

Father Sylvester Malone & Bigotry in Brooklyn

BY GEOFFREY COBB



Photo:
Father Sylvester Malone in the 1890s. Born in Trim in Co. Meath, he arrived in the United States in 1839. He was advised by Bishop Hughes to study for the priesthood at St. Joseph's Seminary in La Fargeville, N.Y. Soon after he was ordained in 1844, Hughes asked him to nurture and expand a struggling parish in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Courtesy of Brooklyn Visual Heritage.

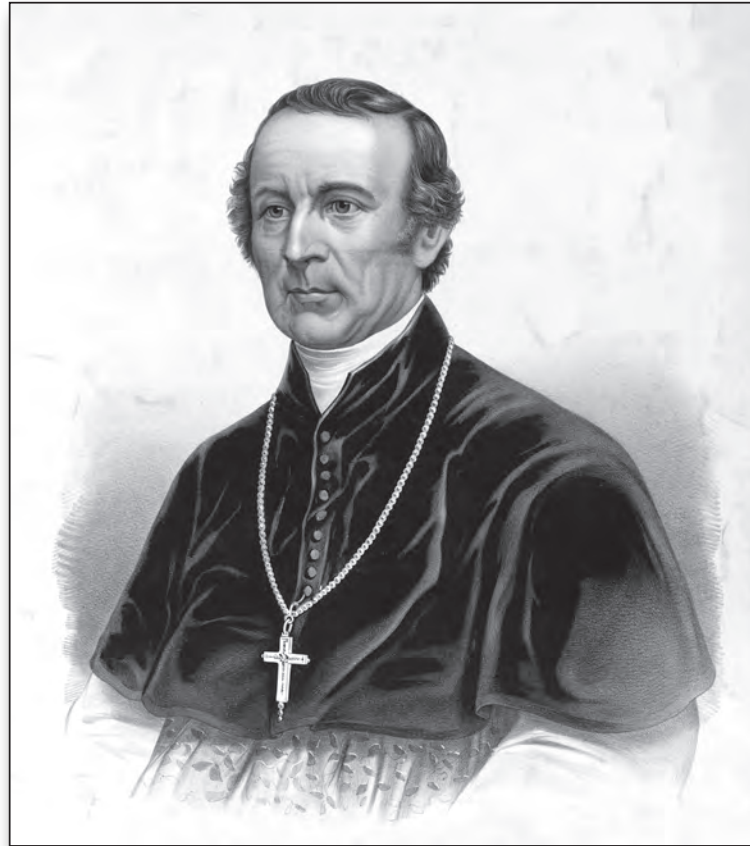
When Father Sylvester Malone died almost at the end of the century on December 29, 1899, his death signaled the end of an era not only for the Irish-Catholic community in Williamsburg but also for the entire neighborhood. A respected figure among all Williamsburg's residents, Father Malone had been an outspoken voice for the many ideals that defined his life. Suddenly that moral voice was gone, and people of all nationalities and faiths realized that a giant had passed from the earth. His hard-won respect among the local Protestant clergy was especially great and rather unusual. Dr. John Coleman of the All Souls Universalist Church commented, "Father Malone was a noble-hearted man. He was honest in the positions he took. I have always regarded him as a conspicuous and useful member of the Catholic Church" (*New York Times*, p.8). The famous Reverend Dr. Richard Storrs from Plymouth Church said of Malone:

I knew Father Malone for a great many years and held him in high and affectionate regard. ... Father Malone, while never in the least compromising in his convictions regarding his own church, recognized freely the good influence and work of other communions (*New York Times*, p. 8).

The respect that Protestants showed Malone and his church was won and not at all freely given. Father Malone's time as pastor at the Saints Peter and Paul Church spanned an amazing fifty-five year period and witnessed a complete transformation in the perception and treatment of Catholics. At the end of Malone's life, Catholics were part of the mainstream of Brooklyn life, a large and powerful group sewn into the fabric of Brooklyn life. There were Catholic businessmen, educators, and politicians. This had not always been so, and many achievements of the Catholic community were

Geoffrey Cobb writes about Brooklyn history. His most recent work, King of Greenpoint, chronicles the life of Peter J. McGuinness, the last Tammany Hall-style ward boss in New York City history. He is currently working on a book about the history of sugar refining in Brooklyn. ©2017. Published with permission of Geoffrey Cobb.

Illustration:
Caption to come.
 A Currier & Ives
 lithograph of Archbishop
 John Hughes published
 around 1864. He
 immigrated to the
 United States in 1817,
 became a priest in
 1826, and was named
 the fourth bishop of
 the New York diocese
 in 1838. He led the
 diocese (which included
 Brooklyn until 1853)
 through years of
 expansive development
 and growth. Courtesy of
 Library of Congress.



the result of years of patient work by Father Malone to defeat anti-Catholic bigotry.

EDUCATED BY PROTESTANT BROTHERS

Sylvester Malone was born in Trim, County Meath, Ireland in 1821. He grew up in the Boyne Valley, not far from the hill of Tara and only twenty miles from Dublin. During his youth in Ireland, Irish Catholics were second-class citizens despite being a huge majority of the population. As a Catholic, Malone was fortunate to receive an education from the Protestant Carroll Brothers who ran a local academy. At the academy Protestant and Catholic children learned together, and Malone made friends with many Protestant classmates. These friendships were to create a lifelong respect for all Christians that allowed Malone to develop a sincere ecumenism at a time when few Christian clergymen were able to bridge the chasm that separated Protestants and Catholics.

In 1836, his father passed away, and the fifteen-year old Malone must have realized that

his future prospects in Ireland were limited. As for many of his generation, America seemed a land where a young Irishman could realize his potential. In 1838, Father Andrew Byrne of St. James Church in Manhattan went to Ireland to recruit young men for the priesthood. He met the seventeen-year-old Malone who impressed him with his piety, intelligence, and capacity for organization. Byrne offered Malone the chance to come to America and study for the priesthood. Malone gladly accepted the offer. He left the next year and arrived in Philadelphia in 1839.

During that year and for decades to come, America in general and Philadelphia in particular were not receptive to Irish-Catholic immigration—especially not to those who hoped to build a strong Catholic church on its shores. Irish-Catholics were often regarded as “papists,” devoid of the independence of mind required to become strong citizens and seen as dangerous members of a disloyal fifth-column. Not long after arriving, Malone met one of the giants in the American Catholic Church, Bishop John

Hughes. Both Hughes and Malone were determined to build the Catholic Church in America in the teeth of fierce bigotry and prejudice. Bishop Hughes advised Malone to enter St. Joseph's Seminary in Jefferson County, New York, which he did. The following year the seminary would move to Rose Hill on the campus of what would become Fordham University. Here Malone would complete his training for the priesthood.

THE TIME OF THE KNOW-NOTHINGS

Malone was ordained on August 15, 1844 during a difficult time for the rapidly growing American Catholic Church. It was a period when the anti-immigrant Know-Nothing Party had increasing political and economic power in America. Individuals in the Know-Nothing movement were often zealous anti-Catholics who preached a message of bigotry and intolerance toward immigrants, especially Irish-Catholic immigrants. In the same year as Malone's ordination two Catholic churches in Philadelphia were burned down and there were anti-Catholic riots in the city.

Malone was sent by Bishop Hughes to one of the areas most notorious for anti-Catholic bigotry—Williamsburg, Brooklyn—a hotbed of nativist sentiment and a stronghold of Know-Nothings. The small Catholic community there lived in the shadows, rightly afraid of the potential for anti-Catholic violence in the area. In 1840 Irish Catholics had constructed a small church on North Eighth Street on the fringes of Williamsburg, but the church had few members and large debts. As soon as Malone arrived in the parish he determined that he would make big changes. He exhorted his congregation to pay off the debt, and within two years they had liquidated their obligation. But Malone had far grander plans that scared many of his congregants. He planned to build a new church right in the heart of the village, next to properties controlled by the intimidating Know-Nothings. He had only a half-dozen families as parishioners when he began planning the new building in 1847. Bishop Hughes came to lay the cornerstone,



but to the oldest and wisest Catholics, the plan to build on South Second Street seemed reckless and daring. They encouraged Malone to build the parish house behind the church to shield the priest from nativist attacks. But the young priest would not hear of such cowardice. Malone believed that the American sense of fair play would triumph and that he and his congregation would be welcomed into the community—a belief many of his congregation feared was naïve and dangerous.

Malone also needed a man to build his church, and he found him in Patrick Keely, a fellow Irish immigrant who came from Tipperary. The two young men quickly formed a friendship, and Malone encouraged the young Irish carpenter to design and build a Gothic-style church on South Second Street not far from the East River. Keely, who had never built a church before, initially

Photo:
The Church of St. Peter and St. Paul on South Second Street in Williamsburg. Designed by Father Malone's friend, Patrick Keely, it was begun in 1847 and dedicated a year later. It helped sustain an active parish community until the 1957. Courtesy of the Keely Society.

doubted his ability to build the church. But Malone had faith in him, and Malone's faith proved well founded. Keely would go on to become one of the most prolific and celebrated church architects in North America, building six hundred churches as well as cathedrals in Montreal, Buffalo, and Boston. The church in Williamsburg turned out a gem and became a symbol of the proud Catholic community now forming along the East River.

HARD YEARS FOR MALONE

Those early years of his priesthood were hard ones for Malone. The church lacked resources even to buy him a horse, and Malone had to visit his scattered congregation on foot. He often had to walk miles to tend to his flock who were spread out over great distances, but his greatest sufferings were not physical, but emotional. As a Catholic priest walking through nativist Williamsburg, Malone was the target of numerous anti-Catholic slurs, especially by volunteer fire department men who proved especially cruel in their taunting. Despite the daily heckling he received, Malone decided he would never respond in anger. He would prove himself a model of Christian forbearance. Malone explained how he dealt with this abuse:

I had my trials. They were long and they demanded patience on my part. Time and time again, my name was rudely called aloud in public by passing thoughtless boys and by young hangers-on of the old volunteer fire engine hose. I avoided being over severe in my language, or showing any anger for I always reasoned with the one whom I thought was the aggressor and what was strange, I never found one to own up to the fact (New York Times, p. 8).

The prejudice that Malone faced was slow in passing, lasting more than a decade in its most virulent form. Malone remained a target for nativist abuse, but he slowly gained acceptance in some Protestant quarters in Williamsburg. Both Catholics and Protestants there alike were shocked in 1853 when they saw Malone walk through local streets locked

arm-in-arm with a Protestant clergyman, Dr. Reynolds, rector of Christ Church. This was a daring move for both men and one of the first acts of ecumenism that would be a lifelong hallmark of Malone's life in Williamsburg.

Despite gaining acceptance by some Protestants, Catholicism remained subject to fierce attacks by others. In Malone's native land the Famine and its aftermath was driving tens of thousands of emigrants to America, and the Irish Catholic population in Williamsburg grew quickly, a growth rate that contributed to more religious bigotry. In 1853 there was an anti-Catholic riot in Williamsburg, and the next year anti-Catholic violence reached its peak in Williamsburg on November 8 when a hundred Irishmen were drawn into a riot with nativists headed for Sts. Peter and Paul Church with the intention of torching the building. The Irish barely reached the church first and just managed to lock the gates. Inside the building armed Irish church members were ready for a bloody showdown with the howling mob outside. The angry nativists shook the gates so violently that cross above its entry came down, and they began to hurl stones at the windows. Only the arrival of Mayor Wall, who defied the angry mob and condemned their attack, plus a detachment of local militia who displayed possible armed action, stopped the rioters from storming and burning the church.

DEALING WITH ABUSE

Malone, much to his credit, never felt anger or hatred toward those who had tried to burn his church. He said "I repaid the blind prejudice of the past by patience, never allowing my soul to hold within it, other than the kindest and most charitable thoughts towards friend or enemy" (*New York Times*, p. 8). Malone proved himself a true Christian in his ability to love those who hated him. He said "I am proud of the truth that I never for a moment cherished an unkind feeling towards any of my fellow citizens, even though they were cruel, unjust and wrong in their treatment of one who was praying for them and their families" (*New York Times*, p. 8).

**Illustration:**

Prejudice toward immigrants in Brooklyn was depicted in this drawing printed in 1881. It depicts representatives from the municipal Board of Aldermen informing immigrants they can't be licensed to work in Brooklyn because they are not citizens. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

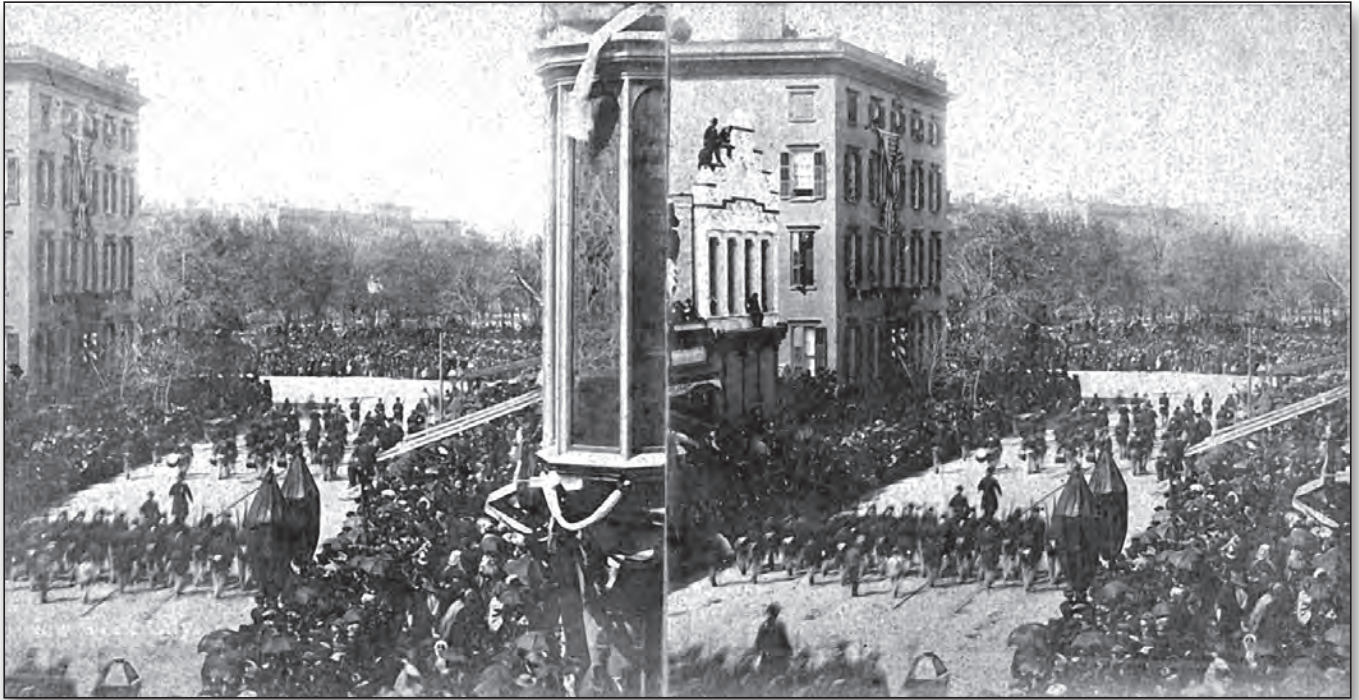
Malone believed that the way to deal with the abuse he and his congregation received was by keeping silent about it. He stated:

I have ever kept silence on the difficulties that beset my beginnings in planting the church in the thirteenth ward, the banner ward of Know Nothingism and of the Americanism of a personal and narrow character that little comported with the genius and spirit of the Constitution of the country (New York Times, p. 8).

One of the defining traits of Malone's character was an abiding belief in America and its values. He once said "I was American in everything, save the accident of my birth." (New York Times Dec 30, 1899, p.8) Unlike many Irish immigrants who were Democrats,

Malone became a Republican and was an avowed abolitionist and enemy of slavery. His staunch support of abolitionism put him at odds with many Irish-Americans who feared that abolishing slavery would prove an economic disaster for the Irish at the bottom of the economic ladder. They feared that competition from freed blacks would cut their already meager wages even further.

Many Irish in America at the time opposed Lincoln and the Civil War to keep the union together, but Malone was a firm supporter of Lincoln and the War. He shocked not only his congregation, but also all of Williamsburg by flying an American flag from the steeple of his church when the War started. His church was the first American Catholic church to fly the stars



Photograph:
A stereoscopic photo from April, 1865 shows part of the funeral procession for Abraham Lincoln in New York moving up Broadway toward Union Square. Malone was a strong supporter of the Union during the Civil War and condemned the assassination of Lincoln and its sympathizers. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

and stripes and sent an unmistakable signal of support for the Union to the Williamsburg community. The flag remained flying for four years until the end of the War. Malone also became a regular speaker at many Brooklyn events supporting the Union. Taking a stance few Irish-American priests took at the time, he spoke out against the Draft Riots in 1863 and condemned the orgy of hate that led to lynching of African-Americans.

Perhaps Malone's most famous sermon was delivered just after the news of Lincoln's assassination. Speaking of its implicit threats, he said:

I ask you to mark well the man calling himself a Catholic, who shall dare to speak approvingly of this assassination, lest he bring disgrace on us all. Pray that the life and integrity of the nation be preserved. Pray that the constituted authority of the nation may pass through this trying ordeal unharmed, and that this rebellion may speedily be destroyed (New York Times, p. 8).

He commented specifically on Lincoln's murder saying:

It is not that Abraham Lincoln has been murdered. It is more. It is the

President of the United States, the representative of a nation of free men, the head and chosen of the people. We mourn this day for this Christian patriot gone from us, but we stand appalled and horror stricken at the murder of the magistrate whose heart so filled with Christian charity and forgiveness for those who had forgotten their allegiance, taken their arms against the most humane government on earth (New York Times, p. 8).

At the start of the war in 1861, Malone made one of his most enduring contributions to Irish-America by founding the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, which still exists today. Malone was shocked by the poor manner in which some Irish celebrated St. Patrick's Day. He wanted to create the society to make the commemoration of the day more of a religiously respectful and family-oriented celebration. For decades he would serve as the society's chaplain, and membership in the club was came to be a prestige symbol in Irish-American Brooklyn.

HIS LATER YEARS

Malone had seen his tiny congregation grow from a handful of Catholics to five thousand parishioners within ten years, swollen by con-

sequences of the Famine and related economic policies in Ireland. He had established a parochial school which quickly became the largest in Brooklyn, numbering at certain points more than a thousand pupils. He had succeeded in building positive relationships with Protestants and Jews in Brooklyn. (In 1870 Mayor Martin Kalbfleish was the guest of honor at a St. Patrick's Day celebration in which he claimed to love all the citizens of Williamsburg regardless of their faith. When he challenged Malone to prove his love for all the citizens of Williamsburg by joining the Jewish community in its Purim celebration, Malone promptly did so. And for almost three decades Malone proved himself a sincere

Malone's reaching old age seemed a miracle. Part of the reason why Malone was so loved was his sincere concern for the poor and the sick. He risked his life, visiting members of his congregation who were suffering from diseases. In 1878 he contracted smallpox from a sick parishioner, which nearly killed him. He recovered, but would also later contract cholera and ship's fever, both of which severely weakened him.

By 1881 Malone had grown exhausted by the immense labor he had done to build his parish. He decided to take a break from his work, and in a sermon he summarized the work he had done in building his parish. Malone stated that he had 10,000 sermons, baptized 18,000 chil-

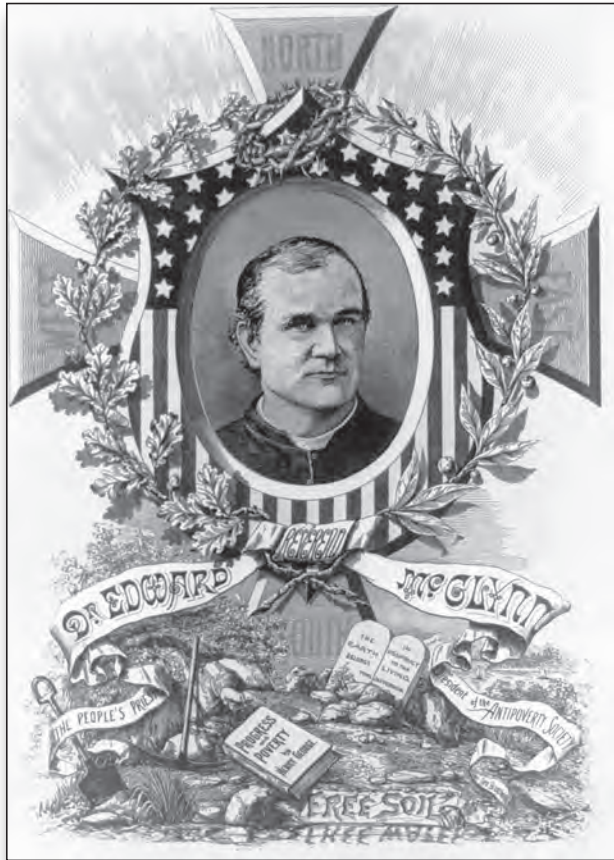


Illustration:

A print published ca. 1897 showing support for Rev. Edward McGlynn and his positions on social issues. McGlynn was a social reformer who supported public-school education and the equal ownership of natural resources by all citizens of a community. Father Malone was a friend of McGlynn, and wrote to the Pope defending the priest. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

friend to Williamsburg's Jews, earning their respect and love. On his Golden Jubilee, Rabbi Gotheil of Temple Emanu-El on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan related an incident of meeting a Jewish lady from Williamsburg who asked the rabbi if he knew "Our Father Malone," as if she were one of his very own parishioners (*Malone Memorial*, p.7).

dren, performed 350,000 marriages and heard 500,000 confessions (*Malone Memorial*, p.8).

In 1881 Malone returned to Ireland, his first visit home in four decades. Although he had come to America as a teenager, he had not forgotten the land of his birth. He visited his mother whom he found strong and in good health, but the same could not be said for the

political and economic state of Ireland. Malone traveled around the country and became an advocate for Irish home rule and a fervent supporter of the Land League. Upon his return to America in 1882, he stated that Ireland had no friends among the aristocracy of the country, and he made the following remarks on the situation of Irish tenant farmers:

It is my belief that were justice done in a country where the life and happiness of a people depends almost entirely on the proper distribution of land there would be no bloodshed, no need of coercive legislation. It is Justice that the people want. ... Treat any people the world over in the spirit underlying the wholesale eviction of families from their humble homes, retaliations, even to murder are inevitable. I do not say it is right. I do not seek to justify any such extreme remedy, but I say you will find human nature of any people about the same in like circumstances
(Malone Memorial, p.8).

The Irish question was a difficult one for Catholic priests, and the solutions espoused by one of Malone's friends led to his removal from the pulpit. In 1886, an old personal friend of Malone, Dr. Edward McGlynn, an advocate of the ideas of Henry George, was suspended from his priesthood by Archbishop Corrigan for "advocating economic doctrines that were not in accordance with the doctrines of the Church." Although personally risky, Malone sprang to the defense of his friend, writing a letter to the Pope himself in defense of McGlynn. Thanks in large part to Malone's letter, McGlynn was vindicated and allowed to re-instated as a Catholic priest.

One of the most surprising positions of Father Malone was his support of public education. Few Catholics trusted the public school system because, at its outset, schools sometimes tried to force Catholic children to say Protestant prayers, and many feared that one of the goals of public education was to make Protestants out of their children. In response, Catholics set up a huge parochial school system, and most priests had few kind words to say about public education. Malone not only praised public education, he was elected in 1894 to the New York State

Board of Regents despite the disapproval of many of his superiors in the Church.

Malone died at seventy-eight. He was buried in Calvary Cemetery, his coffin fittingly draped in the stars and stripes. He left a thriving parish with thousands of parishioners, but it was his work outside of the parish with other religions that won him the enduring love of many people in Williamsburg. Former mayors, millionaires, and politicians sung his praises, but it was the love of Williamsburg's thousands of poor people that showed what a great man Malone had been. Fittingly, it was a local Jewish woman who was the first contributor to a memorial in Malone's honor. Today, few Catholics are aware of how men like Malone fought for their integration into American life, but his legacy lives on and Malone remains an example of a man who loved all the people of Williamsburg.

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