

Historical Commentary on the Irish in Lowell – Excerpts from Primary Sources and Reminiscences

“In the suburbs of Lowell, within a few rods of the canals, is a settlement, called by some, New Dublin, which occupies rather more than an acre of ground. It contains a population of not far from 500 Irish, who dwell in about 100 cabins, from 7 to 10 feet in height, built of slabs and rough boards; a fire-place made of stone, in one end, topped out with two or three flour barrels or lime casks. In a central situation, is the school house, build in the same style of the dwelling-houses, turfed up to the eaves with a window in one end, and small holes in two sides for the admission of air and light. In this room are collected together perhaps 150 children.”

- *Journal*, Portsmouth, NH, 1831

“The Irish are here divided into parties of North South and Middle according to the part of Ireland they came from. It is a circumstance which gives them trouble.”

- Rev. Theodore Edson, diary, Lowell, April 1839.

“But of all classes of foreigners, the Irish are by far the most numerous. They constitute a quiet and industrious portion of the population [of Lowell], and are consequently respected by their Yankee neighbors.”

- Whittier, John G. “The Brotherhood of Man.” *The North Star*. Rochester, New York. September 7, 1849.

“At the very commencement of operations here by the manufacturing companies, a large number of the Irish were employed to do the heavy out-door work. The wages paid for this class of labor were higher than they had been accustomed to receive elsewhere, and this, together with the fact that they could here get *steady employment*, induced many to flock here from other parts of the State, and a large number of them came directly here as soon as they landed on our shores, having been invited and encouraged so to do by their relatives and friends who had been here long enough to appreciate the opening here presented for labor.”

- *Lowell Courier*, Dec 17, 1859

“A large populations was here gathered [in the Acre], destitute of nearly every means of moral or intellectual improvement, so generally enjoyed in New England. It was not to be expected that a community thus situated and neglected so near the center of a populous town, could be viewed with indifferent; on the contrary, it would be watched with great anxiety and apprehension.”

- *Lowell Courier*, Dec 17, 1859

“Some of the first settlers [Irish] shared their shanties with their swine; ere long a great collection of piggeries was formed behind the shanties, and a peremptory standing was issued, ‘Pigs to the rear.’”

- Reminiscence of Charles Cowley, *The Foreign Colonies of Lowell*, Old Residents Historical Association, 1881.

“The English were of the artisan class, but the Irish came as ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water.’ The first Irishwomen to work in the Lowell mills were usually scrubbers and waster-pickers. They were always good natured, and when excited used their own language... They

were not intemperate, nor ‘bitterly poor.’ They earned good wages, and they and their children, especially their children, very soon adapted themselves to their changed conditions of life, and became as ‘good as anybody.’ ...

The fourth class [Irish – the agents were the first class, overseers the second, and mill operatives the third], lords of the spade and the shovel, by whose constant labor and the building of the great factories was made possible, and whose children soon became valuable operatives, lived at first on what was called the ‘acre,’ a locality near the present site of the North Grammar school house. Here clustered around a small stone Catholic Church, were hundreds of little shanties, in which they dwelt with their wives and numerous children. Among them were sometimes found disorder and riots, for they had brought with them from the ‘ould counthrey’ their feuds and quarrels, and the ‘Bloody fordowners’ and the ‘Corkians’ were torn by intestinal strife. They boys of both these factions agreed in fighting the ‘damned Yankee boys,’ who represented to them both sides of the feud on occasion: and I have seen many a pitch battle fought all the way from the Tremont corporation to the North Grammar schoolhouse, before we girls could pursue our way in peace.”

- Harriet H. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 1898.

“... an article in the *Lowell Journal* (August 23, 1832) referring to a “recent meeting” on the subject of what to do about the Irish population. The attendees are not known, but their common viewpoint is discernible. The Irish, filthy, ignorant, and full of vices though they may have been, still had all the rights of every other citizen, and a remedy was to be sought in benevolence (schools, aid societies, etc.), not the likely illegal procedure of procuring land and forcing the “obnoxious Irish” to remove to it.”

- Preble, Doug. *Early Irish in Lowell*. Center for Lowell History - UML Library website, October 28, 1999.