

Lecture Series Highlights Importance of Newport Irish

By James Merolla

The first St. Patrick's Day Parade held in Newport in 1842 actually signaled the end of the initial local Irish era, according to local historian Steve Marino.

"I think the message they were trying to send with that first parade was [that] Fort Adams closed down, but now the Irish are in town and we are letting everybody know we are here," said Marino, who has been giving tours at Fort Adams since 2008 and sits on the Museum of Newport Irish History (MNIH) board. "The parade is the response to the end of an era [of] the Irish not being here the way they were anymore."

Marino, a former history teacher in Connecticut, will conclude the MNIH's 16th annual Michael F. Crowley Lecture Series entitled, "The Newport Pre-Famine Irish Community in Transition: 1836-1846," on Tuesday, March 20 at 6 p.m. at the International Tennis Hall of Fame.

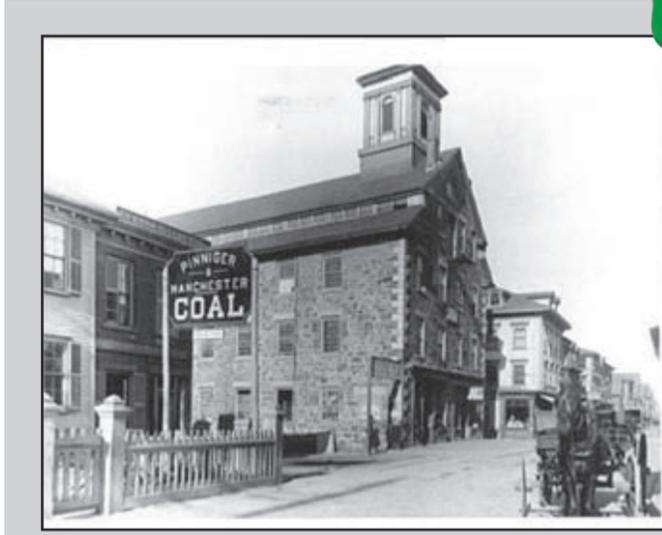
After enjoying 10 years of relatively good wages and steady working and living conditions building Fort Adams, Irish Catholic laborers began experiencing military, economic and cultural forces in 1836 that would fundamentally change the character and circumstances of their community in Newport. During the next decade, the Irish community evolved from a "fort" entity into an integral part of the city.

"We always tell our visitors that hundreds of Irish laborers built the fort, yet no one knew their names," Marino says. "Originally, I wanted to know the names of the laborers, because I figured I could find the descendants of some of them and perhaps diaries or artifacts."

That quest led him to the National Archives in Washington, church archives in Boston and Providence, and local archives at the Newport Historical Society, Redwood Library and Museum of Newport Irish History, as well as to local cemeteries and many other forts dotting the American coastline.

"The Providence Children's Museum formalized my research when they asked the Fort Adams Trust and the MNIH to help them create an exhibit that tells the story of an Irish immigrant family who came to build Fort Adams. That was the genesis of the last talk," he said.

"My next talk is nuanced. I want to suggest that most of the laborers



The boom of tourism and mill work followed the end of labor on Fort Adams. Four mills were erected, including the Steam Mill in 1831, the Perry Mill in 1835 (shown above), Williams Woolen Mill in 1836, and the Coddington Mill in 1837. All were built on lower Thames Street, from Memorial Boulevard to Wellington Street. (Photo submitted by Steve Marino)



who built Fort Adams left Rhode Island. However, I do not want to diminish their historical contribution to Newport and the Irish community. I also want to make a distinction between the Irish laborers who built the fort and Irish laborers who may have worked later at the fort."

Marino said the elimination of Fort Adams laborers meant that the boarding houses built outside the fort, which were home to hundreds of families, were removed. "They are all long gone," he said. "I don't think a lot of people know that. When their labors ended, the Irish were forced to leave."

The construction of Fort Adams and the boarding houses began in 1824, leading to hundreds of Irish arriving in Newport, where year-round labor was available.

"They came really at once. They needed hundreds of laborers to lift and dig. To start the construction of that place was an enormous, labor-intensive task," Marino said.

"You were relatively safe and relatively sanitary. It's a little different than canal building and building rails, the other jobs that Irish laborers had. That canal job was seasonal, those companies went out of business, and you had to move around a lot."

But by 1835 calamities, a government shutdown and a lack of money appropriated for fort building resulted in massive layoffs and a depressed economy. "The work out there that had been so steady for 10 years [ended]," Marino said.

In 1841, a national garrison arrived, stocked with cannons, officers and soldiers. Fort Adams was garrisoned, manned and finished in August to fortify and operate. Repairs were completed, a stable was built and a road was constructed around the fort in 1842.

"Once the garrison arrived, with 125 soldiers and officers, the boarding houses were closed, Marino said.

The second portion of Marino's lecture features what happened in Newport. "Two new industries are in their nascent form, but, boy, are they kicking off," he says. "Four mills go up on Thames Street, two are still there. Three huge hotels are built... mills in the 1830s and hotels in the 1840s, [with the] tourists and textiles industries exploding."

"It's a new wave of Irish immigration, all pre-famine Irish. That's important. These are not the millions of Irish being forced out of Ireland, not the starving farmers. These people are used to earning wages and have semi-skill," he added.

A Catholic church was erected on Barney Street, while families were established. "They [had] money and they spent it. For those first 10 years, Fort Adams was an economic engine around here," Marino said.

Reservations are required for the Crowley Lecture Series. A reception will follow. Call Ann Archer at 401-841-5493 to reserve. Admission is \$5 for museum members. \$20 for nonmembers.

Building up the Irish

By James Merolla



Peter Martin may have retired as a public servant, but only officially.

A train conductor, a former state representative and a Renaissance man, Martin, who will be 77 in May, unofficially retired 15 years ago, but he continues to serve the community, especially the Irish community.

"Having the skills of a website developer, I realized the local Hibernian group needed a website," he said. "My brother was a member and I had time, so, as a favor to him, I developed a website for them. I pulled apart another website and built it in 2003."

This happened years before Martin began, and ended, his three-term stint as a state representative, and decades after he began learning computer codes.

"At one time, I learned 14 computer languages. I'm a nerd... A lot of people are using tools to build websites and they are very inefficient websites. I do my own html coding. I'm expert in that. I write them at that level, and they operate more efficiently."

"When I was in the State House, I was accepted by the Nerd Club as one of them."

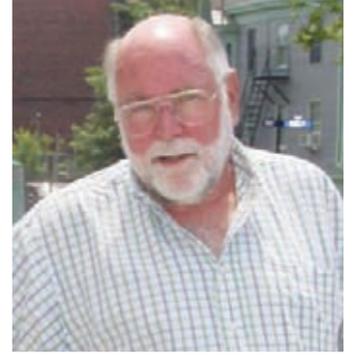
At an age when many senior citizens are just learning how to use a computer, Martin was named the most technically proficient member of the General Assembly.

A member of the Hibernians for the past 10 years, he has also designed websites for the Newport Museum of Irish History and the Rhode Island Irish Famine Memorial, serving on that organization's board of directors.

"I'm retired from politics," said Martin.

It is the only thing he has stopped doing publicly, however. Carrying a bag of harmonicas from gig to gig, Martin plays with his band, The Geezers. "But I'm the only one old enough to be called a geezer," he said.

On Wednesday, March 14, he will play a 2 p.m. concert at the Rhode



Peter Martin designed the R.I. Irish Famine Memorial Website.

Island Veterans Home in Bristol, before racing down to Hibernian Hall to collect tickets for the one-time performance of the legendary Irish trio, The Wolfe Tones.

"These guys have been playing together for 54 years," Martin said. "This is a stop on what may be their last great tour. They are all in their early 70s. To me, they are youngsters. Those who know me think I want to play harmonica with them."

Anything for a cause, he added, especially an Irish one.

In 2011, Martin was instrumental in convincing Governor Lincoln Chafee to pardon John Gordon, a young Irish immigrant convicted of murdering a mill owner in Cranston in 1845.

He saw Ken Dooley's play, "The Murder Trial of John Gordon," and worked with the playwright to get Chafee's signature on a pardon after a formal hearing was held. "We proved, without a doubt, not that he was innocent, but that he was given an unfair trial," he said.

Martin met three times with Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny, including in 2014 when Kenny came to the Rhode Island Irish Famine Memorial and thanked Chafee and related parties for their work on Gordon's behalf.

The luck of the Irish continues to follow Martin. He recently won the grand prize at a fundraiser held by the Famine Memorial committee: a free week's cottage stay in Galway, Ireland, which he will enjoy with daughter, Christine, in July.

Campground Fees to Increase Incrementally

By Jocelyn O'Neil

On March 5, the Middletown Town Council decided in a 6-1 vote to raise the fees of the Second Beach Family Campground by \$4,000 over the next four years.

At Monday night's meeting, residents and the campground's out-of-town guests learned that fees would increase after a motion proposed by Council President Robert Sylvia to raise fees was modified from the original plan of an increase of \$2,000 a year over two years, to \$1,000 a year over four years. Councilor Barbara VonVillas was the only council member who opposed this motion.

At the Feb. 20 meeting, the council reached an impasse with a 3-3 vote which led to the issue to be addressed again on Monday evening. Councilor Dennis Turano was absent during that meeting, causing the deadlock.

VonVillas read a statement before the vote, urging her fellow council members to join her in voting against raising the fees to that level, because the need for such an increase had not been demonstrated to the council.

"We have had no public discussions of the financials relative to the beach, including the beach receipts as related to this proposal," said VonVillas. "Which is peculiar since this council seems quick to discuss the financial implications of every little thing."

"If an increase is necessary to maintain the beach and the facilities, I would like to know why the increases are being placed on the backs of the young families and the elderly campers?" said VonVillas.

She proposed a motion to increase the campground fees one time by \$750 this year and to send

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