

“Slieveroe West:” An Irish Neighborhood Moves to New Jersey**By Thomas Callahan****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v1i1.11>****Abstract**

This article examines the histories of several young Irish men and women who emigrated from Frenchpark, in rural County Roscommon, to northern New Jersey in the last half of the 19th century, recreating their old neighborhood and bonds of community on this side of the Atlantic. In rural Ireland the equivalent of a neighborhood is the “townland.” This article employs the tiny townland of Slieveroe to examine Irish migration and community development in New Jersey. A majority of the fifteen families who lived in Slieveroe and its environs sent sons and daughters to the Garden State, most to West Orange. The factors which drove or lured them out of Ireland are briefly discussed, then, more substantially, the article investigates the reasons why these young Irish men and women chose to relocate in this Newark suburb, how they maintained their personal bonds, and how they kept also in close touch with the families they had left behind. Though separated by thousands of miles, they still considered themselves to be one community, some in Ireland and some in New Jersey, sharing a common experience.

In 2013, Ireland, North and South, celebrated *The Gathering*, a year-long commemoration of the enduring relationship between Ireland and the United States, encouraging Irish-Americans to return “home” for a visit and to reunite with Irish relatives. Inspired in part by nostalgia and in part by the harsh economic realities facing Ireland today, its sponsors hoped both for the joy of family reunifications and a much needed infusion of American tourist dollars. In a way, Ireland in the 21st century is hoping to gain benefit from the sad exodus of the 19th.

In the 19th century millions of Irish men and women left homes and families and sailed to the United States seeking a brighter future. Many were forced from Ireland by poverty or disease, while others were lured by the promise of employment and opportunity. Immigrants arrived with only what they could carry, leaving behind all they had known and valued, starting over in America and building new lives they could never have achieved at home. The first arrivals encouraged family and friends to follow, beginning a social phenomenon known as chain migration, rebuilding, as best they could, their Irish communities and traditions on this side of the Atlantic. They were in a new and different land, but they were not alone.

A considerable body of detailed scholarly work has been produced on Irish settlement in the United States over the past decade, much of it by archeologists and anthropologists. For example, the recent publication of *Historical Archeology of the Irish Diaspora* by Stephen Brighton, an anthropologist at the University of Maryland, analyzes results of archeological digs in County Roscommon, Ireland with digs at Five Points in New York City and the Dublin section of Paterson, New Jersey to show how Irish immigrants strove to maintain connections with home.¹ Tyler Anbinder's earlier, massively detailed study of Five Points in New York City also makes a significant contribution to the study of Irish settlement on the east coast.² In addition, Thomas Killion, an archeologist at Wayne State University, has done much to unearth the early history of the Corktown section of Detroit, named after the Irish city.³ These studies demonstrate that immigrants brought what they could from home and maintained, at least for a while, their traditional lives and social connections.

¹ Stephen A. Brighton, *Historical Archeology of the Irish Diaspora: A Transnational Approach* (Knoxville: University of Kentucky Press).

² Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19th Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

³ Nikhil Swarninathan, "The Pre-Motor City," *Archaeology*, 64, no.6, 2011.

http://www.archaeology.org/1111/features/corktown_detroit_michigan_central_station.html (accessed 20 December 2012).

It is my intention with this article to demonstrate that similar information on chain migration and the preservation of Irish ties can be revealed by digging, metaphorically, through the records and family memories of Irish communities in poverty stricken rural County Roscommon and rapidly expanding West Orange, New Jersey in the late-19th and early 20th centuries.

County Roscommon is located in the province of Connacht, one of the poorest areas in Ireland. Since the county is not amenable to tillage agriculture, farmers today largely raise livestock, cattle and sheep. Before the Famine struck Ireland in the mid-19th century, however, the principal crop in Roscommon, as in much of western Ireland, was the potato. This humble vegetable was easy to grow and could feed more people per acre than any other crop. As a result, the population of Ireland had accelerated in the previous century, reaching over eight million by 1841. Most of the land was owned by Protestant landlords, known collectively as “The Ascendancy,” with hundreds of thousands of tenants and sub-tenants, some renting as little as a quarter acre, but still able to support large families with their potato harvest. The Famine, beginning in 1845, changed all that.

More than a million died from starvation or disease over the next five years and millions more emigrated, greatly reducing rural population density. This reduction in the labor pool should have led to better times for those still on the land. In England, for instance, the Black Death in the 14th century had decimated the population, yet had ushered in more prosperous times for those farmers still alive. The end of the Famine, however, did little to stimulate Irish agriculture. Although there were now many fewer farmers and agricultural laborers, this did not bring prosperity to those who remained, particularly in hard-hit areas such as Connacht. Increasingly, farmers in Roscommon and other western counties came to rely on cattle for their

livelihood, which meant that fewer farm laborers were now needed. Other blows came from rapidly spreading industrialization and commercial farming in England and America. In the prevailing free market economy of Great Britain, Irish exports struggled to compete. Plus, new steam technology enabling emigrants to travel quickly to America also ferried American farm products, including cattle from the mid-west, in the opposite direction. These economic realities in the second half of the 19th century also led to a rapid phasing out of holdings of less than five acres and an end to the subdivision of land in order to provide a small portion of the family's farm to sons in the next generation so that they could marry and start families of their own. More and more, farms passed to a single heir from generation to generation. This trend also deprived many Irish women of the opportunity to marry because fewer young men now had land, and prospective husbands who had to wait for their parents to die before inheriting the farm were much older than grooms had been before. These dismal prospects for employment and marriage continued to drive hundreds of thousands of Irish from the land, long after the Famine had passed.

The initial flood of emigration during the Famine sent over a million Irish to Canada, the United States, England, and Australia. Later in the century, the outward flow, though not as frantic, was still very strong. Studies of Irish census figures reveal that around a quarter of those aged 5 to 24 disappeared from the population each decade before the next census was compiled. The population, which had stood at 8.2 million in 1841 had fallen to 5.8 million by 1861 and maintained its decline to less than 4.3 million by 1926.⁴ Negative population growth continued steadily until the latter half of the 20th century.

⁴ Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 346; David Fitzpatrick, "Emigration 1871-1921," in *A New History of Ireland*, ed. W. E. Vaughn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), VI, 607; For further background on Irish emigration in the 19th century see Janet Nolan, *Ourselves Alone: Women's Migration from*

During the Famine period, entire families had fled Ireland either willingly or by eviction, but the character of later emigration was quite different. Most later emigrants were single young adults traveling on their own. Also, a large proportion of them were female, an unusual phenomenon not seen in other large-scale European migrations. Remarkably, between 1893 and 1904 women leaving Ireland consistently outnumbered males.⁵ By the hundreds of thousands they poured out of Queenstown, now the most popular port of embarkation, over 80% of them headed to the United States.⁶

Scholars often use a “push-pull” analogy to describe the motivations for Irish emigration. In the Famine years, starvation, disease, and desperate landlords had effectively “pushed” the poor out, many against their will, turning them into reluctant exiles. Homeless and run off their holdings, or simply fleeing impending disaster, waves of poor, frequently ill, emigrants set out on long perilous voyages in decrepit, leaky “coffin ships.” Many died at sea, many others, ill and destitute, clogged the ports of Canada and the United States. As many as 30% of those who emigrated at this time died en route or soon after their arrival.⁷ Beginning in the 1860s, however, most emigrants were “pulled” out of Ireland by the prospect of a better life elsewhere. Those who left and found success abroad often advised or aided others to follow, resulting in chain migration.⁸ Their letters described new, successful lives, while money and pre-paid tickets sent home provided the means for escape from Ireland’s desperate shores. New arrivals encouraged families and friends with words like “Dear friend, I mean to let you know that I can sit at a table as good as the best man in Belmullet. Thank God that I left that miserable place.”⁹ Also,

Ireland, 1885 -1920 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1989); Timothy Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), and other works cited below.

⁵ Fitzpatrick, “Emigration,” 612.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 608.

⁷ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 292.

⁸ Gerard Moran, *Sending Out Ireland’s Poor* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 204.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 208.

steamship companies had agents throughout the country, offering visions of a fresh start and abundant opportunities abroad. Back home, Irish youth were primed to leave. An 1889 report from the Irish National Schools reported that "...specimen letters inscribed by children ... were 'inevitably written to some friend [abroad] asking the person to send a ticket to take them out.'"¹⁰ This is not to conceal the fact that many poor left against their will, but most of those who boarded ships at Queenstown between the 1860s and early 1900s left Ireland in a much more optimistic mood than their countrymen carried a generation earlier. The dangers of the long ocean voyage had dramatically diminished. With the new steamships, mortality rates had fallen to less than one per cent, plus fierce competition among shipping companies reduced the steerage fare to around \$8.75 by 1894, the equivalent of about one week's wages for an unskilled worker in the United States.¹¹

As in the Famine years, the highest rate of emigration still came from Connacht, the Irish province with the most grinding poverty. People were forced out by a vicious combination of poor harvests, evictions, and collapsing farm prices.¹² The situation became so serious that even the British government, notoriously reluctant to pour money into Ireland, established the Congested Districts Board in 1891 to encourage assisted emigration by the poorest of the poor. Between the Famine and the end of the century, Ireland's population had dropped by half.¹³ The changes in international trade patterns which took hold by the 1880s had a profound effect on this emigration. Whereas in 1877, the last year of any Irish agricultural prosperity, fewer than 14,000 left for America, by 1883 the number had risen to 83,000 and remained high for the rest

¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, "Emigration," 615.

¹¹ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 355; Kenny, *American Irish*, 140.

¹² Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish* (New York: Pearson, 2000), 132.

¹³ Kenny, *American Irish*, 133

of the century. Nearly a half million emigrated in the 1890s alone.¹⁴ By 1900 the five million first and second generation Irish in America was a half million greater than the entire population of Ireland.¹⁵

Many Irish were profoundly concerned about this hemorrhaging of the life blood of their country. Essayists, editors, and church officials lamented the losses and began to ask rhetorically why so many were leaving, as if they were afraid to address the truth. Was it the lure of America? -- the aggressive sales campaigns of steamship companies and their agents? -- the lack of a promising future at home? They knew, of course, that the answer was “yes” to all of the above. However understandable the causes might be, most who wrote about emigration were alarmed and opposed it. Newspapers predicted a bleak future for Ireland if emigration continued unabated. The country was losing its “youth and strength,” its “bone and sinew,” and, most of all, its “hope for the future.”¹⁶ As the young increasingly escaped to better fortunes out of the country, Ireland was destined to regress into “one vast sheepwalk and pasture.”¹⁷ None of these warnings and dire predictions did much to staunch the bleeding. Young Irish left the island in the millions, headed for what they hoped and believed would be a better life. Those who were Irish when they embarked in Queenstown, became Irish-Americans in New York and Boston, and, within a generation or two, simply Americans.

Among the millions of Irish emigrants arriving in the United States during the last quarter of the 19th century were a group of poor farmers from Frenchpark, County Roscommon, most of whom settled in West Orange, New Jersey. They came one at a time, as they came of age and funds permitted. We can trace their early lives in Ireland and their fates in America through

¹⁴ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 347.

¹⁵ Kenny, *American Irish*, 131.

¹⁶ Schrier, *Ireland*, 49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

government and church records, photographs, letters, and oral histories passed down through the generations. These sources reveal a resilient group of young men and women, determined to make the most of their opportunities in America, yet preserve what they could of their Irish heritage. In the process, unintentionally and unwittingly, they reconstituted their old neighborhoods from Ireland in northern New Jersey.

Most of these immigrants came from the townland of Slieveroe and its immediate surroundings in northwestern County Roscommon. Townlands are the smallest official land divisions in Ireland. They form the organizational basis for tax surveys from Griffith's Valuation in the 1840s and '50s onwards and all Irish census records. There are thousands of them, some large, some tiny, most bearing names that outsiders find quaint and unpronounceable. In America the closest equivalent would be the concept of a neighborhood. Since land in Ireland seldom leaves the family, the same families persist as neighbors over generations. They intermarry, alternate as sponsors at Catholic baptisms, and form close ties of kin and friendship in small, stable communities.

Slieveroe lies in the barony of Frenchpark, civil parish of Kilnamanagh County Roscommon. It covers 220 acres, 47 of which were bog land,¹⁸ and in the earliest surviving Irish census, 1901, contained 15 families with 10 separate surnames, totaling 64 people.¹⁹ In 1837 Samuel Lewis in his *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* described Frenchpark as a "...market and post-town ... at the junction of the roads from Elphin, Boyle, Castlerea and Ballaghadereen, containing 76 homes and 447 inhabitants."²⁰ The town had a long and noteworthy history, with a remarkable cave perhaps from the days of the druids, and the ruins of Clonshanville Abbey,

¹⁸ De Freyne, *Griffith's Valuation*, record no. 1133625, 1857.

¹⁹ National Archives of Ireland, 1901 Census, Roscommon/Frenchpark/Slieveroe

²⁰ Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (London: S. Lewis, 1837).

<http://www.libraryireland.com/topog/F/Frenchpark-Boyle-Roscommon.php> (accessed 3 Jan, 2013).

dating from the 14th century. In present times, he wrote, the future looked bright for the town now that a mail coach road ran through it and markets were held every Thursday, "...much frequented by Sligo merchants who purchase butter in firkins for exportation." Yarn and pigs were also widely traded. Six large fairs were held annually, plus the town had a constabulary police station and a dispensary.²¹

Less than a decade later the demographic and economic impact of the Famine doomed Lewis' optimistic forecast. The biggest demographic shock came in the years immediately following the consequences of the potato blight, but the population drain continued throughout the century. As late as the 1870s the potato remained a major food source there, often devastated by recurring blight and bad weather. Today, Frenchpark is a place one travels through, not to, and its population is smaller than it was before Lewis wrote his famous gazetteer.

What is known of this townland's residents? Until the end of the 19th century when the British government established programs to help farmers make the transition from renters to owners, the vast majority of the families living there and in neighboring townlands rented their farms from the French family and other Ascendancy landlords. All but one of the tenants were classified as "small" farmers, a term used to describe those leasing less than 30 acres, most having fewer than ten. Unfortunately, the destruction of Irish census returns before 1901 make it impossible to know the names of many individual family members between the Famine and the end of the century, though the identities of landholders responsible for paying rents can be obtained from Griffith's Valuation and more recent Roscommon tax lists. These records, combined with surviving Ballinameen and Tibohine Parish Catholic baptism records, indicate the small townland remained a cohesive community with several generations of the same families living together over the decades.

²¹ Ibid.

I first became acquainted with Slieveroe when I began researching the McCormack family, several of whom had moved from Ireland to New Jersey between 1886 and 1901. Their parents, Patrick McCormack (1833-1900) and Catherine Keenan McCormack (1842-1915), had survived the Famine as children and married in 1861. Their first child was born the next year, followed by eleven more by 1886. In all, ten of the siblings survived to adulthood, six of whom moved to New Jersey. Both the 1901 and 1911 Irish census tabulations show two sons and a daughter living on the farm with their mother.²² Another son had joined the Royal Irish Constabulary, the British police force in Ireland.²³ The overriding reason so many left home can be summed up in one word: poverty. They lived in a small two room thatched cottage, eventually demolished and made into a pig sty in 1951.²⁴ Until the McCormacks acquired a little additional land in the early 20th century, the family held only seven acres on which to support their large family. Their second son died before he was two, and another left only a baptismal record to show that he had ever been born.²⁵ The children grew up knowing that there was neither enough land nor room for all of them. With bleak prospects for employment or inheritance in Ireland, the clear implication was that most would have to emigrate, joining hundreds of thousands of their fellow countrymen.

As they reached young adulthood, the McCormacks left home. Immigration procedures in the 19th century were much different than today. Most arrivals needed no visa or passport to enter the United States and take up permanent residence. If you were white and healthy enough to satisfy the cursory health inspections at Ellis Island and other ports, you could establish residence and start the clock for citizenship application. Beginning with the eldest son, John

²² National Archives of Ireland, 1901, House #6.

²³ Royal Irish Constabulary, Enlistment records, Service Number 58333, FHL microfilm Series 085, Film 0852090.

²⁴ J. P. McCormack, conversation with author, 15 May 1982.

²⁵ Ballinameen Parish Record, Baptisms, #9: 16 Jan 1879.

(1862-1937), they sailed from Queenstown and arrived in New York, passing through immigration without problem. The next oldest, Patrick (1866-1897), arrived in West Orange in time to witness John's marriage in 1888.²⁶ Thomas (1870-1938) came in time for Patrick's wedding in 1892,²⁷ and Michael (1872-1941) followed three years later.²⁸ The eldest daughter, Catherine (1876-1952), arrived in 1897 and second eldest, Bridget (1883-1970), in 1901.²⁹ With her arrival, there were now more of this McCormack family in New Jersey than in Ireland.

The United States that welcomed the McCormacks and millions of other immigrants at the end of the 19th century was very different from rural Ireland. It was a nation engaged in profound transformation from a rural to an urban society. After the Civil War, rapid industrialization caused massive urban growth, while improved transportation made it possible to feed and supply the growing numbers of city dwellers. Increasingly, especially on the east coast, many of these cities became new homes for a rising tide of immigrants.

Half a century earlier, the first large surge of Irish emigrants had streamed into New York and Boston, as well as smaller ports, and took their places in the bottom layer of white society, taking whatever jobs they could get. Being Catholic was a drawback in the United States where Protestants saw Catholicism as antithetical to freedom and democracy. Editorial cartoons, like those by Thomas Nast, often portrayed the Irish as sub-human, dirty, and given to drink and violence. Whatever the given rationale might have been, in truth many Americans simply feared the Irish or looked down on them because they were "different." It did not help that a large segment of the early arrivals, being from the Gaelic west, could not read or write English. The great majority of Irish immigrants had been farmers at home, but the profession least attractive to

²⁶ New Jersey State Archives, Department of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Marriage Certificates and Indexes 1878-1940, John McCormack/Ann Morrisroe, 6 December 1888, M-8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Patrick McCormack/Delia Callaghan, 6 January 1892, M-59.

²⁸ U.S. Department of the Interior, Sheet 18, McCormack, Michael."

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Newark City, Essex County, New Jersey, Enumeration District 237, Sheet 1-A, "Daniels, Beatrice."

them in the United States was farming. Instead of moving on inland to occupy rich agricultural lands opening in the west, most men stayed in the cities and took jobs in manufacturing or on the railroads. Irish women steadily filled the ranks of maids, servants, and governesses in the households of the American middle class.

By the time the McCormacks arrived in the United States, the situation had improved. The Irish had become much more assimilated and were beginning to be regarded as more native than foreign. Rabid fear of Catholicism, at least in the northern states, had dissipated, and the earlier characterizations of the Irish as drunken loafers had largely faded. Many Irishmen now had moved into more respectable employment, and, as their numbers grew, their political clout flourished in eastern cities. Irish political “machines” emerged, opening vast areas of public jobs on police forces, fire brigades, and other municipal departments. Many Irish women who worked in upper-middle class homes learned the ways and manners of middle class America and passed these on to their children, making assimilation easier. Catholic parochial schools appeared in every city, and parents pushed their children to get good educations. In the “melting pot” of America, the Irish were nearly assimilated.

The 1900 United States census locates most of the American McCormacks in West Orange, New Jersey. One brother, Patrick, died of liver failure in 1897, but he left a wife, Delia, also from Frenchpark, and four children. The eldest sister, Catherine, had recently moved to upstate New York and married Delia’s brother. The rest, however, all lived in West Orange or Newark, as did, the census reveals, several other immigrants from Slieveroe and environs. There, they were immersed in a society very different from rural western Ireland.

Today, West Orange (in fact all of the “Oranges” – West, East and South, as well as Orange itself), is part of the suburban sprawl that surrounds the cities of New York and Newark.

Around 1900, however, these communities were more distinct. Comprising two ridges of the Watchung Mountains and the valley between, the town has some lovely parks which make it distinctive, but much of its individuality has disappeared over the decades. It was officially established in 1863 when some prominent local residents who were dissatisfied with the public schools in Orange petitioned the state legislature to form a separate township.³⁰ The new municipality and East Orange as well were carved out of the larger town of Orange, which had itself been separated from Newark a half century earlier.

At first it was quite separate from larger surrounding communities, especially from Newark, as Orange had neither carriage nor steam railway connections yet established.³¹ The population grew steadily over the decades, reaching just over 6,000 by 1900 and more than 15,000 by 1920.³² This had grown to some 40,000 by the end of the 20th Century. As time went on and public transportation improved, West Orange became a popular bedroom community for the wealthy who wished to escape the growing city of Newark. In fact, much of the political maneuvering in the late-19th and early 20th centuries centered on efforts to keep Newark from reaching out and swallowing up the Oranges. Republicans who detested and feared the growing Democratic political machine campaigned vigorously to remain separate from “Greater Newark.”³³ When reliable and reasonably priced trolley systems reached West Orange, they also brought with them increasing numbers of working class citizens. Many of these, like the McCormacks and their compatriots, were employed by the wealthy Republicans up on the hill. Over the years industrial employment also came to town. There were hat manufacturers and,

³⁰ J. Nole, *West Orange* (Charleston: Arcadia, 1998), 2.

³¹ For history of West Orange, see J. Folsom, ed. *The Municipalities of Essex County 1666-1924* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing, 1925, II) 761-770.

³² *Ibid*, 764, 770.

³³ J. Schwartz, ed., *Cities of the Garden State: Essays in the Urban and Suburban History of New Jersey* (Dubuque: Kendall, 1977), 54.

most significantly, Edison Industries. In 1886 Thomas Edison had moved to West Orange and bought Glenmont, a stately mansion in Llewellyn Park. He then proceeded to build what was then the largest and best equipped research laboratory in the world a short distance away. The research facility had several permanent employees, but the largest source of employment at Edison Industries became the factory, which produced phonographs, records and batteries.

The McCormack brothers all lived within a mile of each other in West Orange, and their younger sister, Bridget, lived a few miles away in Newark where she worked as a maid. The founder of the New Jersey branch of the McCormack family was John McCormack, the eldest sibling, born on the last day of March 1862 in Slieveroe. At some point after his arrival he changed the spelling of his name to McCormick, launching that variant among all his descendants. Like most men in his generation, his choices at home were severely limited. He could stay and work as a laborer on his father's or some neighbor's farm, travel to England for seasonal labor, if any could be found, or emigrate. He chose to leave, and picked New Jersey as his destination.

When John and his family first appear on the United States census, in 1900, they lived at 14 Llewellyn Avenue in West Orange. Llewellyn Avenue dead-ends at the border of Llewellyn Park, originally some 750 acres, America's first gated community and home to West Orange's elite. John purchased a building lot there for \$300.00 in 1891 and shortly built a sturdy frame house which served the family for over a century.³⁴ His brother Patrick's family lived right next door at #16. An examination of the remaining residents on this short street reveals other familiar names from Frenchpark in general and Slieveroe in particular. Less than one hundred yards from

³⁴ Bill of sale, John McCormack from Mary Sullivan, 14 Aug. 1891. Collection of Patricia Davis, daughter.

the McCormacks, for example, lived a neighbor of particular significance, Peter Duignan, alternately spelled Deignan and, by the early 20th century, Degnan.³⁵

Peter Duignan, aged 40 in 1900, immigrated to America in 1875, married ten years later, and had several children.³⁶ He worked as a gardener in Llewellyn Park on the estate of Hendon Chubb, founder of the Chubb Insurance Company.³⁷ His father in Ireland, Patrick Deignan, was still a neighbor of the McCormacks.³⁸ Since John and Peter were just three years apart in age, they had certainly known each other well in their small closely-knit townland back home. It is reasonable to conclude that it was not just a coincidence that when John came to America eleven years after Peter's arrival they lived on the same short street in West Orange. They also shared the same occupation in West Orange, gardeners in Llewellyn Park.

Other familiar Slieveroe family names also appear in the official records for West Orange. Bernard Farrell lived at 63 Llewellyn.³⁹ Michael Farrell, one of his Slieveroe ancestors, had been a sub-tenant of the McCormacks in 1857.⁴⁰ Martin Brennan, another descendant of former McCormack sub-tenants, lived just up the street from the Duignans.⁴¹ Patrick Dowd lived nearby on Park Terrace.⁴² Peter Mahon ran a saloon on Main Street.⁴³ There were Morrisroes from the neighboring townland of Cartronbeg who were related to the Farrells and lived in Patrick McCormack's former house at 16 Llewellyn after his widow and children moved to

³⁵ U.S. Department of the Interior, Census Office, Twelfth Census, 1900, West Orange Town, Essex County, New Jersey, Enumeration District 185, Sheet 21, s.v. "Duignan, Peter."

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Joe Rush, *Erin to New Jersey – A Family Saga* (Privately printed, n.d.), 8; Dermot Quinn, *The Irish in New Jersey* (New Brunswick: Rivergate Books, 2006), 170.

³⁸ National Archives of Ireland, 1901, House 14.

³⁹ U.S. Department of the Interior, Town of Orange, Essex County, New Jersey, Enumeration District 184, Sheet 19, "Farrell, Bernard."

⁴⁰ Great Britain, Office of the General Valuation of Ireland, Valuation Lists for Roscommon County, Castlerea Rural District, 1850-1942, Slieveroe, 1857, "Catherine McCormack/Martin Brennan/ Michael Farrell."

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; U.S. Department of the Interior, City of Orange, Essex County, New Jersey, Enumeration District 161, Sheet 11, "Martin C. Brennan."

⁴² *Ibid.*, West Orange Town, Enumeration District 185, Sheet 20, "Patrick Dowd."

⁴³ *Ibid.*, City of Orange, Essex County, New Jersey, Enumeration District 160, Sheet 16, "Peter Mahen [sic]."

nearby McKinley Avenue.⁴⁴ Several Sharkeys from the neighboring townland of Cloonfad lived nearby on Cross Street and High Street.⁴⁵

These men and women came from families whose parents had survived the Famine in mid-century. They came of age in a society where the consequences of that catastrophe still touched every family they knew. They grew up not wondering so much if they would leave Ireland as when they would have to leave. When the time came, they bid their families a sad farewell and set off to begin their new lives, but as the records show, not alone. By the turn of the 20th century Slieveroe “west” was thriving and continued to expand into mid-century as Ireland remained mired in economic and political turmoil. The last of the McCormacks arrived by 1950. Paddy McLoughlin, the son of the youngest McCormack sister who had remained at home, arrived in 1948 and his younger sister Maureen followed the next year.⁴⁶ That same year, Catherine received a letter from her youngest brother, Martin McCormack, who had inherited the family’s “homeplace” in Slieveroe. He wrote that their sister Bridget was making plans to get his youngest son, William, out to New Jersey as well because “There is nothing here for anyone...”⁴⁷ Sadly, this last addition to the transplanted Slieveroe neighborhood never occurred as young Willie soon died from an aneurysm at age 22 before his family’s plans for him could come to fruition.

By the next generation these immigrant Irish from Frenchpark and their growing families were well-integrated into life in New Jersey. Some returned for visits, but none is known to have moved back to Ireland. Though most thought of themselves now as Americans, these families preserved here a good deal of their former social network. They also maintained ties with their

⁴⁴ Ibid., West Orange Town, Essex County, New Jersey, Enumeration District 185, Sheet 21, “John Morrisrow [sic].”

⁴⁵ Ibid., City of Orange, Enumeration District 309, Sheet 14, “Patrick Sharkey.”

⁴⁶ Margaret McLoughlin, letter to Patrick McLoughlin, July 1949. Author’s collection

⁴⁷ Martin McCormack to Catherine Callahan, 7 March, 1949, Author’s collection.

families in Ireland who stayed behind on the land and remained relatively poor. The McCormacks, McLoughlins, Dowds, and others regularly sent remittances home to help with expenses.⁴⁸ When the Anglo-Irish war raged at the end of World War I, the rebel forces were supported by many Irish emigrants like Ann Morrisroe McCormick, who bought a \$10.00 Irish Republic bond to support the rebellion.⁴⁹ Divided families also exchanged photographs over the decades. Almost all of the photos of family members in Ireland that still exist have been found in albums and boxes in New Jersey. Similarly, a picture of the West Orange policeman Thomas McCormack was displayed on the mantle of the family farm in Slieveroe. Patrick and Mary Sharkey, who came to West Orange where they established a family and died, are commemorated on a family tombstone in Fairymount Cemetery outside of Frenchpark.

Evidence for some of these people is scarce. Once living memory had forgotten them, all that remained of many was often a few snapshots, a mass card or, perhaps rosary beads or a wallet saved by a family member. Enough is known, however, to reconstruct the hard work and resilience of these Irish men and women in the face of extreme privation. Let us examine briefly some of the accomplishments of two of the families who came from Slieveroe and settled on Llewellyn Avenue, the McCormacks and the Degnans.

The six McCormacks who relocated in America took advantage of the opportunities available in their new land. They all soon married and began families, something they would not have been able to do in Ireland. With one exception, their spouses were also from Roscommon, most just a short walk across the fields from Slieveroe. It is interesting to note that most also seem to have understated their ages on arrival, perhaps to improve their employment opportunities. Since no birth certificates or other legal documents were required for immigration,

⁴⁸ Various family letters to Ann McCormick, P. McLoughlin, 1930-1950, collections of P. Davis and Steffanelli.

⁴⁹ Receipt, Irish Republic, 1920. Collection of P, Davis.

one could, within reason, say they were however old they wanted to be. The McCormack birth and baptism records from Ireland, compared to the United States census forms, show this clearly. John, born in 1862, claimed in 1900 to have been born in 1865. Michael, born in 1872, claimed 1876. Thomas, born in 1870, chose 1873 and Catherine, born in 1876, put 1877.⁵⁰ An alternative explanation for this phenomenon could be simple forgetfulness, but there was never an error in the opposite direction.

This first generation of McCormacks remained working class in their new land, but all owned their own homes and did fairly well financially. Two of the brothers, John and Thomas, soon moved on from their original menial jobs as gardeners and chauffeurs to become professionals as West Orange police officers. They encouraged their children to stay in school and become educated, and the next generation fared even better. John's youngest child, William P. (1904-1984) for example, began work at age eight to help support the family, cleaning out the horse stalls for the local milkman before going to school. When he was eleven, he wrapped parcels at the local A&P grocery. Three years later he became a stock boy at Edison Storage. In 1922 William completed a secretarial course at La Master Institute in East Orange and took a job as a secretary at Carnegie Steel in New York City, staying there for four years. During that time he attended New York University at night and earned his degree in certified public accounting. From 1926 to 1930 he worked as a bookkeeper at Tiffany Manufacturing Company. When the company re-located, William chose not to go, and borrowed money from his father to start his own business, a bold move as by this time the Depression was deepening across America.⁵¹ William, despite his education as an accountant, felt unsuited for office work and wanted a profession where he could work outdoors, and deal with the public. He bought an Atlantic

⁵⁰ Ballinameen Parish baptism records, 1862-1876; Department of Interior, census records, 1900, various enumeration districts.

⁵¹ William P. McCormick, *Work Diary, 1915-1935*, collection P. Davis.

Richfield station, which later became an Esso franchise in the Ironbound section of Newark, and which he operated for the next half century. Though born in America, William P. was proud of his Irish heritage. In 1961, frustrated by the City of Newark's continued harassment over what it claimed were unpaid water bills at a property where there was no water service, he wrote a letter to the Director of Newark's Department of Finance which concluded:

Well, Sir, the reason my ancestors came and settled in the good old United States of America is because they did not like to live in a foreign land under threats and tyranny, and I intend to carry out their tradition by not living under the threat of some imbecilic head of a water department who is having meters read THAT DO NOT EXIST and who is going to shut off water valves that have been shut off for six years....Thank you.⁵²

That was the last he heard of the matter.

Thomas McCormack's son, William J., earned his law degree from Rutgers University in 1935 and entered private practice. He later taught law at Fordham University, and was president of the Orange Bar Association for five terms. He was a New Jersey assistant attorney general between 1934 and 1944 and later served twenty years as chief counsel for the State Department of Transportation. At the end of his career he returned to private practice until his death in 1984.

Michael, Catherine, and Bridget's children, although they did not attend college, also did well. Patrick, who died when his eldest son was only four, never saw his four children grow up, but his widow Delia took in laundry and managed to keep the family together. Their youngest son, William A., earned a degree in accounting at Pace University and worked as an accountant in Millburn NJ until he was nearly 90.⁵³

The McCormack's friend and neighbor, Peter Degnan, who may have initiated the relocation of so many of his Irish friends to New Jersey, raised a family that made out spectacularly well – a veritable American dream. Though Peter himself was illiterate and

⁵² William P. McCormick, letter to Mr. Schorn, Newark Department of Finance, 16 January 1961, Collection of P Davis.

⁵³ "William McCormack, 95," obituary in *Newark Evening News*, March 31, 1991.

remained a gardener well into his 70s, except for a stint as a machinist for Edison Industries around 1920, his children and grandchildren soon moved up into the middle class. Two of Peter's sons had especially distinguished careers. His 3rd son, Bernard, known all his life as Ben, was Mayor of West Orange for fourteen years and later served as Postmaster. Ben's younger brother James was a West Orange municipal judge for many years. Ben's son Daniel received a law degree from Seton Hall and became a partner in a prestigious law firm in Newark. In the 1960s he abruptly changed careers to become a Jesuit priest. Daniel taught at Harvard Law School and subsequently served for several years as Dean of Seton Hall University Law School. Before his retirement, he spent some years as President of St. Peter's College in Jersey City.

One Degnan descendent from the next generation epitomizes Irish success in America. James Degnan's son John, after earning a degree from Harvard Law School, had a clerkship with a New Jersey Supreme Court judge. He then became chief counsel to Governor Brendan Byrne and, in 1978 at the age of 33, the youngest Attorney General in New Jersey history. The deliciously ironic culmination of his career came some years later when he was named CEO of the Chubb Corporation, whose founder, Hendon Chubb, had employed John's grandfather, Peter Degnan, as a gardener on his Llewellyn Park estate.⁵⁴

That band of young Irish immigrants who reconstituted their close community some 2,500 miles from Slieveroe in West Orange fared very well indeed. They sailed from Queenstown with only what would fit in their steamer trunk. As they looked back at Cork Cathedral, the last sight of Ireland that most of them ever had, they began their transformation from Irish to American. Arriving in a new land they found jobs, married and raised their

⁵⁴ Information on the Degnans comes from Rush, *Erin to New Jersey*, 5-26, Quinn, *Irish in New Jersey*, 167-171 and from interview with John Degnan, March 21, 2011.

children. Undoubtedly, living once again among family, friends, and former neighbors, while maintaining ties to home, greatly eased their transition from the Old World to the New.

Sadly, the forces which drove and lured these immigrants and millions more Irish from the homeland more than a century ago are still at work today as Ireland is once again mired in economic crisis, "...abandoned housing projects rot, waist-high weeds sprouting from cracks in the sidewalks. The proportion of households without a working adult is the highest in the European Union, and thousands of Irish continue to leave the country in search of work."⁵⁵ If these new emigrants persevere, work hard, and are lucky, they, too, may succeed.

Dr. Thomas Callahan, Jr. is Professor of History at Rider University in Lawrenceville, NJ. Author of I'm Sending a Shamrock to Remind You of Home: Roscommon Families and the Irish Diaspora 1860-1950 (Dublin: Glasnevin, 2013), his research interests center on late-19th and early-20th century Ireland and Irish emigration to the United States. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and a member of the American Conference for Irish Studies and the Economic and Social History Society of Ireland. He has lectured on Irish emigration at the National University of Ireland – Galway and at Queen's University in Belfast as well as at academic conferences in the United States.

⁵⁵ Suzanne Daley, "From Ireland to Greece: The New Fiscal Reality," *New York Times*, 2 Jan. 2013, A4.