

# Jo Briggs and “the American Gentleman”

## Francis J. Briggs

great grandfather of NYIHR member William E. Devlin, was 13 in 1851 when he came over from Galway with his father, William, a ship's carpenter. Francis wrote a letter to his son in approximately 1918 (full of idiosyncratic spellings and capitalizations) in which he narrated the saga of Famine survivors in the Briggs family. He began with biographical details about his father.

[William Briggs,] born in Galway on the 18th of January 1812, learned the trade of shipwright and became the leading man of that trade in Galway. He succeeded to that position at the death of his Boss, Matthew Lynch, although Lynch had two grown-up sons of his own. Immediately after my Father finished his apprenticeship, he made a voyage to sea for the purpose of completing his knowledge as a ship carpenter, and that voyage had the effect of giving him a sailor's love of the sea, so that before he settled down in this country he had made 14 voyages across the Atlantic, or as he called it the "big pond." Of course, he shipped as a carpenter, and it may not be out of place for me to say that he was the only Carpenter in Galway that had ever been to Sea, there was an insistent demand for him, in fact he had a monopoly of the business. He had the privilege of taking a helper out with him on those voyages and he always took care to bring some young man that he could place confidence in, and he was forever disappointed in that respect, for every young man that he brought over in that way was the means of bringing out the other members of the family. That is a record you may well feel proud of when you consider the straits the people of Ireland were put to. . . .

## William Briggs

worked as a ship's carpenter in New York, too, according to city directories. His son Francis' first listing in the city directories, in the late 1880s, is as a caulker, so he can be assumed to have gravitated to the shipyards, as well.

Francis Briggs, c. 1860  
from a glass negative  
Collection of William Devlin

## Joseph Briggs

or "Jo," William's brother, is also mentioned in the 1918 letter. Described as "a wild youth, but very, very tame after his marriage." Jo also "left home at an early age, probably when he had served his apprenticeship as a Ship Carpenter."

. . . He went to sea for a good many years and there is hardly a landing place in the world that he has not visited. He was 3 years in the English Navy. . . . After traveling, or sailing rather all over the world he [Jo] - with his wife - settled down here [meaning New York]. He went to work in a ship building yard in Green Point. The feeling against the Irish was very bitter and one day one of the Americans said to him:

"Here Mickey give me a hand with this plank."  
"Who told you my name was Mickey," said Jo.  
"Why, ain't that name good enough for you?"  
"No,"- said Jo, "and I want you to meet me over in the corner of the yard after 5 o'clock and I'll tell you what my name is."

Another Irishman who heard the colloggy [colloquy], took care to have a few of his friends over in the corner after 5 o'clock to see fair play. The result was that Jo battered the American Gentleman all to pieces and then took him by the legs and cleaned up the corner of the yard with him. So no one in that yard called him "Mickey" after that.

