

The County Longford Colony in New York —Part 1

BY JOHN T. RIDGE

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County Longford is an inland county situated in the Irish Midlands and borders the provinces of Ulster and Connacht. In 1851 the population of the county was 82,368. With the single exception of County Carlow, it was the least populated county in Ireland for most of the nineteenth century. Of the total population of Ireland (6,552,385), it represented but a tiny 1.26 % of the total, slipping to below 1% by 1926. In area it is the third smallest county with only Carlow and Louth having less area.¹

When one speaks of emigration from Ireland, County Longford is not one of the counties that evoke much of a response. The

more populous counties of the country and those along the less prosperous western seaboard sent the largest number of its sons and daughters abroad. When Longford is compared to these counties, its part in the history of Irish emigration seems small indeed. Between 1851 and 1920 County Longford sent 61,412 emigrants to other places and ranked only twenty-fourth among all the Irish counties in numbers. Counties like Cork, with 545,085 emigrants, Antrim with 284,836, Kerry with 234,716 and Galway with 227,666 far outpaced Longford. Only within the province of Leinster itself—where Longford ranked fifth among the eleven counties—do Longford's numbers take on any significance.²

THE EFFECT AND TRADITION OF EMIGRATION As far as Longford itself was concerned, its emigration had a staggering effect. Between 1851 and 1891 an average of more than 1,000 people left the county, and several years counted more than 2,000 emigrants. The largest record was established in 1852 when 3,453 left, but 1870 with 2,546 and 1851 with 2,532 were also big emigration years.³

The tradition of emigration from Longford started in 1729 when the Presbyterian community at Corbay, organized in part by Colonel Charles Clinton, made a group exodus to New York. The Clinton family left their mark on the young republic contributing both a governor of New York and vice president of the United States. A steady flow of mainly Protestant emigrants followed, but by the 1820s Roman Catholics began to send large numbers of their own to America.⁴

The parish priest of Granard, Reverend Farrell Sheridan, complained in 1835 that economic conditions in the area had deteriorated during the previous decades as a result of the failure of the linen trade, rack rents, reduction in the price of agricultural produce, and the want of

Illustration: Advertisement for annual outing of the County Longford men's association that ran in the Irish Advocate on August 4, 1904. From the John T. Ridge Collection. Courtesy of John Ridge.

John Ridge is a former president of the New York Irish History Roundtable and currently serves as its vice president for local history. He is the author of numerous books on the history of the Irish in New York, including The Flatbush Irish; Sligo in New York; The St. Patrick's Day Parade, and Erin's Sons in America—The Ancient Order of Hibernians.

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employment. Emigrants chose North America overwhelmingly.⁵

Up to and for a time after the Great Hunger there are no statistics available to pinpoint the overall destinations of the Longford emigrants.

A glance at the numerous obituaries, death notices, and missing persons advertisements in Irish-American and Catholic newspapers leads one to the conclusion that many of the newcomers made their way to farms in the Midwest and to cities outside of New York, like New Orleans, Boston, Philadelphia, and Jersey City.

A small number of Longford immigrants appear in Kevin Rich's first volume (1850–1853) on the Emigrant Savings Bank records. Only 42 of the 1,509 entries mention a Longford origin. Most of the Longford immigrants had lived in the City for less than five years, but one depositor was a resident for twenty-six years. Almost all the depositors whose exact place of origin could be deciphered came from the southern half of the county or the Granard

to reflect a shift as immigrants from the northern half of the county become more numerous.⁶

While two of the largest years of Longford emigration occurred in the period of the Great Hunger, conditions did not afterward improve.

The *New York Tablet* reported in 1863 that the conditions of the laboring class were those of extreme poverty, and "this prospect extends to many artisans and once comfortable housekeepers." A few weeks later the same paper reported that "people are leaving the neighborhood of Longford, Edgeworthstown and Granard every week, principally for America."⁷

Two Halls—31st GRAND ANNUAL BALL—Two Bands
— OF THE —
COUNTY LONGFORD MEN'S S. & B. ASS'N
— TO BE HELD AT —
YORKVILLE CASINO
86th Street, Near Third Avenue.
— ON —
SATURDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 8, 1917
Music by Prof. McIntyre's I. V. Band
TICKETS, Admitting Gentleman, Including Wardrobe, 50 CENTS
LADIES 25 CENTS.

— OFFICERS —
B. M. Sheridan, President; Patrick McNally, Vice-President; John Masterson, Financial Secretary; P. J. Quinn, Recording Secretary; Matt Farrell, Treasurer; Francis Nannery, Sergeant-at-Arms; Dr. John Lennon, Physician.

— TRUSTEES —
Thomas Mullen, Thomas Manning, James Sheridan.

— ARRANGEMENT COMMITTEE —
John Christie, Chairman; M. McDermott, Secretary; John Quinn, Daniel Sheeran, B. Brady, Thomas Doyle, Patrick Kiernan, Frank Quinn, Michael McCabe, James Lennon, B. Corrigan, James Kenny, J. Duke, Thomas Kelly, Michael McWeeney, Michael Keilly.

A COLONY IN BROOKLYN

Even in the 1840s there is some evidence of a developing Longford colony in Brooklyn, where many of the immigrants eventually relocated. A Brooklyn branch of the United Irish Repeal Association, an organization dedicated to the repeal of the union between Britain and Ireland, was organized in 1843. In the next year many donors indicated a Longford origin along with their contribution of one or two dollars. Longford far outnumbered any other county, and there was one particularly large group of Longford donors located in Brooklyn's Fourth Ward near the Navy Yard.⁸

From its inception Brooklyn's largest daily, the *Brooklyn Eagle*, carried many death notices of Longford-born people. In the period between 1865 and 1880 alone there were 203 notices which indicated an exact place of origin in Longford, and 39.3% of these came from just three small Longford parishes—Legan, Ardagh, and Carrickedmond. All three parishes were close to one another and located southeast of Longford town. Although almost all the Longford parishes were represented, the southern half of the county was predominant. Only a quarter of the notices

Illustrations:

Above—Ad for the County Longford association's thirty-first annual ball appearing in the *Gaelic American* for December 6, 1917.

From the John T. Ridge Collection.

Right—A rare photograph of members at the Longford Excursion in 1904. This is the earliest surviving photo of members in New York City. From the John T. Ridge Collection.



area where landlord tenant disputes had been especially bitter. Only a handful came from the poorer northern half of the county, but the Emigrant Bank records within a few years seem

came from the parishes of the populous and poorer northern half of the county.⁹

The residences of the Longford immigrants were to be found in Irish neighborhoods all over Brooklyn, but there were three main areas of concentration. The bulk of the Longford people surrounded the Navy Yard from the waterfront on

its western side, comprising Brooklyn's old Irishtown, and stretched south and then east in the direction of St. Patrick's Parish on Kent Avenue. It appears likely that many found employment as laborers in the Navy Yard itself.

Another concentration was located in what was then called South Brooklyn (Cobble Hill to Red Hook). The third settlement was apparently a developing community on the edge of the settled portion of the city south of Atlantic Avenue, east of Flatbush Avenue and west of Washington Avenue and north of Prospect Park. After 1880 death notices mention this third area much more frequently. Death notices often included parish names like St. James, St. Anne's, Our Lady of Mercy, St. Agnes, St. Peter's, and St. Joseph's. Several streets are each cited at least five times in death notices, like Tillary (11), Hudson (11), Navy (7), York (5), and Warren (5).¹⁰

In the late Joseph M. Silinonte's book on the Irish dead in Brooklyn's main Roman Catholic cemetery, Holy Cross, the largest number of interments came from Longford—256. This constituted an incredible 12% of the total and far exceeded the numbers from large counties like Cork and Kerry. A county adjacent to Longford, County Westmeath, also had (with 139) a high number of burials. These numbers suggest a high regional emigration from the two counties and especially the part of the Longford closest to Westmeath.¹¹

There is no question that an extraordinarily large number of immigrants from Longford settled in Brooklyn—and in such a concentration as to surpass any other of Ireland's counties. In a compilation of more than 30,000 immigrants

arriving in 1882, the pattern of Longford preference for New York is clearly evident. Some 536 Longford immigrants were recorded over the course of fifty-two weeks by the *Irish Nation* newspaper. This record is probably the only surviving information as recorded by the New York State officials who manned Castle Garden

before Ellis Island replaced it in 1893. It is a unique record because it shows not only the county of origin in Ireland, but also the state of destination in the United States. While only 29% of Mayo immi-

grants were headed for New York, the percentage of Longford arrivals was 72%, the highest of any county. Longford's concentrated flow to the city made its presence much more notable than if it had been dispersed more evenly across the country. A relatively high number of immigrants and a heavy concentration to New York made a county with barely 1% of Ireland's population much more significant in the City's Irish community.¹²

Longford's impact is evident in the reminiscence by an old Irish-born resident of Brooklyn, Biddy Gilroy, in 1891. She recalled that fifty years before her rough-and-tumble neighborhood in the Eleventh Ward, just to the south of the Navy Yard, was a battleground between her Connacht neighbors and the Longford men. Significantly, she recalled it was not just one county waged against another, but an entire province, Connacht, engaged in a faction fight with just a single county. According to a report in the *Brooklyn Eagle*:

The inborn ill feeling between the natives of Connaught [sic] and County Longford living in Brooklyn was very pronounced a half century ago and precipitated many bloody fights. Mrs. Gilroy was very proud of the fact that she was born in Connaught. In common with her race she



Illustration: County Longford men and women in uniform before marching in the St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York in 1940. From the John T. Ridge Collection. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

*was ever ready for a personal encounter with a native of County Longford. The latter were known as 'long tails.' She alleged to have been frequently arrested for her participation in brawls growing out of her hatred for her 'long tail' neighbors. She carried her propensities in this respect so far that she became famous the city over.*¹³

Longford people were soon, however, to make the climb up the proverbial ladder in a far more peaceful and significant manner.

Notes

- 1 Vaughan, W. E. and Fitzpatrick, A. J., eds., *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821–1971*, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 1978, p. 5-16.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 269–298.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 281–283.
- 4 Gillespie, Raymond and Moran, Gerard, eds., Liam Kennedy, Kerby A. Miller and Mark Graham, "Protestants, Economy and Society 1660–1926," in *Longford: Essays in County History*, The Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1991, p.38.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 43.
- 6 Rich, Kevin J., *Irish Immigrants of the Emigrant Industrial Savings Bank, 1850–1853, Volume I*, Broadway-Manhattan Company, New York, 2000, p. XI.
- 7 *New York Tablet*, May 2 and June 20, 1863.
- 8 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 2 and December 11, 1843 and March 16, 1843.
- 9 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1865–1880.
- 10 Only occasionally a church is mentioned in the death notices since funeral services were not always held at a church at this time.
- 11 Silinonte, Joseph M., *Tombstones of the Irish Born: Cemetery of the Holy Cross, Flatbush, Brooklyn*, privately published, Brooklyn, 1992, p.107.
- 12 *Irish Nation*, New York, 1882.
- 13 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 15, 1891.