Irish Immigrants:

The Streets Were Paved with Cobblestones . . . Not Gold

Many aspiring emigrants to the United States heard tales that the streets of America were "paved with gold," offering almost unlimited opportunities for new Americans to experience personal freedom and achieve economic prosperity. As early as 1783, an article in an Irish newspaper lamented "people deluded by false notions of making mountains of gold in America."

Still, for many of the poor and working classes of 19th century Europe, often deprived of civil rights, whipsawed by waves of political turmoil, enduring religious persecution or just facing meager economic prospects, the allure of those golden streets ultimately led to a voyage across the Atlantic. For the Irish of the mid-1800s, the decision to emigrate was reduced to a more basic life or death wager.

In any case, newly-arrived immigrants quickly found out that the streets were paved with cobblestones, not gold—assuming they were paved at all. In fact, many an immigrant laborer worked on paving crews themselves or, like my own immigrant grandfather, a shoemaker by trade, swung a shovel as a construction laborer. While some immigrants moved West after initially arriving at the Port of New York, the majority settled in large cities in the East including New York, Jersey City, Boston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, gravitating to neighborhoods populated with those from their homeland.

In early 1845, The Irish Emigrant Society of New York published an informational guide for the people of Ireland in the *Belfast Vindicator* newspaper. Specifically directed to "such persons as may have determined on proceeding to the United States," among the very candid pronouncements in that publication were the following:

> *Clerks, accountants, copyists, and professional men will, in most cases, be disappointed if they emigrate with the hope of improving their conditions.* [The reason given being that those positions were "overstocked" and United States citizens were "very naturally preferred to foreigners" in the hiring process.]
>
> *We cannot with confidence advise any persons to incur the expense, the embarrassments and the risk of moving to America, except laborers, mechanics and those possessing a small capital and practical knowledge of agriculture who are willing to settle in our new territories.*
>
> *All should avoid the Atlantic cities and distribute themselves throughout the widespread rural districts. The condition of the emigrant who remains in the Atlantic cities is very little, if at all, improved.*

Sophie Alberding Poe's signature

ESTABLISHED 1850.

INMAN LINE

UNITED STATES AND ROYAL MAIL STEAMERS.

	Tons.		Tons.
CITY OF ROME	8,300	CITY OF MONTREAL	4,490
CITY OF BERLIN	5,491	CITY OF BRUSSELS	3,775
CITY OF RICHMOND	4,607	CITY OF NEW YORK	3,500
CITY OF CHESTER	4,566	CITY OF PARIS	3,500

NEW YORK TO LIVERPOOL, LIVERPOOL TO NEW YORK.

Thursdays or Saturdays. Tuesdays or Thursdays.

THE STEAMERS OF THIS LINE are amongst the largest, fastest and most comfortable Ocean Passenger Steamers in the world. They are built with especial regard to strength, and are fitted with watertight and fireproof compartments. They have long been admired for their beautiful model, great power, and excellent sea-going qualities; and have the highest reputation for speed, comfort and regularity, their passages being amongst the shortest on record.

SALOON. The Cabin accommodation is of the highest order, every consideration being paid to the care and comfort of Passengers. The Saloons, which are luxuriously furnished, especially well lighted and ventilated, are fitted with revolving arm chairs, and take up the whole width of the vessel amidships. The principal Staterooms are amidships, where least noise and motion is felt, and all are particularly light and airy, are fitted with electric bells, have water laid on, and every requisite to add to the comfort of an Ocean Passage. Ladies' sitting and retiring rooms, gentlemen's smoking room, pianos, libraries, bath rooms, barber's shop, etc., provided. Special attention has been paid to the sanitary arrangements. The cuisine has always been a specialty of this line. Experienced Surgeons and Stewardesses carried.

STEERAGE. Steerage Passengers will find their comfort and convenience carefully studied in every respect. They are carried upon the same deck as the Cabin Passengers, the sleeping rooms being inclosed, contain a limited number in each, are well lighted, warmed and thoroughly ventilated throughout. Married couples are berthed by themselves. Single men and women in separate rooms, the strictest privacy being thus secured. Ample space is provided for partaking of meals and promenading. **THE BILL OF FARE includes an abundant supply of Cooked Provisions, served out by the Company's Stewards.**

Persons wishing to send for their friends can obtain through tickets from any railway station in Great Britain or Ireland to any railway station in the United States. Rates of Passage by Cabin or Steerage, Dates of Sailing, Cabin Plans, and other information will be furnished by applying to

JOHN G. DALE, Agent,

31 AND 33 BROADWAY, NEW YORK.

GEO. A. FAULK, Agent, 105 S. Fourth St., Philadelphia.

J. J. McCORMICK, Agent, Cor. 4th and Smithfield Sts., Pittsburg.

Or to the LOCAL AGENT in any City or Town in the United States.

Every emigrant should provide himself before his departure with something more than the price of his passage and supplies. Thousands continually land entirely penniless and are at once reduced to a state of destitution.

None but the frugal, the industrious, and the temperate can hope for success in America. They must be prepared to encounter disappointments, to surmount difficulties, and not be overcome by apparent discouragement.

While reasonable and practical advice, it came only six months before the first of what would be several consecutive years of failure of the potato crop in Ireland. The onset of the Famine would significantly alter both the motivations for emigration and the urgency of the decision to do so. Once that fateful decision was made, it was followed by the difficult journey across the Atlantic. It would be weeks and months before emigrants ever put their feet down on the cobblestone streets of America, providing they successfully navigated the obstacles threatening safe arrival at their port of departure and then survived a sea voyage in steerage.

Many Irish emigrants did not sail directly from Ireland to North America. Instead, they first made their way from their homes in Ireland to Liverpool, England and sailed from there to the United States and Canada. The journey out of Ireland often meant first selling off modest personal property to raise money to purchase tickets for the trip to North America and then literally walking away from hearth and home carrying only the small remnants of possessions. I have often envisioned my great-great-great-grandparents and their 6 children, thin and drawn due to the Famine, walking down a path with their few bags, and then turning one last time to get a final glimpse of the fields and tiny cottage they rented in Skreen, County Sligo.

Once emigrants arrived at their Irish port of embarkation, they took passage on overcrowded steamers or ferries for the Irish Sea crossing to Liverpool, sharing cramped unsanitary spaces with other emigrants, cargo, and animals being transported. In December 1848, *The Belfast Newsletter* reported the death of 72 steerage passengers traveling on a steamer sailing from Sligo to Liverpool. Rumors first circulated that a gang of thieves had boarded the steamer to perpetrate a robbery of the passengers, the deaths happening during that violent attack. It soon came to light from eyewitness accounts that the deaths were actually the result of mass suffocation in steerage when 150 Irish emigrants

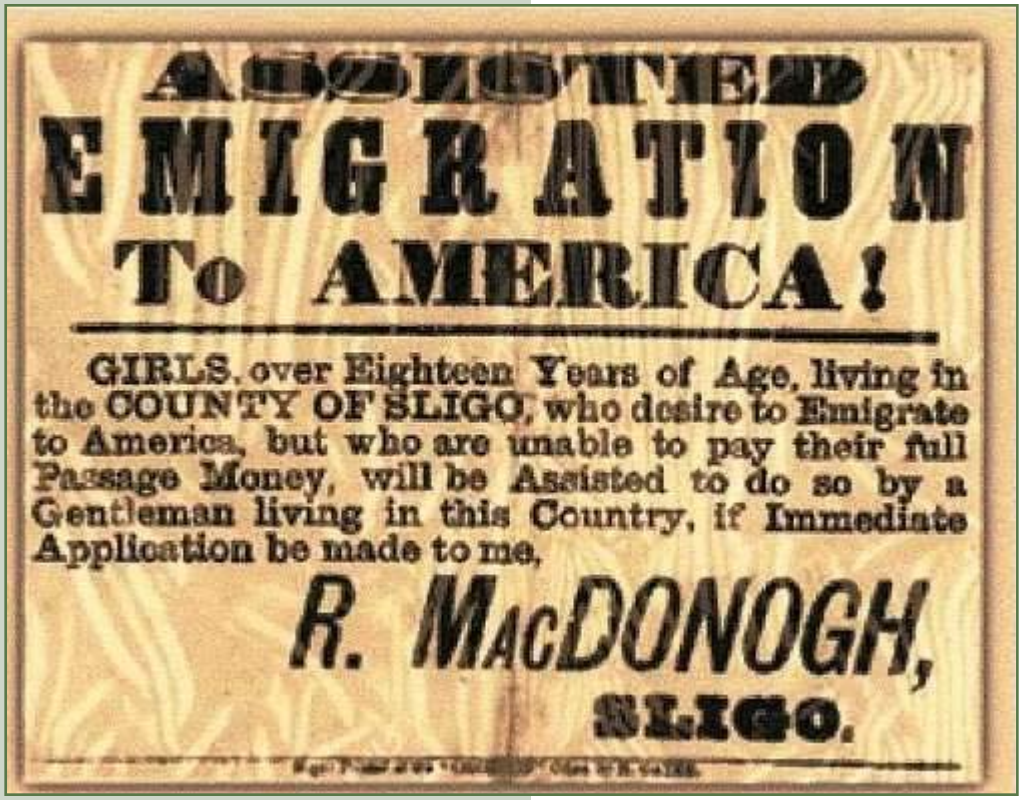
were confined in the extremely small steerage compartment during a strong storm en route. The article described the victims as follows:

> *Nearly all of the steerage passengers, on this most fatal voyage, were poor farmers from the neighbourhood of Sligo and Ballina, and their families; there were about an equal number of males and females, and a considerable portion of children, many of whom are now left fatherless and motherless. Among the survivors are three little children, saved out of a family of nine. It is almost unnecessary to say that all these passengers were miserably poor, many of them half-naked. The loss of cattle and sheep, we have been informed, was also great, but we have not yet learned the exact number.*[1]

Some emigrants entered Liverpool destitute and hoping to find temporary work to make enough money to purchase tickets for the voyage to America. Others came with the funds to buy their tickets only to fall victim to thieves and swindlers in the

rough streets and rundown boarding houses near the docks as they awaited their departure date. Liverpool, a city of about 250,000 in the early 1840s populated largely with the laboring class, swelled to twice that number by late 1847 as hundreds of thousands of desperate Irish arrived. The very poorest of these Irish had no real hope of continuing on to America and instead sought food through English social welfare programs only to be deported back to Ireland by the English authorities.

For those who finally boarded ship in Liverpool for the voyage to America in steerage, the following four to six weeks on the Atlantic in the underbelly of that vessel would be a harrowing, dangerous, and, for some, life-ending experience spent literally alongside hundreds of others like themselves. In addition to having the money to purchase ship tickets, emigrants were responsible for carrying provisions to sustain them during the journey. The shipping companies did distribute small amounts of bread, oatmeal, and water, often spoiled or contaminated, and certainly not an adequate diet in any event. Famine emigrants, already weak from hunger and often with barely the clothes on their backs, fell victim to illness or death in their desperate attempt to make the voyage to America. Having little or no


ASSISTED
EMIGRATION
To AMERICA!

GIRLS, over Eighteen Years of Age, living in the COUNTY OF SLIGO, who desire to Emigrate to America, but who are unable to pay their full Passage Money, will be Assisted to do so by a Gentleman living in this Country, if Immediate Application be made to me,

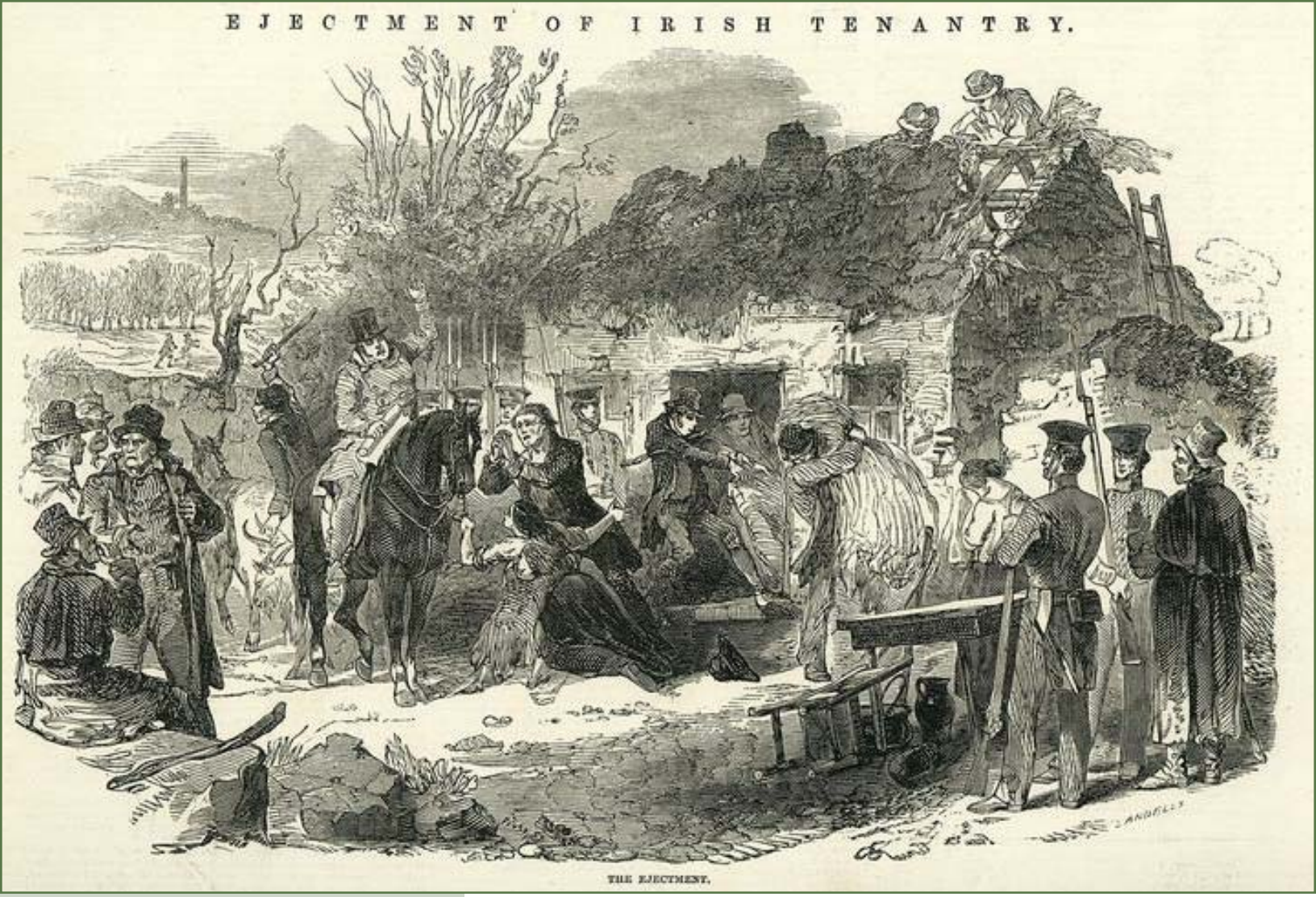
R. MacDONOGH,
SLIGO.

experience traveling by ship, seasickness and retching would have been commonplace and even under the best circumstances, such close quarters meant illness and disease spread quickly, only making conditions more unpleasant and dangerous. And, if that were not enough to contend with, the sinking of ships during these Atlantic crossings were an all too common occurrence.

My Flannelly great-great-great-grandparents and their six young children survived their journey in steerage, leaving out of Liverpool and landing at the Port of New York on November 28, 1846. They landed before the 1855 opening of the Castle Garden immigration station in Lower Manhattan, recognized as the first official U.S. immigration center. At the time of their arrival, the Customs House in Manhattan was responsible for the review of immigrant passengers on incoming ships. After that, immigrants like the Flannellys were set loose on the bustling docks of New York City. Imagine their wide eyes as they picked up their few bags and tentatively took their first steps away from the ship where they had spent weeks of cramped confinement with two hundred fellow steerage passengers. Venturing out into the busy streets of a huge city and likely Irish speakers, their ears would have been assaulted by talk all around them in a language they likely did not comprehend. And, not unlike Liverpool, there were the "runners" who frequented the docks on behalf of disreputable boarding house owners who specialized in victimizing newly-arrived immigrants.

In their publication of 1845 directed to potential Irish immigrants, The Irish Emigrant Society of New York counseled as follows:

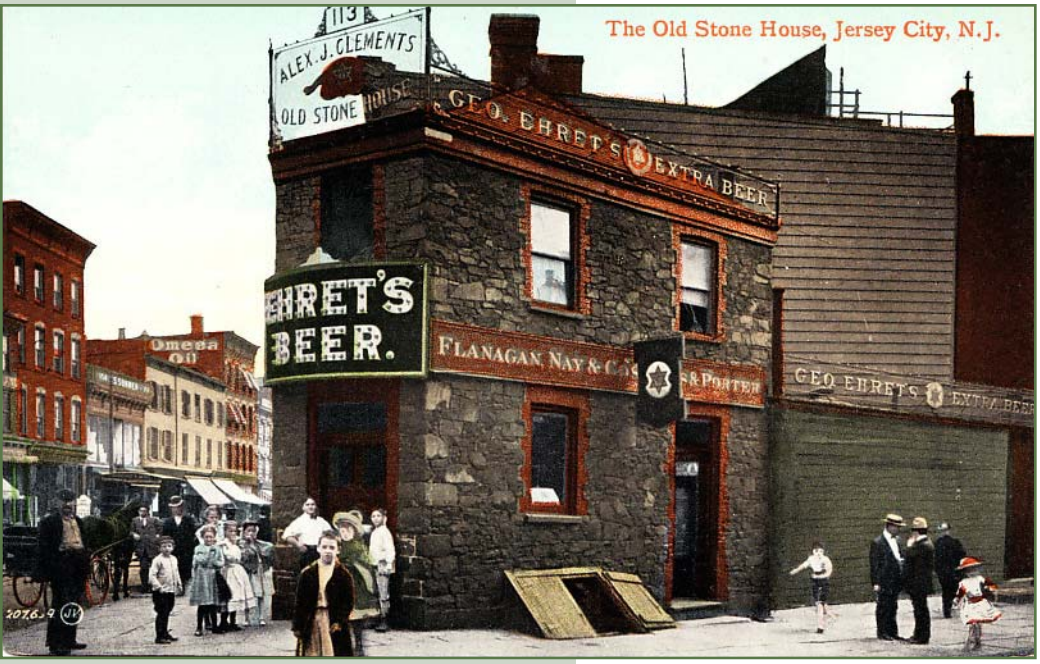
In New York, the emigrant must be aware of certain boarding-houses established here for his special accommodation; but which too often, prove to be dens where he can be cheated, plundered and insulted. He can avoid all this by either consulting with one of the agents of the Irish Emigrant Society, who is generally at the quarantine clock where the emigrants are first landed, or when he comes up to the city, by applying without delay at the office of the society. Before



going to any boarding house he should make a distinct bargain with the keeper of it for his board, having expressly understood whether he is to settle by the day or by the week, whether he is at liberty to leave at any time, and pay to the time of leaving, or is to be held responsible for a certain period, whether he stops so long or not, etc. In fact he cannot be too careful in his dealings with the boarder house keepers, or too particular in the bargain he makes with them; and by having a fellow passenger present at the time witness to the bargain, he will in many instances save himself much trouble, vexation and expense.

Newly-arrived Irish, having survived the gauntlet of obstacles and risks that threatened to thwart their journey to a new life in America, now entered the next phase of their emigration experience. Immediately facing them were new, urgent and daunting challenges starting with finding a place to live and a job to sustain them in their first days as new Americans.

Once arrived in the United States, Irish *emigrants* were transformed into American *immigrants*. Beginning the tentative first steps of their assimilation into their new homeland meant navigating a myriad of social and economic challenges, some



immediate and obvious and others that would arise months and even years later. Each family's story is unique despite actual (or seeming) parallels with others like themselves who left Ireland and headed to North America. Consider, for instance, two tenant farmer families from the same county that left their Irish homeland during the years of the Great Hunger, each sailing from Liverpool to New York City. One resettled in the U.S Midwest, joining relatives that previously emigrated to America. The other, having no existing connections in America, settled in a large city on the East Coast in an immigrant neighborhood. No doubt the paths of their American assimilation resulted in two unique and different family stories affected by factors including geography, familial support, employment prospects, and other social and environmental factors.

Many more Irish settled in U.S. East Coast cities than those who pushed on to the interior of the country. Among those staying in the East were my own Famine emigrant great-great-great-grandparents and their six children, the Flannellys, who left County Sligo and arrived in New York in late 1846. The initial decades of their new life in America tell their personal version of the broader story of the immigrant laboring classes of the 19th century. While a special story to me, it is just one of hundreds of thousands of such stories that come together to form the patchwork of the American immigrant experience.

The Flannellys, unlike many newly-arrived Irish, did not settle in New York City but instead took up residence across the Hudson River in Jersey City, New Jersey, renting an apartment in the downtown Irish immigrant neighborhood. Over the next five decades leading up to the turn of the 20th century, multiple generations of my Flannelly ancestors would continue to be born, live, and die in modest rented space in that same neighborhood. Even my mother and I would be born in Jersey City, extending our family's continuous presence there for over a century. Just as our family changed over that long time period, so did the city itself, evolving from a bucolic country suburb of New York City in the early 1800s to a bustling, densely-populated industrialized community by 1900.

So, what did my Flannellys find when they came to Jersey City in the mid-1800s? Jersey City was in its early years as a municipality when the Flannellys arrived, a community of some

6,000 residents, most of them American-born Protestants of the middle and upper classes. Jersey City had its roots in early Dutch settlers and their descendants as did New York City. In the first half of the 19th century, New York steadily grew as a population and commerce center with Jersey City orbiting it like a small moon and becoming a preferred place of residence for professionals and elite working in New York who could hop a ferry to New York for a round trip fare of twenty-five cents.

The Flannellys were Catholics, part of a religious minority in Jersey City looked upon by their American-born Protestant neighbors as a potential threat to their control of politics and societal authority. These fears of loss of position and control and economic superiority are the same ones that have attached themselves to each successive wave of immigrants causing distrust, animosity, and even violence. Just the same, the growing Irish Catholic immigrant population in Jersey City led to the construction of its first Roman Catholic Church, St. Peter's, which opened its doors in 1837.

In 1844, Irish-born Father John Kelly, once a missionary priest in Africa, was appointed pastor of St. Peter's 500 Catholics. St. Peter's parochial school, believed to be the first Catholic school in New Jersey, had been started in about 1836 in the basement of a residential home. About the time Father Kelly came to St. Peter's, the parish school relocated to the church basement. In the early 1850s the first of two orders of religious Sisters helped staff the school. Father Kelly's legacy would grow large from the modest seeds he planted for his Catholic flock. In his *History of Jersey City,* published in 1895, Alexander McLean included a subsection titled "Roman Catholic Schools," stating that the enrollment in that year had reached about 7,463 students (more than the total of all Jersey City residents in 1850) taught by 125 teachers. From one fledgling parish, and not in small part as the result of Father Kelly's tireless efforts to serve the needs of Catholics in Jersey City and surrounding towns, five new parish churches grew from missions of St. Peter's to self-sufficiency as St. Bridget's, St. Michael's, St. Mary's, St. Patrick's, and St. Joseph's from the 1850s to the 1870s.

In the United States at large during the mid-nineteenth

century, American-born men formed political groups such as the "Know Nothing Party" dedicated to the "protection" of native-born society from the perceived negative effects of the growing population of Irish and other immigrants. These sentiments and movements and the resulting active discrimination against the Irish and other immigrant groups persisted through the period of the Civil War and beyond and successfully held back the progress of Irish immigrant political enfranchisement in Jersey City for many years despite the growing numbers of Irish voters. Gerrymandering of election districts and the rewriting of laws for the specific purpose of thwarting Irish candidates in Jersey City were commonplace.

In 1860, Jersey City had a four-ward structure and its Irish residents were slowly learning to join together to participate in and influence local politics and government, including the police force. Their votes were actively courted, particularly by the Democrats, but they were not part of the Democratic Party leadership which stayed in the hands of native-born men. Although inroads were being made by the new Irish-Americans, anti-Catholic sentiment remained prevalent through the decade of the 1860s. Redrawing of wards and districts in the city was common as a means of fragmenting majority Irish neighborhoods and so diluting the effects of the Irish vote. Despite that, in 1867 the first Irish mayoral candidate was on the ballot although he was defeated by a local business man and former Know-Nothing Party member.

The 1860 US census recorded a little over 29,000 Jersey City residents. The census showed that non-U.S.-born males equated to about 60% of the total adult male population, Irish males representing the overwhelming majority of that 60%. Those Irish men, mostly Catholic, were largely unskilled laborers working in factories and for the railroad and they were mostly poor, living in tenements and shanties. Like the majority of the Irish men heading households in Jersey City, my great-great-great-grandfather and his Irish-born sons were "laborers" according to U.S. census records compiled between 1850 and 1880. What was it that these "laborers" did to earn their meager wages? They gravitated from unskilled job to job, unable to get steady employment. Those jobs were back-breaking, physically demanding, in unhealthy environments, and outdoors in the elements: digging ditches, working construction sites, loading and unloading trucks or railroad cars, shoveling, lifting, and dragging as needed. In between jobs, they and their families suffered without enough food and struggled to keep a roof over their heads, often relying on merchants and landlords for credit to tide them over.

Ultimately, by the 1870s, the growing tide of Irish residents, whose community leaders had learned how to play the political game from their native-born "betters," could not be held back any

longer as they formed beneficial political alliances and assumed various roles in Jersey City government. Irish immigrants and their American-born children continued to come to Jersey City in large numbers, assimilating into the fabric of their city and seeing it become home to a major railroad hub, industrialization and manufacturing during the second half of the nineteenth century. By 1890, the population of Jersey City was over 150,000!

As Jersey City grew to be a bustling center of commerce in the late 1800s and its Irish-American citizens moved up the social and economic ladders, they became business-owners, police officers, firemen, politicians, clergy, and manufacturing workers. By 1920, the downtown Jersey City immigrant neighborhood where four generations of my Flannelly family had lived was no longer an Irish enclave and waves of Italian immigrants, beginning *their* lives as new Americans, replaced the Irish on those same cobblestone streets.

End Note:

1. Central Library, Belfast, Archive. Loss of Lives on Steamer Londonderry, Sligo to Liverpool; *The Belfast Newsletter,* Tuesday, 5 December, 1848; CMSIED 1200378

"Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies."

—Shirley Abbott

Maureen Wlodarczyk

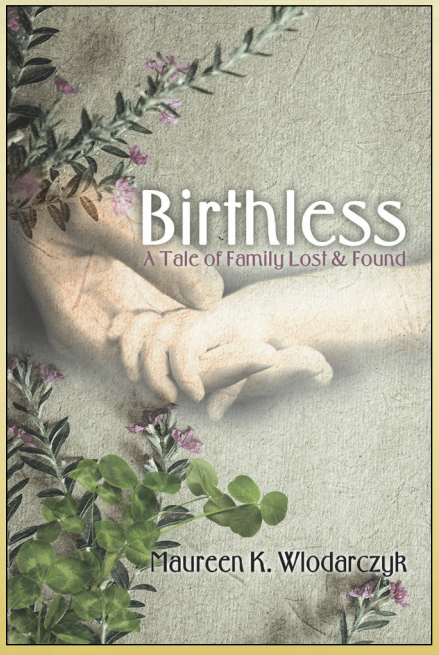
Genealogist, Speaker/Instructor & Author

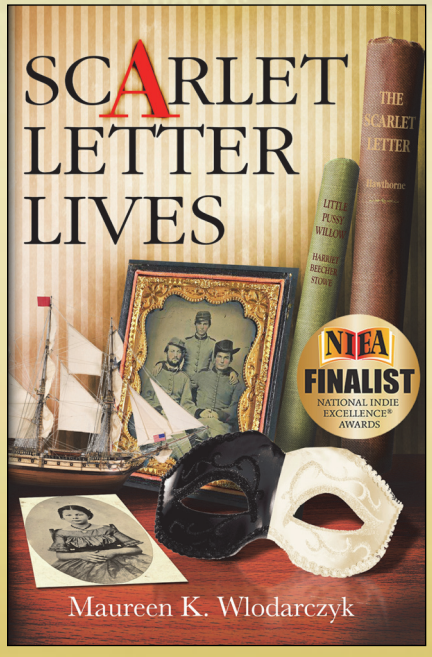
Genealogy Research Services

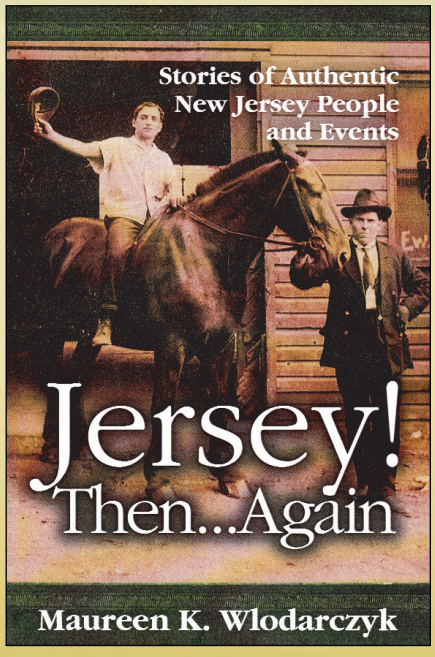
No-Charge Preliminary
Consultation Search
Reasonable Hourly Rates

Programs & Classes

Genealogy How-To
Writing Your Family Story
Self-Publishing How-To







Contact: maureenwlodarczyk@gmail.com or 732-238-5555

Find out more about Maureen at www.past-forward.com