

Transcending the Myth of Irish-American Experience: Inishowen Immigrants in Woburn, Massachusetts

By Marie E. Daly

Popular media has portrayed the myth of Irish-American experience as the story of starving paupers fleeing Ireland in coffin ships and arriving unwanted in East Coast cities such as Boston. Never straying from their dockside slums, they worked as canal diggers and longshoremen, until the ward boss procured them jobs on the police force or at the gas company. The myth holds that their descendants still live in three-decker houses in ethnic ghettos where they march exuberantly on St. Patrick's Day.

In reality, the story of Irish emigration to America is much more complex. The experience of Donegal immigrants in Woburn, Massachusetts, once a small, industrial community situated among rural farms, provides an alternate view of the Irish-American myth as one shaped by the dynamics of the particular local environment.

History of Woburn, Massachusetts

With a current population of 36,000, Woburn is a suburban city located about twelve miles northwest of Boston. In 1850, it was mainly an agricultural town with a population of 3,800 persons. In the span of 150 years, the town was transformed into a manufacturing city, and then into a suburban, residential city with a substantial base of technological, research, medical and financial, and even dot-com businesses.

Established in 1642 by English Puritans fleeing religious persecution, Woburn was initially part of Charlestown, and named for the town of Woburn in Bedfordshire, England. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the town saw major portions split off into separate towns of Burlington, Wilmington and Winchester. The remaining town of Woburn was informally divided into North Woburn, West Woburn, East Woburn or Montvale, and the South End. The inhabitants took part on the rebel side in the American Revolution, and participated in the battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775. The construction of the Middlesex Canal in 1803, which went through Woburn, had a substantial impact on the growth of industry in the town. Operating more than 50 years, the canal was 27 miles long and linked the hinterlands of New Hampshire with Boston, enabling the movement of raw materials and finished products to markets. The coming of the railroad, which crossed Woburn on the east side of town, rendered the canal obsolete, and spurred the growth of industry toward that part of town. ¹

The Tanning Industry

In 1756, David Cummings established a small, family-run tannery on the west side of Woburn, a business his family was to carry on for the next 150 years. Woburn was linked with the tannery business for just as long, and at one time was one of the largest centers of tanneries in the country. Several factors led to the tremendous growth of Woburn's tanneries in the 1850s - a growth in the national economy, the proliferation of boot and shoe manufacturers in the town, and a growing demand for leather with the nation's increasing population. The arrival of Irish labor was the largest factor for industrial growth in New England. Irish immigrants went wherever there was a river or brook large enough to power a mill wheel. They settled in Massachusetts communities such as Clinton, Hopkinton, Hinsdale, Hopedale, and Saxonville. Clusters of immigrants from certain counties set up a century-long process of chain migration to these towns. In Clinton, they were from County Mayo; in Waltham, they were from Athenry Co.; in Galway, they were from Sneem Co., Kerry; and in Woburn, they were from Donegal. ²

The Cummings family continued over generations to produce leather, and in the nineteenth century John Cummings expanded his family's tannery business in the western section of Woburn, along a major stream. Another tannery had been built near Horn Pond in 1825 by Abijah Thompson, who later passed the business to his son-in-law, Stephen Dow. The western section of Woburn subsequently was dubbed "Cummingsville," and the Water Street area was dubbed "Thompsonville." In addition, young tannery managers broke away and established their own businesses, so that by 1860 the population of Woburn had increased by sixty percent in one decade. According to census records, there were 6,300 people living in 988 houses, and the Irish comprised about 25 percent of the town's population in that year. The tanneries and town continued to grow through the decades so that by 1884, there were 26 tanneries

employing 1,500 men, producing \$4.5 million of leather. In 1888, the town had changed its charter and incorporated as a city.³

When the railroad began to run through the south end and east side, new tanneries were constructed in these areas, thereby shifting the location of new immigrant housing to those parts of the town. The tanneries underwent a process of consolidation, which suppressed wage competition and generally lowered wages in the late nineteenth century. Labor unions were formed and with strikes and threats of strikes, wages increased. New immigrant labor, consisting mostly of Italians and Greeks, was brought in.⁴ Tanneries declined during the Depression, and never recovered. By the 1970s, the last tannery, owned by John J. Reilly, closed.

The process of tanning was initially labor-intensive, and involved two types of work: tanning and currying (or preparing the tanned leather). Tanning was a chemical process that treated hides with increasing concentrations of solutions to remove hair, and to "tan" the hides. Currying involved splitting the hides and scrubbing and scraping the rough flesh off.⁵

The work was dangerous, since the employees worked with toxic chemicals and dyes containing chromium and arsenic. The workers moved around on planks between large vats of acid, and if anyone fell in, it was sure death. The beam house, where the hides were prepared for tanning, stunk to the high heavens. The workers absorbed the odors in their clothing and hair, and a Woburn tanner could clear out a trolley car in Boston, no matter how much he tried to wash out the smell. A nurse at the Beggs and Cobb tannery lost twenty pounds in her first two months of work at a tannery, since the stench made her lose her appetite. The tanneries constantly looked for technological innovations to mechanize the processing. Large machine run brushes were used to scrape the flesh off. The air was full of dust, and outside, the coal-powered tannery boilers emitted clouds of coal dust which settled around the workers' houses.

⁶Woburn's death records reveal that many tannery workers died of kidney disease from their exposure to the chemicals, from pulmonary disease from the dust, or by accident.

Inishowen Immigrants in Woburn

Immigrants from Inishowen were not the only Irish in Woburn, and Woburn was not the only destination for people born in Inishowen. But, according to census and naturalization records, Woburn contained a significantly large concentration of Inishowen immigrants, comprising about 50 percent of the city's Irish population. Other Irish immigrants came from Monaghan and Louth, and from the Aran Islands in Galway. Specific tanneries would recruit immigrants from certain counties. J. J. Reilly recruited people from the Aran Islands.⁷ Cummings and Dow recruited people from Donegal.

Inishowen immigrants, particularly from the parishes of Carndonagh and Clonmany, had been coming to Boston since the late eighteenth century. Their presence increased substantially in the 1830s with the establishment of major shipping routes from Derry to Saint John, New Brunswick. Many of the New Brunswick Irish ended up in New England. The 1860 census shows that Inishowen people lived initially in the North End of Boston, in the streets around St. Mary's Parish. Later, they settled in Charlestown, East Boston and Roxbury. In 1840, there were few Irish immigrants living in Woburn. But by the second half of the 1840s, a number of Donegal emigrants came to West Woburn, and among them were Philip McEleny of Carrick, parish of Carndonagh; John McLaughlin of Tullynabrately, parish of Clonmany; and John N. Doherty, the son of Dennis and Grace Doherty of the Isle of Doagh parish of Clonmany.⁸

These first Donegal settlers in Woburn were farmers in West Woburn and tannery workers in the Water Street area near Horn Pond, the location of the Dow tannery. Dow built "tannery houses,"-- spare, wooden boardinghouses -- for their employees. John McLaughlin ran a boarding house off Water Street. Beginning in 1850, there was a large influx of Donegal emigrants, particularly in the Water Street district and Cummingsville. By 1870, many of these tannery workers had purchased their own land and built their own houses, many of which still stand today.⁹ Although the immigrants were initially poor, many climbed to the ranks of homeowners within twenty years of their arrival.

Not all of the Donegal Irish in West Woburn were Catholic. Alexander Porter, James Henry Graham, and the Cassidy family were members of Protestant churches in Woburn. Born in 1871, James Henry Graham was the son of John Graham and Sarah Ray, and belonged to the Orange Order.¹⁰ There was no evidence or tradition of animosity among the Donegal immigrants of varying religious affiliations.

For several years, Catholics in Woburn had to travel eight miles to Cambridge to attend Sunday Mass. But in 1843, Fr. James Strain traveled out from East Cambridge to say Mass in the town hall. He was succeeded by Fr. Manasses O'Doherty from 1846 through 1849.¹¹ A native of Inishowen, Fr. O'Doherty had been assigned first to St. Mary's Church in Houlton, Maine, and then St. John's Church in East Cambridge, and he subsequently established St. Mary's, St. Peter's, and St. Paul's churches, all in Cambridge.¹² In fact, Fr. O'Doherty's presence and encouragement may have attracted Inishowen people to Woburn in this time period. Although St. Charles' Parish had been established in Woburn in 1843, the first regular pastor, Fr. John Quealy of Co. Waterford, was not appointed until 1856. For many years, some Donegal immigrants in Woburn continued to go into St. Peter's Church in Cambridge to have Fr. O'Doherty marry them and baptize their children. St. Charles' Church was built in 1853 along Main Street, near the center of town, so the West Woburn Donegal Irish were not necessarily under the eagle eye of the priest. Although the church was important to the West Woburn Catholics, distance may have prevented the pastor from assuming the traditional dominant role, as in other nineteenth-century Catholic parishes.

Furthermore, St. Charles' Parochial School was not built until 1884. Woburn required that all children between the ages of 6 and 16 attend school, and before 1884, that would have meant public school.¹³ Even after 1884, many Catholic schoolchildren attended public, not parochial school. In the nineteenth century, most of the Irish children attended school at least through the age of 14 or 15 years. But truancy was a problem, and in 1868, the truancy rate was 10 to 15 percent.¹⁴ The 1870 census shows that the literacy rate among Donegal men was around 70 percent, and among Donegal women around 30 percent. Although many people attended classes at night, quite a few of the older immigrants remained illiterate all their lives. By 1880, census records indicate that the literacy rate among the newer immigrants had risen, so that most could read and write. During the Civil War, a number of Irish immigrants in Woburn enlisted in the Union Army. Woburn's Yankee inhabitants (descendants of the original English immigrants) were strongly abolitionist in the 1850s, and had advocated for the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Act. Like other towns in Massachusetts, Woburn was initially reluctant to recruit soldiers from the ranks of the recently arrived Irish immigrants. However, by 1862, the Irish began enlisting in greater numbers.¹⁵ Several Irish immigrants in Woburn enlisted in the 39th Massachusetts Regiment, and they saw heavy action in battles at Laurel Hill and Weldon Railroad, Virginia in 1864. Private Michael Finn, Sergeant William McDevitt, Private Peter Doherty, and Private Philip Doherty were all wounded. While William McDevitt and Philip Doherty recovered from their wounds, Peter Doherty died at a Washington, D.C. hospital. Michael Finn died in Confederate custody, as did several other Woburn men, who died of starvation and disease in Confederate prison camps.¹⁶ The support of the Union cause in the Civil War was a major factor in the Irish gaining acceptance in American society, an assertion supported by the letters of the 39th Regiment Woburn enlistees.

The sale and consumption of alcohol became a major political issue dividing the old Yankee prohibitionist community and the Irish newcomers. By 1866, there were 159 arrests for drunkenness, liquor law violations, and assault and battery. In 1870, there were sixty establishments selling liquor illegally, all run by Irish immigrants. Given the tradition of distilling liquor in Donegal, it is not surprising that some of these "shebeens" were run by Donegal immigrants. The political issue of completely banning the sale of alcohol or regulating the sales through a licensing system was debated and voted on at many town meetings and elections, until the Irish attained a majority in the late 1890s. After that, the issue went away until the 1920s.¹⁷

Later Immigration

Donegal emigrants continued to come to Woburn throughout the nineteenth century, and the numbers that came in the 1880s and 1890s may have exceeded the numbers of Famine emigrants. The tannery businesses continued to thrive, so that by 1884, there were 26 tanneries employing 1,500 workers.¹⁸ The people who arrived thirty and forty years after the Famine were undoubtedly related to the earlier immigrants - nieces and nephews, cousins and friends. But they moved into a different neighborhood: the South End. The Dow tannery burned down in 1893, and the Cummings

tannery in 1901, leaving hundreds of people out of work. The focus of the tannery industry shifted to the east side of Main Street, closer to the railroad. As Dow and Cummings had done, these tanneries built boarding houses for their workers, which were plain, spare domiciles, usually situated in the immediate vicinity. With the major tanneries gone, West Woburn reverted to its agricultural past, and this time with many greenhouses. Among the later immigrants in West Woburn was Alexander Porter, born in Donegal in 1865, who came directly to Woburn at the age of eighteen years. After working as a farm hand, he later bought his own farm, and eventually had eleven greenhouses along Burlington Street in West Woburn. ¹⁹

The 1900 census indicates that Donegal immigrants of the late nineteenth century lived in new housing built along newly subdivided streets off Main Street. Even 120 years later, many of the houses are still quite attractive. Although the prospect across Main Street was grimly industrial, the neighborhood looked out in the other direction over the sylvan landscape of Horn Pond. One of the Donegal emigrants who came in this period was Dennis Dever, the grandfather of Robert Dever, the recent mayor of Woburn. Dennis Dever emigrated in 1889 through New York, and lived initially on Stoddard Street. ²⁰His son, Philip was on the city council for many years.

By the late nineteenth century, the Irish had prospered in Woburn, and were participating more fully in the business and social life of the city. Many of the older Donegal immigrants had turned to other occupations such as farming, or running small commercial establishments, such as hotels, restaurants, and stores. They ran for political office, joined the police force and the fire department, and worked in Woburn municipal departments. The first Irishman was elected to the Board of Selectmen in 1881, and two more were elected the following year. By 1885, an Irishman, James Maguire, was Chairman of the Board of Selectmen. By 1887, a new bank had been organized with Irishmen on the board, and its first loan was to a James Callahan. ²¹

Donegal emigrants continued to settle in Woburn in the early part of the twentieth century, usually around the South End area. By 1920 though, the first and second generation Irish were spreading out around Woburn, moving into new housing and different neighborhoods. At the tanneries, other immigrants from Italy, Greece, and Turkey joined them. The 1920 census shows a number of Donegal immigrants who had arrived in the period from 1900 through 1910. Some continued to arrive in the teens, but emigration dropped sharply during World War One. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Donegal emigrants moved from one community of compatriots to another in the Boston area - the North End, Charlestown, Woburn, East Boston, and Roxbury. The Devers reportedly owned a couple of apartment buildings in the North End, where they would put up newly arrived greenhorns until they found themselves jobs and places to live. Among these rotating families was James McEleny, who immigrated to Boston in 1916 from Glack, parish of Carndonagh, and lived in Roxbury before coming to Woburn to work in a tannery. ²²His grandson, John McEleny, is a well-known lawyer in Woburn, and author of the most recent history, *Woburn: A Past Observed*. As long as the tanneries thrived in Woburn, and young men and women left Ireland to seek their fortune, Inishowen emigrants continued to arrive in Woburn.

The tanneries suffered a great decline during the Depression, and the incentive for new immigrants to settle in Woburn lessened too. Unfortunately, later census material is not yet available to review the birthplaces and arrival dates, so obituaries are the only other source of data. As the population of the area expanded, many people moved out to neighboring towns such as Stoneham, Wakefield, and Reading, among them the Dever family of Cummingsville. In the 1950s, Woburn evolved into a suburban, bedroom community, as many young families moved into new housing in the postwar period. New high tech businesses sprang up along Route 128, which runs through North Woburn. New immigrants from Puerto Rico and the Caribbean came to Woburn in the 1950s and 1960s, and St. Charles' Church began having Spanish masses for them. Today, the city's economic base is a mixture of 40 percent residential, 13 percent industrial, 10 percent open space, 4 percent commercial and 2 percent agricultural. ²³Some descendants of Donegal immigrants still live in the city - a recent mayor (2001) was a Dever, the former chief of police was a McEleny, and the current head of the library is an O'Doherty. There are still Doherty and Kelly descendants in Cummingsville. The tanneries are gone, replaced by high-tech companies and dot-coms, financial and medical facilities, and shopping malls. But the tanneries left deadly remnants of their presence - toxins, such as arsenic and chromium, which have polluted the soils and rivers of the city. In the early 1980s, a chemical company and a tannery

allegedly contaminated the drinking water with industrial solvents, tetrachloroethylene and trichloroethylene. This resulted in a highly publicized case that was documented in a book, *A Civil Action* ²⁴ and later portrayed in a movie starring John Travolta. The water is now safe to drink, and the largest, "superfund" contaminated site in North Woburn has been largely paved over, and is the location of new industrial parks. The city is known for its excellent school system and library, and is a desirable place to live, convenient to public transportation, shopping areas, and workplaces.

Conclusion

The saga of Irish emigration to Woburn and other New England mill towns was one of long duration, one in which Irish skilled labor enabled the expansion industries and the growth of wealth. Inishowen emigrants came as young men and women seeking their fortunes in the New World, and less as unwilling paupers driven from their homeland in coffin ships. In fact, some left home despite the opposition of their parents. Within 15 years of their arrival, they had been accepted by many as valuable contributors to the Union cause. Within twenty years, many had purchased land and built their own homes. Within 35 years, they had attained political power. While they did not occupy the rarified air of Boston Brahmin society, they were not the ditch-digging, ignorant gangsters portrayed in the media. The process of assimilation was accelerated in small American communities such as Woburn, where the Irish and Yankee inhabitants were engaged in social and political dialogue, and where the Irish did not withdraw into parochial, urban ghettos. Their economic progress was limited as long as Woburn remained a one-industry city. But with the failure of the tanneries, Woburn inhabitants could choose among many occupations. With access to good education, the Woburn Irish could move up into white-collar jobs, and move into the middle class. At this point in time, the descendants of Irish immigrants have been fully integrated into American life, and wonder about their families' lives in a time and place long forgotten.

¹ John D. McElhiney, *Woburn: A Past Observed*. Woburn, Mass.: Sonrel Press, 1999.

² Dorothy G. Wayman, *David I. Walsh: Citizen-Patriot*. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1952. Kristen A. Peterson and Thomas J. Murphy, *Waltham Rediscovered*. Portsmouth NH: Peter A. Randall, 1988. Jeffrey Wills, ed., *The Catholics of Harvard Square*. Petersham, MA: St. Bedes Press, 1993.

³ John D. McElhiney, *ibid*.

⁴ Marie Coady, "The History of the Labor Movement in Woburn," August 1999. www.yeoldewoburn.com

⁵ "All About Woburn-No. 17", *Woburn Weekly Budget*, 12 Oct. 1860. "Cummingsville", *The Woburn Advocate*, 10 Feb. 1871.

⁶ Interview with "Stitch" Farrey, May 2001, former employee of John J. Reilly tannery; and interview with Dorothy Hogan, Feb. 2001, former nurse at the Beggs and Cobb tannery. Marie Coady, "The South End in 1900," Mar. 2001. www.yeoldwoburn.com

⁷ Interview with "Stitch" Farrey, May 2001, former employee of John J. Reilly tannery

⁸ Naturalization records, U.S. Circuit Court, vol. 22, p. 489, vol. 14, p. 304, vol. 37, p. 178.

⁹ Federal census records, 1850 - 1880.

¹⁰ *Woburn Daily Times* Souvenir Edition, 9 Feb. 1923.

¹¹ *Woburn Daily Times* Souvenir Edition, 9 Feb. 1923.

¹² Jeffrey Wills, ed., *ibid*. And *Journal of Bishop John Fenwick, 1840 - 1842*. Boston: Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston.

¹³ *Woburn Daily Times*, 13 Aug. 1923.

¹⁴ John D. McElhiney, *ibid*.

¹⁵ John D. McElhiney, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Letters in *The Woburn Townsman*, 3 June 1864. The Woburn Public Library also has an index card database of information on Woburn men in the Civil War.

¹⁷ John D. McElhiney, *ibid*.

¹⁸ John D. McElhiney, *ibid*.

¹⁹ *Woburn Daily Times* Souvenir Edition, 9 Feb. 1923.

²⁰ Naturalization record, U.S. Circuit Court, vol. 292, p. 147.

²¹ John D. McElhiney, *ibid*.

²² Interview with John D. McElhiney, June 2001.

²³. Woburn Mass. Dept. Of Housing and Community Development Profile, Economic Development,
www.state.ma.us/cc/woburn.html

²⁴. Jonathan Harr, *A Civil Action* . New York: Random House, 1995.