

## **History behind the 1830 School Board Decision**

Feelings of nativism amongst the local Yankees and resulting discrimination against the Irish created tension in the community from the time of the arrival of the first group of Irish immigrant laborers in 1822. Treated as migrant workers by the locals, the Irish squatted in “miserable hovels” on a section of land near the mill district. Initially the group was made up primarily of men who labored as canal diggers, but they were soon followed by more Irish – unskilled men, families, and small-business owners. The Yankees tried to maintain a “leave them alone” policy, which resulted in haphazard growth of the Irish neighborhood and the forging of an immigrant community that looked inward for support and problem solving. Since most Irish in Lowell held low-paying jobs and faced employment discrimination, living conditions in the Irish neighborhood were substandard. Yankee shopkeepers feared unemployed teenagers, and young children drifted about the city causing trouble.

By 1830, the town faced a dilemma of whether or not to build a school in the Irish neighborhood, as many newly-immigrated Irish families were not sending their children to the town’s schools outside of the Acre. A small private school run by the priest of St. Patrick’s Church, essentially a rented room, existed in the Acre, and parents made weekly contributions that paid the teacher’s salary. All reports note that it was poorly attended. Consequently, “from poverty and indifference of the parents,” the school was discontinued.<sup>i</sup> Protestant and Catholic community leaders decided to work together to promote the cause of a publicly funded school for Irish children. That year the town’s school committee voted to “establish a school district for the Irish children” in the Acre, appropriating \$50 for its operation. The following year they voted again that the “school district would receive fifty dollars ... [and] that such Irish families not living in the above limits (the Acre) who in the opinion of the superintending school committee are conveniently situated to send [their children] to the school [should] be considered as belonging to that district.” This vote essentially segregated the Irish and Yankee students to their own school districts.

Lowell school committee member recalled his visit to the Acre school in 1830 writing, “...we found the schoolmaster at home in one of those [Irish] camps dispensing knowledge as well as he could. He taught them reading and spelling with the prayers of the Catholic Church.”<sup>ii</sup> This however wasn’t the norm. In the early years of the school, many Irish parents were concerned that Protestant teachers were teaching their children from Protestant books, so they refused to send their children to school. In 1836, the town reached an agreement with St. Patrick’s Church priest Reverend Conolly. The town would continue to financially support the school, and Rev. Conolly would get to approve the books, curriculum, and teachers, to be sure all were of the Catholic faith. Attendance began to climb at what was essentially a town-sponsored Catholic school.

“These schools have now been in operation more than half a year, and your Committee have the satisfaction of believing them to have been eminently successful, and that they are doing much good to this hitherto neglected portion of the community. Four hundred and sixty-nine children have during the year been brought under the influence of these public schools. The average number attached to these schools has been two hundred and eighty-two. Of which number the average daily attendance has been two hundred and eight, showing punctuality fully equal to that of our other schools.”<sup>iii</sup>

As leaders in a young, fast-growing community, Lowell's founders were concerned with developing and sustaining what they hoped would be a model factory town. As the town grew and the population changed in ways the leaders had not anticipated, and they needed to find ways to negotiate a social contract between the Yankee locals and the new community of Irish workers. The poor conditions of the church-supported school for Irish children did not equal the educational opportunities for Yankee children in more established neighborhoods. By establishing a public school for the Irish, Protestant leaders argued, "Lowell would profit in that the schools would serve as a bulwark of morality and stability and foster a sense of community. The tension that existed within the school committee and board of selectmen appears to have been over the expense of these schools. But more broadly, nativist concerns over a rising Irish-Catholic population and unbridgeable ethno-cultural religious differences did lead to a strong anti-Irish Catholic movement in Lowell and elsewhere at this time."<sup>iv</sup>

### **TIHC's Town Meeting Activity**

The Town Meeting activity that students participate in during the Yankees and Immigrants program was extrapolated from this historical event. Town leaders never hosted a "town meeting" to discuss the issue of providing public funds for a school for Irish children. A sub-committee town's school committee made the recommendation to fund the school, and the school committee approved the motion.

Based on primary sources, TIHC staff created composite and fictional characters to represent the various points of view that Irish and Yankee residents may have had on the issue. The four "town fathers" that lead off the town meeting discussion were real people, but not all served on the school board.

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<sup>i</sup> Bruck, David Isaac. *The Schools of Lowell, 1824-1861: A Case Study in the origins of Modern Public Education in America*. Bachelors of Arts thesis, Harvard College, April 1, 1971.

<sup>ii</sup> John Knowles recollections, *Lowell Courier*, 1871.

<sup>iii</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Lowell School Committee Report, March 1836.

<sup>iv</sup> Gray Fitzsimons, personal communication to Kristin Gallas, February 7, 2017.