

Sebastopol, Eastchester 1868

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A local newspaper, *The Yonkers Statesman*, described a neighborhood that “probably” contained more thieves than any other place in the country. The description of this place only got worse: “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. Differences over money and ethnic background led to violence and murder.” What place is the *Yonkers Statesman* referring to?

The place described above was not in some densely populated urban setting in the twentieth century. The newspaper was describing two areas in Eastchester adjacent to the quarries in 1868. One neighborhood was the area around present day Waverly Square and the other 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.

After the Civil War the marble quarries that had lain dormant became active again, employing up to 500 men.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, three-quarters of the land was still unimproved and 100 farmers were still tilling the land and raising livestock. When the Civil War came to an end, there was a hope that things would go back to the way they were before. That would not be.

Rich people still lived in large estates, but 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 quarry workers.

But the post boom in the marble industry would be short lived. A prolonged strike by the stonecutter’s union brought work to a standstill. In 1872 one newspaper commented on the strike:

“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 bought 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 prolonged misery.

The people who suffered the most were the Irish quarrymen. Stonecutters of Scandinavian and British descent 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 quarrymen were not in so great a demand. A layoff meant that they would be restricted to Eastchester.

The life of the Irish quarry workers was not easy. The Irish for the most part did not arrive in family groups consisting of parents and children, but came alone or with their brothers. The majority were male semi-skilled laborers, but some single women were employed as domestic servants. The penal laws of 1695 instituted draconian punishments that prevented the Irish from getting any education or owning land. The Irish potato famine of the 1840’s caused a massive migration of people.

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 Protestant Americans distrusted the Catholic Church and did not accept the hard living life style of the first wave of immigrants.

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.