

A UNITED IRISH UTOPIA?

The Movement for An Irish Immigrant Settlement in America, 1815-1818

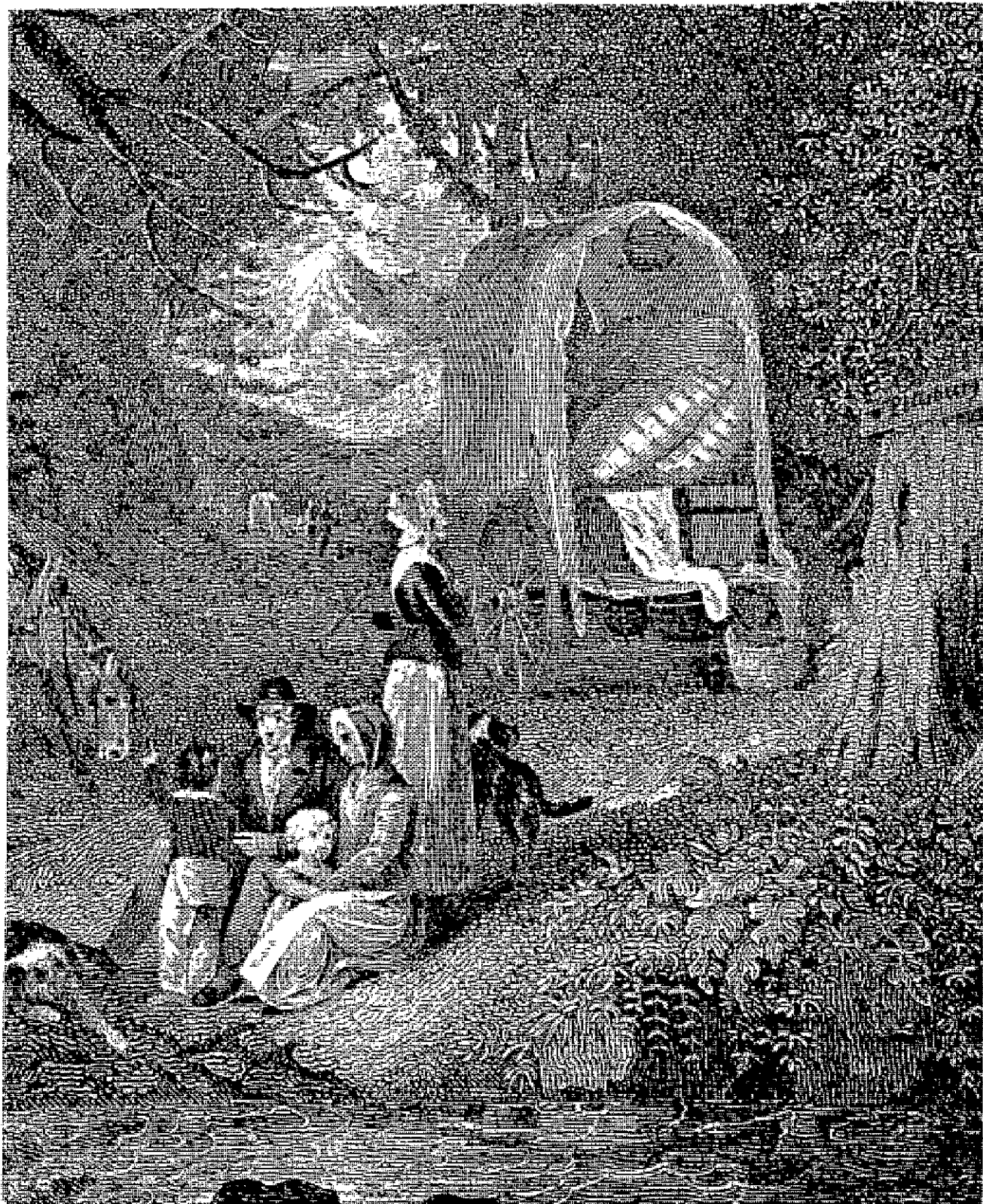
by Frank Naughton

On a cold day in New York City in 1817, *The Shamrock*, America's first newspaper for Irish immigrants, published a hopeful statement: *This is the true way to happiness in America. There are [here] French settlements, Dutch settlements, Swiss settlements, & c. Why do not the Irish think of a settlement? The unfortunate Irish wanderers, banished in successive generations, by the tyranny and injustice of monsters, have been received, relieved and comforted, in most of the countries of Europe. . . . Americans are not less humane, less generous, less politic than Europeans. Why then do not the natives of Ireland unite in an application to the best government in the world, for a grant of land in some favourable situation.* (January 25, 1817)

This exhortation marked the start of a campaign to create in the heart of America's new Illinois Territory a unique settlement for the Irish. Inspired in part by ideals that also supported the United Irish uprising of 1798, Irish American leaders hoped that arriving immigrant families might secure prosperity and equality in newly created farms and towns on the American frontier. Had the settlement movement succeeded, many future immigrants might have found sustaining relief in the Illinois Territory instead of being forced into crowded urban neighborhoods.

In 1818, a year after the *Shamrock* editorial, petitions from Irish-American associations in four cities—New York,

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Baltimore, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh—were presented to the Fifteenth Congress of the United States in a coordinated campaign to win Federal support for a carefully drawn Irish settlement plan. The petitions (“memorials” in the language of the time) made a two-fold request. First, they asked that a promising tract of land in the Territory, large enough to

support “thousands of families,” be granted to trustees responsible for the settlement of immigrants.¹ Each family would get its own farm. Families in turn would be responsible for domestic and community development. Second, the petitions requested extended credit for the settlers, 12 years for each family to pay back the Federal Government for the

property. In this way the land would be kept under cultivation by the immigrants themselves—and land speculation would be avoided.

Two years after the *Shamrock* editorial, the movement for an Irish settlement was abandoned. Presentations of the land-and-credit plan had been made to the House of Representatives and the plan received substantial Congressional support.² But it was rejected three times by the House of Representatives.

Although the movement was unsuccessful, a closer look at the settlement effort can provide new insights about Irish immigration and can extend our understanding of nineteenth century communal settlements in the United States.³ In addition, it can help us understand more about Irish spokesmen in America, and how political and social values behind the 1798 Irish republican movement remained important to them all the way into the next century.

One of Many Utopian Efforts

The Irish settlement movement was one of many nineteenth century efforts to create in America ideal communities or utopias. It was hoped that these, if fully realized, would alleviate growing social problems. Impelled by the late eighteenth century debate over early social and economic programs, European and American reformers shared many ideas in common about how social environments shape individual and family characteristics. Individuals like Cabet, Fourier, Owen, and Warren created utopian designs to achieve social change. Rural settings and altruistic values were common to all of their designs. These in turn became the foundations for the alternative communities which emerged throughout the nineteenth century.

The New York Irish leaders who initiated and coordinated the proposed settlement in the Illinois territory were among these “hopeful idealists” (as historian Dolores Hayden called them) who imposed on the American countryside of the 1800s “an imaginary geography of fecundity, equality, and self-sufficiency.”⁴ The Irish leaders hoped that part of this geography would be peopled with Irish men and women. And they envisioned that these new arrivals would realize in the American West the ideals of economic freedom, political liberty, religious non-sectarianism that in large part motivated the major events in Ireland during 1798.⁵ Irish leaders assumed that the new arrivals were entirely capable of participating in the opportunities and responsibilities of the Republic. They believed that these new arrivals would achieve, partly through an ongoing cultural amalgamation with American-born neighbors, communities fundamentally characterized by equality, liberty, and tolerance.

The plans for governmental and social structures in the projected Irish settlement were not developed as fully as those of some nineteenth century idealists (the Scottish

utopianist, Robert Owen, for example). However the Irish leaders shared with Owen and the other visionaries deep-seated concerns over the harm inflicted on individuals and families through migration from rural communities to unfamiliar urban environments. They saw economic and social problems—unemployment, crime, family disintegration—erupting among Irish immigrants to America in the second decade of the century. They believed these problems stemmed in part from the peculiar culture of American cities, and in part from dramatic changes in Irish immigration to the United States in the years immediately after 1814.⁶

Immigration from Ireland and Emerging Problems After 1814

With the end of the Napoleonic Wars and 20 years of nearly continuous fighting, Irish immigration to America increased dramatically after 1814. Although the United States Government did not systematically count immigrants until 1819, newspaper columns of the day noted frequent shiploads of immigrants from Ireland and other parts of Europe.⁷ Kerby Miller has estimated that, in 1815-1816 alone, 20,000 persons left Ireland and crossed the Atlantic with the United States their preferred destination. Their numbers “astonished earlier settlers. . . .”⁸

The astonishment is understandable. In 1790, the Irish constituted less than ten percent of the country’s population.⁹ And while the number of emigrants leaving Ireland annually during the 1790s has been estimated to be at least 5,000 persons, Irish immigration dropped sharply in the two decades preceding 1815, as war engaged the nations bordering the North Atlantic. According to Miller, only in 1801-02 did significant numbers of emigrants leave Ireland. America’s War of 1812 with Great Britain closed sea lanes to America entirely until 1815.¹⁰

With the conclusion of this warfare, however, America experienced an upswing in Irish immigration that would, with sporadic ebbs and floods, go on for decades. Once peace was declared, the demand for passage to America from Irish and English ports grew until: “there was not enough shipping to transport all who wished to come.”¹¹ To Americans and Irish-Americans living in ports of entry like New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, the number of Irish immigrants arriving after 1814 must have been amazing.

Economic conditions chiefly contributed to the increased Irish immigration to the United States. Prices for Irish farm products declined rapidly following the French defeat at Waterloo. Demand for food for the European war markets had fueled the Irish economy, which was primarily agricultural, since the 1790s.¹² Farmers could no longer make rent payments, land leases were not renewed, and tenancy-at-will grew more common.¹³ In addition, as a consequence of the 1801 Act of Union with Great Britain, new



Stereotyped imagery typical of the nineteenth century British press. Courtesy of the Famine Museum, Roscommon.

A growing number of men and women in Ireland grew disillusioned with their prospects at home.¹⁵ Word of successes achieved by earlier Irish immigrants to America had made economic and political prospects seem brighter across the ocean where, according to one early letter-writer: “a man meets so rich a reward for good conduct and industry. . . .”¹⁶

Only when they arrived in America and started looking for work did most Irish immigrants finally understand that the success stories of earlier generations of immigrants resulted from greater opportunities that no longer existed. In the years 1815-1817, new immigrants from Ireland experienced substantial difficulty in America. Marcus Lee Hansen, writing about this aspect of the Atlantic migration, described conditions in New York City as follows:

*At first, employment opportunities abounded, for during the war [of 1812] many of the Eastern cities, New York, in particular, had fallen behind in the construction of houses, warehouses, docks, stores and offices. Contractors needed masons, stonecutters, carpenters, woodworkers, and hod-carriers. . . . Most of the workmen were Irishmen. . . . As the numbers of newcomers increased, however, contractors found that they could not employ all the hands that offered themselves. New York became congested with workers without jobs or resources.*¹⁷

Another historian of these newer immigrants states that of the 30,000 persons believed to have landed in New York and Philadelphia in 1817, more than half were:

*Irishmen of little means; lacking knowledge of how to make a livelihood in America, they were quickly stranded on the seaboard towns and threatened to become a charge on these communities.*¹⁸

Another dimension of the troubles experienced by post-1814 immigrants is suggested in the petitions presented to the Congress in 1818 for the proposed Irish settlement. The

New York Irish Emigrant Association (one of several immigrant-assistance groups organized to help these newer arrivals) refers in its petition to the large number of recent Irish immigrants in declining psychological and moral decline.

*[They arrive] . . . perplexed, undecided, and dismayed by the novelty and difficulty of their situation; they have fled from want and oppression; they touch the soil of freedom and abundance; but the manna of the wilderness melts in their sight. Before they can taste the fruits of happy industry, the tempter too often presents to their lips the cup that turns man to brute, and the very energies which would have made the fields to blossom, make the cities groan.*¹⁹

The petition from the Hibernian Society of Baltimore (another assistance group) describes the emigrants' difficulties in even greater detail:

*The emigrant, arriving without a previous plan, and generally with very limited means, is tossed about by uncertainty, dissipating time and money in hopes of fortunate accidents, or losing them by rash adventures. The inconveniences the educated emigrant may bear with fortitude, without yielding to despair, or sinking into vice; but experience proves, that it is far otherwise with the laborious rustic; who, without education, lacks moral courage, and is unfortified against the shocks of adversity. Loitering about seaport towns, for want of a better destiny in the country, he procures employment perhaps during the summer, but remains idle through the winter, wasting his hard earnings, sacrificing his time, vitiating his morals, and poisoning his health. When spring returns, the victim of dissipation . . . is no longer animated by health, or nerved with strength; and instead of contributing to the general fund of wealth, becomes a dronish depredator upon it.*²⁰

It is clear that by 1816 at the latest, serious problems awaited the new immigrants from Ireland: chronic unemployment, a degraded urban morality, the economic demands of seasonal work, health problems, and the appeal of criminal activity. Thomas Addis Emmet, a leader in the New York Irish community, commented in 1817 that many recent Irish immigrants had been forced by circumstances “to become noxious and dangerous. . . .” to American cities.²¹ Still, immigrants continued to arrive in the United States.

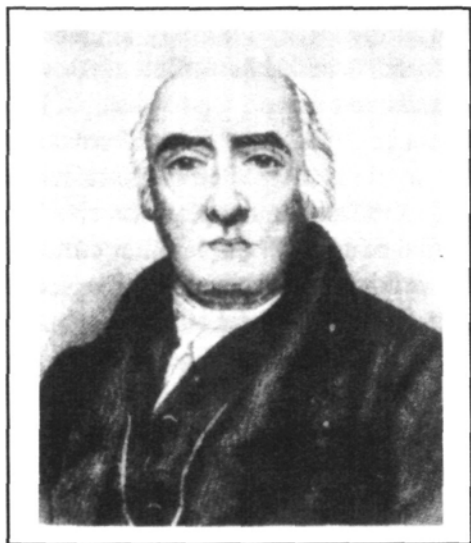
From the need to address such problems, the movement for a communal society in the Illinois Territory was constructed. It aimed to provide more promising conditions for the Irish immigrants steadily arriving in coastal cities. At this point it would be useful to consider briefly some individuals central to this effort and some of the values influencing them to act on behalf of the newer immigrants.

Leaders and Values Behind The Settlement Movement

The petitions brought to the Congress early in 1818 were complementary documents, reflecting a coordinated effort among Irish groups across several states. Coordinating this effort and having "honourably taken the lead . . . in endeavouring to obtain adequate means of relief . . ." was the New York Irish Emigrant Association.²² The settlement effort became known in some circles as the "Emmet-MacNeven Project," named after two of the leaders of this New York group.²³

Years before they became active in the settlement effort, Thomas Addis Emmet and William James MacNeven worked together for causes they believed in. By upbringing and background the two men were notably different.

Thomas Addis Emmet, brother of the more widely known Robert Emmet, came from a



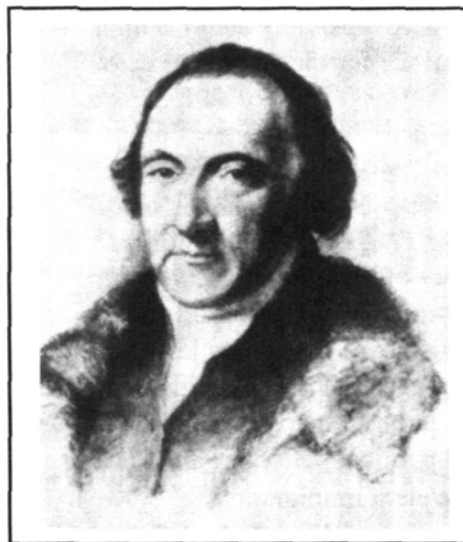
Thomas Addis Emmet

Protestant Irish ascendancy family that held considerable property in southern Ireland. Educated in law, he became committed to Irish republicanism early in life. In an epoch of libertarian thought in late eighteenth century Europe, Emmet became a supporter of political and religious rights for Catholics in Ireland. In the 1790s, he joined the United Irishmen, and was quickly promoted to its Directory.²⁴ Involved in the Rising of 1798, he was sentenced to exile from Ireland by a British bill of attainder. After a discouraging period on the Continent attempting to secure European assistance for the Irish cause, Emmet sailed for the United States in 1804. In New York, he established a successful legal practice and political career. Active in social causes for the rest of his life, Emmet maintained a special interest in the well-being of the Irish.²⁵

By contrast, William MacNeven was the son of a Catholic family that had been forced to the Irish hinterlands by policies of Oliver Cromwell in the 1600s. Raised by nationalists amid Irish traditions, MacNeven traveled to Prague and Vienna for training as a physician. At the same time he apparently maintained a strong interest in politics

and policies affecting Ireland. By 1796, he had joined the United Irishmen and, like Emmet, became a member of its Directory. He served a three-year prison term for his part in the Rising of 1798, and then, too, was exiled from Ireland. After serving briefly in Napoleon's Irish Brigade, MacNeven arrived in the United States shortly after Emmet. He established a medical practice, eventually becoming professor of medicine at Rutgers Medical School and at New York's College of Physicians and Surgeons. Like Emmet, he kept up a continual involvement in social causes, particularly those concerning the plight of poorer Irish immigrants.²⁶

By 1817, both Emmet and MacNeven enjoyed the esteem of many Irish in America because of their activities



Dr. William James MacNeven

on behalf of Irish freedom and religious equality, and also because of their involvement in public affairs in the United States. Honored as "Men of '98," two of many political exiles in America who maintained membership in the United Irish Society, they remained committed to improving

political and social conditions both in Ireland and the United States.

Thomas O'Connor, editor of *The Shamrock* (and another of the "Men of '98"), apparently also played a role in the Irish settlement project, although his participation in the project is more difficult to trace. Exiled from Ireland, O'Connor had come to the United States in 1801 and soon after moved with his wife and younger brother to Steuben County in central New York State. There he established, with followers, a small farming settlement on 4,000 acres. Like the proposed settlement in the Illinois Territory, this early communal project was intended as a permanent organization to benefit immigrants from Ireland. Its existence, however, proved tenuous and finally became impossible to maintain: "pioneer conditions were too onerous for most of the settlers, unaccustomed to that sort of farming, and the utter absence of the facilities of religion was another deterrent. By 1811, the experiment had ended in ruin for Thomas, who bore the brunt of the failure."²⁷

After serving a term in debtors' prison, O'Connor turned to journalism in New York City. Several years later he took on editorship of *The Shamrock* and ultimately achieved

public esteem and political success. However, for years after his Steuben County disaster, O'Connor held fast to the idea of a special settlement for Irish immigrants. He envisioned a place where the culture and economy that these immigrants knew could, to a greater extent than elsewhere in America, be followed. On January 25, 1817, in the pages of *The Shamrock* he gave voice to the idea (quoted in the opening paragraph of this article).

Emmet and MacNeven played major roles in creating and energizing the 1817 settlement effort. The extent of O'Connor's involvement is not fully known, but like Emmet and MacNeven he was an experienced leader who had long been devoted to improving conditions for people in Ireland. And like Emmet and MacNeven, O'Connor had sworn allegiance to the United Irish Society, an important organization which, in its transplanted form in early nineteenth century America, was apparently significant in developing political influence for the American Irish. Regarding the early effectiveness the United Irishmen, Kerby Miller has commented:

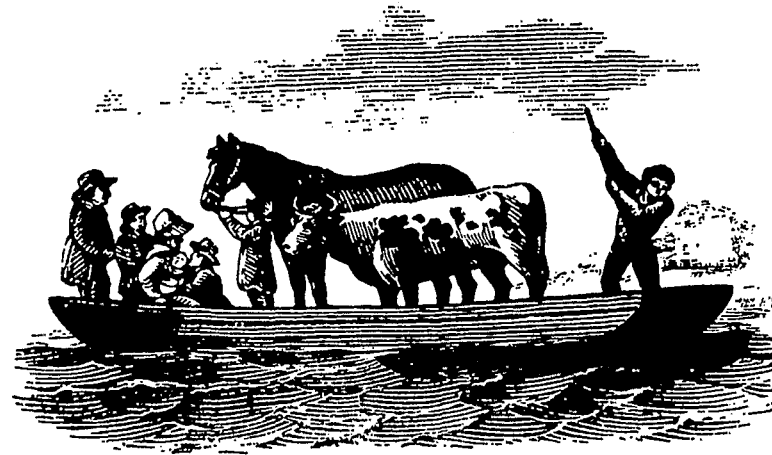
not only did their acceptance and prosperity in Jeffersonian America provide a symbolic model for prospective Irish emigrants, but the United Irishmen themselves offered the protection and "encouragement" which a communal-oriented peasantry still needed before they would hazard their future in a strange land . . . through their influence in the Republican party, the United Irishmen provided political patronage and legal protection to subsequent immigrants.²⁸

Thus, the effort to form an Irish communal society in the Illinois territory went forward with distinct advantages. These included support from an existing network of experienced leaders and the promise of benefits to the larger society (including the resettling of new immigrants from the cities to the Western frontier — where they would be populating open lands, protecting border areas, and attracting future immigrants to still underpopulated regions. The effort also had solid precedents: the United States Congress had approved a similar request for land and credit in March 1817 to immigrants from France, and Congress had just received, in January 1818, another petition for a similar grant from Swiss immigrants.²⁹

The Decision Against the Irish Settlement

Although plans for the proposed Irish settlement were not formulated in precise detail, they were sufficiently developed to be presented as petitions to Congress in early 1818. Representatives from New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh submitted the four petitions. Cumulatively they provide a clear idea what the proposed settlement would be like.³⁰

The Irish settlement in the Illinois Territory would lie



just east of the western military boundary line. The amount of land needed would be sufficient for settlement of 50,000 families divided among ten townships. Potential settlers would not be exclusively Irish; alternate sections in the settlement would be dedicated to American-born citizens. The premise of the settlement plan was that Irish immigrants would find comfort in the familiar culture of their Irish neighbors but could at the same time learn to adapt to the American culture of their other neighbors.

Potential settlers would be screened and sponsored by one of the four Irish associations. Each association, through funds already collected, was prepared to pay overland transportation costs for acceptable immigrant members of the settlement. Settlers would receive their land-credit contracts exclusively through offices of the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, and would apparently be subject to oversight by settlement Trustees. Land would cost \$2 per acre and be limited to 640 acres for "any settler or his heirs." Settlers had to improve at least 20% of their land, construct a home on it, and cultivate it continuously. Within 14 years, later shortened to 12 years, all principal and interest would be paid to the Federal Government. Otherwise, the land would be confiscated and payments refunded to the settler. If all payments had been made, the settler would be given full ownership to the land.

In addition to meeting these requirements, settlers also would be expected to develop community institutions in the townships. The petitions stated that roads and schools would be constructed - apparently through the efforts of the settlers. Settlers apparently were expected to form militia units, since the petitions stressed that the new inhabitants of the Territory, under the proposed arrangement, would repel any "invasion, drive back the war upon the enemy, and give our extended [national] frontier security and repose."³¹

The New York petition for the proposed settlement was introduced formally to the House of Representatives on

February 13, 1818 by Representative John Taylor. Taylor proved to be a strong advocate for the settlement, perhaps convinced earlier in the year of its merits by John Chambers, a member of the Standing Committee of the New York Irish association.³²

Petitions from associations in the other cities were introduced to the House on the same day. All were immediately referred to the Congressional Committee on Public Lands for review and recommendations.

During the next week, the petitions were introduced into the Senate. On February 18, a long letter was composed by Irish association delegates in Washington, apparently to the Committee on Public Lands. Ostensibly written because these delegates "endeavored to ascertain all the objections which might be made to a compliance with the prayer of the memorialists. . .," the letter listed 13 questions related to the proposed settlement — and provided thirteen responses.³³ The letter is an important document in the history of the settlement effort because it provides additional description of the proposed community. It is also important as an early indicator of the proposal's fate.

This fate was soon stated, but not soon made final. On February 25, 1818, the Committee on Public Lands recommended to the House that "the prayer of the petitioners ought not to be granted."³⁴ The Committee did not provide reasons for its negative recommendation, but did refer to reasons stated in its reports on analogous cases.³⁵ The recommendation of the Committee was supported by House membership by a vote of 83-71.

Two more steps were taken before the proposal was defeated. Representative Taylor extended consideration of the settlement effort on February 27 by making a motion in the House that the word "not" should be stricken from the Committee's recommendation. Taylor's motion must have been controversial, since it was followed by a four-hour debate, presumably on merits of the settlement proposal. However, when ballots were cast on Taylor's motion, it was defeated by the same 83-71 vote.³⁶ Apparently none of the Representatives had changed their minds.

There was one more spurt of activity before the proposal's fate became final. On December 16, 1818, Representative Clifton Clagett of New Hampshire moved that a special House committee report out a bill that would embrace all requests in the petitions, with minor changes from the original request. The Clagett motion seems an effort to save most aspects of the settlement proposal while giving House members a role in altering the proposal. However, this motion was defeated "by a large majority. . ." With it died the effort on behalf of the Irish settlement in the American West.³⁷

Conclusion

The movement on behalf of an Irish immigrant settlement in the Illinois Territory ended 23 months after Thomas O'Connor published his exhortation in *The Shamrock*. Intended to alleviate problems facing the new immigrants crowding into American cities, the movement was well-coordinated and came close to success. Inspired in part by the same republican ideals that lay behind the United Irish uprising in 1798, Irish American leaders launched one of the first efforts in the United States to address urban problems resulting from immigration, poverty, and unemployment. It may also have been the last effort to obtain public land from the Federal Government on behalf of a single immigrant group. In the context of American social history, it was one of many attempts in the nineteenth century to create ideal communal settlements that would establish and maintain environments supportive of the best in human relationships and potential.

One can speculate how the settlement plan might have provided for easing the larger immigrations of the 1830s and 1840s. Instead, those years brought a grave expansion of the very problems addressed in the four petitions sent to Congress in 1818.

Notes

[See "Sources," page 39, for full citation.]

1. The large Illinois Territory had been organized by Congress in 1809. With a small settler population on its southern border and fertile fields, it offered good potential for farming.
2. *Niles Weekly Register*, May 23, 1818:212.
3. Many American communal and utopian efforts in the 1800s were based on religious values. Other emerged from secular, nationalistic goals. The Irish movement falls in this latter category.
4. Hayden, Dolores. *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism*. 1976:15.
5. For description and analysis of the ideals behind the 1798 rising, see Curtin, Nancy. *The United Irishmen: Popular Politics in Ulster and Dublin 1791-1798*. 1994:13. For discussion of manifestations of 1798 Irish republicanism in America, see Walsh, Walter, "Religion, Ethnicity, and History: Clues to the Cultural Construction of Law," 1996: 48-69.
6. The perception of cities as sites of morality and viability inferior to that of the countryside is a longstanding, questionable one (see Williams, Robin. *The Country and the*

City. 1975). Nevertheless, all evidence indicates that Irish and other immigrants to American cities after 1814 increasingly experienced real difficulties.

7. Kelly, Sister Mary Gilbert. *Catholic Immigration Colonization Projects in the United States, 1815-1860*. 1939:8; McMaster, John B. *A History of the People of the United States*. 1916 v.5:388

8. Miller, Kerby A. *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*. 1985:193

9. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957*. 1960:116

10. Miller, 1985:169-93

11. Kelly, 1939:8; Hansen, Marcus Lee. *The Atlantic Migration 1607-1860*. 1941:7

12. Guillet, Edwin. *The Great Migration: The Atlantic Crossing by Sailing-ship Since 1770*. 1937:2; Miller, 1985:172

13. O Tuathaigh, Gearoid. *Ireland Before the Famine*. 1972: 135

14. Blessing, P.J., "Irish Immigration to the United States, 1800-1920: An Overview," 1985:15; Kenny, Kevin. "Religion and Immigration: The Irish Community in New York City, 1815-1840." 1989:6

15. Curtin, 1988:61; Miller, 1985: 172-89).

16. Miller, 1985:172. As well as descriptions of opportunities in America sent privately, Irish newspapers of the period frequently publicized conditions there. From 1816 to 1818, the *Dublin Evening Post* reported on the U.S. in highly favorable terms.

17. Hansen, 1941:8

18. Kelly, 1939:9

19. Niles, May 23, 1818:21n

20. Niles, May 23, 1818:21n

21. *Dublin Evening Post*, January 8, 1818:3

22. Niles, 1818:213

23. Kelly, 1939:9

24. The United Irishmen, or United Irish Society, was an important factor in the movement for a communal settlement. The Society, a symbol for many of Irish political and religious unity, began in 1791 as a reform group influenced by the American and French republicanism and sought a republican state in Ireland. By 1798, the group had changed to a more militant antimonarchist, anti-English organization

(Curtin, 1994:38-89; Elliott, 1982:xiii). After its failed revolutionary activities in 1798, many of the leaders were forced into exile and settled in the United States where their past activities were a source of prestige and influence among the Irish in America. Ties to the Society assisted in the communal settlement effort of 1817-1818.

25. Potter, George. *To the Golden Door: The Story of the Irish in Ireland and America*. 1960:214-221; Wittke, Carl. *The Irish in America*. 1956:76-77

26. Potter, 1960:208209; Wittke, 1956:77

27. Walsh 1928:307

28. Miller, 1985:1861-88; see also Potter, 1960:222; Green, 1980:99

29. In comments reported in the *New York Evening Post* (Nov.27, 1817) and later cited in the *Dublin Evening Post* (Jan.8, 1818:3), Thomas Addis Emmet referred to the French and Swiss applications as precedents for the Irish petition. The French petition had secured 92,000 acres at \$2.00 per acre, payable to the Federal Government in fourteen years and free of interest (Niles, Aug.8, 1818:393).

30. Copies of the petitions were printed in *Niles' Weekly Register*, May 23, 1818:211-15, as well as in Congressional records. Letters giving greater particulars on the settlement are in *Niles' Weekly Register*, May 30, 1818:229-35.

31. Niles, May 23, 1818:212

32. On January 6, 1818 Thomas Addis Emmet wrote a letter of introduction for John Chambers to Taylor. The letter suggests that Taylor may have already known of the settlement movement, and requests that Taylor "...give the application every support in your power" (Emmet, Thomas Addis. Letter to John W. Taylor, January 6, 1818).

33. Niles, May 30, 1818:232

34. Niles, May 23, 1818:235

35. Whether these reports provide accurate reasons is unknown. Interestingly, later in 1818, Niles' Weekly Reader reports that abusive land speculation by persons associated with the French settlement of 1817 caused rejection of the Irish petition (Niles, Aug.8, 1818:393). Still later, a 1819 letter by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams states what may have been a growing sentiment by 1818 that immigrants should receive equality in the United States, but not special privilege (Niles, April 29, 1820:157).

36. Niles, Mar. 7, 1818: p.27

37. *Annals*, Dec. 16, 1818:411

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