

# When Williamsburg and Greenpoint

by John T. Ridge

Nowadays many people know Williamsburg and Greenpoint only from the vantage point of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. From the elevated highway the weathered facades of tenement buildings look like things haven't changed for a hundred years. Physically this is quite true, but the ethnic composition of Williamsburg and Greenpoint has changed dramatically since the time those buildings were new. Mary Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* was set in turn-of-the-century Williamsburg and three generations of Irish lived there and in Greenpoint (where Irish families remain to this day).

Though never as populous as their better known west Brooklyn rivals, Bay Ridge and Cobble Hill, in the nineteenth century the Eastern District (the part of Brooklyn added when the old City of Williamsburg joined Brooklyn in 1855) was a thriving center of Irish life. An endless succession of Irish dances, picnics, sporting events, socials, and political rallies in Greenpoint and Williamsburg had their own particular neighborhood flavor.

## Old Williamsburg

Although the Irish can be found from time to time in the colonial records of the Eastern District, it is with the gradual urbanization of the area that large numbers of Irish first came in the 1830s and '40s to work in the lumberyards, turpentine factories, and ropewalks. Before their own church could be built, the Irish Catholics of Williamsburgh crossed by ferry to Grand Street in Manhattan in order to attend Mass at St. Mary's Church. Many of them hailed from St. Mary's parish and nearby areas of Manhattan's Lower East Side.

In 1840 Williamsburg's first Roman Catholic Church, also called St. Mary's, was dedicated and four years later its first resident pastor, Rev. Sylvester Malone, a native of Trim, County Meath, arrived. Malone quickly built up parish facilities and in 1848 a new church called Sts. Peter and Paul (renamed to avoid confusion with the Manhattan parish) was built.

The old residents of this area strongly protested against the church's construction until Father Malone threatened to build a cemetery instead. The architect of Sts. Peter and Paul's Church was a young Irishman named Patrick Keely. His work was the forerunner of some 700 he designed in North America!

By 1853 Sts. Peter and Paul's numbered 5,000 parishioners. Father Malone remained pastor there for a total of



Schematic drawing of Brooklyn neighborhoods by Pedro Weinberger, The Pratt Center, Brooklyn

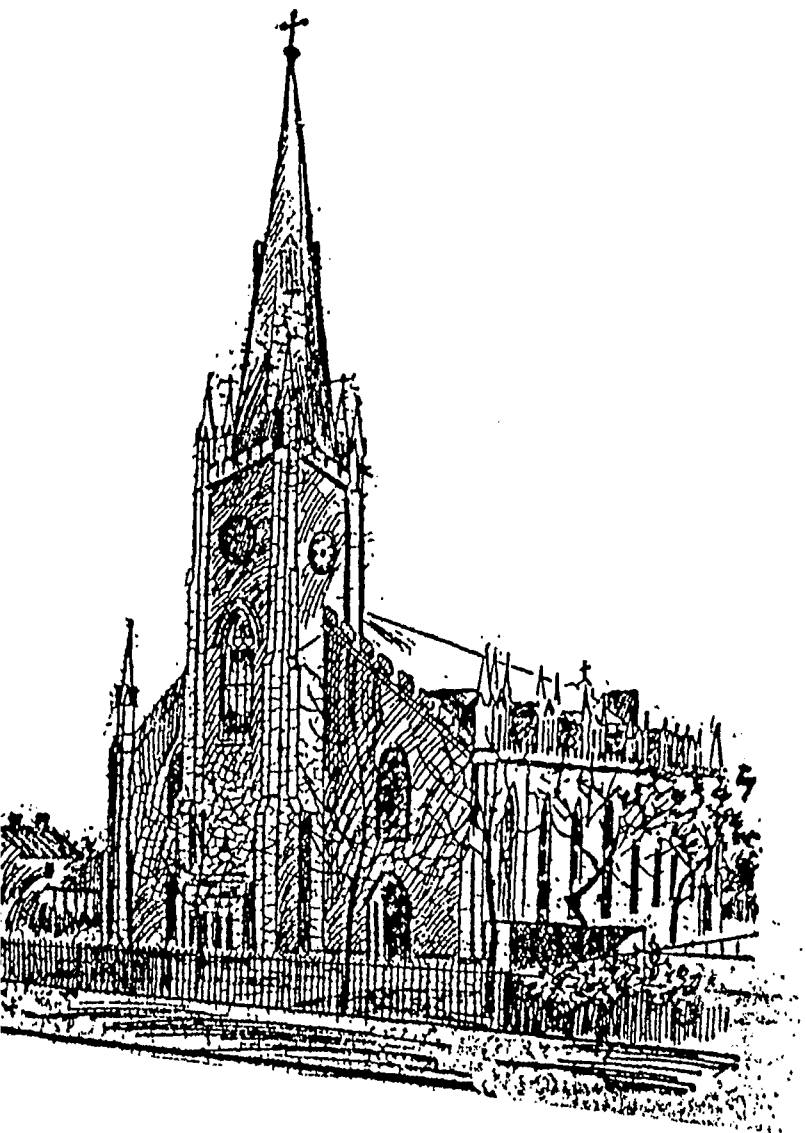
55 years. His commanding personality left an indelible mark on the Catholic and Irish community of Williamsburg and the surrounding Eastern District.<sup>1</sup>

Williamsburg initially was unfriendly to Irish Catholics. Father Malone himself had to endure the jeers of the volunteer firemen who were quartered near his church and seemed to take particular relish in harassing him. Know-Nothingism was strong in Kings County, taking root there long before it spread to other parts of the state. As early as the 1834 elections the nativists of Kings County won a significant portion of the vote. Irish Catholics were not wanted.

In the elections of 1844 the "Native Americans" obtained a sweeping victory when the Whig Party backed their candidates. At election time emotions ran high and nativist anger focussed on the Irish. On November 8, 1844 100 Irishmen were drawn into a riot with special deputy sheriffs at Second Street and North 6th.

# Were Irish

**The following day, November 9, 1844 a mob of 600 Nativists came by ferry from Manhattan and marched through the principal streets of Williamsburg manhandling Irishmen along the way. The cry rose up: "TO THE CHURCH!"**



Sts. Peter and Paul Church, Williamsburg

Immediately the mob headed for Sts. Peter and Paul's. Three Irishmen succeeded in arriving just before them to lock the doors and the gates, but the nativists beat so strongly on the iron gate that they broke the cross from the top. Stones were hurled through the windows and only the arrival of the Mayor of Williamsburg, William Wall, prevented the attackers from storming the church and setting it aflame. When the 1844 election results were tallied the nativist share of the vote was 34 percent, a slight gain on the previous election.

The Irish in the Eastern District had at mid-century more in common with the Irish community in Manhattan than the western half of Brooklyn. Communication by ferry was easy to several different points in Manhattan while the journey overland to downtown Brooklyn was long and slow through the crowded streets. There were more often job and family connections in Manhattan rather than in western Brooklyn as well. For these reasons the Irish societies of the Eastern District were much more likely to march in the St. Patrick's Day Parade in Manhattan than the parade in western Brooklyn.

Greenpoint's Denis Meagher was chosen grand marshal of the Manhattan parade in 1864 in recognition of faithful support from the Eastern District Irish. Members of the New York Ancient Order of Hibernians in turn marched in Williamsburg's annual Independence Day Parade.

In 1867 the Williamsburg AOH took part, as usual, in Manhattan's St. Patrick's Day Parade, but they came to rue the day. At the corner of Grand and Ridge Streets in Manhattan, the ranks of Division No. 3 of Williamsburg were broken by a wagon and team of horses. Division 3 claimed the horses had been deliberately driven into them. A riot developed: bystanders, police and Hibernians joined in and the event was depicted by Thomas Nast in a hideously anti-Irish cartoon, "The Day We Celebrate." The Irish in their full regalia are depicted as inhuman simian creatures throttling the heroically handsome and entirely human police. Nast's sarcasm towards the parade ballad of the same name is endlessly reprinted, a classic example of nineteenth century Irish caricature.

The Hibernians were first organized in Williamsburgh in 1848 and in Greenpoint in 1853. Greenpoint could not muster a second division until after the turn of the century but there were always at least two units in Williamsburgh, Division 2 (on the southside) and Division 3 (on the northside). Both divisions had died out by 1900. Divisions 27 and 34, respectively, took their place.

In 1872 the Eastern District and the rest of Brooklyn

John T. Ridge, author of numerous publications on Irish American history, is historian of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and a past president of the New York Irish History Roundtable.



finally agreed to combine forces to parade on March 17th. The traditional rendezvous point was "the Fountain." In subsequent years, however, trouble dogged the Eastern District divisions. On March 17th, 1878, as Division 9, Greenpoint, marched home through Williamsburgh, a bystander on Fourth Street near North 2nd attacked the division banner, ripping it in several places. The culprit was seized and arrested.

Opposition to the parade came not only from outside the Irish community but from inside as well. On St. Patrick's Day 1878, Father Sylvester Malone denounced the AOH parade in strong terms at all the masses at Sts. Peter and Paul's. He accused the parade of causing, "St. Patrick to be the object of newspaper criticism and mockery." Father Malone and the AOH had never been close allies. Both went their separate ways thereafter.

While the AOH was supposed to be non-political, it served very often as the jumping-off point for would-be Irish political leaders. In addition, many members gravitated from the AOH to the Democratic machine. Father Malone, an old abolitionist and staunch Republican, was the odd man out, somewhat, in a community where neighborhood politics was a passionate affair.

In 1887 the AOH paid back Father Malone in kind when he asked them to sponsor a lecture in Brooklyn by his close friend, Father Stephen McGlynn. The AOH county board voted down Father Malone's appeal by a vote of 102 to 2. McGlynn had taken to heart a number of

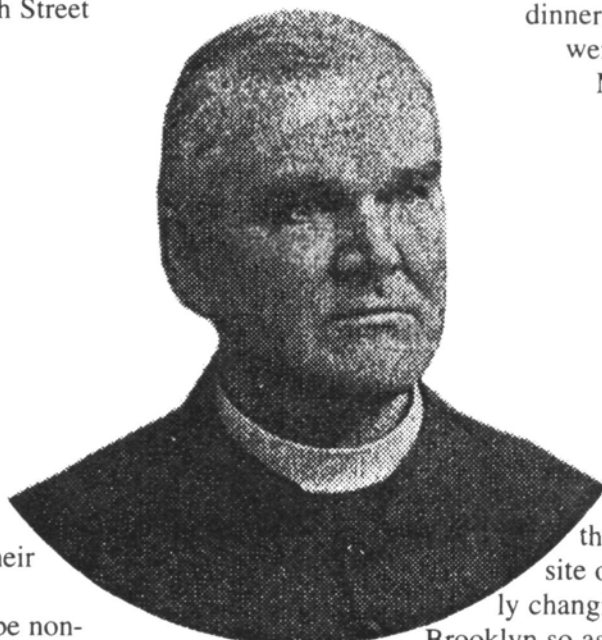
organization of the same name. Williamsburg's Friendly Sons were a tight-knit society. They admitted some Protestants but were recognized as a Roman Catholic society in their early years. The group's principal event of the year was an elaborate St. Patrick's Day dinner. Prominent clergy and politicians were always present. Very often the Mayor of Brooklyn himself

addressed the gathering. Members of the Friendly Sons were issued a limited number of tickets for the event, forcing many "to refuse most intimate friends" a place at their table.

### Fr. Stephen McGlynn

Father Sylvester Malone was a dominant figure in Williamsburg almost to the time of his death in 1899. It was only after his passing that the Friendly Sons changed the site of their annual dinner from ethnically changing Williamsburg to downtown

Brooklyn so as to be closer to the bulk of Brooklyn's Irish community. Despite his activities on behalf of Irish nationalist causes, Father Malone's parish, Sts. Peter and Paul's lost its "Irish" reputation long before Malone's death. The aged pastor had unorthodox views concerning parochial schools and politics which distanced him from mainstream Irish-American thinking. His parish did not develop the same "Irish" ethos as the neighboring parishes as a consequence.



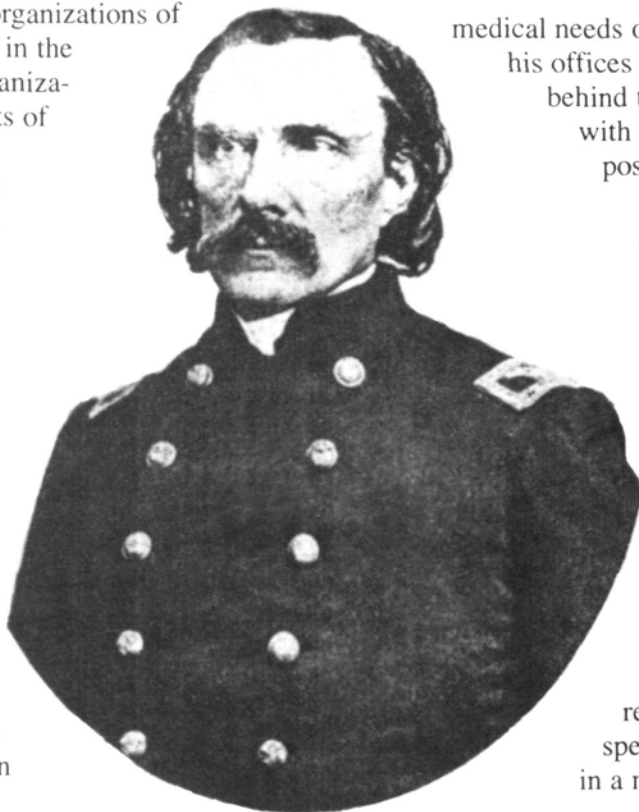
## Irish Nationalism

A striking characteristic of the Irish in Brooklyn's Eastern District in the 19th Century was prolonged and vocal support for Irish nationalist causes, often of the more militant stripe. As early as 1863, in the midst of the American Civil War, the Fenian Brotherhood leader John O'Mahoney came to the parish of St. Vincent de Paul to lecture in the nationalist vein for the benefit of the poor of the parish. Williamsburg became one of the strongholds of the Fenian Brotherhood and afterwards for its most successful follower, Clan na Gael. Clan na Gael of Williamsburg contended with the organizations of western Brooklyn for preeminence in the nationalist field and other Irish organizations that had branches in both parts of the county acted similarly.

The Irish of the Eastern District made a point that they were just as active and important as their brethren to the west. Several societies maintained a military wing which conducted shooting practices and military encampments with the vain hope that one day they might return again to Ireland and free it from English control. Not only was there the Clan na Gael Guards, but the several companies of the Hibernian Rifles and I.R.B. (Irish Republic Brotherhood) Guards in Williamsburg and Greenpoint in the last quarter of the 19th Century. The unit of 45 men in the Greenpoint Hibernian Rifles in 1887 was commanded by "Captain" Alex Mullholland, a Huron Street horseshoer. The volunteer units' main function seems to have been ceremonial since they were most commonly seen as escort units in parades and performing drills at picnics and excursions.

One militant campaign which seemed to be embraced with much enthusiasm in the Eastern District was the so-called Skirmishing Fund in the late 1870s. The skirmishing fund sought to send agents into Britain to plant dynamite charges at key military and commercial installations in the hope that this might somehow induce Britain to abandon Ireland. At a meeting at Alliance Hall on Grand Avenue in Williamsburg in 1877 it was decided that the establishment of "a skirmishing club for Irish revolutionary purposes was feasible" particularly with the prospect of England involved in a war. One of the speakers on that occasion was the ill-fated Greenpoint doctor, Thomas Gallagher, who would himself travel on a mission of destruction only to be caught and imprisoned.

Gallagher seemingly lived a quiet life caring for the



Fenian co-founder John O'Mahoney

where in North America. A number of priests became directly involved. Father Sylvester Malone was one of the most enthusiastic, to the extent of supporting the cause from the pulpit at Sunday Masses. Social issues appealed to Malone, perhaps more than ethnic ones. Two Irish issues Fr. Malone steadfastly championed were Irish land reform and the Irish Parliamentary Party in the British House of Commons. On one occasion in 1886, Malone's 13th Ward Branch of the Irish Parliamentary Fund raised \$1,500 for the cause.

Malone lent his voice to public demonstrations as well. At a major rally sponsored by the Clan na Gael at Williamsburg's Grand Army Hall, Malone was joined by such notables as Justin McCarthy, M.P.; Patrick Ford of *The Irish World*; John Boyle O'Reilly, the old revolutionary and editor of *The Boston Pilot*; and Patrick J. Gleason, the colorful Tipperary-born mayor of nearby Long Island City. The men occupied seats in the lower hall while the ladies, who equalled them in number, occupied the galleries.

### To Uproot All Tyranny.

PRINCETON.—In response to your call for the benefit of the Skirmishing Fund, and to encourage our brother Irishmen at home to persevere in the good work they are now engaged in—namely, to uproot all tyranny, the undersigned subscribed as follows:—

G. McGuire, Roscommon.....	\$1 00	M. R. Byrne.....	\$1 00
Thomas Groves.....	1 00	Anthony Holmes, Bliga.....	1 00
John Fagan.....	1 00	M. L. Oarmody.....	1 00
Martin Gleason.....	1 00	Patrick McAun.....	1 00
Thomas Hoblin.....	1 00	Owen Vahey.....	1 00
Thomas Tighe.....	1 00	John Kennedy.....	1 00
Thomas Lyons.....	50	Joseph Board, America.....	50

### Financial report: Skirmishing Fund *Irish World*

medical needs of the Greenpoint community from his offices at 420 Manhattan Avenue, but behind the scenes he was experimenting with various incendiary devices for the possible destruction of London Bridge.

Ironically, Gallagher, a physician born in Glasgow, had never set foot in Ireland. He set off directly for England on his bombing mission, but was quickly caught, and sentenced to hard labor. Gallagher's treatment in British prisons can only be described as "barbarous." He was deliberately broken physically, leading to his complete mental collapse. A clemency campaign for the Greenpoint doctor dragged on for decades on both sides of the Atlantic before Gallagher was finally released in 1896. It was too late. He spent the remaining years of his life in a mental hospital in Flushing.

The Land League campaign, which began in the early 1880s, excited Irish communities every-

"Emmet Day," Robert Emmet's birthday, was a bigger event in the Eastern District than even March 17th. Indeed, coming just a week or so before St. Patrick's Day, it often served as a warm-up for New York's main event. Emmet Day was lavishly celebrated. Towards the turn-of-the-century performances featured Chauncey Olcott, the romantic Irish singer and star of the stage, and took place at Arion Hall, the magnificent home of the German singing society of the same name.<sup>2</sup>

Emmet Day was celebrated in western Brooklyn as well, and with the consolidation of Brooklyn into Greater New York in 1898 and a declining Irish population in Williamsburg, western Brooklyn gradually came to monopolize the celebration. Another sign that the Williamsburg Irish community was dwindling was the lack of support for a new hall built near Greenpoint Avenue for branch number 3 of the Father Matthew Total Abstinence and Benevolent Society. A year after the hall was built in 1873, the society was in trouble, and both the hall and the society soon vanished.

The ethnic settlement of Williamsburg and Greenpoint and the Eastern District closely paralleled ethnic groupings across the river in Manhattan. Germans dominated the Lower East Side blocks from East 14th Street to Grand Street — with the Irish north and south of them. Across the river in Brooklyn, an identical pattern was repeated: German Americans concentrated in Williamsburg, particularly in its central and eastern wards. The Irish clustered together in south Williamsburg and along the Wallabout. To the north they lived in Greenpoint and Long Island City on the north.

The Irish in Williamsburg divided into northside and southside communities attending St. Vincent de Paul's Church and Sts. Peter and Paul's Church, respectively. The German community predominated in Williamsburg and in even denser concentrations in the eastern part of the Williamsburg's 16th Ward (where the Irish formed only about 3 percent of the total population). In the 14th Ward on the northside, by contrast, the Irish comprised 35 percent of the population. In numbers, the Irish stock (offspring of an Irish-born mother, and those born in Ireland) were similar in Williamsburg and Greenpoint. In 1890 Greenpoint contained about 12,000 persons of Irish stock, and Williamsburg about 13,000, most of them concentrated in the two wards adjacent the East River. Another 5,000 or so Irish mixed in among the Germans in the eastern Williamsburg wards. All told, in 1890 more than 30,000 Irish lived in Williamsburg and Greenpoint, and this does not take into account those whose Irish ancestry was a generation or more further removed.

### Cultural Pastimes

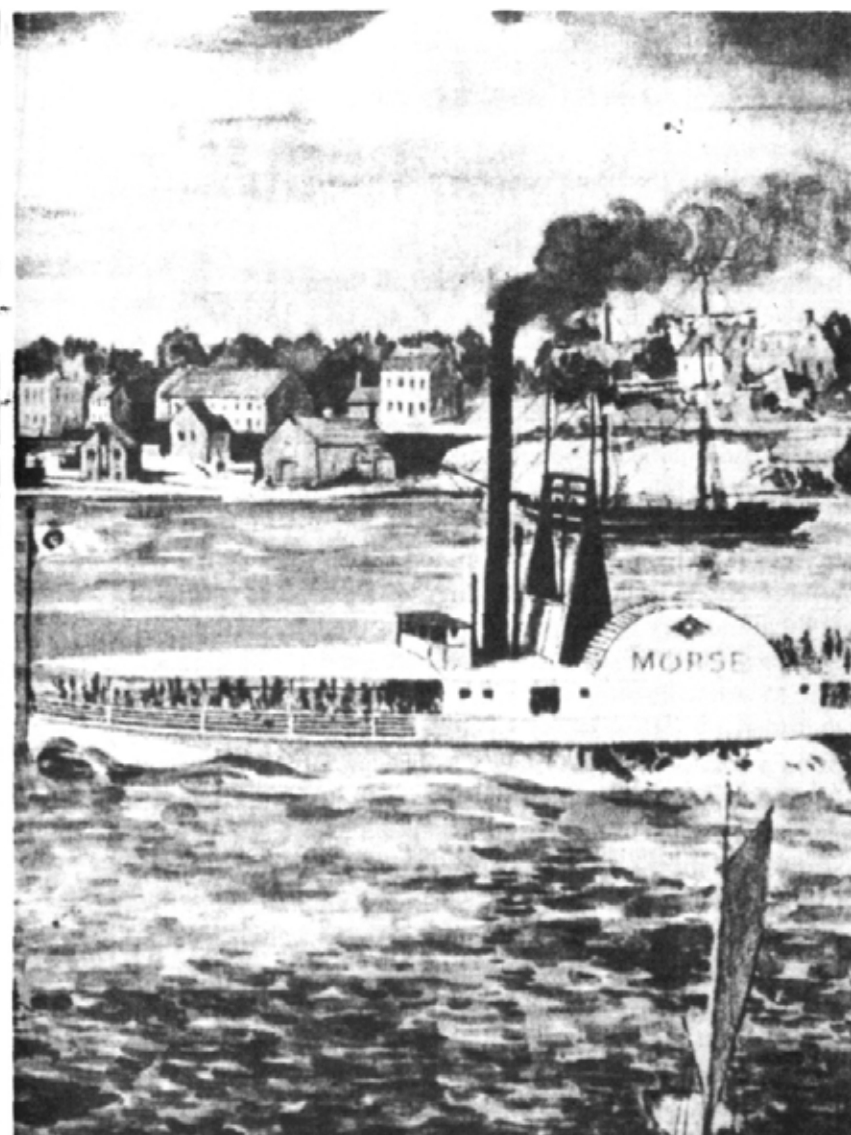
Larger Irish parishes in Williamsburg and Greenpoint fostered a barrage of cultural offerings: church hall socials, musical entertainments, and amateur plays.



The Williamsburg shore, 1850s

Performances took place in elaborate halls that served as community social centers, such as the McCaddin Institute in Sts. Peter and Paul's. Up until World War I, productions were invariably Irish (or at least "stage Irish"). Since many of the performers were young, American-born parishioners, the Tin Pan Alley version of Irishness predominated. The 1940s movie "My Wild Irish Rose" conveys the pseudo-Irish material that seems to have been preferred at the time to Ireland's real musical and cultural heritage. Pastors recognized the importance of having a social center by building and Irish entertainment, albeit in somewhat distorted form, was an important part of that life.

While fraternal and nationalist organizations were numerous in the Eastern District, cultural organizations were far fewer. One of the most prominent, and the longest survivor, was the Celtic Club of Greenpoint, founded in 1873. While the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick of Williamsburg limited membership to the drawing-room set, the Celtic Club drew the middle class and aspirants to the middle class. Advanced for its day, the Celtic Club welcomed both women and men as members, and acquired a reputation for excellent socials and entertain-



ments. Their musical evenings were formal affairs, complete with printed programs of songs and recitations. Renditions of Thomas Moore's pieces were popular and the club maintained good relations with Greenpoint's Scottish society of similar stripe, the Burns Club. The gentel of the Eastern District eventually found their way into the Celtic Club, which survived until the 1920s.

"The excursion of the Celtic Association heretofore have been of so pleasant a character and so quietly conducted that women, usually very wary about interesting themselves to the management of other clubs, have no hesitation whatever in accepting invitations to this one."  
—*Irish World*, July 30, 1887

The Gaelic renaissance hit Greenpoint in 1898: A local branch of the Gaelic League was organized by Patrick J. Boylan. Boylan, a gifted columnist for the *Brooklyn Ledger*, a weekly friendly to Irish and Catholic causes, subsequently moved to the *Irish Advocate* and the *Brooklyn Tablet*. For more than twenty years, Boylan was the most important Irishman in the Eastern District. His newspaper beat ranged from the A.O.H. to nationalist soci-

eties. An account of the first public entertainment to take place at St. Anthony's Church hall, which drew an audience of 500 and included speeches, recitations, and several songs in Irish, gives a sense of Boylan's standing in the community, as well as a flavor for the cultural life of the Eastern District:

"While Mr. O'Byrne was speaking in Irish a number of youngsters commenced to laugh and some who were not quite so young joined in the chorus. The speaker kept right on, and when he sat down Mr. Boylan, the chairman, in a few dignified and happy chosen words, but full of earnestness and suppressed indignation, rebuked the offending parties. He said that from New York to California there could not be found children of German or Italian parents, or of any other nationality, who would show disrespect to the language of their fathers. It was the parents, not the children, who were to blame, the speaker said. It was a regrettable mark of the chain of England which seemed to bind some of our people even in this country. The chairman's remarks were received with a storm of applause, in which Fr. O'Hare [pastor of St. Anthony's] led."

—*Irish World*, April 29, 1899

The incident seemed to heighten the sensibilities of the audience because when a young man who was not on the program was introduced to give a stage Irish dialogue between a "Mrs. Cumiskey and Mr. Malone" of the "Arrah gud aivenin' tee yez" order, a member of the Gaelic society rose up from the audience after one minute and objected to the continuation of the performance saying he had not come to be insulted. Others followed with protests and the chairman, who was about to stop the performance anyway, asked the young man to withdraw:

"It was hard on the young man, but it will set him a-thinking, and many of the uninitiated present will doubtless think a good deal over it too."

—*Irish World*, April 29, 1899

At the time, the Gaelic League was growing so rapidly across the United States, that one of the speakers at the meeting voiced the hope that in a year or two there would be a hundred young men who could stand on the stage and speak the language with fluency.

Americanization was creeping inexorably into the Irish community: A reader of the *Irish Advocate* wrote an irate letter complaining about an upcoming dance at which Greenpoint's Division No. 9 A.O.H. was to have two bands—one playing American music and the other Irish traditional. It was common at the time for Irish societies to engage two bands on the same night and have the two play simultaneously in upper and lower halls: What the reader found intolerable was that the Irish music was advertised for the "lower hall."

## The Changing Neighborhood

With the turn of the century, thousands of Eastern European immigrants settled in Williamsburg, vastly outnumbering the resident Irish. Increasingly, Irish residents moved to Greenpoint where by 1905 there were five Hibernian divisions in Greenpoint alone, three in St. Anthony's parish, two in St. Cecilia's.

In the years before World War I, the two pastors of Greenpoint's

Roman Catholic parishes were exponents of everything Irish. Father Patrick O'Hare of St. Anthony's and Father Edward McGolrick of St. Cecilia's epitomized the "Soggarth Aroon" (the good priest). They were exceptional individuals, full of dynamism for religion and ethnicity, who also possessed the personal touch and built a warm bond with their



REV. EDWARD J. MCGOLRICK

parishioners. Both men were remarkably similar, of north of Ireland origin, approximately the same age and had large and important parishes virtually the same size (both parishes hovered just above 10,000 parishioners) and both were active with Irish societies, Father McGolrick being the chaplain of the Kings County Board of the A.O.H. for many years. Remarkably, the two shared a physical similarity which in some photographs show a resemblance to Bing Crosby's priestly sidekick, Frank McHugh. The two pastors elevated the Irish to a position in Greenpoint they would never again attain.

Greenpoint became a last stand for the Irish in the Eastern District and collected many of those who were leaving the ethnically changing streets to the south. In so far as two important Irish activities, Greenpoint's location was an excellent one. Calvary Cemetery, the "City of the Celtic Dead," lay just across Newtown Creek and not only provided employment for many unskilled laborers, but brought Manhattan Irish through the streets of the neighborhood on their way to and from the cemetery and the Greenpoint ferry. The high and early mortality of the New York Irish and their habit of visiting their departed loved ones on Sundays made Greenpoint a familiar place. Traffic was further increased by the opening of Celtic Park, the principal Irish sporting grounds in the city until the early 1930s. Although Greenpoint was increasingly removed from the concentrations of Irish in the rest of

Brooklyn as this Irish population shifted further and further and further to the south of the county, Greenpoint was in no sense a backwater of the city's Irish as a whole. As Queens opened up to people from Manhattan, the areas immediately adjacent to Greenpoint in Sunnyside, Laurel Hill and Woodside became major centers for Irish newcomers and Greenpoint's Irish formed a part of a greater Irish community straddling Newtown Creek.

Easy access made Greenpoint an attractive place to live and it also enabled residents to continue to work in Manhattan while enjoying better living conditions across the river. There were, of course, many employment opportunities in industrial Greenpoint and the waterfront had long provided Irish work. Peculiar to Greenpoint was the tugboat industry and especially that of the McAllister Brothers whose place in the Irish community was unique. The McAllisters attracted hundreds of immigrants from their native Cushendall, County Antrim, to Greenpoint. Soon a sizeable proportion of Greenpoint's Irish community, particularly in St. Anthony's parish, was composed of Antrim men and other immigrants from Ulster counties. So strong was the Antrim element that they formed their own County Antrim Society, previous to and separate from the New York society of the same name, and entrenched themselves in Greenpoint where many continued to work on the tugs. Interestingly, St. Cecilia's Parish had concentrations of Connacht immigrants from Mayo and Galway with a sizeable group of Cork and Kerry immigrants as well. Many of St. Cecilia's Irish worked at Calvary Cemetery.

Division No. 9, the old Greenpoint division of the AOH, became the Irish society for most of the Antrim men reflecting the strong position of that organization in the North of Ireland. In its ranks could be found names like Black, Caffrey, Convey, Gillen, McVicker, McSparren, McKillop, McErlane, McAllister, McAuley, McWilliams, McCullough and Reid. Yet, Division No. 9 was not exclusively an Antrim organization and attracted members from all over Ireland.

### Not All of Ulster's Emigrants in Greenpoint Were Catholics

Many Protestant Irish worked in industrial Greenpoint and they too were a visible part of the community. In the 1890s the Orange Order was represented by two Greenpoint branches, Appomatox Lodge No. 194 and the Greenpoint Purple Heroes No. 18. Both lodges usually met at one of the Masonic Halls in the area but only the Greenpoint Purple Heroes survived up to World War I.

## Microcosm of a Community in Transition: The Ancient Order of Hibernians in Greenpoint

**T**he Greenpoint A.O.H. reflected at times the sentiments of the more extreme nationalist community. The Glens of Antrim from which so many of the members came was a nationalist island surrounded by fiercely loyalist communities. This group of Irish seems to have embraced American nationality with a special enthusiasm and regarded it as the fulfillment in part of their own longings for national independence. Celebrating in 1903 their 50th Anniversary in Greenpoint, the division was fearful of what it perceived as a growing English influence in America:

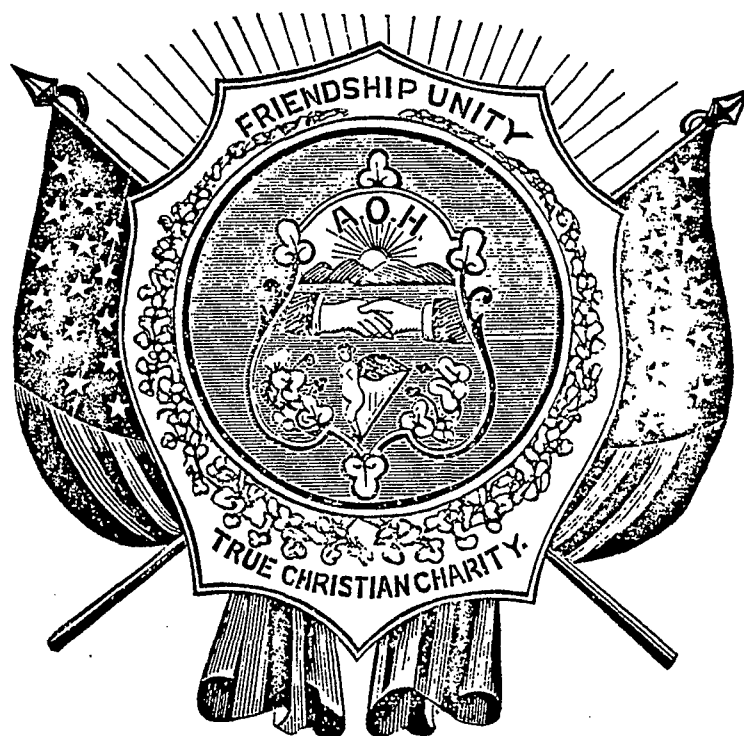
**"It is the mission of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in America to teach a broader and more liberal civilization than that called the Anglo Saxon, which is the bane and curse of this Republic. The introduction of English customs and manners and the intermarriage of American women with the profligate English nobility marks a decadence in American society, and inculcates a repugnance for republican values."**

Sensing the approaching conflict in Europe the AOH was not shy about displaying its sympathies in the approaching conflict:

**"The mission of all such Orders as the Ancient Order of Hibernians is to teach the true principles of liberty, morality, fraternity and equality, to draw us closer to the civilization and business interests of Europe, and to promote an antagonism to England, whose destruction should be the object of all civilized peoples."**<sup>3</sup>

While the majority of Division No. 9's 112 members were laborers, a number were engaged in business for themselves. A variety of activities were represented such as: builder, scrap metals, hay and grain, printer, manufacturer of mineral waters, undertaker, horseshoer, bandmaster, wheelwright, physician, hotel keeper, coal dealer, wines and liquors, and restaurant proprietor. One of the most colorful members, Martin Byrne, one of two lawyers and the corresponding secretary of the division, was a major in the cavalry during the Civil War and a former Texas Ranger. Sixty percent of the members lived north of Greenpoint Avenue and most of them in the vicinity of Manhattan Avenues and concentrated in Huron and Green Streets. Eight other members actually lived in Long Island City.

Another leading division of the A.O.H. was Division No. 23 of St. Cecilia's Parish, the half of Greenpoint east of Humboldt Street. Up to the time



## Division No. 9, A.O.H.

of the foundation of this division in 1903 there had been only one branch of the Hibernians in Greenpoint, but it was suddenly decided that the Irish community was big enough to establish additional A.O.H. branches. Perhaps some of the initiative came from Father McGolrick. He was very aware through personal experience when he took over his parish in 1888 how his own church had almost disappeared in the minds of many by the lack of the assertion of territoriality. He found that many of the people living in the confines of the parish were going elsewhere to mass "so that the neighboring Pastors thought their parishes extended to the very doors of St. Cecilia's Church." Division No. 23 regularly helped raise money for the parish and was all but a parish society but in name and this is much more than what would have come to the parish if there had been but a single division in the community.

On March 17th, 1905 Division No. 23 showed a fierce loyalty to St. Cecilia's. The division protested the intention of the county board of the A.O.H. to have anybody else but itself to be escorted by the cadet unit of St. Cecilia's, the Loughlin Battalion. A year later the division protested plans to have any other division escort the Brooklyn A.O.H. into St. Cecilia's for the laying of

(continues on page 22)

# The Ancient Order of Hibernians

## Microcosm: The A.O.H. in Greenpoint

(continued from page 21)

the cornerstone for the new school. The same year Division No. 9 of St. Anthony's had to conference and agree as to how each division was to march through each other's territory before the St. Patrick's Day Parade. Just as St. Cecilia's had to exert itself to establish its parish identity, so did Division No. 23 have to exert itself to mark off its territory from encroachment. Much of this was in reality petty politics. When new additional divisions were added in St. Anthony's, a new division in 1909 was added consequently in St. Cecilia's. One suspects it was mostly done merely to maintain a balance of power in the A.O.H. rather than for any motive of improvement. The result seems merely to have split the existing division into smaller and weaker ones.

The biggest problem for Division No. 23 and the other A.O.H. divisions was the problem of maintaining the sick and death benefits. The death and sick benefits were literally killing the division and as early as December, 1905, just two years after its foundation, causing it to be on "the verge of collapse." Death benefits were not only given for members but for the wives of members. Sick benefits could be extended at the rate of \$6 a week to eight or nine weeks. It didn't take many claims to wipe out a treasury which in 1907 had a balance of \$108 and in 1916 a balance of \$36. Throughout all this benefit drain the charity extended to all was generous beyond belief extending as far as helping to build churches in Switzerland!

It soon became obvious that organization of the A.O.H. in Greenpoint was greatly overextended. P.J. Boylan wrote:

"Monsignor O'Hare says there should be only one division of the A.O.H. in Greenpoint and so say we all. There are three divisions in St. Anthony's parish and two in St. Cecilia's. If they were all in one great division they would accomplish a great deal more at much less expense. They got together for the St. Patrick's eve banquet and made it a splendid success, they united in the St. Patrick's Day parade and made an excellent showing; now let them unite for a monster excursion this coming summer, a ball next winter, and a club house of their own in the future. With a club house in the Nassau avenue section within easy reach of all, amalgamation would soon follow."

—*Irish Advocate*, March 27, 1915

The A.O.H. came down like a house of cards in Greenpoint. In 1918 the other St. Cecilia's division collapsed and a few members came into Division No. 23, but it was not enough to stem the tide. By 1920 there was no money left to pay claims and the division failed to meet for several months. In January 1921 the 34 remaining members of Division No. 23 voted to disband ending almost 20 years of the organization in the parish.

Old Division No. 9 itself was on the verge of collapse by 1916, but it was the last of the Greenpoint Hibernian divisions to finally go under in the late 1920s. The loss of all the Greenpoint A.O.H. divisions mirrored a collapse of the organization all across the country that seems to be closely linked with financial problems stemming from the disbursement of benefits. The countrywide Influenza epidemic of 1918 was probably a contributing factor for it was in that year that the heaviest financial drain was suffered. Oddly enough, A.O.H. Division 34 (St. Vincent de Paul Parish) in Williamsburg survived until the late 1930s before its demise. It was not until 1939 that a entirely new division, No. 6, brought the Hibernians again to Greenpoint. This division is still extant as is a Ladies Hibernian division.

### SOCIETY NOTICES.

## A. O. H., No. 16.

THE OFFICERS AND MEMBERS are requested to attend a SPECIAL MEETING,

**ON SUNDAY, 11th INSTANT,**

**AT THEIR HALL, at 3 o'clock.**

**CHARLES HIGGINS, President.**

**PATRICK GALVIN, Secretary.**

**A. O. H., DIVISION NO. 9, GREENPOINT, Brooklyn.**—There will be a special meeting of the above Division held at its hall, India street, near Union place, on Tuesday evening, March 13, 1877, at 7½ o'clock. All officers and members are requested to be present, in order to make final arrangements for the celebration of St. Patrick's Day. By order of

**PATRICK HYNES, President.**

**PATRICK BYRNE, Secretary.**

## Greenpoint Since 1916

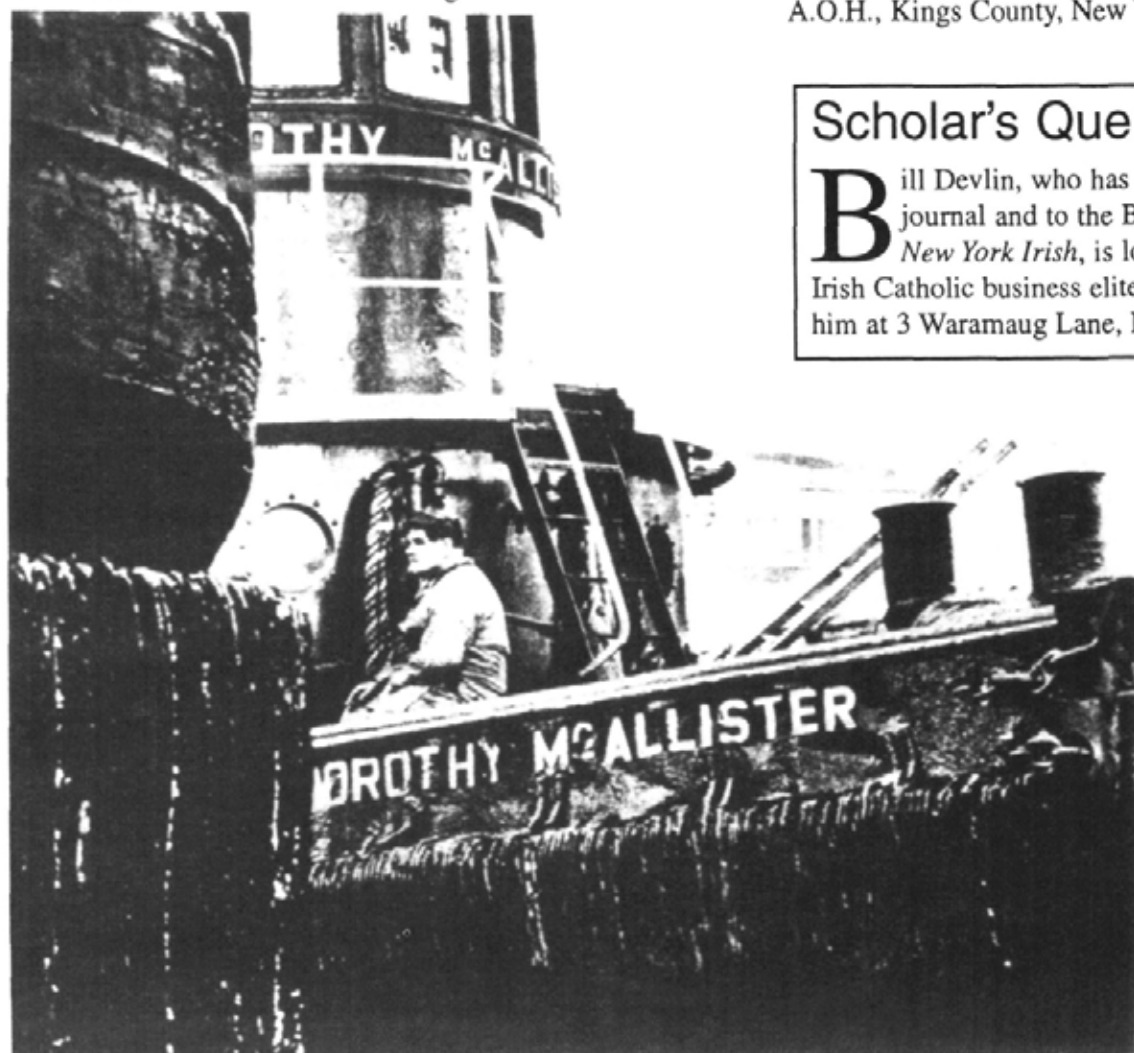
During the Irish War for Independence (1916-21) there were two branches of the Friends of Irish Freedom in Greenpoint. St. Cecilia's unit (the "Myles the Slasher" Branch) carried on through the 1920s as the pro-DeValera Americans for the Recognition of the Irish Republic. The Irish were strong enough to have block parties in 1920 for the benefit of the cause of Irish Freedom with one of them on Sutton St. between Driggs and Nassau sponsored jointly by the Friends of Irish Freedom and the A.O.H. Greenpoint seemed to have a personal stake in Irish Freedom since one of the executed leaders of the 1916 Rising, sometimes called "the Father of the Revolution," was Thomas Clarke who had been a resident of Russell Street in Greenpoint for several years before returning to Ireland in 1907. In a 1919 meeting at St. Anthony's Hall, two of the priests who had attended Clarke and the others executed at Kilmainham spoke of his last days there. The fiery Irish patriot Countess Markowicz delivered a major speech at Greenpoint's New National Hall just before the commencement of the Irish Civil War in 1921 in which she predicted incorrectly that there would be no armed conflict between the former comrades in arms.

In 1950 there were 1,255 Irish-born still living in Greenpoint. Most of the Irish-born lived in St. Anthony's Parish with only about 300 living within the confines of St. Cecilia's. Most of the remaining Irish social and cul-

tural activities centered therefore around St. Anthony's and this is where the re-constituted Hibernians made their home. Almost entirely disappeared were the Irish-born from Williamsburg's old Irish parishes of St. Vincent de Paul and Sts. Peter and Paul's where less than 100 Irish-born could be found.

The ethnic picture of Greenpoint had dramatically changed by 1960. Of the total population of 41,465, residents of Polish stock formed the largest group at 8,863 while the Irish numbered only 2,760. The reputation of the neighborhood as a Polish area has long supplanted the public awareness of Greenpoint's formerly well-known Irish colony. The proclivity of second and third generation Irish to move to the suburbs has been well known and combined with the infusion of very few new Irish immigrants has more or less sealed the history of the Irish in this part of New York City. The remaining population of Irish ancestry are, however, a hardy lot and the close knit family ties of a generation or two before are not entirely lost.

1. American Irish Historical Society, p. 41 from O'Brien, Sylvester Malone.
2. In the Eastern District, as nearly everywhere in New York City, the Irish often used meeting halls built by the German community.
3. *Souvenir Semi-Centennial Anniversary Division No. 9* A.O.H., Kings County, New York, 1903, p. 29



## Scholar's Query

**B**ill Devlin, who has contributed articles to this journal and to the Bayor and Meagher book, *The New York Irish*, is looking for information on Irish Catholic business elites before the Civil War. Write him at 3 Waramaug Lane, New Milford, CT 06776.