

# The Great Hunger in New York

by John Ridge

In the 1840s the links between New York and Ireland were in many ways closer than at the present time. Commerce and a steady flow of immigrants had made the growing seaport of almost 400,000 people a city of world-wide importance. Part of that flow in goods and people came from Ireland and represented a continuation of a relationship of long standing. Immigration from Ireland to New York had long been a fact of life and new arrivals from across the ocean were not usually an item for much notice in New York. Irish people and Irish ways were familiar to, if not always appreciated by, most New Yorkers.

While most of the Irish living in the city in the 1840s were still struggling to make a living, others were enjoying relative prosperity. The Irish already could be found in most walks of life. Still it would come as a surprise to many in 1847, when a descendant of Irish immigrants with the recognizably Irish name of William V. Brady was elected mayor.

While the Irish were a highly visible and (because of their accents) audible part of New York's bustling scene, news from Ireland, 3,000 miles away, arrived slowly and haphazardly. Steam ships had shortened the Atlantic crossing to about two weeks' duration, but sailing ships could still take as long as 90 days. Even in the best of circumstances, information from Ireland arrived several weeks old and lost its immediacy for newspaper readers.

Like the media today, newspaper editors knew that sensationalism was often the key to success. People liked to read about disasters. A steady stream of such reports from all corners of the globe made their way into the New York press, stories of ship sinkings, fires, floods, terrible storms, even famine. They were so frequently printed and from so many exotic places that after a while they lost their intended shock value. The nineteenth century world was full of hardship and disaster. Many disaster stories appeared only once and then vanished without any further follow-up.

Readers of any of the New York papers knew something about Ireland and her problems. The Emancipation movement and the Repeal movement of Daniel O'Connell had been faithfully reported for decades. It was apparent that Ireland was a land of discontent. Crop failures, agricultural distress, and the miserable life of the tenant farmer were well known.

For New York City newspaper readers, therefore, famine was a relative term, not one that caused immediate concern. It covered a wide variety of situations. The ocean that separated

America from Europe allowed the development of an American people distinct from their kindred in Europe. It often caused events in Europe to be observed at times with all the clarity of a clouded glass. Europe, particularly Ireland and Britain, were familiar, but still far away and part of that old world.

## The Early Warnings

Late in 1845 the potato crop partially failed in Ireland. The first notices reached the New York press as early as October.

Some regions were affected more than others and consequently published reports were somewhat conflicting. New York was slow to understand the seriousness of events in Ireland owing to a series of mixed accounts that were received about distress in the Emerald Isle. On January 15, 1846, for example, the *New York Herald* story carried the subheading, "The Alleged Famine in Ireland" and reprinted a letter from a London newspaper from an unnamed, apparently British informant, who had written from Sligo to a London newspaper on



*The Ladies' Newspaper, 1849*

John Ridge is a past president of the New York Irish History Roundtable. He is the author of *The Flatbush Irish*, *Erin's Sons in America: The A.O.H.*, *The St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York* and *Sligo in New York*.

November 28th of the previous year:

Having spent a great deal of my time, since I came to Ireland, in rambling over the country snipe shooting. I have made it my business to inquire at every potato field, respecting the crops; and my own opinion is very different from the general one, in as much as I do not think at present at least - that there is just ground for alarm universally expressed. (*Herald*, January 15, 1846)

With the approach of St. Patrick's Day 1846 it was apparent that no particular alarm had been raised within the New York Irish community. The traditional procession was held in the usual fashion and afterwards several Roman Catholic churches overflowed with the marchers and their supporters at special services. The only recorded charitable collection made on the day was made at St. Columba's after an Irish language oration by its popular pastor, Father Burke, for the purpose of providing for the interior furnishings of the new church. In the evening the more well-to-do societies such as the Friends of Ireland and the Hibernian Benevolent Society feasted together as was their St. Patrick's Day custom. In resplendent banquet rooms they toasted each other's health. Clearly, the calamity near to hand in Ireland had not yet made any impression on the New York Irish.

Foremost of the March 17th banqueting societies was the venerable Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, an organization which was mainly social and charitable in nature and whose members represented every shade of Irish political opinion. Many foreign consuls attended their dinners, including the British representatives. The Friendly Sons dinner on March 17, 1846 offered among its many toasts one to Queen Victoria, "the Queen, the Lords and Commons of Ireland," as the orchestra played "God Save the Queen" as an accompaniment. In the wake of the Great Hunger such courtesies extended to the British would vanish forever.

There was one toast, however, that night, "Union between Indian Corn and Irish Potatoes, which when once established may it never be repealed," which referred directly to the recent large-scale commercial export to Ireland of American indian corn. The corn was sent in a partial effort to compensate for the failures of the potato crop. The toast, however, was given not in a sense of alarm, but as a cheerful acknowledgement of the increasing American trade with Ireland which in the eyes of many would prove to be a benefit to both countries. (*Courier*, March 18, 1846)

New York's Irish community was a relatively happy one in early 1846. Irish plays and entertainments were regular features for New York audiences and during the spring and summer of 1846 such notables as comedians Barney Williams and John Collins drew large crowds. Williams, a favorite for his "stage Irish" buffoonery, did perform in a benefit in

September, but it was not for any cause back in Ireland, but on behalf of the Prince Street Orphanage, a Roman Catholic institution which provided almost exclusively for the children of parentless Irish immigrants.



Illustrations courtesy of  
The New York Public Library Picture Collection

Visiting Irish performers seemed especially welcome. One such visitor, a Mr. Mooney, who had authored a volume on the history of Irish music, appeared in late April at the Apollo Saloon. Under the sponsorship of one of the grand dames of New York society, Mooney gave both a lecture and a musical entertainment. If there was any worry about events in Ireland it was not evident from New York's lively Irish entertainment scene.

Prosperity had already come for some Irish in the city. The commercial section of the daily newspapers carried the advertisements of several Irish businesses such as the clothing merchant Leary and Co., shipping agent P. O'Hearn & Co., and restaurateur William Niblo's elegant new Alhambra. A.T. Stewart, the Antrim-born dry goods merchant and soon-to-be millionaire, opened in 1846 his giant and grand store on Broadway between Chambers and Reade Streets, a solid and well-made structure which still stands today hardly showing a sign of its age. Stewart's new store fascinated all of New York, if not America, and was the model for the modern department store. It became a training ground for many Irish-born entrepreneurs who soon made their own mark in the commercial life of the city.

Life was going on as usual for the Irish population of New York City when, in October 1846, the news from Ireland suddenly turned grim. A detailed report was published which stated that "famine with its numerous and dreadful train of diseases, knocks at the doors of the great majority of its brave and hardy population." By November worse news arrived. Newspapers reported the "conditions of the poorer classes to be at their lowest ebb" and "starvation was staring them in the face." (*Herald*, October 4, 1846 and November 1, 1846)

The New York papers increasingly began to report pathetic stories of individual immigrants. At first, many of these were elderly arrivals: Barney Trainor, a 75-year-old immi-

grant, landed on a Wednesday with his three sons, but was dead by Saturday in a tenement house at 64 Charlton Street "of old age and debility arising from the voyage." (*Herald*, December 7, 1846)

All too commonly, these newcomers became overwhelmed amid the confusion of their new surroundings. They lost their way and became separated from friends and family with disastrous results. A "poor feeble old woman" named Mary Fry was found wandering about in the heavily Irish Fourth Ward in search of friends whom she had lost. A recent arrival, she had simply lost sight of her companions and had no one else to turn to. She and others like her were taken to the Alms House.

Emigrant ships bearing a flood of Irish famine refugees burst suddenly on New York late in the fall of 1846. Many of these refugees had already lost friends and relatives who had died or fallen ill en route to New York. Between October 1846 and January 1847, ship captains reported 226 shipboard deaths. The majority died from ship fever.<sup>1</sup>

The *Pontiac* arrived on December 19, 1846 after a 55 day voyage during which 18 of her 197 Irish passengers perished. The Quarantine Station at Staten Island received 56 of the most severely sick survivors, while the remainder, the "destitute" as the daily newspapers described them, were released onto the wharfs of the East River. A few days later a family of 11 from the same vessel, parents and nine children, were found by an Alms House employee. All 11 of them were too sick with "ship fever" to be moved to the Alms House. Within a few days, despite food and medicine, the mother and two of the children died. The surviving members of the family were taken under the care of the city.<sup>2</sup>

A short time later the vessel *Garrick* wedged itself onto the beach at Deal, New Jersey when it entered shallow water. One hundred Irish deck passengers were taken off, sick and in a state of destitution. On arrival in New York, several immediately applied for relief from the Alms House.

## The New York Response

It is unclear why New York did not respond more promptly to the hunger in Ireland. In November charitable efforts for the victims of the flooding in the Loire Valley in France had been successfully conducted by the "French citizens" of New York. In December relief vessels left for Ireland with cargoes of food from such cities as Baltimore.

It was not until December 18th, 1846 that a group of New Yorkers finally began organizing emergency relief for Ireland. A committee gathered at one of the "small rooms" at Tammany Hall. The *Herald* commented: "It is high time for the people of New York to take some action in this matter." (December 17, 1846)

The planning committee announced it would hold a public

meeting in Tammany Hall December 26th. It was hoped "a sum large enough to make an impression will be raised." The movement was heartily endorsed in the press:

If any man has the ability to give doubts for a moment he will be called on to contribute, let him imagine himself (and his family, if he has one) out of business, and out of bread, with no prospect ahead but starvation, and no hope for relief but benevolence of the well-fed, and well-to-do in this world abroad. Who would not hasten on this hope to its realization, when so much is to result from it. Go one, go all to the meeting. (*Herald*, December 24, 1846)

The meeting announcement which appeared in the classified section of several New York dailies contained the names of 11 aldermen, four doctors, and about 60 others including prominent political leaders from the Irish community, such as John McKeon, James T. Brady, and Charles O'Connor. Very few prominent individuals other than Horace Greeley came from outside the Irish community. It was also

painfully obvious that most of its members were adherents of Tammany Hall, a fact which almost automatically excluded a large body of individuals opposed to that political machine.

The St. Stephen's Day gathering at Tammany Hall turned out pretty much as expected, with the hall only "pretty well filled." Although chaired by New York's Mayor Mickle, several speakers hinted that not everyone invited had decided to attend. When the hat was passed only \$833 was collected and this after a number of large contributions had been received. Plans were then made for a systematic collection organized by ward and conducted by designated collectors. (*Herald*, December 27, 1846)

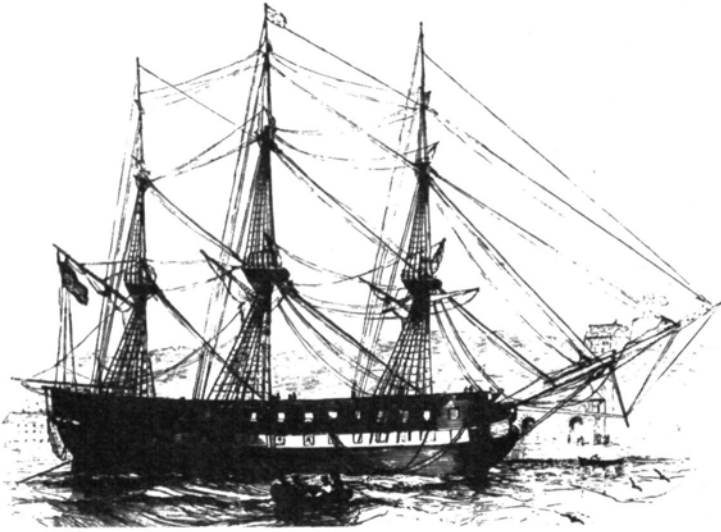
There was something basically wrong with this first New York relief committee — it was organized largely by politicians. Although many of them were sincerely motivated, such a committee could never get the broad-based support their urgent cause deserved. What was needed was a relief committee that transcended political lines and was headed by civic and financial community leaders who could command the respect of the public at large.

Little Jersey City had already been successful with its own broad-based committee. Prominent individuals came to the forefront and divided the city into districts, sending out canvassers for the task of "visiting every resident in the district." Nine hundred dollars was raised and immediately sent on to the American Consul at Liverpool for distribution to the most distressed districts in Ireland. It put New York to shame. The *Herald* urged New Yorkers to "make amends for their dilatoriness in this matter." (December 27, 1846)

The city by this time had become painfully aware of trouble in Ireland: "crowds of distressed paupers in all parts of the city" were evident. Weeks passed, however, before a new relief committee got underway.

In mid-February 1847, a new group, this time led by "the most respectful and influential citizens," chose Myndert Van





**U.S.S. Macedonia at Cobh**

*London Illustrated News*, August 7, 1847

Schaick as its chairman. The committee included many wealthy businessmen among its 40 vice-presidents: William R. Havemeyer, August Belmont, William B. Astor, Phillip Hone, William H. Macy, and P. Lorillard, Jr. The most visible and powerful member of the New York Irish community, Bishop John Hughes, agreed to speak on behalf of this relief committee at a major fund raising effort to be held at the Broadway Tabernacle on March 20th. [His speech is excerpted beginning on page 13 of this issue.] Tickets were widely circulated and sold directly from commercial establishments such as Stewart's on Broadway, Dunigan's on Fulton Street, and Hugh Kelly's on the Bowery. (*Herald*, January 27, 1847 and February 16, 1847)

The St. Patrick's Day celebrations in 1847 were quite different from those of the previous year. All the usual formal dinners were abandoned in favor of using the money normally expended towards famine relief. Curiously, Tammany Hall chose to hold a grand ball at its rooms for the benefit of Irish relief. The various Irish societies appeared decked out in their usual regalia and enjoyed a typical soiree:

Let all who dance, go to-night or send a subscription, and remember that after the pleasure of the evening is over, the dollar is not done with, but is about going to commence a voyage to the green isle to carry a few loaves of bread to the pinched of hunger. (*Herald*, March 17, 1847)

Individual churches held their own collections for famine relief. Transfiguration Church, at that time located on Chambers Street, with its large but poor congregation collected \$1,000.

New York's Catholic churches took the unusual step for the time of forwarding all of the money they collected through the Society of Friends. This action won praise from the *Courier* as "a signal instance of the surrender of ancient customs and exclusive actions." Other denominations from German Lutherans to the Jewish community acted similarly "in their original character of human brotherhood, to help

brothers in distress." (March 29, 1847)

The relief committee under the chairmanship of Van Schaick clearly had the wherewithal to deliver both supplies and money to Ireland. Composed of several individuals whose business it was to regularly send goods abroad, three ships were contracted to receive food and cash donations. Contributions were supposed to be delivered by St. Patrick's Day to their respective berths in lower Manhattan: the *New Haven* at the foot of Roosevelt Street and the *Duncan* at Coenties Slip, both on the East River, and the brig *Boston* at Rector Street on the Hudson side. At each ship donations could be dropped off, a receipt obtained from the captain and in turn dropped off at the committee headquarters at Wall Street.

Another ship, the *Macedonia*, was donated for the committee's use by the Secretary of the Navy. But no immediate provision was made to fit up this creaky veteran of the War of 1812 which had been captured from the British by Commodore Stephen Decatur himself. Funds to sail the *Macedonia* were finally forthcoming in May thanks to an Act of Congress. The loading of the *Macedonia*, which also included supplies for distressed parts of Scotland, proved to be something of an event in itself. Vast crowds gathered at the pierside as if their mere presence could somehow help in the relief efforts.

One of those who watched the loading of the relief ship was a poor cobbler whose stall was located near the wharf. He was unable to spare any provisions on account of having to support a family of ten but on the day before the vessel sailed the cobbler approached the ship's captain with the donation of a single roll of leather, saying it "will help make shoes for the poor fellows." (*Courier*, May 19, 1847)

Support for relief of the distress in Ireland crossed party lines. But there were already signs pointing to a deep division over how conditions in Ireland could be interpreted. These conflicting views ultimately had great bearing on long-term commitments to alleviating the sufferings of the Irish people. Divisions were evident in the columns of the *Courier* between those who saw the calamity as a natural result of British misrule (which "robbed the Irish Roman Catholic of his dues, legalizing a system of deputed tyranny, the worst sort of oppression in his land") and those who simply saw the hand of God acting to smite the improvident. (April 26, 1847)

One individual, who used the pen-name "Erigena" in frequent letters to the editor, struggled against the notion that the Great Hunger was somehow the judgement of God on the people of Ireland. Erigena argued that it was simply a question of properly allowing the land to serve the people rather than the landlord class and then:

the resources which the God of Nature has lavished on the land will be no longer let run to waste, but improved for the benefit of the people, and Ireland yet be the source of peace, literature, religion and happiness. (*Courier*, March 25, 1847)

Another section of opinion was ready to dismiss Ireland and its suffering population with startling callousness. A report



published in the *Courier* from the Paris correspondent, "States" Man, was typical of this attitude:

The truth is, that the Irishman of the lower classes is in his own land a poor creature of shift, whatever be the cause, and whatever may be his good qualities and disposition to labor when transported to a foreign soil; and in his place an Englishman or an American would have years ago raised himself to comfort and independence, in spite of bad legislation and averse misrule. The root of the evil is in the man himself, and Cromwell knew it when he commenced his cruel but politic scheme of wholesale extirpation. (March 24, 1847)

### The Care of Immigrants

New York's ability to meet the wave of poor immigrants was strained beyond its limits. Although the burden on the city had increased steadily since 1842, no one anticipated the mass exodus from Ireland in the spring of 1847. Thousands crowded the facilities of the city's charitable institutions. According to a city corporation report: "They were very destitute and generally unhealthy owing to their famished condition before leaving the country as to the inefficient and unwholesome supply of food, (generally consisting only of oatmeal and biscuit) furnished to them for the voyage across the Atlantic."

The city corporation found that up to 1847 the cost of maintaining an immigrant from Great Britain (including Ireland) was 40 cents a head. By comparison an immigrant from France only cost 25 cents a head. The corporation exacted a one dollar fee from the captain of each vessel for every immigrant landed and it was argued that the corporation actually was making a profit. Many immigrants came down from Canada and were soon in the care of the city. No head tax could be obtained for them. (*Courier*, March 18, 1847)

Many destitute Irish were destined to spend the remainder of their lives on Blackwell's Island (today Roosevelt Island). Too ill to take care of themselves, they slowly died of the effects of starvation and disease. In 1849, 1,006 of the total of 1,672 inmates of the Alms House, a 60 percent share, were listed as Irish-born. Ironically, they were set to growing their own food which largely consisted of potatoes.<sup>3</sup>

Some destitute immigrants were housed on farms on "Long Island" (Brooklyn and Williamsburgh), with the head of household crossing to Manhattan by ferry for work. In addition, a boarding house was operated on Chambers Street. It was reported in 1851 that coffee was regularly roasted in the boarding house, not as a drink but because it deodorized and allegedly detoxified the inmates.

Very often the work of the charitable authorities was undermined by the effects of the poor conditions experienced on board the immigrant ships. While the German immigrant ships arriving in New York were compelled to have sufficient provisions on board, the British ships, which carried practically all the Irish, were notorious pest holes. Lacking a change of clothes, many of the immigrants disembarked in clothes full of vermin from the bug-infested bunks in steerage. (*Enquirer*,

July 3, 1847)

The first half of 1847 witnessed the worst suffering for the Irish arrivals in the city. Between January 1 and June 30, 1847, 81,954 passengers arrived in New York. The ships' captains reported a total of 947 deaths on board before arrival in port — and 2,750 of those who did land were subsequently confined to the Quarantine Hospital. Thirty of these died from the effects of the voyage within 24 hours of being quarantined on Staten Island.<sup>4</sup>

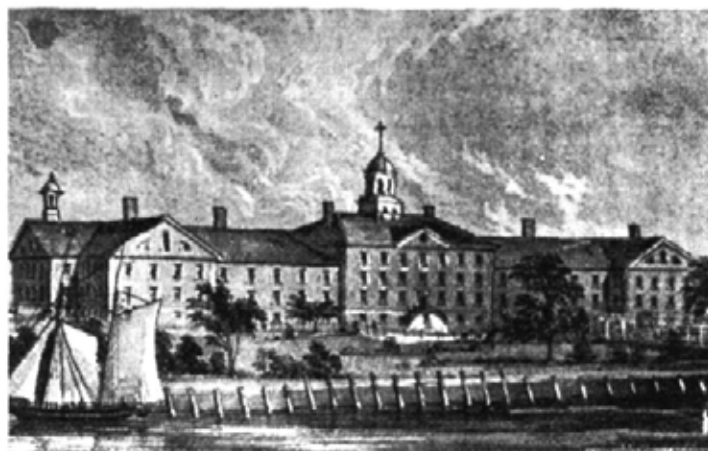
Typhoid was responsible for almost exactly half the deaths of Irish-born New Yorkers in 1847, 1,396 of the 3,813 total. In mid-July it was reported that *just since the 5th of May* more than 50,000 applications for relief had been received by city authorities. (*Courier*, July 16, 1847)

The Marine Hospital at Staten Island attempted to isolate the immigrants with contagious fevers, but it was impossible to quarantine the diseases entirely. By May every corner of the hospital was filled and a temporary building had to be erected to accommodate another 300 sick:

The ship fever, that cruel scourge of the poor emigrant, starved to death before embarking, and provided (for) in some cases afterwards, worse than the African slave in the slave ship, has made its way notwithstanding the Quarantine Station and Hospital, to this city, and has made great havoc among the emigrants in the lower part of the city. From here it has gone to Albany and infected some of the river towns. (*Courier*, June 25, 1847)<sup>5</sup>

Vessels carrying food imports for the United States from famine-ravaged Ireland arrived almost unnoticed in the midst of the starving immigrants. In July, for example, the *Herald* reported that the "arrivals of wheat from Ireland, either of home grown or foreign returns during the last fortnight have been very considerable." (*Herald*, July 5, 1847)

Throughout the period of the Famine the sickest and hardest-hit refugees were joined in New York by other Irish immigrants, principally small farmers who arrived in healthy condition and with at least some capital. The *Herald* noted that most of these moved on to the West. They left by the hundreds



Alms House, Bellevue Hospital  
The New York Public Library Picture Collection

on every boat departing for Albany. After reprinting an engraving from an English newspaper showing destitute Irish immigrants boarding vessels for America at Liverpool, the *Herald* emphatically pointed out:

It is a great folly for certain prejudiced persons to continually cry out, as they are in the habit of doing against the emigrants; calling them paupers and stating them to be incapable of earning a livelihood. A few of them, and a very few, composed to the great aggregate, are no doubt in destitute circumstances. The whole of them are not, as may be seen by their healthy and comfortable appearance. At almost every corner, patches of six or seven rosy cheeked, athletic, and comfortably clad emigrants, are hourly seen comparing notes with each other, and deliberating upon their plans for the future. (April 21, 1847)

### Encouraging Reports

Initial reports from Ireland published in the late spring and early summer of 1847 continued to report distress, which "promises ever to be." The news soon turned, however, to accounts of improving conditions because of the flood of provisions arriving from America.

The Quaker-led Central Relief Committee in Dublin was in regular correspondence with the Van Schaick committee in New York. The CRC letters carefully traced the whereabouts of each of the provision ships and gave detailed accounts of exactly where the food and money was distributed in Ireland. Joseph Bewley, the Central Committee's secretary, wrote in May to New York:

The evidence furnished us by each successive arrival from America, of the untiring kindness of her benevolent citizens toward our poor, suffering people, whether in their native land, or when they seek an asylum on your hospitable shores, and they are now doing by the thousands, is indeed remarkable and contributions not only to strengthen our hands by your munificent and most seasonable supplies, but to animate us to pursue our engagement, in which, we have been surrounded with difficulties and discouragement of which we are concerned to say we can as yet, see no prospect of an early termination. (*Herald*, June 7, 1847)<sup>4</sup>

Conditions in Ireland and among the immigrants in New York began to slowly improve in the late summer. The potato blight was reported to be over and the harvest then in progress abundant. Although the numbers of immigrants continued at record proportions, the number of deaths en route became fewer. The Quarantine Station could report for the first time in July that the number of inmates had dropped to 600. Those remaining suffered mainly from fevers. By October there were only 390 left. The number of immigrants at the Quarantine Station at Staten Island continued to drop as the convalescents were sent up to the city. (*Courier*, July 21, 1847, August 7,

1847, and October 6, 1847)

Although the Great Hunger was far from over in Ireland, and its effects were still being felt in New York, the efforts of the New York Relief Committee were slowly but consistently being reduced. Ireland struggled through several more years of shortages and epidemic diseases, but once the grand effort of early 1847 was past, the attention of New Yorkers turned away from thoughts of relieving the symptoms of the famine. They looked instead to the famine's root cause which for most Irish New Yorkers was "the unfortunate and unhappy connection with England."

The *Enquirer* optimistically reported:

with the new harvest in progress and with the aid of permanent means of relief by the British government, it may be anticipated that further contributions from this country will not be indispensable. (August 7, 1847)

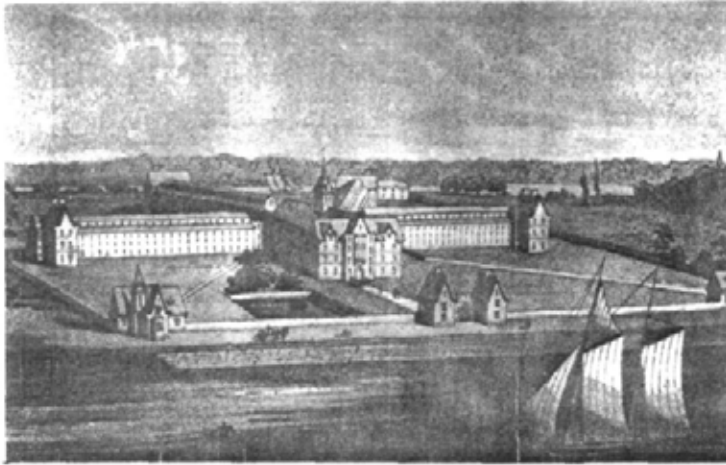
This optimism about British relief efforts was unfounded and somewhat ignorant of what was continuing to be reported elsewhere. The vessel *Magnes* from Galway arrived with ten of its 141 passengers dead, the *Gowrie* from Cork had four deaths among 71 and the *Portland* from Derry had four deaths among 338 passengers. (*Enquirer*, August 7, 1847)

While the number of hunger-related deaths of Irish refugees in New York in no way approached the numbers in Ireland, it was nonetheless significant. For the seven years between 1847 and 1853 an average of just under 5,000 (4,761 to be exact) deaths of Irish-born residents per year were recorded in New York. The total of Irish-born who died during the entire period was 28,568.

Year	Irish Deaths	Percentage of N.Y Deaths
1847	3,813	24.1
1848	2,949	18.5
1849	5,680	23.9
1850	3,382	19.9
1851	4,362	19.8
1852	4,135	19.1
1853	4,247	18.7

It is difficult to say how many of these deaths may be attributed to the Famine and its aftermath, but it possibly could have been as high as 10,000 for the seven-year period. In any event the ratio of Irish-born deaths to total population of the city dropped steadily, as Ireland made a partial recovery in the early 1850s. Certainly in 1847 more than half of the recorded deaths were famine-related. Almost half were from typhoid (ship fever) alone.

The Famine had an insidious effect for many years after 1847, even for those who had emigrated to New York. The long period of debilitation in Ireland, on shipboard, and in the



**The Workhouse on Randall's Island**

Courtesy: New York City Municipal Archives

tenement districts, rendered them susceptible to other diseases, most notably the cholera outbreak in 1849. When cholera hit New York in the spring and summer of 1849, it carried away a far greater proportion of Irish-born (2,219 or 44 percent of the total victims) than native Americans. The report of the City Inspector for 1849 summed up the susceptibility of the Irish wards of the city:

The inhabitants of these wards, especially in those sections of them where the disease mostly prevailed, were among the most miserably poor and destitute; just in that half-starved and exposed condition that reduces the *vis vitae* too low, successfully to repel the disease of any kind, much less an epidemic of this nature. They were, in fact, the proper food for Asiatic cholera.<sup>7</sup>

While New York witnessed thousands of deaths caused by the Irish famine, its suffering can be described as a slight aftershock compared to the "earthquake" which claimed more than a million lives in Ireland. Although still aware of the sufferings at home in Ireland, as fall 1847 approached, New York returned to a sense of normalcy as far as the Irish were concerned. Charitable efforts now concentrated on taking care of the legacy of the famine in New York, the vast number of Irish poor in the lower wards of the city. New societies like The Society for the Employment and Relief of the Poor gave employment to many of the new immigrants in the manufacture of clothing items to be sold at its charity shops. Roman Catholic charitable institutions seemed to spring up on every corner.

By late 1847 news from Ireland in the New York press increasingly concerned itself with the so-called agrarian outrages. Newspapers carried stories of whiteboys and ribbonmen who operated under cover of darkness against the landlords and their allies. The attention of the Irish in the city turned to organizing groups like the Irish Republican Union and the Friends of Ireland, groups advocating the establishment of an American-style republic in Ireland, rather than committees for famine relief. The year 1848 in all of Europe was ripe with revolution. Many of the Irish in America took inspiration from

the oratory of Mitchel, Meagher, and O'Brien.

The flood of Irish had profoundly changed things in New York. The care of immigrants was better regulated after 1847. Through bonding and landing fees, emigrant ships were made increasingly liable for their steerage passengers' subsequent care. By 1851 Castle Garden at the Battery, the scene of so many Irish entertainments and receptions, had been turned into the first great immigrant processing center in the city, the forerunner of Ellis Island.

Many reforms were instituted in the housing code of the city to eliminate the crowding caused by the wave of immigration in the 1840s. Stricter regulatory legislation was passed to eliminate substandard housing. Up until this time tenements were constructed literally in the backyards of existing buildings. In addition, protective legislation prevented cellars from being used as residences. New facilities were built on the islands in the East River to care for the indigent, the sick, and the orphans.

### **Charity for Immigrants**

Despite the negative reporting about the poor Irish in New York, and despite the growing nativist movement which aimed to cripple their efforts to advance in this country, America, and in particular New York, had for the most part been kind and caring to the thousands of sick and dying Irish. This charity, admittedly, was administered somewhat begrudgingly and with tightened purse strings. In addition, some individuals used the opportunity to proselytize and practice a version of Yankee "souperism." Nevertheless, relief was given and many on the brink of death were given a new chance at life. As Dublin's Central Relief Committee many times noted in their letters to their New York counterparts, the United States was the haven that Ireland needed. Without it, thousands more would have perished. While the New York Irish community outdid itself to provide for their own, it was the native-born American and others of diverse beliefs and ethnic origins who gave the greatest share.

Irish New York grew and matured as a result of the famine immigration. Famine-era immigrants were a special breed who carried a deep wound. The wound is evident with just a brief exposure to the rich treasury of immigrant songs which the Famine immigrants left behind.

That is not to say the experience of Famine immigrants in New York was one long doleful lament. The Famine-era Irish learned quickly to avail themselves of the economic and educational opportunities open to them in New York. Overnight, a succession of Irish newspapers and a fledgling Irish book publishing industry emerged in the 1850s. They gave vent to the anger which lingered from the time when Ireland starved. It was a free press and the Irish in New York City could do and say what they liked. As these new publications made their way back to Ireland, often secretly, it became food for the mind of a country that had long been both physically and intellectually starved.

The starvation of our long-departed kindred is a legacy which lives with us still.

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen*, William C. Bryant & Co., New York, 1847, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Annual Report of the Alms House Commissioner for the Year 1849*, McSpedon and Baker, N.Y., 1850, p. 25-28.

<sup>4</sup> *Annual Report of the Alms House Commissioner for the Year 1847*, McSpedon and Baker, NY, 1848, pp. 44-46 and *Courier*, July 16, 1847.

<sup>5</sup> While this was being reported, Irish-born William Niblo was announcing the opening of his magnificent Alhambra at 557 Broadway. The lavish saloon and restaurant featured large elegant fountains, exotic plants and flowers, flavored ices and other delicacies.

<sup>6</sup> Irish goods continued to be imported into New York all through these troubled times. A shipment of blankets, quilts, ticks and napkins of the "finest quality" and best materials was advertised for sale by Jeffrey, Morrish and Co. of Liverpool in the New York press in July. (*Enquirer*, July 16, 1847)

<sup>7</sup> City Inspector's Office, Board of Aldermen, New York, 1850.

*NYIHR member Marie Tierney Smith, Florida coordinator of The Great Irish "Famine" Educational Series, for the Irish American Unity Foundation, found the handwritten letter printed to the right at an auction in Ireland. It was written during the horrible winter of 1847 by a man in Sligo, John Frazer, to his brother in New York. Marie Smith thinks the man was writing from Aughreferran, near Ballyfarnan. The writing is too illegible to say for sure. Ellipses in the text indicate indecipherable passages. Brackets indicate Marie Smith's best guess at a word.*

February 1847

My Dear Brother Fitzgerald

You may judge the satisfaction of mind it gave me to hear by Mrs. Hasard's letter to her mother the comfortable state you were in I return her many thanks for letting us know that you were still alive as I believe we are nearly erased from your memory. Please let Mrs. Hasard know her mother, brothers, sisters and friends are in good health. My dear brother I suppose you have heard of the very great failure of Ireland you cannot compare it to anything more properly than the siege of Jerusalem people are dying so fast with perfect hunger that we cannot attend to see them perfectly interred the crops failing in Ireland this season has left it in the greatest distress

My dear brother [if you] are in a way that you can afford it I hope you will send me some little relief in these hard distressing times with a little money or a few barrels of your American provisions but I hope and trust that the Lord who is the rewarder of all such and who is the sovereign disposer of all things may amply repay you for provision rates as follows in this country viz oatmeal one pound nine shillings per hundred whole meal £14 Indian meal £1-2 and everything in the provision way accordingly. As for the potatoes there is none of them in Ireland which is the occasion of all this distress. I would be glad if I could get to America this season as I fear the next will be as bad as this as we cannot afford to put down a crop this year.

When sister Margaret was going to America her son James forged my name to a bill in the bank of Boyle for £5-5 which I had no knowledge of until after she went and paying that together with sending off my father's little daughter . . . has left me much down ever since I sent her off along with Mgt. [Margaret?] there is not many deaths of ? but there is many dying with starvation and you may judge the state of this country when Archy Frazer of Shanwally and his son Johns things were . . . at the . . . of . . . last week even to the beds they laid on were sold. Brother Archy and I family sister Joan [Jane?] and family farewell Dr. Brother, I remain your affectionate brother John Frazer

When you write which I hope will be on the receipt of this letter please direct to John Frazer [Aughreferran?] Ballyfarnan P.O. by which it will come safe to hand.

In care of Mr. Richard Hasard (383)  
Greenwich Street New York  
for Fitzgerald Frazer  
America