In the 1820s and 1830s, New Haven experienced its first major expansion. Development projects just east of the city’s original downtown nine squares opened for settlement lands as far east as the Mill River. The whole development area was known as “New Township.”

One part of the New Township was the well-organized project of Wooster Square where streets lined with handsome homes were laid out around an idyllic green. But on the eastern fringe of Wooster Square, an altogether different type of development occurred. With little or no planning and only modest dwellings for homes, New Haven’s first two ethnic enclaves sprang up all by themselves. One was an African-American neighborhood known as New Guinea; the other, an Irish-American neighborhood known as Slineyville. Both raised some eyebrows among old-time New Haveners.

One historian described Slineyville simply as “untidy,” and New Guinea as “of similar grade.” Whatever their other works and attributes, what caught the attention of that historian was that the two men most prominently connected with the enclaves — William Lanson and John Sliney — each kept a house of “resort and entertainment.”

Lanson, in fact, was an extremely talented and energetic black man. He was best known, writes a modern-day researcher, “for extending New Haven’s Long Wharf between 1810 and 1812,” a feat that had “a profound impact on New Haven’s development as a successful port town after 1812, and … which earned William Lanson a place in the history of American engineering and construction in general, and in New Haven history in particular.”

Lanson’s New Guinea grew up spontaneously around the intersection of Chapel and Franklin streets. Slineyville, not only the first Irish enclave but the first of many ethnic European neighborhoods in New Haven, grew similarly just a block west of New Guinea at Chapel and Chestnut streets. It was an unforeseen result of Connecticut’s historic economic development project, the Farmington Canal.

In the late 1820s, the entrepreneurs behind the canal project imported Irish immigrant...
Itinerant priest baptized Irish immigrants’ infants at canal camps

(Continued from page 1)
laborers for the dig that began from New Haven harbor and led northward through the center of Connecticut all the way to Northampton, Massachusetts — about 90 miles.

Contemporary accounts of the immigrants and their work are scarce. A newspaper account from Northampton in March 1827 describes the men “at work upon the canal … through all the intensely cold weather of January and February. These hardy Irishmen we are told were seen toiling in their shirt sleeves when the mercury was 10 degrees below zero.” A Windsor Locks historian, Jabez Hayden, wrote, “They dug and removed the dirt with wheelbarrows on plank runs of the width of a single plank and when near the bottom of the excavation it required a run of steep grade and strong muscles to dump the barrow on the tow path … Temporary board houses were erected and made tenable for the workmen.”

Such accounts should not be interpreted to suggest the Irish workers were just muscular and foolhardy adventurers. On the contrary, they were poverty-stricken Irish peasants who came to America because they were desperate for jobs.

Fortunately for the historical record, a logbook kept by Father Robert D. Woodley, an itinerant priest of the Archdiocese of Boston, provides a more realistic picture than the stereotype of big, dumb Irish canal diggers ready to drink and fight at the drop of a hat. Woodley’s log confirms that many canal workers were family men with Irish wives willing to share whatever hardships were necessary to build a new life in America, even if it meant bearing children in hastily thrown-together shacks along the canal ditches.

One such family on the Farmington Canal was that of John Sliney and his wife Mary. While John was laboring on the canal somewhere near Hartford in late summer 1828, Mary gave birth to a daughter. Shortly after the birth, Father Woodley wrote in his journal, “On the canals about Hartford in September baptized Mary about a week old, parents Jno & Mary Sliney. Sponsors. Jas. Hennessey & Cath. Shannon …”

One of Sliney’s co-workers was James Murray, probably the same James Murray who was among the passengers on the ship Lydia which sailed from Cork and arrived in New Haven in June 1826. Like Sliney, Murray was a family man. When Father Woodley again visited the canal workers in Enfield in May 1829, he baptized John, the son of John and Mary Murray with Daniel Murphy and Mary Sliney as the sponsors.

A year later, both the Murrays and the Slineys had come back south from the canal excavation sites to settle permanently in New Haven. They arrived at the time of the first major residential expansion of the city since its founding.

Land in what was called the New Township just east of the original nine squares was being developed. In 1825, Wooster Square was laid out. Historian Gardner Morse described the development in an article in the New Haven Colony Historical Society papers in 1894: “Almost the entire population east of Wooster Square at this early time,” he wrote, “consisted of a small, untidy Irish neighborhood known as Slineyville, at the corner of Chapel and Chestnut streets, named from John Sliney, its father — one of the first settlers of his race who kept a place of entertainment and resort for laborers of his nationality, workers on the canal and other employments; and of another small neighborhood on Franklin Street, of similar grade, known as New Guinea, and tenanted chiefly by the African race …”

The 1830 U.S. census returns for New Haven indicate the bare outlines of the Irish enclave. In close proximity in the listings are the Sliney and Murray families as well as John McGrath, and John and Francis Bagley families. The 1830 returns list only the head of each family and no birthplaces. But the Slineys, Murrays, McGraths and Bagleys all contain the notation: “aliens, foreigners not naturalized.”

John Sliney’s family includes one female under five years, one female between the ages of 20 and 29; one male aged 30 to 39. John Murray’s family is just one man, 30-39 and one woman, 15-20.

John McGrath’s home has one female under five; two males aged 20-29; one female aged 20-29; John Bagley’s, two boys, 5-9; one man, 15-19; three men, 40-49; one woman, 20-29; Francis Bagley’s, one man, 30-39; one girl, 5-9; one girl, 10-14; one woman, 20-29.

Besides these families residing close to each other, the census returns contain a few scattered entries of what probably are Irish natives living in New Haven in 1830. They include: John Maloney, age 30-39, and Patrick Glenny, age 20-29. They are next to each other in the listings but with no other family members. Both are identified as “foreigners not naturalized.”

Also, Charles Maloney, whose family includes himself age 40-49, one boy and two girls under five and one woman, age 30-39. All five are foreigners not naturalized. Thomas Kelly, age 20-29, a woman, age 20-29, and two girls under five. All are foreigners not naturalized. James McHugh, most likely McHugh, whose family includes one woman 20-29, one man, 40-49, one man 20-29, one man 15-19, all foreigners not naturalized.

On the 1840 census, Sliney is listed as a “person employed in navigation of canals, lakes, rivers.” By that time, the number in his household has grown to eight: one boy and one girl under five; one girl five to nine; one girl 10 to 14; one woman 30 to 39; one man 30 to 39; one man 40 to 49 and one man 50 to 59. In the Murray home, there is a boy under five; a girl five to nine; a man 30 to 39; and a woman 20 to 29. Murray was “employed in manufacture and trade.”

Illustrating how rapidly Slineyville grew, the Slineyes and Murrays are surrounded on the 1840 listings by the Irish families of Daniel Costloe, John Luby, James Welch, John Harrigan, Patrick Haly, John Goodwin, John Hannon, Patrick Touhy, James Hayse, John McGrath, Patrick Woods and John Riley.

Slineyville attracted minimal, and negative, attention in contemporary New Haven newspapers. Two brief items suggest the Irish were uncouth and unwelcome. In October 1836, the Columbian Register reported, “An Irishman was found dead at Sliney’s whiskey hole, at the corner of Chapel and Chestnut sts. … We understand there was an appearance of a blow on the head of the deceased; but the jury of inquest were unable to decide whether the deceased came to his death by violence or not. Sliney and the keeper of the other Irish steam works a few doors distant, are great public nuisances, and should be removed — peacea-
Irish natives James and Catherine Henderson, their five children. On the other side were Thomas, 40, an Elizabeth McGuire and their brother. Rick Coleman, 14, perhaps Johanna's younger Welch, 25; Mary Welch, six months; and Patrick Welch, 25. John Mackey, a blacksmith, and John Welch, probably a relative. Two houses away was another Welch family: John, 25, and Alice, 27, and their children, Henry, 6, and Willy, 2, along with boarders Thomas and Michael Welch.

Nearby were families of Mahers, McGees, Healys, Burks and Brainards. Several of the men were blacksmiths, but for the most part their occupations were "laborer," indicating they as yet lacked any particular job skills.

In 1859, the Colemans followed the pattern of many immigrant families by moving to the suburbs — in their case a few blocks east to the newer neighborhood of Fair Haven. Johanna was worried about the move. "They were all Tipperary people," she said of the Irish in Fair Haven, "and I was afraid I wouldn't get along with them, for I was from Cork. But I found them good neighbors the Lawlers, the Kennedys and all the rest of them."

For 40 years, Johanna's husband Thomas was a watchman at Belle Dock, where ferry boats landed in the Wooster district. "One night," Johanna recalled, "he walked in with no less than 17 greenhorns whose relatives had failed to show up at the dock to care for them. I gave them food and shelter." Having 17 immigrants arrive in just one night was an example of how the Irish — and later immigrants of many ethnicities — flocked to New Haven and the Wooster neighborhood.

The 1892 New Haven Historic Resources Inventory describes what it was that brought all those "greenhorns" to the Wooster district, but fails to capture the dimensions and significance of the Irish immigration. During the second quarter of the 19th century, says the inventory, "... the economic focus of New Haven, like many other commercially based New England cities and towns, had begun to shift away from maritime commerce toward manufacturing ... By 1851, much of the eastern portion of the Wooster Square district, especially along the harbor and the Mill River, was dotted with small factories and workshops producing such items as carriage parts, malleable iron, rubber goods, clocks, ceramics, locks ... Industrial growth continued in the area through the mid-1860s, apparently aided by a significant influx of Irish immigrant labor ..."

"Apparently" aided? More accurately, industrial growth was "obviously" aided and perhaps even made possible, by an immense influx of Irish immigrant labor that continued for a half century. Beginning with just a handful of families in Slineyville in the 1830s, New Haven's Irish-born population literally exploded: 3,533 Irish natives living in the city in 1850, 7,793 in 1860, 9,578 in 1870, 9,617 in 1880 and 10,556 in 1900.

From 1850 to 1900, Irish natives were by a huge margin the most numerous immigrant group in the neighborhood and city. In 1860, for example, immigrants of other origin in New Haven numbered: England, 2,512; Germany, 1,579; Scotland, 261; France, 100; Italy, 10. Forty years later in 1900, the immigrant populace included: 10,556 natives of Ireland; 5,310 natives of Italy; 4,802, of Germany; 3,397, of Russia; 1,980, of England; 1,395 of Sweden; and 1,301 of Canada.

Within the city in 1860, the largest concentration of Irish was in the Fifth Ward, 2,383 Irish natives, or 30 percent of the total ward population of 7,266. Most of the Fifth Ward lay in the eastern part of the Wooster neighborhood. There were another 868 Irish natives living in the Fourth Ward, part of which formed the southeastern segment of the Wooster district. Given the early Irish roots in the Wooster district and the magnitude of the continuing Irish immigration, that district must have had 2,000 to 3,000 Irish natives from 1860 through 1900.

The Irish era of the Wooster neighborhood was not just a quick and shallow interlude, but a distinct period. Its people and their traditions and contributions are a legacy as rich to New Haven and the region as anything that came before or later.

Canal-digger John Sliney was the founder of New Haven’s first Irish neighborhood, but Francis Donnelly, the city’s first Irish real estate developer, played an important role in laying out the streets and home lots in both the Wooster district and across the Mill River in Fair Haven.

Donnelly arrived in New Haven in 1836. In 1843, he opened a grocery store at the corner of Union and Cherry streets near Wooster Square. Cherry was a short street that ran from State to Olive between Fair and Chapel streets.

According to historian Garner Morse, Donnelly, “made his first deal in real estate in the New Township by the purchase of Nathaniel Bacon’s pasture lot on the southerly side of Grand street near the site of St. Patrick’s Church, for sale and division into house lots on Wallace and East streets.”

Morse credited Donnelly with being responsible “by his enterprise alone, or in company with others” for settlement of what became Fair Haven, “the district lying east of Mill River and north of Grand street ... and by investments and improvements on Ferry street ...”

Donnelly later owned a stone quarry and had a successful career in politics, becoming president of the city Board of Aldermen and a member of the boards of relief and public works. He was active, too, in Irish affairs, serving as the first president of the city’s longest-lived Irish organization, the Knights of St. Patrick.

Years later, at a St. Patrick’s day banquet of the knights, Patrick Doyle, himself one of the earliest Irish residents, told an interesting story about Donnelly. He said that a young New Haven tough who was a worker on the city’s wharf was hired to run off a recently employed Irish immigrant. When the confrontation was over, said Doyle, the immigrant was still on the job and remained there for many days afterward. The Irishman he referred to was Francis Donnelly.

In January 1841, nearly 100 immigrants founded the Hibernian Provident Society, New Haven’s first Irish organization. The society’s main purpose was to serve as a mutual benefit organization that established a financial safety net for members’ families in the event of sickness or death of a breadwinner.

At least a third of the 90-plus original members resided in the Wooster Square neighborhood. The first vice president was Irish-native John Greene, a weaver who lived on Grand Avenue at East Street, and its treasurer was, Michael Cogan, who lived at 68 Grand, corner of Leffingwell. The founding of the society was evidence both of the rapidly increasing numbers of Irish around Wooster Square and of the spilling over of Irish immigrants into other neighborhoods such as the Hill.

In addition to providing a bit of financial security for the mostly impoverished immigrant families, the society set out to make the expanding Irish community a part of the New Haven scene. Its first public appearance was on April 17, 1841, when it marched in a procession at the time of the death of President Benjamin Harrison. The Irish group, reported one newspaper, “attracted much attention as it was the first Hibernian Society ever seen in New Haven.”

A year later, on March 17, 1842, the society gave New Haven another first — the first of more than 150 years of St. Patrick’s Day observances by the city’s Irish.

Led by a band, the Hibernian Provident Society members marched through downtown to Christ Church at Davenport Avenue and York Street where Mass was celebrated by Father James Smyth.

In the afternoon, members paraded to the Exchange building at Church and Chapel streets for a program of music and speeches. The main speaker was William Erigena Robinson, a Scots-Irish native of County Tyrone who was attending Yale. “A better looking procession of men with their noble banner and their green scarfs never passed through Chapel Street,” commented the Columbian Register.

In just a few years, New Haven’s Irish had come a long way from being so obnoxious in the eyes of a leading newspaper as to deserve removal from the neighborhood either “peaceably if possible” or “forcibly if it must be so.”

The St. Patrick’s Day parade soon became a New Haven tradition and in recognition of the large Irish presence in the Wooster area, the parade in many years marched through that district even though it was removed a few blocks from downtown. Accounts indicate also that the district was usually decorated festively for the day. In 1874, for example, it was reported, “Two large American flags were suspended across Hamilton street above and below Grand street. Across Grand at the corner of Hamilton, a green banner with harp and sunburst and the motto ‘Erin go bragh’ was suspended. A large American flag was stretched across Wallace street at its junction with Grand, running from Wm. Crowley’s store to James Reilly’s. Another flag spanned Grand street from Reilly’s to the store of P. & J Griffin. Still another flag — a large one — was suspended on a rope leading from the clock shop to the store of Thomas Brinley, corner of St. John and Wallace streets…”

Wooster waterfront was a world all its own of jobs, crime and pleasures

The name Wooster Square evokes the image of elegant homes surrounding a park where kids play and old-timers stroll. The historical Wooster Square neighborhood had that, but it also had a more exotic side: a waterfront. Its waterfront was New Haven’s maritime link to the world and it was everything that courtly Wooster Square was not.

A series of docks — Belle or Steamboat Dock, Heaton’s Wharf and Basin Wharf — began at the Tomlinson Bridge where East Street joined Bridge Street, and ran westward as far as the more well known Long Wharf which had been the center of maritime commerce in early times. The Wooster neighborhood docks included a network of railroad yards and tracks where both freight and passengers were the commodities. The rail yards were large enough that several hundred freight cars a day could be loaded and unloaded.

Their cargoes were a mix of lumber, pig and scrap iron, oysters from Virginia, tons of rags from Egypt, ivory for a button works in Massachusetts and 8,000 coconuts for a Northford factory “where the kernels are made into prepared coconut and the shells are manufactured into dippers.” In 1888 alone, 877,000 tons of coal passed through Belle Dock on its way from coal fields in Pennsylvania and West Virginia to heat homes, stores and plants in Connecticut towns and cities.

Jobs were plentiful for Irish immigrants on the waterfront. Among the Irish stevedores living in the Fifth Ward in 1870 were John Collins, William Maher, Thomas Hartigan, Patrick Kennedy, Patrick Scully, James Hamilton, all young men, and 65-year-old Lawrence Honan. William P. Reed of Hamilton Street, worked unloading schooners. Thomas Burns and Dennis Cronan of Wallace Street were longshoremen at Belle Dock. John Shea, 27, worked “on the steamboats.” John Nugent, 50, and his son John Jr., 27, were “ship smiths.” Daniel Burley, 28, was a freight house clerk. Michael Sullivan and Frank Redman were watchmen at Belle Dock. P.H. Fitzgerald was a telegraph operator at Belle Dock. John McCarthy was a painter at Steamboat Dock.

Patrick Murphy and Patrick Foran were employed as “roundsmen” for the New Haven Ice Co., one of their duties to deliver ice to steamships departing on the daily run to New York City. Patrick McGuire unloaded coal barges for the New England and Empire Transportation Co. Thomas McCaher was a coal shoveler.

Irish wit

Waterfronts always have their distinctive characters and an Irishman named John E. Powers filled that role quite well in the late 19th century era of the dock in the Wooster neighborhood. A native of Massachusetts whose parents were Irish immigrants, Powers lived on Wooster Street. In 1887, he was appointed tender of the drawbridge that since the 1790s had connected the Wooster neighborhood with the east shore.

He seemed to like nothing better than to entertain townspeople with a steady diet of happenings that made the bridge appear to be a place of great drama, excitement and mystery. For example, in August 1891, Powers reported that a strange woman had sailed a sharpie.

(Please turn to page 12)

John Brady was proprietor of a coal barge at Belle Dock. Even one of the tugboats at Belle Dock was named for an Irishman: the James E. Hogan.

Irishmen working in the Consolidated Railroad freight yards on the Wooster harbor front included: brakemen James Brady, Michael Shaw, John Sands and William Maher; yard hands Edward Kelley Edson Quinn, and Patrick Clark; track repairman John McGrath of Wallace Street and switch tender, Murty McMahon.

Irish cops, among them James Lonergan, Charles Stokes and Martin Higgins, were assigned to the Belle Dock beat. It was hazardous duty given the robberies, fights, riots and even murders that are typical of all waterfronts.

But as tough as the neighborhood was, the waterfront was also a place of entertainment. Belle Dock was the terminal for the steamboat passenger business that thrived for decades after the first such boat, the Fulton, made the New York to New Haven run in 1815. Regular passenger service eventually included destinations such as Hartford, Stonington and Providence.

The steamboats also provided what was perhaps the most popular recreation of common people in the pre-automobile era: excursions on Long Island Sound. Throughout the summer months, the large Irish community in the Wooster neighborhood and in the city beat the heat on such excursions. On July 4, 1894, for example, the New Haven Register reported that the first and largest of four excursions departing from Belle Dock on the holiday was the steamer City of Boston, which “left about 8:30 o’clock with 1,300 passengers, the members of the St. Patrick’s Total Abstinence Society, who went to New York City and up the Hudson River. An orchestra was on board and there was dancing …”

An even larger excursion was the annual outing of the Clan-na-Gael, an Irish nationalist organization. In August 1882, it was reported, “An unending stream of people wended their way on board for fully an hour and a half previous to the time of starting … best estimates placed the number on board from 2,200-2,300. From the flagstaff floated the Irish flag, its dimensions 18 by 11 feet … The American band played concert and promenade music upon the upper deck, and there was a string band on board to furnish dancing music. There was plenty of vocal talent on board to entertain the passengers …”

Excursions were not the only entertainment at the waterfront for the Irish of the neighborhood. In 1885, an Irish policeman, John Clancy, and an Irish pie baker, John Ryan, staged a race in outriggers from Long Wharf to Belle Dock. Clancy won by a length.

Sources: Rollin G. Osterweil, Three Centuries of New Haven, pp. 237-261; New Haven Register, Jan. 24, 1879; Dec. 6, 1881; July 22, 1882; Dec. 8, 1884; March 31, April 22, July 31, 1885; Aug. 3, 10, 1885; July 18, Dec. 6, 1888; April 19, July 4, 1894; Nov. 14, 1899; Sept. 6, 1894; May 15, 1896; Oct. 7, 1897; Jan. 5, 1898; Sept. 3, 13, 1900; Nov. 23, 1905.
Bridget and Paddy were worker bees of 19th century Wooster district

A significant sign that Irish immigrants were inundating the Wooster Square district was when the 1860 census returns showed 70 Irish-born women residing in one boardinghouse on Court Street between Olive and Union.

It wasn’t obvious at the time, but in hindsight their presence marked the flowering of New Haven’s famous garment industry. What must have been a dormitory-size boardinghouse also was early evidence that the Wooster district was poised to become the industrial heart of the city, and that the future of the old Yankee town was to be shaped by wave after wave of newcomers.

The immigrant residents of the boardinghouse were employed as seamstresses by the Winchester and Davies Shirt Manufacturing Co., whose plant stood across the street on the site occupied in later years by the Strouse-Adler Corset Co. Oliver Winchester, who eventually became famous as a gun manufacturer, had moved his shirt company from Baltimore to New Haven in 1848 and gone into partnership with John M. Davies.

In 1859, they built their five-story, T-shaped factory and equipped it with the latest high-tech machinery: hundreds of foot-pedal-operated sewing machines. The project came just in time to provide exactly what dozens of Irishwomen fleeing from their hunger-plagued homeland needed to get a start in America.

Among these Irishwomen who represented such a huge demographic change were Bridget and Margaret P. Bohen, ages 28 and 30; Bridget Dillon, 42; Catherine Flood, 33; Ann, Margaret and Mary Gilligan, 26, 30 and 32; Margaret McGrath, 34; Mary Riley, 30; Martha Sweeney, 33.

A couple years later and a few blocks away, a manufacturer named Joseph B. Sargent moved his hardware factory lock, stock and barrel from New Britain to East Water Street so that he could take advantage of the shipping opportunities at dockside on New Haven harbor. With Sargent came not only numerous industrial job opportunities, but, as was customary among affluent New Haven families, numerous domestic job opportunities. The Sargent company employed, among dozens of other Wooster district immigrants: William Murphy, a molder; Martin McDonough, coremaker, James Kelly, mason and Michael Meaghan, laborer. And in his new home at 132 Wooster St., Joseph Sargent employed an entire staff of Irish natives: Rose Riley, 36, waitress; Julia Gibney, 25, seamstress; Maggie Doyle, 23, cook; Hanna Kent, 40, nurse; and George Doherty, 30, coachman.

Nearby on Wooster Place was an interesting New Haven institution, a military school operated by William Russell. The school had a faculty of five, about 35 students from as far away as Mexico, Panama, Sandwich Islands, Virginia and Illinois, and an all-Ireland domestic staff: housekeeper Maria Manning, 47, born in Nova Scotia of Irish parents; cook Annie Keenan, 40, born in Ireland; and four Irish servants, Alice Maher, 40; Alice Keating, 27; Mary Sullivan, 35; and Mary Smith, 27.

Typical of the industries that flourished in the Wooster Square district was one that remains there today: C. Cowles & Co. The company was founded in 1838 by Chandler Cowles and William Cornelius who built a prosperous business supplying hardware for New Haven’s many carriage manufacturers.

After years on York Street, the company moved in 1890 to spacious office and factory quarters at the corner of Water and Chestnut streets. A payroll log of the company from 1888 through 1891 is filled with the names of male and female Irish immigrants who were working from 45 to 59 hours per week. In the nail and button room were numerous Irishwomen: Alice Heslin, Anna Flood, Kate Sha-

St. Patrick’s church was heart and soul of Wooster’s Irish enclave

The rapid increase in Irish immigrants settling in the Wooster Square district between 1840 and 1850 made it imperative that a new Catholic parish be organized to serve that neighborhood.

Thus, in 1851, Father Edward J. O’Brien, pastor of St. Mary’s Church located on Church Street, purchased land at the corner of Wallace Street and Grand Avenue. Situated in the then easternmost section of New Haven, the parish was to serve not only the growing Catholic populace in the Wooster neighborhood, but Irish people scattered across the Mill River in Fair Haven and in suburban communities of East Haven, Branford, Guilford and Clinton.

Father John Sheridan, a curate at St. Mary’s was commissioned to oversee construction there of a church to be named for Ireland’s patron. The cornerstone of St. Patrick’s was laid on Aug. 31 that year with much celebration and ceremony. Led by a cross-bearer and acolytes with candles, a procession of schoolchildren, the clergy, and the men of the Hibernian and Montgomery societies moved from St. Mary’s Church to the construction site where Bishop Bernard O’Reilly of the Hartford Diocese presided at the Sunday afternoon dedication.

Fourteen months later, the first Mass was celebrated on Dec. 19 in St. Patrick’s by Father Matthew Hart, a native of County Longford who had graduated from Fordham College in New York and was ordained in July 1851. Two days later, Hart baptized the first new member of the parish: Catherine, the daughter of a 25-year-old laborer, Thomas Gallagher, and his 23-year-old wife Rosanna. The first wedding was five days later, the day after Christmas, when Patrick Noonan and Mary Ahern exchanged vows with Edmund Gamel and Johanna Hennessey as witnesses.

When St. Patrick’s was built, the tidal wave of Irish immigration had only just begun. When the church was dedicated in 1852, parishioners numbered about 1,500. By the late 1860s, the number had grown to 6,000, even after a new parish had been established to serve the equally rapidly increasing Irish population of Fair Haven.

Much of Father Hart’s early work was of construction: a four-room school fronting Hamilton Street in 1853, a rectory attached to the church in 1856, a second school which was a three-story brick building facing Wallace Street in 1858, and in 1870 a convent. Parish organizations and activities grew apace.

When the Civil War began with the fall of Fort Sumter in April 1861, St. Patrick’s was reported to be the first church in the city to fly the American flag. Father Hart raised the Stars and Stripes, “amid the cheers of an assembled crowd who joined in expressions of unconditional love and devotion to the Constitution and the Union.”

During the war, many Irishmen from the parish and the neighborhood responded to the call including Thomas Cahill, who was largely responsible for the organizing of Connecticut’s Irish regiment, the Ninth Volunteer Infantry. Four years later, the pastor responded to the assassination of President Lincoln by urging his people “to unite with our fellow citizens in this hour of affliction and irreparable loss and … to pray for our country that the God who has guided the helm of her affairs through the stormy sea of rebellion, may still deign to guide and preserve her in this hour of danger.”

In the late 1860s, the growing number of Irish voters made it possible to force a change in New Haven’s educational policies that was of great benefit to children who attended the parish school. In early 1868, Father Hart petitioned the city school board “to receive the pupils of St. Patrick’s school (about 600 children) and instruct them as pupils of the public schools.” The board responded that because it was responsible for educating all city children and because there was no public school available in that neighborhood, “it is ready to rent for temporary use the building now occupied by St. Patrick’s school … and to commence and maintain therein a public school for the children of that neighborhood on exactly the same basis as all other schools …”

The city school board thus took over the parish school operating it as the Hamilton Street School. The faculty was composed primarily of Sisters of Mercy, who were examined as to their teaching credentials by the superintendent of schools. The course of studies was regulated by the school board and subject to visits by the superintendent and board members. The results, the school board, said, “thus far are quite satisfactory; exhibiting regularity of attendance, good order and earnest attention to duties, highly commendable

(Please turn to page 8)
In the era of Irish prominence, Father John Russell of St. Patrick’s Church, a native of County Cork, was a familiar figure in the streets of the Wooster Square district, his carriage powered by his favorite horse, Lady Elm.

to teachers and pupils…”

Similar arrangements were made in several other Connecticut communities to deal with the knotty problem of religion and education.

A visitor to Hamilton Street School in December 1872 came away impressed. He was given a tour of the 13 classes by Sister Mary Agnes Welch. Ages of the students ranged from five and a half to 14. Each sister was in charge of 50 students who were divided into two sections by proficiency. Subjects included reading, writing, arithmetic, music, free-hand drawing and deportment. “Recitation,” the visitor said, “is treated as a most important subject and great pains are taken in teaching it.”

During the school day, each sister actively taught one segment of the class, while the other segment worked on exercises on their slates or paper.

No instruction in religion was permitted, but the sisters provided religion classes outside the school itself and all students attended Sunday school. The nuns also devoted their Christmas, Easter and summer vacations to the teaching of religion.

“This is the only instance in the United States” wrote the visitor, “of a female Catholic community teaching in schools in connection with the state, and schools … being under the superintendence of a female …” The school board, he added, had bent its rules to permit this “in consideration of the superiority, judging by system and results, of Sister Agnes as an educational and eminently successful superintendent.”

Sister Mary Agnes was succeeded by a line of other Irish Sisters of Mercy: Sister Mary Celeste Wall, Sister Mary Rose Murphy and Sister Mary Edmund Judge.

Father Hart was pastor of St. Patrick’s for 24 years until his death in July 1876. In an era when Catholicism and the Irish were looked upon with suspicion in Connecticut, he won the respect of the entire community. The New Haven Register of July 22, 1876, commented: “It was our pleasure to know the Reverend Father Hart intimately and to be frequently brought in contact with him during his long and useful residence in this city … (He) will long be remembered by our people, not simply as a Catholic priest, but eminently a Christian gentleman in every walk of life.”

In 1883, Father John Russell was appointed pastor of St. Patrick’s Church. He was a native of County Cork and was ordained in 1873 after studying at St. Mary’s College, Emmitsburg, Maryland, and at the Grand Seminary in Montreal. Father Russell had the distinction of serving 55 years at St. Patrick’s, said to be the longest pastorate in the history of the diocese. He served until his death at the age of 80 on July 20, 1938.

Father Russell was a friend and benefactor of the Little Sisters of the Poor and whenever the sisters needed a horse to take their carriage around the city for charitable work, the pastor provided one. He also was instrumental in bringing to New Haven another congregation of nuns the French Sisters of the Holy Ghost. The sisters were exiled when anti-clerical legislation was adopted in France in 1902. Property on Greene Street was purchased for them and they carried on their work from there among the poor of the city.

Father Russell also was the prime mover in establishment of St. Lawrence Cemetery when the old St. Bernard’s Cemetery began to reach its capacity in the 1890s. The pastor was superintendent and one of the trustees of the new burying ground.

As the Wooster neighborhood became more cosmopolitan, Father Russell welcomed the newcomers to St. Patrick’s parish. In 1889, the growing number of Italian immigrants settling in the Wooster Square neighborhood began using the school hall for Mass. In 1895, the Italians purchased the old Baptist church on Wooster Square, remodeled it and dedicated it as St. Michael’s Church. As with the Irish, their parish church became a symbol and a center of the Italian immigrant community.

St. Patrick’s Church more than any other landmark represented the Irish era in the Wooster Square neighborhood. The migration to the suburbs gradually lessened the Irish presence there. In 1966, the church was purchased and razed by the city Redevelopment Agency to make way for construction of the I-95 and I-91 connector through the neighborhood.

Irish leaders from Wooster neighborhood in wartime and peacetime

Thomas W. Cahill organized and led Connecticut's Irish regiment, the Ninth Volunteers, in the Civil War. A young Irish-American whose immigrant parents had settled in New Haven, Cahill was living at 153 Franklin St. with his wife Margaret and their two children, Mary Ann, 2, and Edward, just nine months old, when the war began.

Cahill was a plasterer by trade, a city alderman and one of the founders of the Washington-Erina Guards, a New Haven-based unit of Connecticut's military establishment. In 1855, the guards and all other militia units comprised of Connecticut residents of Irish descent were ordered disbanded by "Know Nothing" Gov. William Minor who said Irishmen might not be trustworthy in time of crisis. Six years later, when the nation faced a terrible crisis, Cahill spoke for many Irish when he suggested that revocation of the disbandment order was necessary before asking Irishmen to enlist. The order was promptly revoked and Cahill became the moving force in a successful effort to raise an entire Irish regiment. With Cahill, promoted to the rank of colonel, leading them, the original 700-men of the Ninth, plus many additional enlees, served with honor in campaigns in Louisiana, Mississippi and the crucial and victorious campaign in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in 1864.

Worn out by four years of the heavy responsibilities of leading troops, Cahill died prematurely in 1869, just four years after the war ended. Connecticut's Irish owed him and others of his caliber in the ranks of the Ninth and the state's other regiments a debt of gratitude for paving the way for the rapid advancement of the Irish in the latter years of the 19th century.

Among those in the ranks was another soldier from the Wooster neighborhood who paid the last full measure of devotion to the Union cause. He was John Marlow, who lived on East Street with his wife Bridget and their children when the war began. John and Bridget had already served in one conflict for their adopted country. John went off to fight in the United States Army in the Mexican War in 1848 and Bridget was at his side as a nurse.

John enlisted in the Ninth Regiment on Oct. 4, 1861, just a week after his fifth child, a son named Owen, was born. In late November, the regiment sailed from Boston for the Gulf of Mexico. After participating in the occupation of New Orleans, the Ninth was sent to Mississippi where some of the regiment was captured and the others had to return to New Orleans. From there, the Ninth and the state's other regiments participated in the occupation of New Orleans, the Ninth was sent to Mississippi where some of the regiment was captured and the others had to return to New Orleans.


Cornelius T. Driscoll was the first Irishman, the first Catholic and the first immigrant ever elected mayor of New Haven. The voters elected the Democratic candidate by a margin of 1,525 votes over incumbent Mayor Farnsworth on April 19, 1899, just as the 19th century was coming to an end.

When the returns had been tallied, reported the Register, "a band was procured and an improvised parade was started. There were about 500 starters in the procession, and along the line of march the number increased by men of the same mind. About 100 of them carried torches … The band playing ‘The Wearing of the Green …’"

Born in Cahie, Co. Kerry, on May 2, 1845, Cornelius was the son of Daniel and Hannah Sullivan Driscoll. His parents immigrated to New London County when he was a child and he graduated from Norwich Free Academy before earning a bachelor's degree and a law degree at Yale. He remained in New Haven and formed law partnerships with Adolph Asher from 1872 to 1884, and with Carleton Hoadley from 1887 to 1890.

Driscoll settled on Wooster Street and married Mary Benedicta O'Brien. On the 1880 census, the Driscoll household included daughter Lillie and Driscoll's widowed mother Hannah. Driscoll was elected to the common Council in 1876-77, and to the Board of Aldermen from 1878 to 1882. He served as corporation counsel for the city from 1883 to 1889 and from 1891 to 1895.

The future mayor was active in the Catholic total abstinence movement. In 1870, he was among delegates from throughout the state who gathered in New Haven to organize the Catholic State Temperance Union of Connecticut. He served as chairman of the constitution and by-laws committee, and once its work was done, he was elected the first president of the union. Driscoll also was one of the small group of Irish Catholic laymen who joined Father Michael McGivney in founding the Knights of Columbus in 1882.

On the night of his election, Driscoll assured his supporters that the election "meant a period of first-class government as far as he could make it so for the city. His administration would be entirely non-partisan and would work only for the good of the city."

The Irish World newspaper predicted that Driscoll's victory "marks an epoch in the government of that stronghold of Puritanism." Driscoll served only one term, losing in his bid for re-election in 1901. But the epoch of immigrant and ethnic mayors became a reality within a few years when a number of Irish, Jewish and Italian mayors followed in the path first laid out by Driscoll.

Sources: Hartford Courant, Aug. 20, 1870; New Haven Register, Nov. 17, 1898, April 19, 1899, Aug. 15, 1931; New Haven City Directory, 1878, p. 85, 1883, p. 117; Irish World, April 29, 1899.
Paving the way for a community of immigrants

Perhaps no one person contributed more to the growth and welfare of the Irish of the Wooster neighborhood and New Haven than Patrick Morrissey who arrived in the city from Ireland in the late 1840s.

Morrissette began his career in teaching in September 1849 on the ground floor of St. Mary’s Church. He was in charge of the boys while Miss Elizabeth Meagher was already established there as the girls’ teacher. The school flourished as did the relationship between Morrissey and Meagher who became man and wife and set up housekeeping at 108 Grand St. Years later, the historian of the Catholic Diocese of Hartford described Morrissey as “then a vigorous young man just from Tipperary county … who in his career of 20 years has taught the greater part of the young men of New Haven, some of them priests today.”

Public school visitors expressed amazement at what they witnessed when visiting Meagher and Morrissey’s classrooms in 1850. The caliber of teaching and learning, they wrote was “in most excellent condition and far surpassing our expectations … in grammar, reading, spelling, speaking and defining there was throughout the exercises great promptitude and surprising accuracy.” One little girl, between four and five years of age, took her station at the maps and passed most triumphantly a close examination in geography, answering correctly for some 15 or 20 minutes nearly every question put to her.”

Morrissette was a moving force on an issue that still is controversial in America: citizenship for immigrants. In 1852, he was secretary of the Naturalization Society of New Haven. A speaker brought in from New York found Morrissey and the society’s president, Bernard Reilly, determined to “not leave one Irishman in the city entitled to citizenship unregistered. We cannot praise the earnest manner in which this respectable association has gone to work too much … they stand together a body of intelligent and thinking men, to take advantage of their rights and prove themselves worthy of free institutions. The unalloyed spirit of Americanism, of true Republicanism, of devotion to the best interests of the commonwealth, was present in the hearts of those at that meeting.”

The visitor noted that New Haven’s Irish were also expressing their patriotism and loyalty to their adopted homeland by filling up the ranks of a militia unit. He concluded that no better citizens could be found in the United States than the Irish Americans of the city of the Elms.

Morrissette was a link for immigrants with their homeland. If New Haven’s Irish needed help sending money home to family or securing passage for brothers, sisters and cousins to come to America, he could make arrangements, going either way, through his connection with the Royal Bank of Ireland and the shipping firm of Roche Bros. & Coffey in New York City.

Elizabeth and Patrick also operated a book store at 110 Grand St. There immigrants could find a variety of items for keeping in touch with their religion, culture and current events in Irish-America and back home in Ireland. The store advertised that, in addition to a stock of “dry and fancy goods,” it maintained “a large selection of Catholic Books and Religious Articles consisting of Bibles, Prayer Books, Histories, Tales, Crosses, Pictures, Beads &c. Useful, cheap and beautiful Holiday Gifts can be selected from stock. There are always for sale requisites for Wakes, such as Habits, Candles, &c. All the Catholic newspapers are kept on sale … (and) the prices do not vary from those of the publishers.”


Sounds at the seashore

Life by the harbor was not totally pleasant for residents of the Wooster neighborhood. One Irishman residing “in the neighborhood of East Street,” found a regular sunrise event in 1885 so annoying that he wrote a letter to the editor:

As early as 4 and 5 o’clock on Fridays and other mornings, the unearthly sounds of the fishmongers’ horns are heard on the streets, and an incessant howl, for it cannot be called a sound, is kept up for fully three hours, thereby frightening poor, tired humanity out of their wits as well as their sleep, and generally disturbing the whole neighborhood.

The noises of those horns remind one more of a battlefield when the numerous bugles sound the call to arms. I have no blame to the fish peddlers to try and sell their fish, but it should not be done to the detriment of the weary sons of toil, who for the most part inhabit the locality.

In conversation with one of the constables who patrol the place, I was informed that there was ‘an ordinance against it’ and that ‘it certainly would not be permitted for a moment up town.’ … People who toil hard all day need all the rest they can get, and if those fellows are allowed to blow their horns at 4 o’clock in the morning, I don’t envy the comfort of the unfortunate individual who resides on classic East street.

J. Francis Fitzpatrick

“J. Francis” may have been John Fitzpatrick, son of Thomas and Margaret Fitzpatrick, who were living at 352 East Street when the 1880 census was taken. Thomas was a “laborer,” while John, 18, worked at O.B. North Co., a carriage hardware manufacturer on Franklin Street, and his brother Robert, 17, worked at Sargent’s. In 1890, a John Fitzpatrick, employed as a boatman, boarded at 527 East Street.

Sources: New Haven Register, June 28, 1885; 1880 U.S. census; 1885 New Haven City directory, pp. 152, 583; 1890 New Haven City directory, p. 184.
Wooster district brass molder was Fenian hero

In the mid and late 1800s, Irishmen at home and in America organized the Fenian Brotherhood to overthrow English rule in Ireland. One of the most ardent Fenians was James Reynolds of New Haven. A native of the County Cavan, Reynolds came to America in 1847. He learned the trade of brass molding and was employed in New Britain by the hardware manufacturing firm of Joseph B. Sargent.

In 1864, Sargent moved his entire operation from New Britain to the Wooster neighborhood. His facilities were at dockside along Water, Wallace and Hamilton streets. Reynolds was a foreman in the Sargent brass foundry, and resided with his wife Ann Fagan Reynolds and their daughter, Anna, at 12 Collis Street. By 1877, Reynolds was living on East Street and had established his own brass foundry under the name James Reynolds & Co.

In 1879, Reynolds was elected town agent by city voters. The position was similar to that of the modern-day town manager with considerable authority and responsibility over everyday municipal operations. He served for 10 years and, although often involved in political controversy, was praised for his efficient, fair-handed and progressive handling of the town’s business.

Reynolds applied his energy and numerous talents with equal vigor to the cause of freedom for the land of his birth.

When the Fenian movement began, he raised thousands of dollars and was known as one of the most dedicated and dynamic organizers in the United States. In the mid-1870s, he played a key role in a remarkable rescue of six Fenians who had been sentenced to life imprisonment in western Australia for plotting a rebellion in Ireland.

Reynolds led a committee that purchased an old New Bedford whaling ship, the Catalpa, to attempt to free the six. The committee refitted the Catalpa and hired a New Bedford sea captain, George Anthony, and a crew to sail it to Australia. At one point, funds ran low and Reynolds mortgaged his own home to revive the project with fresh funding.

The Catalpa sailed on April 29, 1875. To keep its true mission secret, the ship spent six months hunting whales in the Atlantic before setting sail for Australia. By April 1876, the Catalpa was offshore at Freemantle in Western Australia.

Meanwhile, two Fenian agents had sailed from San Francisco to Freemantle and made contact through the Irish prison chaplain with the incarcerated Fenians. On Easter Monday, April 17, 1876, the prisoners walked away from their work details outside the walls of the jail and were picked up by carriages driven by the two agents.

They then made a mad dash and rendezvoused with a rowboat from the Catalpa on an isolated beach.

The rowboat, filled with the rescuers and the rescued, reached the Catalpa just ahead of a pursuing Australian gunboat. Using a bullhorn, the captain of the gunboat accused the American ship of harboring prisoners. Capt. Anthony replied that there were only free men aboard his ship.

At length, the Australian gunboat, not wanting to fire on a ship flying the American flag, turned away and Anthony set sail for America. Four months later, the Catalpa docked in New York City to a tumultuous welcome by that city’s Irish.

Years later, an Irish-American newspaper wrote: “While the fame of this daring rescue shall last; while the name of the Catalpa shall wake and fan the fires of Irish enthusiasm, so long will the name of James Reynolds be held in fond and loving remembrance.”

Ever after, Reynolds was known as “Catalpa Jim.” His gravestone in St. Lawrence Cemetery in New Haven is engraved with that name and a carved image of the rescue ship.


Irish doctor led drive to build St. Raphael’s

In 1906, a group of 14 New Haven doctors concerned by the scarcity of hospital care for New Haven’s poorest residents organized the Catholic Hospital Association. The purpose of the association, they said, was to fill the need “for a charitable hospital in this city, one in which all physicians whether or not connected with the staff of the institution and irrespective of creed could treat their private patients.”

Dr. John F. Luby, a native of the Wooster Square neighborhood, was elected president of the association. Dr. Matthew C. O’Connor was vice president; Dr. Thomas A. O’Brien, secretary; Dr. James H. Flynn, treasurer. The other 10 doctors were: Leonard Bacon, William Butler, Jeremiah Cohane, Norton Hotchkiss, Stephen Maher, Edward McCabe, Francis Reilly, William Sheehan, John Sullivan, William Verdi and Frank Whittemore.

The cause of a new hospital proved very popular and within a short time $33,000 of the estimated $100,000 cost of the hospital was raised. On July 25, 1907, 2,000 people attended the laying of the cornerstone at 1442 Chapel St. Bishop Tierney of the Hartford Diocese presided and, a New Haven native, Father Edward Downes of Milford was the speaker. “New Haveners,” he said, “are to be congratulated that now there is to be a hospital where all doctors will be received upon an equal standing and where fair play will be in vogue.”

The silver trowel used in the ceremony was presented to Father John Russell, pastor of St. Patrick’s Church in the Wooster Square district, whose donation to the hospital fund was the largest made.

Irishman tended Tomlinson drawbridge with plenty of wit

(Continued from page 5)

through the bridge. A female sailor was in itself unusual, he said, but this woman had hidden her identity by holding a crab net in front of her face and “sailed straight out into the Sound” and disappeared from view. The next day a man visited the bridge and inquired about a woman in a sharpie.

The man said the woman had borrowed the net from him, but rented the sharpie from its owner in Fair Haven. When asked what he thought of the whole incident, Powers replied, “Think about it? I think the Fair Haven man will never see his sharpie again!”

On another occasion, Powers was in the engineer house of the bridge relaxing when he discovered smoke rising from a crevice between two planks of the bridge. He discovered a fire blazing on the underside of the planks and was able to extinguish it. The cause of the fire was a cigar thrown on the bridge by a passerby. Powers said that had the fire been fanned by a sea breeze, he would have had to call firefighters. “The side of the draw on which the fire occurred was in the Annex,” he said, “but had it been necessary, I would have called the city fire department and then whirled the draw around so as to bring the fire within the city limits.”

The Irish bridge-tender was credited with saving numerous lives, ranging from a 10-year-old boy who fell off the dock while fishing, to a disturbed man intent on suicide to a member of the Yale rowing crew who tipped his shell over on an October evening and was being swept away by the tide.

Powers was constantly reporting shark sightings. In one case, he said there were two sharks making a regular circuit between Lighthouse Point and the Tomlinson Bridge. On another occasion, a newspaper reporter wrote, “Bridge-tender John Powers says a shark, the largest seen in this harbor for many years, was stranded on the mud flats opposite Belle Dock this morning. The monster became furious and thrashed about at a terrible rate. For over an hour the battle continued when finally the big fish reached deep water.”

Sources: New Haven Register, Aug. 2, 1887; Feb. 28, Oct. 31, 1888; Aug. 14, 19, 22, Sept. 8, 1891; July 14, 1892; Dec. 6, 1895.

(Continued from page 5)