

Recollections from St. Patrick's Old Cathedral

BY GAVIN REILLY, O.F.M. CAP.

I thought it would be a nostalgic and spiritual experience. Early in 2008 the New York Irish Historical Roundtable sent me an e-mail invitation to attend a St. Patrick's Day Mass in Gaelic at St. Patrick's Old Cathedral on Mott and Prince Streets in Manhattan. My family had longstanding connections with this church. As a Capuchin-Franciscan priest, I thought I might be able to con-celebrate the Mass and, at the same time, investigate family history and remember family members who had attended the church long ago.

My interest in the church stems from both sides of my family—the Reillys of Westmeath on my father's side and the McCarthys of Cork and Sullivans of Kerry on my mother's side. I've written the story of their immigration in a book which I hope to publish under the title of *Mostly Manhattan Irish*. My twelve Irish ancestors settled in Manhattan between 1828 and 1881, before and during the Castle Garden (1855–1890) entrance period. This background explains my interest in a Mass at St. Patrick's Old Cathedral, which was completed in 1815 and became the seat of the New York diocese.

Before the Mass, I planned to wander the nearby streets in search of the old tenements where my family lived some thirty years before the Irish gave way to other ethnic groups. I had come upon a few addresses in my genealogical investigations.

ON MULBERRY STREET

The first address was 361 Mulberry Street. My great-great-grandfather, Bernard Early, had come to New York City in 1828 from an unknown spot in Ireland. In New York, he met Catherine Carroll, a native of Street, a village in County Westmeath near the better-known Edgeworthstown. Records indicate that Catherine



entered New York City about 1833, perhaps on the ship *Tallahassee* which arrived there August 20, 1833, with her younger brother, Maurice.¹ (A prominent Carroll had died not long before in 1814, the suppressed Jesuit—later elected Archbishop of Baltimore—John Darnell Carroll. His cousin, still alive at Catherine's arrival, Charles Brooke Carroll of Carrollton, was the longest-living signer of the Declaration of Independence. Neither Carroll, however, had any known relationship to Catherine Carroll.)

My first stop was to be 361 Mulberry Street. In 1845, Bernard Early had finally made it into *Doggett's New York City Directory*, from which the Irish had previously been excluded. He was described as a porter, i.e., a horse-and-wagon carter, which was his life-long career. Joseph, the last of his six children, was born at 361 Mulberry Street in 1847. Joseph Early may also have died there, perhaps with burial at the Eleventh Street Cemetery near First Avenue, since he does not appear in the 1850 national census or in any records thereafter. However, the hopes that I had of finding the original building

Photo:

St. Patrick's (now called St. Patrick's Old Cathedral) on Mott and Prince Streets in Manhattan. It was the first Roman Catholic cathedral in New York and was completed in 1815, at time when the city's Irish population was beginning a new period of growth. The Cathedral was the seat of a diocese that included all of New York State and parts of New Jersey. Courtesy of Gavin Reilly.

Father Gavin Reilly lives at the Good Shepherd Annex in the Inwood section of Manhattan and is writing a history of the New York-New England Province of the Capuchin Order, one of the three branches of the Franciscan Order. In Ireland, the Capuchins over the years figured prominently in the Irish struggle for independence. Father Reilly is a member of the New York Irish History Roundtable. ©2008. Published with permission of Gavin Reilly, O.F.M. Cap.

were dashed—a parking garage occupies the site! Perhaps I would have more luck at my next stop.

ON SPRING STREET

I walked down Mulberry Street to the next corner a half block away. Across the street lay 42 Spring Street, where the Earlys lived during the years 1849–1850.² But once again my hopes of finding the original tenement were gone. The building had been razed, and in its place, occupying the entire corner, lay the DeSalvio Playground filled with a multitude of happy children. Emphasizing the enormous ethnic change was a large sign at 45 Spring indicating the presence of Rocky's Italian Restaurant! Even the Italian population thinned out in the 1970s partly because of a rumor that a major thoroughfare was to slice through the neighborhood. A Yuppie element began to fill the gap. History was treating rather harshly this visitor looking for some sign of his Irish antecedents. But there still was hope.

ON PRINCE STREET

My next destination was a duplex building, numbers 23/25 Prince Street, where my great-great grandparents had lived from 1850 to 1867. To arrive at that tenement, I retraced my steps past St. Patrick's Old Cathedral on the corner of Mott and Prince, and found my ancestral dwelling a half-block east of the church on Prince Street. Fortune did not hide this time; the building was still there.

The Earlys occupied No. 23 of the double building for two years (1850–1852) and No. 25 for the next fifteen years (1853–1867)—during census periods of 1850, 1855, and 1860. The family had seven members in 1850: Bernard 42, Catherine 38, John 13, James 10, Ann (Hannah) 9, Bernard and Mary (twins) 6. The decade of these national and state censuses was that following the Famine in Ireland (1845–1851), a period during which immigrants were arriving in New York and looking for a place to live. The census records indicate that the seven-member Early apartment swelled at times to twelve occupants with newly arriving boarders. Intriguing family names suddenly appear: laborer, Thomas Early, and policeman, James Carroll and his wife, Mary.

*Photo:
At 23/25 Prince Street,
just down the block
from St. Patrick's,
the building where
the Earlys lived still
remains. The fam-
ily, which had grown
to seven members,
remained there from
1850 to 1867—at
times taking in relatives
and friends. Courtesy of
Gavin Reilly.*

Later that day, I stopped at the pizza shop next door. The proprietor told me that a woman had bought Nos. 23/25 in 2003 for \$350,000 and had sold the building in 2007 for some millions. Property values had certainly changed from the \$7,000 that the state census



had attached to that brick four-story structure in 1855. Exclusive shops on the ground floor of the building indicated the change: a dress boutique, “Variazione,” displaying draped models under No.23, and a confectionary shop, “Lunettes et Chocolat,” under No.25. The neighboring building to the east maintained something of the original flavor with its canopied windows, black fire escape and original red brick. But Nos. 23/25 no longer had cornices over the windows, and the whole façade had been painted a dull yellow.

A NOTEWORTHY BURIAL

In 1853, the year in which the Earlys moved into No. 25 Prince Street, a noteworthy burial took place down the street at the churchyard of the Cathedral, that of the Venerable Pierre Toussaint (1766–1853), the black ex-slave whose cause for beatification is pending. Though buried at St. Patrick's, Toussaint attended another church, the first Catholic church in New York, St. Peter's on Barclay Street.

I had always had a certain affinity for St. Peter's where the first permanent pastor in New York City was Father Charles Maurice Whelan, an Irish priest of my order, the Capuchins, who presided over the laying of the cornerstone there in November 1785. This Irish Capuchin, who pertained to the Capuchin Province in France during this era of English

persecution, was fluent in Gaelic and French but deficient in English. Rather than contend with parochial opposition, Father Whelan resigned three months after the corner-stone laying in favor of another more urbane, English-speaking Capuchin, Andrew Nugent.

Exactly thirty years after the corner-stone laying of St. Peter's Church, St. Patrick's was completed under

Joseph Francois Mangin, the architect of City Hall. The building was dedicated in 1815, and thirty-eight years later its church-yard became the final resting place of Pierre Toussaint. I wondered if my great-great-grandparents ever heard of this remarkable member of St.

Peter's Church whose burial took place, just down the block, in their church's cemetery.

Undoubtedly Bernard Early and Catherine Carroll did witness two pivotal events from No. 25 Prince Street during the following decade: the Civil War and the appearance of Boss Tweed.

THE CIVIL WAR

During the Civil War, in New York City a major disruption marked the summer of 1863—the anti-draft riots which lasted from July 13 to July 16. They were caused, in part, by protest by persons liable to be drafted into the Union Army and who could not pay \$300 to get substitutes for their military service. Apparently, the problem did not affect the two oldest Early boys, John and James, because of their exemption as members of the No. 9 Marion Street Volunteer Fire Department.

Less than a year after the riots, a surprise attack by Confederates on the morning of October 19, 1864 routed the Union Army at Cedar Creek in the Shenandoah Valley. The commander of this daring maneuver was Lt. General Jubal Early (no known relationship to

Bernard Early), who was West Point graduate and a native Virginian. With superior forces (32,000 to 21,000), General Philip Sheridan turned the battle around in the afternoon. Beyond the coincidence of the name Early, the battle has particular interest to my family history because of an obituary listing in the *New York Herald* dated November 9, 1864.



Two names appear side by side. One is that of a soldier killed at the battle of Cedar Creek—and the other is that of Catherine Carroll of No. 25 Prince Street. Two days before, Bernard Early's wife and the mother of five surviving children had passed away of typhoid fever in her mid-fifties. The accompanying burial

notice of the soldier's passing at Cedar Creek recalled the conflict raging in the country at the time of Catherine's death.

Less than a year later, 25 Prince Street was still the family home when, on the day before the last naval battle of the Civil War at Galveston Bay, Texas, Catherine's oldest daughter, my great-grandmother, Hannah Carroll Early, married John White Reilly in St. Joseph's Church on Sixth Street and Sixth Avenue, on June 1, 1865. Various designated in the city directories as blacksmith, wheelwright, and carriage-maker, John had entered New York in about 1860. Since there were at the time more than a hundred John Reillys in the city at the time of his marriage, his local whereabouts were difficult to trace. His Irish birth in 1839 (the year of Ireland's "Great Wind"), in the same town of Street in Westmeath where his mother-in-law Catherine Carroll was born, proved an easier search.

Hannah Carroll Early kept her recently deceased mother in fond remembrance. She gave to her first child, born in 1866 at 25 Prince Street and baptized at St. Patrick's, the name Catherine.

Illustration: Boss Tweed got significant support from, and provided largesse to, the many independent firehouses in New York City. The name "Big Six" referred to the most prominent house (Americus No. 6) that was particularly valuable in keeping him in control of the Tammany organization. The Early brothers belonged to the No. 9 Marion Street firehouse. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

BOSS TWEED AND THE EARLYS

While the war caused concern elsewhere, the rule of William Marcy Tweed touched ominously upon the lives of those living at 25 Prince Street. His influence radiated from Tammany Hall where the Scots-Presbyterian Tweed (1823–1878) had become a leading figure. Though organized as a fraternal order in 1788 by an Irishman, William Mooney who had served in the Continental Army, Tammany (named after a legendary Delaware Indian) remained anti-immigrant until 1821 when New York State abolished the property-owning requirement for voting. Having become political, Tammany then began seeking the newly available Irish vote for its Democratic candidates. However, something of the anti-immigrant bias remained. Only after Tweed's death did the officers of Tammany become Irish. Honest John Kelly, the Boss's successor, was the first of 10 successive Irish Tammany leaders at their Hall, whose headquarters was located from 1830 to 1927 on East Fourteenth Street and Third Avenue. Of importance to the history of the Earlys of Prince Street was that in 1863 Tweed had become the "Grand Sachem" of Tammany Hall, a political post that wielded great control in the city.

An aspect of Tweed's influence was his involvement in city government. In 1857, having returned from a congressional position in Washington, Tweed had become a member of the city's board of supervisors. From that position where Tweed was president for four terms and during which he sat on the standing and special committees, he exercised enormous power in New York City.

Tweed's double strength, both Tammany and governmental, passed into the No. 9 Marion Street Volunteer Fire-House. Volunteer firehouses had become the effective political clubs of Tammany Hall. There the Democratic voters assembled on a social basis. Tweed himself, had organized the most prominent of the firehouses, Americus No. 6, or the "Big Six" as it was called. The No. 9 Marion Street volunteers fit into the pattern.

In a special way, Tweed's governmental influence had great sway in the No. 9 firehouse

also. Its foreman, a close associate of William Tweed, was Jim Hayes who held that leading position all during the time that John and James Early offered their service (1858–1866). According to *Valentine's Manual* of the city, Tweed and Hayes shared seats on the city board of supervisors in 1866 (the final year of the Volunteer Fire Departments) and on its committees that controlled taxes, courts, county officers, armories, repairs, and riot claims.

The exact relationship of John and James Early to the above political and governmental set-up is not known. Certainly, during their years at the No. 9 Marion Street Volunteers, the brothers had a prominent role. John, the older, on occasion held the position of "representative" of the house. Furthermore, I had always heard that there was an uncle in my family who had an exquisite penmanship. On reading the original hand-written, rolls of the firehouse at the Municipal Archives, I discovered that the uncle was James Augustine Early. From 1861 to 1865, he was the recording secretary of the Marion Street firehouse who signed the lists with the flourishing hand of a John Hancock. Meanwhile, the brothers continued to live at 25 Prince Street.

At the same time, James A. Early penetrated even further into city politics becoming commissioner of deeds and, in 1862, "English Clerk" in City Hall. By 1866, he had become first assistant clerk of the board of councilmen with an office at No. 5 City Hall. Perhaps James Early viewed Lincoln's body, after the President's death in April of 1865, when it rested for some time in front of those offices of City Hall. Thereafter, he seems to have left city government with no further notices of his name in *Valentine's Manual* of city employees. Later census records list him as a "clerk in a store" and finally as an "auctioneer." James continued to reside at 25 Prince Street until February 13, 1866 when, in St. Patrick's, he married Margaret Theresa Dennin, whose brother-in-law, Thomas Hanlon, and other Dennins were also members of the Marion Street firehouse.

And the fate of the No. 9 Marion Street Volunteer Fire-House? Three powers in the city ganged up on the volunteer firehouses: the

Metropolitan Police Department, the insurance companies, and the Republican Party. Competition among firehouses often led to brawls at fire scenes, a problem for the police. Meanwhile the fires burned away, a problem for insurance companies. The fire houses were the organizational centers of Tammany Hall, whose ward politics attracted the Democratic Irish voter—a problem for the Republican Party. By an act introduced in Albany in 1865, these combined forces were able to abolish the volunteer fire departments in favor of a professional Metropolitan Fire Department, accordingly organized beyond New York City



confines. Eventually in 1870, Tweed managed to restructure the Metropolitan into a New York City Fire Department, now professional, but without the political power of its volunteer antecedent. Tweed's own political demise followed soon after with his first conviction for corruption in 1873. He died in the Ludlow Street jail five years later.

Meanwhile, the Earlys of 25 Prince Street moved uptown in 1867 to the edge of Hell's Kitchen and the Tenderloin District.

TO THE CATHEDRAL AND THE WESTSIDE

After all these reflections at life at No. 25 Prince Street, I could now turn my attention a half-block west, to the Cathedral itself. On that corner, Mott and Prince, lay the Cathedral's school, the oldest Catholic school in the city. In 1850, John Early, the oldest of the children would have been about 13. Did the Early children attend the school only a half-block from their home? Did the younger brother, James, later the City clerk, practice his penmanship there? To uncover these facts, I once inquired without success about the existence of old school records.

I continued to walk north on Mott Street past walls once set up to defend the church against attacks by the anti-Catholic nativists. The French bishop of New York, John Dubois (1826–1842), had to contend with such an outrage in 1835. He also had to put up with opposition from his flock who had expected the Irish candidate, John Power, to be appointed to the See. I feel that Dubois would have been most

sympathetic to the problems of the first permanent pastor of the city, the Capuchin, Charles Maurice Whelan. New York's Irish Catholics resented Dubois' French accent as did New York's English Catholics resent Whelan's Irish brogue. A marble

plaque inscribed with Dubois' name lay in front of the entrance to the Cathedral. Supposedly, his will stipulated its placement there so that those who walked over him during his lifetime could continue to do so after his death! However, official records record his burial in the crypt.

As I entered the Mott Street courtyard of the Old Cathedral, I met a group from the New York Irish History Roundtable and told them that I was hoping to con-celebrate the Mass in Gaelic since my great-great-grandparents, Bernard Early and Catherine Carroll, had married there on October 15, 1835. I mentioned that the original church had burned down in 1866. When one of the members (James Garrity) informed me that three of the original walls had been incorporated into the present structure, I felt an even greater connection to the event. Inside the Cathedral, my request to con-celebrate was heartedly welcomed by Father Andrew O'Connor, the celebrant. His companion, Father Hynes, would also con-celebrate. I then met the pastor, Monsignor Donald Sakano, whom I recognized from a previous meeting occasioned by my interest in the Earlys and Reillys.

Photo: The DiSalvio Playground at the corner of Mulberry and Spring Streets. The Earlys had lived at this location for about a year but the building had been torn down by the late twentieth century. Courtesy of Gavin Reilly.



Photo: Holy Innocents Church on West Thirty-seventh Street in Manhattan. In 1867, the Earlys left the area around St. Patrick's Old Cathedral and moved to Holy Innocents parish. Monsignor Donald Sakano, the current past of St. Patrick's, was previously pastor at Holy Innocents. Courtesy of Gavin Reilly.

After leaving 25 Prince Street, the Early/Reillys moved up to the West side—to West Thirty-fifth Street where they lived from 1867 to 1871. Their new parish church was Holy Innocents on West Thirty-seventh Street. More than a century later, Monsignor Sakano served as pastor of Holy Innocents before moving to St. Patrick's Old Cathedral. I had previously found in Holy Innocents the late-1860 baptismal records of Thomas and John James Reilly, the grandchildren of Bernard and Catherine Early. The godmothers of the boys were the sisters of John White Reilly, father of the children and son-in-law of the Earlys. The presence of the women recalls the focal point of this recollection—St. Patrick's Old Cathedral. Both godmothers, hav-

ing left their apartment on 19 Prince Street (a few doors down from the previous Early residence), were married in the Cathedral from their new tenement on 278 Mulberry Street: Ann in 1871 to the shoe salesman John Lally, and Catherine in 1874 to the engineer Joseph Burns. In a conversation with Monsignor Sakano, while he was pastor in Holy Innocents, I had spoken with him about these family connections.

A comparison of life near Holy Innocents in the late 1860s to that of life on Prince Street at the time has some startling aspects. The tenement at 245 West Thirty-fifth Street, now an office building, lay between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. It was a corridor squeezed between Hell's Kitchen and the Tenderloin District. Eighth Avenue (from Thirty-fourth to Fifty-ninth Streets) was the eastern boundary of Hell's Kitchen with its tough gangs of railroad and dock workers. A rookie policeman, according to one story, referred to a disorderly tenement on West Thirty-ninth Street in the area as "hell." His older partner replied that "hell" was too mild a term. "Hell's Kitchen" was a more fitting designation. The first printed use of the designation was in the *New York Times* in 1881.

Seventh Avenue was the western boundary of the "Tenderloin District" which described the area (Fourteenth to Forty-second Streets and Fourth to Seventh Avenues) controlled by the then Twenty-ninth Precinct station house on West Thirtieth Street. Appointed to precinct in 1876, Captain Alexander Williams (alias "the Clubber") acknowledged that the higher income of the precinct allowed policemen to buy better cuts of meat, tenderloin, as opposed to less desirable rump steak. From that comment came the name of the district. Unstated was the source of the higher income: kickbacks from the many illegal businesses (gambling, prostitution, and clip joints) especially along Sixth Avenue. Living in the midst of this unruly atmosphere, the Early/Reillys must have looked back with some longing to the more serene life around St. Patrick's.

As I spoke with Monsignor Sakano in the sacristy, I also recalled that I had been living at St. John the Baptist Capuchin Church at West Thirtieth Street when I last met him. At the

time, I was chaplain at the Fashion Institute of Technology. Both lay in that same corridor, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. Much as the Early/Reillys might have longed for the quiet of the St. Patrick's area, they remained up-town from 1871 to 1874 within the same corridor—moving down to 202 West Twenty-seventh Street. Often they must have passed St. John the Baptist during its construction in 1870–71 on an open corner uncluttered by the present loft building that blocks the stained-glass windows on the church's east wall. When a friar with vision suggested purchasing the corner, the superior replied laconically: "Capuchins are not in the real-estate business!"

The tenement into which the family moved lay in the present-day quadrangle of the Fashion Institute on West Twenty-seventh Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. Never having married, a great-aunt, Mary Rose Reilly, who raised my father in the days when families shared burdens, was born at that site in 1872. But this time, the Irish family went down four blocks to the French church, St. Vincent de Paul, on West Twenty-third Street for Aunt Mamie's baptism. Today, only one such tenement remains on West 27th Street. As I ministered at the Fashion Institute, I often reflected on strange ways of Divine Providence. I had connections there older than anyone else at the school.

My visit to St. Patrick's Old Cathedral on that day stirred no further West Side family recollections. (The Early/Reillys relocated to the east side of Manhattan in 1874.) I told Monsignor Sakano that my con-celebrating at St. Patrick's Old Cathedral was a nostalgic occasion for me. My great-great-grandparents, Bernard Early and Catherine Carroll, had been married there on October 15, 1835. Of their six children, the oldest and youngest, John and Joseph, had been baptized there, as well as their first grandchild, Catherine. And their second son, James Carroll Early, had been married there. The family was part of the Cathedral's history.³

The Mass that day, a St. Patrick's celebration moved to March 14, 2008 because of Holy Week, was a moving experience. I had determined to offer the Mass for my ancestors who had been parishioners of the Cathedral. My only

problem was trying to coordinate my English words of consecration with the Gaelic words of the celebrant, Father O'Connor. The children of the school in attendance reminded me of the five Early children of former times.

I had asked Mary Ann Mooney of the New York Irish Historical Roundtable to take some pictures for me, a task she reported as exciting and

challenging. And now, recalling that day and the past times it evoked leaves me with a sense of awe and fondness for all those immigrants who brought us the Faith we love.



Notes

- 1 Ship's records for the *Tallahassee* report arrival of a 25-year-old "spinster" matching her description.
- 2 For the next 30 years, a considerable Irish population continued to fill the area around the Cathedral. Thereafter, the 12,000 Italians in the city of 1880 swelled to some 400,000, according to the national census of 1900. Spring Street and its environs became home to this new group and received the name "Little Italy."
- 3 Two additional incidents were worth noting. John Carroll Early was baptized in September 1836, only three months after the ordination to the priesthood at St. Patrick's of St. John Nepomucine Neumann. I'd like to think that such a rare and important event in the life of the church of those days would have drawn my great-great grandparents to the service. The second incident touches upon a more human side of the church. In 1835, church records placed both baptismal and marriage information on the same page of the same book. With baptisms, a second marriage occupies the same page as the notation of the Early/Carroll matrimony. Next to that other marriage, the priest had made a distinct notation with a quill using the darkest of ink. It read in Latin: "*Nihil dederunt.*" That comment translated reads: "They gave nothing!" The livelihood of priests in those days without formal salaries depended on free-will offerings to a greater extent than today. The scribe made a point to be remembered.

Photo:
Father Andrew O'Connor speaking during the Mass in Gaelic at St. Patrick's Old Cathedral in March, 2008. The Mass was con-celebrated by Monsignor Donald Sakano and Father Gavin Reilly, who may be seen in the background. Courtesy of Mary Ann Mooney and Gavin Reilly.