



Historically Speaking

With Eastchester Historian
Richard Forliano

The Irish in America: Survival, and the Catholic Church

According to the census of 2000, 55 percent of the population of the Town of Eastchester – including the villages of Bronxville and Tuckahoe – had one parent of either Irish or Italian ancestry. Italian Americans are the largest ethnic group in the town, making up 35 percent of the population. But the Irish arrived first. While the story of the Irish has gone first, it will not be the last. The story of the other groups, starting with the Italians, will follow.

The arrival of the Irish to America was heroic, but tragic. The people of Ireland suffered from centuries of British oppression. In 1690, the English forces of William of Orange defeated Irish nationalists and their French Catholic allies at the Battle of Boyne. From that point on, Irish Catholics were not allowed to vote or hold office, were forced to practice their religion in private, and had all their land confiscated and seeded to Protestant families. Irish Catholics were compelled to pay rent for the land that they had once owned. They were not allowed to even pick up twigs for kindling, pick mushrooms or hunt game, and had to give financial support to a church that was not their own.

By the mid 19th century, when the great wave of Irish emigration to America began, the population of Ireland was double what is today. Most of the population lived in small settlements: each family had a tiny garden growing potatoes, virtually the only crop for Irish peasants. In April of 1846, the beginning of the ‘great trouble’ that would destroy Ireland began. A vicious blight ravaged the potato crop, creating a famine of horrific proportions. But it was not the potato blight that caused over a million of the Irish to die between 1846 and 1851. It was the horrific treatment by their insensitive and cruel British oppressors.

The British government insisted that large amounts of grain, corn, and livestock be shipped to England, while over a million men, women, and children starved. They were not allowed to hunt for game. A Protestant landlord would call on the forces of the British crown to physically evict the family in the case that an Irish Catholic tenant farmer fell behind on his rent or if simply wished to clear his land for grazing.

Sir Charles Trevelyan, the British civil servant in charge of relief, refused to help the starving people of Ireland. His view was that, “the great evil which we have to counter is not the physical evil of *the famine* but the selfish and perverse and turbulent character of the Irish people...too much charity might destroy Irish character.” When Trevelyan was asked to give relief funds to send people to North America, he claimed that such expenditures were unjustified. Over 50,000 of the Irish died of typhus or dysentery in emigrant vessels known as coffin ships, or in quarantine camps in America. Between 1846 and 1851, the population of Ireland declined from over 8 million to a little over 6 million. Within the next 50 years, the population of Ireland through famine, disease, and emigration would be cut in half.

During the period of the great famine, the Irish arrived in America and the township

of Eastchester. The Irish first worked on the New York and Harlem railroad and later in the Tuckahoe marble quarries. A study of the Census of 1850 shows that many of the first Irish immigrants were unskilled unmarried young men, not well established in any occupation. They boarded in homes, hotels, inns, and boarding houses. The average length of life of the Irish immigrant was six years after their arrival in America.

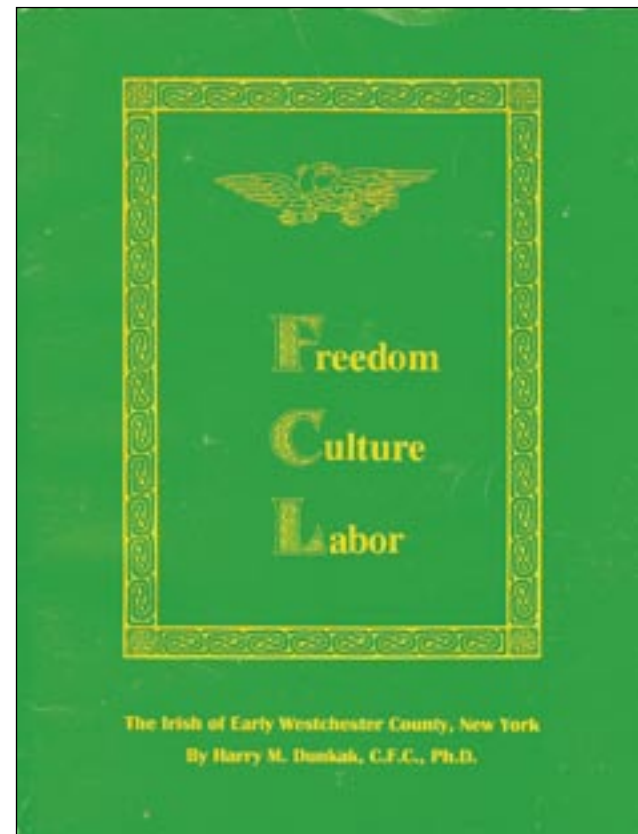
But the Irish survived in Tuckahoe – first working as unskilled quarrymen in the village’s two quarries. The 1850 census shows that 356, or 20 percent of the entire town’s population, were Irish. In 1850, the Rev. Eugene Maguire celebrated the first Catholic Mass at Marble House (Old Ward’s Tavern at the intersection of White Plains and Winterhill Road). Three years later, an Irish-born priest Thomas McLouglin founded what is today the Church of the Immaculate Conception.

The special relationship of the Irish immigrant to the Roman Catholic Church is beautifully described by Professor Harry Dunkak in his book, “The Irish of Early Westchester County:”

“In Ireland...both laity and clergy suffered under the tyranny of the state. The circumstance created by that special bond that made Irish and Catholicism inseparable terms. When the Catholic arrived in the United States, they first looked for advice, leadership, and assistance in their new and sometimes hostile environment. In return, the poverty stricken Irish used every spare penny to erect churches, schools, hospitals, orphanages, and houses for the poor.”

The grinding poverty and relentless discrimination both in the home country and America frustrated them as individuals, but also galvanized the Irish as a group. The Irish in America had to establish their own institutions, from their churches to their schools. They established unions, built orphanages, and hospitals. Denied the right to organize politically and succeed economically in Ireland, they took advantage of the new opportunities in America. They faced the sting of discrimination with the signs of “No Irish need apply” and felt the disdain of mainstream America. Yet, the Irish survived and prospered.

This is the seventh in a series of articles on the history of the Irish in this town. “Historically Speaking” runs bi-weekly.



Contributed photo
Harry Dunkak, professor of History at Iona College, wrote an excellent book on the history of the Irish in early Westchester.