

From Gaels to Mainers: A New
Sense of Identity

By Paula Sheehan-Kopp 2014

Searching for a place in Family and Geography:

On a breezy April day in 2014 a father and daughter arrived at the library at the Maine Irish Heritage center in Portland, ME and inquired if the DNA program was still active. They were interested in having their DNA tested immediately. They had learnt of the program while attending a lecture the previous month on the sinking of the RMS Bohemian and the loss of 42 Irish immigrants off Cape Elizabeth in 1864. Upon confirmation that the testing was available they took their tests right there in the former sacristy of St. Dominic's church and are now eagerly anticipating the results. The family already knew they were of Irish heritage but did not have a detailed family history, the Portland, ME connection being the one solid lead they had. Maine often plays second fiddle to Boston, but in this case the duo had taken a bus from Boston to the Maine Irish Heritage Center, knowing they would find expert help there.

I witnessed the above process as part of my ongoing research into the Maine Irish community. When I first examined the Maine Irish community I had several questions about how Maine Irish-Americans' sense of place and identity are influenced by their heritage: How do Maine residents of Irish-American descent identify themselves today as Mainers? Which parts of their heritage do they feel are important to recreate, preserve and pass onto a new generation? In what sense is their culture and Maine identity spatially mediated? Why is there so little Irish language literature extant in urban Maine, even though other urban areas have had Irish language newspapers and literary reviews? Does the fact that the Irish communities were originally unwelcome newcomers have a bearing on their ongoing ethnic and cultural persistence? These newcomers were forced to the outskirts of Maine space, physically and culturally, during the nineteenth century; it could be argued that this process cemented their identity, obliging them to adapt and bond as communities in order to thrive and become accepted as long term members of the Pine Tree State. This experience has also left the Irish in Maine with an affinity for other immigrant groups.

At the Maine Irish Heritage Center, in the former St. Dominic's church at the corner of State and Gray Streets, many of my questions were answered in more detailed, vibrant and colorful ways than I thought possible. The church was at the center of the historically Irish quarter of Portland and formed the nucleus of Irish Catholic community life for 170 years. Now in its new incarnation as a cultural center it continues to act as a force in the community and a venue for Maine Irish culture, dance, literature, history, community and genealogical research. Through archival research, oral history interviews with members of this community and attendance at cultural events and research seminars held at the center I have gained insights into how this Maine community has grown along with St. Dominic's church and how, paradoxically, the closing of the church in 1997 paved the way for a new Irish center that is embodied in St. Dominic's and that reflects the changes that had already taken place in the community when the building reopened as the Maine Irish Heritage

Center in 2003. This center enables the Irish community to welcome all Mainers to learn about Maine Irish culture and provides a meeting place and home for many Irish-American organizations.

For the Portland Irish community a sense of identity and heritage is very much spatially mediated. They are proud of their history in the Munjoy Hill and Gorham's Corner area of Portland, with a keen awareness of their ancestors' part in building Portland's infrastructure and contribution to Portland's industrial history. Many of the people I spoke to at the Maine Irish Heritage Center spoke in great detail of the geography of the Irish neighborhoods, the lore of the families that grew up there and the impact that the destruction of buildings and neighborhoods on the Portland waterfront has had on the community. This building embodies an Irish-American culture that has roots throughout the state, but whose members congregate in Portland. The Irish in Portland Maine are a prime example of an Irish community in Maine sustained by chain migration. They represent how Irish culture was historically embedded in Portland space and how organization of space and social relations can be replicated by chain migration. Customs can be embedded in the home land and the new world that over time become part of the immigrants' sense of place in their new home.

The Maine Irish Heritage Center itself is much more than a host for archives: it is the nexus and meeting place for many Irish American groups in Portland and indeed throughout the state. It is the home of the Irish American club of Maine (41 years old), the American Irish Repertory Ensemble (AIRE) and the Claddagh Mhor Pipe Band. It also hosts Irish-American gatherings, weddings, after school clubs and Irish dancing classes. Irish language lessons are also held at the center, the significance of which will be discussed below. Affiliated organizations include the Ancient Order of Hibernians, in Portland since 1876, the Portland Hurling club, and the Maine Police Emerald Society. The Center's inclusive mission statement demonstrates how the Irish community in Portland has evolved:

Our mission is to protect, preserve and restore the historic landmark that was formerly St. Dominic's Church, a hub of early Irish Community in Maine; provide a center for Maine's diverse communities to share their cultural experience through education, programs and community events; and house Maine's Irish Genealogical Center, Museum, Archives and Library, preserving the story of Irish history in Maine.¹

The fact that the mission statement states the center's purpose to provide a space for diverse Maine cultures and communities to come together, and that this purpose precedes its goal of preserving Irish archives speaks volumes for how the community has evolved and how it sees itself as relating to other Maine communities. The Maine Irish Heritage center is a meeting place for Irish people of different religions, backgrounds and perspectives. It illustrates the regeneration of Irish-American culture in Maine.

In Maine history the Irish formed the first large group of immigrants to come after English colonizers and challenge the cultural status quo after American and state independence. Although some early Irish settlers were prominent, they were few and far between. It was from the 1820s-30s on that a significant Irish Catholic community began to grow in Portland. Priests including Father (later Bishop) Cheverus were sent from Boston and would visit Portland Catholics on their way to Newcastle and Damariscotta Mills, where St. Patrick's church was already established as the Kavanagh and Cottrill families, prominent timber merchants formed the center of an early Catholic community there.

From the 1830s on Maine faced an influx of Irish immigrants, a significant proportion of whom settled in Portland. They travelled from the Kennebec and St. John migration routes, having first arrived in Canada, or travelled north from Boston. By the 1850s John A. Poor and like-minded industrialists had succeeded in their

¹ <http://www.maineirish.com/who-we-are/mission/>

efforts to make Portland an international shipping destination with direct connections from Liverpool England, to Portland and by rail to Montreal and Boston. Ships leaving England would stop in Cork where many Irish immigrants embarked. In this manner Portland became a direct destination for immigrants. Many would continue on to Boston, but this direct transport link, together with the Irish community already in Portland increased the numbers who stayed in Portland. The timing of these coinciding developments was key to the development of an Irish ethnic identity in Maine and to the reaction of Maine's social and political elite to these newcomers. By the middle of the nineteenth century Maine had a booming logging and shipping industry, with growing cities and many burgeoning mill towns. I would like to examine how this influx of immigrants affected Maine's sense of place, then and now. Throughout the nineteenth century Mainers reinvented themselves as part of a national reform movement, and Neal Dow's Maine law prohibited alcohol, in a direct attempt to stem what was seen as a dangerous culture of drink and violence among the Irish. Immigrants were limited to housing in working class areas of the cities near the mills and factories where they worked. The Maine Yankee tradition was solidified and benevolent societies formed to protect the morals and traditions of long term Mainers who were coping with the onslaught of great social, demographic and technological change.

In the 1830s Boston had finally sent a priest, Father French, a Galway native, to minister to the Portland flock and St. Dominic's was dedicated. At this time groups were formed such as St. Patrick's Society and church societies. It was in the 1850s that many Irish reform, mutual, benevolent and political societies were formed by the growing number of immigrants that had fled the famine, together with earlier immigrants who were already established and thus had energy for community activities beyond mere survival. These societies performed three functions: In promoting temperance, community morals and self-improvement societies, the Catholic Irish found a way of assimilating into Yankee society by emphasizing hard work and self-control, character attributes that had come to be associated with the Yankees. Secondly, such groups protected the Irish from a larger hostile society and provided a mechanism for providing aid to those who had fallen on hard times. Finally many Irish-American organizations in Portland supported efforts to help the Irish materially and politically in a transatlantic context. Whether it was the repeal movement (to repeal the 1801 Act of Union of Great Britain and Ireland) and famine relief efforts in the 1850s and 1880s or support of the Land League, which had Irish and American branches agitating for land reform and some basic rights for tenants of England landlords in Ireland throughout the 1880s, Portland branches existed to further the Irish cause. Paradoxically this did not prevent the Irish from seeing themselves as Americans or becoming citizens. Ireland was still part of the British Empire and Irish immigrants saw the US as a model of freedom and self-determination for other countries. In pledging allegiance to the US the Irish saw themselves as being loyal citizens of their new country while encouraging their friends and family in Ireland to continue to campaign for Irish independence.

Language and Identity:

The Irish were followed closely afterwards by French immigrants, the bulk of whom came to Maine between 1880 and 1930. One aspect of the Irish cultural effort in Maine that has received scant attention is the Irish language. The Irish in Maine were the largest group of urban Irish speakers proportionally speaking in any US city.² They competed with the Franco-Canadians for jobs and control of Catholic Church organizations in Maine. While these groups have often been compared in terms of competition for labor, Catholic culture and their status as new immigrant groups, a comparison of the two in terms of language status has been neglected.

² Kenneth E Nilsen. "The Language that the Strangers Do Not Know": The Galway Gaeltacht in Portland, Maine in the Twentieth Century." in Michael C. Connolly. ed. *They Change their Sky: The Irish in Maine*. (Orono, Maine: The University of Maine Press, 2004):297-298.

Language was paramount to how the French Canadians carved out a sense of place within Maine, creating a network of French language schools and 150 national parishes in a constellation known as *Petits Canadas*. French language newspapers thrived into the 1930s, even into the mid-century in some parts of Maine. In contrast Irish people arriving in Portland pretended they had no language of their own, if they had a few words of English from their travels to the city in Ireland they stuck to those until they gained fluency and they did not promote Irish language education. Even those who continued to speak Irish at home hid it to such an extent that it was indeed a hidden language; it is only in the last decade that any significant study has been published on the Irish speaking community in Portland, Maine. In the mid-nineteenth century the Brackett Street and Clark Street area housed Cork settlers, and other arrivals from the Munster region would have included Kerry and other Munster counties where Irish was spoken.³ Munjoy Hill and Gorham's Corner were home to many Irish speakers from the Connemara, Cois Fharraige and Corr na Móna area of the *Gaeltacht* (Irish Speaking Area) in Co. Galway.⁴ From 1880-1920 Galway immigrants would dominate the immigrant stream from Ireland and form the majority of the Longshoremens in Portland.

Peg Harmon remembers Irish language prayers such as the Our Father being recited at home among her Irish-American family, but other than that the language was not transmitted to the children.⁵ Many parents would speak Irish among themselves but spoke English with their children in order that they would integrate better into American society. Matthew Jude Barker recounts how his great-great grandfather insisted English be spoken at home in Galway, prior to immigration, and this was in a Gaeltacht area.⁶ He knew well that the situation in Ireland might force his children to immigrate and wanted them to have survival skills. His son (Matthew's great-grandfather) did indeed immigrate to Portland in 1910. Matthew notes that in the 1920s, forty years after the surge of immigration from the Gaeltacht to the Portland area, some immigrants did allow their children to speak Irish. The Irish language was never a public form of identity or self-expression among the Portland Irish, however, and it is only in recent years that the community has reclaimed their pride in the language.

One reason that the Irish immigrants' attitude to language was so markedly different to the Franco-Canadian immigrants' fierce and demonstrative pride in their own language is linked to their respective experiences prior to immigration. In Ireland punitive laws throughout the centuries of British rule had marginalized the use of Irish for business and legal purposes. Although by the turn of the twentieth century the punishments for speaking and teaching Irish had been relaxed the laws had been effective in relegating Irish to an oral language, and the idea that "The Irish won't help you sell the cow" was more than a saying. In contrast, following the conquest of Quebec in 1759, and the Quebec Act of 1774 the French were allowed to continue to use their language and follow their customs. Different ways of governing in various parts of the British Empire created different survival strategies among immigrants to the US from that empire. In Quebec there was tension between Irish immigrants and Québécois, but whenever the government tried to impinge on the language rights of the French or the rights of Irish and French citizens to a Catholic education the two groups would join together politically to protect their rights.⁷ In New England the two groups interacted in a different way, competing for dominance within the hierarchies of the Catholic Church. Both groups fought for Catholic education, the French maintaining a bilingual system well into the 1950s.

³ James Mundy. *Hard Times, Hard Men: Maine and the Irish, 1830-1860*. (Scarborough, Maine: Harp Publications, 1990): 69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 297

⁵ Interview with Peg Harmon at the Maine Irish Heritage Center, April 25th, 2014.

⁶ Interview with Matthew Jude Barker at the Maine Irish Heritage Center, April 22nd 2014.

⁷ Robert J. Grace. "Irish Immigration and Settlement in a Catholic City: Quebec, 1842-61." *The Canadian Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (June 2003): 218.

In the 1980s and 1990s Kenneth Nilsen, Professor of Celtic Studies at Saint Francis University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia and Michael C. Connolly, Professor of History at St Joseph's College in Standish, Maine and lifelong resident of Munjoy Hill, interviewed some of the Irish speakers from Galway who had arrived in Portland many years before. Their descriptions of community life in Portland are invaluable as an insight into how the Irish adapted to life in Maine. As the Irish language was not an official part of church, school or work life, if it was not for these recordings the history of the Irish language speakers in Portland, Maine would have passed into oblivion. The fact that this Portland Gaeltacht was unheard of in the literature is also remarkable given that the Irish speakers, of Boston, New York, Springfield, MA and Yonkers, NY had all been studied.⁸ It is a testament to how much the Irish in Portland wished to assimilate that their native language went almost unnoticed in their new community. Mary Kilmartin was able to give detailed genealogical information to her interviewers as well as reciting Irish poetry and songs. Jim Brown talked about how the Irish domestic workers worked every day except Sunday and Thursday afternoons. On Thursdays the young women would visit family or walk on the Eastern or Western Promenade, where they could meet young Irishmen. *Óró mhíle grá* is a folk song that can be adapted depending on location and milieu. In Portland the Irish would sing "Óró Mhíle Grá siar is aniar Congress Street and back the Promenade."⁹

Deb Sullivan Gellerson recalls a family story regarding the use of Irish in public. Her great grandfather Sullivan had a job managing the workers at John Bundy Brown's sugar factory in Portland. The same man would put sugar cubes in his workers lunch boxes in order that their children would have a sweet: "You know the Irishmen they never spoke a bit of Irish brogue or Gaelic because they wanted to appear as American as possible and all of a sudden all, you know all heck broke loose and there was Gaelic spoken everywhere because you know my great-grandfather was speaking Gaelic telling them to quick go to your lunchboxes and take out your sugar cubes because we're getting an inspection and you don't want to lose your jobs."¹⁰ This is a wonderful story, demonstrating that the language taboo was only broken under extreme circumstances, such as when the men's livelihoods were at stake. It also shows the necessity for the manager to speak in Irish in order that all of his men would understand quickly what was going on. Of course in this instance it probably played a dual role, in that the inspector would not understand the warning if he appeared as it was being delivered. According to the longshoremen who spoke with Michael Connolly Irish was frequently spoken among groups of longshoremen who were Irish born but if they were working a shift alongside second generation Irish-Americans they would defer to them and speak in English. Even though many of the second generation could understand Irish, as a group, they wanted to conform. Another instance of Irish being spoken in a work context was among the longshoremen when a load was about to be dropped and endanger someone. Then a warning would be shouted out in Irish.¹¹

One longshoreman, Larry Welch, also remembered his uncle reciting Irish poetry and stories with great style at a wake. In this context Irish was allowed, although it is suggested it was the fact that alcohol was involved that let the barrier fall. Speaking with descendants of those who arrived from the Galway Gaeltacht between the 1880s and 1920s and hearing the longshoremen's lore it becomes obvious why Irish language literature from that time in Portland is not extant. Up to twenty percent of Irish immigrants at that time would

⁸ Úna.Ni Bhroiméil. *Building Irish Identity in America, 1870-1915: The Gaelic Revival*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003).

⁹ Kenneth E Nilsen. "The Language that the Strangers Do Not Know": The Galway Gaeltacht in Portland, Maine in the Twentieth Century." in Michael C. Connolly. ed. *They Change their Sky: The Irish in Maine*. (Orono, Maine: The University of Maine Press, 2004): 321.

¹⁰ Interview with Deb Sullivan Gellerson at the Maine Irish Heritage Center April 27th 2014.

¹¹ Kenneth E Nilsen. "The Language that the Strangers Do Not Know": The Galway Gaeltacht in Portland, Maine in the Twentieth Century." in Michael C. Connolly. ed. *They Change their Sky: The Irish in Maine*. (Orono, Maine: The University of Maine Press, 2004): 319.

have been illiterate and many would have a mixture of literacy in English and Irish.¹² Fluent Irish speakers might have a store of poetry, literature and history, but since Irish language education had been illegal in Ireland under various laws up to the turn of the twentieth century and still severely restricted up to independence in 1922, written Irish was not always a part of this. Immigrants might only be able to fill out rudimentary forms in English, but have a great command of Irish literature and poetry. Others would have difficulty with any English language forms, although that would soon change in America. Therefore the Irish language culture that was passed down among the Portland Irish was in the form of songs, poetry and stories that were recited orally. Public forms of expression were made through music and dancing. The art of storytelling is still prized among the community and Irish-Americans are proud if an ancestor was considered a seanchaí.¹³

Irish-Americans at that time had some bilingual and Irish publications, most notably *An Gaodhal* a paper devoted to the promotion of the Irish language that was published in New York by Irish entrepreneur Michael J. Logan and circulated throughout the country at its peak. It encouraged Irish scholarship as well as nationalism and implored the Irish not to forget their language. Many Irish language publications at this time were published by those who would not have been brought up in Gaeltacht areas but were promoting the revival of the Irish language in all parts of Ireland as part of the Gaelic revival and Irish nationalism. *An Gaodhal* did have some readers in Maine. A copy of an 1899 edition is among the papers of William H Grady at the Maine Historical Society. Mr. Grady, a Bangor man, had finished “Footprints of Early Irishmen and others on the Penobscot and its Environs”, a history of the Irish in the Penobscot region before he died in the 1940s.¹⁴ The Boston Pilot would have been the most widely circulated paper apart from local Portland newspapers among the Maine Irish. It featured an Irish language column and a missing family and friends section where people who had been separated at some point along the immigration journey could trace lost connections. For the most part the Irish speakers of Portland maintained their traditions orally and this is how they have been passed down through the generations. Public assertions of their ethnic identity and citizens’ rights were expressed through politics and religion and a growing wish for control of their children’s education, as will be discussed below. The church did not encourage the Irish language or promote worship through that medium and prominent Irishmen who had moved up in Portland society would generally use English to express themselves in writing for the Irish community or Portland public.

Family, work and community:

Irish immigrants who formed the labor force that completed the Cumberland and Oxford Canal in the 1830s contributed to the fund to build St. Dominic’s. The significant Irish presence working on the canal was part of the reason that the Boston ecclesiastical authorities were happy to proceed with the final arrangements and completion of the church building, knowing the workers would contribute some of their wages towards the church fund. By the 1850s the Irish were working on the St. Lawrence and Atlantic Railway, which was completed in July 1853 and leased to the Grand Trunk Railroad Company three weeks later. They would continue to work on the railroad after it opened for operation and later in the nineteenth century the biggest share of Irish laborers were employed as longshoremen on the Portland waterfront. In 1880 the Portland Benevolent Longshoremen’s Society incorporated, membership peaking in 1900 at a time when the Irish

¹² Michael C. Connolly. *Seated By the Sea: The Maritime History of Portland, Maine, and Its Irish Longshoremen*. (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2010): 82.

¹³ A seanchaí is a professional storyteller in Irish culture, now used to describe a gifted community storyteller.

¹⁴ William H Grady Collection Box #160 Maine Historical Society Collections.

accounted for roughly ten per cent of Portland's population.¹⁵ The Irish in Portland contributed a great deal to Maine labor history and the advancement of workers' rights in Maine, but for the purposes of this piece I will concentrate on how their work influenced their sense of place, community and family life and ethnic identity.

Having come from villages on the Atlantic, many embraced work on Portland's waterfront; those not involved in longshore work participated in kelping, fishing, and later fish processing. Many were involved in construction and various types of factory work. The 'city by the sea' drew Galwegians from the other side of the Atlantic and as mentioned above although many Galway men arrived in Portland in the 1840s, by the 1880s the increasing work on the docks and the effect of chain migration and contacts already in Portland increased the flow from the west of Ireland. In this way Portland was typical of many American cities where chain migration drew many from the same source communities and to communities where their skills would be utilized. In this way Butte, Montana became a magnet for Irish people from West Cork with mining skills; many of these villages of origin in West Cork, one of the hardest hit areas of the great Famine (1845-50) are still deserted today. Buffalo, New York was home to Irishmen involved in grain transportation and processing, and women domestics worked for wealthy families in Boston, New York, and indeed Portland, Maine.

Another pattern demonstrated in Portland is that of inhabitants of rural Ireland choosing to live an urban life in the US. At the turn of the century it is estimated that there were 70,000 Irish speakers in New York, 30,000 in Boston, 40,000 in Philadelphia, 30,000 in Chicago and 20,000 in Yonkers.¹⁶ This is amazing as the Irish speakers had been pushed to the margins of the country, often to the west and Atlantic islands and certainly from urban to rural areas as the nineteenth century went on in Ireland, therefore the change to urban communities in America would have been enormous. Once employed in an American city, however, Irish men and women could send money home and often paid for family members and friends to join them. In their new cities they were members of Catholic communities and could recreate the bonds of community formed in Ireland.

The pattern of agricultural people moving from areas that could no longer sustain and feed the population to urban US cities is also notable in a North American context. Many Franco-American communities developed when bad harvests and grain prices from the mid-nineteenth century onwards forced many in Quebec province to move to Quebec or Montreal, and often to the growing mill towns and cities of New England. This was despite the Catholic clergy of the day urging people of both countries to stay on the land and avoid the moral temptations of the city. It is quite striking to compare Catholic newspapers in Ireland and Quebec and their similar rhetoric urging people to stay on the land.¹⁷ A notable example of the attempt to maintain the rural character and culture of the Irish is the colony in Benedicta, Maine, an agricultural community created by Bishop Fenwick, the second bishop of Boston in the nineteenth century. In April 1833 he began recruiting settlers and in November he purchased 11,000 acres in Aroostook country. He envisaged a Catholic college and seminary supported by agriculture, lumber trade and milling. As unlikely as it seems now, at the time the idea was not far-fetched: Fr. Dennis Ryan was head of the Catholic Community at Whitefield, ME, where a church of Irish immigrants who were for the most part timber traders thrived. It was only the third Catholic Church in the diocese outside of Boston, having been established in 1818 and to this day St.

¹⁵ Michael C. Connolly. *Seated By the Sea: The Maritime History of Portland, Maine, and Its Irish Longshoremen*. (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2010):66, 78.

¹⁶ Ó hAnnracháin, Stiofán. (ed.). *Go Meiriceá Sia.*, (Nás: An Clóchomhar Teo, 1979): 10.

¹⁷ *Le Monde Canadien* 1898 "Extrait du "Monde Canadien" du 28 décembre 1899 Microfiche. Ottawa : Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions, 1983 [Fiche CIHM 04465](#)

Denis's church is home to one of the most vibrant Catholic communities in Maine. Though never quite successful in this way, Benedicta did attract some Irish immigrants.¹⁸

Life was tough for those immigrants who settled in Portland; many were killed or maimed when working on the railroads and other construction jobs. Drownings were frequent occurrences in the maritime world of work, and many accidents happened on the voyage to Portland. Death rates were high, sadly among infants as well as adults. It was in this context that community organizations and the church, as well as kin were so highly prized, and solidarity among the Irish community was needed in order for survival. Peg Harmon, who grew up on Munjoy Hill, speaks of her ancestors and their friends in the Irish community who "journeyed through hardships together" and blessed their children with survival skills and an abundance of stories. Her great grandparents first met on the boat from Ireland and renewed their acquaintance in Portland before eventually marrying. She is an example of a Portlander with a strong sense of place who remembers all the characters and events of her youth in Munjoy Hill as well as the stories passed down through the family. She is also well versed in the lore of her friends who lived in the Gorham's Corner neighborhood: "the nitty gritty Irish." Now living in Lewiston, she returns to the heritage center most Fridays to meet with friends, research and participate in community events.

Peg does not romanticize the life of her family in Portland: her great uncle died at the age of four, and she knows of the grim conditions and poverty that made disease rampant in the tenements of Portland during the nineteenth century. It is for this reason she values the character traits and methods of survival passed down through her family. She tells of how "you were taught from the time you were babies you were Irish, learnt Irish songs, a way of being; humor. They had great humor. I didn't know I was American until I went to school." In another interview when talking about expressing her Irish-American heritage Peg reflects:

How does it feel to be Irish-American? They overlay: it's impossible to differentiate. In the United States the atmosphere can be electrifying; it's hard to explain how you can step aside and be Irish and then step back into being American. My family, my grandmother and great-aunts influenced me: their family came from the poor part of Ireland. They were noble in poverty: they were faithful to their church and families; all of us who were raised by them here: you had a good sense of who you were. They were great role models, as I get older I think more of them and they were hard workers...all of their qualities that are lacking in people today. Difference between how I am and people generations here before: I don't know if being Irish has anything to do with it. Upbringing has a lot to do with it, church school, the nuns: you can't get away from the nuns. I wouldn't want to disappoint them [her family] if they were looking down on me...Sometimes I do feel different (as a person of Irish descent).¹⁹

Peg also offers some valuable insight into the world of work and socializing among young Irish people in previous generations. Before the turn of the century few occupations were open to Irish women and many worked as domestics. In the summers during the second half of the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth century a new form of employment opened up in the form of housekeeping and waitressing work at Poland Springs Resort. Peg's grandfather Patrick and grandmother Barbara met on the train to Poland Springs. They were not the only couple who met in this way and later married, several in their circle had similar stories. Girls were watched carefully at home and the opportunity to work at Poland Springs with other

¹⁸Edward T. McCarron. "A Brave New World: The Irish Agrarian Colony of Benedicta, Maine." in Michael C. Connolly. ed. *They Change their Sky: The Irish in Maine*. (Orono, Maine: The University of Maine Press, 2004): 121-137.

¹⁹ Interview with Peg Harmon at the Maine Irish Heritage Center, May 2nd, 2014

immigrant groups such as the Franco-Canadians opened up new social as well as working opportunities. Employment opportunities for women were limited and many Irish women participated in bootlegging or “selling the hooch”, as Peg recalls. Her great-grandmother Kate was widowed twice and married three times. Women were often left alone with large families and limited means of support. Her great-grand-father John died helping off Cape Elizabeth between the two lights.²⁰

Interactions with other Immigrants:

Irish and Franco-Canadian groups were the first two waves of immigrants to hit Maine, but by the turn of the century they were joined by Eastern European and Russian Jews, Italians and Eastern Europeans. While the interaction between the Irish and Franco-Canadians is well documented it was Italians and Jews who first became neighbors of the Irish in the Munjoy Hill area in the East end of Portland and at Gorham’s Corner in the West end. Speaking with the descendants of these immigrants brings the complex relationships between these communities to life and explains the consequences ethnic tensions had for individual families. The development from competitive and defensive relationships, whereby immigrants treated newer immigrant groups in the manner that the Yankees had treated them, to feelings of kinship encapsulates the story of St. Dominic’s and its evolution to a cultural center. A shared sense of what it means to have come through a time when immigrants in Portland faced many shared difficulties and threats, when the line between life and death was tenuous, bonds immigrants who came through this time together. The loss of St. Dominic’s was very hard for the Irish community but it is a positive that it now houses a center where immigrants of different backgrounds meet and hopefully represents more fully a time when immigrants no longer need to segregate themselves in order to survive, or are involuntarily segregated or ghettoized. St. Dominic’s came into its own at a time when Catholics, whether they be Irish or French were seen as a threat to the community, a foreign influence intent on taking over or subverting society, even a threat to civilization itself. Unfortunately, immigrants are still put in a position of representing the threatening unknown, and today it is the Muslim religion that, for some people, has come to represent everything foreign and threatening to American values. Being in a position of representing a threat, which is not even necessarily understood or articulated clearly by those who feel threatened, is a position the Maine Irish can empathize with.

Many of the people I spoke with at the Maine Irish Heritage Center spoke eloquently of how understanding the shame people were made to feel at being part of an ethnic or religious minority in the past informs their social conscience today. One lady who found a Jewish ancestor on her family tree after taking a DNA test now honors these relatives by placing Jewish symbols in her home during Jewish holidays. She does this as she realizes her ancestor was forced to hide his Jewish identity in order to survive and this part of his identity was virtually erased from the record. She hopes that people will never again be forced out of public places and cultural space due to their heritage. Peg Harmon spoke of how it is a very American thing to be concerned with your ancestry. After describing her Irish traditions, she spoke about her Italian neighbors who were just as concerned with tradition and were competitive about who in the neighborhood made the best sauce. Matthew Jude Barker spoke about a shared Catholic heritage between those of French-Canadian, Italian and Irish backgrounds in Portland’s Catholic schools. These friendships developed after a period where some Irish initially looked down on newer immigrants, looking to solidify the place in society they had fought so hard to create. Likewise these newer immigrants often tried hard to recreate the family and community structure from their old countries and frowned upon people who married outside of the community. At a recent genealogy discussion Peg Harman and Krista Ozyazgan chatted about what their Italian relatives brought to the community, laughing about visiting Italian friends and seeing vast quantities of olive oil stored in basements for Italian cooking. This reminded Peg of earlier times when there were tensions if intermarriages took place.

²⁰ Only one of the two lighthouse towers that made up Two Lights remains standing.

Peg remembers one woman who never forgave her son for marrying an Irish girl. She refused to set foot in their marital home. She would visit her grandchildren but they would have to come outside, she never crossed her daughter-in-law's threshold.²¹

Deb Sullivan Gellerson's family story is a microcosm of many of the themes I came across while talking to the community. Her ancestors came directly to Maine to work in the factories; these include the Joyce family from Co. Galway, who were sheep farmers. Her family has long known the stories on her father's side (the Sullivans), but until shortly before her mother died they knew little about that side of the family. Upon doing some research it emerged that her mother (Deb's Grandmother) had married a French-Canadian for which deed she was ostracized by the family. Her mother married a Vachon and was never spoken to by her mother again. Deb's mother was brought up by her aunt, after her mother died in childbirth and her father moved to New York. Aunt Sadie, who ran a boarding house in Portland, where the Mercy Hospital car park stands today, did not explain the family rift to the young girl, who knew she had many cousins but was kept in the dark regarding the reasons that she was excluded from family gatherings. Today Deb attends family gatherings on her Irish and French side; the attitudes that led to this rift have long gone.²²

Another interesting part to this story is that the Vachon family changed their name to Dennett when they arrived in the Saco-Biddeford area. Convinced they would find it easier to find jobs and assimilate if they assumed an English name, they picked Dennett when they saw Dennett's funeral home and its respectable sign, and subsequently baptized their children with the name Dennett. This is recorded in church records, as is the point at which they changed their name back to Vachon. This illustrates the point that although many French families were proud of their language and assertively protected their language rights, they were not immune from the hostility felt towards foreigners at that time. By the time the Vachons arrived in the Saco-Biddeford area, there were many Franco-Canadians working in the mills and resentment was being directed towards the immigrants who were seen as taking jobs as well as negatively influencing New England culture. Some obviously felt it was easier to assimilate by adopting anglicized names, and trying to pass as native English speakers, just as the Irish had done.

In 2001, shortly before Deb's mother's death, her family paid a visit to Ireland, and she saw where her ancestors were buried in Kilmilkin graveyard, Co. Galway. It meant a great deal to her that she now knew what her heritage was. During the same trip Deb and her family gathered some missing documentation demonstrating their Irish heritage. In 2002 Deb, together with her seven siblings presented these documents to the Irish consulate in Boston and received their Irish citizenship. Deb asserts that it makes her feel like a proud Mainer to know that her family worked so hard to make a better life in this country for themselves and their children:

I would say because all of my ancestors came into the United States, to Maine, to work in the factories, it instilled in me a great sense of pride that my ancestors came from other countries to try to better a life for me and my children so I think that the heritage, their pride in coming to this country and wanting to become better people certainly makes me, I think feel like I'm a more proud Mainer than those that might not have worked as hard as my ancestors did.²³

²¹ Interview with Peg Harmon at the Maine Irish Heritage Center, April 25th, 2014.

²² Interview with Deb Sullivan Gellerson at the Maine Irish Heritage Center April 27th 2014.

²³ Ibid.

Deb feels for new immigrants, and how daunting it must be for them. At a recent Mass in the cathedral in Portland, she realized she was a minority among immigrants of Latino and African origins. She imagined what it must have been like for her great-grandfather, alone in a new city, and empathized with these new congregants. Deb feels strongly, however, that these new communities should try to assimilate like her ancestors did. She speaks of the translators for fifty-eight different languages in Portland High Schools, asserting that this is not necessarily a good thing. While her ancestors were thrown in at the deep end and had to learn English all at once, she feels this was the better long term policy for them and their children. While she empathizes with newer immigrants, she worries that using translators long term might hold them back eventually. These issues demonstrate that Portland is a good case study to show how immigration affects a sense of place in Maine. Many of the mill towns that teemed with French and Irish immigrants are now sleepy country towns with French street names and heritage, and maybe some renovated mill buildings housing museums, businesses or art galleries in towns that are doing well. It is hard to imagine them as the towns at the forefront of industrialization and urban unrest during the nineteenth century. In contrast Portland is still the urban face of Maine and faces similar challenges to those faced by citizens and newcomers in the 1800s, challenges now experienced in a 21st century context. Cities like Portland, whose Irish population approached ten per cent of the population in 1920, and which still attracts diverse immigrant groups today, and Lewiston, who historically attracted Irish and French-Canadian workers and has a unique Franco-American heritage, have ongoing dialogues regarding immigration. Lewiston today has a Somali population that accounts for approximately ten per cent of its inhabitants.

Politics and the Irish community in Maine:

From the beginning of their journey in Maine, the Irish used politics to protect and advance their interests; politics was one community approved form of expression. It could be argued that the lobbying of the Boston Diocese to send pastors to minister to their flock and establish the structure of a parish in Portland was the first successful political undertaking by the Irish in the state. During the nineteenth century, the Irish were concentrated in three wards of Portland and became active in municipal politics. In response to the virulent strains of nativism in Maine the Irish organized political rebuttals and asserted their credentials as worthy citizens, deserving of their rights to practice their religion, pursue their business and professional interests and educate their children as they saw fit. In 1851 Know Nothings in Ellsworth tarred and feathered Fr. John Bapst and burned the Catholic Church. During this time Fr. O'Donnell of St Dominic's was regularly accosted as he went through the streets, had stones thrown at him and was physically threatened. He was in the church while rocks were thrown through the window. After the events in Ellsworth he realized the seriousness of the situation and notified the authorities.

One notable political group in the 1860s was the Fenian Brotherhood. The Fenians were the Irish and Irish-Americans who were struggling for a fully independent Irish Republic, and were willing to use force to achieve it. Daniel O'Connell O'Donoghue was the leader of the Portland circle (chapter). In 1866 the Fenians attempted to invade Canada and in Maine this took place at Eastport in an attempt to capture Campobello Island. It seems farcical now, but the branch of Fenians who advocated a Canadian attack had some logic. They feared an invasion of Ireland would be unsuccessful, while an attack on Canada would force the British to negotiate. They hoped the British would award them belligerent status, as they had to the confederates, and an Irish Republic would thus be internationally recognized. While almost comical in retrospect, the attempted invasion of Canada had political consequences in both Canada and the United States. The Johnson administration had knowingly provided weapons to the Fenians; the Democrats needed Irish votes at a time when the Irish made up to a quarter of New York's population. In British North America the skirmish led people to contemplate how vulnerable they would be if a serious military attack took place, and this need for

strong communal defenses was what finally led some to agree to confederation.²⁴ Irish-American participation in their local political groups could therefore have regional consequences, as well as often having Irish dimensions that overlapped with American politics.

Through municipal politics the Irish made sure that their nationality would not bar the second and third generations' professional participation and upward mobility. In 1869 Daniel O'Connell O'Donoghue was elected to the Portland School Board and the first Irish public school teachers were appointed. When school board members began to be elected by wards more Irish people were appointed to the school boards beginning with Patrick McGowan in 1880. Gradually more teaching positions opened up for Irish women, but at first they were appointed to kindergarten and lower grades as there was still great resistance to Catholic teachers having an influence on children's morals. Prominent teachers in the Irish community include Lizzie Walsh, who taught at Staples school in Gorham's Corner and her sister, Katie. Elizabeth, or Lizzie, worked at Staples School as a teacher, and later principal for fifty-seven years.²⁵ Katherine O'Brien became head of the Mathematics department at Deering high School. She studied at Bates College in Lewiston, before receiving her masters from Cornell and eventually a PhD in Mathematics from Brown University in the 1930s. Many women had to leave the state in order to gain education that would gain them entry into professional fields.²⁶

Irish women faced a double challenge: forming part of a minority and facing the resistance of the time to women gaining employment outside the domestic sphere. Women in the Irish community were encouraged to cultivate the virtues that would lead to a happy family, rather than training for a lifetime of professional employment. This was despite the fact that a third of Irish women in America worked outside the home in 1920, compared to one quarter of all women nationally. In addition to this an unusually high percentage of Irish women immigrated while they were single, compared to other immigrants who arrived as families or formed groups dominated by single men. Statistics have long documented this and my interviews with the Maine Irish community have borne this out: most of the subjects' ancestors did not marry before coming to America, and many had aunts or great aunts who supported themselves as domestics or proprietors of boarding houses, with later generations working as teachers or owning stores. In 1923 a referendum supported by the Klu Klux Klan eliminated the ward system of election for city council and school board members. Since minorities were concentrated in particular wards this virtually eliminated their chances for participation and representation in civic life. Maine's Klu Klux Klan leader Eugene Farnsworth explained the point of the referendum: "We will not permit Catholics on the school board anymore and we will not permit teachers who are Catholics to further hold these positions until they become Americans."²⁷

The Maine Irish for the most part found a home within the Democratic Party. Within the party their religion was accepted and they could fight for the rights of working class constituents, while still adhering to their Catholic social beliefs. The Irish formed part of political discourse in Maine that was significant for future generations, paving the way for other Catholics and immigrants to participate in civic life. At the Maine Irish Heritage Center there is a photo of John F. Kennedy, arguably the most famous New England Irish-American. This led me to comment on the back lash that he faced as a Catholic during the 1960 presidential election. Norman Vincent Peale, the popular evangelist minister, founder of Marble Collegiate Church in New York and early adopter of audio and television evangelism claimed that electing a Catholic as president would threaten American free speech and the nature of American culture: "Faced with the election of a Catholic,"

²⁴ Gary W. Libby. "Maine and the Fenian Invasion of Canada." in Michael C. Connolly. ed. *They Change their Sky: The Irish in Maine*. (Orono, Maine: The University of Maine Press, 2004):250.

²⁵ Eileen Eagan and Patricia Finn. "Mutually Single: Irish Women in Portland, Maine, 1875-1945." in Michael C. Connolly. ed. *They Change their Sky: The Irish in Maine*. (Orono, Maine: The University of Maine Press, 2004):262.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 264,

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Peale professed, "our culture is at stake... It is inconceivable that a Roman Catholic president would not be under extreme pressure by the hierarchy of his church to accede to its policies with respect to foreign interests".²⁸ Former state legislator and historian Herb Adams pointed out that by that stage a candidate's Catholicism was not an issue for the majority of voters in Maine. Edmund Muskie had been Governor of Maine from 1954-1958, when he became a United States Senator for Maine, prior to that he had served in the Maine State Legislature. Adams pointed out that for Maine to vote for a Democrat, at a time when Maine Republicans were continuously elected, was a far greater turn of events than a vote for a Catholic of Polish background was.²⁹ The discussion regarding foreign influence and whether Catholicism, foreign birth or descent rendered one a threat took place early in Maine, with the Know Nothing movement of the 1850s and the resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan amidst rising immigration into the 1920s. By the 1960s, however, the topic had mostly been dealt with within this state. Nixon won all of Maine's Electoral College votes in 1960, but this demonstrates support for the Republican Party and the candidate, rather than a suspicion of Catholicism.

The achievements of Governor Joseph Brennan, whose parents both immigrated to Portland, Maine from the Galway Gaeltacht, are an illustration of how the hard work of the first generation Irish often paid off in opportunities for their children. When John J. Brennan arrived in Portland Maine, he immediately got work as a longshoreman. He married Catherine Mulkerrin, from Callowfeenish (Calibhfuinse) in the heart of the Gaeltacht, and the fifth of their eight children was governor of Maine from 1979 to 1987. Governor Brennan asserts that his story, rooted in the Munjoy Hill area in Portland, is also representative of many immigrant experiences in America, in that his parents came from a country which had few prospects, but they grasped the opportunities available to them within the social structure of the US and opened up a new world for their children.³⁰ Senator George Mitchell is another example of someone of Irish (and Lebanese) heritage, who proved with his successful political career - which includes international dimensions and his critical role in the Northern Ireland Peace Process - that children of immigrants are accepted into Maine society and can also contribute greatly to a society which they see as providing their families with hope for a new life. Senator Mitchell is a great supporter of the center, and his many contributions to Maine, and indeed Ireland would fill several books. One particular anecdote concerning him serves to illustrate both how the Irish-American community has changed and how resilient it has proven to be. At a recent event Maureen Coyne Norris stood before the empty steps which used to approach the altar at St. Dominic's and remembered as a child witnessing children being presented there and held before the congregation by the priest. "Who will take these lovely children?" was the form a request for adoption took, and in many instances a couple would return from Mass with a new family. This is how George Mitchell's father was adopted from St. John's Church in Bangor. He was born in Boston and when his Irish immigrant parents died their children were placed in an orphanage.³¹ They were part of a group taken to Maine in the hope that they would be adopted into families. This story shows the precariousness of life for immigrants: many survived the transatlantic journey only to succumb to illness shortly afterwards. There is no doubt that the marginalization the Irish experienced bound them together as a community. As they gradually became part of the wider community, however, they also felt a debt of gratitude to their new home, which led to an attachment to place; many felt a call to serve the community in ways that would give future generations the opportunities they had, with fewer obstacles and dangers.

²⁸ Lawrence Fuchs. *John F Kennedy and American Catholicism*. (New York: Meredith Press, 1967):178.

²⁹ Interview with Herb Adams at the Maine Irish Heritage Center, March 7th, 2014.

³⁰ Michael C. Connolly. *Seated By the Sea: The Maritime History of Portland, Maine, and Its Irish Longshoremen*. (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2010): xiii.

³¹ Interview with George Mitchell (4) by Andrea L'Hommedieu George J. Mitchell Oral History Project, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine
Maureen Coyne Norris, Genealogy Roundtable and tour of Maine Irish heritage Center, April 27th, 2014

Adoptions from the altar rail are one example of how the Irish Catholic community in Maine and New England tried to look after their wider community.

Images of Ireland and Maine: A New England Sense of Place.

Gorham's corner in the nineteenth century marked the intersection of five streets, Pleasant, Danforth, York, Center and Fore Streets. For this reason and its reputation as the site of Irish disorder and violence during the nineteenth century it was known as the "Five Points" of Portland, referring to the notoriously violent Irish neighborhood of that name in New York. The Simian images of the Irish as portrayed by Thomas Nast in Harper's Weekly were akin to how the Irish were portrayed in the Portland, Bangor and Maine Press. The Portland writer Edward H. Elwell in *The Boys of Thirty-Five, A Story of A Seaport Town* (1884), characterized the area as the center of all mischief: "This was an unsavory locality of the town, in bad repute because of the turbulent character of its inhabitants; the center of sailor boarding-houses, and the scene of street brawls and drunken rows."³² In this fictional account the protagonist Dandy George, was one of the "Gorham's Corner Boys", lionized by his followers and detested by his enemies. A Maine lumberjacks' song also told of the "Gorham's Corner Boys":

Three hundred Gay fellows
That day marched along
all with their great cudgels
Both brave and strong

You'll think them the locust
From the E-gyptian plains
And Like the Wild Devils
Let Loose from their chains³³

This reputation was earned: it was newsworthy when violence or unrest of some sort did not break out in the area on a Saturday night: On Monday June 6th 1859 the Portland Advertiser actually reported with amazement that quiet had (unusually) reigned in the area that Saturday night. When the civil war came many Irish fought in Maine and Massachusetts battalions and proved their dedication to their new country. Colonel Patrick Guiney of Gorham's corner led "the fighting Irish Ninth" into battle. He had worked for the Portland Company and would later become Suffolk County Register of Probate and Insolvency. Guiney would come back to Portland to speak at Fenian rallies and other Irish events. Newspaper reports of the Irish regiments and their contribution to the war provide a picture of the Irish in Maine that contrasts sharply with accounts of drunken brawls at Gorham's corner. Heroes returning to their Portland neighborhoods giving speeches while participating in Portland politics paint the Irish in a different light. Yet this was the same neighborhood, where on the one hand hardworking Irish kept their noses to the grindstone and came and went to St. Dominic's church, while on the other hand their compatriots kept notorious grog shops and sparked such violence it led to the murder of Thomas Guiney, in one instance of an argument of honor taken too far.³⁴

Film director and Portland native John Ford (born John Feeney in Cape Elizabeth and brought up with ten siblings on Munjoy Hill) was responsible for another image of Irishness in his 1952 film *The Quiet Man*, a romantic comedy set in Ireland and starring John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara. It earned him his fourth of six academy awards for best director, but, more importantly for the purposes of this discussion, in 2013 the Library of Congress announced that *The Quiet Man* had been selected for preservation as part of the National

³² Edward H. Elwell. *The Boys of Thirty-Five, A Story of A Seaport Town*. (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1884).

³³ James Mundy. *Hard Times, Hard Men: Maine and the Irish, 1830-1860*. (Scarborough, Maine: Harp Publications, 1990): 67.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

Film Registry. This registry preserves films because of their cultural, historic or aesthetic significance. Librarian of Congress James H. Billington asserts that the collection is a “vehicle for understanding our culture and society more broadly.”³⁵ Ford’s films often featured John Wayne and stories of the Wild West, and he also filmed the Battle of Midway in 1942, accurately depicting the face of war with meticulous precision. In this light it is interesting that his Irish film is quite sentimental, featuring an American boxer who has to learn the ways of matchmaking and social mores of rural Ireland in order to win the object of his romantic affection. There are elements of realism in it too: it was filmed in Co. Mayo, providing authentic images of the Irish countryside to Americans. Many Irish-Americans channeled their sporting energies into boxing and gained celebrity status and a legitimate outlet for physical prowess in the early twentieth century. This was true in Maine where local heroes included Bartley “Wildey” Murphy, Bartley Connolly and the famous John L. Sullivan. The choice of a boxer as a protagonist in an Irish-American film was apt.

Ongoing Traditions: Music, Literature, Festivals and a Sense of Place:

Among the Maine Irish community there is a strong commitment to maintaining cultural traditions and passing them down to the next generation. Music and literature, both oral and published are the predominant forms of Irish culture in Portland. Peg Harmon feels it is important that the Irish learn the history and cultural traditions of their people and pass it on to the next generation. St. Patrick’s Day festivities provide the opportunity for the community to demonstrate these traditions for the community in the form of a dinner and cultural evening on the Saturday preceding St. Patrick’s Day at the Maine Irish Heritage Center, and a parade on the Sunday. The parade takes place on Commercial Street where members of the public can march alongside representatives of community groups, the police, fire and rescue services, and civic leaders. They can also choose to watch as the parade passes by in order to get a better view of the Irish dancing and hear and see the pipe band as it proceeds down the waterfront.

St. Patrick’s day celebrations are seen as the primary means of celebrating group identity every year and also represents the parts of Irish culture that have become part of the American mainstream. Matthew Jude Barker acknowledges that everybody wants to be Irish on St. Patrick’s Day. I have even received a confused response when I remarked during a conversation that I was studying Irish festivals in Maine. My interlocutor wanted to know what Irish festivals took place in Maine and when St. Patrick’s Day was mentioned I was told that the St. Patrick’s Day parade was an American invention. While this is not strictly true, St. Patrick’s Day parades in America have a distinctly American flavor to them and differ to parades in Ireland. St. Patrick’s Day was traditionally a religious festival in Ireland and even post-independence it was a more somber event than was celebrated in Irish-American communities. For many years pubs were closed on the national holiday to insure the people marked it with due reverence.

St. Patrick’s Day is also when the negative stereotypes of Irish people as bawdy drunkards reemerge and Matthew Jude Barker points to this as the stereotype he wishes was challenged more. He expresses his Irish heritage in his love for genealogy, both professionally and personally. He has extensively researched his family history and through his mother has gained a love of Irish culture. Matthew is the leader of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in Portland, but at 40 years old, there is only one member younger than him. He does not envisage this fraternal organization, which requires you to be at least nominally Catholic to join, surviving into the next generation in Portland. He does not see this as wholly negative, as there are newer non-denominational organizations like the Irish-American Club which have no barriers to membership and are well established and thriving with about 500 members and many more who attend dances and classes. He does feel

³⁵ Michael O’Sullivan, “Library of Congress Announces 2013 National Film Registry Selections”, *The Washington Post*, December 17th, 2013.

sadness at the diminishing amount of people who participate in Catholic religious life. He thinks it would be a sad day if there were no Catholic churches in the US.

Matthew, when asked how his heritage influences his identity as a Mainer, replied that his heritage does not affect him in that way. Reflecting more on this question, he elaborated that while he has lived in Maine his whole life, and his various direct ancestors came to Maine from the late 1600s and 1700s up until 1910 when his great-grandfather arrived from Galway: “I am a Mainer, but it’s not an important part of my identity.” He explained that he identifies more as Irish-American, clarifying that he is “foremost American”, but if he had to pick a subgroup within this identity he would call himself Irish-American. “Like I said, I love Maine, I’ve been all over Maine, camping and everything, but more Irish-American, I’d consider myself more an Irish-American, than I would a Mainer. I’m foremost American of mostly Irish ancestry.” Matthew does identify strongly with Portland however, having lived within Greater Portland all his life. He has created the Maine Irish Heritage Trail in Portland and written a book on the Irish in Portland; he is currently writing a book on the Maine Irish in the civil war. His long term goal is to write a more in-depth history of the Portland Irish. “I think part of, partly why I was meant to be here, was to preserve the Irish history and genealogy of Portland (and Maine)”. As mentioned above Matthew wishes to expose some of the negative stereotypes associated with the Irish as myths, he describes with scorn a St. Patrick’s Day in recent years when a thousand people participated, but the Portland Press Herald reported only on one drunk. He also feels that historically the papers neglected to mention many of the positive contributions of the Irish community, and he believes the Irish community themselves are only beginning to learn of that history now. He hopes his books on the civil war will remedy this and his history of Portland will be a ‘warts and all’ account, including both positive aspects of the Maine Irish experience and negative stories that have likewise been quashed. Matthew respects those learning the Irish language, but it is not an important part of his sense of being an Irish Portlander. Genealogy, history and literature are the realms in which he expresses his Irish identity. Matthew spoke very scornfully of those with Irish heritage who have no interest in any aspect of Irish history or culture but who use their Irish surname as an excuse to get drunk on St. Patrick’s Day.³⁶

Portland as a locus for Irish Culture and as part of the wider Regional Context:

Portland demonstrates a pattern seen in Maine of immigrant hubs forming in cities, providing cultural and community centers for immigrants around the state. In the case of the Portland Irish, the Maine Irish Heritage Center forms the repository for genealogy and archives from around the state and a meeting point for community cultural events and exchanges. People come from Lewiston and further north to Portland to participate in annual celebrations such as the St. Patrick’s Day parade and to engage in language classes, genealogy and the DNA project. Céilithe (Irish dances) and Irish classes in Portland witness the coming together of new learners and the oldest generation of Irish speakers from Co. Galway. Popular images of Maine today often focus on a rural idyll or tourist getaway, but the urban history of the state tells a more complicated tale. The urban history of the Irish in Portland fits in with their history as immigrants to cities across America. Henry David Thoreau idealized Maine as the last frontier and wilderness in New England, hoping some moral virtues would remain enshrined in this wilderness. In a strange way his hopes were echoed by the Irish Catholic hierarchy in Boston who advertised in the press for volunteers to form colonies in rural Maine where community values would be preserved away from urban temptations. In contrast to these wishes, the majority of Irish immigrants in cities like Lewiston, Bangor and as studied here, Portland, toiled in slums and grappled with the same urban problems faced in Boston and elsewhere. If the Boston hierarchy had cared to consult the Portland newspapers they would have seen this reality. A similar dichotomy exists today, between the images of Maine, served up as a slice of romantic old New England in the national media, and the

³⁶ Interview with Matthew Jude Barker at the Maine Irish Heritage Center, April 22nd 2014.

socio-economic realities of Maine, no longer at the forefront of New England industry, but still facing urban and rural ills, such as poverty, unemployment and marginalization among its less fortunate citizens.

In the nineteenth century, Maine was at the forefront of an industrial revolution and neighborhoods like Munjoy Hill and Gorham's Corner formed the coalface of new social constructs and interactions between immigrants of different nationalities as they became American together. Pat McBride, a volunteer, and the backbone of the Maine Irish Heritage Center describes how she grew up in "an Old Yankee Town" (Acton) in Massachusetts, and was unaware that different nationalities existed as part of the American landscape until she traveled and came to, among other places, Portland and the Maine Irish Heritage Center. She feels like she is filling in an experience she missed out on growing up when she participates in events at the center and listens to people as they link the stories between their Italian, Acadian and Irish ancestors. In contrast, her husband grew up in a mill town fifteen minutes down the road, where everyone knew what nationality they were, and where three different Catholic churches existed for a population of eight thousand people. Likewise her father grew up in an industrial town with many immigrants: Ware, Massachusetts. There, in a church designed by the same architect that designed St. Dominic's, the Polish community held prayer meetings in the basement, while they waited for their own church to be built, a similar arrangement that the Polish community in Portland had with St. Dominic's. Ware is near Springfield, Massachusetts, where through chain migration many people from the Co. Kerry Gaeltacht and the Blasket Islands ended up in a new community. Thus Portland was part of a regional pattern where mill towns and industrial cities changed the ethnic face of communities.³⁷ Portland was similar to other New England cities in that its Irish communities had a low rate of home ownership before the twentieth century and were employed in similar professions.³⁸ Differences were also striking: with a far greater Irish population Boston saw more upward mobility and political power among the Irish. Among women, teaching replaced domestic service in the second generation, but that change occurred sooner and created more opportunities in Boston. Women who wanted to train as nurses or gain other professional training would have to move to Boston. In 1850 only thirteen Irish people of many sandwiched into the Gorham's corner area owned any real estate and these figures would remain low for some time.³⁹ Michael Connolly has argued that the Irish in Portland and other New England cities had lower rates of mobility than their compatriots in the west. Further west the Irish were newcomers, but so were migrants from New England, and opportunities existed for everyone. In Portland, the Irish struggled with the English language and suffered under hard living conditions that were among the causes for the high rate of infant mortality at more than one and a half children per family.⁴⁰

The Maine Irish Heritage Center often participates in events with other Irish heritage centers, such as when a delegation went to the Irish American heritage Center in Chicago in 2013 to witness the induction of John Ford into the Irish-American Hall of Fame. It has closer contacts with New England centers, especially in Massachusetts which shares much Irish-American history with Maine. The Maine Irish Heritage Center, however, is unique, in being housed in a church that formerly served members of the same community it now serves as a cultural center. This seems to be a Maine phenomenon; although it is unique among Irish heritage centers the Franco-American community in Lewiston, Maine faced a similar dilemma when it lost one of its

³⁷ Interview with Pat McBride at the Maine Irish Heritage Center May 3rd 2014.

³⁸ Michael C. Connolly. *Seated By the Sea: The Maritime History of Portland, Maine, and Its Irish Longshoremen*. (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2010): 82.

³⁹ James Mundy. *Hard Times, Hard Men: Maine and the Irish, 1830-1860*. (Scarborough, Maine: Harp Publications, 1990):69.

⁴⁰ Michael C. Connolly. *Seated By the Sea: The Maritime History of Portland, Maine, and Its Irish Longshoremen*. (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2010): 82.

parish churches. It is now the home of a thriving cultural center and its members gave enormous support and direction to the Irish community in Portland who faced the same dilemma a few years later.⁴¹

A New England Sense of Place:

The hostility faced by the Irish and other immigrants in Portland and Maine was most violently expressed through the Know Nothing Movement, the burning of the Ellsworth church and earlier anti-Irish violence such as that in Bangor in 1833 when a riotous mob of sailors burnt down Irish buildings. More subtle forms of discrimination came in the form of measures such as the Maine Law, which was selectively applied to the Irish and not to respectable members of society. The Irish adapted, however, and measures such as this did not prevent families such as the McGlinchys from Derry building up a huge commercial business which had started from the proceeds of illegal alcohol trading.⁴² Domestic workers referred to the Yankees they worked for as Poncáin and the Yankee resistance to the newcomers is often noted. There was a difference, however, between the violent opposition the Know Nothings, and later the Klu Klux Klan displayed, and the mutual bewilderment between immigrants and Yankees that spoke of a cultural gap and fear of change more than outright hostility. Portland's population doubled between 1850 and 1900 and great technological and social changes rattled its long term inhabitants. In Bangor the population increased by twenty percent over two weeks in 1833, as the city braced for an influx of Irish immigrants with cholera, and in Biddeford the population increased by 137 percent between 1840 and 1850.⁴³ Bearing these figures in mind, it is no wonder that locals felt defensive. They knew the world around them was going to change and that their social and political hegemony would come under threat. The difference between Acton, Massachusetts and the mill towns nearby, where mills and various ethnic churches sprang up, demonstrates how these changes became embedded in place and architecture throughout New England. It was an improvement when instead of violent opposition newspapers described the strange goings on in the Irish neighborhoods with wry humor and some crude stereotypes. Gradually, however, the Irish became respected and moved upward in society and in time would feel a similar attachment to their buildings and institutions in Portland that the Yankees did. They would learn, with the closing of St. Dominic's, that change can bring new relationships and community as well as loss. One interaction between Yankee and Irish that displays the move from hostility to accommodation is the true story of an Irish domestic who was asked to dust a statue in a wealthy woman's house. Upon asking who the statue depicted and being told it was Oliver Cromwell, she declined to fulfill her duty. The mistress of the house just laughed. She presumably thought the Irish had strange ways, while the Galway girl thought it incredible that her employers would immortalize the man responsible for the Cromwellian plantation of Ireland and expulsion of thousands from their homes, not to mention the deaths his campaigns caused.⁴⁴

Metamorphosis:

Ironically, the growth of the Maine Catholic community and the fact that in 1853 Maine officially became a diocese, which incorporated all of New Hampshire at that time, was arguably a factor in the downfall of St. Dominic's. With changing demographics, the church hierarchy needed to close churches and consolidate. In the Cathedral City which Portland had become, a church like St. Dominic's inevitably lost out to newer churches and the cathedral. St. Dominic's congregants would henceforth worship at Sacred Heart Church on Mellen St. The altar was dismantled and is now forms part of the altar in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception on Congress St. While some of the former parishioners still grieve for their lost church

⁴¹ Interview with Maureen Coyne Norris at the Maine Irish Heritage center, March 7th 2014.

⁴² James Mundy. *Hard Times, Hard Men: Maine and the Irish, 1830-1860*. (Scarborough, Maine: Harp Publications, 1990): 81.

⁴³ James Mundy. *Hard Times, Hard Men: Maine and the Irish, 1830-1860*. (Scarborough, Maine: Harp Publications, 1990):14, 63.

⁴⁴ Interview with Matthew Jude Barker at the Maine Irish Heritage Center, April 22nd 2014.

community they acknowledge that the heritage center would not exist without the fallout that surrounded the closure of St. Dominic's Church.⁴⁵

The Irish now have a building to house their cultural and literary activities, which have been undergoing a renaissance since the 1970s. The Irish-American club was founded in 1973 at a time when civil rights awareness and accompanying social movements were giving minorities across the country the confidence to express their heritage. The Irish had long since assimilated into Maine society, but as a community whose language had long been hidden, it now felt the time was right to re-engage with the Irish Language. Irish classes have now been offered by the Irish American club for decades and now take place at the heritage center. In recent years a surge of interest in genealogy has taken place, and the center helps many people find their roots. The occurrence mentioned at the beginning of this piece is not unusual. Friday is open house day for genealogy consultations at the center, and each subsequent Friday I was present someone appeared and requested to have their DNA tested. Many people also come for help tracing relatives or ancestors through traditional means.

Another positive outcome that the transformation from church to cultural center brought was the opening up of the Irish community to Irish people of all traditions. Irish people were among the first settlers in Maine, and some fought in the war of Independence. They came as part of a British colony however, and being Protestant, were accepted into the Anglo-Saxon community. They may have told of their Irish origins but no one ever characterized them as a separate ethnic group. Later when hundreds of thousands of Catholics came to the country, and formed part of the immigrant underclass, the Presbyterians who had come from an Ulster Scotch background began to identify themselves as the Scotch Irish to differentiate themselves from the newcomers and disassociate themselves from the slothfulness, drunkenness, violent tendencies and other attributes that were being used to describe the Irish Catholics. It is fitting that as well as opening up avenues for multicultural celebrations and interactions with other ethnic groups the center now acts as a research and meeting place for the whole Irish community. The Scotch-Irish music of the Maritime Provinces and the Acadian influenced music of the Irish who settled in New Brunswick before coming to Maine can be heard at gatherings such as the Saltwater Music festival, to be held this year in Portland, and at smaller center gatherings. From 2006 -2008 the center was closed due to damage caused firstly when the 4100 pound bell fell from its moorings, and later when a storm caused great damage to the interior and exterior of the building. In October 2008 it was reopened to great fanfare by Éamon Ó Cuiv, an Irish member of parliament (Teachta Dála) and grandson of the late president Éamon De Valera. It is a testament to the community that they maintained the center through these trials; one reason the diocese cited for closing the church was \$1.5 million in repair costs.

The Maine Irish Heritage Center demonstrates the intersection of family genealogy, social and community history. Of six particularly complex mysteries presented to the center, five have been successful solved, with one needing more information in order to move forward. Parents have been found, family histories enriched, and above all community ties have been strengthened. Many have found ancestors in New Brunswick and the Maritime Provinces and the link between the Maritime Provinces and the Irish community has been reaffirmed. Many Irish in Portland during the nineteenth century were second generation whose parents had immigrated to New Brunswick, but this is unclear in census records which simply listed people as Irish. The center provides a place to learn about the history of migration from Ireland and between Boston, Portland and the Maritime Provinces of Canada.

Coming Full Circle:

⁴⁵ Maureen Coyne Norris, Genealogy Roundtable and tour of Maine Irish heritage Center, April 27th, 2014.

On Saturday 3rd May, 2014 the Maine Irish Heritage Center hosted a reception for Seán Ó Coistealbha and his daughter. Seán is part of the Maine Gaeltacht project, and while visiting his Portland friends he received his DNA results, linking him to the extended family trees the project is working on. He is also an Irish language educator, poet and policy maker, supporting Irish language cultural and educational projects in Gaeltacht areas across Ireland. News was exchanged with the Portland hosts of their kin and friends in Ireland, with whom they have been visiting annually in recent years. The DNA project leaders were eager to demonstrate the methodology with which DNA is being utilized to enhance traditional genealogy and overcome previously stubborn research blocks. In return, Seán looked at place names on family trees and census records, pointing out inaccuracies where translations or approximations might have led to the wrong place of birth to be recorded. He is an expert on the etymology of place names.

At lunch Italian subs and whoopee pies were provided in order that Seán would have the opportunity to enjoy what Portlanders consider real Maine fare. Everyone was gratified when a full whoopee pie was declared delicious, following the first tentative agreement to share half of one. Claire Foley's soda bread also received the stamp of approval and the visitors were tipped off that it was the best in Portland, beating local Gerry Connolly's to the post. Claire maintains that the only reason there is even a debate regarding the two specimens of Irish baking is that Gerry makes his from her recipe, having long ago lost his grandmother's one. Claire, who will turn ninety within the next year and immigrated from Co. Galway in 1946, had a poem in Irish *Inis Iar* (the name of one of the Aran Islands), which she had learnt as a song at school in Loughrea. Seán copied it to bring home, as it is no longer well known in Galway although a famous melody called *Inis Iar* is popular across Ireland. A heritage calendar from Letter Mullen was shared and photos of some of the older locals were compared with a photo of the founders of the heritage center, one of whom was a brother to a Galway man in the Irish photo. Some reminisced about the good old days when Amato's sold Italian subs to the Longshoremen at the nearby waterfront for 25 cents each.

A bilingual poetry reading eventually got under way, with Seán providing English translations of his poems for those who were not fluent in Irish. Members of his audience read the translations he provided and each poem sparked a conversation, one about the merits of translation and interpretation, one about Irish Republicanism and one about immigration, longing for the seashore and perceptions of place. A favorite poem was one about Seán's Uncle Séamus who immigrated to Portland, but caused great excitement back in Co. Galway when he arrived home for an extended visit with enough money to buy a Volkswagen. Before the end of the afternoon plans were discussed for a cultural exchange in which a dozen High School students from the Portland area will travel to Galway, not just to soak up the atmosphere, music and sights, but to have instruction in the Irish language. Members of the Maine Irish community are eager to give their youngsters a taste of their heritage, now that transatlantic travel is easier than ever before and internet connections allow groups in Galway and Maine to plan and research together all year. Before returning home Seán visited Calvary Cemetery in South Portland, where his uncle is buried along with many members of the Irish community.

Conclusion:

There is no doubt that the Irish in Maine bonded as a community and put down geographical roots. In Portland, these roots took hold in the Irish neighborhoods of Munjoy Hill and Gorham's corner. Their sense of identity and heritage is spatially rooted in these locations, even though the architecture has changed, buildings have been destroyed, streets eliminated. Irish-Americans still choose to live in this area and their memories and culture are embedded in it. Through examining this community I have learned that a sense of place can involve multiple locations: "The transnational and global are often about the relations between the

local and the local, between one place and another”.⁴⁶ The Portland Irish were part of a wave of over a million Irish immigrants who came to the United States between the end of the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries and part of an exodus that found the Irish scattered in countries across the globe. By the 1990s the diaspora numbered seventy million from an island that then contained five million people, its greatest population peak estimated at eight million before the Great Famine. The Portland Irish can be analyzed as part of these greater population movements, or as part of the many immigrant groups that arrived in the States, but fundamentally theirs is the story of a group of people who left a rural place to find a new home in the harbor City of Portland. Though their community shares ties and similarities with other Irish-American communities in Maine, New England and throughout the nation, and lasting bonds with Ireland, their stories are uniquely theirs: tales of the Portland Irish. At the Maine Irish Heritage Center in Portland the quest for identity, kinship, and preservation of roots continues. Within the social construction and interpretation of place, DNA maps have been added to family trees, maps of origin and neighborhood boundaries, as this community continues to journey together in time and place.

⁴⁶ Joseph Deloria. “Places Like Houses, Banks, and Continents.” *American Quarterly* 58, no.1 (March 2006):25.

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