

## THE IRISH OF WALLINGFORD

*Like most Connecticut communities, Wallingford has been the home of a large number of natives of Ireland and people of Irish descent. Settled in 1670, the town attracted Irish immigrants with employment opportunities in industry, transportation and domestic service. This issue of The Shanachie features the stories of just two of the many Irish of Wallingford.*

### 'Claddagh Carver' was born in Boston, raised in County Cork

Jim Sheehan, the artist known widely in Connecticut as the Claddagh Carver, has no roots at all in the town of that name in County Galway. Sheehan was born in Boston and grew up in County Cork where as a boy he learned the craft of woodcarving. It was only when he returned to the United States and settled in Wallingford, however, that he began a half century of producing art that depicts and honors the history and traditions of Ireland.

Sheehan's parents, James Jacob Sheehan and Anne Frances Donoghue were born just 25 miles from each other in Ireland — James in Mitchelstown, County Cork; Anne Frances in Lismore, County Waterford. But they never met until the worldwide economic hard times of the 1930s brought them together in Boston where they married and started their family.

"I was born in Massachusetts General Hospital on June 17, 1934," says Sheehan, who resides in Wallingford with Terry, his wife of 48 years, in a home that is decorated with the creations of his artistic skills. "My parents were living in Cambridge, Mass. ... It was during the Depression. My mother was fortunate. She worked as a servant in a home ... on a street where all the houses were castles ... comparable to  
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*Half a century after he arrived, Jim Sheehan is still carving.*

### Town's grassroots chronicler had both Puritan and Irish roots

Every community ought to have a Bill Stevens. He was one of those people who not only love their hometown, but spend years observing and filing away recollections of it in their memories. In the early 1950s, when he was in his 70s, Stevens let all those recollections pour out in a weekly column for the *Wallingford Post* newspaper. An anonymous archivist had the good sense to cut copies of every Stevens column and paste them into a book of about 200 pages that now is on the shelves of the Wallingford Public Library. He and his book are Wallingford treasures.

On his father's side, Stevens was a descendant of Sgt. Richard Beckley, one of the 120 original Puritan planters of New Haven Colony in 1638. In the 1660s, Beckley and other New Haveners moved northward and purchased land in Berlin that came to be

known as the Beckley Quarter. Stevens was a great-great-great-grandson of Sgt. Beckley. "My father, Edgar Stevens, was the first of the Beckley family to leave the Beckley Quarter ...," wrote Stevens.

On his mother's side, Stevens was the grandson of much later immigrants. In one of his *Wallingford Post* columns, he wrote: "In the year 1858, when the great Irish immigration was in progress and the Irish famine ... was still raging, my grandmother landed in Middletown, a smiling young Irish colleen, finding a job as maid to one of Cromwell's wealthy families by the name of Coe. About the same time, a tall slender Swiss immigrant speaking the German dialect also arrived in Cromwell. He was a young man of 18 years, having a height of six feet, three inches. In Switzerland, he had  
*(Please turn to page 5)*

Downton Abbey on television ... She had been here for seven years and was saving up money to become a nurse."

Jim's father, one of 11 children, had immigrated to the heavily Irish Fair Haven neighborhood of New Haven, Connecticut, and lived with his brother Thomas and sister Hannah until moving on to Boston in search of work. After the birth of their son, James and Ann Frances returned to Ireland. "When my parents went back, things were tough over there too," says Sheehan. "They went from one place to another. They left me with my grandmother on the family farm in a place called Mountain Barracks, about three or four miles outside of Mitchelstown. Then they went to England and one of my sisters, Joan, was born there."

In just a few years, the Sheehan parents and children were reunited in Mitchelstown, a community of 3,000 close to the border between Cork and Tipperary and on the main road from Dublin to Cork city. "Mitchelstown had a large market square," Sheehan recalls. "Every Thursday, the fish mongers would come in from Cork city about 30 miles away. They would come down with their fish and clothes and such. The locals would bring in their livestock and cows and pigs for sale. They would make a deal and the way they sealed the deal was to spit in their hands and then shake hands."

Construction and woodworking, rather than farming, were in the Sheehan genes. "Both my father and my uncle Owen were carpenters," says Sheehan. "Actually my father was a builder which included the carpentry. They often combined forces. The uncle was the ultimate carpenter because he would build cradles and coffins and all the furniture in the house, everything built in the shed that he had for a workshop ... They made the doors and the windows and all that stuff because they were not prefabricated like today ..."

The Sheehan carpenters did a lot of work for the British families whose splendid limestone homes lined the town square. The main entrances to those homes, Jim remembers, "had big ornate front doors, but nobody ever used them, not even the occupants ... There was not much mingling except for tradesmen. My father did a lot of work down there ... We built a couple of

dance halls ... I used to drive the donkey and cart and go get the materials ... I was the gofer."

Eventually Sheehan's father built houses on land he purchased in Mitchelstown. Among them were two homes for his own family as it grew from just Jim and Joan to include siblings Thomas, Mary and Michael. The second house was two-stories and featured a large plate-glass window in front. "Where he got the knowledge and expertise, I don't know," says Sheehan of his father. "... He was a wheeler and dealer. He



*Over the years, Jim Sheehan has carved more Claddagh rings than any other artifact.*

came home one day with this old horse-drawn hearse carriage. The coffin would go in the back and it was all glass around ... He took it apart and that was the glass window in the front of the house that he built."

Sheehan not only worked with his father and uncle in the construction business, but also began at a very early age to experiment with another kind of woodworking — carving. He developed his skills by using scraps of wood left over from the work done by his father and uncle. "When they made the windows," says Sheehan, "they would make the sashes and then where they mortised the bottom part of the window ... they had to leave that little extra so that the mortising wouldn't weaken it until they got it put together. Then they cut off the pieces on the side. Those pieces were precious to me because I would borrow one of my father's

chisels and I'd make toys out of them."

Another source of wood for Sheehan's carving were boxes of knotless plywood in which tea was imported to Ireland from India and sold in a general store in Mitchelstown. After he learned the boxes were smashed to bits when empty, he arranged that he take them home instead.

One item that he carved from the boxes in 1941 was a length-of-your-hand statue of Popeye the Sailor Man. Decades after he had forgotten the project, the Popeye came back to him when his brother Tom brought it to Connecticut from his home in Mitchelstown. The carving was intact, but the paint was all but gone. Sheehan repainted the sailor man and today Popeye has a place of honor among the numerous carvings in the Sheehan home in Wallingford.

Sheehan was seven years old when he started carving Popeye and other toys. About the same time, he began attending school in Mitchelstown. Nuns who taught the first three grades were excellent teachers, but Sheehan still remembers that one requirement, daily classes in three languages — Gaelic and Latin as well as English — was a burden to a lad who preferred to be working with wood.

Another early preference for Sheehan was bicycling, not just locally, but throughout the scenic region. "I had a circuit of 60 miles around," he recalls.

"I would cycle it in one day ... I would go about 12 miles from Mitchelstown before I came to the Blackwater River ... that flowed down into Lismore. Along the way there were orchards. The apples were just hanging out on the side of the road. I would take a couple and fortify myself with them. Then I would go see my grandparents in Lismore and have a cup of tea and a sandwich or something with them.

"Then I would head off from there and go up into the Comeragh Mountains to a monastery, a place called Mount Melleray. I always made a stop there because one of the monks was a personal friend of my grandfather. The monk, Brother Finian, was a 'nominated procurer.' The monks were not allowed off the monastery grounds except Brother Finian. They grew much of their own food, but there were some items that they couldn't grow and he would go into

town to purchase them. I guess he got to know my grandfather who was a baker in Lismore ...

“Then I would get back on my bike and go all the way into Clonmel in Tipperary ... I rode up to what they call the ‘Vee’. You go up to that high point ... and you would see the whole Galtee mountains ...”

As lovely as the Irish countryside was, Sheehan was an American by birth, and had his heart set on returning to the United States. When he was 18 and out of school, he went to the American consular office in Cork city and checked his citizenship status. It was during the Korean War and the consular office helped Sheehan make arrangements to enlist in London for a four-year tour of duty in the U.S. Air Force. He took basic training at a British air base in Wales and then was sent to Brize Norton, a Royal Air Force base in Oxfordshire that was leased to the U.S. Air Force.

With his experience in carpentry, he was assigned to a distribution center that shipped airplane parts to U.S. bases all over Europe. At the beginning of his final year of military duty, Sheehan requested to be transferred to an air base in the United States. Asked for his preferences, he chose Westover in western Massachusetts, Otis on Cape Cod or McGuire in New Jersey. In typical military style, the Air Force sent him to McChord Field near Tacoma, Wash. “That was my immigration,” Sheehan says, “I came in on a military airplane.”

During his years in the military, Sheehan had few opportunities to use and develop his carving skills. He lived out of a duffle bag with no space for a set of carving tools much less the carvings he would produce. But when he arrived at McChord Field in 1956, he was assigned to a unit whose work was to produce and maintain street and building and directional signs all over the base. “That was a great help to me,” he says. “There was a lot of carving of signs, street signs but also some elaborate work like carving signs for the outside of the base chapel ...”

When he was discharged in February 1957, Sheehan headed for a home away from home. “I came right back to my aunt’s place in New Haven — Ann Sullivan. She had married a Kerryman, John Sullivan ... They lived on Cedar Hill Avenue. My uncle Tom Sheehan was still living in New Haven. Plus I had a great-uncle also in New Haven,

## A Jim Sheehan gallery



*In his woodcarving career, Jim Sheehan has often sculpted scenes from Irish history and mythology. The Children of Lir carving above goes back to an ancient Irish story in which a king’s children are turned into swans by a wicked step-mother. Sheehan began carving statues like that of Popeye from scraps of wood. Bottom left is his rendition of the Turoe Stone that is believed to be carved in County Galway in the Iron Age. Bottom right is Sheehan’s carving of a seahorse that won first prize in a competition sponsored by the Mystic Carvers Association.*



Tom Darney, a trolley car driver ...”

After working at the National Box Company in New Haven for several years, Sheehan found a job making metal O-rings for nuclear reactors at Advanced Products Company on Defco Park Road in North Haven.

At Advanced Products, Jim met his wife to be Terry Scarpa. They met in June 1966, started dating in September, were married in August 1967, and bought their home in Wallingford in 1968.

Settled down in a home in Wallingford and with two children — Laura born in 1970 and Jamie in 1974 — Sheehan returned to carving. His first products were similar to the toys he had carved in boyhood. “We were in the Long John Silver Restaurant in Wallingford one evening,” says his wife, Terry, “and I commented on a picture of the pirate.”

Within a few days, Sheehan produced for Jamie’s bedroom a carving of a pirate on a board all gnarled and broken like a piece of a ship.

When Terry and the other young mothers in the neighborhood were weaving Holly Hobbie dolls for their daughters, she came home one day to find two Holly Hobbie dolls carved out of wood and painted — for Laura’s room.

When the Sheehans visited Ireland, Terry was much taken with the traditional Claddagh rings designed with joined hands symbolizing devotion, loyalty and friendship. The name comes from the County Galway fishing village of Claddagh where the rings were first fashioned. “I thought a Claddagh ring would look nice on our door.

“When we came home, the next thing I knew,” says Terry, “Jim had carved a Claddagh ring. It was too big for the door, so he put a mirror inside it and we had it as a wall hanging. Since then, he has made at least 200 of them and that is where the name ‘Claddagh Carver’ came from.”

Over the years, Terry has become accustomed to her husband’s artistic mindset. “No matter where we are or what we are doing, for as long as I can remember, he always sees something artistic in everything — the sky, clouds, sunset or anything. That inspiration turns into his drawings and carvings. His mind works that way all the time.”

The proof of that can be seen in the Sheehan home which is filled with drawn and carved images and artifacts of all kinds

of objects, scenes and creatures.

Sheehan’s talent has led to some fascinating projects and experiences. For many years, for example, the famed Yale singing group, the Whiffenpoofs, organized in 1909, called on Sheehan to continue one of their cherished traditions: the carving of the initials of new members on the tables and the walls at Mory’s in New Haven.

In 2007, Sheehan entered a contest sponsored by the Mystic Carvers Association. He won first prize with a replica of a seahorse — the tiny fish that looks something like a



*One of the many creative Irish family crests that Sheehan has carved.*

horse and is found in shallow tropical waters throughout the world.

Sheehan is also past president of the Connecticut Wood Carvers Association. He has taught woodcarving in the Wallingford adult education program and at the Senior Center in Wallingford.

But, in his half century as a woodworker, Sheehan has specialized in projects that spring from his Irish roots. He has avoided for the most part stereotypical shamrocks and Paddies in top hats in favor of more truly traditional Irish ways, objects and events.

An example is a lovely carving he did that illustrates the ancient Irish legend, the Children of Lir. In the legend, the beautiful and handsome daughter and three sons of King Lir were turned into swans by their evil step-mother.

Another example is a six-inch-tall carving he did out of basswood, of one of Ireland’s oldest standing monuments, the Turoe Stone. A three-foot tall granite boulder, the stone’s rounded top and sides are adorned with an intricate pattern of Celtic spirals, curves, trumpets and circles. The stone is thought to have been carved in the Iron Age, in the centuries before Christ.

The stone’s original home is thought to have been the Rath of Feerwore, an Iron Age ring fort in Kiltullagh, County Galway. Today it stands on the grounds of Turoe House in Loughrea in Galway.

Sheehan’s carvings begin that far back in Irish history and come forward even to the 21st century. When Irish-Americans in Connecticut began a campaign to erect a monument at Vicksburg, Miss., to the state’s Irish regiment in the Civil War, Sheehan carved a model of the monument to be shown at fund-raising events.

When a statue of St. Patrick from the old parish church of that name in New Haven was about to crumble to pieces, the New Haven Knights of St. Patrick turned to Sheehan to rescue it. The statue, says Sheehan, was very delicate. Constructed in the late 1800s, it was made of horsehair and plaster, was hollow inside and was falling apart. The saint’s hands were broken and his staff had been lost along the way. Sheehan went to work on it, firming it up with netting and plaster and repainting it. Today, the statue occupies a place of honor in the Knights’ home on State Street in New Haven.

Over the years, perhaps the carvings in greatest demand, with the possible exception of Claddagh rings, are family coats of arms. One of Sheehan’s friends visited relatives in Ireland and came home to Connecticut with a gift of a small horseshoe from an old blacksmith’s forge in Tipperary. At a loss how to display the horseshoe, the friend took it and a photograph of the blacksmith’s workshop to Sheehan for advice. Sheehan studied the items and came up with a coat of arms that included the horseshoe plus a carved likeness of the forge and the family name and location, all in a Celtic font, and trimmed with County Tipperary colors of blue and gold.

*Sources: Interviews with Jim and Terry Sheehan during the winter of 2014-2015.*

# Main Street historian proud of both Puritan and Irish roots

*(Continued from page 1)*

worked on a large Catholic estate ... He was also a member of the Swiss Guards connected with the Vatican. He got employment as a farm laborer in Cromwell and in the course of time met and married this Irish colleen, my grandmother."

Stevens does not name his grandparents, but they seem to fit the census descriptions of John Myer, or Meyer, and Ellen Reidy, who were married in St. Mary's Church in New Britain in October 1858. On the 1860 census for Cromwell, John, a native of Switzerland, and Ellen, a native of Ireland, have one child, 10-month old Mary. On the 1900 census, Mary, the wife of a Wallingford carpenter-builder named Edgar Stevens, listed her age as 40, her father as born in Switzerland and her mother as born in Ireland, and one of her sons as William F., age 18.

The Edgar Stevens family moved to Wallingford in 1889, when Bill was about eight years old. The transfer from Cromwell was motivated by an occupational and financial opportunity for Bill's father, like many of his Yankee ancestors, a carpenter. "At that time," Bill explained in one of his columns, "a building boom was being experienced as the H.L. Judd Company, a company with headquarters in Brooklyn, had moved its entire plant into the borough. Many houses were being built for the workers moving into town."

"When my folks came to town," Stevens said, "I started my schooling in grade 2 and finished in grade 9. This was known then as a common grammar school education although grade 9 took us through many studies now taught in the high schools."

Stevens went to work at 16 as an apprentice carpenter with his father. He continued at that trade most of the rest of his life. His occupation took him into every nook and cranny and most homes of the borough, which included an inner or downtown area, and the outlying farmlands and hamlets of what is one of Connecticut's largest municipalities with 42 square miles all told.

He was also an active member of the community: one of the founders of the local carpenters union, the first building inspector, an early member of the Advent Christian Church of Wallingford, a member of the Wallingford Grange and the Wallingford Club and a charter member of the Retired People's Club.

In February 1952, Stevens began his career as a journalist for the town's weekly paper. From then until very near his death on March 18, 1956, he painted with words the history of the streets, neighborhoods and people of Wallingford as they had been during his lifetime. Among those recollections were many, many Irish families. To some extent, he may have done that because of his Irish roots. But he undoubtedly did it also because from the late 1800s well up into the 1900s, Irish comprised the largest immigrant population of most Connecticut towns and certainly of Wallingford.

Stevens had a way — perhaps it was the Irish in him — of not just mentioning people but of weaving stories about them into his writing. Describing a building on Colony Street, he wrote: "This is the home and business place of Michael O'Callaghan. He is a tall, good-natured Irishman, born in the parish of Fermoy, County Cork, some 50 years ago ... where he was a shepherd boy. In the year 1857, he emigrated to Wallingford, first working at R. Wallace & Sons and then at the Hall Elton Co. where he learned the manufacture of



*In October 1955, at the time of their 50th wedding anniversary, Bill and Ellen Spencer Stevens posed for a picture to go with his newspaper column about their 1905 courtship and wedding.*

## *Golden wedding anniversary*

In the midst of his career as a columnist for the *Wallingford Post*, Bill Stevens and his wife Ellen celebrated their golden wedding anniversary. In a column on Oct. 10, 1955, Stevens described a typical 1905 courtship and wedding.

In spring that year, he wrote, "I became acquainted with a young woman from the town of Guilford. She was the daughter of a seafaring man, Capt. Robert Spencer ... I went around with his daughter during the spring and summer months, together enjoying the sports and pleasures of those days ..." That included trolley trips to area parks, shoreline dinners and boating excursions.

Engagement followed. The wedding was set for Oct. 24, and a month before that, Bill and Ellen rented and began furnishing a house on Mansion Road on Wallingford's west side.

On their wedding day, Bill and Ellen were driven to the Baptist parsonage in the Yalesville section in a "covered carriage with shiny red wheels." There they were married by the Rev. Hall-rust. After the ceremony the newlyweds boarded a train at the railroad depot in Tracey, a neighborhood in northwestern Wallingford. "My wife had a large bouquet of yellow chrysanthemums and I was still in my wedding clothes," wrote Stevens. ... We traveled to New Haven (by train), transferring at Cedar Hill to the Shore Line. We then went to Branford, where we had a wedding dinner and a room engaged at the old Branford House. We spent the night there and the following day we went by train to the Old Town of Guilford where we spent the rest of our honeymoon ...

"We arrived home in Wallingford 10 days later and went up the hill by trolley, stopping at the meat market ... we purchased some meat and groceries for our Sunday dinner ..."

spoons. In 1858 he sailed for Australia going extensively into the sheep-raising business. He was general manager of a ranch that covered 55 square miles. He came back to Wallingford in 1868. After returning, he engaged in the wholesale liquor business at the building which I mentioned. He was in that business for 23 years ... He served in nearly all the town and borough offices and for seven years was a member of the Board of Water Commissioners. In 1889, he was elected representative to the legislature in Hartford, receiving the largest majority ever given a Democratic candidate."

O'Callaghan also supervised the building of the Colony Street School and was instrumental in securing land for the present Holy Trinity Church. He apparently was a stickler for details. Stevens wrote about an incident in the construction of a house on Church Street. A carpenter named Peter Cullen was painting or staining the front door when "Michael O came along ... He stood tall and erect and in his Irish brogue said, 'How in the world did that door get by with those two knots in the panels? Send it back.'"

In one of his columns, Stevens described the interesting occupation of a "Mr. Monahan" who operated the "Bone Mill" on a hill overlooking the Quinnipiac River. "All the old horses that had become useless for work were brought there and disposed of. I think they were ground up and used for fertilizer," wrote Stevens. "Mr. Monahan used a lot of this material on the surrounding sand plains on which he produced some wonderful crops of melons. Many of the watermelons were as large and sweet as the ones grown in the South. Every summer and fall, the melons were peddled out and sold to people dwelling in the borough."


The Monahan of whom Stevens wrote was Philip Monahan who in the 1893 Wallingford directory was listed as an employee of the bone mill. Another Monahan in Wallingford at that time was Patrick who was a gardener.

If Philip Monahan worked in an occupation that was fading from the scene, three other Wallingford Irishmen were on the cutting edge of technology. In 1882, Wallingford established a water company. Pistaugh Pond was acquired and a water main

was extended into the borough or downtown area.

"The advent of water in the borough," wrote Stevens, "brought the work of fitting in pipes, sinks, toilets and bath tubs." A Meriden plumber named John H. McCormack, who had immigrated to Connecticut from his native Ireland in 1854, seized the opportunity and went into the business of fitting Wallingford homes with all the appli-

THE BEST GRADES  
OF

**COAL**  **COAL**

AT  
MODERATE PRICES.

**ANTHRACITE and BITUMINOUS.**

**WILLIAM HASSETT,**  
OFFICE and YARDS, QUINNIPIAC ST., opp. DEPOT, WALLINGFORD, CT.

*William Hasset, a native of Tipperary, was among the enterprising Irish who put down roots in Wallingford.*

ances needed with running water.

McCormack and two Irish employees, Peter J. Leonard and P.J. Fagan were, according to Stevens, "kept very busy putting modern plumbing in all the old houses." Both Leonard and Fagan, Stevens wrote, were well known in the borough being expert and practical plumbers and business men."

In the year 1893, McCormack patented the McCormack Hot Water Boiler and formed the McCormack Steam Heating Company with Leonard and Fagan as his partners. The company's headquarters were at the intersection of Orchard and Center streets in the downtown area. Later, Stevens said, "Leonard went into business with James Hall and carried on the plumbing business for many years."

Wallingford also had an Irish home painting, paper hanging and decorating expert named Peter Cullen. According to Stevens, Cullen "in the Gay Nineties was the leading decorator in the borough."

Both Cullen and his wife Mary were born in Canada in the 1850s of Irish immigrant

parents. They emigrated to Connecticut about 1882 and Cullen started his decorating establishment in 1889 and, wrote Stevens, "had built up a large business and was the employer of painters and decorators ... He along with a Swedish builder by the name of Andrew Olsen and an Irish plumber, Simon O'Neal, were known as the Builders Trinity. Many homes were built by this combination."

Another successful Irish businessman was William Hasset, who provided the commodity that most people used to heat their homes in the latter years of the 19th and early years of the 20th century. "Crossing the (railroad) tracks," wrote Stevens, "we come to William Hasset's coal yards. These coal yards are the largest ones in town and have been managed by Mr. Hasset for a number of years. He was born in County Tipperary in 1850. He came to this country 32 years ago. Having learned the trade of machinist, in 1870 he went to work for the old Judd Manufacturing Co. whose works were then located in New Haven. When their plant was moved to Wallingford in 1877, he was among the employees who came here ... He has been in the employ of the

company for over a quarter of a century and for a number of years has been their superintendent.

Stevens praised Hasset, as an innovator who after buying the coal business from John Kendrick, made many improvements. "He became one of the first dealers in this section of the country," wrote Stevens, "to equip his yard with devices for automatically unloading the cars to the coal sheds."

In addition to his business interests, Hasset was active in town affairs. He was a member of the Court of Burgesses and "an enthusiastic supporter of our public schools system and served many years as a member of the Central School District Board."

Near the railroad tracks through the center of Wallingford and not far from Hasset's coal yard, stood a firehouse known as the Wallace Hose House. Stevens described the building as "a two-story frame building with a sheathing exterior looking like a large barn. In front is a large door to take in the hose carriage and a side door opening on a flight of stairs that lead to the second floor where tables and chairs are located for

the benefit of the members of the company..."

The firefighters were volunteers and as was the case in many Connecticut and American communities, Ireland was well represented in their ranks. In 1895, wrote Stevens, John F. Downey was foreman of the Wallace Hose Company with William J. Hayden and William Fogarty as his assistants, William Hogan as treasurer and John Merchant as secretary. Downey, Hayden, Fogarty and Hogan were all the sons of Irish immigrants. Merchant was a French-Canadian whose wife Hannah was of Irish birth.

In addition, several of Wallingford's Fire Department officials were Irish. Fire Chief Luke Martin, wrote Stevens, "is of Irish parentage, born in the city of Manchester, England, in 1851. At the age of 16, he came to America ... In 1867, he started work in the G.I. Mix factory in Yalesville. In the following spring, he started serving his time with Horace Botsford, a mason and building contractor, his first job being on the present Congregational Church ..."

Martin moved to Derby where he became a member of that community's fire department. He returned to Wallingford in the early 1890s and "in the year 1894 he became by unanimous vote chief engineer of the Wallingford Fire Department.

Another Fire Department officer was William M. Casey, who was a man of many talents. He joined the firefighters in 1889 and "gave service for many years."

Stevens described him as president of Wallingford's Young Men's Total Abstinence Society and a pitcher for Wallingford's baseball team. "He brought many victories to the borough boys, especially against the neighboring city of Meriden, their chief rival," wrote Stevens.

Casey, wrote Stevens, also was "an accomplished dancer ... known as one of the best prompters in New Haven County. I well remember taking lessons from him in the Gay Nineties."

Casey was born in the District of Columbia to Irish parents. His wife Margaret was born in Connecticut of Irish parents.

During the 1890s and early 1900s, the

business of undertaking was conducted along sectarian lines. Wallingford had three undertakers, all of whom combined undertaking with the sale of furniture.

One of them was John W. Fitzgerald, born in 1857 of Irish parents. John and his wife Margaret, also born in Connecticut of Irish parents, were themselves the parents of nine children, all born in Wallingford.

Their home and place of business was at

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**J. W. FITZGERALD,**



**FURNITURE DEALER  
AND  
UNDERTAKER.**

**NILES' BLOCK, COR. CENTER AND MEADOW STS.,  
WALLINGFORD, CT.**

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*John Fitzgerald was Wallingford's Irish Catholic undertaker.*

40 Center St. near the "plains" area along North Colony Street where numerous Irish families lived. The city directory of 1899 described the business as "the J.W. Fitzgerald Furniture and Supply Co., stoves, crockery, furniture dealers and undertakers."

Stevens wrote, "Fitzgerald did a large undertaking business since he took care of the funerals for all the Catholic residents of the town."

Another Irishman who performed an important service in Wallingford was Nicholas Bridgett who lived on Orchard Street off Center Street. Before the advent of electric streetlights, Bridgett was the town's lamplighter, the municipal employee who ignited the gas lights on street corners. "For many years," wrote Stevens, "you could see Nicholas going his rounds at sunset on horseback lighting the lamps and as we lay abed in the early morning we could hear the sound of his horse's footsteps as he passed our dwelling extinguishing the lights ..."

Both Nicholas and his wife Margaret were born in Ireland, he in 1847, she about 1850. Nicholas was listed on the 1880 census as a "night watchman."

Stevens had only minimal Irish credentials. His ancestry was mostly of the Puritan English who founded New Haven. Both he and his mother were born in Connecticut, and the first person of Irish birth on his family tree was his grandmother. But for whatever reason, he cherished the heritage of his Irish born grandmother. In a column published the day after St. Patrick's Day in 1954, he shared with his readers thoughts about his own Irishness and his thoughts on the abundant Irish community in Wallingford.

He began the column with a narrative of the life of St. Patrick. Then he wrote of how "the Irish people came under the control of the English nation and gradually the iron yoke of bondage was placed around their necks and they were made serfs and servants to the English rulers. They ruled the tiny nation with a rod of iron owning all the land and renting property to the natives ..."

He then wrote of the disaster caused by successive failures of the potato crop in the 1840s, and

linked the disaster specifically to the policies of the English overlords. "In the year 1846," he wrote, "enough beef, mutton and farm products was shipped to England to feed their ten million inhabitants ... until in less than a decade the population (of Ireland) had decreased by over three and a half million people ... Not all these people were among those who died from starvation. A new land, a land of plenty, a rich country with its farms of virgin soil and its towns and villages of booming industry, its religious freedom, its free schools of education and other gifts of God too numerous to mention held open hands to them ..."

Stevens went on to say that while he was proud to be a descendant of the very first Puritan settlers of New Haven and Wallingford, "I am also proud to say that pure Irish blood flows through my veins. My grandmother on my mother's side was one of those immigrants that came to America during the Irish famine ..."

The arrival of the Irish, he continued, marked "a new epoch ... and in the following years the Russian and German Jews, the Italians, Germans, Hungarians, Polish and many other people came to our shores."

He wrote, too, of a simple habit by which over the years and changing times he expressed his affection for his Irish heritage. It is a habit which many others of Irish descent may recognize in their own lives.

"When the phonographs first came out back in the Gay Nineties," Stevens wrote, "I was one of the first in the town to purchase one and I would sit for hours in the evening after my day's work as a carpenter listening to the Irish songs and melodies ... The same thing occurred when radio came into use. I would sit in front of the machine until far into the morning ... following St. Patrick's Day listening to the same old Irish melodies ... and now in the present age I watch the Irish programs with the natives in their village customs doing their Irish jigs, cracking their jokes and singing the good old Irish songs."

In that same column, Stevens closed his St. Patrick's Day reverie with memories of

his fellow Wallingford Irish: "They settled on the plains near the railroad where they found their daily labor and they built their small but neat dwellings along Colony street and the streets running up the hill towards Main where the original Wallingford settlers dwelt.

"After the passing of the first generation, the children growing up took to different vocations ... many of the younger stock went to work in factories or into different lines of business.

"A great many of them went into politics and became office holders ... The Downes family of which the late Michael Downes, a lawyer, was a descendant; Daniel O'Reilly and William Fogarty, two of the first police officers of the borough; Thomas Kennedy, a newspaper dealer for years; Pat Curran, owner of a dry-goods store on Center Street, owning a block also; the Gallaghers that managed the coal and wood yard on

Quinnipiac Street and which is still run by a member of the family. I also mention the Dalys, Sheehans, Dr. Mark, still representing the family.

"Then there were the Downes — Morton Downey, the talented tenor singer, being one of this family ... the Callahans, O'Briens, Fagans, Maloneys, Sullivans and many others too numerous to mention.

"They brought their Christian faith with them, celebrating their first Catholic Mass at a house on High Street. Under the supervision of their beloved pastor, Rev. Hugh Mallon, they built the beautiful edifice standing on North Colony Street pointing its awe-inspiring steeple skyward towards the giver of every good thing — In closing, I will say, 'God Bless the Irish.'"

*Sources: "Bill Stevens Relates, Articles from the Wallingford Post, Feb. 14, 1952 to Feb. 2, 1956," Wallingford Public Library. Meriden Morning Record, March 19, 1956.*

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P.O. Box 185833  
Hamden, CT 06518  
(203) 392-6126

www.ctiahs.com  
ctiahs@gmail.com

President George Waldron  
Vice President Vincent McMahon  
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Webmaster Finbarr Moynihan

*In Ireland, a Shanachie is a folklorist, historian  
and keeper of the traditions of the people.*

"We have kept faith  
with the past;  
we have handed  
a tradition  
to the future."

*Padraic Pearse*

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