

The Municipal Archives

By James Hurley

It is extraordinary to realize that it wasn't until 1950, that a Municipal Archives staff was established to preserve and maintain the records of New York City. Today, in 1986, the New York City Municipal Archives is a modern facility equipped with both photographic and conservation laboratories.

There is vast, largely untapped information here. Located off the lobby of what was originally called the Hall of Records across from City Hall at 31 Chambers Street, the Archives is a part of the Department of Records and Information Services (D.O.R.I.S.). This agency was set up in 1977 with the significant assistance of Paul O'Dwyer, then City Council President.

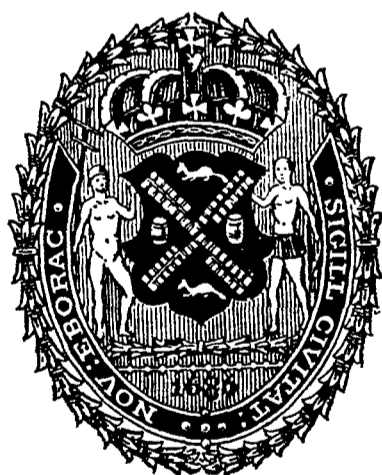
Registered death records prior to 1920 and birth records prior to 1898 are available on microfilm in the Research Room, designed by the Archive Director, Idilio Gracia-Pena. Some of the other records of Irish-New York interest are touched upon in B-Ann Moorehouse's article "Researching the Irish-Born in New York City", (available through the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society) but they include the 1890 Police Census, various early 19th century court records, Civil War substitute slips (connected with the Draft Riots), carter and hackman license applications, Board of Health minutes and Common Council Filed Papers.

One of the special treasures of the genealogy collection is the birth certificate of one George DeValera, born on East 41st St., October 14, 1882 to Spanish-born Vivion DeValera and Irish-born Kate (Coll)DeValera. A second certificate, dated June 10, 1916, records the change of the name George to Edward, soon to be transliterated into the more familiar Eamon.

For those interested in the non-genealogical side of the Irish story in New York, the Archives has a wide variety of sources ranging in age from the nearly new papers of Paul O'Dwyer as Ombudsman and City Council President in the 1970s to records of the Dutch colonial government of the 1650s. These latter are part of a collection of 135 volumes just received (Dec. 30, 1985), from the Office of the City Clerk where they had been stored for years in a large safe marked "Ancient Municipal Records". They are the cornerstone of New York City's Municipal records, and also include original records of the Common Council up to 1831 as well as various other unique items. Although they have not been examined from the point of view of Irish American data content, we are confident that a close scrutiny will yield data of interest. Another accession, received

since the October NYIHR meeting includes 68 photographs of Mayor Thomas F. Gilroy (1893-94) and his family, many in a home setting and revealing a peculiarly personal - if rather formal and "lace-curtainty" side of an Irish-American mayor's period and life.

Because the Municipal Archives is relatively new and the volume of records produced by the city's government over three and a half centuries is rather vast, the task of identifying, appraising and processing the historically valuable portion of those records into usable reference tools is far from complete. Though some 75,000 cubic feet of documents have been accumulated over the last 35 years, many of them have received only preliminary processing and there is a large backlog of work to be done, including an enormous conservation problem resulting from prolonged years of poor storage and the high acidic content of much of the paper produced since the mid-19th century. Even some of the recent records, including the two boxes of working papers and manuscript articles prepared by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s for the planned book, "The Irish in New York", are presently unavailable to researchers because of the poor quality of the paper. Microfilm, an obvious but expensive solution, is out of the question, because more than 100 other boxes (including many duplications and other non-historical materials) of Project records will have to be analyzed and reduced in-toto before any microfilming can begin.



First Seal of New York City.

However, even with these limitations, much is still available to the serious researcher who will not be daunted by the dearth of a finely tuned finding aid system and who will explain his/her project to one of the professional staff.

Among the major collections likely to prove productive to the serious Irish-oriented researcher are:

The papers of the Common Council (now City Council) from 1670 to the present, including documents of Thomas Dongan, distinguished Irish Catholic

STATE OF NEW YORK. 352241
 City of New York. City of New York.
BIRTH RETURN.
 (In All Cases, write in full.)
 Name of Child *George De Valera*
 Sex *Male* Color or Race, if other than the White.
 Date of Birth *Oct. 14, 1882*
 Place of Birth (Street and Number) *Nursing & Child's Hospital*
 Name of Father *Vivion De Valera*
 Full Name of Mother *Kate De Valera*
 Maiden Name of Mother *Coll*
 Birthplace (County or State) of Mother *Ireland*
 " " of Father *Spain* Age & Occupation *Artist*
 Number of Child of Mother (whether 1, 2, 3, &c.) *1* How many of them now living *1*
 Name and address of Medical Attendant or other Authorized person, in own handwriting *Dr. Charles P. Murray M.D. Nursing Child's Hospital*
 Date of this Return *Nov. 10 '82*

Birth Certificate of Eamon DeValera

Governor of New York Province from 1683 to 1688; various papers on Christopher Colles and his NYC water system proposals of the late 18th century; references to the early and later celebration of St. Patrick's Day; and a number of resolutions on Irish affairs during the period 1916-1922.

The papers of every mayoral administration from 1849 to the present consisting of general and departmental correspondence, subject files, reports, legislative files, etc. Included are the eight Irish-American mayors reigning between W.R. Grace (1881-2) and John P. O'Brien (1933). A unique finding aid to the 1849-1897 portion are the 3-shelf feet of typed abstracts of every piece of paper saved for this period, a Herculean task performed by personnel of the W.P.A. Historical Records Survey. The abstracts are replete with references to Comptroller Richard ("Slippery Dick") Connolly, Chamberlain Peter B. ("Brains") Sweeney and other top Irish-American office-holders. From the later period, one box filed with the LaGuardia mayoral papers contains detailed reports on the ethnic make-up of each branch and precinct of the Police Department in March

1931 - the majority then clearly of Irish birth or parentage.

Two other collections that probably merit attention but may be cumbersome to work with are the Tax Books (1699-1976), which can show ethnic concentrations in neighborhoods; and the records of the Manhattan District Attorney (c.a. 1790-1951).

Many other collections, large and small are available but have yet to be analyzed for their Irish or ethnic content. For those Irish-American researchers with a prospector's instinct and a fairly clear idea of what they are looking for, the Municipal Archives offers some potentially good digging.



James Hurley is an Associate Archivist at the Municipal Archives and has also been associated with three of New York City's historical societies as staff member or Director.



City Hall, Wall Street.