

## In the name of heritage, country and church

### The Downes family, longtime parishioners of St. John the Evangelist in Syracuse, are Irish Catholic pioneers of county

By Richard Long  
SUN contributing writer

Long before Syracuse enjoyed clean Skaneateles Lake drinking water, Nicholas Downes was concerned about how to purify water for his fellow citizens.

After the Civil War he patented his own water filter and began to sell it at his store on Warren Street. An 1868 City Directory lists an ad for the filter.

John Downes, 81, grandson of Nicholas Downes, remembers that Richard Wright, former director of the Onondaga Historical Association, considered Nicholas Downes' water filter an important part of Syracuse history.

"People didn't have inside plumbing in those days and the proximity of water to waste materials was always a threat to health," said Downes, a parishioner of St.

Michael's on Onondaga Hill, whose family has been connected with St. John the Evangelist in Syracuse for generations.

"Any means to purify drinking water was a forward step," Wright told me," Downes said.

Downes, who is retired, is the former executive director of the Gifford Foundation.

He has cause to be proud of his grandfather for other reasons.

"He was a feisty Irishman, very proud of his Irish roots, his new country, America, and his Catholic Church," Downes said.

"He played an important part in keeping order during the annual St. Patrick's Day parade. There was a lot of anti-Irish feelings in those days and the parade became a target."

The 1850s were an era of intense anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant feelings. It was the time when the Know Nothing Party (also called the American Party) came to power.

The Know Nothings believed that only native born Americans should hold political office. This was in reaction to the great waves of Irish and German immigrants, mostly Catholic, arriving from Europe in the 1850s.

The local impact of the Know Nothings is not clear, but they were a force in national politics. President Millard Fillmore, born in neighboring Cayuga County and a member of the same party, refused to join the new Republican Party and ran in 1856 as the pro-Southern candidate of the Union Party. He was defeated.

Fillmore was the only Catholic in the White House. He was a member of the Catholic Church in Washington, D.C. The pro-Southern

author of *Pioneer Irish of Onondaga*.

Downes told Bannan of the step taken to keep order during the St. Patrick's Day parade.

"The National Guards were organized in Syracuse in 1850 by Irishmen to protect themselves on St. Patrick's Day

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*Day in the*



John Downes, a former executive director of the Gifford Foundation, remembers his grandfather, Nicholas Downes, as a "Feisty Irishman, very proud of his roots, his new country, America, and his Catholic Church."

during their parade," Downes said.

"It was a military organization and received its arms from the state and responded to the state's call when needed to quell disturbance of any kind. So the enemies of the Irish feared to molest the state military men on the 17th of March.

"Men of other nations were members in the minority and the Citizens' Corps, another military company, often joined them in the parade," Downes said.

Nicholas Downes' struggles for independence, and against prejudice, go back a long way into Irish history. Nicholas' father, Michael Downes, and his two brothers fought for Irish independence from England in the rebellion of 1798.

Nicholas was born Jan. 1, 1820, at southtown, County Meath, Ireland, near Dublin. His father, Michael, was a cloth weaver in Smithtown.

Michael Downes decided to make the voyage to America in 1842.

He was 22 years old at the time.

"Nicholas told my father (regarding the voyage)," John Downes said, "that it 'would be much easier to die. I would never do it again.'"

British ships were unsanitary in those days. Also the ship hit an iceberg at Newfoundland, delaying the voyage, which took more than six weeks.

The Downes family eventually settled in Watertown. Nicholas went to school there and eventually became a teacher at Brownsville and Oswego.

Nicholas had planned to seek his fortune in Chicago in 1847. However, when he heard there was an epidemic in that city, he decided to take a temporary job at a stove and hardware store owned by Matthew Murphy on

E. Water Street.

The "temporary" job lasted 10 years. He eventually began his own stove and hardware store on E. Genesee Street in 1862 (it would later move to Warren Street). Nicholas Downes married Mary Stapleton in 1851.

They had a son, Edward, who continued the Downes' business tradition with a furniture store in Syracuse.

Edward Downes and his wife, Margaret Fitzgibbon, had six children: John Downes is one of two sons. Though John Downes now attends St. Michael's, three generations of the Downes family, beginning with Nicholas, were parishioners of St. John the Evangelist in Syracuse.

The old Downes residence was at N. State and E. Willow streets, a site later occupied in 1905 by Christian Brothers Academy.

John Downes has kept in touch with his Irish roots over the years.

"When the kids were growing up we had great trips to Ireland and visited the family places," he said.

#### CATHOLIC PRESS MONTH

### Bishop Costello, in Catholic press statement, says 'write the truth'

WASHINGTON (CNS) — One of God's best instruments in bringing together the diversity of the church has been an "aggressive, competent Catholic press," according to Anthony J. Spence, president of the Catholic Press Association.

In a message written for Catholic Press Month, celebrated in February, Spence said, "Nowhere else does the richness and diversity of Catholic life come together in such compelling ways as in Catholic magazines, newspapers, books and newsletters."

The Catholic press not only provides the place where "Catholic voices meet, debate and challenge," but it also enables those voices to "find consensus, ultimately celebrating the one faith that binds us all," according to Spence, editor of the *Tennessee Register*, newspaper of the Nashville Diocese.

Spence's column appears in a booklet issued by the Catholic Press Association to mark the 1995 Catholic Press Month with the theme, "One Faith, Many Voices: Sharing the Voices of Inspiration, Witness, Hope, Faith and Truth."

The booklet also includes statements by Archbishop John P. Foley, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, and Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Costello, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Communications Committee and honorary president of the CPA.

Bishop Costello urged members of the Catholic press to be constantly mindful of their readers.

"Communication happens when the reader is informed and, with us, is transformed," he said.

The bishop said Catholic journalists must inform their readers "more deeply in the truth."

"We need readers to achieve our purpose," he said. "I'm not thinking about circulation; my concern is involvement. Selling the publication isn't enough. Success resides in the experience of the subscriber."

In Archbishop Foley's column, he said the Catholic press helps to "articulate, strengthen and reaffirm" people's faith while reflecting the diversity which makes the church "one of the most Catholic — or truly universal — in the world."

The archbishop said the Catholic press offers society inspiration, witness and role models by profiling Catholics "in love with the faith," the "educated word worker," the "sound moral principled person," and the "wise social commentator."