

THE BROOKLYN IRISH.

Some Notes of the Early Settlers

Here of That Race.

The First Organizations for Social and Patriotic Purposes Which Show Bonds of Fraternity, Liberality and Good Neighborly Feeling—The Men Who Founded Them.

President James J. Kerwin of the Emerald association is delighted with the outlook for the usual financial and social success promised by the annual ball of that organization, which will take place at the Academy of Music next Wednesday evening, in aid of the orphans. All the old friends will be on hand and a legion of new ones have been drafted in to make sure that, as far as they are concerned, at least, the orphans won't know anything about the hard times. The social side has been always a prominent feature of the event. Indeed, that was one of the objects aimed at when the founders started the Emerald in 1839. The second article of the constitution states this in the following words:

Second. To secure a pleasant meeting place, where confidence and intimacy will be promoted under moral influences; to improve the mind; to brighten the habitual intercourse of daily life by mutual communings; to establish, in brief, bonds of unity, harmony and cordiality among all its members.

That this end has been kept constantly in view is clearly demonstrated by the enjoyment and satisfaction given in the fifty-four annual entertainments already held under its auspices.

Although professing no racial exclusiveness, the name of the association, as well as the general run of its membership indicates the Hibernian tendency of its tone and makes a passing glance at the Irish colony in Brooklyn of present interest. The Brooklyn Catholic Historical society has been industriously delving into the musty records of the past for the name of the first

Catholic settler in Brooklyn, but the search has not been satisfactory. It might also have disclosed who was the first Irishman here, but quest is still being made. The first Irish immigrants came to America in 1643. They were the war slaves sent out by Cromwell after his devastation of the Irish provinces. It is calculated that no less than 6,400 Irish men and women were thus transported in four years to the British colonies here. After this they kept drifting out until in 1771-72 it is calculated that the immigration amounted to 17,350. That the ubiquitous Celt would be attracted to the fair shores of Long Island seems plausible until we remember how entirely Dutch everything about here then was and how uncongenial such surroundings would be to him. But even that did not prove a bar, for in the old graveyard of the Schenck family, who kept one of the tide mills in the village of Bushwick, there was a tombstone that recorded that John O'Neill died on May 28, 1816, aged 64 years, and that he was the husband of Elizabeth, daughter of Teunis and Catharine Schenck. It was only after the revolution, however, that the Irish colony came to be in evidence as a component part of Brooklyn's local life. We have nothing to show who located here first, but many of the old Irish-American families can trace back for a century. James Furey, for instance, and his brother Robert came out from the County Donegal in 1798 and settled in Brooklyn not long after. Other Irish names crop out in local history of the latter years of the last century of men whose grandchildren are well known in our own time. Henry Dawson, who kept the ferry at the foot of Fulton street from 1789 to 1808, was born in Dublin. He came here in 1760 and married a Miss Coombs of Jamaica, L. I. He was of good family and kept his pack of hounds and stable of hunters as his ancestors had done in Ireland. The grandfather of Henry C. Murphy was Timothy Murphy, a native born Irishman, who emigrated here in 1766.

The Methodist church in Brooklyn owes much to the venerable Robert Snow, a native born Irishman, who emigrated here in 1784. He was the founder of the first Brooklyn Sunday school, the first president of the Apprentices' library and a man who, in every relation with his fellows during a long and busy career, always lived up to the letter and spirit of his favorite maxim: "Endeavor to leave the world better than you found it." The first mayor of Brooklyn, George Hall, was the son of an Irishman. It is a curious fact that he was afterward made the candidate, in 1854, for the same office by those political fanatics, the Know Nothings. One of the campaign arguments used against him was the assertion that he was born in Ireland, and he had to prove that although his parents came from the County Wexford he himself was born in New York. He seems to have been a sort of political paradox. In early life he was noted for convivial habits and the skill with which he could sing that Irish Bacchanalian revel, "The Cruiskeen Lawn." In 1833 he was elected president of the village in a closely contested election on a platform that promised to exclude hogs from the streets and shut up unlicensed rum shops. In 1844 he was defeated as a temperance candidate for mayor. When the village did shake off its Dutch lethargy the Irishman came at once to the front and, it is hardly necessary to add, has been there ever since.

The first Irish organization in Brooklyn was the Erin Fraternal association, started, it seems, by George S. Wise, jr., and George L. Birch in 1823. Wise was a purser in the navy yard and born of Irish parents in Virginia. He came to Brooklyn in 1812 and from that time till his death, in 1824, he was one of the leaders in everything that went on in the village. He was president of the first board of trustees of the Roman Catholic society that built St. James' church in Jay street.

George L. Birch was a Methodist, born in the city of Limerick, Ireland, on August 15, 1787. He landed in New York in 1798 and in early manhood was the friend of that other noted Irishman, Peter Mooney, who, under Aaron Burr's inspiration, founded the Tammany society. Birch became associated with Mayor Noah in the management of the Democratic organ of that time in New York, the *National Advocate*, and

in the course of the big political rows that went on in those days pretty much as they do now he was sent over here to Brooklyn to start a rival paper to Alden Spooner's *Long Island Star*. This he called the *Patriot*, issuing the first number on March 7, 1821. The editorial compliments passed between the two make very lively reading even now. On December 21, 1821, he was made postmaster of Brooklyn and held the office for four years. He was prominent in the fire department and started a branch of the Tammany society on this side of the river, which paraded in honor of Perry's victory on Lake Erie on September 10, 1823. He was also prominent in the organization of the Apprentices' library. He was the chief in fact of the local Democracy who swore by Andrew Jackson and believed in the theory that to the victors belong the spoils, and in all the other unregenerate doctrines taught by Martin Van Buren.

The Erin Fraternal association was intended mainly to celebrate St. Patrick's day in the time honored way. So dear to the sons of St. Patrick. It was evidently a local rival to the New York body of similar patriotic purpose, the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, a society patterned after the Philadelphia organization of like name and revolutionary renown. George Wise was the first president and Birch was the secretary. The composition of the membership was on entirely non-sectarian lines. Robert Snow was the successor to Wise in 1824, and among the many names on the roll may be noted those of Peter Turner, William Purcell, George Hall, Eugene Farnam, Thomas Kirk, Thomas S. Brady, E. Powell and others. The society met in rooms at the corner of Main and James streets, and at other times in Maxwell's grammar school in Main street. On St. Patrick's day they marched in a body to St. James' church, and heard mass and a sermon and then went to Du Flon's Military garden, where the dinner was served. The society was chartered in 1835 and lasted for a few years after.

In 1841 a rival appears in the Shamrock Benevolent society and in 1847 the Emmet Benevolent society was founded. The latter was chartered in May 1849. Neither seems to have made any very definite impression on the local records.

The Emerald association which was started on January 12, 1839, had almost an entirely Irish membership, but the stated purpose of its being was:

"This association shall give an annual ball for the benefit of the orphans in the Roman Catholic orphan asylums of the City of Brooklyn, the net proceeds of which shall be paid over to the treasurer of said institutions at such a time or times as the board of directors of this association may direct."

This eliminated the patriotic element from the society, but it was soon supplied. On the evening of February 5, 1850, the last meeting of the season of the Emerald association was held at John Sweeney's hotel, corner of Columbia street and Atlantic avenue. After this meeting adjourned the following, all members of the Emerald, reorganized into another meeting and then and there

founded that other Brooklyn institution, the St. Patrick society: John Sweeney, Joseph Regan, James Gallway, Michael Nevin, James Bennett, Daniel M. Kelly, Patrick Lynch, Thomas Mulligan, John K. Shanley, Dr. Joseph P. Colgan, Charles Harvey, Charles Reilley, John O'Mahony, John L. Doyle, Charles Byrnes, John Hinchy, Michael Cunningham and John O'Rourke. Of these founders only one now survives, Mr. John L. Doyle. He is still hale and hearty and bids fair to celebrate many another St. Patrick's day. At this meeting John Sweeney presided and John O'Mahoney acted as secretary. The starting of the society was determined upon by the holding of a dinner on the following St. Patrick's day. The formal meeting of organization was held on February 11, 1850, at Dominic Colgan's Eagle hotel, in Fulton street. Joseph Regan presided and these first officers of the society were elected; President, John O'Mahoney; first vice president, Charles Harvey; second vice president, James Bennett; secretary, John O'Rourke; assistant secretary, John L. Doyle; treasurer, James Gallway; chaplain, Rev. James McDonough, pastor of St. James' church. The spirit of the founders and intention was embodied in the preamble to the constitution, which ran as follows:

"Participating in the universal feeling of humanity which inspires all men with a love of their native land, and which seems in a particular manner common to the Irish race, and to nourish, strengthen and perpetuate that beautiful sentiment as well as to draw closer those bonds of friendship and brotherhood which should invite the children of Ireland in a distant land, we whose names are hereunto affixed form ourselves into an associated body, and resolve to be governed by the following constitution and bylaws":

The constitution states that the main object of the society shall be to celebrate in a proper and becoming manner by a public dinner each recurring anniversary of St. Patrick's day. Other objects of a useful and elevating character may be instituted by the society wherever it is deemed expedient.

Section 3. Any person of Irish birth or descent of good moral character shall be eligible for membership. Persons of other nationalities may be admitted members by a three-fourths vote of the members present.

Section 4—Article II. No subject of a religious or political character shall be permitted to be discussed in the society. All questions, however, having a bearing on the freedom and prosperity of Ireland shall be legitimate subjects of discussion.

It was first proposed that the president should be a native born Irishman, but this restriction was subsequently done away with. After the first dinner, which was given on Monday, March 18—St. Patrick's day falling on Sunday—in old Montague hall, at the corner of Court and Montague streets, the St. Patrick society became and still flourishes, a permanent fixture in Brooklyn's social life. It would hardly be an extravagant estimate to say that more than half the present population of Brooklyn have Irish blood in their veins.