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Enclave in a Small Town

The Irish in Norwood, Massachusetts

by Patricia J. Fanning

The increase of the Irish population in suburban Boston has often been attributed to natural migration patterns after World War II as the children of immigrants who served in the war took advantage of the G.I. Bill and moved to affordable locations in the suburbs. Then, common wisdom says, the “white flight” of the 1970s increased their numbers further. But these assumptions overlook the influx of Irish immigrants directly into less urban locations surrounding Boston. The story of the Irish in one such community, Norwood, brings to light a unique migratory trend and experience.

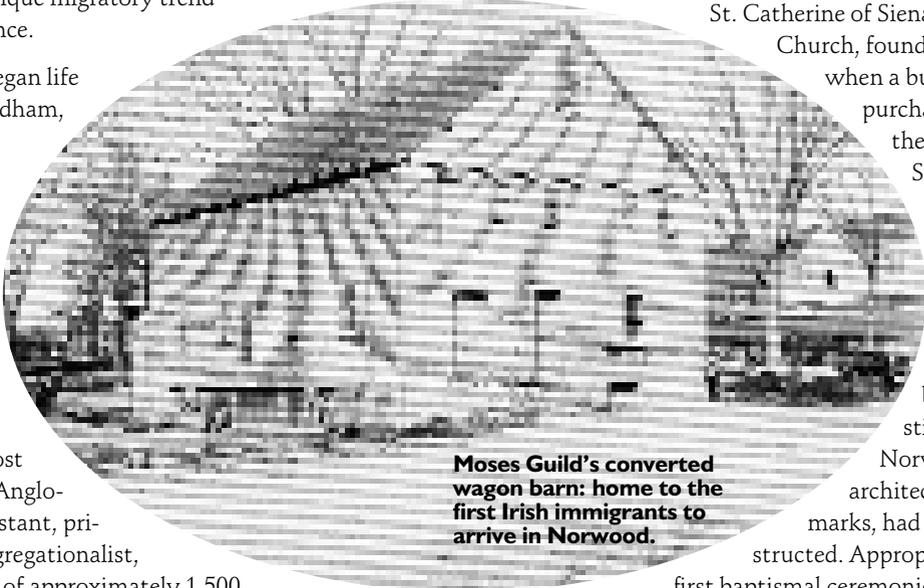
Norwood began life as South Dedham, part of the town of Dedham, which was itself founded in 1636.

By the mid-nineteenth century, it was an almost exclusively Anglo-Saxon Protestant, primarily Congregationalist, community of approximately 1,500 residents. But, as fate would have it, just as the Norfolk County Railroad was being built and industrial factories—tanneries, printing mills, and ink works the largest among them -- sought laborers in South Dedham, the Irish were being driven from their home country by a disastrous multi-year potato blight and subsequent famine. Upon their arrival, there was little in the way of housing in the community. Consequently, many of these Irish pioneers, arriving primarily from Counties Clare and Mayo in southwestern Ireland, found themselves without a place to live until Moses Guild converted his old wagon barn into a tenement. According to legend, both floors of the building were divided into

12 by 12 foot rooms, lighting was from whale oil lamps and lanterns, a bucket-well provided water, and the sanitary facilities consisted of a sole privy for several families. After a few years of steady employment and frugality, however, most tenants moved into homes of their own.

Initially encountering discrimination and the disdain of some of the town’s residents, the Irish kept to themselves and quickly developed a distinct and flourishing community. They became the mainstay of

St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church, founded in 1863 when a building was purchased from the Universalist Society. In 1890 the parish obtained its first resident pastor and by 1910 a new church building, still one of Norwood’s architectural landmarks, had been constructed. Appropriately, the



Moses Guild’s converted wagon barn: home to the first Irish immigrants to arrive in Norwood.

first baptismal ceremonies held in the new church on December 25, 1910 were those of Joseph Conley, John Horgan, and Christopher O’Neil. The first marriage in St. Catherine of Siena was that joining Ellen Donovan and Cornelius Cleary on April 17, 1911.

In addition to their dominance of St. Catherine’s parish, the Norwood Irish started their own neighborhood stores with Peter Flaherty’s grocery store, later known as Shurfine Market, one of the first to open. Across the railroad tracks, T. J. Casey’s grocery was founded in 1879. In 1890, the firm of Pendergast and Callahan, founded by Edward Pendergast and Daniel Callahan, both Norwood-born sons of Irish immigrants, succeeded Casey. In 1895, John Callahan, Daniel’s brother, went into business under the name of the Norwood Furniture Company. A few years later, Daniel joined his brother in

the family enterprise and Callahan's Norwood Furniture Company occupied a storefront on Washington Street for decades. Another successful Irish-American was James Folan who, in 1887, opened a small shoe store in Norwood center. He eventually made his mark in real estate and even helped found the Norwood Business Association.

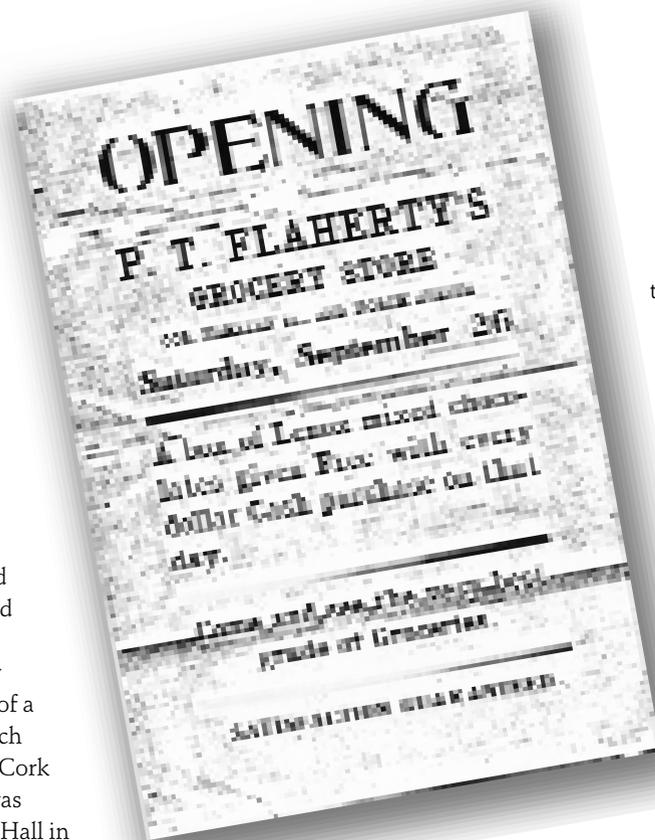
Despite individual achievers, the majority of the Irish remained in the working class. They found employment at the Lyman Smith's Sons tannery, the New York and New England Railroad Car Shops, and the American Brake Shoe & Foundry Company. When economic hard times made employment at the local factories uncertain, many Irish turned to the town's public works, police, and fire departments. Residentially, the Irish also remained segregated in particular neighborhoods. A 1913 "racial survey" of Norwood published in the *Norwood Messenger* by town statistician Joseph F. Gould identified three districts within Norwood which were populated by the Irish, nicknamed Dublin, Galway, and Cork City. Only two of these can be traced today, however: "Dublin," located along Railroad Avenue, west of Washington Street, and "Cork City," radiating out from Railroad Avenue to the east of Washington Street.



Within these districts, various organizations emerged. Casey Hall, built by Thomas Casey behind his store, became the rallying place for members of local trade unions as well as the headquarters for Norwood's chapter of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, founded in 1880. As a charitable society whose purpose was "to give aid to widows and orphans, to provide for the sick, and to befriend the stranger," the A.O.H. distributed sick and death benefits and acquired a substantial plot in the town's Highland Cemetery for those in need.

In 1912, the Norwood Gaelic Club, an organization whose chief purposes were to promote a United Ireland, spread a knowledge of Gaelic, and perform other beneficial activities for the community, was founded by Patrick Kelly, Michael Lydon, Peter Flaherty, and Daniel Collins. Like the A.O.H., the Gaelic Club promoted the unity of local Irish and Irish-American residents. The group met in Conger Hall, on the second floor of a commercial building which bordered the Dublin and Cork City neighborhoods. It was officially renamed Gaelic Hall in 1927 and the club continued to meet there until the 1950s.

Well into the twentieth century, the Norwood Irish fostered a rather remarkable chain migration. Family and neighbors from Ireland, particularly from the Gaelic-speaking villages along the South Connemara coast, emigrated not just to America, but to Norwood in particular. This migratory pattern was confirmed anecdotally by Gaelic scholar Maureen Murphy and statistically by the 1950 U.S. Census. Murphy recounted that when she was learning the language in the mid-1960s in Ireland, she would ask people if they'd ever been to Dublin, and many times the reply would be (in Gaelic, of course) "I haven't been that far, but I've been to Norwood." Furthermore, an analysis of the 1950 U.S. Census statistics, completed by Frank Sweetser of Boston University's Department of Sociology, disclosed that, with the exception of the expected groupings of Irish-born residents in portions of Boston, the Dublin and Cork City neighborhoods of Norwood held the highest concentration of Foreign-born Irish in the entire Metropolitan Boston area. Norwood's Irish neighborhoods, in fact, had such distinctive social and economic characteristics that they were allotted their own census



tract number. Gaelic was often heard around the neighborhoods and in such local spots as the Irish Heaven, a barroom housed in a small, two-story clapboard building next to the municipal light department on Central Street. There, the most accomplished twentieth century writer of fiction in the Irish language, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, spent many hours. Norwood even figures in Ó Cadhain's 1949

masterpiece work *Cre na Cille*, translated as "Churchyard Clay," in which one of the novel's main events is a key character's immigration to Norwood.

For nearly 100 years, then, from the time of the Great Famine until after the Second World War, Norwood was a prime destination of Irish-born immigrants. As their ranks swelled, the Irish maintained their dominance in St. Catherine's parish, which came to be known locally as the "Irish Church." Irish dancing, music, and festivities were immensely popular and Irish and Irish-American owned businesses flourished. As the decades passed, the community's Irish immigrants remained, along with their children and grandchildren. By the 2000 Census, a full 37.4 percent of the town's population reported Irish ancestry. It appears that Norwood's Irish enclave has deep and sturdy roots. Far from being the result of a Boston Irish migration, Norwood's Irish population has a distinctive and continuing history of its own.

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