

THE SHAMROCK OF NEW YORK, THE FIRST IRISH-AMERICAN NEWSPAPER

By John P. O'Connor

NYIHR member John P. O'Connor is compiling a list of doctoral dissertations that relate to the New York Irish for the NYIHR bibliography project.

Irish American journalism began in New York City December 15th, 1810 with the first issue of "The Shamrock or Hibernian Chronicle." No earlier dated Irish American newspaper has been found in libraries or reported in historical studies. While German language newspapers were first published in Philadelphia in 1732 and French papers in New Orleans about 1800, *The Shamrock* became the first immigrant English language newspaper since the founding of the United States in 1789. ("The Albion", started in 1822, was a New York British weekly written for English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh emigrants and residents.)

Edward Gillespy wrote and edited *The Shamrock*, reporting news of Ireland honestly interpreted which other papers of the time ignored or derided. Irishmen had edited newspapers in various cities, e.g. New York as early as 1752, but those were general newspapers. Gillespy wrote for English-speaking customers whether emigrants, recent exiles or "narrowbacks", Americans born of Irish parentage. Most Irish who had come to America were English-speaking Protestants, some of whom had become middle or upper class. Irish Catholics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were mostly Gaelic-speakers, and those who came usually were sailors, indentured servants or exiles.

Very little is known about Edward Gillespy, not even if he was Irish born. The 1810 Federal Census listed him as a household head, 46 years or more, living with a male youth but no women in a residence on Rivington Street, possibly indicating a widower. He was the paper's sole editor from its beginning in December 1810 until June 1813, when the paper had its first suspension. In the issue dated May 5th, 1813 he lists health and financial problems as causing the shut-down. Unpaid subscriptions, totaling thousands of dollars, were undoubtedly due to the cessation of merchant shipping and mercantile activity resulting from the War of 1812. He continued to edit from 1814 until the newspaper's second suspension in January 1815. Thereafter, Gillespy's name disappears from the city's directories.

Originally the paper sought to publish Irish news and commentaries. However, limited receipt of Belfast, Cork or Dublin papers due to reduced shipping schedules also reduced the old country's presence in the columns. Increasingly, the paper relied on New York's own Irish to furnish the substance and perspective that was the reason for the paper's existence. William Sampson, a lawyer and exile of the '98 Rebellion, was the first to respond.

From January through March 1811, seven consecutive issues had serializations by Sampson, namely "Advice to the Rich" and "The Defense of the Journeymen Cordwainers." The first was a reprint of a 1794 pamphlet that took Britain to task for its exploitation of Ireland. It was one of many articles Sampson had written which resulted in his imprisonment and exile. The second was his trial defense of New York's marine rope workers accused of union organizing.

The Shamrock's first series was printed on folio-sized paper 17" x 20" on four pages of five columns each. The last page was

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usually more than half filled with advertisements throughout the 1810-1813 period. Initially such ads featured lotteries and servants agencies. Noteworthy were two notices for slaves that brought a few cancellations but no restatement of policy.

Newspaper historians have estimated that the average weekly newspaper of the 1810's had production runs of about 500 copies. *The Shamrock*, the only Irish-American publication at that time, sought the widest distribution possible via the stagecoaches and coastal sailing vessels that connected the early urban centers (neither the Erie Canal nor steam railroads having been built yet). By February 1811 distribution agents had been appointed in Boston and Philadelphia as well as Hudson, Newburgh and Albany, New York. By April, the distribution network stretched southwards to Charleston, South Carolina and westward to Lexington, Kentucky. By March 1812, Gillespy had added 18 new distribution centers including cities as far west as Canaoharry, New York and Chillicothe, Ohio as well as Newbern, North Carolina to the south. Such an extensive distribution network, about 25 cities, which lacked an adequate revenue collection system probably contributed to Gillespy's poor cash flow and the paper's first suspension. Mathew Carey of Philadelphia faced similar problems with his books and publications, finally restricting his distribution to deposits tied to sales.

JUNE 18, 1814.

THE SHAMROCK,

BY

E. GILLESPY & T. O'CONNOR,

published weekly,

AT 4 DOLLARS PER ANNUM,

payable one half in advance--Country subscribers will pay yearly in advance, or secure it payable half yearly in New-York.

Letters and communications, to the editors, by mail, to be forwarded free of postage.

OFFICE 69 WILLIAM-STREET.

Gillespy suspended publication of *The Shamrock* from June 1813 to June 1814 in order to get new capital as well as collect outstanding debts. He also undertook other publishing ventures including William Sampson's "The Catholic Question in America." This was a trial report detailing the arguments and the court decision on "Whether a Roman Catholic Clergyman be in any case compellable to disclose the secrets of Auricular Confession." Sampson won the case, setting the legal precedent for the "sanctity of the confession" in American law.

Resuming publication June 8th, 1814, Thomas O'Connor was added as co-editor, another exile of '98. O'Connor came from County Roscommon and was one of the few Catholics prominent in the United Irishmen. After coming to America in 1801, he took part in developing the agricultural lands of western New York State. As others learned in those early years, land speculations were no longer profitable and he returned to New York to seek his future.

THE SHAMROCK;

OR,

HIBERNIAN



CHRONICLE,

"FOUNDED UNDER THE WING OF HIS IN THE REVOLUCY."

NO. 1.

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, APRIL 13, 1811.

NO. 18.

O'Connor became editor successively of two papers, "War" and "Military Monitor," reporting on military matters and the War of 1812. He also wrote two books in these years "A History of the Revolutionary War in America" and "An Impartial and Correct History of the War between the United States and Great Britain" which had just ended, in both of which he portrayed the role played by Irish-Americans.

After the 1812 war ended, newspapers were left with little important news to engage their readers and sales slumped. From 1814 on *The Shamrock* never had any advertisements to depend on and circulation became everything. Some newspapers, including *The Shamrock*, changed their sizes to the smaller quarto pages, while increasing their pages to eight with three columns of text each, reducing the textual material 20%. Such downsizing had the effect of running one story on the front page while giving a fuller image to the newspapers. Among the filler items used was a listing of the number of Continental and Militia troops furnished by each state during the nine years of the Revolutionary War. This second run of *The Shamrock* lasted only eight months.

Beginning with the September 2nd, 1815 issue Thomas O'Connor assumed the Editorship, holding it throughout its future years. The reduced size format of the paper was continued during this third run of twelve months but the price was increased to \$4 a year.*

During the spring political campaign of 1816, *The Shamrock* ran a series of letters by Thomas Addis Emmet questioning the democratic principles of Rufus King. King was the American Ambassador to Britain when Emmet and other United Irishmen were imprisoned after the 1798 Irish Rebellion was crushed. King took the lead in denying exile in America to leaders of the Rebellion, saying that "their principles and habits would be pernicious to the order and industry of our people and I cannot persuade myself that the malcontents of any character will ever become useful citizens of ours."

In 1807 Emmet had questioned King's position in the *American Citizen*, a city newspaper, when King was running for State Assemblyman. In the 1816 campaign Rufus King was the Federalist Party's candidate for Governor. On both occasions King's characterizations of the Irish, and of naturalized citizens in particular, were attacked with Thomas Addis Emmet leading. King lost both State races in the spring of those years, and also in their fall Presidential and Vice-Presidential races. Such defeats contributed to the decline of the Federalist Party in New York State and the nation. The impact of such spirited political activity by naturalized citizens may have laid the basis for the virulent anti-

Irish attitudes of later years. The religious dimension was not a factor in this early period inasmuch as both Emmet and King were Episcopalians with ties to Trinity Church, Broadway.

August 16th, 1817 was the last issue of *The Shamrock*, under its original heading, published during its fourth run of nine months. During 1819, O'Connor tried publishing a monthly magazine 'The Globe' but it barely lasted a year. In June 1822, there was a notice in the *United States Catholic Miscellany* of Charleston for 'The Shamrock for the Country' of New York, with a Toohey as publisher and O'Connor as editor. The last reference to the revised *Shamrock* is for September 7th, 1824 again in the *Catholic Miscellany*.

However, the only available issue of this last run is the New York Historical Society copy of October 23rd, 1823. That issue lists 48 different cities in 10 separate states plus the District of Columbia as its distribution network. It would be useful to learn if any other copies of this fifth run, published over a twenty-seven month period, reside in the historical societies of its far-flung market area.

The Shamrock's original policy was to report news from Ireland not available in the general press. Such news focused on the economic and political inequalities affecting the whole island's quality of life. Political independence rather than self-government was the paper's goal but in the reality of the recent past and the pattern of future famines, it was an ideal to be maintained. The continued example of Catholics and Protestants striving together could not develop roots here as it withered over there.

Rather, in printing news of the local scene, *The Shamrock* made its place in the flow of American history. Trial reports and stories of union organizing in 1811 and 1823 date worker's struggles earlier than generally credited. The Emmet letters of 1807 and 1816 similarly give evidence of early Irish-American political activity and should be examined for their residual effects socially as well as politically. Perhaps in what the editors and writers did is to be found a truer measure of their worth as Irish Americans rather than as exiles.

*Note: Times were hard, Thomas O'Connor's wife died and there were no funds for the son's education, so Charles O'Connor was for a while apprenticed to a tar and lampblack manufacturer before entering a law office as an errand boy. In subsequent years he learned law as Lincoln did, by on-the-job training. On the basis of several noted cases he earned the recognition of his peers, later participating in the 1846 State Constitutional Convention, acting as Jefferson Davis's counsel and as New York State's prosecutor of Boss Tweed. In 1872 Charles O'Connor became the first Catholic nominated for the Presidency by the Democratic party.