

JOHN STRATTON O'LEARY and THE O'LEARY FLATS

by Patricia O'Connor

Patricia O'Connor wrote the following paper in 1987 for the late NYIHR President James T. McHugh's class on "The Irish in America" at Queens College, CUNY

In August of 1935, after much thought and deliberation on the part of my mother and father, a move from the South Bronx to the North Bronx was decided. By word-of-mouth, the news had reached them of beautiful new apartment houses that had recently been built on farmland by an Irish-born builder named John Stratton O'Leary. Not surprisingly, then, these new dwellings were called the O'Leary flats. The South Bronx was still a thriving, liveable place, but the fact that the North Bronx offered more open space, a lower density of people, and newer living accommodations was an inducement to make the move, a move made possible by the extension of the subway to Pelham Bay Park. A hard move it was for them too, for only a few years earlier they had made the hardest move of their lives, when for economic reasons they had left behind them in Ireland their homes, their families, and their friends. Now new-found friends would be left behind and for the second time in a short period, they would be starting over again.



The O'Connor family in front of O'Leary's Flats, the Bronx in 1944.
Photo, courtesy of Patricia O'Connor.

The O'Leary flats covered an area of about eight square city blocks from Beach Avenue to White Plains Road. Although they were less elegant than many apartment houses in more upwardly mobile sections of the North Bronx, the buildings were uniform in appearance, were well-maintained, and the premises were respected by all who lived there. In summer, every window had a matching canvas awning, which protected the inhabitants from the heat of the sun, and which also enhanced the appearance of the brick structures. The four-story buildings were surrounded by private homes, by parks and playfields, and by a very large tract of untouched land several miles wide, which was owned by the

Archdiocese of New York. One street, called Beach Avenue, had a neat row of stores, which included a bakery, a butcher, a drugstore, a fruitstore, a cleaner, and other small businesses that provided the necessities of everyday life. If more than these necessities were needed, they were obtained by walking miles to stores in older neighborhoods; the people walked because they would not afford themselves the extravagance of spending five cents for a trolley car or subway ride. Most of the neighborhood people were American-born and foreign-born Irish, Italians and Jews, the majority being Irish. St. Anthony's, an Italian mission church that had served the needs of Italian farmers since 1908, became the parish for the new Catholic residents and Father Burrieschi, who was affectionately called Fiorello because he looked like the presiding Mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, was the pastor. He built a parish school and it was that school or P.S. 102 that all the local children attended.

In time, my family was joined by many other relatives and friends, who also decided on a move to "the country." Surrounded by family, friends and extended families, life in the North Bronx was basically a happy one. It seemed that a kindred relationship existed between me and most people I encountered in my daily life. From this lower-class neighborhood, where little thought was given to that class distinction or to the fact that we might be poor, emerged doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses, priests, nuns, pilots, civil servants, and people who fill the myriad of professions and occupations of today's society. And there were some Studs Lonigans, too. The subway lines in their trek north had caused the disappearance of the farms and villages but the new communities that emerged still imbued that small-town friendliness of the earlier close-knit rural Bronx.

That I lived in the O'Leary flats I had always taken for granted but that this neighborhood and this time had been the center of my life for twenty-five years never truly was a reality to me until my father died in 1987. As I opened his old suitcase that he said came with him from the old country in 1924, and as I began to pour over his treasured newspaper clippings and memorabilia, I saw an Irish experience unfold and I began to wonder who was John Stratton O'Leary, who were those Irish people who lived in his apartments, and what is their place in the American-Irish experience.

The fact that John Stratton O'Leary's death notice appeared in the September 25, 1942 editions of the *New York Times* and *The Gaelic-American* is not inconsistent with the life and times of this man. That the *New York Times* was the foremost American paper of the day and that the *Gaelic-American* was the foremost Irish newspaper of the day indicates the dedication and the loyalties that this man held for his native land and the land in which he spent the greater part of his life.

He was born to a distinguished family in Kenmare, County Kerry in 1865, and he came to the United States in 1879. He settled in New York City and shortly after obtaining his citizenship papers, he was appointed a member of the police force where he served with distinction under Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt. He resigned, however, after a few years to enter the building and real estate field in the fast-growing borough of The Bronx. Here success

came to him rapidly and he was recognized as one of the leading men in the field.

In 1905, John O'Leary married Sarah Donohue, a native New Yorker, the daughter of Jeffrey Donohue and Mary Kelly. They too were in the real estate and building business, and had their roots in Kenmare. A cousin was Timothy D. Sullivan, nicknamed "Big Tim," who was the East Side Democratic leader and Congressman from the Bowery. It is believed that Kenmare Street in Manhattan is named after the Congressman's mother. Mrs. O'Leary, who studied at Columbia University and who was a public school teacher and assistant principal before her marriage, shared her husband's interest and devotion to American ideals and traditions as well as the background culture and refinement of Ireland.

The site of the O'Leary's apartment house development in the northeastern part of the Bronx was the land of the Siwanoy Indians in the early part of our nation's history. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Indians were gone and the area had become one of palatial estates. The home of the Mapes, an influential New York family, was on the site of St. Anthony's Church, which became a focal point in the emerging neighborhood of the early twentieth century. The advent of inexpensive transportation saw real estate development boom and likewise saw large land-owners sell their lands and move to less congested areas. The



JOHN S. O'LEARY

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Mapes estate was subdivided and became known as Versailles Park, a community of one and two-family homes that stand to the present day. For many years much of Versailles Park went undeveloped until the end of World War I when the availability of steel allowed the subway lines to be extended and made the building of multiple housing feasible. The apartment house development that John O'Leary erected on the Versailles Park tract between December, 1926 and September, 1930 was representative of the last word in modern multiple dwellings.*

As the borough's influence grew so did the influence of John

O'Leary in the public and charitable affairs of the borough and the city-at-large. This involvement was largely encouraged by Mrs. O'Leary who had been a leader in the civic life of The Bronx and who had been a leader in the civic committees for the Democratic Party. Because of her civic endeavors she was appointed by Gov. Franklin Roosevelt and reappointed by Gov. Herbert Lehman to serve as a life-long member of the Visiting Board of the Rockland State Hospital.

Mr. O'Leary during his active career served as President of the Bronx Eye and Ear Hospital, President of the Bronx Grand Juror Association and President of the Bronx Taxpayers' Alliance. He was prominent in the Bronx Rotary, a member of the Elks and Bunker Hill Social Club, and the Bronx Board of Trade. He served as a vice-president of the Fordham Savings Bank and he was a director of the National Bronx Bank that he had helped found. His humane efforts led him to the vice-presidency of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and to be a constant supporter of the Big Brother Movement. His devotion to the Church found him a Fourth Degree Knight of Columbus. The generosity of his man's spirit, time and money led him to be appointed an aide for Gov. Alfred E. Smith when he occupied the Executive Mansion in Albany, and in 1933, he was appointed by Mayor John F. O'Brien to serve as a member of the newly founded Triborough Bridge Authority.

As the outer boroughs grew, New York City had difficult problems to solve in its highway connections. The very conditions that made New York a perfect seaport imposed handicaps on surface travel. Queens and The Bronx had no previous connection between each other and the Triborough Bridge project was instigated to link three of the five boroughs, The Bronx, Queens and Manhattan.

The Triborough Bridge idea was conceived in 1927 but the project languished and was not revised until the Federal Government launched the first public works programs through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation in 1932. The Triborough Bridge became a symbol of the RFC with the federal, state and city governments cooperating to make the public works project a success. The Triborough Bridge Authority was established in 1933 and Mayor O'Brien appointed John Stratton O'Leary one of the members of that board. Delays in financing, resulting from the functions of the RFC being transferred to the new Public Works Administration, and the intervention of a municipal election which saw the old Tammany politicians ousted by LaGuardia's Fusion Administration, led to the ousting in January of 1934 of the members of the Triborough Bridge Authority. LaGuardia frankly admitted that if elected he would shake all Tammany commissioners from their posts and replace them with competent men, and one of his first acts after his inauguration was to reorganize the TBA. LaGuardia's remarks to the press that he would build a bridge instead of patronage, a bridge of "steel" not "steal" was responded to by Tammany politicians who said that the "Mussolini" was trying to replace them with his hacks.

John O'Leary was accused by LaGuardia of inefficiency, neglect-of-duty and incompetence in that he was guided by the dictation of the Flynn organization, the Tammany group in the Bronx, and former Mayor O'Brien in voting for the appointment of incompetent individuals. LaGuardia's request that O'Leary resign was met with refusal when O'Leary denied the charges and declared that he would fight removal. If removed, he said that he would seek redress in the courts. Mr. O'Leary in his official statement on the matter alluded to the fact that in his 70th year, his good name and reputation were being attacked for the duties of an office he performed with great personal sacrifice, without pay

*Note: It was the forerunner of Parkchester the gigantic housing development built by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in the late 1930's on the grounds of the Catholic Protectory, a site that formerly had served as a home for abandoned boys.

and solely with the intention of hopefully giving employment to thousands of unemployed people who were suffering the Depression. He swore never to run away from the fight, stating that the charges were trumped up so that LaGuardia could take charge of the Authority, an Authority that he said was being run efficiently and economically by the Federal Government. Although it was finally ascertained that Mr. O'Leary never intended to betray the public trust, he was replaced on the commission by the Fusion politician, Robert Moses when the anti-Tammany members took control of the Authority.

The victory of the Fusion Organization saw the beginning of the demise of the Irish politician's influence in the affairs of New York City. Mudslinging and dirty politics were demeaning the Tammany politicians, the politicians who had helped the Irish as they tried to assimilate into their new country. John Stratton O'Leary's name had been vilified too when LaGuardia and his group attacked one of their own, one who no matter how successful he had become never forgot his roots. In his youth, Mr. O'Leary was an ardent supporter of Charles Stewart Parnell in his fight to establish a Parliamentary form of government in Ireland, and for more than forty years the Irish community knew O'Leary to be an ardent and sincere worker in Ireland's fight for complete independence.

In the Irish Victory Drive and again in the Irish Republic Bond Drive in 1920, he was the single largest contributor as he gave of himself physically, emotionally and monetarily and as he tried to encourage others to become involved in the concern that he held for Ireland. He was a founder of the Friends of Irish Freedom, a member of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, a member of the Friends of Erin and life-long member of the Clan-na-Gael. On the occasion of Douglas Hyde's visit to the United States in 1906, the O'Learys donated a substantial amount of money to him in his attempts to revive the Gaelic language and the Gaelic society.

The O'Learys were life-long members of the American Irish Historical Society where he served as a Vice-President General from 1927 until 1941. At the dedication ceremonies of the Society's new home at 991 Fifth Avenue in 1940, dignitaries from the city and country assembled to celebrate the occasion. They heard Mayor LaGuardia praise the Irish in America and their contributions to the nation and they heard John and Sarah O'Leary singularly acclaimed and honored for their work for Ireland and the Irish race. In this instance, in order to encourage interest in Irish Studies, the couple donated an elevator to the building so that all might avail themselves of this association's library. Perhaps, at that moment, the O'Learys and their supporters felt vindicated.

The prosperity of the days in the 1920's in which the O'Leary flats were built were short-lived when the good days ended and

the Depression took hold. Those who had moved into the new apartments felt the impact of the times and shared with each other in their common problem—survival. Life revolved mainly around the apartment, the apartment house, the local neighborhood, the Church and the school, all of which became the support system for the people. John Stratton O'Leary's generosity too was a bulwark to his tenants when those who were unable to pay their rents were not pressured on the matter.

Life was simple. Entertainment was the radio, card games like Old Main, Rummy and Monopoly, hand ball, stick ball. Celebrations were in the Church hall where the St. Patrick's Day dance and entertainment was the social event of the season. The audience consisted of many of the parish's young who had a great time poking fun at their friends who had been forced by their proud parents to perform. The Stratton Park Social Club was the site of other local events. Here on a Sunday morning on your way home from Mass you could stop to watch friends learning their jigs and reels. And, of course, there were a few pubs too which were an extension of Irish life and times in the old country.



The second graduating class of St. Anthony's School in 1936. O'Leary's Flats tripled the number of St. Anthony's parishioners and prompted the building of the school of 1931. Most of the students were of Irish descent.

That time and lifestyle has passed away for the Irish and finds friends and relatives separated by distance. The prosperity of the war years, the G.I. Bill of Rights and a more modern banking system that encouraged money lending made the availability of a college education possible for a wider spectrum of the society. This first generation group assimilated into the larger society and as success followed and as the inner city structures started to decline, many moved to the suburbs. In nostalgic moments the emotions and events of a bygone day can take hold and you can hear imitations of Mike Quill; you can hear accordians and bagpipes being practiced; you can stop to chat with your friends and neighbors in the halls of the apartment house as you exit and enter; and, you can hear Aunt Mary, the Irish Molly Goldberg, calling from her apartment to our apartment without the aid of a telephone.

In 1940, a special tribute was given to the O'Learys by the American Irish Historical Society at which time Bronx Borough President Lyons said that this gracious couple would long be remembered. Forty-seven years later as I dug for information about this man and the section of the Bronx that he had built, no one knew much about him or about Park Stratton. I felt sad that history had forgotten us already and I put down the little I could find. Maybe now the O'Learys, their flats and their Park Stratton section of the Bronx can be remembered along with the Fordhams, the Kingsbridges, the Riverdales, the Woodlawn, the VanNests.



O'Leary's Flats, 1937.