



Historically Speaking

With Town Historian
Richard Forliano

Irish Americans in town: A group on the way up, 1850-1900



A photo of the old Washington Hotel.

Contributed photo

In 1850, there were 356 people born in Ireland living in the town of Eastchester – most of who worked in the Tuckahoe quarries. At that time, the Irish composed 20 percent of the total population.

Fifty years later, according to the 1900 census, Irish Americans were the largest minority in town, composing 40 percent of the total population. Old maps from the latter half of the 19th century show that Irish Americans lived in Waverly Square and in small but well built homes on Highland, Tuckahoe, and Prospect avenues.

But that was not the only place where

Irish Americans had enclaves. An 1893 map shows 15 Irish families with names like Kelly, Bellew, O’Neil, and Lynch living along Water Street east of White Plains Road, near the present day Eastchester High School. The total population for Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville barely exceeded 2,000, and Irish Americans had homes throughout the town.

Not only had the newly arrived Irish survived the terrible potato famine that killed a million of their countrymen, they endured the perilous Atlantic crossing. The Irish escaping the famine were Europe’s poorest,

unskilled peasants. In America, they faced grinding poverty and relentless discrimination. A special bond was formed with the Catholic Church. It is no mistake that soon after their arrival, these poor Irish immigrants founded the Immaculate Conception Church in Waverly Square in 1853.

As time passed, the Irish in Eastchester and Tuckahoe took advantage of new opportunities. Not all the Irish remained in the marble industry as unskilled and poorly paid quarrymen. Some became stonecutters in the quarries and were paid three times as much as the quarrymen. Samuel Fee at age 16 emigrated to America and worked 12 years for the erection of a Catholic cathedral on Fifth Avenue in New York City. In 1859, he came to Tuckahoe and entered the employ of William Masterton. He continued his connection with Masterton as operator and superintendent of the quarries until 1892.

Samuel Fee became a leading figure in Eastchester politics. He was elected 12 years as justice of the peace, five years as assessor for the town, and eight years as school board trustee. In 1870, he ignored the papal ban against free masonry and became a charter member of the Masonic Lodge of Tuckahoe, becoming a brother along with many of the non-Catholic leaders in the community.

In 1883, Samuel Fee built the Washington Hotel at 101 Main St. which is still standing today. This finely proportioned building was a large meeting hall for the Journeymen Stonecutters’ Association and an ideal place for union meetings. Fee had a fine country home and farm behind the hotel where he lived with his Irish-born wife and five children on seven acres of land.

The Irish were here to stay and would continue to have an important role in the business, manufacturing, and cultural life of the community.

Not all the Irish had the success of the Fee family. To survive, you had to be tough. Bourke Cochran, according to his biographer, at age 19 became a teacher in the public school at Tuckahoe, probably somewhere near Waverly Square. The story of his first few days by James McGurrin, Cochran’s biographer, tell much about the rough and tumble of Irish life:

“The former principal, ‘Bourke’s predecessor,’ was forced out of his position, by a group of rebellious students in the senior grades...ranging in age from fifteen to seventeen... After a series of lively altercations in the classroom, resulting in an unbroken score of victories for the rebels, the humiliated principal decided to resign. Bourke

Cochran was ready for his new students:

“Bourke arrived at school well ahead of time the next morning and took his place in the classroom, prepared to face his first hostile American audience...Eleven strong they marched into the classroom in single file. The ringleader, without removing his cap, walked at the head of the column and with a sneer of defiance on his face approached the principal’s rostrum. The new principal, ‘Bourke...’ went into action, and with a single blow, sent the young rebel leader sprawling across the floor.”

Legend has it that Cochran assaulted the other 10 students one by one, and never had a discipline problem after that. Today, Cochran would have been jailed after the first blow.

Entertainment reflected the hardness of life for those of Irish American descent. Just about every home had a chicken coop in the back of their yard. One pen was for hens to lay eggs, another was for roosters for dinner, and there was a third pen that was different and more sinister than the others. In this pen was a big aggressive bird, angry and nervous, that would pace around its cage. This bird did not like its home or anything about it. It was never allowed to go near the hens.

On Saturday nights, people came to the saloons at Waverly Square to watch the primitive and illegal sport of cock fighting. In the saloon was a dome like cage into which the two birds would be placed from which only one would emerge. The fight must have been a gory thing, not fit to write about. Also on these nights, bare-knuckled boxing matches took place, with wages being placed on men as they had been placed on birds.

As the 20th century drew near people of Irish American descent was the largest ethnic group in the town. According to the 1900 census they composed 40 percent of the population of over 2,000 people. The full story of the Irish in Eastchester will be told at a future date.

Further research is necessary to document the experience of the descendants of the Irish Americans in town. Families of residents who grew up in the town have to be interviewed, census, cemetery, and church records scrutinized, photographs and newspaper articles studied, old maps reviewed, and other relevant documents analyzed. Help is needed.

This is the eighth and the last for now of a series of articles on the Irish in town. Ongoing research is being conducted on the 20th century impact of Irish Americans in town.