

Famine Relief from Brooklyn

BY HARVEY STRUM

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The Great Famine in Ireland led to philanthropic efforts by Irish-Americans and non-Irish Americans to alleviate the suffering by raising money to ship food to Ireland. Word of the famine conditions in Ireland, Scotland and the European continent appeared in the American press during the winter of 1846–47, and Americans organized relief efforts that culminated in shipments of food that left America for Ireland and Scotland in the spring and summer of 1847. One of the vessels carrying food to Ireland, the *Anna Maria*, became known as the "Brooklyn Ship" because it carried food provided by donations raised by the citizens of Brooklyn between February and May 1847. ¹ [Editor's Note: *Brooklyn was an independent city at the time, and Famine refugees would swell its Irish-born population to 56,753 by 1855.*]

Beginning in December 1846 Brooklynites, including Henry A. Lees, editor of the *Brooklyn Advertiser*, contributed to famine relief, but a concerted effort to encourage donations did not take place until early February 1847, when a second

Brooklyn newspaper, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, actively solicited contributions. The *Eagle* encouraged its readers to send food or money to Ireland. It pleaded "Give Now. Wait not. Pestilence and ashy-faced starvation have their iron grip on hundreds of thousands of our fellow creatures." ²

Prompted by recent reports of starvation in Ireland brought to America by the steamer *Hibernia*, a group of prominent Brooklynites called for public meeting to organize a Brooklyn Irish Relief Committee. Residents of the City met at Hall's Exchange, the same site as the December fundraiser, to discuss the situation in Ireland and concluded "that a state of famine there exists unexampled in modern times." Former Brooklyn mayor Henry C. Murphy chaired the meeting. Murphy and other leading citizens called on their fellow Brooklynites to contribute to alleviate the suffering in Ireland. ³

Over the next three weeks several public meetings were held to heighten awareness of the issue and stimulate contributions. Citizens attended a meeting at the Brooklyn Institute on February 16th and the Committee of Thirteen led by Henry C. Murphy organized another meeting on February 26th at the Brooklyn Institute. The *Eagle* called upon fellow Brooklynites to attend and support "the effort to aid this most holy object." ⁴ Two hundred and fifty people showed up at the Brooklyn Institute. Six former mayors of Brooklyn and the incumbent, Francis B. Stryker, attended and seven hundred dollars were contributed. Most of the citizens also signed a petition to Congress asking the federal government to loan vessels to transport the food to Ireland. This meeting also called upon clergy in every church in Brooklyn and Long Island to solicit contributions. A committee of correspondence was established to contact other villages and towns on Long Island to raise funds for Irish Relief. Mayor Stryker was elected Treasurer of the Executive Committee to collect donations in money, clothing and



Illustration: An Irish woman begging for alms in Clonakilty, County Cork in February 1847. Originally published in the Illustrated London News, images such as this one were often picked up by newspapers like the New York Herald. They helped spur local famine relief efforts.

provisions. The women of Brooklyn were encouraged to take an active role in fundraising activities.⁵

Brooklyn women had already organized to help the relief work. As one New York newspaper, the *Sun*, observed, “we are glad to see the energy of our Brooklyn ladies....It is worthy of them, and exacts our admiration.”⁶ In late February a group of women led by Anna M. Heffernan organized the Ladies’ Irish Relief Association of Brooklyn, attracting prominent non-Irish American women to the cause. They held regular meetings from February through May and posted advertisements in the Brooklyn and New York press to solicit donations. A public tea party and festival was scheduled on March 10th and 11th at the Lyceum and tickets were sold for twenty-five cents. The association was unique in Brooklyn because relief efforts were usually dominated there by men at that time. This area of the public sphere was opened to women in 1847 as a socially acceptable means for women to demonstrate their organizational skills through public philanthropy in a cause that had been blessed by respectable Americans from the two major political parties, Whig and Democratic. In April author Maria Edgeworth, who corresponded with a New York City friend Harriet Cruger, sent a letter from Ireland addressed “To the Ladies of America, more particularly to the ladies of New York,” requesting that the women of America send food and seeds to Ireland. Her letter was widely distributed in the American press and gave a further blessing to women working for Irish relief.⁷

Roman Catholic churches in Brooklyn and Williamsburgh raised collections in late February for famine relief. For example, at St. Paul’s Church in Brooklyn over \$1,000 was contributed and St. Mary’s Church in Williamsburgh raised \$230. Published reports suggest that most of the funds raised in church collections in Brooklyn and Williamsburgh came from Irish Catholics. This is not surprising especially since Archbishop John Hughes endorsed the relief effort and spoke in Brooklyn on its behalf. Smaller amounts were raised by other denominations, such as the Free Congregational Church, the First Baptist Church, and the North and South Dutch Churches of Gowanus. The largest contribution

raised in a Protestant Church came from the Unitarian Church of the Savior where congregants contributed over \$500.⁸

Contributions came in from a variety of sources besides church contributions and the relief committees’ appeals. For example, workers at the Brooklyn Navy Yard combined their day’s pay to donate \$650. As a New Orleans newspaper concluded: “This is the poor man’s mite.” Various groups held benefits and donated the funds for relief. The Terpsichoure Association, for example, held a ball to aid Irish relief in March.⁹

In neighboring Williamsburgh residents held a meeting in February and appealed to Washington to send aid to Ireland. Locally, a Committee of Forty was selected to divide up the village into districts for fundraising. The office of the Williamsburgh Insurance Company was designated as the site where donations could be sent, and five committee members were elected to oversee the fundraising.¹⁰

Although the Brooklyn committee’s appeal was extended to the end of Long Island, the surviving evidence suggests that most of the funds and most of the activity came from both Irish and non-Irish residents of Brooklyn and Williamsburgh. Various parts of Long Island did contribute. In Sag Harbor donations came primarily from Irish-Americans who sent small amounts, 50 cents or one dollar, for famine relief such as Catharine McGurk and Mary Ryan respectively. Contributions from Long Island came from Irish-Americans, Protestant churches, and non-partisan voluntary committees organized for famine relief. The Christ Church in Syosset collected \$64, the Chapel of St. Paul’s College, near Flushing raised \$60, and the Rockpoint Baptist Church donated \$14. Citizens’ committees operated in Hicksville, Riverhead, Glen Cove, Huntington and L’Orient, and they donated money, rye, corn and wheat flour. These contributions appear to be relatively small compared to the thousands of dollars raised in Brooklyn. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that the starvation in Ireland prompted non-Irish to join in what became the great American philanthropic effort of 1847.¹¹

Simultaneously with the raising of funds for Ireland, a smaller scale effort was made to solicit donations for Scotland where the potato blight had also hit its Western Highlands and Islands

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(although the devastation was considerably less than in Ireland). Often, in the mind of many Americans in the winter of 1846–47 and spring of 1847, famine relief efforts for Ireland and Scotland merged. The *Eagle* called upon Brooklynites to contribute to the collections that “are being made for the relief of the poor Highlanders, whose food has been destroyed by the same plague that has visited Ireland.” Some of the funds for Scottish relief went through the Brooklyn, Williamsburgh and New York City

Ladies’ Relief Association. The Brooklyn Insurance Company donated an office for the relief committee to accept donations. Four of the members of the Ladies’ Relief Association also used their homes as places where donations could be left. The funds were then sent to the New York City General Relief Committee which assumed responsibility for using the donations to buy provisions and arrange for their shipment to Ireland and Scotland. Most of the arrangements for the distribution of provisions on the other side of the Atlantic were made through the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends in Dublin. Food for Scotland went to the Glasgow Relief Committee and the Highland Destitution Committee.

Individuals who wanted to send money or food to Ireland could avoid going through the Brooklyn committees by using two private firms. One, Harnden and Company, based on Wall Street in New York City, offered to remit money “any sum—small or great—to Ireland free of discount for their trouble,” through its agents in Liverpool and Ireland. Another firm, based on Fulton Street, R.J. Todd, volunteered to collect provisions and clothing by cart from homes in Brooklyn, Williamsburgh and Flatbush “without any expense of cartage, storage or shipping till a vessel can be got to carry the same to Ireland.” Unfortunately, no records survive of how many Brooklynites opted to use these private channels to send aid to Ireland rather than going through the Brooklyn Irish Relief Committee or the Ladies’ Relief Association.¹⁴

The first known load of supplies sent by Brooklynites went on the bark *Victor*, chartered by the New York City committee, which left New York in early March 1847 for Dublin. Included in its cargo of provisions were one hundred and twenty barrels of meal bought from donations by the workmen in the Brooklyn Navy Yard and one hundred and fifteen barrels of meal bought from donations that came from the citizens of Williamsburgh. In May most of the provisions sent by Brooklynites went aboard two vessels, the *Anna Maria* and the *Patrick Henry*. The *Anna Maria* carried 1,700 barrels of cornmeal to Limerick.¹⁵ The *Patrick Henry* sailed to Liverpool carrying 78 bushels of corn, 300 barrels of biscuit, 18

relief committee at 54 Wall street, up stairs.

Relief for Ireland.

☐ The charitable and humane wishing to contribute relief for the famishing Peasantry of Ireland, either in clothing or provisions, are respectively informed that the undersigned will cheerfully and thankfully receive such contributions; and if made up in shopping packages, marked RELIEF FOR IRELAND, will send his cart for such packages in any part of Brooklyn, Williamsburgh or Flatbush, without any expense of cartage, storage or shipping, till a vessel can be got to carry the same to Ireland. Orders left with the undersigned will receive all due and prompt attention.

R. J. TODD, 83 Fulton street.

Democratic County Convention.

Notice is hereby given that an adjourned meeting of the De

Irish relief committees and funds raised from Scottish Americans were sent through the local St. Andrew’s Society.¹² Not every Irish-American was thrilled that some of the funds raised by the Brooklyn Relief Committee would end up feeding the Scots as well as the Irish. An unknown Irish-American wrote to the *Eagle* suggesting that a separate fund be raised by “our wealthy adopted citizens from the land o’cakes” for Scottish relief. He wanted “every dollar’s worth of provisions purchased” from the Irish Relief Committee’s donations to “be sent to the legitimate objects, the peasantry of Erin’s Green Isle.” Despite his objections, part of the funds collected by the Brooklyn Irish Relief Committee went to feed the starving in Scotland as well as Ireland.¹³

Funds raised in Brooklyn, Williamsburgh and the rest of Long Island were collected by the Brooklyn Irish Relief Committee and the

Advertisement:
R.J. Todd’s appeal
published in the
Brooklyn Eagle on
February 18, 1847.

bushels of rye, wheat and beans and two cases of clothing from Brooklynites. "On behalf of the citizens of Brooklyn, we have shipped to your address, by the *Patrick Henry*, for distribution to the famishing poor," wrote the Executive Committee of the Brooklyn Irish Relief Committee, directing that provisions be distributed in Newry in hope that "our mite may arrive in time to alleviate the miseries of a few of the many sufferers of your devoted countrymen." Smaller amounts of supplies arrived in Dublin aboard the *Malabar* from Irish Americans in Sag Harbor, and from the congregation of St. Ann's Episcopal Church in Brooklyn aboard the *Macedonian* destined for Cork. Later in the year a final shipment of provisions arrived in Liverpool aboard the *Europe* from the citizens of Williamsburgh, Hicksville and Glen Cove.¹⁶

One of the relief ships, the *Macedonian*, created a great deal of controversy in Brooklyn and New York City, and as a result most of the provisions sent in May went aboard the *Anna Maria* and *Patrick Henry* instead. In February a debate developed in Congress over whether the United States should contribute to famine relief. While Whigs supported a Congressional appropriation, President James K. Polk and most of his fellow Democrats in Congress opposed government aid and killed the proposal. Instead, Congress authorized the use of

two naval vessels, the *Macedonian* and *Jamestown* to transport foodstuffs to Ireland by the relief committees of New York and Boston, respectively. Questions arose in New York and Brooklyn over whether the *Macedonian* was a captured prize from the War of 1812 (which it was not), and who would pay the shipping costs. Despite efforts by George DeKay, the commander of the *Macedonian*, to defend his position and encourage citizens to ship food aboard his vessel for Ireland and Scotland, he failed to persuade the leaders of the New York City and Brooklyn relief committees. In the end, while some aid like that from Brooklyn's St. Ann's was carried aboard the *Macedonian*, the warship had to go to Boston to find a full cargo of relief supplies. Instead, the local committees in Brooklyn and New York City chartered other vessels, like the *Patrick Henry* and *Anna Maria* to carry foodstuffs to Ireland, because they believed these ships would provide quicker and cheaper transportation.¹⁷

While the people of Brooklyn, Williamsburgh and Long Island raised funds for Ireland, another controversy arose over the longer term consequences of famine refugees emigrating to New York. Apparently, to avoid New York City regulations that affected all arriving immigrants, some ship captains were landing immigrants on the Brooklyn shore instead. The

Eagle complained in April 1847 that "these immigrants are from Ireland, and of the poorer classes" in need of public assistance. Brooklyn city authorities and the *Eagle* were concerned about additional municipal expenses created by Irish immigrants disembarking in Brooklyn. Ironically, while Brooklynites were quite willing to join in the philanthropic enterprise of providing foodstuffs to the starving in Ireland and Scotland,

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American
philanthropic
effort of
1847.”

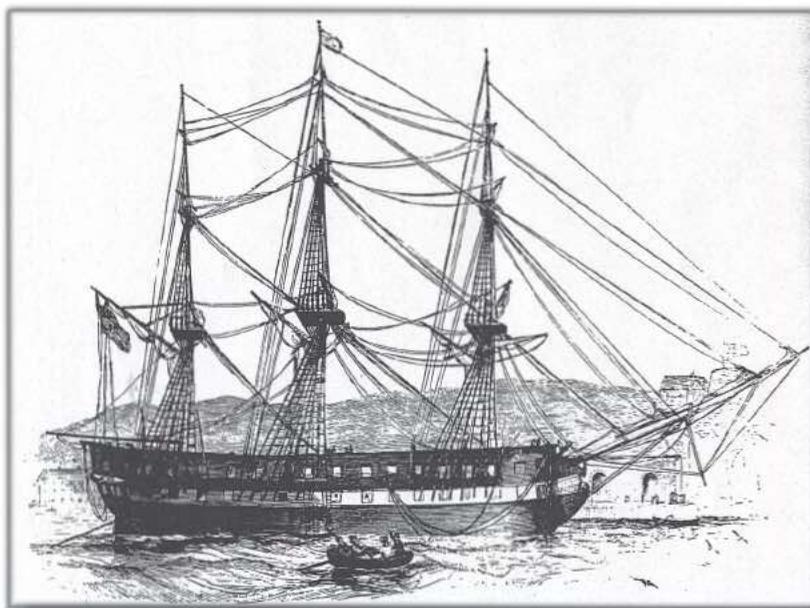


Illustration: The U.S.S. Macedonian at Haulbowline in Cobh harbor, County Cork on 16 July 1847. London Illustrated News, 7 August 1847. Courtesy of Harvey Strum.

there was far less enthusiasm for refugees who would soon alter the population in Brooklyn, New York City, and upstate cities like Albany and Troy. By the end of the 1850s they would all have large Irish immigrant populations.¹⁸ In fact, by 1860 Brooklyn had the third largest Irish population of any city in the United States.

In the winter of 1846–47 and spring of 1847 the famine in Ireland caught the public's imagination and Americans—both Irish Americans and non-Irish—rallied to the cause of the starving in Ireland. Roman Catholic churches raised contributions among poor Irish immigrants and Protestant congregations joined in the public philanthropy. Citizens' committees in Brooklyn, Williamsburgh and elsewhere on Long Island were organized and solicited funds for famine relief. In Brooklyn, in particular, women took an active role by creating the Ladies' Relief Association, one of the few instances in the mid nineteenth century when women were actively encouraged to participate in civic affairs. Prominent citizens from both the Whig and Democratic political parties joined in support of what became an outpouring of American philanthropy for the starving in Ireland and Scotland. The citizens of Brooklyn took the lead in organizing famine relief on Long Island, and in encouraging churches and citizen groups to raise funds from Brooklyn all the way east to Sag Harbor and Riverhead.

Notes

- 1 General Relief Committee. *Aid to Ireland: Report of the General Relief Committee of the City of New York*. (New York: The Committee, 1848), pp. 87, 89, 181.
- 2 *New York Freeman's Journal*, Decemeber 12, 1846; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 5, 1847.
- 3 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 6, 1847.
- 4 *Ibid.*, February 17, 25, 1847.
- 5 *Ibid.*, March 1, 1847.
- 6 *New York Sun*, February 18, 1847.
- 7 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 20, March 10, 12, April 17, 1847; *New York Tribune*, February 22, 1847; Margaret Kelleher, "Philosophic Views, Maria Edgeworth and The Great Famine," *Eire-Ireland* 32:1 (Spring 1997), pp. 50-51.
- 8 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 6, 11, 22, 1847; *New York Freeman's Journal* March 6, 1847.
- 9 *New Orleans Courier*, February 26, 1847; *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 22, 1847; *New York Tribune*, February 22, 1847.
- 10 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 23, 1847. *New York Tribune*, February 22, 1847.
- 11 *New York Freeman's Journal*, February 27, 1847. Surprisingly, the *Sag Harbor Corrector* while detailing the famine in Ireland did not cover local relief efforts, *Sag Harbor Corrector*, January 20- April 14, 1847; *Report of the General Relief Committee of the City of New York*, op.cit., pp. 33, 40, 45, 49, 55.
- 12 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 18, March 8, 10, 12, 15, 25, 1847.
- 13 *Ibid.*, February 19, 1847.
- 14 *Ibid.*, February 5, 18, 1847.
- 15 *New York Herald*, May 14, 15, 1847; *New York Tribune*, May 14, 1847; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 18, 1847; *Report of the General Relief Committee*, op.cit., pp. 87, 89; Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends, Dublin, *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends During the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847* (Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1852), pp. 336-337, 342-343, 345.
- 16 William Harris, et.al. (Brooklyn Irish Relief Committee) to the Central Committee of the Society of Friends, Dublin, May 11, 1847, *Transactions*, op.cit.,p. 242.
- 17 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 11, 12, 30, April 5, 1847; Report of the General Relief Committee, op.cit., pp. 165-175.
- 18 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 17, 1847. For a diatribe against poor immigrants also see *Sag Sarbor Corrector*, February 3, 1847.