

THE NEWSLETTER OF

THE MUSEUM OF NEWPORT IRISH HISTORY

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THE EARLY IRISH IN NEWPORT COUNTY: THE 1800'S

(Part I - 1800 to 1850)

As we have seen in our earlier discussions the Irish had come into Newport County since the European settlement of the area. (The museum Newsletters, Fall 1998 and Winter, 1999) Their numbers were relatively small, however, and very difficult except for the few official records of the Colony and Town of Newport. In the early 1800's, however, several events drastically changed the immigration aspect for the Irish. The first event was the commercial opening of the Portsmouth coal mine. In his interesting book, "Historical Tracts of the Town of Portsmouth", John T. Pierce reviews the history of the mine, and points out that although coal was known to be available at that site, it was not until 1808, when the General Assembly of the State granted a lottery to raise \$10,000 in search of coal, was a commercial operation begun. The Aquidneck Coal Company and the Rhode Island Coal Company were formed in 1809 and operations started. Pierce states that - "most of the miners came from the Allihies copper mines of Ireland and were highly skilled in their occupations". (Others came from Cornwall and Pennsylvania).



Portsmouth Coal Miners circa 1904 "Historical Tracts of the Town of Portsmouth" (John T. Pierce)

The Irish had their social gatherings, dances and played trap or hurling. A small chapel was built (see accompanying picture) which was blown down by a storm in 1869. The Newport Mercury reported this on 18 September, 1869. (see article - courtesy of Pat Murphy) The date that chapel was built is unknown, but it is apparent that there were a considerable number of Irish at work

here for, as was noted in St. Joseph's Church History (1924), a Father Matignon visited the area in 1811, and Bishop Cheverus visited in 1813. Incidentally, the mines were in operation off and on for the next 114 years, closing in 1913.

FORT ADAMS

The construction of a new, vastly enlarged Fort Adams begun in 1824, and continuing into the 1850's, signaled the establishment of the core of the Irish community in the City of Newport. The construction of the Fort was authorized by Congress after the War of 1812 which saw the English easily invading our coast, even burning our young Capitol in Washington. Fort Adams construction was a massive undertaking, requiring many hundreds of skilled and unskilled workers, and at several periods during the work, the US. Army, responsible for the building, sent teams of recruiters to Ireland for skilled masonry and brick layers. Fort Adams records show that at one period there were upwards of 350 Irish workers engaged. It was during this period that the Irish established themselves in Newport's 5th Ward area, it being reasonably close to the work site. (and later, to work at the "Cottages" on Bellevue Avenue).

THE FAMINE

An event of historic and tragic consequences had begun to unfold in Ireland itself. While there had been earlier potato crop failures, in the 1810's and 1820's, nothing of the massive crop failures of 1845 - 1848 had ever occurred, so that English Government was totally unprepared, and many say, not really caring enough to prepare for and handle the disaster that followed for the Irish. The results were, of course, a massive outflowing of Irish to North America, with many immigrants settling in Newport County during the 1840's and 1850's.

Patrick Conley, in his Heritage booklet, "The Irish In Rhode Island", points out that in the first Federal Census of 1850, Rhode Island had 23,111 foreign -born out of a population of 147,545, and of these 23 thousand, 69 percent, or 15,944 were Irish! In Newport the Federal Census of 1850 shows that of a population of 9860, there were 715 persons (by an unofficial count by the author) born in Ireland.

THE FIRST IRISH PARISH ESTABLISHED

In 1828 the Diocese of Boston purchased an old school house on the corner of Barney and Mt. Vernon Streets in Newport and converted it into the first church in the state. The church was set up here to support those Irish immigrants who were working in Portsmouth coal mines and at Fort Adams. The little building was quickly deemed too small, and in 1837 a new wooden church was dedicated on the site. By 1846 there was a congregation of 375, and in 1847 a new site was purchased for a new church. Construction was begun, with mostly volunteer labor, by the Irish working at Fort Adams. This new church was dedicated to St. Mary of the Isle in 1852.

THE IRISH IN NEWPORT COUNTY - 1850-1950'S - In the next Newsletter
V. Arnold

THE EARLY IRISH IN NEWPORT COUNTY

The gale seems to have been more destructive on this island than any place in its whole course.

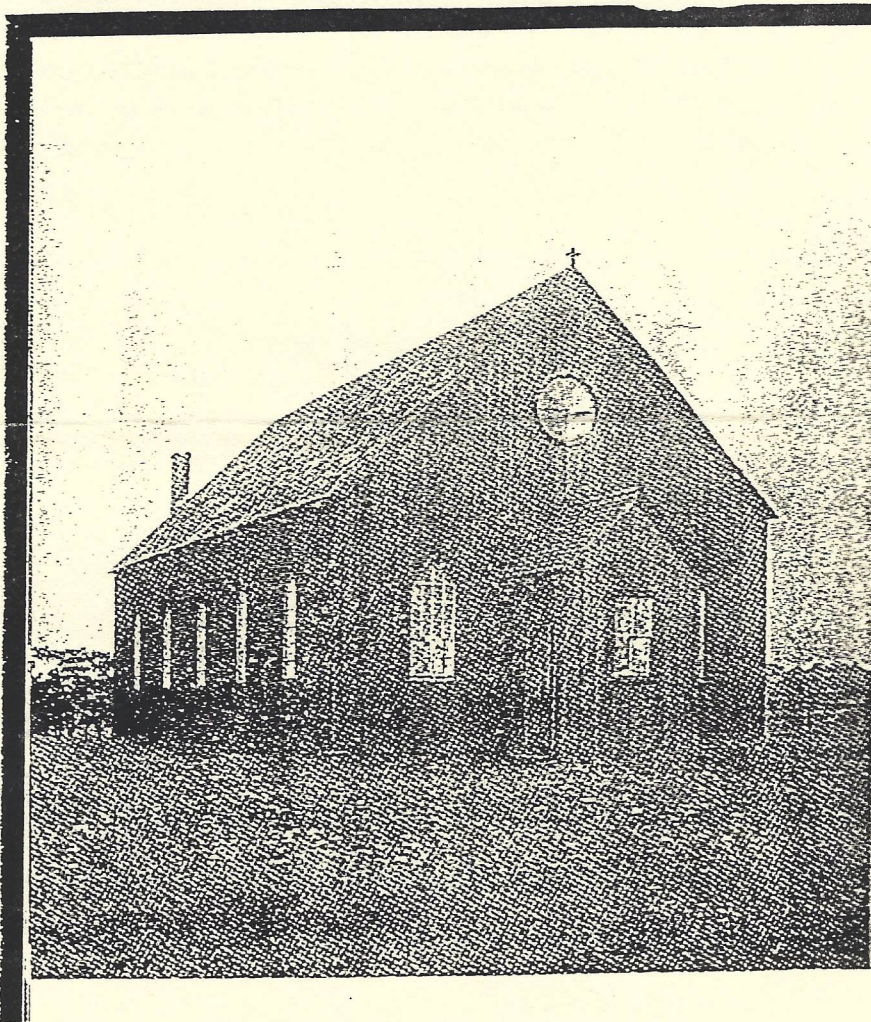
Block Island received a pretty severe touch, and several dwelling houses and barns are destroyed. The Free Will Baptist Church at the West side of the Island, was blown down. It was built in 1867, and cost about \$2,000.

Middletown—William Sanford's house had the tin roof taken off, and the family was obliged to take shelter at a neighbor's. A chimney was blown over on to the roof of Pardon Brown's house, and broke three timbers. The seven large trees in front of Geo. B. Weaver's house were all prostrated. Nathaniel Potter's barn was partially demolished. A new house at Three Mile Corner, belonging to Mrs. Taggart, demolished; end of Cyrus Peckham's barn torn out; Robinson P. Barker's barn down, as also that of the widow Peckham; fence on South and East of Fair Ground down; cupola on barns of Peleg Sherman and William Peckham blown off; chimney of Daniel Congdon's house down.

Portsmouth—The Catholic Church near the coal mines, used as a schoolhouse, was raised from its foundation and went to pieces in fifteen minutes after one hundred children had left. The beacon is gone at Bristol Ferry, and the small bridge at Ferry Neck. The damage to the fishing boats at Portsmouth and Tiverton is great, yachts and boats being straggled all along the shore. The Bristol Ferry grist mill was blown over. Orchards suffered severely, whole rows of trees being torn up by the roots. Part of a chimney was blown off of Captain John Manchester's house; eight large apple trees in his orchard torn up by the roots, and two broken off. The chimney on Captain Sherman's house, blown off down to the roof. A shed blown away at Giles Lawton's, one belonging to Joseph Anthony, one at St. Mary's Church, and another at the Christian Church. A barn prostrated on the farm at the Glen, occupied by William D. C. Main. A fine yacht, lying in the East river, owned by the Barstows, went ashore and was destroyed, and a fishing smack belonging to E. L. Williams went ashore. Two barns were unroofed on the place owned and occupied by Zaccheus and Peter Chase. The roof of Benjamin C. Sherman's house was taken off; the family had to flee to the barn for shelter. Carriage house down and barn shattered.—The roof of William Anthony's mill is off. William Gibbs' crib blown over; also barn destroyed and two horses killed. William A. Chace's barn down, and one horse killed. Leander Boyd's barn down. On the farm of Peleg T. Thurston, the end of a stable was blown out and 22 trees uprooted.

The draw at the old Stone Bridge was washed away and the timbers drifted over to the Hammocks.

This article regarding a fierce storm that occurred September 8th, 1869 appeared in the Newport Mercury, September 18th, 1869.



This picture of the mission chapel in Melville. (from the St. Joseph's Church book, 1885-1985)

From the Museum Library

The Museum was fortunate recently to have received an anonymous gift of seven fine books and several maps of the Cork/Bantry area. The newly acquired books are:

The End of Hidden Ireland
Rebellion, Famine & Emigration
Robert James Aally 1995

More Irish Families
Edward Ward MacLysaght
(with essays on Irish Chieftains) 1996

The Irish in America
Edited by Michael Coffey 1997

The Irish Century
Photographic History
Michael MacCarthy Morroch 1998

Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape
Cork University Press 1997

Ireland - Our Island Home
Photographic aerial tour of the coast
Kevin Dunge 1997

Bere Island
A Short History
Ted O'Sullivan 1992

Kay O'Brien has donated several beautiful books on Ireland:

Irish Life and Landscape
J. Crampton Walker
The Talbot Press

This book has wonderful Irish landscape prints and sketches by notables such as Nathaniel Horne, George Russell, G.F. Kelly Keating and others of the late 19th and early 20th century.

Atlas and Cyclopedia of Ireland
Murphy and McCarthy NY 1903
Beautiful maps, pictures and coats of arms with a history of Ireland.

Editor's Note: The Museum now has a collection of approximately 100 books on Irish history, landscape, etc. If anyone is interested in cataloguing these books, please call me at 847-2890.

PROGRAM
for the
DEDICATION AND BLESSING
of the
RESTORATION WORK
at the
ST. JOSEPH/"BARNEY STREET"
CEMETERY

3 P.M. SUNDAY, MARCH 28, 1999

