The Irish in Middletown:

The Pre-Famine Generations

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History 351
While it is commonly assumed that emigration to New England, and more particularly, Connecticut, was undertaken almost exclusively by those of English forebearance and citizenship as well as Puritan-Calvinist religious orientation, there are indications that during the period of colonial settlement and beyond, individuals of other national origins and religious affiliations did also seek refuge here in numbers substantial enough to raise questions as to the nature of Connecticut's ethnic homogeneity.

In this paper I shall attempt to examine the sources of contradiction that I have discovered, and using whatever documentation available, both primary and secondary, delineate them and speculate upon the nature of their presence in a period that both precedes and extends shortly beyond that of the years 1790 through 1820. It is my hope that this paper will be of some basic assistance to the further study of ethnic and social history of Middletown, in providing some beaten paths to discovery, as the
information available is far greater in amount than can be studied by one individual.

From its inception in 1636, the Connecticut Colony granted toleration to Catholics. However in 1724 their privileges became more restricted—their ability to hold public office was removed. In 1743, all laws which had previously protected Catholics had been stricken, thus precluding the possibility of the establishment of any Catholic Church in the colony.

Faced with the burden of illegally professing their Catholic faith it seems unlikely that those immigrants continued to maintain it. Further, it seems more likely that those who came to America after 1743 came with full knowledge of the laws here, and abandoned their faith for reasons of security once they arrived. There were no Catholic churches in which to practice their religion. The pressure from within the colony demanded religious homogeneity; thus, if one were to prosper, conformity to the dictates of the settlement was essential. All immigrant groups felt this pressure—Scots, who were primarily single men intermarried with those of Puritan stock. The Hugenots, French immigrants, realized that they were accepted primarily because they were Protestants, and aban-
doned their ethnic traits; the Germans anglicized their names while the Irish gave up their religion. With this process of Americanization complete, the population of New England represented a relatively stable group.

In addition to the renouncement of their religion, other factors also increased the likelihood of the Irish acceptance in New England. Initially, most of those coming to America were not from the lowest classes. Rather, these immigrants were composed mostly of literate artisans, professionals, and small farmers who were convinced that their lot would be greatly improved in a land where they would be rewarded for their initiative.

Because Catholicism was a drawback, and there was little or no opportunity to practice their faith, many chose to embrace the more dominant Protestant faiths, for not only did this allow them to co-exist more peacefully with their neighbors, but also served to fill their religious needs.

After the Revolutionary War and the signing of the Constitution, an increasing number of states became more tolerant of Catholicism. New England was an exception. While they were granted the same rights as Protestants, they were still viewed with suspicion. Many felt that
Rome was trying to establish her religion here and convert all of America. In Connecticut there was not a Catholic Church until the late 1820’s. And while there were a few Catholic families scattered throughout the state, the Reverend James Dana counted only seven families in New Haven as late as 1800.

New England grew to become a fairly isolated area with a relatively stable population. From 1789–1819 Connecticut was a one party state (Federalist). Those who wished to rise in such a political atmosphere had to realize that mobility came by embracing the ways of the ruling group. Furthermore, Connecticut did not abolish her established Congregationalism until 1818.

During this period following the Revolutionary War, a number of economic conditions persuaded the Irish to remain in their homeland despite the problems connected with absentee landlords and a host of political injustices. Being a producer of agricultural goods, this people supplied Europe’s need for food from the time of the French Revolution until the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. The economy was in an upswing which is commonly associated with wartime. There are only isolated cases of any emigration and these do not include those of the farming
class. Rhode Island and Connecticut traded in parts of Southern Ireland at this time and they often brought back small numbers of Irish refugees. On August 18th, the Brig Aurora, under the direction of Captain Childs returned from a forty-nine day crossing, while on the same day another brig, The Kesiah, under a Captain Thomson ended a thirty-nine day voyage to New London from Belfast and Dublin carrying thirty-seven and fifty-five passengers, respectively. Thus, with the exception of voyages of this type, New England remained separated from the "old world" during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, or for nearly two generations. Because of their homogeneity and their increasingly difficult adherence to their dwindling Puritan ideal, they were removed from the other colonies until 1825. Additionally, New Englanders felt a pride in the purity of their native blood, particularly Connecticut "Yankees" who felt superior to the cosmopolitan frontier communities.

At the end of the European wars, Ireland suffered from a devastating depression. Moreover, there were several blights upon their potato crops. The population was straining, for the food supply was inadequate. In order to alleviate this problem in Ireland,
the English looked to emigration as the solution. Yet the British could not imagine sending or allowing a large number of exiles to venture to America, as she had recently been at war with her and an increase in the American population would lead to increased American strength.

The solution came in providing grants to Canada, which were issued between 1823 and 1827. However, discontent with the sparseness of the area, many who took advantage of this aid granted by their former rulers soon turned toward America as their final destination. Some walked from New Brunswick to Maine and eventually settled there, while others availed themselves of the gypsum trade, which was a leading export of Nova Scotia to Eastport and Passamaquoddy. Here the gypsum was transferred to American coastal vessels which gathered in great numbers at these ports. For a small sum, these immigrants were given passage on decks to such harbors as Newburyport, Boston, Providence and New London.

In the late summer and early fall of 1810 alone, three sloops: The Regale, The Favorite Patchy, and the Susan Grey under the command of a Captain Smith as well as well as a schooner, The Empress,
steered by one Captain E. Wotton, came up river to Middletown from passamaquoddy, presumably to deliver gypsum, widely employed as a mineral fertilizer to the farming community there. New Brunswick's vessels also did lumber trade with Ireland, and on their return voyages they often carried passengers back to Canada. From whence the immigrant could gain passage to neighboring New England via established routes.

The War of 1812 triggered a number of conditions which demanded an increase in population which the inhabitants of New England could not supply. Increasingly sons and daughters left their cities and towns to seek their fortunes in westward territories. Towns and cities felt the loss. The War also fostered the increased development of industrialization—laborers were needed to man the increasing number of factories. So too, with increasing industrialization came a greater desire for internal improvements which in turn required more people. The only means to satisfy that end was to give way to the immigrant.

Yet fearful for the precarious state of their own secular and religious community, and uncertain of what the future might hold for them, a strong sense of anxiety prevailed that was new to them.
Allowing German and Irish Catholics to dwell and work in their presence could only compound that hard felt anxiety by bringing ever so much closer the presence of the Romish Church that their forefathers had journeyed so far and toiled so long to escape. It must have seemed ominous or even providential to them to watch their old ways die amid a resurgence of Catholicism in a land once dominated by their Puritan ideals.

However, those in New England had to become more flexible if they wanted to prosper and reap the benefits of an industrializing society. There was much evidence that ardent Congregationalism was waning, for in Middletown in 1818 there were eleven churches (3 Baptist, 4 Congregational, 1 Independent or Separatist, and 2 Methodist). No other community in Connecticut supported so many. Catholicism also grew. Whereas the United States had 70 priests, 80 churches, and 70,000 Catholics in 1807, 14,000 Catholics resided in New England and 16 churches had been established by 1830.

These facts may be taken as a further indication of growing toleration due to economic need. It must
stressed, however, that those who emigrated from Ireland before 1850 were largely literate and came from the middle class — that is, they represented neither the landed gentry, nor the peasant poor.¹⁹

In viewing conditions on either side of the Atlantic, both in Ireland and New England, much can be gained in the understanding of what an Irish Catholic would undergo in the process of emigration. Though the two worlds are obviously different, they offer some remarkable similarities.

By 1800, Ireland had undergone nearly three centuries of English colonial domination. The official church in Ireland became the Episcopal Church. British monarchs from the time of the Tudors, particularly Edward, sought to and succeeded in removing Catholicism of its political force. Catholics could expect neither positions of public responsibility, nor, economic opportunity. Their ability to hold land became increasingly more close to impossible, and what Irish Catholics did hold was eventual confiscated by or forfeited to British Absentee landlords, leaving them to be wanderers of the roads, while sapping Ireland's economic resources.
Thus, for someone coming from Ireland to New England during the colonial period, the situation was obvious. A choice had to be made. Catholicism in any form was not tolerated to any real extent, and a newcomer had to abide by these rules or remain in continual subjugation to British tyranny in Ireland. In the New world, one at least had a chance toward economic opportunity.

What is clear about Connecticut's early anti-Catholic sentiments is that they were expressed most strongly after the Second Great Awakening when Protestantism and the Puritan ideals were threatened by schism. Anti-Irish sentiments seem to correlate most strongly with those anti-papal fears which periodically revived.

It is very clear that many citizens of Irish descent fill the rolls of Middletown from early in its history, and these descendants of the Celts, help to redefine the nature of Connecticut's homogeneity as religious rather than ethnic. Their rates of intermarriage bear this out. Later in the period of the "Capitalist Revolution, anti-Catholic sentiment once again rises as again the entire community is further threatened by the increasing demands of an immigrant labor force."
In Middletown and Portland, increasing numbers of Irish made their way to work in the brownstone quarries of Portland. Again anti-Irish sentiment surfaces in the form of jokes, Anti-Catholic rhetoric and fictionalized sketches of Irish life, largely parodizing their emotionality and religious beliefs as in Francis Riordan. It is at this time the Irish laborers seek to build a church. In 1829, Reverend R.D. Woodley, the first priest to come to Middletown, said Mass here while on a mission through the Connecticut River towns. In 1835, Masses were being said at the Taylor house on East Court Street. Further services were held at the home of Michael Ahern of Portland. For New Haven was the site of the nearest Catholic church.

Efforts to establish a Catholic Church were not met without opposition. In 1836 a Captain Worthington offered the use of his barn, but the day following this gracious offer, he denied them access to it when they appeared for worship.

Final success in their efforts came when a five-hundred dollar donation was made by Mrs. Richard Alsop, a leading citizen of Middletown, and a Catholic, herself. Her husband's first cousin Charles Richard Alsop, also professing the Catholic faith, made available a tract
of land at a very reasonable price, which left more than enough money from the original donation to begin its construction.\textsuperscript{29}

While examining genealogical materials, a number of inconsistencies were present. There are two Alsop genealogies, one at Wesleyan\textsuperscript{30}, and one compiled by Mrs. Louis Richter of Holy Trinity in Middletown.\textsuperscript{31} The Richter genealogy rather mysteriously leaves out two names from the otherwise complete work. That of Aimee Garcin, or Mrs. Richard Alsop, and of her relative Charles Richard Alsop, both integral members of that family, and both professing the catholic faith.

Further, in the analysis of material provided by the Middletown Upper Houses,\textsuperscript{32} a discrepancy exists. Two families who ultimately settled in Middletown, the Rileys\textsuperscript{33}, and the Savages\textsuperscript{34}, are examples of this discrepancy. Both bear surnames that can be traced to Ireland, and are prominent among the Pedigree of the Irish Nation\textsuperscript{35}. The name Riley is well established in County Kerry, and Savage, from Ards and County Down. These names also occupy prominent places in Irish History, yet, the genealogical information compiled by the Upper Houses, fails to document these names before their
arrival in Connecticut. The Savage Papers state, "There is no knowledge of him antecedent to the Hartford record which reads, 'John Savage of Hartford was married to Elizabeth Dub(l)(b)in Y° tenth day of febru: one thousand six-hundred and fifty-two.' Middletown land records give the name of his wife as Dublin." 36 The documents go on to show relation to a Dublin who resides in Rhode Island, a state which is tolerant of papists. These two cases suggest the change from Catholicism previously mentioned in the paper.

Riley's genealogy begins in Wethersfield in 1716, and moves to Middletown, where he is married to Abigail Montague, whose lineage is also traced in Upper Houses. He was a harness maker by trade, and a member of the church there.

Middletown's list of citizens of Irish descent proves that these people lived here in relative ease, and achieved prominence. Probate records at the Connecticut State Library 37 also bear out that they owned land and held livelihoods that could support them.

Arthur Magill, born 1743 in Northern Ireland achieved great prominence in the U.S. Bank. He was a cloth mer-
merchant and also appears in Stow v. Converse. He held a co-partnership with Captain Steven Clay which was dissolved on October 31, 1809. He married Esther Wetmore, a local Protestant and was buried in Mortimer Cemetery when he died at the age of 69. He was the 22nd warden of the Episcopal Church and fathered eight children: William Arthur, Esther, Elizabeth, who died in childhood, Mary, Elizabeth #2, Arthur Jr., Stephen Clay, and Patty. His brother Captain Charles Magill emigrated at the same time from Ireland, but died in Sheldon Vermont who was also buried in Mortimer Cemetery on December 6, 1807.

James Casey was another prominent member of the Middletown community. He was born July 1, 1760 and married Susan Chandler of New Haven in September 1781. In addition to being a merchant whereby he sold wines, spirits, flour and currents, he was also the fire warden of the city from March 22, 1803 until 1809. Established largely through his initiative, the company was organized not only to extinguish disasters of this kind, for the duties of the warden appear to be largely preventative in nature. It was the responsibility of the warden to examine chimneys and stoves during the months of November, January and March. Casey also notified the public of
various means available whereby residents could properly protect their property from fire.46 At one point in his life he appears to have formed a Patent Baking Works with one of the Starr's which made ship and pilot bread.47 Casey was also the 23rd warden of the Episcopal Church and on April 10, 1803, the day before he was made warden, he purchased pew 19 for a sum of £9.48 According to the U.S. Census records, he had a large family, it shows that he had twelve persons under the age of 26 living in his household in 1810.49 His most renown son was William Bryan Casey M.D. who attended Columbia College and was mayor of Middletown in the 1850's.50 Dr. Casey was instrumental in the establishment of the Connecticut Home for the Insane and served on its board of directors for a number of years.

When James Casey died in 1822 of apoplexy,51 he still had two sons who were pupils of Asa Cromwell of Cheshire.52 His estate was substantial for he not only left $16,839.86, but also property in both New Haven and Middlefield (2½ acres) in addition to a lot in Middletown which bordered Nehemiah Hubbard.53 His wife appears to have travel some after his death,54 and she died a number of years later at the age of 87 of old age in 1868.55
Another resident of Middletown who amassed a considerable degree of wealth was Captain Thomas MacDonough. His great-grandfather, John, originally came to Long Island from Salmon which is about 12 miles from Dublin in 1658. It wasn't until 1730 that the family emigrated to Connecticut. Thomas MacDonough married Lucy Ann Shalor in December of 1812.

Other residents with Irish surnames include:

Gleason, Oliver, listed as a fireman in the Middlesex Gazette, March 29, 1811.

Gleason, Captain, listed as a slave dealer on map of 1770; the name Gleason appears in the list of Irish Pedigrees on page 508.

Kelly, Hannah, listed as head of Household in the Census of 1810. The surname, Kelly appears in Irish Pedigrees on pages 117, 669, 684, 685, 658 and 783.

Kelly, Lucy, listed on the Census of 1810 as head of household.

MacCough, Petrlik, listed in the probate records at the State Archives, 1789. Surname may be found in Irish Pedigrees, pages 139.

MacDonough, Thomas, listed in the probate records at the State Archives 1826. Bears, Irish Pedigrees on pages 112, 521, and 747.

Malone, Patrick, listed in the probate records at the state archives 1804 #2276, he died insolvent. The Middlesex Gazette July 31, 1801 lists an advertisement for tallow, wherein it states that he has a soapworks store where he is a candle and soap maker.
McCall, James listed on the tax list of 1825. The surname is noted in Irish Pedigrees page 542.

Molony, Michael, listed in the probate records at the State Archives 1763 #2397, in Irish Pedigrees on pages 153, 406.

McCleave, Uriah, listed in the State Probate Records 1815 #2253.

O'Daniels, Esther, listed on the Census of 1810 as head of household with one female 0-10 yrs, one female 16-26 and one male 16-26. It is possible that her husband was away and she was listed as head of household.

O'Daniels, John listed on the Census of 1810.

O'Daniels, Timothy listed on the Census of 1810.

Riley, Asher, listed in the Probate Records at the State Archives 1823. The Riley name is listed as originating in East Brefney, Ireland in Irish Pedigrees on page 743.
FOOTNOTES

3. Hansen, p. 156.
5. Purcell, p. 61.
8. Middlesex Gazette, August 22, 1811.
9. Hansen, p. 156.
11. Billington, p. 34.
13. Ibid., October 4, 1810.
14. Ibid., October 4, 1810.
15. Ibid., October 25, 1810.
17. Purcell, p. 65.
22. Ibid. March 15, 1831.
23. McKenna, Rev. Edward, "History of St. John's Parish".
25. McKenna, Beers, p. 144.
27. Beers, p. 144.
28. McKenna, Beers, 144.
30. Alsop Papers, Manuscript Box 1, Wesleyan University.
31. Richter, Records Holy Trinity Church Archives.
32. Adams, Middletown Upper Houses.
33. Adams, p. 615.
34. Adams, p. 640.
38. Middlesex Gazette, November 11, 1809. Ibid. October 31, 1809.
40. Richter, genealogical material.
45. Middlesex Gazette December 6, 1802. Also has ads about stolen guns—470 he was having cleaned. On February 28, 1803 Casey seems to be an important news item. Along with this information it is said that Casey had to hold a white cane whenever he was at a fire so that everyone would know who was in authority. This seems strange as it would prevent one from assisting in extinguishing the fire. (Middletown really hasn't changed all that much.)
46. Middlesex Gazette, February 3, 1809.

47. Middlesex Gazette, August 9, 1802. Also sold wine to ships; see Probate Records State Library.

48. Richter.

49. U.S. Census, 1810, Wesleyan Manuscript Box 5.

50. Richter.

51. Richter.

52. Probate Record, James Casey, State Archives, Hartford.

53. Ibid. To Philadelphia where daughter resided. To Vermont and New York.


55. Richter.

56. The Life of Comodore MacDonough, p. 7 (Russell Library).

57. Richter.
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Alsop Family Papers, Wesleyan University, Manuscript Box I.

Census Index, Connecticut Historical Society, Elizabeth St., Hartford, Connecticut.

Probate Records, Colonial Documents, State of Connecticut State Library Archives, Hartford, Connecticut:

Genealogical Information, Church Records, Government Documents, Tombstone Inscriptions.