

McSwyny's 400: An Immigrant's Response

BY ED O'SHAUGHNESSY

The "New York 400," a list of the supposed most prominent families in New York City, continues to interest celebrity followers. A 400 list has survived 130 years of continuous revision and challenges to its relevancy.¹ Given the current national dialogue about issues of social inequality and immigration, it is opportune to review the origins of the New York 400 and tell the story of one of its first challengers, a New York City Irish immigrant. New York City history buffs may know the story of the Astor-McAllister connection, but today few people know the adjunct story of a roguish gadfly, Bryan McSwyny.

ORIGIN OF THE NEW YORK 400

The origin of the New York 400 dates to the late nineteenth century, the period often called the Gilded Age, a term coined by Mark Twain. The term was intended to describe an imperfect society, one that appeared burnished and shiny on its surface, but which had significant problems and fault lines beneath. New York City in 1888 was a case in point. Once a small Dutch colonial port it was by 1880 the largest city in the United States, a city whose growth in population was built by immigration. It was a city of poverty and of great wealth. Those without wealth aspired to work their way up the socioeconomic ladder and into the mainstream of society. Those with wealth, and especially those with great wealth, sought ways to display it. There was considerable jockeying for prestige among the very rich, and between the old-money patriarchs and the new-money capitalists. This is the background against which the New York 400 took form.

The 400 was first spoken of in 1888 by a prominent social observer and arranger, Samuel Ward McAllister. In responding to a question put to him by a reporter, McAllister allegedly replied "Why, there are only about 400 people in



Illustration:

A portrait of Samuel Ward McAllister in 1889. McAllister, a late nineteenth-century social observer and adviser is best remembered for an offhand remark that led to the idea of a "New York 400," a notion still in use today. He was famously associated with Caroline Astor, the grande dame of New York elite society in the late 1800s. He called her his "Mystic Rose." Some called him "King of the Snobs." Courtesy of New York Public Library.

fashionable New York society. If you go outside that number you strike people who are either not at ease in a ballroom or else make other people not at ease."² Furthermore, McAllister intimated that he maintained a list of the four hundred most prominent families which he used for invitation purposes. While there are competing versions about the determination of McAllister's 400, the notion that an actual list of favored families existed was great gossip fodder, and the list, though unseen for years, was quickly named "McAllister's 400."³

Ward McAllister, born in 1827 in Georgia and of Scottish descent, was a man of applied manners and taste who had acquired some wealth through personal industry, and who had acquired more by marriage. He kept a house in New York City, and early in his public life had purchased a summer home in Newport, Rhode Island, a town still known today as a gathering spot for

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Illustration:

Drawing shows Mrs. Astor with Elisha Dyer, former governor of Rhode Island, at the Assembly Ball in New York City during 1902. Caroline Astor sought to order the elite among New York City society by highly exclusive categories. Ward McAllister served as her court chamberlain, developing guest lists for her many balls in accordance with their views on pedigree and manifestations of class. Initially favoring old money patriarchs, the two later acknowledged the importance of new money capitalists. Courtesy of NewYorkSocialDiary.com.

the well-to-do. McAllister possessed a number of personal attributes that advanced his value in social circles, and his appearance in Newport was eagerly anticipated by his summer neighbors. “Wait until McAllister comes” people used to say when the season dragged in the early summer, “He will make it lively. He did too, don’t you know! He organized cotillions, picnics, dinners and all sorts of entertainments, and he kept us going until the end of the season.”⁴ Newport was to be, for McAllister, a springboard into a bigger pond. A man of energy and organizational skills, attuned to the rhythm of genteel society—one also married to a relative of Mrs. William Astor—would prove quite useful to Mrs. Astor, the *grande dame* of New York City society. Caroline Astor was famous for her balls and dinners, and highly exclusive affairs they were. Ward McAllister would famously become Mrs. Astor’s *majordomo*, her court chamberlain.

MCSWYNY’S RESPONSE

While the story of McAllister’s 400 is often told, there is a lesser known but delightful story of one man’s response to McAllister’s 400, an immigrant by the name of Bryan Gladstone McSwyny. Bryan McSwyny was a figure also well-known to the New York City public in the

late nineteenth century. McSwyny, affronted by the exclusive ordering of New York City society by McAllister and Mrs. Astor, decided that a righteous challenge was in order. A sporting man, McSwyny thought that it would be great sport to announce an alternate list of four hundred, also to be used as a guest list for a dinner and ball to be hosted by himself on the same night as one of McAllister’s most important soirees. Unlike McAllister, McSwyny would not be coy about naming those with whom he would dine and dance that night, and he went public with his list of 400 as soon as the ink was dry. The press howled at the audacity of the common man taking on the “Nobs” and the “Swells,” the terms McAllister used for the old New York families and the new money families flocking to New York City. McSwyny’s 400 was immediately the talk of the town, and the foil upon which to skewer McAllister’s 400.

McAllister’s 400, a list closely held by McAllister, was reputed to be comprised of the *crème de la crème* of New York City society. McSwyny’s 400, on the other hand, was extensively, but not exclusively, dominated by the New York City Irish. One stated that the “official list” of McSwyny’s 400 was full of O’Haras, O’Shaughnessys, Connellys, Sullivans, and Macs.

This account indicated that the publication of McSwyny's 400 was made on Sunday, April 14, 1889, a little more than two weeks before a day of great city-wide celebrations. The *cause célèbre* was to be two invitation-only banquets and balls the evening of April 30, 1889, during the three-day celebration of the centennial of George Washington's inauguration. These three days of commemoration would be the most significant national celebrations in the history of the United States to date. Every citizen of the city wanted to find a way to revel in this festive moment, and to manage the affair the most prestigious events or places at the events required tickets. New York City would turn out *en masse* for parades, picnics, exhibitions, festivities and fireworks. As it developed, the most important evening events would be the two ticket-only banquets on April 30, one organized by McAllister and one organized by McSwyny. The McAllister-McSwyny competition for public attention was called by one newspaper wag the "War of the Macs."⁶

A STRIKING CONTRAST

To the press and to the public the contrast between the two Macs was irresistibly striking. Whereas Ward McAllister had established himself in the public's eye as a self-appointed arbiter of high society, the King of the Snobs, connected to Mrs. Astor and her kind, Bryan McSwyny had established himself in the public's eye for some time too, and was also connected to interesting people. But McSwyny's interests would not be found in a syllabus at a finishing school, and the company he kept included some very notorious men.

Born in Cork in 1842 McSwyny came to the United States in 1864 with his parents. He immediately entered the shoe-making trade and became very successful at it, making his debut into public attention with custom-made shoes for many of the notable record-holding athletes of the day, among whom was the world champion long-distance pedestrian Daniel O'Leary and the famous boxer John L. Sullivan. Ever alive to opportunity, McSwyny

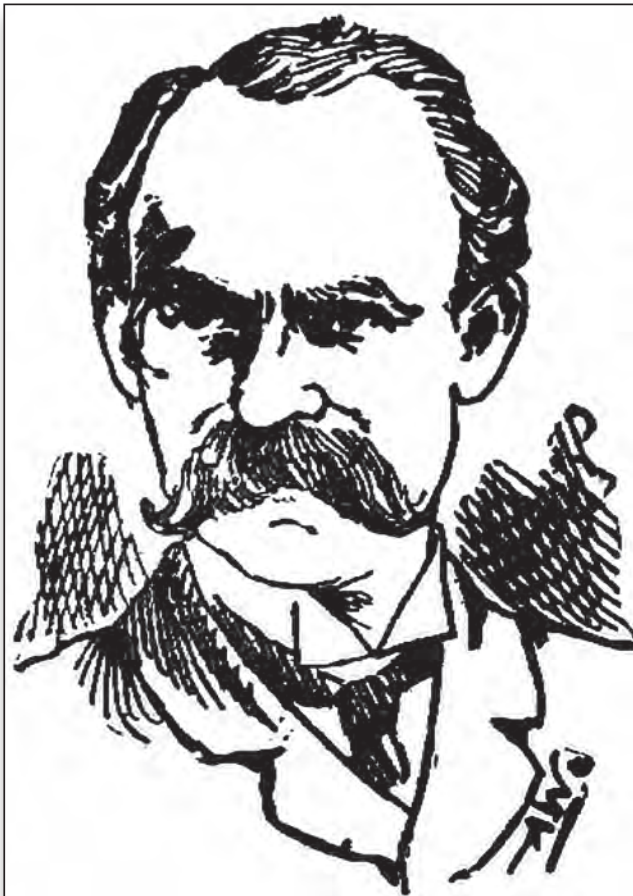


Illustration:

A sketch of Bryan Gladstone McSwyny in 1889. Born in Cork, Ireland, he and his family arrived in New York City in 1864. An immigrant, a man of the trades, a Fenian head centre, and a man known for betting on athletic events, McSwyny was stunned to receive a gilt-edged invitation to an Astor-McAllister ball in 1889. A creative man, when presented with a dilemma he created opportunity. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

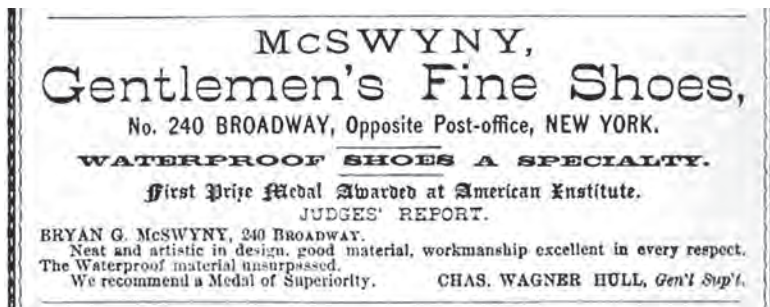


Illustration:
 McSwyny's fine shoes were not only favorites among gentlemen, they were favorites of several record-holding athletes of the day, including long-distance walkers and boxers. This advertisement, found in the back of an 1884 book titled *A History of the Phoenix Park Patriots*, written by James Francis Corrigan and published by "Number One" Publication Co. in New York City, is an indication of the company McSwyny kept. This book attempts to justify the 1882 assassination in Dublin's Phoenix Park of the newly appointed chief secretary for Ireland and his permanent undersecretary by a radical breakaway group of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

would request return of the shoes after a notable athletic performance and proudly display them in his store window with a placard stating that these were the shoes that the champ wore for such and such event. Patrons flocked to his store to see the display, and to sit for custom fittings. An annual, *The Illustrated New York*, in 1888 devoted a paragraph to McSwyny's reputation as a maker of shoes, stating "One man's name, Bryan G. McSwyny, No. 240 Broadway, stands prominent in this respect before the public, not only acquiring metropolitan fame in New York, but also national and international fame, his shoes, for originality, comfort and design being known in both continents."⁷ Not only did McSwyny make shoes, he improved upon them, and in December 1889 applied for a patent claiming improved comfort from his improved design.

Not unlike McAllister in one respect, McSwyny craved the attention of the public, and he found many occasions to gain and hold it. Illustrative of doing whatever it takes, on one exceptionally hot day in 1888 McSwyny stepped outside his shop on Canal and Broadway and stood stock still in the heat staring across the street at the flagpole in front of City Hall Park. Some passers-by stopped to ask what he was doing, standing trance-like in the oppressive heat. He replied that he was waiting for the ball on top of the flagpole to melt:

Several stopped to look—a little knot collected, then a crowd, then a big crowd. This brilliant sally was reported in the newspapers, together with the fact that he had induced about 200 persons to stand in the hot sun for ten minutes watching for the catastrophe, and all added to the reputation of McSwyny. He was always alive to the value of self-advertising and man-

*aged to get his name printed as often as he could.*⁸

McSwyny certainly possessed an outsized personality, but he was more than a gossip column curiosity. Over the decades leading to the creation of McSwyny's 400 he had acquired a reputation not only as a master cobbler, but also as a man of purpose and action. He had acquired a wide range of friends and allies, especially among republican-minded Irish Americans. He was, quite possibly, a Fenian "head centre" within a year or two of his arrival in New York City, and he certainly was in the center of activities that evolved from the Fenian movement.⁹ He was one of the organizers of the Irish Parliamentary Fund which sent thousands of dollars to Ireland to help defray the cost of serving as a Nationalist MP. He raised money for the Land League to help the Irish tenants, and was so enamored of Charles Stuart Parnell, the leader of the Irish Land League movement, that he managed a meeting with Parnell at the House of Commons in London while travelling in Europe in 1880. It was said that McSwyny belonged to every club and organization this side of the Atlantic that sought to advance the cause of Ireland's freedom. McSwyny was active in Tammany Hall politics as well and not infrequently nominated by friends for patronage appointments. One obituary noted that he never held political office "but he always considered himself a dark horse who might be entered at any time to run to victory."¹⁰ He was truly a man of varied interests and pursuits.

Given his tradesman profession and his social predilections, it came as a huge surprise when in March 1889 McSwyny received a gilt-edged invitation to the Washington centennial inaugural ball hosted by McAllister and his associates. Not knowing immediately what to make of this, he followed the instructions in the invitation and, with ten dollars in hand, took the invitation to the Madison Square Bank to purchase his ticket. The *New York World* reported in the bated-breath cadence of a dime novel that

... [McSwyny] bought his ticket solemnly, quietly, reverently, and earnestly, and with due sense of the great honor that

was thereby being thrust upon him. Then he pondered within himself as follows: "Why is it that countless four hundreds of good men mourn because they cannot go to the ball? Is it that Ward McAllister and I are greater than they? Heaven forbid. I will organize a new Four Hundred who shall have a ball in honor of President Washington's inauguration. There will be many cotillions, a dazzling banquet and lakes of McSwyny fizz-frappe, with not a ghost of a headache on their beady shores."¹¹

Multiple press accounts, in more prosaic fashion, provide the sequence of events. Now on record for converting his invitation into a ticket, McSwyny approached a few close friends to discover if any had also received an invitation.¹² They had not. That presented a dilemma, or an opportunity. True to form, McSwyny chose opportunity. The *New York World* account continued: "Bryan McSwyny went his way, with so many lines of care on his brow that those who knew him marveled. To some of them he confided his scheme. They were all tickled by it."¹³ The pro-McSwyny press delighted in drama and hyperbole, but the claim of the latter sentence would be borne out by events.

McSwyny next went to consult with several judges at the Justices' Chambers of the City Court of New York. Judges McAdam, Ehrlich, and Nehrbas were men whose considered opinion and support would benefit McSwyny in the scheme that was taking form. We don't know how the idea was presented, but it is recorded that these influential men "agreed with him that they too, as well as many other solid citizens of this city were entitled to dance upon the same floor as Washington's opponents, and so they resolved to organize a society that should excel McAllister's 400, both in point of numbers and in merit."¹⁴ To do the thing proper, nothing less than a competing dinner and ball would do, to be held on the very same evening as McAllister's ball, with a venue as elegant and a program as satisfying. No pedigree would be required, and the number of tickets to be sold would be limited only by

the capacity of the facility. It would be widely announced, the tickets would cost ten dollars and formal evening dress would be required. Furthermore, McSwyny had decided to send a personal invitation to McAllister. Some said he did so to "heap coals on the head of McAllister;" others thought he did so for the sake of good form, to return a courtesy.

EXCITEMENT AND MUCH TO DO

The word of McSwyny's scheme travelled through the city fast, "like electricity," a newspaper reporter noted. The *New York Press* captured the feeling of excitement, noting that those "excommunicated" from McAllister's guest list "may throw up their hats for Bryan McSwyny, who has thoughtfully provided them a hope and a refuge" with a presidential ball open to them on so prestigious an evening. The newspaper suggested that "Perhaps McAllister did not dream that any man would have the temerity to rise up and question his recognized authority, and the question is will he ever recover from the shock?"¹⁵ Some of the headlines that appeared in quick order were: "McSwyny's Four Hundred, A Rival Aristocracy Getting Ready to Eclipse M'Allister's Crowd;" "McSwyny's 400 Will Dine Too;" and "The War of the Macs." The War of the Macs was cleverly and comprehensively written—a humorous synopsis of the contest that developed between the two camps.¹⁶

McSwyny had much to do in the six weeks before the great day. The first task was to find a venue to hold the dinner and ball, no small task given the many events taking place the evening of April 30. Eventually the facility found was the banquet hall at the famous Delmonico's. Organization committees were quickly established, with the press reporting on the composition as details were made known. As this entire display was all about the ways and mannerisms of contrasting societies, the pro-McSwyny faction delighted in every chance to portray McAllister's faction as unequal to the challenge. It was noted, for instance, that McSwyny's team could "not help viewing with alarm the prospect that they were going to outshine those careworn *coutillonaires* on the day

Photo:

First opened as a pastry shop in 1837, Delmonico's restaurant grew in reputation and in clientele so much that, many times over, the facility was enlarged and relocated. In 1888 it was located on Fifth Avenue and Twenty-sixth Street. It was frequented by the rich, the famous, and New York City's many fraternal organizations for their annual banquets. The Friendly Sons of St Patrick regularly dined here. Courtesy of New York Public Library.



of the game...,” and this statement was made with the full knowledge that McAllister’s team had an eleven-month head start on preparation time. But then the reporter explained the cause for his confidence. McSwyny had a distinctive advantage over McAllister because McAllister didn’t have “an adviser in any of his committees whose name begins with ‘Mc.’ McSwyny has a dozen or more of them.... It is easy to predict what a triumph McSwyny will enjoy, for, if one Mc has already engineered a stupendous social and historical success, what must be the fruit of the efforts of a score of Mcs?”¹⁷

Letters of support and requests to join McSwyny’s society poured in, beginning with the three judges sending letters of support the very day of the visit by McSwyny. Pillars of the New York City Irish American community fell in line to proclaim membership in McSwyny’s 400. McSwyny did not stop the invitations at the boundaries of New York City. Patrick Egan, then the U.S.

Ambassador to Chile was invited, Judge John E. Fitzgerald, the politician John E. Fitzgerald, Colonel Roger F. Scannell, Congressman Patrick Collins, all of Boston were invited, as was the ever-popular Bishop Michael J. O’Farrell, formerly of New York City but now the Bishop of Trenton, and Mayor Orestes Cleveland of Jersey City. Even Mark Twain was invited, though he did not attend. It was truly a democratic crowd, mostly Irish, mostly Roman Catholic, but inclusive of all sectors of economic and professional life. It was quite unlike the crowd that would be attending the centennial banquet at the Metropolitan Opera House.

Now it has to be said that there were some unique aspects about McAllister’s centennial banquet against which McSwyny could not expect to compete. He could go nose-to-nose in competition with many of the components that made up the banquet, to wit, the program of activities, the selection of the dinner choices

and the wines, the toasts, the music, and the dancing. But McAllister's centennial banquet had more than the attention of the rich. It had the attention of the Mayor of New York City and the Governor of New York because the two most important guests that evening would be the recently inaugurated President Benjamin Harrison and Vice President Levi Morton. McSwyny had decided to compete against a tough act.

The public was very aware of this of course, but it only added to the appeal of McSwyny's challenge. Under the title "That Other Centennial Banquet" the New York *Herald* noted that "requests to be counted in are coming in rapidly, and in spite of the counter centennial attraction at the Metropolitan Opera House on that evening there will be a distinguished company present."¹⁸ When the \$10 tickets were made available they sold "like hotcakes." Several accounts noted that McSwyny was "overwhelmed" by the public response, as the ticket sales quickly exceeded expectations.¹⁹ By April 15 the number of ticket holders was approaching five-hundred. By April 21 McSwyny was compelled to shut down the ticket sales. The tickets were sold from McSwyny's shop at 240 Broadway, so it is a safe bet that McSwyny was, at the very least, well-informed. It is important to note that when the press reported names and numbers of ticket holders, they were speaking of men's names only. That was the custom of the times. But the centennial banquets were not stag affairs, in both cases a ball followed the dinner. Five-hundred names on a list would in reality produce about one-thousand participants.

With a keen sense of situational awareness, McSwyny published the list of his "immortal 400" as soon as the ticket sales reached four hundred. Unlike his competitor McAllister, McSwyny was not about to hide his society under a bushel basket. Reporting on a by-line from New York, dated April 16, the Rockford, Illinois, *Daily Register* noted that the official list of McSwyny's 400 was published the previous Sunday, April 14. Where it was published on April 14 was not stated. However, two lengthy lists can be found: one in the Boston *Daily Globe* published the day of the banquet, assumedly

from a subscriber list, and one published in the New York *Press*, on the day following the banquet from observation of the attendees. Neither list is complete, but by comparing the two and the identities of attendees found in other articles, a near-complete list can be reconstructed. (That list is found at the end of this article.) There may be some double counts and some missing names, but in its present form the list is just shy of five hundred names. Students of nineteenth-century New York City Irish American history will recognize many names immediately. Descendants of nineteenth-century New York City Irish and Irish Americans may recognize their ancestors.

MCALLISTER'S DERAILING

While preparations proceeded apace with McSwyny's committees, preparation proceedings managed by McAllister had derailed him. McAllister had run afoul of two important people, Stuyvesant Fish and Elbridge Gerry, both key members of organization committees for the ball for which McAllister was chairman of the general committee and *de facto* manager of the ball. The spat was covered by the daily press and in postmortem accounts. It came to a head in mid-April, and McAllister was forced to resign from his positions of management. There were layers of discord and background internecine warfare contributing to this falling-out to be sure, but history records that McAllister set himself up for the fall. He had forgotten his place among people who thought he should have known better. So out he went. The "War of the Macs," so cleverly written, captured the dethroning of McAllister.²⁰ Not surprisingly, McAllister would not appear at the ball on April 30, the ball for which he had worked so hard for so long.

McSwyny was aware of McAllister's comeuppance, covered as it was so sensationally in the press. He may have even been aware of the discussion that if McAllister were to be present at all, the best he could expect was guest status, a mortifying fall from grace. We don't know if there was secret communication between the two, but we do know that McSwyny sent McAllister an invitation to his centennial banquet. The invitation was sent on Saturday, April 27, three days before the

Illustration:
The press and the public were eagerly following the riposte between McAllister and his kind and McSwyny and his kind. We don't know who leaked to the press the invitation communication shown in this clipping from the Philadelphia Times in April, 1889, but we may assume it was no mistake. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

PERSONAL AND PERTINENT

BRYAN MCSWYNY, the leader of the New York "500," has sent the following polite invitation to Ward McAllister:

"NEW YORK, April 27, 1889.

"WARD McALLISTER, Esq. :

" DEAR SIR: It affords me great pleasure to tender you a cordial invitation to the Centennial banquet at Delmonico's, April 30, 1889, for which I enclose ticket. Should you be able to favor us with your company we shall feel very much obliged. Awaiting a favorable reply, yours faithfully,

"BRYAN G. MCSWYNY.

"P. S.—A seat will be reserved for you near chairman."

And here is the equally courteous response :

"NO. 16 EAST SIXTEENTH STREET.

"Mr. Ward McAllister regrets extremely that absence from the city deprives him of the pleasure of accepting Mr. McSwyny's polite invitation to the Centennial celebration dinner, April 30, at half-past 6 o'clock.

"April 27, 1889."

• • •

banquet, late in allowing a social man time to clear his calendar. The response came back immediately: McAllister would be out of town. The *New York Times* reported with a dateline of Monday, April 29, that McAllister was then in Washington D. C. and not likely to return to New York City for any centennial events. Curiously, it would appear that McAllister left New York City for Washington about the time of, or shortly after, the time of McSwyny's invitation. If there was secret communication between the two it was not revealed to the press. The *New York Herald*, one of many newspapers to publish contents of the invitation and the response, described the exchange as "compliments exchanged in courteous terms between the two social autocrats."²¹

A DAY AND EVENING OF CELEBRATIONS

April 30 was indeed a great day of celebrations. The weather cooperated, the crowds were immense, and it was noted that everyone behaved civilly. As daytime activities came to

a close, many citizens went home to prepare for the evening's events. Those attending the centennial banquets went home to put on formal evening dress. Expectations ran high. The *New York Press* stated that "While McAllister's 400 are eating to the blessed memory of George Washington at the Metropolitan Opera House, Bryan McSwyny's 500 will be clinking glasses to the same sentiment at Delmonico's."²²

When McSwyny's guests entered Delmonico's they were greeted with the typical Delmonico's attention to detail and splendor. Red, white, and blue bunting and American flags were in abundance. No harp-bedecked green flags were to be seen. It was to be a very American patriotic event. It was noted that men of the bench, the bar, the church, the soldier, the reporter, and the tradesman were there, and most of them were first-generation Americans. It was also noted by one reporter who attended that the good-natured "jocular" which had so named the attendees "McSwyny's 400" was appreciated by the guests, who made some

mileage with it, noting among themselves that many of them had names that also began with "Mc." Patriotism and happy enthusiasm permeated the gathering.²³

Promptly at eight o'clock, guests were led to the dining room. Six tables were prepared for the diners; five arranged north-to-south and the head table arranged east-to-west. While red, white, and blue covered the walls, the table cloths were white, the candles were sheathed in red glass globes, and confectionaries on the tables held in decorative green paper. A program of four folded pages was placed before each diner, which included a commemorative front cover, followed by the toasts, the menu and, on the back, a listing of those responsible for the planning and production of the evening's event. In the typical treatment at Delmonico's, the menu was entirely in French, and the New York *Sun* reported that "there wasn't an English name on the menu except 'fruits,' and they were not in great demand."²⁴

McSwyny and his select party took their places at the head table while the other guests went to theirs. To McSwyny's right sat the ever-popular Bishop O'Farrell, formerly of New York and now bishop of Trenton, and next to him was Father James J. O'Dougherty, popular pastor of St. Monica's Church and recently elected chaplain of the 69th Infantry Regiment. Next to Father O'Dougherty sat Mayor Orestes Cleveland of Jersey City, the leading political orator of the evening, and Mayor "Pat" Gleason of Long Island City. To McSwyny's left sat Judge McAdam, the Honorable John E. Fitzgerald of Boston, the Honorable P. J. Gleason, the Honorable W. G. Stahlnecker, and the lawyer William Lane O'Neill. Other prominent men were also at the head table.

But there was one man absent from the head table, to whom an invitation had been sent. His absence was noted, and overheard comments were later printed in newspapers. The absent man was, of course, Ward McAllister. A *Press* reporter wrote that it was regretted that McAllister was absent, and that his absence was regretted for two reasons. First, it was hoped that McAllister could be coaxed into telling a few

stories about his adventures as a social leader and, second, it was hoped that he would reveal to this crowd of first-generation Americans "what we 'Centennial people' have thought of the show so far."²⁵ The reporter continued, with obvious tongue in cheek, that despite McAllister's absence, the evening was a great success. Why? Because "McSwyny was there. That accounts for it."²⁶ As the master of ceremonies, the extroverted McSwyny was in his element.

The orchestra was placed in a balcony above the diners and played throughout the dining. When the "Star Spangled Banner" was played, it was said that it was greeted with a great "Galway cheer."²⁷ Dinner was served, in ten courses, a typical Delmonico's banquet service. Wine flowed freely, and it no doubt contributed to the observation that formality lessened with each succeeding course, so that by the time the speeches were made formality had ceased altogether. It was nearly ten o'clock when McSwyny rapped his table with a gavel to command attention and silence. When all eyes were upon him he began the opening remarks:

*Tonight, above all other nights that have passed since the oldest of us was born, we are not politicians in the party sense. We are neither Democrats, Republicans, nor Irishmen tonight; we are Americans. It is true that most of us were born in Ireland, yet if you look at the more Irish districts of the city during the last two days you must have seen that they were more smothered with flags and bunting than the more prestigious mansions on the brownstone avenues.*²⁸

Letters of regret were read, and they included some from those attending the other banquet that night. Regrets were sent by Governor Hill, Mayor Grant, Archbishop Corrigan, and Patrick Egan, then arranging his transportation to Chile. A telegram was also read. The politician John E. Fitzgerald of Boston had wired: "Missed train. Awfully sorry. Two hundred thousand O's and Mc's of Boston send greetings to McSwyny's 400."²⁹ McSwyny then continued:

Gentlemen, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the response you have given to my idea of celebrating the Centennial of George Washington by this banquet. I regret exceedingly tonight that I have been restricted by Mr. Delmonico in regard to the number I would like to see around this festive board. You have tonight conferred a great honor on me—an honor which no wealth could purchase. You have also honored yourselves and your posterity in coming here tonight to do honor to the memory of one whose name is dear to every American citizen—the name of the immortal George Washington.

Gentlemen, in getting up this banquet I—that is, we—have been animated by a pure and patriotic motive in honoring Washington, first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen. Gentlemen, we have here tonight speakers who will give you the history of Washington from the beginning to the end and the best thing that I can do is to call upon them without delay.

McSwyny next introduced the keynote speaker Mayor Orestes Cleveland of Jersey City. (For the sake of brevity, descriptions of the following toasts, the presenters, and some remarks are presented in abbreviated form.) An observation and commentary on “The United States” was presented by the Mayor, and significant portions of his statement were reported in newspapers the next day.

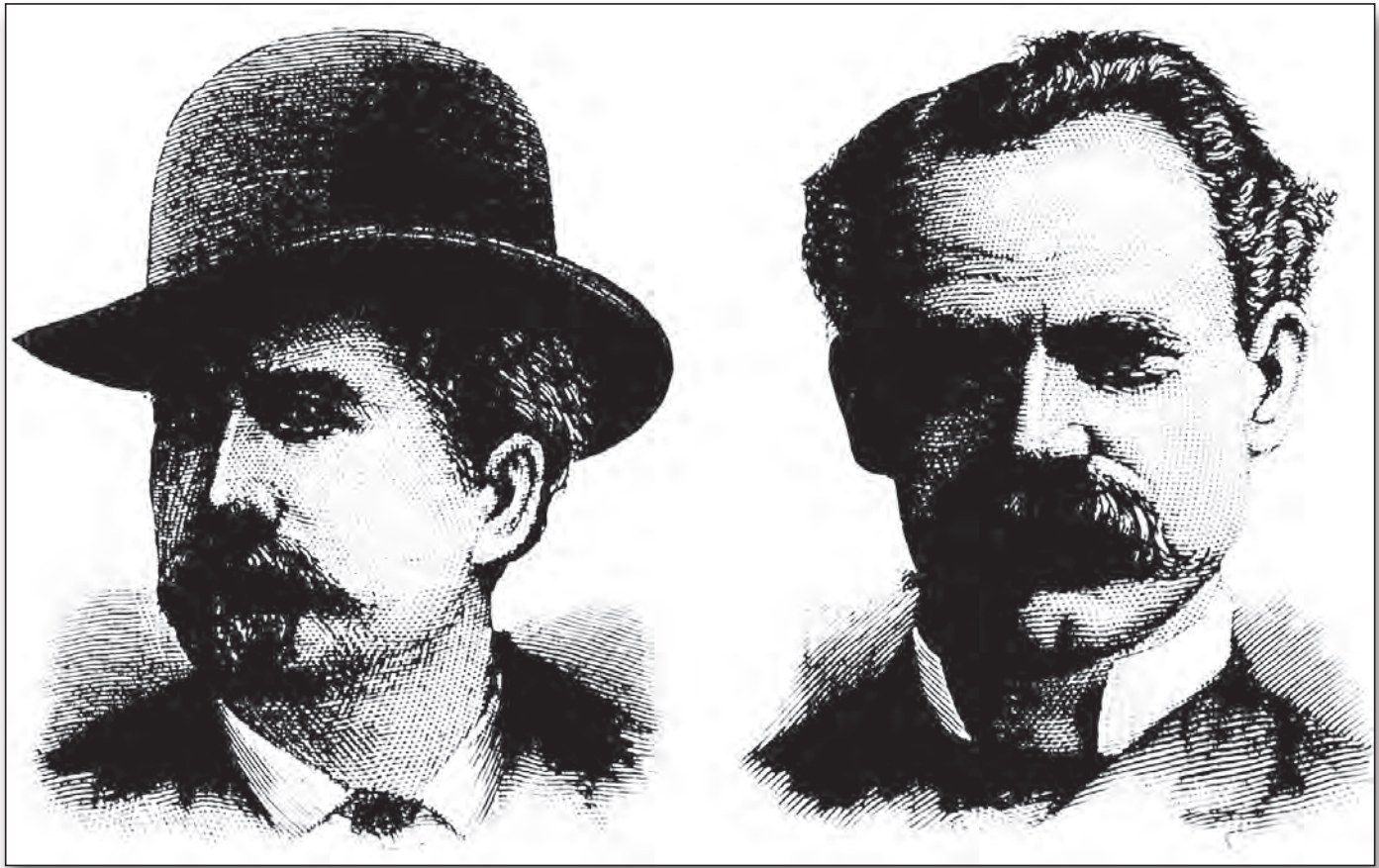
This was followed by an observation and commentary on “George Washington,” presented by Col. John O’Byrne, the Washington historian of the evening. Reflecting the sentiment that spawned the formation of McSwyny’s 400, Colonel O’Byrne could not resist taking a shot at New York City’s elite, stating that when the call for soldiers came in 1861 it was not the likes of McAllister’s 400 who rushed forward to fill the need, but rather “men like you and me, and not those fine people of whom we hear so much about.”³⁰

Next, an observation and toast on “The State and the City of New York” was presented

by Judge David McAdam. (Initially there were to be two toasts, one for the State of New York and one for the City of New York, but with letters of regret from Governor Hill and Mayor Grace the two toasts were merged.) Looking around the room at one thousand faces, Judge McAdam commented that it appeared the McAllister’s classes had been chased out by the McSwyny’s masses. In reviewing the history of the City, Judge McAdam noted that progress over the last one hundred years had been impressive, and he predicted that soon the City would extend its reach to Brooklyn and to Jersey City. He noted that it was a thrilling experience to see the entire country again united under one flag, as evidenced by those from all sectors of the country marching in the parade that day under the Stars and Stripes.

Additional observations and commentaries followed: “The Irish Representatives in Federal Hall in 1789” was presented by Bishop O’Farrell who spoke of the influence of Irish expatriates in molding politics, particularly in the United States, but also in other civilized countries around the world; observations on “The Thirteen Colonies of 1789—the Forty-two States of 1889” were presented by William Lane O’Neill; observations on “The Press” were presented by Professor Peter E. Tarpey; observations on “The Adopted Citizens” were presented by James J. Kelley for the absent John E. Fitzgerald, and observations on “The Ladies” were presented by Amos J. Cummings, a former newspaper man, a Congressman, and a former Civil War Sergeant Major whose valor would eventually be recognized by the awarding to him of the Medal of Honor.

At the conclusion of the speeches the ball began. It was near midnight. The dancing carried on for several hours, but the press was less interested in reporting on the dancing than on the speeches and recording those in attendance. The reports that appeared in the following day’s editions ended with closing comments suggesting the evening was a great success and those attending the banquet would not soon forget it. With the exception of one over-enthusiastic attendee, who sneaked into the orchestra balcony to offer an unsolicited song,



Ward McAllister

Bryan G. McSwyny

it was said by one observer that no discontent, no malcontent nor crank would mar the memory of such a delightful evening.

ONE MORE GATHERING

There would be only one more occasion for McSwyny's 400 to gather. The occasion was the first anniversary of the Washington Inaugural Centennial, celebrated exactly one year later, April 30, 1890, also held at Delmonico's. There was no counter banquet that night against which to compete, so the public's interest was not nearly as piqued and the press did not give the banquet nearly as much attention. The number of diners was trimmed to one hundred and fifty, while others gathered in the gallery to listen to the speeches. McSwyny did strive to maintain the momentum achieved the year before, securing

ex-President Grover Cleveland as the keynote speaker. The *New York Times* reporter covering the event commented that McSwyny's 400 was now more vigorous than it was a year ago. But the diminution in reporting by the media would seem to argue differently.

McSwyny's 400 had seen its high water point. As an impromptu response to a surprise invitation from Ward McAllister, McSwyny's 400 was a perfectly timed *tour de force*. McSwyny saw the wave, and he rode it. The public was, then as now, fickle. Yesterday's news does not sell. But McSwyny was not the only gadfly to observe that the king had no clothes. When McAllister slinked off to Washington D. C. to avoid the presidential banquet, one article said that he went off in a pout because the other 60,000,000 American citizens didn't share his belief in the importance of his 400.

Illustration:

These portraits were among eleven images on page titled "The Men Who Did It All" published in The National Police Gazette in May, 1889. The images referred to individuals who organized and managed centennial celebrations of the presidential inauguration of George Washington in New York. Under McAllister's portrait is written "The former chief of the Four Hundred," indicating his fall from grace. Under McSwyny's illustration is written "The present chief of the Five Hundred," acknowledging that McSwyny's masses had chased out McAllister's classes. Courtesy of National Police Gazette Archive.

The War of the Macs

BRYAN MCSWYNY STRIKES TERROR TO THE HEARTS OF MCALLISTER'S FOLK.

M'Allister's 400

They will have to look to their laurels.

Why?

Because there is a sturdy opponent in the field.

And who may the opponent be?

Bryan McSwyny's 500!

What?

Does the magic word "Ancestry" stand for naught? It seems so.

"But", cry the McAllister's, "we have all the front seats at the Centennial;

"We have all the boxes at the ball:

"We have all the favorite places in the quadrille.

"We have all the money that has been appropriated for the festivities. So we don't care.

The McAllister's battle cry is:

"We are the bosses."

There's trouble ahead.

Ward the Wary and his followers are in desperate straits.

The leader has just received a few knock-down blows.

Deposed, in fact, from his mighty throne!

The king is dead!

M'Swyny's 500

The eyes of the town are upon them.

Why?

Because they are expected to outrival a party.

And what party may that be?

Ward McAllister's 400!

What?

To be a 500 man does not necessarily mean blue blood. Red will do.

"The McAllister's may have front seats now, but they will take backs seats when we get at them.

"They can keep their boxes; we'll take the floor.

"They can dance in the quadrille. We are satisfied with the rest of the programme.

"They have all the money, and that is why we object.

The McSwyny's war cry is:

"We are the people."

So look out for squalls.

Bryan the Bold has seen the 400 and gone them one better.

He has just been proclaimed king.

He wears his honors like a true ruler.

Long live the king!

Illustration:
The "War of the Macs" was a cleverly written synopsis of the rivalry in spring 1889 between the McAllister camp and the McSwyny camp. Published in the society column of the Evening Telegram in New York on April 18, it captured the latest actions, including McAllister's derailing and McSwyny's ticket sales hitting the five-hundred mark. We don't have to read past the subtitle to know the sympathies of the author. Ward the Wary is dead, long live Bryan the Bold! Courtesy of New York Public Library.

A POST-SCRIPT TO THEIR LIVES

Because Ward McAllister and Bryan McSwyny were such attention-getting characters in their day, sharing time on the public stage, a post-script to their lives after these events of 1889–1890 may satisfy some remaining interest. Life would move forward for both, but not in the direction either would have willingly chosen. By March, 1891, McSwyny's personal issues were crowding out his public interests. Debts had accumulated and, worse, it was discovered that he had a secret life for years with a second wife, Bella Malone, and that he had a family with her. He was sued for alimony, jailed, pursued

by creditors, deserted by friends, and finally brought down, most likely, by his own hand. He was found unconscious in his store the night of June 7, 1893, by firemen responding to a fire that appeared to have started in his store. It was suspected to have been started by McSwyny, but the cause was never definitively determined. It was hoped that McSwyny would recover in the hospital and talk. But less than a day after he was found unconscious in his store he succumbed to the effects of smoke inhalation. The end was sad and tawdry. Both Catherine McSwyny, the wronged wife, and the family of Bella Malone made claims to his corpse. Despite

Catherine McSwyny's best attempts to find a sympathetic priest, McSwyny was denied burial in Calvary Cemetery. When he was laid to rest in non-denominational Greenwood Cemetery only three people came to mourn and bear witness; his wife Catherine, his brother Cornelius, and the leader of the Fenian "dynamiters," Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa.

McAllister was soon to be on the way out too. He had been commissioned to write a book about his experiences as a social leader, which he did. His book, *Society as I Found It*, was published in mid-1890. He had given interviews in advance of publication, and there was great anticipation. When the book was published, however, many of McAllister's associates, colleagues, and friends thought that he had over-stepped acceptable boundaries. One wit wrote a parody called *Society As It Found Me Out*, also published in 1890.³¹

Several public social faux pas followed, and the elite began to distance themselves from him. When McAllister finally published his list of 400 in February 1892, it was thought by some that he did so to revive his reputation. It did not work. The list was scrutinized. It listed only 319 names, included dead people, and it was criticized. McAllister continued to offer advice on manners, food, and wine, but his reputation had lost its luster. His health deteriorated in his final years, and he died on January 31, 1895. His funeral was covered by the press, and photographed, but Mrs. Astor, his one-time sponsor and the person who most benefited from his diligent service, did not bother to attend. As a parting comment on a man of manners, it was said that if McAllister had known that Mrs. Astor would not attend, it would have killed him.³²

McSwyny's 400—The List

Ackerman, Gunther	Brennan, T.	Callahan, John	Conlan, Lewis
Angel, Judge	Breslin, J.	Cantor, A., Hon.	Connelly, Andrew
Banks, G.	Breslin, M.	Carey, Edward	Conolly, Michael
Barry, E., M.D.	Brockway, H.	Carroll, Howard	Conolly, Daniel
Bartholomew, George	Brown, D.	Case, Gabe	Costello, Thomas
Blessing, G.	Brown, Edmund	Caslin, P.	Costello, Augustine
Blissart, Robert	Brown, H.	Casperfeld, H.	Costigan, Thomas, Hon.
Bogan, James	Brown, L., Colonel	Clancy, C., Hon.	Coyle, Hugh
Bolger, Thomas	Brown, Martin	Clancy, James	Cowan, H.
Bond, Thomas	Brown, Nicholas	Clare, H.	Crane, Michael
Boyd, R.	Buck, H., M.D.	Clark, Joseph	Creamer, J., Hon.
Bradley, J., Hon.	Bujac, P.	Cleveland, Orestes	Cremin, M.D.
Brady, Jerome	Burke, M.D.	Coates, J.	Crenmar, P., M.D.
Brady, Phillip	Burke, J.	Cockerill, John	Crimmins, Thomas
Brady, Thomas	Burke, R., Rev.	Coffee, William	Croker, George
Braun, Henry	Burke, William	Cole, William, Hon.	Cuming, J.
Breckelmaier, F.	Byrne, Thomas	Coleman, James	Cummings, Amos,
Brennan, Michael	Byrnes, Inspector	Colner, P.	Cummings, J.
Brennan, N.	Cahill, Edward	Coney, D.	Cummings, Charles

Cunningham, J.	Fellows, John, Hon.	Henderson, Andrew	Langdon, R., Hon.
Curly, T.	Fenlon, John	Hennessey, A.	Layman, J.
Curry, Edmund	Fennelly, Michael	Hennessey, C.	Leavy, Joseph
Curry, J.	Ferrigan, Hugh	Hennessy, John	Levy, F., Hon.
Dalton, Peter	Fine, Christopher	Henken, F.	Loeb, F.
Dana, E.	Fitzgerald, Edward	Herbert, John	Loftus, John
Dawson, William	Fitzgerald, James	Hermann, H.	Loonie, Denis
Deery, Michael	Fitzgerald, John	Hicks, M.	Lowry, Thomas
Delany, John	Fitzgerald, John	Higgins, C.	Lyman, J., M.D.
Desmond, John	Fitzpatrick, James	Hill, James, Hon.	Lyons, J.
Devine, John	Flack, J., Hon.	Hill, J.	MacDonald, Henry
Dickenson, Thomas	Flynn, Edward	Hogan, E., Hon.	Mack, John
Dillon, Joseph	Ford, Augustine	Holehan, Maurice	Mackin, J.
Dillon, J.	Ford, Patrick	Holland, D.	MacMahon, T., Gen.
Diver, P., Hon.	Fox, John, Hon.	Hooser, John	Magennis, P.
Dobbins, Percy	Fox, Patrick	Hopecraft, George	Maguire, James
Docharty, Augustus	Frost, J.	Hopkins, Francis	Malone, Patrick
Donlin, P., M.D.	Gannon, J.	Hopkins, Thornton	Martin, Bernard
Donahue, J.	Galligan, Bernard	Howard, John	Martin, P.
Donahue, P.	Geoghegan, William	Howard, Joseph	McAdam, David
Donohue, Hon.	Gerken, F.	Hyatt, George	McAlleenan, Henry
Doran, Michael	Gibbons, Austin	Hynes, F.	McAlpine, D.
Dougherty, J., Rev.	Giblin, Michael	Jacobs, F.	McBreen, P.
Drew, James	Gill, James	Jackson, H.	McCabe, Frank
Drew, H.	Gilmore, Patrick	Jackson, L.	McCaffery, Robert
Driscoll, C.	Gilroy, Thomas	Johnston, Louis	McCaffery, John, Hon.
Duffy, George	Gleason, Patrick	Jones, G.	McCann, John
Duffy, Edward, Major	Glynn, M.	Journey, Edward	McCann, Patrick
Dunphy, James	Goff, John Hon.	Joyce, H.	McCarthy, John
Early, John	Grinnon, Daniel	Kaughran, John	McCarthy, John
Ecclesine, T., Hon.	Griffin, Matthew	Kavanaugh, P.	McCarthy, Owen
Ehrlich, Simon, Hon.	Giffin, Michael	Kean, J., Rev.	McCarthy, William
Ehret, George	Guerin, Michael	Keicher, John	McChyrstal, Michael
Elliot, W.	Guinan, Thomas	Keicher, John, Jr.	McCloskey, James
Ellis, J.	Hagan, Thomas	Kelley, J.	McClure, David
Ellsworth, Joseph, Captain	Hall, Charles	Kelly, James, Rev.	McConnell, John
Emmett, T., M.D.	Hall, E., Hon.	Kelly, John, Rev.	McConville, James
Evans, J.	Hall, Edward	Kelly, Joseph, Rev.	McCorkle, Walter
Everard, James	Hall, George	Kelly, Thomas, M.D.	McCormack, M.
Fallon, Owen	Halloran, John	Kelly, Thomas, Rev.	McCormick, H.
Farell, E.	Hanly, Daniel, Hon.	Kennedy, Roderick	McCormick, John
Farrell, James	Harper, E.	Killkelly, M.	McCuska, A.
Farrell, W.	Harrigan, Edward	King, Hugh	McDonald, J.
Farley, Terrance,	Haverty, P.	Kirkpatrick, Thomas	McDonald, J.
Farley, E.	Hawley, Jesse	Kreuschman, P., M.D.	McDonnell, John
Fay, J., Captain	Healy, Gabriel, Rev.	Kruger, Theo	McDonnell, Peter
Fay, James	Healy, J.	La Fay, James	McDonough, P.
Feitner, Thomas	Heiser, Charles	Lalor, J.	McDowell, James

McGeary, John	Mullaney, J.	Paddock, A.	Skinner, E.
McGlynn, David	Mullins, John	Parker, Eugene	Slater, M.
McGovern, J.	Mulry, W.	Parker, James	Spellman, John
McGowan, Hon.	Murphy, Patrick	Parsell, W.	Stahlnecker, W., Hon.
McGroarty, John	Murphy, P.	Payne, O., M.D.	Slatterly, E., Rev.
McGuinness, Owen	Murray, Peter, Hon.	Payne, William	Slevin, J., Hon.
McGuinness, Peter	Murray, Thomas	Penny, William	Smyth, Frederick, Hon.
McGuire, C., M.D.	Nagel, John, M.D.	Perry, Charles	Spellissy, D.
McGuire, Edward	Nannery, Thomas	Perry, C., Dr.	Staples, Earnest
McGurk, E.	Naughton, Bernard	Philben, Stephen	Steckler, A., Hon.
McInerey, John, M.D.	Naughton, James	Plankett, William, Hon.	Stein, C.
McIntyre, John, Hon.	Nehrbras, Charles, Hon.	Power, John	Stevenson, Vernard
McKea, John	Newschafer, W., Hon.	Power, Maurice, Hon.	Stradey, C.
McKeen, William	Nicholson, John	Prince, R.	Strauss, E.
McKenna, W.	Nolan, William	Purroy, H., Hon.	Strong, A., M.D.
McLaughlin, M.	Nooney, R., Hon.	Quinlan, J., Colonel	Sullivan, John
McLaughlin, M.	Norton, Michael, Hon.	Quinlin, J.	Sullivan, Richard
McLaughlin, William	Nugent, John	Quinn, John	Sweeney, J., M.D.
McMahon, Bryan	O'Beirne, James, Gen.	Quinn, James	Sweeney, J.
McNamee, P.	O'Brien, M., Hon.	Quinn, Patrick	Sweeney, B.
McManoney, E.	O'Brien, J.	Reed, James	Sweeney, W.
McManus, John	O'Brien, James	Reilly, Bernard, Hon.	Talcott, James
McManus, P.	O'Byrne, J., Colonel	Reilly, Edward	Tarpey, Peter
Mcmanus, Phillip	O'Connell, James	Reilly, John	Taylor, M.D.
McNally, J.	O'Connell, Thomas	Reilly, John, Hon.	Thurber, Frank
McNamara, J., M.D.	O'Connor, T.	Reilly, M.	Tilly, M.
McQuade, John, Hon.	O'Donahue, James	Reilly, P.	Turner, S.
McQuirk, Phillip	O'Donnell, M.	Roche, James	Twomey, John
McShane, William	O'Donohue, Joseph	Rockwell, Peroy	Twomey, Thomas
McSorley, Alex	O'Donohue, Timothy	Rogers, Charles	Vancott, Daniel
McSorley, John	O'Farrell, Dominick	Rogers, John	Van Hosen, Hon.
McSweeney, M.D.	O'Farrell, Michael, Bishop	Riordan, John	Waldron, Hugh
McSwyny, Bryan	O'Gorman, James	Rourke, James	Wall, J.
McSwyny, Cornelius	O'Hara, Bryan	Ruppert, Jacob	Wallace, W., M.D.
Meehan, Thomas	O'Hara, J.	Ryan, J., Captain	Wallace, J.
Melan, John	O'Hara, P.	Ryan, Joseph	Walsh, Henry
Messemer, M., M.D.	O'Leary, John	Scanlon, M.	Walsh, J.
Meyer, Phillip	Oliver, J.	Scannell, Roger, Colonel	Walsh, P., Rev.
Milligan, Phillip	O'Meagher, William, M.D.	Schultze, Lewis, M.D.	Walsh, Simon
Mitchell, James	O'Neill, Frank	Scully, D.	Walters, R.
Mitchell, William	O'Neill, Hugh	Sewell, C.	Ward, John
Moore, J.	O'Neill, John	Sewell, R.	Welde, Charles, Hon.
Moran, W., Colonel	O'Neill, William	Shayne, C.	Whalen, John
Morgan, John	O'Rourke, Charles	Shea, John	White, Andrew, Hon.
Moriarity, John	O'Shaughnessy, E.	Shea, John	Wills, Thomas
Moriarity, Thaddeus	O'Sullivan, John	Sheehy, Edward	Wilson, Des
Mortimer, Captain	O'Sullivan, S.	Shiels, Thomas, Hon.	Winton, H., D.Ed.
Moynahan, R.	O'Toole, Peter	Shrady, J., M.D.	Wiseman, W., Rev.

Endnotes

- 1 See *New York Social Diary*, a website that keeps tabs on New York's rich and sensational. It periodically publishes a current list of the 400: <http://www.newyorksocialdiary.com/social-diary/2015/400-list-time-marches-on>.
- 2 Reputed to have been stated to a *New York Tribune* reporter on March 24, 1888 and quoted here from the *Patriot*, Harrisburg, PA, June 7, 1888, p. 3.
- 3 McAllister was so fond of his lists that some dubbed him "Make-A-Lister." It is likely that McAllister did have a list of 400 in 1888, but he refused to release it until 1892. See *New York Times*, February 16, 1892, p. 5.
- 4 "Who is McAllister?" in *St. Louis Republic*, April 13, 1889, p. 13.
- 5 *Daily Register*, Rockford, Ill., April 16, 1889, p. 4.
- 6 *Evening Telegram*, New York, April 18, 1889, p. 2.
- 7 *Illustrated New York: The Metropolis of Today*, 1888, New York, p. 247.
- 8 *New York Times*, June 8, 1893, p. 5.
- 9 *New York World*, May 6, 1866, p. 5.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *New York World*, April 7, 1889, p. 14.
- 12 One contemporary account disputed the notion that McSwyny actually purchased a ticket. But his name is found on the subscriber list, evidence that he had indeed purchased a ticket. See Bowen, Clarence Winthrop, ed. *The History of the Centennial Celebration of the Inauguration of George Washington As First President of the United States*. New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1892, p. 265.
- 13 *New York World*, April 7, 1889, p. 14.
- 14 *New York Press*, April 15, 1889, p. 1. The comment that ordinary citizens could dance on the same floor as Washington's opponents was a slap at the Patriarchs, a subset of McAllister's clientele, who claimed descent from the earliest settlers, many of whom did not stand with Washington during the years of the Revolution.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *New York Evening Telegram*, April 18, 1889, p. 2.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *New York Herald*, April 22, 1889, p. 4.
- 19 *Irish-American Weekly*, New York, May 4, 1889, p. 4.
- 20 Details of the spat can be found in *Illustrated Programme of the Centennial Celebrations in New York*, New York: J. S. Ogilvie, 1889, pp. 5–7 (available online). See also *New York Times*, April 15, 1889, p. 1. Readers noting the name Elbridge Gerry in the dethroning of McAllister may also recall the name from current political reporting. The Elbridge Gerry living in New York in 1889 was the grandson of the Elbridge Gerry of gerrymandering fame. That Elbridge Gerry was a member of the Continental Congress, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, a governor of Massachusetts, and the fifth vice president of the United States. As governor of Massachusetts he signed a law in 1812 to allow re-drawing of voting districts to favor his political party.
- 21 *New York Herald*, April 29, 1889, p. 6.
- 22 *New York Press*, April 15, 1889, p. 1.
- 23 *New York Herald*, May 1, 1889, p. 6.
- 24 *Sun*, New York, May 1, 1889, p. 5.
- 25 *New York Press*, May 1, 1889, p. 4.
- 26 *New York Press*, May 1, 1889, p. 4.
- 27 *Alton Telegraph*, May 3, 1889, p. 1.
- 28 *Irish-American Weekly*, New York, May 11, 1889, p. 3.
- 29 *New York Herald*, May 1, 1889, p. 6.
- 30 *New York Press*, May 1, 1889, p. 4.
- 31 Thompson, Alfred. *Society as it Found Me Out*. New York: Carlton-Regand, 1890.
- 32 Ethan Mordden gives us this taste of black humor on page 7 of his book, *The Guest List*. He states that "In an old joke, had McAllister been alive by then this (failure of Mrs. Astor to attend his funeral) would have killed him."