located along what is today Water Street north of Eastchester High School between White Plains Road and California Road.) Three hundred people living in Sebastopol presented a petition to Alexander Turney Stewart, who owned the nearby quarry, to reopen his quarry by leasing it to the quarry workers.

Who was A.T. Stewart? Stewart was not merely the owner of the quarry who kept his summer residence nearby Sebastopol on White Plains Road, but was one of the richest men in America. Back in 1846, Stewart developed one of the largest and most elegant stores of his day, the forerunner of the first department store. The store made exclusively of Tuckahoe marble became known as the Marble Palace. Today, Sears, K-mart and Wal-Mart have built upon and refined Stewart's ideas of distribution, merchandising, manufacturing and payment methods. Later, Stewart built a \$2 million mansion on Fifth Avenue and 34th Street out of Tuckahoe Marble from his quarry.

Stewart rejected the request of the workers to lease his quarry, even though the quarry was not in use. *The Yonkers Statesmen*, a local newspaper, claimed he did so because his experience in labor negotiations with the Journeymen Stonecutters' Association had embittered him. He was also angered when residents from nearby Sebastopol had vandalized idle sheds on his quarry. But his refusal to deal with the unemployed workers was probably much more than that.

Tension between the Irish immigrants and the native born residents of Eastchester had been building. Soldiers returning from the Civil War must have resented the behavior of the Irish mob in Eastchester that tore up



Irish workers in the Tuckahoe quarries after the Civil War.

the train tracks of the New York and Harlem Railroad along the Bronx River during the New York City draft riots of 1863. A mob from the marble quarries went on a march into Mount Vernon (then a newly formed village in the town) armed with sticks, stones, and other makeshift weapons with the avowed purpose of burning down the houses of all the Republicans in the place. A strong minority of local residents supported the union cause and, across the Northeast, there was a pervasive hostility against these newly arrived immigrants who were Roman Catholic, uneducated, poor, and rough and crude in their lifestyle.

It is not too much of a stretch to assume that Stewart shared in these sentiments. It is obvious that Stewart did not like a tavern and the newly built boarding houses inhabited by hard drinking quarrymen a few hundred yards from his summer home. He did not like the conditions in nearby Sebastopol that caused the local congressman to fear to go there in periods of high unemployment. At the time of his death in 1876, Stewart was building at Hempstead Plains, Long Island,

the town of Garden City, with the purpose of affording to his employees comfortable and airy housing at a moderate cost. Three weeks after his death, Stewart's body was stolen and held for ransom. The ransom was paid and the remains were returned, although never positively identified as his.

The Stewart quarry remained inactive as late as 1888 – its mill and other facilities in ruins. But over the next 20 years, demand for marble increased and sporadically there was more work in the quarries. Resentment against this first wave of Irish immigrants lessened as newer immigrants from Italy began to arrive. The Town of Eastchester was approaching the 20th century and other changes would abound.

This is the sixth article in a series on the history of the Irish in the town. "Historically Speaking" runs bi-weekly. This article is partially a reprint of one published on Jan. 16, 2009. At the present time, census records and church histories are being studied, families are being interviewed, and old newspapers scanned to put together a clearer history of the Irish from the 1870s on.