

Texas, Maryland:

A Historic Tale of Irish Refugees Starting in a New Land and Quarrying Marble

Brian Fisher Johnson

Times were tough in the farming community of Ballykilcline, Ireland, during the 1830s and 1840s. The British Empire subdivided Irish farms into smaller and smaller parcels, making it nearly impossible for farmers to live off the land. To make matters worse, in 1845, a water mold began to ravage the potato crop the Irish had come to depend on, causing the infamous famine that killed at least a million people. These circumstances forced millions of impoverished Irish, including many residents of Ballykilcline, to leave Ireland and head for the United States, hoping for a better life.

Bottom: courtesy of Cassie Kilroy Thompson; top two: courtesy of the Baltimore County Public Library Photographic Collection





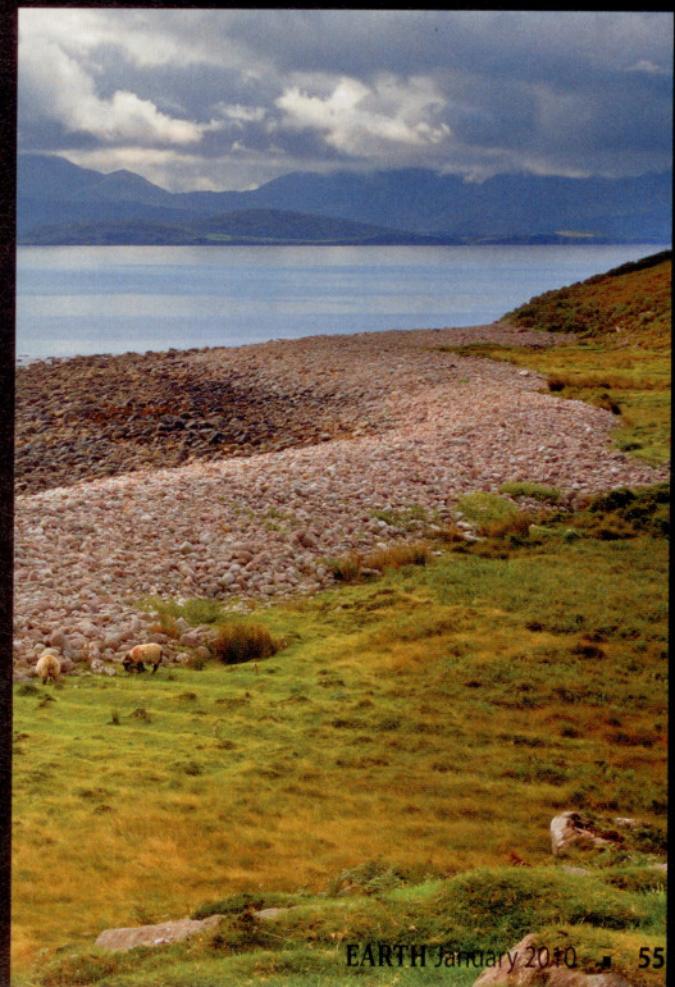
Some of Ballykilcline's residents arrived in New York City in the mid-1840s, says Stephen Brighton, an archaeologist at the University of Maryland in College Park. Starting in about 1847, some of those immigrants made their way to an area just north of Baltimore, Md. By 1850, historical evidence shows about 50 people lived in this Maryland settlement, Brighton says. The town took the name Texas after residents formed a volunteer company called the "Texas Greens," in light of the United States' contemporaneous war with Mexico over Texas and other territories, according to John McGrain, a retired historian for the surrounding county. Within 10 years, the town hosted roughly 600 people — most of whom were either Irish or of Irish-American heritage, Brighton adds.

Exactly how the Irish came to settle Texas is not certain, Brighton says. One thing that is clear is why they came: jobs. The area was home to an abundance of marble and calcite that could be quarried for building stone and burned to make fertilizer.

And quarry the Irish did — from the late 1840s until the 1920s, says Page Herbert, a local geologist who consults for quarries across the country, including a quarry in Texas that still functions today. The stone from these quarries went into everything from fertilizer to some of the East Coast's most famous structures, including the Washington Monument, the porticoes of the Senate and House wings of the Capitol and even St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, according to the University of Maryland's Center for Heritage Resource Studies. The quarries themselves became a part of Irish-American history.

Eventually, the owners sold off the quarries as the stores of quality stone became exhausted and the associated industries changed. A few of the Texas Irish took over some of the quarries, until an outside businessman bought them and turned them

Times were not good in Ballykilcline in the Connacht Province in Ireland in the 1840s. The remnants of a ruined castle in the Connacht Province (above) and a potato field (below) can be seen today.



into aggregate quarries. To this day, the marble in Texas is crushed for concrete and other building materials, while the calcite is used in products like paper and plastics, Herbert says. In the meantime, Brighton says, as the new quarry industry came in and a new road and a light rail line plowed through town, the Irish-American community began to disappear from the landscape and was mostly gone by the 1930s.

Texas' mark on the land might have stayed largely buried had it not been for Brighton, who sees Texas as a unique case of Irish immigration in the United States. Last summer, he started digging through the layers of trash the Irish-American residents of Texas left behind. By analyzing how the layers of material culture changed as the Irish became more established in the United States, Brighton hopes to unearth the story of this historic Irish-American quarry town.

The uniqueness of Texas

There are many historical accounts of Irish-American communities in places such as New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Pa., Boston, Mass.,

Minneapolis, Minn., St. Louis, Mo., and San Francisco, Calif. But Brighton — who is of Irish heritage and studies the Irish diaspora, or history of Irish refugees — was struck by the lack of writing on the Irish in Maryland. He knew there had been Irish families in Maryland during colonial times, and had heard about Texas from a Ballykilcline heritage society while excavating — of all places — Ballykilcline. So he sent an undergraduate student to various libraries to find anything he could about the Irish in Maryland. "He only came up with about three or four different sources — none of them in very specific detail," Brighton says. "It's a huge gap, I think, in understanding the Irish diaspora." That's when Brighton developed an interest in Texas.

Immigrants in the United States often collect in their own neighborhoods and maintain their own cultural traditions. But as they and their descendants gain a foothold in America, they often absorb the culture of their new country and eventually disperse into new places. Excavations of Irish-American neighborhoods in New York City and Paterson, N.J., reflect this trend, Brighton says.

The oldest layers of these archaeological sites contain ceramics patterns and vessel types similar to those from comparably aged sites in Ireland. But by the beginning of the 20th century, Brighton says, Irish-American artifacts are indistinguishable from the material culture of the American-born majority.

This same type of stratigraphic record may hold up in Texas once Brighton and his students sort through the layers of artifacts they excavated this summer, he says. After all, "the Irish that live in Texas aren't any different from the Irish that live in New York City or the Irish that live in any industrialized urban area."

But the Irish-American community of Texas was different in one way, Brighton says: The Irish-Americans there — for reasons that are not yet clear — did not disperse; they stayed in Texas well into the 20th century. Evidence such as census data supports this trend, showing that the original Irish surnames appear repeatedly and that households in Texas took in extended family, Brighton says.

In that vein, Brighton wonders if the artifacts from Texas that he and his students excavated last summer and any that he may find in future digs will

Today, the landscape of Texas, Md., is marked by a light rail, a road and an aggregate quarry, which excavates marble for use in concrete and other building materials.





illustrate that social isolation — if, for example, the layers of artifacts remain dissimilar from the surrounding, non-Irish communities elsewhere in the region into the 1930s, rather than becoming the same by the turn of the century as at other sites.

The excavation at Texas

Little is left of the original Texas settlement today. Just one of the four original streets, Church Lane, remains in its original form, a side street off a state route lined with shopping centers. But once you get away from the suburban highway, the aura of Church Lane quickly changes. On the south side of the street is the stone complex of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, first built by the Irish in 1852, according to McGrain. Next to the church is a graveyard — filled with names of the families that once inhabited the area, etched on tombstones largely made from the very stone they quarried.

Down the street, about 10 plain-looking houses remain from the original Texas. They are still inhabited, but the Irish families that once lived there largely left the area in the 1930s, Brighton says. At the end of the street, beyond a light railroad and a paved road that truncates Church Lane, massive piles of marble debris stand behind the sign of "Lafarge," a multinational company that now quarries the marble for use

in concrete, asphalt and other materials. Blasts from the quarry still rumble through the area daily, one Texas resident says. Beyond a line of trees to the south of town are the former quarries and lime kilns that once sustained Texas, Brighton says — the quarries now filled in or paved over by store parking lots, the lime kilns shrouded in the trees and shrubbery along the light rail line.

It was near this scene that Brighton and some of his students began excavations of Texas last June. Lacking the funding for geophysical exploration tools such as ground penetrating radar to guide their search, Brighton's team did things the old-fashioned way: carefully digging out square pits along a straight line. The goal was to dig down at least 50 centimeters per pit until the team hit a "feature" — mixing between the normal soil horizons or an immovable object, like a wall, that clearly resulted from human activity.

By the third week, Brighton's team hit a stone foundation. They expanded their search out from their original line of investigation, and over the next several weeks, exposed two structures: two short, parallel walls of dry laid stone a little more than a meter apart and a meter deep, and a rectangular cement box seemingly built into where a wall would have connected the ends of the two parallel stone walls.

LAYOUT OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE:

- 1. Mixed soil and an organic stain left from a fence post. Artifacts in the soil associated with the stain, like coins with mint dates on them, can give archaeologists an approximate date for when the post was planted.**
- 2. This stone structure probably dates to the late 1800s or later, based on the dates of coins and ceramics found inside the structure.**
- 3. The stone structure is probably no older than the 1910s or 1920s, based on the cement box dated to that time that was built into the structure. The archaeologists used a principle similar to the geological law of cross-cutting to figure this out.**
- 4. A deep layer of mixed soil suggests that the soil was disturbed by human activity. The disturbance was likely either a trash pit or where a tree or bush was planted.**



Above: University of Maryland undergraduate student Joseph Mallonee cleans artifacts from the Texas site. Below: University of Maryland graduate student Adam Fracchia holds a caster, or the wheeled foot of a piece of furniture, from the Texas site.



Brighton thinks the stone structure must have been built sometime between the late 1800s and the 1920s, which he bases on two lines of evidence: First, the excavation site contained several layers of artifacts — including coins with mint dates of 1861 and 1901, as well as pieces of ceramics with maker's marks from between 1890 and 1914. That items from the late 1800s were associated with the stone structure would suggest that it was built sometime around that period or later, Brighton says.

Second, Brighton learned from another archaeologist that the cement box — which contained junk mostly from the 1970s — was made from a low-quality Portland cement produced between the 1910s and 1920s. That suggests the stone walls were likely built no later than the 1920s, because the cement box cut into the stone structure as if it had been stuck in later.

Last summer's field season ended in July, with the team excavating only the area around the stone structure and the cement box. Brighton and his students are now back at his lab at the University of Maryland sorting through the layers of artifacts and trying to make sense of the overall layout of the site.

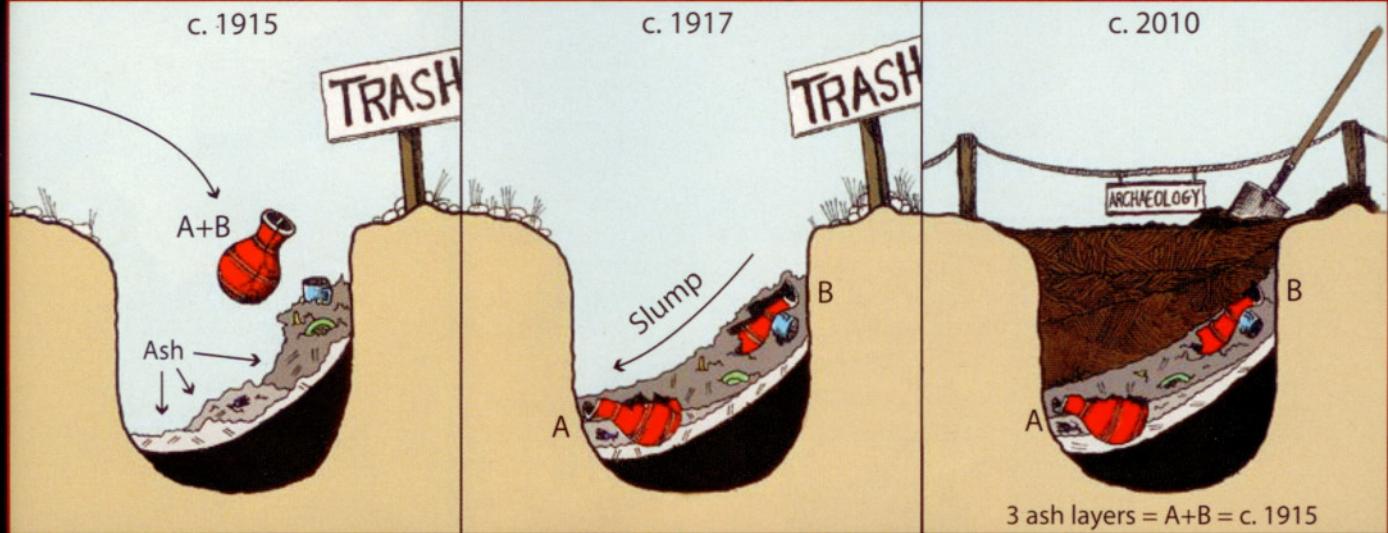
The evidence so far suggests that the stone structure Brighton and his students found was a multi-seated outhouse, or privy, likely shared among several households. That's conceivable based on the lack of running water in Texas up until the 1930s, the size of the structure (too big for a cistern), as well as the hodgepodge of stuff the structure contained, Brighton says.

At the time, there was no municipal system with garbage men coming by to pick up trash, "so when people break

c. 1915

c. 1917

c. 2010



- Trash layers can accumulate at one side of a pit because people throw garbage in from a certain direction. Therefore, artifacts or parts of artifacts can roll down into an exposed portion of a lower, older layer.

- As a result, when the layers slump over time, artifacts from a younger layer may appear to come from an older layer.

- Brighton and other archaeologists keep track of which pieces of artifact come from which layer. If two pieces of a vase, for example, are found in different layers but the pieces clearly belong to the same artifact, then you can assume those layers are "associated," or deposited around the same period.

By excavating the layers of trash people leave behind, archaeologists can understand how a community's material culture changed over time. To interpret these layers, archaeologists rely on the geological law of superposition: The older layers of a site are on the bottom and the younger layers are on the top. But trash deposits are not necessarily deposited horizontally, and sorting them out can require a little extra detective work.

something, or buy something new and want to get rid of the old stuff, nine times out of 10, if they don't dig a hole and bury it ... they'll throw it in a privy," Brighton says. "When you actually excavate those privies, you get stratigraphic deposits of cultural material over time." That's when archaeologists employ the laws of logic used by geologic stratigraphers, he says — in particular the law of superposition, which says that younger material is deposited on older material, so a sequence of layers starts at the bottom and moves up, and therefore can be dated in that order.

But the law of superposition can break down when it comes to human trash deposits like old privies, Brighton says. Unlike the horizontal sediment layers that accumulate in a lake or an ocean, layers of human trash can pile up unevenly as people repeatedly pitch garbage in from one side of the privy. As layers slump under their own weight, items — say, shards from a ceramic pot — from an upper layer may slip down into the exposed part of a lower layer, so that upon excavation, those shards appear to be from an older layer than they actually were.

To deal with this issue, archaeologists employ what is called cross-mending.

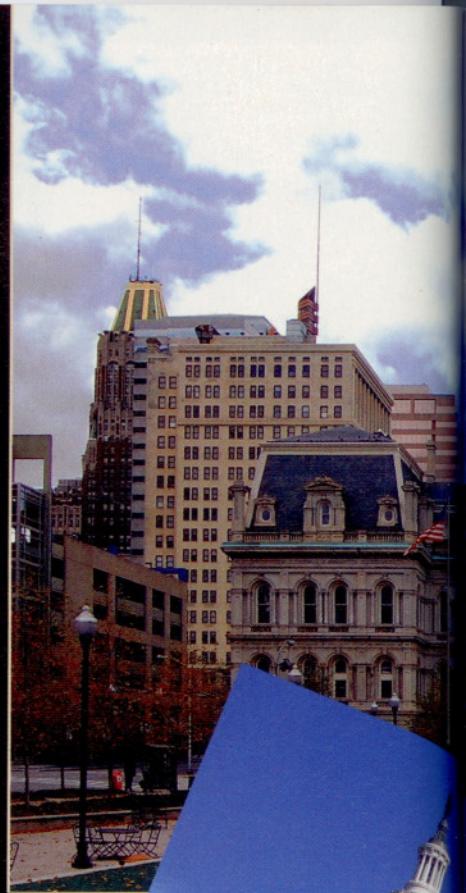
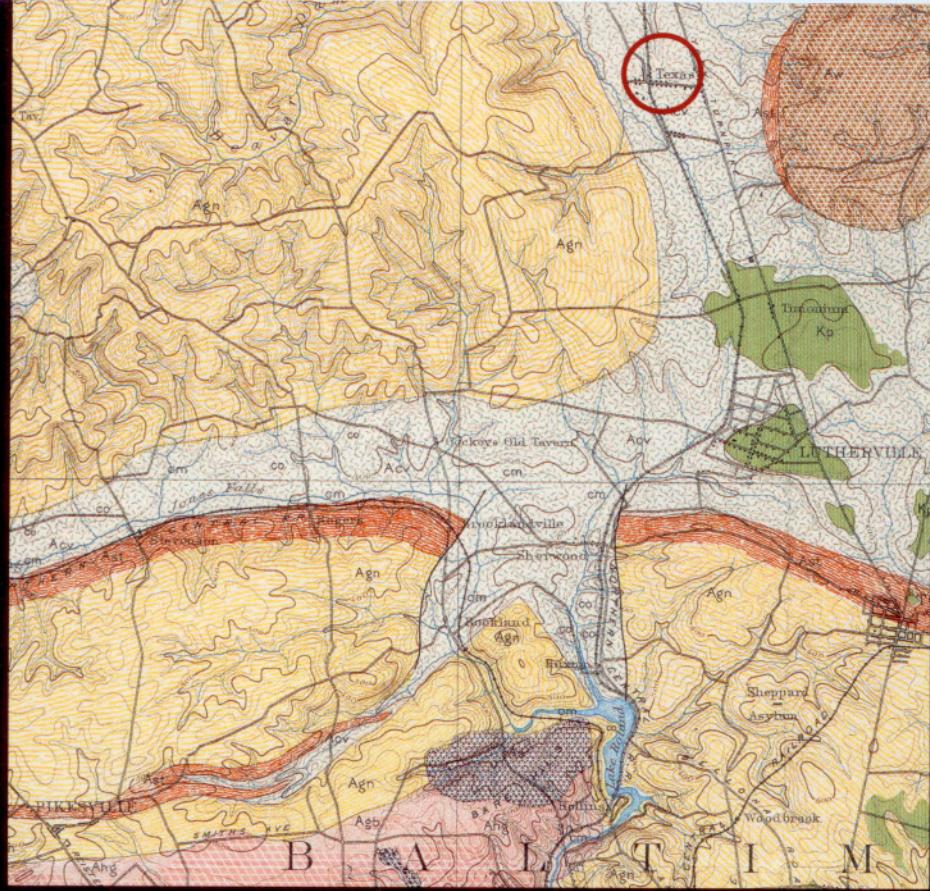
A lice comb and a coin recovered from the Texas site.

In short, if it becomes clear that pieces of a pot associated with two different layers are actually from the same pot, Brighton and his students will then know that those two stratigraphic layers actually accumulated about the same time.

Brighton and his students are now in the process of cross-mending the stone structure that they dug up this summer, which contained three layers: mixed soil on top, followed by ash (likely left over from coal or wood burning at a residence), and then another layer of mixed soil on the bottom. If the stone structure were indeed a privy, Brighton would expect at least one layer of "night soil" — a dense, dark brown material that resembles human excrement. But given that the privy was so shallow (its diggers would have hit the marble bedrock after digging only a meter down), it is possible someone periodically cleaned out the privy to keep it from filling up, Brighton says, removing any such layer.



Although Brighton has found only one possible privy so far, its relatively young age suggests that there may be other, older privies in the area that could give his team a more complete record of the stratigraphy of material culture in Texas. Though Brighton doesn't know if they'll ever find more artifacts, the archaeological work so far indicates he might, he says, which gives him hope that there will be more to learn from this unique Irish-American settlement.



Top left: An 1892 U.S. Geological Survey map, showing the Irish-American town of Texas, Md. (circled), situated on the "Cockeysville Marble" (white with dashes). Stone from the quarries around Texas, Md., made its way into numerous landmark buildings, including the Baltimore City Hall (top right); the Washington Monument (opposite, far right); the porticoes of the House and Senate wings of the U.S. Capitol (right); and St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City (bottom left).



The quarry that shaped the face of America

The value of the stone near Texas, Md., was recognized long before the Irish settled in the area. According to McGrain, in 1811, Dr. H. H. Hayden noted that the area's rock "approaches so near to marble as to render it not only useful but highly valuable in almost every branch of civil architecture; and the prospect is favorable to a supply of such as will answer every purpose of statuary and sculpture in all their variety."

In fact, the area's rock was a mixture of marble and calcite, Herbert says, which is now labeled the "Cockeysville Marble," according to the U.S. Geological Survey. About 500 million years ago, near the Cambrian-Ordovician boundary, limestone (made largely of calcite) was laid down, he says. Then, about 240 million years later, the intense pressures associated with the formation of Pangaea metamorphosed the limestone into marble.

According to McGrain, by 1834, quarrying in the Texas area had yielded at

least

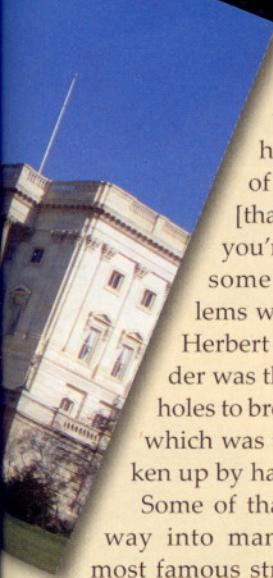
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"bushels," or about

5,600 kiloliters, of lime (likely burned from the calcite to be used as fertilizer, Herbert says). By 1847, when the first influx of Irish from Ballykilcline arrived, the area was home to 13 quarries, according to McGrain. By 1852, the area also had 37 kilns, a local paper reported.

It was a lucrative business. By the industry's peak near 1860, Brighton says, one four-man lime kiln business produced about \$18,500 worth of lime in a single year. Another 50-person marble quarry produced \$300,000 in marble stone.

Despite the flourishing industry (aided by a nearby railroad), life in the quarries was dangerous at best, Herbert says. Quarry stones were excavated by hand: One quarry worker would hold a long drill bit while another worker banged it



The marble used to build the Washington Monument comes from two Texas-area quarries. These stones weathered differently over time, creating the current color divide between the lighter bottom third and darker top two-thirds of the monument.

the monument. This fact explains why the bottom third of the Washington Monument is currently a lighter color than the top two-thirds: The marble from the other quarry weathered differently with time, according to the National Park Service.

Other projects included the Baltimore City Hall and Baltimore's (much smaller) Washington Monument, the porticos of the House and Senate wings of the U.S. Capitol building and the towers of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, according to McGrain.

But by the 1880s, the quarrying business started to bottom out, Brighton says. Many of the quarries in the area had exhausted their stores of good stone, an 1898 Maryland Geological Survey report noted. Moreover, Brighton says, the area's marble — white with black flecks — fell out of fashion for use as building stone compared with pink-hued marbles available in other parts of the country. For example, when a local bank was built in 1903, McGrain states, it included limestone all the way from Indiana. Furthermore, the lime-burning business had also begun to decline by this time — a victim of new kiln technology, Brighton says; rather than build new kilns, most of the kiln owners sold off their holdings.

By the 1920s, Herbert says, an outside businessman bought up the Texas quarries to produce newly popular construction materials like cement and concrete. Today, Lafarge, a company based in France, still quarries Texas' marble for that purpose. Another French company, Imerys, quarries the calcite for other uses like papermaking and plastics, he says.

But the glory days of quarrying building stone did not disappear completely. In 1998, the National Park Service began restoring the Washington Monument due to cracks, weathering and other damages. Lafarge donated blocks of marble to the effort. The restoration was finished in 2002, still a testament of immigrant labor.

Regardless of what more Brighton uncovers through excavations at Texas, one thing is clear: The Irish community there left a very material impression on the face of America.

Johnson is a staff reporter for EARTH.

