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In Newport, Irish is forever

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NEWPORT — Bright green shamrocks and the crisp tricolor flag of Ireland still grace the storefronts and wave from the porches on this St. Patrick's Day in Newport, where Saturday's annual parade and evening festivities lured thousands of partygoers to the waterfront.

Though the City by the Sea may be known internationally as a summer haven for blue bloods and a safe harbor for their yachts, the crowded byways that sprout from lower Thames Street in Newport's Fifth Ward speak of a much different reality.

Boston may have a more vigorous association with the slow rise to power of Irish immigrants, but Newport's Irish heritage remains as crucial if less obvious.

A century after the first wave of Irish immigrants arrived in the 1820s, their descendants were building a citywide political machine and eroding the walls of ethnic prejudice.

Now, in a city where 37 percent of the 28,000 residents consider themselves Irish, according to the U.S. Census, some are trying to salvage the strands of a history frayed by time.

They aim to chronicle the Irish achievement by

they tended at Bellevue Avenue's mansions, and from their own faded gravestones in the derelict Barney Street burial ground.

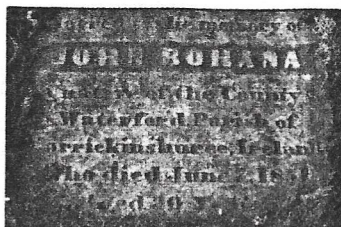
Adopting a strategy played out in many communities, Newporters of Irish descent took aim at employment in government, law enforcement and the church as ways to secure positions for their children and neighbors.

IN DOING SO, they helped shape the character of the city.

"In Newport you've got a situation where the Fifth Ward has been maintained, probably the only Irish, old-style ethnic neighborhood that's survived," said lawyer and historian Patrick T. Conley, who wrote *The Irish in Rhode Island*. "That community has held its cohesiveness. The others have passed."

According to Conley, the first Irish immigrants to land on Aquidneck Island for employment came to a dreadful pair of Portsmouth coal mines, which operated on and off from 1808 to 1883.

The wave grew stronger in the 1820s, when the federal government sponsored the construction of Fort Adams. Foremen actually sailed to Ireland to recruit experienced stone carvers as well as common laborers. The project lasted nearly 40 years, a magnet for continuing Irish immigration.



Journal-Bulletin/ANDREW DICKERMAN

GONE, NOT FORGOTTEN: A gravestone at the Barney Street burial ground testifies to a history of Irish immigration that continues today.

establishing The Newport Museum of Irish History, restoring the state's first Catholic cemetery and documenting the ongoing saga of the Irish in Newport.

The stories that echo outward from the Fifth Ward are spun from the labor of the Irish immigrants who built Fort Adams, from the landscapes

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That impact grew stronger starting in the 1840s, when the Irish famine brought immigrants to Newport and other Rhode Island communities by the tens of thousands. They were kept from gainful employment by discrimination and lack of training.

By the time of the Civil War, said Conley, the Irish were at the bottom of Rhode Island's social order, packed in squalid urban tenements.

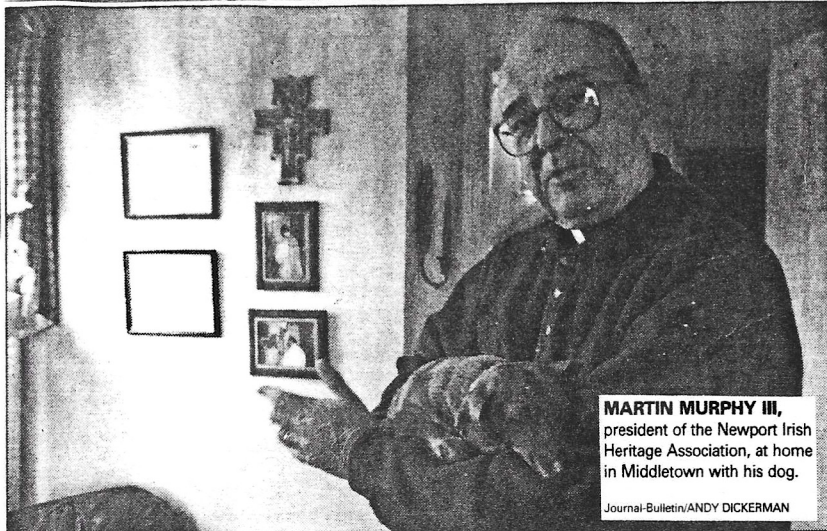
"In Newport, the men were laborers and the women domestics," Conley said. "Gradually, they acquired specialized skills — bricklayers, carpenters, stone masons. Some started shops and small businesses."

And some of those businesses grew. Thomas Galvin owned a large nursery and landscaping business that served the wealthy summer colony. His Spring Street house, built about 1846, was a sign of his growing prosperity.

Knowing that public-works projects were feeding their children, the swelling Irish population in Newport set about to make inroads in local government in the decades after the war.

By the turn of the century, the transformation of the Irish from day laborer to civil servant was complete.

LOCAL HISTORIAN Leonard Panaggio has been writing about Newport history for decades, and he's collected as much of this lore as anyone.



MARTIN MURPHY III, president of the Newport Irish Heritage Association, at home in Middletown with his dog.

Journal-Bulletin/ANDY DICKERMAN

Now 79, Panaggio is so comfortable with his material that a conversation can prompt the aside: "Hold on, I've got the 1923 city directory right here."

So he looks it up.

In 1923, there were 550 Sullivans in the directory and 270 Sullivans on the city's tax roll.

The mayor was a Sullivan (Mortimer A.), and so were the street commissioner, probate judge, city solicitor, sealer of weights and measures, commissioner of wrecks and packer of fish.

There were Sullivans on the city's Board of Health, Examining Board of Plumbers and School Committee. The weathers of coal included four Sullivans. There were four Sullivans in the Police Department and seven on the Representative City Council, a much larger body in those days.

Not surprisingly, outsiders crudely dubbed Newport "Sullivanville."

"The power was the power of patronage," said Martin J. Murphy III, president of the Newport Irish Heritage Association, who has been working on a book on that heritage for the past five years. "The Irish took care of themselves when nobody else would."

"Policemen, politicians and the priesthood," Murphy said. "If you control that, you've pretty much got everything covered."

Between 1895 and 1996, 11 of Newport's mayors were of Irish descent. The first of these, Patrick J. Boyle, served in six separate terms over 29 years, dying in office in 1923.

The late Mayor Humphrey J. "Harp" Donnelly III oversaw Newport's transition from Navy town to tourist destination in the 1970s. Former Mayor Robert J. McKenna, though not a native Newporter, mixed politics with a 30-year teaching career at Salve Regina University.

"If there's 10 people who want a job, you make 9 enemies and 1 ingrate," McKenna quipped, dismissing the old patronage system.

One of the Fifth Ward's most remarkable women is former state Supreme Court Justice Florence Kennis Murray, who retired from the bench in 1996 after more than 40 years of judicial service.

Born on Webster Court 81 years ago, she was the first woman presiding justice of the Superior Court and the first woman Supreme Court justice in Rhode Island. The Newport County Courthouse is named after her.

FOR NEARLY 200 years, waves of Irish immigrants have landed on the shores of Newport for the same reasons: the lure of family, security and adventure.

Janis Gibbons felt there was something missing. She came to Newport to find it.

Now a waitress at Christie's, a restaurant on lower Thames Street, Gibbons, 27, recalled growing weary of her bank job in Sandyford, Ireland.

"I felt there had to be more to life," said Gibbons, her soft brogue as smooth as cream. "Now I have the feeling of home, a feeling beyond words. Comfortable. Safe."

Young visitors from Ireland have found a haven at Christie's in recent years, where a well-paying job and a community rich in Irish history have made a hospitable combination.

"The main reason I like it here is because of my brother," said waitress Beth Fitzpatrick, of Artane, on Dublin's north side. Still in her early 20s, Fitzpatrick followed her brother Joseph to Newport.

"I was going a bit crazy, so I left Ireland a year and a half ago," she said with a bright laugh and a brilliant smile. "Right now, I'm planning on staying. There's a lot of Irish heritage here."