The Last Mayor of Long Island City:

Patrick Jerome Gleason

By Joseph Brunelle

November 2, 1886 marks the 100th anniversary of the election of Patrick Jerome Gleason as mayor of Long Island City (LIC), New York. Between its incorporation as a city in 1870, and its final absorption into Greater New York City in 1898, LIC encompassed the areas of Western Queens now identified as Hunters Point, Ravenswood, Astoria, Sunnyside and part of Woodside. From 1881, when he was first elected to the LIC Board of Aldermen, to 1898 when he lost the mayor's job in the Greater NYC incorporation, Gleason dominated the political life of Long Island City.

Early Life

In adult life, Gleason was a handsome man who sported a handlebar mustache in the fashion of the times, and though he did not wear a beard, he had a fine head of hair. Gleason, at six feet tall, was the shortest boy in a family of seven boys and one girl, and was born in Tipperary County, Ireland on April 25, 1844. In 1862, with some of his brothers already in America, Gleason decided to immigrate to New York. One of his first jobs in America was the operation of a whisky distillery in Flushing. Shortly after this venture Gleason borrowed some money from a brother and opened a saloon in Williamsburgh, Brooklyn. In 1872 Gleason made his first entry into politics by running for office in the Williamsburgh seventh Assembly District against Frederick Cocheu, a wealthy railroad company (streetcar) president. Gleason lost the election on this occasion.

In December 1872, shortly after his defeat in Brooklyn, Gleason borrowed $300 and took passage on a steamer to join some of his brothers living in San Franciso. His steamer was shipwrecked off the coast of Mexico and, after many other misadventures, Gleason finally arrived in San Francisco in February 1873. Again borrowing money from a brother, Gleason started a distillery business which he later sold. By speculating in stocks he was able to turn the $5000 he earned from the sale into $32,000. Returning to Long Island City in 1874, Gleason used this money to open a horsedrawn trolly line running along Borden Avenue between the 34th Street ferry Terminal in Long Island City and Calvary Cemetery. Gleason had obtained the franchise for this line before his trip to San Francisco but did not have the funds to use it until after his West Coast business success. For the next seven years, Gleason continued to operate his very profitable trolly line and concentrated on expanding and improving his traction holdings.

In 1880, Gleason married Isabelle Bennettt and they purchased a handsome row house on what is now called 45 Avenue in Long Island City. After nearly a decade of prosperous operation of his trolly line, Gleason again entered into political life in 1881 and won an Alderman's seat as a Democrat from the predominantly Irish First Ward of LIC. Upon taking office, he was elected president of the Board by the other Aldermen.

A political scandal in 1882, in which the LIC Treasurer committed suicide, convinced Gleason to run for mayor in 1883 against the incumbent mayor George Petry. On October 2, 1883, one month before the mayoralty election, and four months after giving birth to a daughter, Gleason's wife Isabelle died of consumption. Gleason remained in the race, but lost to Petry a month later.

"Battle Axe Gleason"

Gleason's political ambitions continued and after one term out of the Common Council ((1883-1884), he ran
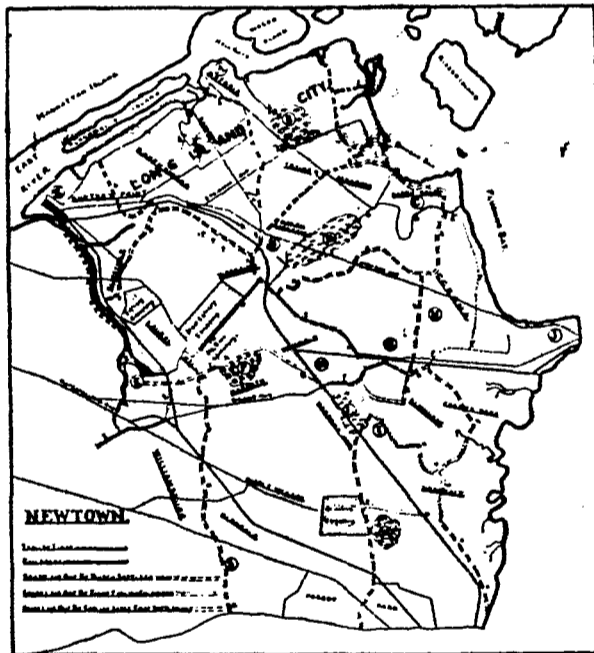
for and won the Alderman at Large seat for 1886 and 1887. In November 1886, with one year left as an Alderman, Gleason defeated three other candidates (including incumbent Petry) and was elected Mayor of Long Island City. Gleason s good showing in the Irish First Ward, and the vote split between the four candidates, gave him the victory. Retaining his seat on the Common Council, Gleason, due to a loophole in the LIC Charter, continued to vote as a Legislator as well as a mayor. Shortly into his first term, Gleason came under increasing attack from the local newspaper, the "Long Island City Star". This criticism continued for the rest of Gleason's career and before long, New York City newspapers such as the "New York Times" and the "New York Tribune" began writing articles about the colorful Irish mayor of Long Island City. On a few occasions, Gleason and his supporters took axes in hand and cut down fences and broke up LIRR sheds near the LIC end of the East River ferry. The newspapers promptly labeled the mayor "Battle Axe Gleason".

In November 1889 Gleason ran for re-election against Frederick Bleckween, the Republican LIC Treasurer. As usual, the mayor ran an exciting race, driving about the town behind his team of famous trotters, Gladstone and Parnell, scattering pennies among the children and ballots among their fathers and elder brothers. He was preceded by a bugler on horseback, and posters for Gleason had been previously distributed to school children. Critics claimed that the word had been passed that every female teacher with a brother or father who voted against Gleason would find herself without a job at the close of the school year following Gleason's election.

Despite bitter attacks by the local press, Gleason won the election by a majority of 331 votes out of a total of 5447 votes cast.

The Second Term

Gleason began his second term by embarking on a huge public school building program to replace LIC's antiquated schools. By 1892 he had completed his showcase school in the Irish First Ward and he came under heavy charges of graft and kickbacks for its $225,000 cost. Increasing criticism brought out the physical aspects of Gleason's nature and in this term as mayor he was brought to court for assaults against his critics. In September 1890 he assaulted George Crowley, an Associated Press reporter, and spent five days in the LIC jail. Other assaults against citizens, other politicians and even his own trolley employees were eventually dropped and Gleason was never to spend another day in jail for either personal or political actions.

Defeat and Re-Election

In 1892 Gleason ran for a third term as mayor and was defeated by Horatio Sanford in a hotly contested race. Gleason refused to vacate the mayor's office, claiming he had won, and a protracted court case developed. After a couple of months, Sanford won and Gleason was physically removed from City Hall at the threat of bodily harm.

Gleason returned to the full-time operation of his railroad and the running of his new venture, the Woodside Water Company, which was a supplier of LIC drinking water. By 1895 he had divested himself of his trolley lines, which by this time had been electrified, and ran for mayor a fifth time. Gleason ran with the backing of his own party against a regular Democratic candidate named John Madden, and a Republican named Dr. Benjamin Strong. On this occasion, Gleason won by only 30 votes and, as in 1892, found the election results contested in court. This time Gleason was victorious and on January 1, 1896 he took the reigns of mayor for the last time, accompanied by a parade of school children and cheering spectators.

LAST MAYOR, cont'd.

The controversy surrounding the Mayor continued. In 1897 his enemies tried to oust him from office on the grounds that he was not a naturalized citizen. Gleason took out a new set of naturalization papers and the courts ruled he had shown good faith and dismissed all charges. His enemies next charged him with selling a fire engine to Long Island City for $2,200 when he had paid only $20 for it. Again Gleason had the indictment dismissed on the grounds of insufficient evidence.

Picnics and Politics

In April 1896 the citizens of LIC and other Queens County towns voted for consolidation with New York City. Gleason suprisingly supported this action, though he stood to lose his mayor's job when LIC joined NYC. By the summer of 1897, Gleason officially announced he would be an independent candidate for the first mayor to preside over Greater New York City. He opened his campaign by organizing and paying for a huge picnic for 14,000 LIC residents. A flotilla of three

steamboats, five barges and two tugs transported the exursion from Astoria to Yonkers where 600 gallons of ice cream, 5,000 quarts of milk, 3,600 bottles of soft drinks and 2,200 pounds of cakes and cookies were consumed. Gleason provided two brass bands and some dances played were "Hail to the Chief", "Long Island City", "More Bricks,", "Seventh Regiment,", "Battle Axe", "To The Greater New York" and "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight".

Unfortunately, Gleason's race for mayor of New York City was not as successful as his huge picnic. His formidable opponents were Seth Low, former mayor of Brooklyn and president of Columbia University, Judge Robert Van Wyck, the Tammany Hall Democratic nominee, Benjamin Tracy and Henry George. At election day, November 2, 1897, Gleason received only 1, 263 votes out of more than 500,000 votes cast. Robert Van Wyck, the Tammany candidate, was the victor, with 233,450 votes. On January 1, 1898, Long Island City became a borough of New York City and Gleason was out of a job.

In December 1899 Gleason filed a petition for bankruptcy, and on Monday, May 20, 1901 he died of a heart attack at his home in Long Island City. At his bedside were his 18 year old daughter, Jessie, his physician, attorney, and a clerk from his office. A High Mass was celebrated at St. Mary's Church in LIC, and mourners walked to his burial place in Calvary Cemetery. As he was interred, his schoolchildren sang "Nearer My God to Thee." His obituary in the "New York Times" read "Mr. Gleason's death removes from public view one of the most picturesque of the striking characters which have been brought to the front in the multifarious working of American politics since the Civil War." It is apparent from Gleason's career that there was much truth to this statement.

Joe Brunelle is a Contract Administrator for the Federal Government and enjoys reading New York City history. This article is condensed from his unpublished Master's Thesis entitled "Patrick J. Gleason and the Politics of Long Island City, New York".
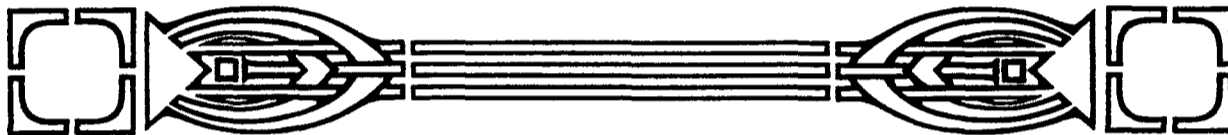
Jack Kinsella

Computer Talk

My primary aim in this article is to demonstrate how valuable a personal computer can be for historical research and to encourage other people to see that their local records are entered on computer.

The project I wish to describe was not planned as a computer task. Rather, it was meant to be the simple chore of copying the cemetery records of Seneca Falls, N.Y., a small upstate town that just happened to be where my mother grew up. These records contained the following types of information: name of deceased, place of birth and date, date and cause of death, cemetery lot and plot number, and the name of the undertaker.

My first thought was to simply record the names and corresponding lot numbers. I could then quickly generate an alphabetized list to accompany the copies. After giving the matter further thought, however, I decided that it would be of much greater value if I typed all the information into the computer. The problem with this, of course, is that it involved several hours of typing -- a fact usually ignored by computer sales people, who emphasize the "blazing speed" at which computers manipulate information.

The task of entering data is not difficult - just time-consuming. I used a computer database program called dBASE. This requires that the data to be manipulated be typed in a specific format. The format I used was the following:

NAME
BIRTHPLACE
RESIDENCE
DATE OF DEATH
AGE
CAUSE OF DEATH
UNDERTAKER
LOT #
PLOT #

Using the database format, it is necessary to type this iinformation for each person listed - 1500 names for this project. Once the data is entered, however, it becomes possible to manipulate it various ways by entering a few simple commands, including printing the records out in alphabetical order.

Once the data is in the proper format, answers to questions such as the following are provided almost instantaneously:

WHAT IS THE AVERAGE AGE OF DEATH
-In 1880?
-In 1885,86,87?
-Between 1880-1890?
-Prior to 1870?
-After 1900?
-Etc., etc.

By properly phrasing the questions, it is a simple matter to generate histograms on a wide variety of topics. One example might be the major cause of death by age group, by decade.

After completing the cemetery project, I volunteered for a somewhat more ambitious one, that of copying the birth, marriage, and death records of St. Mary's Catholic church in my hometown - Waterloo, N.Y. Whereas my first project consisted of slightly more than 1500 records, this project, covering the years 1845 to the present, contains several times that number.

I have completed the copying phase and feel relieved that now more than one copy of those irreplaceable records exists. The data entry task for this number of records is a formidable one, and I am afraid that it will have to wait until I retire next year. A cursory check of the entries shows fascinating data just waiting to be analyzed. I'll give one example: St. Mary's was founded in the 1840s, primarily by Irish immigrants. In the 50's and 60's German names begin to appear in the records and by 1890, Italian names. Intially, intermarriage between these groups is rare but as the years pass it becomes more and more common. A more stubborn barrier is religion: marriages between Catholics and Protestants almost never occur before 1900. Three decades later, however, it is a common occurrence.

Of course, the number of records involved in the above projects are far too few to be used to generate meaningful statistical data. However, if enough people can be encouraged to take on similar local projects, and then all these are integrated into one large database, then some truly valuable information will be generated.