

Calvary Comes to Queens: The Emergence of Long Island City

by Richard F. Teevan

Long Island City came into existence directly as a result of the "The Rural Cemetery Act," passed in 1847 by the New York State Legislature. The act authorized the "corporate ownership" of cemeteries outside of churchyards and private property. Gravesites in the churchyard of old St. Patrick's Cathedral on Mott Street and its 11th Street annex were full to capacity. Archbishop Hughes had plans to build a cathedral on the site originally intended as the auxiliary cemetery at 50th Street and Fifth Avenue. Cheap swampy farmland was available just across the East River, along Newtown Creek in Queens. And with the population of Manhattan and Brooklyn growing by leaps and bounds, and a correspondingly large number of people dying, there was a crying need for additional burial grounds. That need built Calvary Cemetery, and Calvary Cemetery, strange to say, built Long Island City.

That is not to say that the entire county of Queens was built by Calvary Cemetery. Queens long predates Calvary (going back to 1683) and in fact had a population more than three times that of neighboring Brooklyn in the first Federal Census in 1790! This essay, however, will not tackle the entire history of Queens, but only one small part of it. By introducing the reader to Long Island City, as a case study of Irish settlement patterns in Queens, one can better understand how, when, and where Irish New Yorkers came to settle outside the teeming Irish neighborhoods

Richard F. Teevan is a long-time Roundtable member who has relatives buried in Calvary Cemetery as far back as 1851 and cousins settled in Long Island City as recently as the 1980s.

Calvary Cemetery as it looked in 1855. The broad road at right was the Newtown and Bushwick Turnpike.

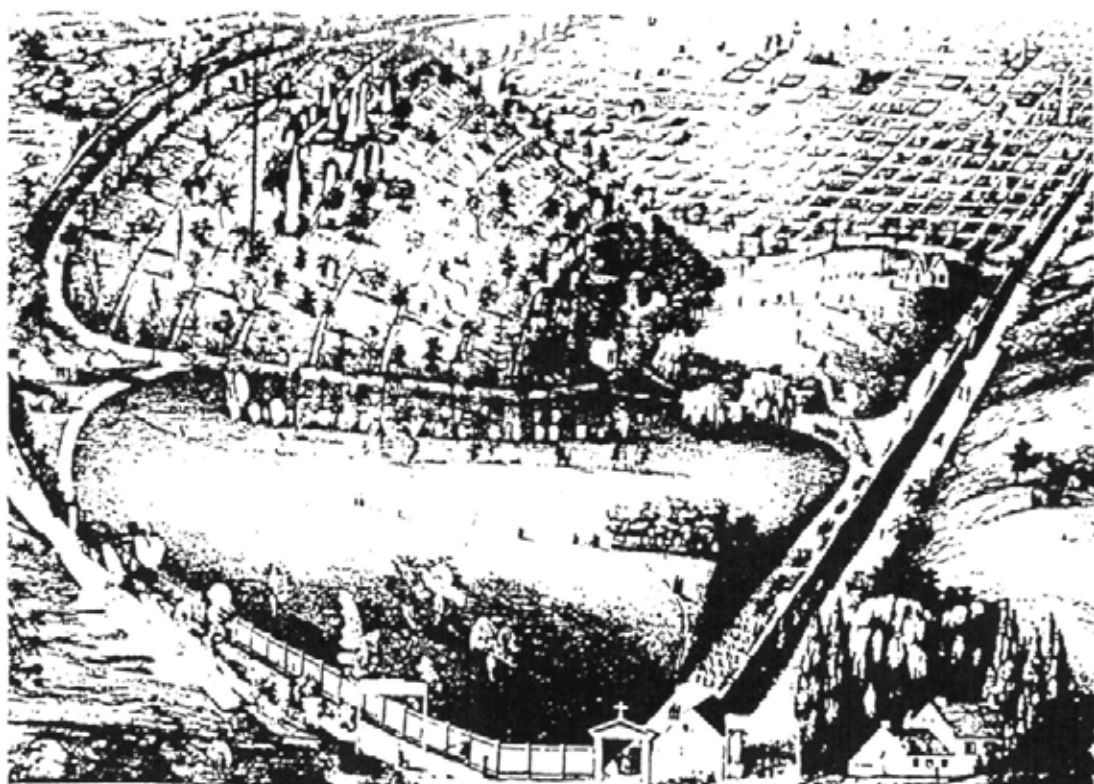
The Queensborough Public Library

of Manhattan where newly arrived immigrants first made their homes.

Nineteenth century maps show four pre-existing communities within the boundaries of modern-day Long Island City: Newtown, Hunter's Point, Blissville, and Ravenswood. At the time of the 1850 Federal Census, however, these early settlements had very few inhabitants. Most Queens residents lived a little farther north, in and around Astoria (until 1835 known as Hallett's Cove) which today forms the northern border of Long Island City. Some of the Irish immigrants among these Astoria residents found work at A & E Carpet Factory. Others worked as farmhands or servants at the homes of Dutch and British families.

Irish families living in the outskirts of Astoria brought "St. John's Parish" into being in July 1841. A lot was secured at Towbridge Street (26th Avenue—dubbed "Shamrock Avenue" by locals) and Van Alst Avenue (21st Street—dubbed "Emerald Street"). The lot was purchased from John Shea, a New York teacher, and his wife Mary Ann. On the site, Father James Curran erected a frame church and celebrated Mass in September 1841, for a growing parish of 2,000 persons.

The congregation raised \$819.25 to build the church, but the collection at the first Mass amounted to only \$2.31.



In ensuing years the parish was renamed "Our Lady of Mt. Carmel" and it persevered. Among other parish activities parishioners organized a total abstinence society and supported the cause of Irish Repeal (to repeal the Act of Union between England, Ireland, and Scotland—rammed down Ireland's throat in the year 1800). Parishioners' enduring links to Ireland were evidenced in their gravemarkers. Surveying the Mt. Carmel Cemetery at 26th Avenue and 21st Street, Finula Bourke noted in a 1986 journal article, "Not one of the deceased were identified from a national state, but rather by counties."

While Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Parish was establishing itself in the 1840s, nothing but farming was taking place in the geographical area that was to become Long Island City. However, the 1847 Rural Cemetery Act transformed everything. The Trustees of St. Patrick's Cathedral (Mott Street) purchased the Alsop Farm on the north bank of Newtown Creek for \$16 an acre even before the State Legislature passed the act. One Esther Ennis had the dubious honor of being the first person buried on the site in 1848, and a flood of coffins soon followed.



Eight trolley lines, two ferries, and the L.I.R.R. converged near Long Island City's Borden Avenue and 34th Street terminal (1905). The Queensborough Public Library

In order to transport mourners and Sunday visitors to the gravesites of loved ones, the Trustees of St. Patrick's Cathedral initiated a ferry service from 23rd Street, Manhattan, up Newtown Creek, to the "Penny Bridge," connecting Queens and Brooklyn. (A local turnpike company charged pedestrians a penny to cross.) The sole purpose of the bridge, initially, was to accommodate persons heading for Calvary Cemetery. More coffins poured in from Manhattan, more mourners trekked out to pay their respects, and more (and larger) ferry boats were brought into service to accommodate them. Ferryboats began disembarking passengers at both the Penny Bridge and Greenpoint Avenue in Brooklyn (and continued to do so for the next 73 years).

Steam-powered railroads followed. The Long Island Railroad established a passenger stop at the Penny Bridge

for Calvary Cemetery visitors. Scots-Irishman A.T. Stewart, the most successful department store entrepreneur of his day, developed the Central Railroad of Long Island, which also made stops at the Penny Bridge. And the construction of these various transportation links from Manhattan to Calvary Cemetery had the predictable result of attracting support industries, oil refineries, workmen's lunch counters, saloons, housing developments, and street railroads. Hundreds of Irish laborers found employment and the populations of the neighborhoods surrounding Calvary Cemetery soared.

St. Mary's Parish is a case in point. An outgrowth of St. Anthony's Parish, just across the Newtown Creek in Brooklyn, St. Mary's came into being in 1868. Fr. John Crimmins, a popular and influential figure in Queens politics, said its first Mass. St. Mary's parishioners were among the lobbyists most vocal in support of a legislative act that would create a new municipality, "Long Island City." The act was signed into law in 1870 and Long Island City became a legal entity.

Long Island City remained an independent municipality only 28 years. In 1898 it was incorporated into New York City. But it made its mark on history, after a fashion, in the swaggering personality of one of its mayors, Patrick J. Gleason, who served in office from 1887 to 1892 and from 1895 until 1898. Gleason's heroics are recounted in the accompanying sidebar by reporter Thomas Collins.

"Paddy" Gleason was born in Ireland (like his predecessor in office, John Quinn). He made his fortune in the distillery business and in 1871 plowed his accumulated capital into the Long Island City and Calvary Rail Road. The latter took passengers from the Long Island Railroad ferry to the Greenpoint Avenue entrance to Calvary Cemetery.

Grafting politicians were the order of the day in America's cities in the 1880s and 1890s and patronage and municipal railroad franchises were two of the era's most lucrative cash cows. The historical record is unclear whether Paddy Gleason took ill-gotten gains from the railroads servicing Long Island City, but clearly Gleason went toe-to-toe with many of them. A case in point was the time Gleason blocked construction of the Steinway railroad tunnel beneath the East River (which is still in use today) until the underwriters promised Gleason "[his] people [would] receive the work." Alderman James Cominsky was promptly named foreman on the job.

Historian John Ridge notes that there were two A.O.H. divisions in Long Island City in 1877, and four by 1904. In addition to St. Mary's, eight other parishes established themselves in Long Island City: St. Raphael (1867), St. Patrick (Dutch Kills, 1869), St. Rita (a division of St. Patrick, 1894), Most Precious Blood (1922), Immaculate Conception (Ravenswood, 1924), St. Francis of Assisi

(Ravenswood), Queen of Angels (Sunnyside), and St. Margaret Mary.

Celtic Park, a sports arena featuring Irish sporting events, was built in 1897 on a site straddling four subdivisions of Calvary Cemetery. The arena closed its doors in 1919 and the site, near modern-day Bliss Avenue, is now

occupied by Celtic Park Apartments. But the community all around Calvary Cemetery remained heavily Irish from the 1920s through the 1940s and the 1980s saw a resurgence of Irish immigrants and industries settling in the neighborhood.

The Lord Mayor of Long Island City PADDY GLEASON

The most colorful of Long Island City's mayors was Patrick Jerome "Paddy" Gleason. Paddy Gleason served as Long Island City's chief executive from 1886 to 1892 and from 1895 until the incorporation of his township into Greater New York City in 1898.

The 6'3" Irishman had a reputation to match his expansive girth and ham-like hands and toes. With an ax he smashed railroad fences when Austin Corbin's men (from the Long Island Railroad) sought to fence in a street. That legendary wielding of the ax, to the cheers of the Irish immigrants who watched from their tenement windows, earned Paddy Gleason the nickname "Battle Ax" and symbolized his reputation for doing battle with the large corporations which were then fast gobbling up Long Island City for industry.

Among Paddy Gleason's other nemeses were Standard Oil, which sought to build on the banks of Newtown Creek; the Long Island Railroad, which demanded land for expansion; and interestingly Calvary Cemetery Corporation, which was believed to be a profit-hungry real estate holding company. Gleason also angered owners of fat-rendering plants on Newtown Creek. For years the Health Department had tried to close down the plants as acrid polluters of the air and water, but it took Gleason just 24 hours after his election to send police into the plants and close them down.

A son of Erin and educated to the ways of the world on the New York streets, Gleason made his fortune in and out of office. While mayor, he owned Long Island City's only fire engine and was known to have sold his own land to the town for unknown quantities of the taxpayer's dollars.

The exact records of those transactions are missing, taken by Gleason himself from City Hall files when he was literally carried out of office following a defeat in the 1892 election. The election was very close and Gleason was actually declared the winner by his own appointee, a city clerk. But state courts judged otherwise and ordered cops into City Hall where they forcibly carried out the huge politician to the jeers of Irish supporters milling about on City Hall steps.



New York Recorder, January 2, 1893

Queens Local History Collection
LaGuardia & Wagner Archives
LaGuardia Community College/CUNY

—Thomas Collins

(excerpted from the *New York Daily News* of April 13, 1975)

A Calvary Gravedigger's Story

What was it like to work in Calvary Cemetery itself, the graveyard that built Long Island City? Leitrim-born groundskeeper John Joe Hoey boasts his was a marvelous job: "Plenty of fresh air, healthful outdoor labor, and thousands of men under me." To Hoey, Calvary was a welcome "patch of green," in New York City's endless expanse of brick and concrete.

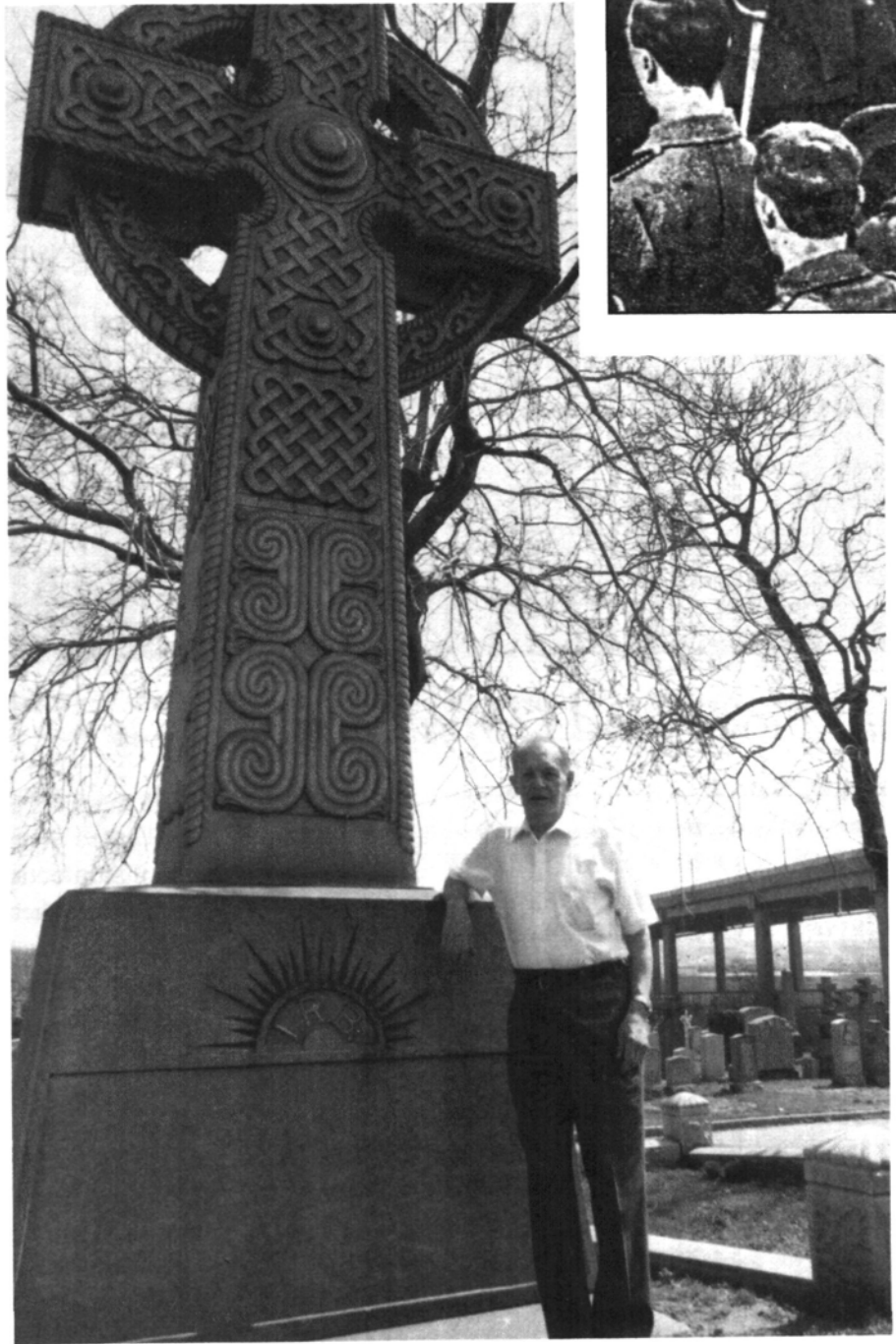
Several years back, Hoey led a very personal historical tour of Calvary Cemetery. Highlights included the grave of Michael Corcoran, Civil War commander of the Fighting 69th, and the mausoleums of Clan-na-Gael leader Judge Cohalan, "Honest John" Kelly, "Boss" Croker, and a who's who of Tammany Sachems. Hoey had tour-goers climb to the oldest part of the cemetery to gaze at the spindly 18th century marble gravestones of the Alsop Family, who originally lived on and farmed the property. He pointed out the receiving vault for Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, which for a few months held the exile's body before being returned to Ireland for the famous burial service in which Padraic Pearse orated: "But the fools! The fools! They have left us our Fenian dead. . . ." In a lighter vein, Hoey recalled the enormous floral wreath in the shape of a tugboat, complete with smokestack, sent by 1950s longshore boss "Tough Tony" Anastasio upon the death of Spike Sullivan, late of the Teamsters Union.

Hoey is an I.R.A. and Clan-na-Gael veteran, who had to leave Ireland in 1951 because his political activities and World War II internment left him blacklisted from work. It was with special pride, therefore, that he showed the way to the two Fenian memorials in Second Calvary. One is inscribed in Irish, with an accompanying legend: "Who fears to speak of '98?" A second, simpler memorial was commissioned by the Irish Republican Brotherhood and dedicated to the soldiers who fell from 1865 to 1877.

Hoey chuckled with pleasure bringing me to his favorite tomb, in Old Calvary—a massive, somber memorial to David Murphy, Balintobnig, Tralee, County Kerry,

1811-1891, surrounded by the graves of family members, and an outsized bronze-faced railing, ironically inscribed: "To outlast the British Empire."

—Joe Doyle



(above) Gravedigger John Joe Hoey at Calvary Cemetery's Fenian memorial
(top right inset) Pearse orating at O'Donovan Rossa's grave, Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin

photo:
Kathleen
O'Halloran