

# The Donegal Colony in Brooklyn

BY JOHN T. RIDGE

**Illustration:**  
An artist's depiction of the Brooklyn Navy Yard and environs early in the 1800s. The Navy Yard opened in 1801, and many Irish found employment there throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

In the early years of the nineteenth century Donegal immigrants began to penetrate deep into the heart of Brooklyn life, and over the next two centuries they played significant roles in developing the commercial and social life of the borough. As they built communities, churches, businesses, and schools, they took care of each other through formal organizations and informal groups. They also left unusual and sometimes startling stories behind in their struggles to build a new life in America.



## EARLY DONEGAL SETTLEMENT IN BROOKLYN

Donegal settlement in Brooklyn pre-dated the first Roman Catholic Church of St. James which was founded in 1822. According to the *Brooklyn Eagle*:

*...there was some Catholic population dating from the opening of the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1801: and the advent of a lot of families from Derry and Donegal, among them the parents of the future Cardinal McCloskey. For more than half a century after the Pro-Cathedral was dedicated, the overwhelming majority of Brooklyn and Long Island Catholics were Irish in stock.<sup>1</sup>*

Derry was a city with many trades, including shipbuilding, and the establishment of the Navy Yard “gave employment to hundreds of mechanics in various shipbuilding trades and soon there was a rush of Irish immigrants, mostly from Catholic Donegal and Derry.”<sup>2</sup>

They settled in St. James parish and around the Fulton Ferry, the gateway from Manhattan to Brooklyn.<sup>3</sup> Part of this area, near the western Navy Yard wall, was originally a settlement named Vinegar Hill, named after a decisive, but ill-fated, battle of the 1798 Irish rebel-

lion. It later became known as Irishtown and held onto some of its Irish population up to World War I.

One of the early settlers in Brooklyn was James Furey, who found employment at the Navy Yard as did later his son:

*Mr. James Furey was probably one of the earliest Catholic settlers in Brooklyn. He came out from the County Donegal, Ireland, in 1798 and located in Brooklyn not long after his advent to this country. He lived here until his death, as did also his brother, Robert. They were well known and respected citizens in their day and were among the founders of St. James Church.<sup>4</sup>*

The oldest tombstone in St. James churchyard was that of John O'Connor, a native of the parish of Kildinig, County Donegal, who died in 1822, at age 36. He was supposed to have been a grocer with a shop in Cherry Street in Manhattan.<sup>5</sup> Among the few legible stones in the churchyard were John Loughrey, 1823; John Campbell, 1836, and his brother James in 1852; John Dawson, 1837; Neal Carney, 1837 and the Rev. James Doherty, 1841, age 33, an early pastor of the church.<sup>6</sup>

The most noteworthy Donegal family to be buried in the old churchyard was the family

of Brooklyn's legendary political boss, Hugh McLaughlin, whose father, also named Hugh, was a native of Clonca (Cloncae) parish, and died in 1835. Around him are numerous other McLaughlins of this powerful Brooklyn clan. Donegal connections radiated from this political family to many individuals connected with public office and government positions right down to the death of politician Hugh in 1904.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to these Catholic trailblazers from Donegal, Brooklyn had a large immigrant population of Donegal-born Irish Protestants, and this included at least one prominent Brooklyn clergyman, the Rev. William Morrison, rector of All Saints Episcopal Church in Park Slope. Morrison's father, Stephen, also a clergyman and rector of a Donegal Church of Ireland congregation, was a supporter of the Irish Home Rule Movement. On a visit home to his native county in 1903, the Brooklyn rector penned a lengthy report on his travels for the *Brooklyn Eagle* which detailed a somewhat negative picture of poverty, especially in the ancestral district of Brooklyn's political boss McLaughlin.

Other early Donegal settlers in Brooklyn were immigrants engaged in the leather and hides trade that was centered in the swampy district in Manhattan just to the north of the present City Hall. The leather trade continued to have a large Donegal element right up to World War I with many Brooklyn Donegal men involved in the industry.<sup>8</sup> A struggle for political power was waged largely on sectional considerations between the Donegal people and the Kerry and Cork contingent in the downtown wards, but the latter counties remained dominant. This was not the case across the river in Brooklyn where Donegal immigrants and their descendants became the leading Irish sectional group.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE BROOKLYN DONEGAL ASSOCIATION

In the history of county societies in New York, only two, Donegal and Antrim, were for long periods of time active only in Brooklyn. The Donegal Association in Brooklyn can be traced back to 1872 when it was initiated in



#### Photo:

*St. James Pro-Cathedral in the old Irish town neighborhood was the bridgehead for many of the early Donegal immigrants. In 1932, tombstones marking the graves of some of Brooklyn's Irish pioneers could still be easily found. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

Manhattan, and where meetings were held for more than fifteen years.<sup>10</sup> It was a society composed of members from both New York and Brooklyn, with the two leading figures in the organization in 1882, for example, being its president Daniel G. McGowan, an East Side real estate broker, and Patrick Brennan, from Brooklyn, an accountant for the A&P grocery chain. It was Brennan who secured the famous journalist and writer, James Redpath, to lecture at a mass meeting at Cooper Union in December, 1882, for the "benefit of the distressed people of Donegal."<sup>11</sup>

The Donegal Association in 1886 threw its support behind the striking workers of the Third Avenue Railroad in Manhattan and affiliated transport lines in Brooklyn. At a regular meeting, it passed a resolution urging its membership to boycott the transport lines until they came to an agreement with the labor unions. A humorous newspaper account told the story of President McGowan and his powerful friend, Manhattan's ex-sheriff Bernard Reilly, boarding a Brooklyn-bound car and stuffing extra cash into the fare box in the belief they were supporting a union line only to learn they had just helped finance an affiliate strike-bound line headed for Brooklyn.<sup>12</sup> In the 1890s, the Central Labor Union worked closely with the society, frequently furnishing a delegation to support Brooklyn Donegal events.<sup>13</sup>

All the socials and public events of the

*John Ridge is a contributor to the commemorative book, The 1916 Easter Rising: New York and Beyond, published in 2016 by the United Irish Counties. His last article for New York Irish History, "Wrong Way Corrigan & the New York Irish" appeared in volume 32. He is president of the New York Irish History Roundtable and lives in Brooklyn. ©2020. Published with permission of John T. Ridge.*

*Photo:  
The oldest drydock  
in the old  
Brooklyn Navy  
Yard. Basic ele-  
ments for it were  
built before the  
American Civil  
War, during a  
period when many  
workmen were  
immigrants from  
Donegal. Courtesy  
of John T. Ridge.*



Donegal Association were held in Manhattan up to 1888, but in January of that year the weekly *Irish American* described the organization as “a social and benevolent organization of Brooklyn” that “comprises members who reside in New York, Brooklyn, Jersey City and vicinity.”<sup>14</sup> It was stated that “until recently it has been holding its meetings in New York,” but from this point in time in 1888 the meetings of the Donegal Association were switched to Brooklyn, initially at Carlin’s Hall on Myrtle Avenue, just south of the Brooklyn Navy Yard.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the shift for the site of the regular meetings, the next scheduled event of the society was a benefit lecture and entertainment on April 12, 1888, at Manhattan’s Cooper Union “to raise funds for the defense of Father McFadden of Gweedore and Father Daniel Stephens of Ballyshannon.”<sup>16</sup> In June, the Rev. James Nash of Sacred Heart parish (Fort Greene) was allowed by the County Down-born bishop of Brooklyn, John Loughlin, to act as treasurer for the fund. Loughlin was familiar with the Gweedore district and at one time had “many old friends there.”<sup>17</sup>

A meeting in Brooklyn in February, 1889, was held in response to a published appeal:

*The recent barbarous evictions on the Olphert estate, in Falcarragh and Cloughaneely, in the bleak wilds of dark Donegal, when a dozen poor families were cruelly forced from their homes and firesides, in the cold of Winter, to perish of hunger by the roadside, or in the ditches (for aught the tyrant landlord and Balfour’s military cared), will be brought before the meeting for discussion and final action. Your correspondent therefore appeals to all Donegal men, their sons, and friends in New York, Brooklyn and Jersey City, to attend this meeting in order that means may be adopted to assist the families who were thus so inhumanely evicted; and to pass resolutions of sympathy for the forty brave undaunted Donegal men, who were arrested and conveyed to Derry jail, for no crime, save their valor, in defending their families and homes.<sup>18</sup>*

In March, a benefit was held in Brooklyn for the first time, the initial event at Uris' Novelty Hall on Fulton Street, again in the district south of the Navy Yard. The proceeds were turned over to the "suffering peasantry on the Gweedore and Cloughaneely estates in Ireland."<sup>19</sup>

The transition of the Donegal Association from Manhattan to Brooklyn was apparently a decision made with the full support of the old membership. Manhattan resident Daniel G. McGowan continued for a while as president in Brooklyn, although by 1889, Patrick Brennan, a Brooklyn man, became the new president. His supporting committee included just about all the former Manhattan officers of the 1880s including Edward F. Freel, another ex-president and one of Brooklyn's largest contractors, whose projects dotted the metropolitan area.<sup>20</sup>

A thousand dollars was raised for the "Father McFadden Fair Trial Fund." The effort included the systemized canvassing of the principal parishes where Donegal immigrants congregated. In one sweep of the St. Patrick's parish, located on Kent Avenue south of the eastern side of the Navy Yard, \$112 was collected from eighty-nine individual donors.<sup>21</sup> Patrick Brennan spoke of the special role Brooklyn played among Donegal immigrants:

The president called the attention of the members to the fact that Donegal was the only county that had an organization to represent it in Brooklyn, and the reason was that a large percentage of the people of that historic landlord-ridden county became useful citizens and established their home in this beautiful and flourishing Democratic city of Brooklyn. The association was neither selfish nor sectional, but simply established and maintained for social enjoyment among the members, and when occasion required to assist their oppressed brethren in the bleak wilds of Donegal and defend their noble and patriotic priests when ruthlessly thrown into prison by the abominable coercion laws of the "Monster Balfour."<sup>22</sup>

Patrick Brennan, although active in various projects of the society for more than a



*Illustration: Father James McFadden from Gweedore in Donegal was arrested and imprisoned for alleged political crimes in 1888. He was the inspiration for many of the early activities of the Donegal Association following its move to Brooklyn from Manhattan in that same year. Father McFadden later came to Brooklyn to collect money on behalf church building projects. A fluent Irish speaker, he also rallied Brooklyn's Irish language societies to support of the Gaelic Revival. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

decade, was president of the association for less than two years. He had visited Ireland during the summer of 1888 and often spoke from personal experience of the conditions of the tenants in Ireland and of the cruelty of the evictions.<sup>23</sup> Brennan was transferred by his company in 1890 to Birmingham, Alabama, where he continued in his spare time as a local political leader and advocate for the cause of his native country.<sup>24</sup> The *Brooklyn Eagle* published a tribute to Brennan soon after his death:

*Mr. Brennan was born in County Donegal, Ireland, and was a loyal supporter of the Irish cause. He was the leading promoter in gathering the funds used in the liberation of Father McFadden, who incurred the enmity of the English government, and the money which Mr. Brennan raised he carried home in person and was present at the liberation of the priest.<sup>25</sup>*

A new president, Thomas Breslin, was elected to replace Brennan in April 1890. He was active in the labor movement and not yet 30 years of age. Patrick D. Sweeney, who served as one of three trustees, was also a young union

*Photo: The Knox Hat factory was founded by a family from the town of Ramelton who were active in supporting the Irish Brigade during the Civil War. They provided employment for many fellow immigrants from Donegal. The large factory building still stands on St. Marks Avenue where the cornerstone is plainly visible. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*



activist in the plumber's union.<sup>26</sup> Most of the other members were probably under 30 as age restrictions applied for eligible admission in the society in order to function financially soundly as a "Protective and Benevolent Association." Members paid significant dues in order that sick and death benefits could be provided. Hugh Sweeney, the sergeant-at-arms, was, at age 48, an exception. He was a former owner of a small coal mine in Pennsylvania who had come to work in Brooklyn as a foreman of the crosstown cars.<sup>27</sup> Another older member, Columb Roarty, served as a trustee in 1893 and was a "leather expert" for a wholesale commercial firm.<sup>28</sup>

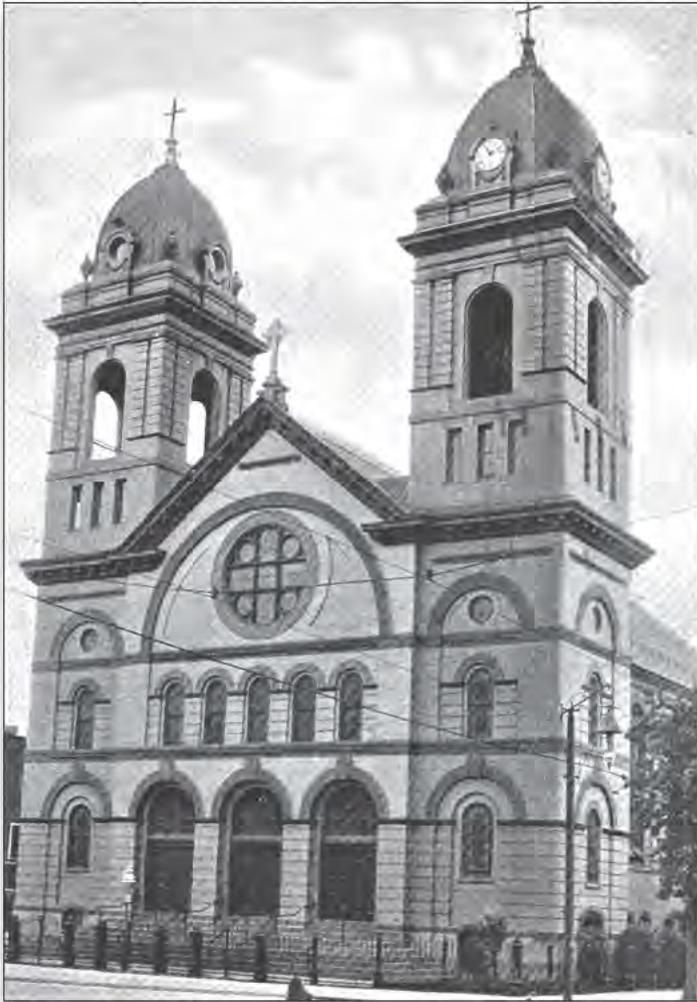
The transplanted Brooklyn Donegal Association prospered among the large number of people from that part of Ireland who had settled in Brooklyn. In 1890, it was stated by the auditing committee that the "membership during the last year increased considerably" and the "the association is stronger in membership at the present time than it has been at any time since its inauguration."<sup>29</sup> In 1895, 132 members attended a regular meeting at Occawanna Hall, Myrtle Avenue. Almost \$1,700 was in the treasury. Typically, about five-hundred people attended the annual ball of the association.<sup>30</sup> When a fierce storm struck Brooklyn in February 1899, about one-

hundred loyal members still turned out only to find the hall completely closed. It was so cold that the hall's gas pipes had frozen and no lighting was available.<sup>31</sup>

The annual picnic was another popular event for the Donegal Association: "the gathering being one of those family affairs where everyone is acquainted with everybody else."<sup>32</sup> In the 1890s and almost up to World War I, the picnic was held on the Queens border in Ridgewood Park (Grove) where the music began at two in the afternoon in a large hall for "American" dancing and in two smaller "jig" halls. Patrons commonly brought their own luncheons, served after the children enjoyed the "wild animals," the carousel, and the swings. Athletic competitions were held, including in 1891 the debut of a Donegal Football Team.<sup>33</sup> The football team made irregular appearances at the annual picnic, but was still competing in 1913.<sup>34</sup> The last of the picnics were held in Ulmer Park in the Gravesend neighborhood of southwest Brooklyn, not far from Coney Island.

The visit of the Primate of all Ireland, James J. Logue, in 1908, for the 100th anniversary of the Diocese of New York, was as close to a visit of Irish royalty as one could get from a country without a king. The Donegal Association's Roger Gallagher, a carpet store retailer, was given the honor of welcoming the dignitary to Brooklyn and presenting the members of the association to the Donegal-born prelate. The visiting clergyman replied warmly: "Cardinal Logue said that it was true that he had been born in that county and that he was glad of it. If I had not been educated for the priesthood, he said, I might have been a member of the association."<sup>35</sup>

After World War I, the Brooklyn Donegal Association remained active, but not as active as it had been in the pre-war period. A Donegal Ladies Auxiliary was begun in 1908 with fifty-four members, but it never was as stable an organization as the men's.<sup>36</sup> The men's society had perhaps one big attraction that the Manhattan counterpart did not offer. Sick Benefits were paid at the rate of \$5 a week for thirteen weeks, and a death benefit of \$75



was paid to the widow and family. New members, consequently, were restricted to ages 18 through 45.<sup>37</sup> Works of charity were also performed for non-members. When a homeless Donegal immigrant passed away in 1933 without anyone claiming his body, the association stepped in to pay all costs for a mass at St. Teresa's and a funeral in order to prevent a burial in Potter's Field.<sup>38</sup>

As noted above, the Brooklyn Donegal Association settled comfortably into a steady routine of social events such as dances, picnics, and excursions in the period up to World War I. In all this time, the organization usually met on or near Myrtle Avenue, a street that stretched from downtown Brooklyn eastward to the Queens border and beyond. Except for the occasional venue for a dance in downtown Brooklyn, the world of Donegal was concen-

trated south of the Navy Yard, mainly in the old 9th and 7th Wards, and in, for the most part, the three Catholic parishes of St. Joseph's, St. Patrick's (Kent Avenue) and, increasingly, St. Teresa's. The area was a part of Brooklyn with a mix of residential neighborhoods and busy commercial enterprises ranging from light to heavy manufacturing.

Although Donegal residents of Manhattan continued to patronize the activities of their Brooklyn brethren, a separate organization continued to function in Manhattan, but it was in no way nearly as successful as the one across the river. Donegal-born pastor of Holy Cross Church in midtown, Charles McCready, in 1890 acted as the treasurer for a separate Manhattan collection for Father McFadden's defense fund.<sup>39</sup> Although there is evidence of further activity in the 1890s, the Manhattan

Donegal group apparently died out until revived about 1903.<sup>40</sup> From that point on, two Donegal societies, Manhattan and Brooklyn, operated separately until an amalgamation in 1939.<sup>41</sup>

#### HELPING THE HOME COUNTY

The success of the fund-raising efforts of the Donegal Association on behalf of Father McFadden and the evicted tenants in Ireland alerted church officials in Ireland to the possibilities of raising funds for the church in Ireland in Brooklyn. In 1892 two Donegal priests arrived to collect funds for the new cathedral to be built in Letterkenny.<sup>42</sup> Capitalizing directly on his popularity, Father McFadden himself was sent on a mission by the bishop in 1900 to raise funds for the same purpose, delivering a lecture that was sponsored by the Philo-Celtic Society, a group of

#### Photo:

*St. Teresa's parish, just to the northeast of Prospect Park, was the last stronghold of the Donegal community in Brooklyn. Within an easy walk of "Donegal Hill," the neighborhood began to lose its character as Irish immigration came to an virtual end in the 1960s. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

*Photo: Prospect Place was one of the streets in St. Teresa's parish where many Donegal immigrants settled. The attached row houses provided comfortable apartments for the Irish immigrants like this group enjoying a summer afternoon in 1937. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*



Irish language revivalists.<sup>43</sup> A year later, although the exterior of the cathedral was finished, two more priests seeking funds for the interior decoration arrived in Brooklyn, this time for a fund-raiser held at Assumption Church, another parish on the edge of Irishtown.<sup>44</sup> A month later, another event for the cathedral was held in the developing Flatbush neighborhood where increasing numbers of Donegal immigrants and their families were settling.

Donegal people in Brooklyn consistently responded to appeals for aid from Catholic churches in Ireland. In 1893, a benefit for the parish of Strabane, parts of which lay in both the Counties Tyrone and Donegal, was held at St. Matthew's Church hall in Brooklyn. Because of its cross-county location, it was argued that parish could make "claims on the emigrants of both counties, and their descendants."<sup>45</sup>

Benefits became extremely popular in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1928, money was raised at Brooklyn dances at halls on Myrtle Avenue for the rebuilding of a church destroyed by fire at Kincassalagh,<sup>46</sup> barely a month before another benefit had been held for St. Joseph's Orphanage at Bundoran.<sup>47</sup> A social for the same purpose had already been held two years

before at a private house on Herkimer Street for a visiting priest from Ireland.<sup>48</sup>

Occasionally proceeds, such as in the case of a dance in 1930, went to missions in the rural south conducted by Donegal-born priests like the Rev. McDevitt of Waynesville, N.C. A fever-ridden Mill Hill priest, Father Joseph McLoone, in Namibia, Africa, wrote directly to the *Tablet* in 1920. The newspaper headlined his appeal for money specifically to his fellow countymen with the words "Are You from Donegal?"<sup>49</sup> There was a long procession of priests from Donegal as honored guests at Donegal dances, such as in 1928 for a Father Monahan, "who is touring the country,"<sup>50</sup> and a farewell party in 1939 for Father Peter Harkins, from Killybegs, on his return to Ireland.<sup>51</sup> The period, however, marked the eclipsing of Brooklyn by Manhattan as the center of Donegal activity as Manhattan's central location, with quick and easy transportation and the availability of many dance halls, turned that borough into a fund-raising power house.

#### OTHER DONEGAL SOCIETIES

There were other Donegal societies in Brooklyn that appeared from time to time. The "Home" Donegal Association was little

more than a group of immigrants from the home county that got together the home of P. J. Collins on Pulaski Street in the Eastern District. The evening was a homey gathering of exiles taking turns singing Irish songs and performing comic recitations around a piano. Perhaps the attraction for the fifty or so guests was the supper served by Mrs. Collins.<sup>52</sup> Social gatherings like this rarely reached notice in the newspapers, but there were probably other more or less informal gatherings of Donegal people taking place in Brooklyn. In 1914, the Merville Boys Association held a fund-raiser in Brooklyn for the Irish National Volunteers in their home place in Ireland.<sup>53</sup> The Sons and Daughters of Inver held a “bonfire night” in the same place that featured an appearance by writer and poet Seamus MacManus, who was for a time a school teacher in Inver.<sup>54</sup> All proceeds went to the fund being raised “for this little Irish parish.”

For a long time up to the late 1980s, Brooklyn members of the amalgamated Donegal Association held a prominent role in its activities. Dances were often held in Brooklyn for the Donegal Association and in this decade the annual “Mary from Dungloe” Contest was held in conjunction with one at St. Anselm’s Church Hall in the Bay Ridge section.

This was also the time of the last Donegal society to survive in Brooklyn, the Iniskeel-Ardara Association, originally a group composed solely of immigrants from that part of Donegal. The Iniskeel Club held its final gatherings in the late 1990s in Flatbush at the A.O.H. Division No. 35 Hall on Avenue D. The membership initially mandated mem-

bers had to be from Iniskeel and Ardara. It then expanded to all Donegal, then other parts of Ireland and finally it welcomed all those who enjoyed Irish music and a sing-along. The group had its origins in the 1930s in St. Teresa’s parish.

While St. Teresa’s maintained a strong Donegal population into the 1950s, in earlier decades, the Irish population of Brooklyn had



**Photo:**  
St. Joseph’s Church, now a co-cathedral of the Diocese of Brooklyn, was a stronghold of Donegal immigrants up to the 1950s. Inspired by the many Irish language speakers from the county, the parish was the center for a Gaelic language classes conducted by a branch of the Gaelic League. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

spread out from the proximity of the Navy Yard to other neighborhoods in Brooklyn: Bay Ridge and Flatbush/Flatlands. St. Patrick’s Parish on Kent Avenue was the first of the major Donegal concentrations to suffer, but St. Joseph’s on Vanderbilt Avenue began something of an Irish erosion as well.

As the Donegal population in Brooklyn

*Photo:*  
The Donegal societies of Manhattan and Brooklyn unified in late 1939. In this 1940 photograph, Con Boyle of Brooklyn (back row, third from left) was the outgoing president. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.



was less concentrated in the old neighborhoods, the meeting and dance halls became far less convenient. In the meantime, the rapid transit system of greater New York had now linked the entire city with Manhattan in the center. It was now easier to ride in from many parts of the outer boroughs to the numerous, and better equipped, Irish dance halls in Manhattan. The Brooklyn Donegal Association was still a vibrant organization in 1939 at the time of merger with Manhattan.<sup>55</sup>

#### DONEGAL IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS

Just before the United States entered World War II, Congress instituted a draft for young men in 1940. In 1942, the age limits were extended for the registration of men in the age group 45 to 65. Unlike the earlier registrations, the "Old Man's Draft," as it was often called, provided in many cases not only information about birth in Ireland, but the name of the county of origin. In some cases, it even provided the exact town or parish. From analyzing the information for 261 Donegal-born individuals, we can get an idea of just where Brooklyn Donegal people lived in the borough. The results by neighborhood are as follows:<sup>56</sup>

*Old 9th Ward* (Atlantic Avenue on the north, Franklin Avenue on the East, Prospect Park on the South, Flatbush Avenue on the West)—51 (19.5%)

*Park Slope and Windsor Terrace*—51 (19.5%)

*Flatbush*—31 (11.9%)

*Central Brooklyn and Bedford*

*Stuyvesant*—29 (11.1%)

*Sunset Park*—24 (9.2%)

*Brooklyn Heights* (including Columbia Heights and Cobble Hill)—17 (6.5%)

*South of Navy Yard to Old 9th Ward*—14 (5.4%)

*Flatlands* (Marine Park, Gerritsen Beach, Sheepshead Bay)—11 (4.2%)

*Cypress Hills*—8 (3.1%)

*Greenpoint*—8 (3.1%)

*Bay Ridge*—7 (2.9%)

*Old 7th Ward* (St. Patrick's Parish, Kent Avenue)—6 (2.3%)

*Bushwick*—3 (1.1%)

By 1942, big changes had occurred in the old Donegal stronghold of St. Patrick's on Kent Avenue. Industry replaced many residential buildings in the area. The last wave of immigrants in the 1920s and 1930s had chosen other neighborhoods, and St. Patrick's had long ceased to be one of the outstanding churches of the diocese. The smaller number of Donegal newcomers began to push southward in Brooklyn into more leafy parts of the borough such as Flatbush, Flatlands, and Bay Ridge. By the 1950s, it was hard to find any Irish-born immigrants in the vast district lying around and south of the old Brooklyn Navy Yard.

In 1942, most of the Donegal people lived within walking distance of Prospect Park, which was conveniently and centrally located in the middle of their neighborhoods. It is not surprising that a meeting spot like Donegal Hill in Prospect Park became such a popular place on weekends for exiles to gather together.

#### DONEGAL HILL

In 1929, the newspaper wire services picked up a story about a place called "Donegal Hill" in Prospect Park:

*Donegal Hill in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, is covered with hundreds of*

*Irish "imports" lolling on the emerald slopes in groups according to native counties. Faith and 'tis a sorry day for the "narrowback" (American) who calls an "import" an immigrant, or another Irishman who hurls the Ould Sod epithet, "donkey."<sup>57</sup>*

The exact origins of Donegal Hill will probably always remain obscure. In Hazelton, Pennsylvania, there is a neighborhood with the same name that is derived from the Donegal settlement in this coal region town in the nineteenth century. From the death notices of many Donegal individuals in the Brooklyn papers and in census records, there is ample evidence of the close connection of eastern Pennsylvania with the Brooklyn Donegal colony. Many Donegal people in the borough were, in fact, second-bounce immigrants who had first tried their luck in the mines and supporting industry of Pennsylvania.

The name "Donegal Hill," except for a very few references in the daily press, seems to have been largely confined to the Irish community. Although almost all the Brooklyn Irish knew of it personally, it remained something of an inside secret. Whatever publicity developed about this recreational meeting place that smacked of romantic gatherings in

ancient Ireland came about only in the New York Irish weeklies like the *Irish Advocate* and *Irish Echo*. Besides pick-up games and practice of Gaelic sport, there was always talk of the Ireland that had been left behind:

*On the grassy knoll in Prospect Park last Sunday, which has come to be known as "Donegal Hill," Paddy Burns discussed Donegal pearls. Valuable pearls are found in the Cloudy River and tributaries. Recently, a Donegal woman got \$12 for a pearl. Its buyer, a driver of a locomotive, sold it for \$40 and eventually it fetched over \$250.<sup>58</sup>*

Donegal Hill was reported on week after week in the Irish weeklies in chatty newsy columns like that written by John J. Keating, sometimes called the "Mayor of Donegal Hill." He reported on the comings and goings of those who came to meet and greet, but mainly to court. Once a marriage took place, another immigrant disappeared for a while until they brought back their children to run and play in the grass. Typical was a Keating report in 1941:

*Donegal Hill on Sunday saw a few of the boys out in their Spring apparel. Bob O'Leary whom Pat Twomey expects to join the [newly married] happy benedicts around Easter was seen with a*



**Photo:**

*St. Patrick's Church on Kent Avenue in Brooklyn's 7th Ward had so many resident Donegal immigrants that collectors were assigned in the 1880s to canvas door-to-door to collect funds for the relief of evicted tenants and two prominent imprisoned priests. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

*nice brunette strolling around the historic mill. Donegal Hill in summer is the mecca for Irish girls in the Park Slope.*<sup>59</sup>

Donegal Hill witnessed its best days in the early 1930s during the last big wave of Irish immigration until the late 1940s. Under the cherry trees in springtime, the spot was a welcome relief from the boarding houses or tiny servant quarters experienced by many of the immigrants. In 1933, Keating reported that there were thousands on the green, but most commonly he mentioned hundreds making the Sunday visit to the hill.<sup>60</sup> A sunny day brought out big numbers, but even in a fog or a rainy downpour, there were still a few hardy souls to be found. Perhaps the most regular were the hurlers who came every evening to sharpen their skills. With immigration from Ireland practically at a standstill after 1931, it was increasingly a lament for the forlorn bachelors who gathered in decreasing numbers. And World War II was, of course, a serious blow to the gatherings.

#### DONEGAL IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR EMPLOYMENT

The 1942 Draft Registration also provided information as to employment, but the exact nature of the work is sometimes obscured because there was no attempt to categorize the actual nature of the job. Some of the employers were not indicated or could not be indentified at all, so the number of Donegal immigrants classified by occupation is smaller (total=233) than the geographic distribution. The Donegal immigrants were employed as follows:

*Government* (including police, fire and hospitals)—58 (24.9%)  
*Retail and Buildings* (stores, warehouses, building maintenance)—33 (14.1%)  
*Maritime* (including stevedores and docks)—25 (10.7%)  
*Food Industry* (including groceries)—17 (7.3%)  
*Industrial* (including manufacturing)—16 (6.9%)  
*Utilities* (gas and electric)—14 (6.0%)

*Self employed*—14 (6.0%)  
*Trades* (including plumbers)—4 (1.7%)  
*Construction*—3 (1.3%)  
*Retired*—3 (1.3%)  
*Unclassified Employers*—11 (4.7%)  
*Unemployed*—35 (15.0%)

Although the exact job descriptions are not supplied on the draft registration forms, it is likely that most of immigrants were in unskilled positions, most of these requiring some degree of physical labor. Not evident, at least at this time, are the tunnel construction workers, or sandhogs, known to be an occupation that employed a great many Donegal immigrants. In general, Donegal immigrants like other immigrants from Ireland lacked the solid educational opportunities open to those in later generations and, consequently, sought out whatever work that was available in a variety of activities. Surprisingly, the unemployment rate was a rather high 15% of the total, but this may represent the still recovering stage of the United States economy and the more difficult task of finding employment for older workers.

#### THE IMMIGRANT CLERGY

Only one priest and a religious brother of the Donegal men who registered for the Old Man's draft in 1942 were listed as clergy, but Donegal men were among Catholic priests serving in Brooklyn at that time. For instance, Father John J. O'Doherty, a native of Malin Head, was pastor of St. Agnes Church, Sackett Street, up to his death in 1957.<sup>61</sup> That same year, the Rev. Edward J. Boyle, S.P.M., who came to the United States with his family as a young boy from Gweedore, was ordained in 1957 at St. Teresa's Church, where he had grown up.<sup>62</sup>

It is difficult to trace all the priests of Donegal birth who served in the Brooklyn Diocese. Father Joseph Campbell served as an assistant pastor at St. Peter and Paul's parish in Williamsburg between 1861 and 1878. Born in Donegal "at a period when religious bigotry was at its acme," he was said to have "retained some of the peculiarities surrounding his early



*Photo:  
Rev. Edward  
McGolrick was the  
beloved pastor of St.  
Cecelia's parish. He  
spent almost fifty years  
not only as spiritual  
leader of his church  
but also as a powerful  
advocate for the work-  
ing class of the neigh-  
borhood. Courtesy of  
John T. Ridge.*

life and training.<sup>63</sup> Rev. Phillip O'Hanlon was a chaplain at the St. John's Orphan Asylum in Seagate, Coney Island, when he passed away at age 41 from tuberculosis in 1909.<sup>64</sup> Another Donegal priest was Father Edward Harley, pastor of a church in the Hollis section of Queens, who for many years served in various Brooklyn churches. In 1921, his young cousin in Ireland was murdered at Mt. Charles by the Black and Tans. Harley wrote directly to British Prime Minister Lloyd George demanding an investigation.<sup>65</sup>

The Rev. John J. Tinney was a native of Glen, County Donegal. He was ordained for the Brooklyn Diocese and arrived to serve at St. Patrick's parish in 1893. This was one of the few times a Donegal-born priest was assigned to a church where a major portion of the congregation was composed of fellow Donegal immigrants. He brought eight-hundred new members into the parish Holy Name Society. Tinney was moved around to various Brooklyn parishes including Assumption parish near the Fulton Ferry, a parish with strong Donegal roots, before being assigned to start a new parish in Springfield Gardens, Queens where he served

from 1913 until his death in 1948.<sup>66</sup>

Two priests named McGolrick (but with their names spelled slightly differently) were also active in the Brooklyn Diocese and were, in fact, cousins. The Rev. Edward F. McGolrick, who died in 1930 as pastor of a Flushing Church, had served in several Brooklyn parishes previous to his pioneer work in Queens. He passed away only weeks after his return from Donegal.<sup>67</sup> The Rev. Edward J. McGolrick was pastor of St. Cecelia's in Greenpoint from 1888 until his death in 1932 and was by far the more famous of the two. There is still a park in the neighborhood named after him. There was also a McGolrick Field named after him. In a reverse of the usual pattern, the money to complete the grandstand built in the field in 1910 came from Donegal. A well-to-do relative there donated \$4,000 to complete the project.

Rev. McGolrick's own financial abilities were legendary, and he turned a new parish on the edge of Brooklyn into one of the most prosperous in Brooklyn. He built many institutions for the young and the poor of the parish including a youth center, a nursery, ballfields and playgrounds, and, in 1927, a

**Photo:**  
Monsignor McGolrick Park in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn commemorates Donegal-born Rev. Edward McGolrick, the pastor of St. Cecelia's parish in Greenpoint. He began and ended his life in Ireland. He was close to making one last visit to his native Donegal when a sudden illness stopped his journey short in Dublin. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.



maternity hospital for the neighborhood. After almost fifty years as pastor of the Greenpoint church with a congregation that was almost entirely Irish, but unlike some of the other parishes of the borough not one that was predominantly from Donegal, he made a pilgrimage to the land of his birth where at age 81 he died suddenly.<sup>68</sup> As a boy, McGolrick attended a school taught by the father of the Rev. John J. Tinney, who was his cousin.<sup>69</sup>

[*Ed. Note:* This is Part I of a two-part article on people from Donegal living and working in Brooklyn. Part II will appear in the next volume of *New York Irish History*.]

## Endnotes

- 1 *Brooklyn Eagle*, August 9, 1921. Derry City on Lough Foyle divided Counties Donegal and Derry from one another and was the chief waterway in northwest Ireland for emigration to America.
- 2 *Brooklyn Standard Union*, February 15, 1922.
- 3 *Brooklyn Citizen*, April 10, 1908. Father William J. White, Supervisor of Catholic Charities in Brooklyn, speaking on the topic "Germans and Irish in Brooklyn" argued that there were then no Irish colonies in Brooklyn because they were scattered all over the borough. His speech was, however, rather more advocacy against what he considered "the evils of massing of people in limited areas" than a very detailed report on where the Irish actually lived.
- 4 *Brooklyn Eagle*, January 7, 1894.
- 5 *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 2, 1890.
- 6 *Brooklyn Standard Union*, May 19, 1901. Father Doherty was a native of Desertegny (Desernety), Inishowen, Donegal.
- 7 *Brooklyn Eagle*, December 9, 1904 and *Brooklyn Citizen*, April 10, 1908. The McLaughlins came from the Inishowen peninsula near Derry City and Lough Foyle.
- 8 *Brooklyn Times Union*, April 6, 1915. One of the last of the hide, skin and leather experts was William Harkin of William Harkin and Sons, "one of the best known experts in the selection of leathers in the Swamp District, Manhattan." Harkin was one of the leaders of the industry for almost 50 years.
- 9 Ridge, John T., "Irish County Colonies in New York City (Part II)", pp. 44-50 in the *New York Irish History Journal*, Vol. 26 (2012). See for details of the Manhattan origin of the Brooklyn Donegal settlement and early settlers in Brooklyn.
- 10 *Brooklyn Citizen*, June 29, 1890. "This organization came into existence about 17 years ago, in New York, but its members drifted to this city, here the larger number now resides. It has been in existence in this city about four years."
- 11 *Brooklyn Eagle*, December 17, 1882.

- 12 *New York World*, May 10, 1886 and *New York Sun*, May 29, 1886
- 13 *Brooklyn Citizen*, June 23, 1890.
- 14 *Irish American*, March 24, 1888.
- 15 *Brooklyn Eagle*, August 13, 1904. Hugh Carlin, owner of the hall, was born in Philadelphia of Irish parents. He was the son of Lawrence, also a tavern owner, who was an active member of the Donegal Association.
- 16 *Irish American*, April 14, 1888.
- 17 *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 14, 1889. Father John Nash was pastor of Sacred Heart Parish where many of the Navy Yard workers attended mass. Although born in the parish, Nash was popular with Irish immigrants and may have had Donegal ancestry.
- 18 *Irish American*, February 2, 1889.
- 19 *Brooklyn Standard Union*, February 27, 1889.
- 20 *Brooklyn Eagle*, April 5, 1884. Edward's brother was the Rev. Francis J. Freel, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Brooklyn.
- 21 *Brooklyn Citizen*, September 8, 1889. Many of the listed contributors bore distinctive Donegal surnames.
- 22 *Brooklyn Citizen*, January 30, 1890.
- 23 *Brooklyn Citizen*, March 3, 1889.
- 24 *Birmingham News*, Birmingham, Alabama, June 22, 1896. Patrick Brennan was born in Croagh, Parish of Killaghtee, Co. Donegal, in 1843 and died in Birmingham, Alabama, on June 22, 1896. At 19 he came to the United States and after college in Oswego, N.Y., worked at the headquarters of the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company in Manhattan. He was soon their head bookkeeper, but was sent in 1890 to Birmingham to take charge of their store in that city.
- 25 *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 27, 1896.
- 26 *Brooklyn Citizen*, May 24, 1892 and July 18, 1890.
- 27 *Brooklyn Eagle*, February 16, 1912.
- 28 *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 6, 1911. Roarty died in 1911 and was one of the last of the Donegal immigrants who dominated the leather trade in lower Manhattan at one time. The leather industry was responsible for the cluster of Donegal people who settled to the east and north of the present City Hall.
- 29 *Brooklyn Citizen*, September 11, 1890.
- 30 *Brooklyn Eagle*, February 6, 1891 and *Brooklyn Citizen*, February 19, 1903.
- 31 *Brooklyn Citizen*, February 14, 1899.
- 32 *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 26, 1894.
- 33 *Brooklyn Citizen*, August 11, 1891. The present Donegal Football Team was not organized until about 1949.
- 34 *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 21, 1913. Donegal also fielded a soccer team at the picnics. The impression is given that the same players served on the Gaelic team as well.
- 35 *New York Sun*, May 4, 1908. Visiting clergy from Ireland often had relatives living in New York. Father Charles Logue, who had served in the Brooklyn Diocese in several parishes in the borough, was a distant cousin. Another cousin was for a time an editor of the weekly New York Irish weekly, the *Irish Echo*.
- 36 *Tablet*, December 12, 1908. The Ladies Irish societies, particularly those attached to county societies, were almost entirely composed of young single women. When the women married they tended to drift away from the organization as the care of children demanded more and more of their attention. The men's society, being around a lot longer than the ladies' organization, had a greater spread of ages, including members who again became active after their families were raised.
- 37 *Brooklyn Times Union*, December 24, 1923. Unlike many Hibernian divisions that floundered and collapsed from the payment of benefits in the influenza epidemic of 1918/19 and the Great Depression, the Brooklyn Donegal Association was apparently able to maintain its beneficial character up to the time of the merger in 1939.
- 38 *Times Union*, May 23, 1933. The deceased, Peter Carlin, was a veteran of the British Navy and a veteran of the Battle of Jutland who had passed away in Kings County Hospital.
- 39 *New York Sun*, April 2, 1890.
- 40 *Irish Advocate*, December 30, 1922. The Manhattan Donegal group celebrated its 19th annual ball in this year.

- 41 *Irish Advocate*, November 11, 1939. Con Boyle, a member of the Manhattan Donegal group, but a Brooklyn resident, was elected first president of the unified organization.
- 42 *Brooklyn Eagle*, June 10, 1892.
- 43 *Irish American*, February 17, 1900. McFadden's parish was in Gweedore, an Irish speaking village then as it is today. McFadden's topic was "British Oppression of Ireland in Recent Years."
- 44 *Brooklyn Citizen*, January 28, 1901.
- 45 *Brooklyn Citizen*, July 19, 1893.
- 46 *Tablet*, May 5, 1928.
- 47 *Tablet*, April 14, 1928.
- 48 *The Chat* (Brooklyn), December 24, 1927.
- 49 *Tablet*, January 10, 1920.
- 50 *Brooklyn Times Union*, January 28, 1928.
- 51 *Irish Echo*, June 10, 1939.
- 52 *Brooklyn Citizen*, November 30, 1890.
- 53 *Brooklyn Eagle*, September 16, 1914. This was held at Tammany Hall, Grand Avenue and Pacific Street.
- 54 *Tablet*, June 12, 1920.
- 55 The last president of the Brooklyn Donegal Association was Joseph M. Breslin who was the founder in 1939 of Division No. 5 of the Hibernians, originally organized in St. Teresa's Parish. A list of the first officers indicates that, based on the surnames, most of them must have been former members of the Brooklyn Donegal group.
- 56 "United States World War II Draft Registrations, 1942", from the website of [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com). The breakdown by neighborhood reflects the old and the newer neighborhoods where Donegal people had settled. The small numbers of registrants in the vicinity of St. Patrick's Church, Kent Avenue, in the old 7th Ward and the complete absence of registrants in the old Donegal stronghold of Irishtown indicates the profound changes taking place in ethnic Brooklyn. About half of the central Brooklyn registrants lived closer to Broadway and the Bushwick neighborhood than to the Bedford district. Those that did live in the Bedford district seem to have been a spill-over from the old 9th Ward and St. Teresa's Parish.
- 57 *News Press*, Fort Myers, Fla., September 2, 1929. Dozens of newspapers across the country carried this identical one paragraph story. It is one of only a national notice of Donegal Hill to have appeared in the country's press.
- 58 *Irish Advocate*, September 26, 1929
- 59 *Irish Advocate*, March 29, 1941
- 60 *Irish Advocate*, May 13, 1933. Keating will not be remembered as a great chronicler of Irish-American history. His writing was little more than lists of names of those present accompanied by the thinnest of details. After reading through more than 15 years of his columns, it is a little bit like watching the 1950s movie "Marty" for the hundredth time.
- 61 *Tablet*, April 5, 1957.
- 62 *Tablet*, May 19, 1957..
- 63 *Brooklyn Eagle*, December 5, 1878.
- 64 *New York Sun*, January 1, 1909.
- 65 *Brooklyn Times Union*, March 24, 1921.
- 66 *Tablet*, January 3, 1948 and June 19, 1943.
- 67 *Brooklyn Times Union*, September 30, 1930.
- 68 *Tablet*, September 3, 1938, and *Brooklyn Citizen*, August 25, 1938. He was born in 1857 in the parish of Dunnoughmore in County Donegal and settled at age 8 with his parents in St. James Parish near the Navy Yard. Reports in the press indicated he had almost reached his birthplace when he was stricken and rushed to a hospital in Dublin where he died.
- 69 *Brooklyn Eagle*, April 19, 1910. He was a native of Trean Beg, Barony of Kilmacrenan, Donegal.