

NJS Presents**Teaching NJ History****In this Issue:*****Finding and Using Primary Sources to Teach about the Irish Experience in
New Jersey*****By Augustine J. Curley, O.S.B.****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v2i2.50>**

This article offers a number of ways to find original documents for the teaching of the history of the Irish in New Jersey, citing several documents as examples. Sources suggested include cemeteries, print and online collections of material, and archival repositories. It also suggests strategies for getting the most out of searches. A second section includes references to the relevant New Jersey Common Core Standards.

I. The Sources

Other participants in this program have spoken about various sources that are available for the study of the Irish experience in New Jersey.¹ What I am going to do is to talk about these, and other sources which may not have been mentioned by the other speakers, as material for teaching about the Irish experience in New Jersey to K-12 students. Since my experience is, for the most part, with high school students, I will trust that the suggestions I make will be useful, in modified form, to teachers of grammar school age students.

I am a firm believer in the idea that any study of local history, or ethnic history, must be put into the broader context of United States history, or world history. The significance, for

¹ Part I was originally presented as part of the symposium on “Understanding the Irish in New Jersey: Researching their History, Struggles, and Diverse Contributions” held at Drew University on November 6, 2009.

example, of the 1854 Know-Nothing attack on St. Mary's Church in Newark cannot really be understood without a knowledge of the Know-Nothing movement in American history. Yet it is also valuable to be able to discuss the Know-Nothings in American history in class, and then walk across the campus to the current Saint Mary's School building, built on the site of the old wooden church, and describe the Irish factory workers watching the Orangemen come up William Street, and the melee that followed (one that was quite different, one might add, from the one described by the *New York Times* of the next day, which spoke of the Irish as having barricaded themselves in the church, and firing out the windows at the "orderly group of marchers"). In fact, the only person in the church when the Orangemen broke in was the elderly housekeeper armed, as the inquest later determined, only with a broom.

This being said, let me offer some ideas about using primary sources concerning the Irish in New Jersey in a classroom setting.

We can start by asking, "When did the Irish first come, where specifically did they come from, and where did they settle?" Since written records of the early Irish are scarce, we have to see what we can use to begin to piece together this information. One place to look is the cemeteries. Among the graves in the cemetery at Ringwood Manor in Passaic County, for example, one finds a headstone for Mical Reynold. We learn from his stone that he was born in Ireland near Mullingar, and that he died in 1763 at the age of thirty. Asking who he is and why he is buried at Ringwood would lead students to a study of the history of Ringwood, which began as an iron smelting site in the 1740s. It attracted so many Irish immigrants that the area

behind the forge was called “Irishtown” by the locals, the area around Charlottenburg being designated “Germantown.”²

Another cemetery with some early headstones for Irish immigrants is the cemetery of the Dutch Reformed Church in Belleville, Essex County. What are the graves of Irishmen doing in a Dutch Reformed cemetery? The headstones themselves begin to tell us some of the story. The headstone of William Coventry, a native of Co. Donegal, Ireland, tells us that he died on April 20, 1814, “by the explosion of the Belleville Powder Mill.” 26-year-old William Birney also died on that day, leaving a wife and children. And although his headstone does not specifically say so, the obvious assumption is that he also died in the explosion of the powder mill. We are told specifically on the headstone of one Wilson, whose first name as been worn away, that he died in the twenty-first year of his life on April 20, 1814, “by the explosion of the Belville Powder Mill.” Moreover, we are told that he was born a native of the parish of Auhnithen, Co. Donegal, Ireland. Finally, we have the headstone of Andrew Norris, whose age is chipped away, but who also died on April 20, 1814, and in his case we are also told that his death was caused “by the explosion of the Belleville Powder Mill.” While most of his place of birth is chipped away, enough is left, the letters “Auhn,” that we can make the reasonable assumption that he, too, was born in Aunithen, Co. Donegal, Ireland. While the name Aunithen cannot be found in the standard resources on Irish placenames, perhaps it should be identified with Aghanunshin.

Thanks to the efforts of the good Sisters at New Brunswick, we have copies of the tombstone inscriptions from the old Catholic cemetery there, which was on the site of what is now Sacred Heart parish. From these inscriptions, we know that Elizabeth McLaughlin, who died on November 9, 1813, had been born in Co. Derry. We also know that members of the

² Dermot Quinn, *The Irish in New Jersey: Four Centuries of American Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 44.

parish came from Counties Armagh, Cavan, Derry, Donegal, Down, Dublin, Galway, Kildare, Kilkenny, Leitrim, Limerick, Louth, Meath, Monahan, Queens, Roscommon, Tipperary, Tyrone, Waterford, Westmeath, and Wicklow. Sometimes we are even told the parish or town, and in the case of Michael Scully, who died February 11, 1861 at the age of 61, we are told that he was a “native of the Barony of Tenneuinch [i.e. Tinnahinch], Parish of Rearymore, Townland of Cloonach, Queens County, Ireland.”

Another headstone could serve as the start of a discussion about the slow acceptance of the Irish. In the cemetery of St. John’s R.C. Church in Orange can be found the grave of Terence Murphy. The stone is an impressive one, with the inscription fairly well worn. But enough can be made out to see the importance of Civil War service for the acceptance of the Irish in New Jersey. Terence Murphy, an immigrant Irishman, died during the Civil War. His funeral was well-attended, and the citizens of Orange paid for an impressive headstone. The inscription speaks of Terence and his brothers who left their friends to fight for their adopted country, and notes that the citizens of Orange appreciated the service of “this gallant Irish American.”

Thanks to the Internet, we have access to a good number of documents that can be used to examine the Irish experience in New Jersey, from the voyage over to living conditions. I have used in an immigration class as an assignment a copy of the manifest for the ship that my great-great-grandfather came over on with his family. At first sight, students see it simply as a list of names, but if taught how to read and interpret the document carefully, they will find that it can speak to them about the experience of traveling across the Atlantic.

On the fifth and sixth pages of the manifest for the AZ out of Liverpool that arrived in New York on January 20, 1851, one finds the Thomas Connolly family. Thomas, a 60-year-old butcher, and his wife Mary, are travelling with their six children, who range in age from infancy

to 16 years. Looking at the rest of the manifest, we can get some idea of what the voyage was like. On the last page, we can find the total number of people on the voyage, 179. But the number was reduced by six, to account for the six people who died on the voyage. From notations on the manifest, we know exactly who these were: two men in their fifties, a 23-year-old member of the crew, a twenty-year-old female, an infant traveling with its mother, and a seven-year-old girl who was traveling with her eight-year-old sister to rejoin their father.

Connolly eventually settled in Orange. In 1857, he applied for a liquor license and opened the “Shamrock Hall Hotel,” the name of which we can find by using the city directories of the time. This was presumably on the land he bought on November 3, 1856, as we see from the Essex County deeds [the originals are available at the Essex County Courthouse; they were microfilmed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS or Mormons) and are available at the State Archives and through the Family History Center network].

I think one of the mottoes of this symposium could be “History and Genealogy: Perfect Together” because in many ways it is only through looking at the history of individual Irish and Irish-American families that we can get a good sense of the Irish experience in New Jersey.

Belleville is a good source for looking at and teaching the Irish experience in New Jersey. As we have seen, the Irish were in Belleville relatively early. Besides those Irish who perished in the explosion of the powder mill, a look at the Donnelly family of Belleville offers a glimpse into the Irish experience. The first record we have of Peter Donnelly is the record of his marriage to Eliza (Elizabeth) Cole at the Dutch Reformed Church at Second River (Belleville) in 1826. We know that Peter was buried in St. Peter’s R. C. Cemetery, and that he remained a Catholic all his life. The religious denomination of his wife has not yet been determined, but there are Coles who are related to her in the registers of St. John’s R. C. Church, Newark. She was born in New

Jersey, which would be unusual if she were born a Catholic, and she had a brother or a cousin named Wesley, which might indicate that the Coles were originally Methodist. This is interesting, given what would happen to their son Hugh. Although baptized Catholic, Hugh would eventually marry a Methodist woman and convert, and forever after be known by the Catholic part of the family as “Black Hughie.” The great-great-grandson of Peter Donnelly’s brother Hugh is a retired Methodist minister; his mother’s name is Ann Dow, certainly a descendant of the founders of the Methodist Church in Belleville, although I do not know right now whether she is a convert or possibly the daughter or granddaughter of converts. The Irish experience in Belleville certainly deserves an article, if not a book, and a study of that experience would have to include a study of the interaction between the Catholic, Dutch Reformed, and Methodist populations.

Records of religious denominations, besides the obvious sacramental registers, many of which have been published or microfilmed by the LDS, offer insight into the status of the Irish in New Jersey. Let me take one example from the records of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, whose archives are housed in the William Noé Field Special Collections division of Walsh Library of Seton Hall University. Every year, the pastor of each parish had to submit a written report. The reports, called “Notitiae,” are available at the archives. The pastor responded to standard questions. One of the questions is: “How many over twelve have not made first communion?” In his 1855 report, the pastor of St. Peter’s Church, Belleville, answered: “I have so far found many adults from Mayo & Roscommon in Ireland in this mission who have not made first communion.” “Why?” we could ask. Is this situation the result of conditions that prevailed during the Famine? Or is it rather an indication of the type of pre-Famine Irish Catholicism that Jay Dolan describes as “a religion grounded in the Celtic past where devotions

at holy wells and pilgrimages to sacred sites were how they expressed their Catholic faith. Regular attendance at Mass and participation in the sacraments was not yet an Irish tradition.”³

The simple census statistics also present an interesting question to examine. In 1856, the congregation was made up of about 400 men, 400 women, and 200 children. In 1857, there are about 500 men, about 500 women, and about 300 children. By 1863, there are 250 men, 300 women, and 250 children. By 1865, there are only 200 men, but the number of women has risen to 400, and the number of children has dropped to 200. A teacher might ask a student to consider the possibilities that could account for such a change. In 1868, the number of men rises to 300, but the number of women rises to 500, and the number of children to 450. By 1869, the men still number 300, but the women now number 535, and the children 475. Again, assuming the figures are accurate, a student could be challenged to come up with likely explanations of the fluctuation.

Also among religious records are diaries of churchmen. Some have been published, some are only in manuscript form. The diary of James Roosevelt Bayley, the first bishop of Newark, was edited and annotated by Edwin Vose Sullivan and is currently being prepared for publication by the New Jersey Catholic Historical Commission. Bayley in a number of places writes about the Irish. Under the entry of September 6, 1854, he speaks of the attack on St. Mary’s Church, Newark, in which one Irishman was killed and another mortally wounded. Of the one who was mortally wounded, Bayley later adds a note that one of the Irishmen, McDermott, “who was also wounded died afterwards— tho he had four or five stabs in his back & a piece of lead in his vertebrae, the Coroner’s Jury said he died of *Cholera*.” Under the date of February 16, 1867, he makes note of the riot between Irish factions who were digging the railroad tunnel through a hill

³ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 108.

in Jersey City: “The Papers this Evng. contain an account of a terrible Riot between the Irish Factions engaged in making the Tunnell [sic] thro’ Bergan Hill: P.S. turned out to have been greatly exaggerated.” Bayley will usually mention the name of the newspaper he is referring to, and the date of publication, and Sullivan offers very full explanatory notes. His note on this entry helps us understand something about the attitude of the press towards the Irish:

The *Newark Daily Advertiser* of Monday evening, February 16, carried a full column of description of the riot between “far-downers and Corkonians” among the Irish working on the tunnel. Munstermen trespassed on the grounds of the “shanties” of the Connaught men: 1200 men were employed, 400 to 500 (so stated the newspaper) engaged in the fight. As was typical of newspapers in the Know-Nothing days, the account is replete with items about Saturday’s pay, whiskey flowing, and a fight that lasted from 2 p.m. to 9 p.m. Casualties, said Monday’s paper, were two children killed, one man dead and another, James Horrigan, expected to die.

Sullivan continues: “Bayley’s note about exaggeration is borne out by Tuesday and Wednesday (February 17 and 18) issues of the *Advertiser*: only 200 fought, no one was killed, 47 were arrested.”

One of the other key sources for documents from New Jersey history is the many volumes of the *New Jersey Archives*, now fully available and searchable on Google books. Among the documents printed are notices of runaway servants, including mention of Irish servants, such as this one from *The Pennsylvania Journal* of August 13, 1767:

Run-away, on the 11th day of September last, from the subscriber at Princeton, New-Jersey, an Irish servant girl named Mary Croane, about 26 years of age, a middle sized woman, was supposed to be secreted by Robert Nemins at Princeton, and by him conveyed to his son William Nemins living at Brandywine Rocks near Christeen Ferry, and there it's said passed for said William's servant, was challenged by James Saunders the forepart of April last, at the house of Henry Bracken, about five miles from New-Port in New Castle County, but he, the said Saunders, being detained by said Bracken and his sons till said Mary made her escape. Whoever takes up said servant and secures her in any of his Majesty's goals, so that her master may have her again, shall have THIRTY SHILLINGS reward and all reasonable charges paid by Daniel Balis at the Head of Elk, or WILLIAM MOUNTEER.

The Essex County Clerk's Marriage Records published in Volume 22 of the 1st Series includes names such as Connolly, Cunningham, Macloglan, and Magee, all married between 1799 and 1802.

The New Jersey Digital Highway is a relatively recent source for documents. The idea is that institutions scan in appropriate documents to be shared on the web as part of this project. Among the items that come up as a result of a search for the term "Irish" is a letter from Mary Garvey, Irish immigrant, to her mother, October 24, 1850. Garvey was the servant of Rescarrick Moore Smith, a Hightstown businessman and New Jersey State Treasurer, and speaks in this four-page letter of her life in New Jersey, and encourages her Uncle, if he is not making money, to come to America where he can become rich.

Web sites keep springing up that offer primary material, either transcribed or as images, useful for the study of the Irish. PatersonIrish.org, for example, seeks to document the Irish presence in Paterson, and, while a bit meager right now in terms of material, promises to be a major source of material in the future. The date of creation is not available in the properties, but we can only hope that it is not one of the many Internet projects that get started with a great deal of enthusiasm, but never get beyond a few pages.

The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, which can be searched online at <http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/oclcsearch.html>, is a finding aid for manuscript collections.⁴ A search using the terms "New Jersey" and "Irish" turns up some interesting collections of relevant material. One collection, in the Camden County Historical Society, has been given the title, "Scenes of my childhood collection, 1848?-1934?" and the description shows that it would be a fruitful source for primary material on the Irish experience in New Jersey:

⁴ The older print catalog is available in major libraries, and should also be searched, since, as I have found, not all collections that were entered in the print catalog necessarily made it into the on-line edition.

Original copy of the memoirs of Rachel D. Parkes Day (ca. 1848-1934), compiled by her daughters, Theresa and Cora S. Day, and copy of the edited version by Gail Greenburg, including information about Rachel Day's father who arrived in the U.S. from Ireland in 1797, the Jackson Glass Works (founded by Thomas Richards near Atco, N.J., in 1827), and life in Loudon, the company village; two store account books of John Parks, from the Waterford Glass Works (1868, 1871); photograph (ca. 1905) of a street in Jackson Glass Works; and letter from Isabelle Foster Sakewicz, detailing memories of her great-aunt Rachel Day.

A search using the terms "Newark" and "Irish" brings up the Burns Family collection at the New Jersey Historical Society, described as "Chiefly household financial accounts kept by Thomas H. Burns, Irish-American iron founder, and his son, Thomas H. Burns, Jr., in Newark, N.J.," and dating between 1856 and 1907.

Changing "Newark" to "Elizabeth" brings up the records of the "Young Men's Father Matthew Total Abstinence and Benevolent Society" of Elizabeth, including minutes, 1898-1910; membership list, 1886-1907; accounts, 1898-1903; lists of officers, committees, and sick members, 1898-1901; and list of resignations, 1898-1903. This is held by Rutgers University's Alexander Library special collections department.

Searching with the terms "Camden" and "Irish" brings up an oral history interview with Josephine Agnes McGovern Blake recorded in 1978, relating to the Irish-American contribution to the growth of Camden City and County. This interview is in the collections of the Camden County Historical Society.

Some published works can also be sources for primary material. Joseph Flynn's *The Catholic Church in New Jersey* (Morristown, 1904) contains a fairly long piece of what we would today call oral history. He relates the story he was told by a Mrs. Littell when in her nineties, about her emigration from a little town in County Cavan to America in the year 1816, settling originally in Caldwell, where, she notes, there were no Catholics, and moving after a few months to Macopin, where, they had heard, there was "quite a gathering of Catholics." Her story

goes on for four pages, and includes details about names, dates, and incidents, that could be followed up on. Dermot Quinn's *The Irish in New Jersey* also includes photographs of documents that could be used in a classroom.⁵

In conclusion, let me say that my intention was to give you an idea of the types of records that are available, and an idea of how to locate them. But I would certainly recommend that you get as local as possible, and check the vertical files at your local library or historical society. Take a walk through the local cemeteries. I would also recommend the *Save Our History* web site, a program sponsored by The History Channel to encourage young people to become interested in the preservation of our historical heritage. It offers suggestions—and grants—for projects to get students involved in local history, and reports from successful grant applicants about their projects.

II. New Jersey Common Core

The material spoken of here is useful for a number of the New Jersey Common Core standards for social studies. While many of the standards are appropriate, the following seem most relevant:

6.4. United States and New Jersey History

6.4.4 A. Family and Community Life

3. Discuss the reasons why various groups, voluntarily and involuntarily, immigrated to America and New Jersey and describe the problems they encountered.

Over the years, the Irish came for various reasons. Some came for jobs, others came to escape discrimination in Ireland. The reasons for coming differed according to the year, and

⁵ Another source of primary material for early Irish immigrants is Kerby A. Miller, et al., *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

according to the area of Ireland from which they came, or the area of New Jersey to which they came. The largest group of emigrants came as a result of the famine of 1845-1852.

5. Explain that Americans have come from different parts of the world and have a common American heritage, in addition to the heritage of the countries of origin.

While the Irish adapted to American life and customs, they kept close ties to their homeland and traditions.

6.4.4 B. State and Nation

6. Discuss the experiences of immigrants who came to the United States and New Jersey, including reasons for immigrating, experiences at Ellis Island, and working and living conditions in America.

6.4.8 G. Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877)

2. Analyze different points of view in regard to New Jersey's role in the Civil War . . .

The Irish had various reasons for fighting in the Civil War. Some wanted to prove their allegiance to their new country. Others sought military experience that would be useful in the fight against England. For example, Terence Murphy's brother Owen would, shortly after the Civil War, be instrumental in the founding of a branch of the Fenian Brotherhood.⁶

Augustine J. Curley is a monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Newark, serving the community as Prior and Archivist. He also teaches in the monastery school, St. Benedict's Prep. He has written and spoken about the Irish in New Jersey. His current projects include a history

⁶ For more information about the differing Irish responses to the Civil War see my "The Irish in the Church of Newark" in Marta Deyrup and Maura Grace Harrington, eds., *The Irish-American Experience in New Jersey and Metropolitan New York: Cultural Identity, Hybridity, and Commemoration* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2013), 14-16.

of the Irish community in Belleville, and a study of Irish-born Edith O’Gorman (1842 - 1919), the “escaped nun” who began (and ended) her life as a religious Sister in New Jersey.