

Bethlehem Moment: The Irish in Bethlehem

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 *Latest in a series of posts on Bethlehem Moments* 

Bethlehem Moment 20

City Council

April 7, 2020

Councilwoman Grace Crampsie Smith

1403 Lorain Ave.

Bethlehem Moment: The Irish in Bethlehem

The first settlers to the Lehigh Valley and Bethlehem, in particular, were Scots Irish. That first wave of immigrants pre-dates the 1742 Moravians and arrived in 1728 to build the Craig settlement in Northampton County.

The pioneering spirit of the Scotch Irish Ulstermen caused them to be among the early movers and shakers because of their fierce patriotism and fighting spirit.

Between 1815 and 1834, Irish immigrants arrived just in time for the canal-building boom. The saying was that all you needed to build a canal was a pick, a shovel, a wheelbarrow, and an Irishman. A thousand Irish workers, with help from local German farmers, built the Lehigh Navigation Canal, finishing the 46-mile route that carried anthracite coal from the mines to market in record time. Irish workers were instrumental in building all the anthracite canals and later the railroads that ultimately replaced them.

The Irish famine years of the 1840s triggered further Irish immigration. In 1850, Irish immigrants made up more than half of the foreign-born residents of Pennsylvania.

How fitting that Bethlehem's 1st mayor hailed from Ireland. Andrew Harford Boyle emigrated from Burtonport, Ireland, to New Orleans, then moved to Bethlehem when he attended Lafayette College. He was a successful engineer and merchant and was Mayor of Bethlehem for 27

years, from 1886 to his death in 1913. That's even longer than Mayor Donchez!!

In 1900, prior to the expansion of the steel mills, the native Americans, Irish, and German immigrants dominated the population of South Bethlehem

Irish immigrants faced discrimination and were vilified as lazy, drunken, dishonest, and, as Catholics, un-American. The 19th century found most Irish immigrants and their first- and second-generation descendants at the bottom of the social and economic scale. "No Irish Need Apply" signs were frequently displayed. Strikes and violent confrontations between miners, steelworkers, and others against increasingly remote, wealthy, and autocratic owners did little to help.

However, those difficulties led Irish Americans to form strong community supports such as churches, parochial schools, colleges, social groups, beneficial societies, and political groups. These all helped promote many second and third generation Irish Americans into the middle class and into positions of social, economic, and political power in Pennsylvania and the nation.

In 1861, Holy Infancy Church was established as a parish in South Bethlehem and was the first Catholic church in Northampton County.

South Bethlehem's first Burgess, James McMahan, a respected Irish citizen, had been an active participant in the organization of Holy Infancy.

Patrick Briody, an Irish immigrant who came to America in 1850 from County Meath, Northern Ireland, was also a dedicated founding parishioner of Holy Infancy Church. Briody was Superintendent of Furnaces for The Bethlehem Iron Company. In March of 1894, he was appointed Postmaster of South Bethlehem, with the Post Office located at the corner of 4th and Brodhead Ave. Briody was also a member of the School Board and was on the committee for building the Central High School, and Webster, Excelsior, and Packer schools.

Like him, many community leaders of Irish descent contributed to the community by the close of the century, including John Donegan, Charles Quinn, James Broughal, and Thomas O'Reilly.

In 1912, James Bonner, brother to my grandmother Grace Bonner Crampsie, moved to Bethlehem from the coal region town of Summit Hill. James's parents had emigrated from County Donegal. James worked as an electrician at Bethlehem Steel as well as operated his own electrical business. James's daughter Cynthia Bonner was born in 1935. Cynthia graduated from Liberty High School and joined the Air Force upon graduation from nursing school. Cynthia rose to the rank of Lt. Colonel in the Air Force and served as an Air Evacuation Nurse in Vietnam and Director of Nursing at Howard AFB in Panama. She also assisted in the aftermath of the Reverend Jim Jones disaster. Later in life, she was exposed to the H1N1 virus which contributed to the downfall of her health.



In retirement she continued providing nursing services at Maher AFB and the county of Sacramento. She loved her country, her hometown of Bethlehem, and her Irish heritage. While she lived throughout the world, she always spoke fondly of her days growing up in Bethlehem, and Bethlehem was always close to her heart.

Bethlehem has been blessed with many Irish immigrants and their descendants contributing to our great city, and to those we are forever grateful.

In the present day, Bethlehem hosts the Celtic Cultural Alliance – an Educational non-profit organization that hosts the Annual Celtic Classic Festival and many other Celtic Cultural events throughout the year. The resurgence of Celtic Culture in the valley through organizations like the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Irish Dance Schools, and Scottish Pipe Bands made it a natural place to start one of the major Celtic Festivals in North America bringing almost 300,000 people annually to Bethlehem.

I wish to thank Joe McCarthy of Holy Infancy Parish and my good friend Timothy Briody, descendant of Patrick Briody, for their invaluable contribution to this Bethlehem Moment. And a special thanks to my

cousin Cynthia Bonner for her selfless contributions in serving our country.

May the road rise to meet you on this Holy, sacred day as Irish Americans pay homage to their patron Saint, Patrick. [This Bethlehem Moment was originally scheduled for March 17.]

Slainte and Sith!!

“Without a shared history, we are not a true community.”