

Historical Treasures from the Vaults of Emigrant Savings Bank



Marion Casey (a past-president of NYIHR) received a phone call last fall from Emigrant Savings requesting help. The bank needed the space occupied by nearly 300 canvas and leather-bound ledgers dating back to the 1840s. Ms. Casey, who is writing her doctoral dissertation at New York University on the Irish in New York perked up at the first mention of Emigrant Savings, knowing the bank was founded originally to help Irish immigrants send remittances to Ireland. She convinced the bank that a professional survey was the first step towards finding a repository which would make these volumes available to scholars. The bank promptly hired her to conduct the survey.

Stored in a dusty jumble in the basement of Emigrant's 42nd Street headquarters, the ledgers had not been used for decades. Ms. Casey realized she had in her hands a gold mine of information on nineteenth century Irish New Yorkers. She invited NYIHR founder John Ridge to see the ledgers and he confirmed their historical value. The ledgers contain bond, mortgage, and real estate records, and most valuable of all, 11 volumes of "test books."

In an era predating social security numbers and drivers' licenses, test (or proof) books contained confidential facts about the identity and background of passbook holders: marital status, mother's maiden name, county and village of origin,

names of brothers and sisters and their whereabouts, and particulars about passbook holders' dates of emigration, including the name of the ship that brought them to America. In the event a passbook was lost, account holders could replace it and withdraw money by answering questions to prove their identity.

The ledgers offer dazzling possibilities for broadening the base of knowledge about famine-era Irish. Emigrant Savings opened its doors September 30, 1850. Approximately 170,000 depositors have personal details recorded in the test books and deposit ledgers.

From her notes appraising the ledger books, Marion Casey reports that the first depositor (Account No. 1) on 30 September 1850 (the first day of business) was Bridget White of Henry Street. Her husband, William, was a tailor. Bridget White was a native of Ferrymount, six miles from Mt. Mellick, Queens County (Laois). She arrived in New York in July 1841 on the *Fairfield* from Liverpool. Her father, John Flanagan, was in Ireland; her mother, Bridget Fahy, was





deceased. She had four brothers: Pat, John and Terence in the United States, and Martin in Ireland; and three sisters, Ellen, Honora, and Sarah.

Among the other depositors that first day of business were John O'Brien, Patrick Egan, and Neil Lafferty, laborers; Michael Walsh, James Reagan, and Eugene O'Sullivan, clerks; Hugh Kelly, dry goods; C. M. Nanry, a grocer; Jeremiah Regan and Patrick Lennan, porters; Catherine Lafferty and Mary Ryan, domestics; and Bishop John Hughes (Account No. 9).

Marion Casey ascertained that 58 of the Emigrant Savings Bank volumes were of unique historical value. They include nine volumes of minutes, covering the years 1841 to 1933, of the Irish Emigrant Society, the philanthropic organization which founded the Emigrant Savings Bank in 1850. She inventoried and wrapped these volumes, then made arrangements to transfer the 58 books to the 42nd Street research branch of The New York Public Library. Ruth Carr of the library's Genealogy and Local History Division and Mimi Bowling of the Manuscript Division were instrumental in the negotiations to accession the books. The New York Public Library will soon make the vast volume of information contained in the ledgers widely and easily accessible to the public, most probably through a computerized database which will enable extensive cross-referencing.



Seal: Emigrant Savings Bank
All photos courtesy: Emigrant Savings Bank