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# The Irish in New England

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## The Irish in Rhode Island

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Irish immigrants were certainly part of the colonial as well as the early national population of Rhode Island: Scots Irish from the North, Protestant Anglo-Irish from the English pale, and a scattering of Catholic Irish from many parts of Ireland. The War of 1812, the embargo that preceded it, and the depression that followed it, however, caused most of the native-born Irish, who had not established themselves in the community, to move elsewhere.

Initially, the majority of the Rhode Island Irish immigrants were found in Pawtucket, the cradle of the industrial revolution, where a ready supply of yarn from the Almy, Brown, and Slater mill provided work for Irish weavers and cloth printers. A significant Irish population also lived in Newport and smaller ones in Tiverton and Portsmouth. The mostly male Irish residents in Newport labored in the building of Fort Adams. Those in Portsmouth worked in the coal mines, while those in Tiverton worked in the mills in Fall River. The Irish populations in Pawtucket, where they numbered in the hundreds, and in Newport, where there may have been as many as 2,000 at times, were large enough to support the first mission churches established in the state in 1828.<sup>1</sup> A local depression in Pawtucket in 1828 and the reduction of government spending on Fort Adams in the 1830s caused most of the Irish in both places to look for work elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> In 1820, when twenty-year-old Anne Campbell and her husband Michael arrived in Providence from Ireland, only 5 other Catholics lived in the town.<sup>3</sup> How many non-Catholic Irish there were at the time is not known. During the course of the 1820s, however, several hundred more Irish (many, but not all Catholics) settled in Providence either as single individuals or as young families. The Catholic Irish, who worked at a variety of low-paying occupations, were not numerous enough to build a mission church of their own until 1838. The Scots Irish and other Presbyterians did not build a church in Providence until 1872. The first reliable information on the size of the Irish population in the Providence area came from a census undertaken by the Hibernian Or-

<sup>1</sup> The 2,000 estimate was made by Benjamin Hazard in a speech at a June session of the Rhode Island General Assembly and recalled in a *Providence Journal* article on 9 August 1839.

<sup>2</sup> Additional information on the early Irish immigrants can be found in Robert W. Hayman, *Catholicism in Rhode Island and the Diocese of Providence, 1780–1886*, 2 vols. ([Providence, R.I.]: Diocese, 1982), 1:18–25.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Obituary of Anne Campbell, *Providence Visitor*, 3 March 1890; cf. also Welcome Arnold Greene et al., *The Providence Plantations for Two Hundred and Fifty Years* (Providence, R.I.: J. A. and R. A. Reid, 1886). Chapter 6, "The Religious Life of the City—Continued," 155–61, was written by Anne's daughter, Annie Campbell.

phan Society in 1839. The society reported that the Catholic population of the city—men, women, and children—totaled 1,696. Another 1,000 may have lived in Newport and in the various mill villages in the state. In 1840 the federal census takers counted 108,830 Rhode Island residents.<sup>4</sup>

The state's population increased to 147,545 in 1850 and to 174,620 in 1860. While the census takers did not record the religion of the population, the fact that twelve new Catholic missions were established between 1840 and 1859 suggests that Irish Catholics made up a large percentage of foreign-born Irish in the state. In 1850 U.S. census takers counted 15,944 foreign-born Irish residents in the state in a general population of 147,545. The largest growth occurred in the late 1840s and early 1850s because of the potato famine in Ireland. By 1860, 25,285 foreign-born Irish were recorded in Rhode Island out of a population of 174,620.<sup>5</sup>

The year 1842 saw the culmination of a struggle to widen the suffrage in Rhode Island in what is called the "Dorr War." Thomas Wilson Dorr emerged as the champion of the disenfranchised workingmen of the state. Unless one was an owner of real estate valued at \$134, one could not vote in Rhode Island. As did others elsewhere in this age of Jackson, Dorr wished to see the workingman, who rented rather than owned property, admitted to the vote. The thought of rootless workingmen living in the state was upsetting to the Rhode Island gentry, who had long controlled the state's political affairs, and the thought of the foreign-born Irish workingman voting was too much to countenance. As early as 1834 Henry Bowen Anthony, the young editor of the *Providence Journal*, used such a prospect to rally opposition to the proposed expansion of suffrage. It is true that the foreign-born, mostly Irish Catholic, population of the state began to increase rapidly in the 1840s. The idea, however, that Irish Catholics were about to grow so numerous they might seek special privileges, as was then happening in New York City—or even take over the state as the more radical anti-Catholics feared—was more intended to arouse anti-Catholic prejudices than to advance political debate. On the orders of Bishop Benedict Fenwick of Boston, whose diocese included Rhode Island, Irish Catholics took no significant part in the Dorr War. Following the defeat of the cause Dorr championed, Rhode Island adopted a new constitution in November 1842. According to the new document, native-born citizens who did not own the requisite amount of property could vote if they paid a registry tax. But the 1842 constitution retained the \$134 colonial charter provision for voting by foreign-born,

<sup>4</sup> Greene et al., *Providence Plantations*, 151, 156.

<sup>5</sup> *Rhode Island Manual*, 1965–66, "Population of Rhode Island from 1708–1960," 416–20; Edwin N. Snow, "Census of the City of Providence, taken in July 1855" (Providence, R.I.: Knowles, Anthony and Co., 1856), 13–18; *Providence Journal*, 15 December 1852.

naturalized citizens.<sup>6</sup>

In 1828 only two naturalized Irishmen lived in the state. Between 1840 and 1842, about thirty Irishmen petitioned for and were admitted to citizenship. In 1842, according to one observer, there were “not one hundred naturalized citizens in this state,” and most of these were not Irish.<sup>7</sup> While some of those who sought American citizenship did so in the hopes of voting, the main reason for seeking citizenship was to be able to hold property. Following the tradition of English Common Law, aliens could not own property in Rhode Island unless they secured the specific permission of the general assembly. Very few such petitions were granted in any given year, and those were mostly obtained by people with English names who wished to engage in business. Between 1836 and 1840 the assembly granted petitions of but five Irishman to hold property. The law prohibiting aliens from owning and conveying property was not abolished until 1868.<sup>8</sup>

In May 1853 the Democrats gained control of the governor’s office and both houses of the legislature. The Democratic-controlled general assembly passed a resolution calling for a referendum on the question of assembling a constitutional convention to alter, among other things, the voting restrictions imposed on naturalized citizens. In June and September, proponents of reform tried a variety of tactics to get some measure of suffrage extension passed, but each proposal was soundly defeated.<sup>9</sup>

The election campaigns during in the 1850s witnessed vitriolic verbal attacks on foreign-born residents of the state, particularly on the growing number of Irish Catholics.<sup>10</sup> The attacks came from many quarters, but the most strident and consistent were those from the pen of Henry Bowen Anthony. His editorials suggest that his antipathy towards the Irish, particularly Irish Catholics, was motivated by his desire to ensure the triumph of his party. While Anthony professed not to be prejudiced himself, he appealed to both the ethnic and religious prejudices of his readers in order to promote the political triumphs of Whig and later of Republican candidates and causes.

Following the defeat of the Democratic Party suffrage proposals 1853,

<sup>6</sup> For information on the Dorr War and the anxiety that the Irish created, cf. Patrick T. Conley, *Democracy in Decline: Rhode Island’s Constitutional Development, 1776–1841* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1977). The latest work on the Dorr Rebellion is Erik Chaput’s *The People’s Martyr: Thomas Wilson Dorr and the 1842 Rhode Island Revolution* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> *Republican Herald*, 12 March 1842.

<sup>8</sup> *Acts and Resolves*, January 1868, 90.

<sup>9</sup> Conley, *Democracy in Decline*, 368–70.

<sup>10</sup> Hayman, *Catholicism in Rhode Island*, 1:123–40; Edward Field, ed., *State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the End of the Century: A History*, 3 vols. (Boston: Mason Publishing Co.), 1:351–66; Charles Carroll, *Rhode Island: Three Centuries of Democracy*, 4 vols. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., Inc., 1932), 1:576–81.

John Coyle, a teacher at St. Patrick’s School, Providence, and a leader in the Irish community in Providence, wrote a long article addressed to the naturalized citizens of Rhode Island in which he attributed the defeat of the proposed convention to “animosity towards the members of the Catholic religion.” Coyle’s address was printed by the newly founded nativist paper, the *Providence Daily Tribune*. No one chose to publicly contest Coyle’s charge that anti-Catholic prejudice was the main reason why the Democratic suffrage reform proposals failed so decisively to win approval by Rhode Island’s electorate.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1860 federal census the foreign-born Irish population in Rhode Island was listed as 25,285. In the state census of 1865 the number recorded was 27,030. To these figures one can reasonably add about 15,000 children of Irish-born parents to give a total Irish/Irish-American population in 1860 of about 40,000 in a state population of 174,620. With the onset of the Civil War in 1861 the Irishmen of the state, both foreign-born and native, constituted a substantial part of the pool that would be called upon to fight for the Union. Many individual Irishmen volunteered to serve in the existing state militia units, which formed the First and Second Rhode Island, with the majority of the initial Irish volunteers joining the Second. To encourage the enlistment of foreign-born Irish in other regiments, some speakers at recruitment rallies promised to work for the passage of an act that would grant the right to vote to those who had honorably completed their service and who did not meet the property qualifications.<sup>12</sup>

The first attempt to make good on that promise failed because of a clerical error in the general assembly’s 1861 session. When the attempt was renewed in September 1862, it was postponed until January 1863 after a debate in the House which revealed the anti-Irish sentiments of some of its Republican, ex-Whig, members. Differences over how to word the amendment delayed action further. It was not until August 1864, after a draft had been initiated in order to fill the ranks of the Union armies, that the amendment went before the people for a vote. The proposal was defeated. It received a majority of the vote, but not the three-fifths necessary for passage. Another attempt to pass the amendment was made in 1871 and still another in 1876. Both times the amendment received a majority of the votes but not the necessary three-fifths. It was not until April 1886 that an amendment extending the vote to soldiers and sailors who had served honorably in the Civil War was passed. This time the vote was 18,903 to approve and 1,477 to reject.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Providence Daily Tribune*, 8 July 1853. Coyle repeated his charge in a letter to the editors of the *Tribune* published on 21 July 1853.

<sup>12</sup> *Providence Journal*, 26 February 1866.

<sup>13</sup> Charles E. Gorman, “An Historical Statement of the Elective Franchise in Rhode Island” (Providence, R.I.: privately printed, 1879).

Given the refusal in 1876 on the part of a sizable minority of Rhode Islanders to extend the suffrage, proponents of the measure then turned to the U.S. Congress. In 1878, 1,800 Rhode Islanders petitioned Congress, which was then considering the Fifteenth Amendment, to include the words "place of nativity" among the reasons one could not be denied the right to vote. The effort was blocked by Henry Bowen Anthony, then a senator from Rhode Island. Anthony refused to vote for the amendment if the words, "nativity, property and creed," which had been inserted by the House into the Senate's version of the amendment, were retained. Since Anthony's vote was needed for the passage of the amendment by the Congress, the reconciliation committee acceded to his wishes that Rhode Island be allowed to make regulations for the state that suited it.

In 1870 Charles C. Gorman, the Massachusetts-born son of an Irish immigrant and Yankee mother, became the first Irish Catholic to be elected to the Rhode Island House. Gorman took it as the chief objective of his public service to secure an extension of the suffrage to the foreign-born. Gorman recognized that sons and daughters of foreign-born parents were increasing far more rapidly than those of "native" Americans. Furthermore, they had become essential to Rhode Island's prosperity and productivity. It is true that the Irish in general made the slowest social and economic progress of any ethnic group in the nineteenth century other than African Americans. It is also true that Irish women were the exception to that statement. By 1870, however, the collective wealth of the Irish, the number and sophistication of the state's Irish societies, both religious and secular, and the rise of an educated Irish upper class held promise of a change in their political status in the near future. That future was to arrive in April 1888, two years after the vote on the extension of suffrage to Civil War soldiers and sailors when an amendment removing the property qualification in general, the so-called Bourn amendment, was passed by a vote of 20,068 to 12,193.

Did the exclusion of the vast majority of foreign-born Irish protect the state from the political corruption experienced by New York City and other places? No. In a February 1905 article, "Rhode Island, A State for Sale," Lincoln Steffans laid out the story of corruption by a group of prominent, native born, business people. In 1906 the first Irish American, James H. Higgins—the front man of a Brown University-educated, Irish-American political boss, Pawtucket's John J. Fitzgerald—was elected governor on a reform ticket. In that same year a state census found that Catholics constituted the largest single denomination.

Did the exclusion of the Irish from voting for most of the nineteenth century prevent the passage of special interest legislation feared by the nativists? Yes, with two exceptions. One was the restoration of tax-exempt status to private schools in 1894, which the nativists had taken away in 1876. The second was the granting of Catholic clergy the right to minister to Catholics in the state prison and other institutions in 1899.

Such was the dark side of the Irish experience in Rhode Island. But there was a positive side. Although excluded from any significant participation in Rhode Island's political life, the foreign-born Irish and their native-born sons and daughters succeeded in forging a new life for themselves. While the economic and social progress of the Irish was slow, they made advances in spite of the environmental, social, economic, and political obstacles they faced.<sup>14</sup>

Like other immigrant groups, the first notice of the Irish in the state after 1820 was that of thieves, drunks, and brawlers, with the occasional note of a good Irishman. As elsewhere, the Yankees did not distinguish between the Irish Presbyterians from the North or the Catholic Irish from Ulster or another of the Irish provinces. They were all Irish. The writer of an account in the 16 September 1828 *Rhode Island American and Providence Gazette* of a brawl in one of the cellars of the Arcade in Providence (the first enclosed shopping mall in the country) between a workman from Londonderry and another from Tipperary made nothing of the fact that one was probably Presbyterian and the other Catholic. Brawls between Irishmen were commonplace. This fight, however, was apparently an exception, because the author noted that "The Irishmen engaged on that building have uniformly conducted themselves in a peaceable and orderly manner."<sup>15</sup>

Until the Irish Catholic population began to swell in the 1840s, native Americans regarded immigrants from the many parts of Ireland as collectively Irish and made little of the distinctions that separated Irish within their own communities. After the coming of increasing numbers of Irish into the state in the 1820s, the Irish, of all persuasions, celebrated St. Patrick's Day. On 22 March 1828 the *Providence Patriot and Columbian Phenix* was happy to print a note from "a gentleman of Pawtucket that on St. Patrick's Day not a single Irishman was seen in Pawtucket in a state of intoxication."<sup>16</sup> On St. Patrick's Day, 17 March 1839, "perfect decorum" was once again observed at the largest celebration of the day yet recorded. The celebration was held at the invitation of the Hibernian Orphan Society at the newly constructed City Hotel in Providence. About 120 sat down for dinner. The guests consisted of Irishmen, Englishmen, Scots, and Americans, "who mingled with perfect cordiality." Among the guests that evening was Nicholas Gordon of Cranston. His neighbor, Amasa Sprague, had been invited but was unable to attend. Among those

<sup>14</sup> There is not a great deal of data available to study the progress of the Irish in Rhode Island. The author has gathered a small collection of Irish obituaries which attest to the struggles and successes of a few of the Irish in the state. Diocesan Historical Archives, "Irish."

<sup>15</sup> *Rhode Island American and Providence Gazette*, 16 September 1828. See also the articles in the same paper for 19 March 1822 and 31 January 1826 for other examples of how the Irish were seen by their neighbors.

<sup>16</sup> *Providence Patriot and Columbian Phenix*, 22 March 1828.

native Rhode Islanders who did attend was Philip Allen, whose Providence printworks employed some 300 Irish. The society, which received a charter from the state in 1841, was inspired by a similar society in Boston and was formed to raise money to compensate families that took in Irish orphans.<sup>17</sup>

By the 1840s the relative harmony that once existed among the different groups of Irish and between the Irish and "progressive" native Rhode Islanders began to break apart. In 1842 Fr. John Corry, the Irish-born pastor of the first Catholic church in Providence, Saints Peter and Paul, administered the temperance pledge to 360 Irish and afterwards organized the Catholic Temperance Society. Corry organized the society on a strictly Irish and Catholic basis. The society evoked good will from some quarters. In an article that appeared in the *Providence Journal* on 13 January 1841, the writer noted "a surprising change" among a large part of the Irish population of Providence and added (perhaps with some exaggeration) that the Catholic Temperance Society then numbered "over eleven hundred members, all Irish, and it is believed that the pledge has not been violated in any case." Other temperance societies existed in Providence in 1842 that the Irish could have joined, but many of the members of these societies were growing wary of the increasing number of Irishmen.<sup>18</sup>

In 1842 and 1843, in the midst of the political troubles that were then troubling the state, the various Irish societies organized celebrations of St. Patrick's Day in Providence, Woonsocket, and other places and continued to do so through the Know-Nothing period of the early to mid-1850s. In Pawtucket, in March 1851, the Father Mathew Beneficent Catholic Total Abstinence Society celebrated the day with a Mass at St. Mary's Church and then paraded the streets of the town with music and banners. When the society did so again in 1854, some thought that there would be trouble, as had occurred the previous year in New York City, between the Protestant Irish and the Catholics, but "all passed off without difficulty."<sup>19</sup>

Not all the Irish societies in Rhode Island were connected with the Catholic Church. Although it was not until 1866 that a division of the Ancient Order of Hibernians was officially recognized by the national office, a group of Irishmen petitioned to obtain a state charter for the

<sup>17</sup> *Republican Herald*, 20 March 1839. Even in the late 1840s the Irish of all persuasions and native Rhode Islanders could come together in a common cause; see Harvey Strum, "Not Forgotten in Their Affliction": Irish Famine Relief from Rhode Island, 1847," *Rhode Island History* 60, no. 1 (2002): 227–36.

<sup>18</sup> *Providence Journal*, 5 October 1840, 13 January 1841; *Manufacturers' and Farmers' Journal*, 11 February 1841, 20 March 1842. Saints Peter and Paul was established in 1837. While the Irish could have joined with the natives in their temperance societies, many of the native advocates of temperance were also advocates of causes hostile to the Irish.

<sup>19</sup> *Pawtucket Gazette and Chronicle*, 21 March 1851, 24 March 1854.

predecessor organization, the Hibernian Benevolent Sick and Burial Society, in February 1856. The new society celebrated St. Patrick's Day quietly for its first two years, but in 1858 over 1,000 men from around the state braved the inclement weather of the day to march through the streets of Providence. The mounted officers wore flowing green capes over their uniforms; those who marched on foot wore green sashes over their black broadcloth suits and decorated their hats with sprigs of shamrocks. The marchers were accompanied by McCarty's Cornet Band and carried both American and Irish flags at the head of their procession. The parade was not just an expression of their affection for their native land. In the wake of the Know-Nothing years, it was also a statement on their pride and of their increasing prosperity.<sup>20</sup>

Following President Lincoln's calls for volunteers to save the Union, the Irish enlisted as quickly as native Rhode Islanders to serve in the Union armies. As in Boston and New York, some among the Irish in Providence—led by Peter A. Sinnott, a liquor salesman and publisher whose short-lived paper, *The Adopted Citizen*, in 1860 sought to promote voting rights for the Irish—tried to organize an Irish Regiment and succeeded in obtaining authorization from the state to do so. Sinnott and his supporters recruited six companies in various cities in the state but were not able to reach a full complement of men or to raise the \$20,000 to \$30,000 necessary to equip the regiment. The idea of an Irish regiment was also frustrated by the opposition of others among the Irish who felt that it was "the right of foreign-born Irish citizens to be accepted into the ranks of the units formed from among the entire citizenbody of Rhode Island." Although Sinnott was elected colonel of the new regiment, when it came time to take the regiment into the state's service on 12 August 1861 as the Third Rhode Island, the state's adjutant general chose an experienced regular army officer to command the regiment. The ranks of the Third Rhode Island were filled out with men drawn from throughout the state. The regiment served honorably during the Civil War as did the Irish in other units.<sup>21</sup>

By 1870 when Charles C. Gorman, who was to be their champion in the cause of equal rights, was first elected to the Rhode Island House, the majority of the Irish in Rhode Island believed that the time had come to be accepted on an equal basis with other Rhode Islanders. The service of the Irish in the Civil War was only part of their argument. The Irish of the state were no longer a mostly poor and badly educated group. The majority of the foreign-born Irish, who had now lived in the state for a time, were becoming increasingly prosperous, as were their American-born

<sup>20</sup> *Providence Post*, 2 February 1856, 18 March 1858.

<sup>21</sup> *Woonsocket Patriot*, 3 May 1861; *Providence Post*, 23 April 1861, 14 and 19 August 1861; Frederic Denison, *Shot and Shell: The Third Rhode Island Heavy Artillery Regiment in the Rebellion, 1861–1865...* (Providence, R.I.: Third R.I. H. Art. Vet. Association, 1879).

sons and daughters. Although only two Irish immigrants, Thomas Cosgrove and John B. Hennessey, both merchants and real estate investors, were listed among the larger real estate taxpayers in Providence, many Irish in Rhode Island were in comfortable enough circumstances that they could contribute \$1 annually to the building of a cathedral church in Providence, in addition to numerous other churches, schools, and institutions of charity. The Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, constructed over a ten-year period, alone cost more than \$300,000. Where once they had been unskilled or semiskilled workers on the fringe of a developing industrial economy, by the 1880s many of the Irish were lower middle class with steady incomes. They were beginning to send their sons to high schools and some to colleges to study for the professions. When the Bourn amendment was passed in 1888, the Irish of Rhode Island were ready to take their place as full citizens of the state and to make their mark on the state's politics as they had already done in many other areas.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Evelyn Savidge Sterne, *Ballots and Bibles: Ethnic Politics and the Catholic Church in Providence* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), and Scott Molloy, *Irish Titan, Irish Toilers: Joseph Banigan and Nineteenth-Century New England Labor* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2008).