

Whence came all these Roman Catholics?

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In May 1911, Thomas Watson, at that time, editor of *The Jeffersonian Magazine* published in Providence, Rhode Island, visited Cleveland, for his first, and perhaps only time. He was asked how he liked the city. He responded with a question, "Whence came all these Roman Catholics?" This question, I believe, is the place to start in this brief overview of the origin of Catholicism in the Western Reserve. Incidentally, the reason Mr. Watson was interviewed by the newspaper was a statement he had written in *The Jeffersonian Magazine* that month. He said, "The Roman Catholic hierarchy is the deadliest menace to our liberties and our civilization today."

I'm sure that all of you know the story of the founding and early settlement of Cleveland and the Western Reserve. Cleveland was part of a strange colonialism from its very beginning. When the survey of the Western Reserve, made by perhaps 40 men from Connecticut led by Moses Cleaveland, was completed in the fall of 1796, the surveyors returned to their homes and most of them, including General Cleaveland, never saw the city again. The land they surveyed into ranges, townships and lots was generally sold at auctions, and the purchasers of the land came out to settle on it. Often they were enticed by the lurid advertising - which bore only slight resemblance to the reality of the frontier, but having purchased the land, they had little choice except to occupy it. So they came west, generally in Conestoga wagons, grimly determined to make the whole area prosper. The area did prosper, but not during the short lifetimes of the original settlers.

The study of the early history of Cleveland reveals that the city, perhaps, never would have grown had it not been for the sense of the covenant the first settlers made with one another. This theory of covenant was borrowed from the Congregational Church of New England with which they were very familiar. The early settlers could not go home except in disgrace for failing to keep the covenant. In the case of Cleveland's early settlers, the covenant was one of money and community, as well as a covenant made with God and one's neighbors.

In any case, the settlers stayed. They endured cholera, fever, family tragedy from premature death, dreadful winters, mosquito-infested summers, homesickness and separation from the dynamics that were forming the states of the Eastern Seaboard into the United States. Especially helpful to these settlers was the town meeting which they had experienced back in Connecticut.

All of these factors caused a very tightly-knit Yankee community to become extremely proud of itself, homogeneous and confident of its future in the Connecticut Western Reserve. However, these factors all but guaranteed the failure of later settlers - non-Yankee arrivals in the Western Reserve - to become part of this community for the entire remainder of the Nineteenth century. These facts provide significant background that aids one in understanding the several ways in which later immigrants - most of whom were at least nominally Roman Catholic - who encountered this original Yankee community, found themselves rejected by the host culture and were forced in upon themselves. This was especially true for the first non-Yankees who came directly from Europe to the Western Reserve: the Irish, fleeing the catastrophic potato famine in Ireland; the Germans who came to this country to escape the laws of Catholic suppression in their home country; and, to a lesser extent, Bohemians, who came to the Western Reserve in search of great new wealth.

The original Catholic settlers in the Western Reserve did not arrive here in any significant numbers until 1845. Prior to that year, there was one church in Cleveland, St. Mary of the Flats, a small frame building which stood on Columbus Road at the corner of Girard Street in the Flats. There was one priest living in a cabin on the site occupied today by the Rose Building. There were 14 priests in the entire Western Reserve. With the advent of the potato famine in Ireland in 1845, immigration began. In 1845, there were a little over eight million people in Ireland; by 1853, there were five million people living in Ireland. Eighty-five per cent of those who left Ireland listed the place of destination as the United States. In the subsequent half-century, another three million Irish came to

this country. In that same time frame, more than three and a half million Germans came to this country. In those two immigrant groups were to be found the Catholic people who settled in the Western Reserve in the middle of the 19th century.

The census records for Cuyahoga County show that in 1834 the Catholic Church did not exist in Cleveland. In 1846 there were 4,000 Roman Catholics in the county. That same year, there were recorded 1,472 English-speaking Protestants. In 1850, there were 1,644 English-speaking Protestants. By 1860, the number had more than doubled. In contrast, by 1860 the number of Roman Catholics had grown to 13,145.

On April 9, 1847, responding to the petition of Bishop John B. Purcell of the Diocese of Cincinnati, which included the whole state of Ohio, Pope Pius IX established the new Roman Catholic Diocese of Cleveland. The new diocese extended from Indiana to Pennsylvania and from Lake Erie to the fortieth parallel of north latitude. For the bishop of the newly formed diocese, the Pope chose Fr. Louis Amadeus Rappe, a French-born missionary priest who had come to this country in 1840 at the invitation of Bishop Purcell. Prior to the establishment of the new diocese, Rappe had been working with immigrant Irish laborers in the Toledo area who were digging a new canal to connect the Wabash River with Lake Erie via the Maumee River.

After less than a year living in rented rooms in Cleveland, Bishop Rappe made the first of three major begging trips to his friends in Arras, France. He was in need of what every new bishop seeks - priests, women religious (i.e. nuns), and money. In 1849, Bishop Rappe returned to Cleveland with four recently-ordained priests, twelve teaching sisters, two nursing sisters, and a remarkably large sum of money. During his first ten years as Bishop of Cleveland, Rappe:

- 1) Built a new Cathedral, completed and dedicated in 1852, to replace St. Mary's of the Flats. The Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist was located at what is now East Ninth and Superior, occupying the same site where the Cathedral stands today.

- 2) Established St. Patrick Church on Bridge Avenue, the first church on the West Side, in 1853.

- 3) Began a convent school for girls in 1850 under the direction of the Ursuline Sisters in a mansion on the south side of Euclid Avenue at East Sixth. These nuns came from Arras, France, where the Bishop had been their chaplain prior to his coming to America.

- 4) Established an orphanage in 1851 on the West Side at Fulton and Monroe Street, staffing it with the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, a community he had established that same year.

- 5) Built Cleveland's first hospital, St. Vincent Charity, at E. 22 and Central Ave. He staffed the hospital with the same community of sisters who had staffed the orphanage. The hospital marked a radical departure from the Catholic policy which previously had institutions serving only Catholics. St. Vincent Charity was open to all, especially wounded Union soldiers who, during the Civil War, were frequently discharged from the Army at the place where they were wounded. Prior to St. Vincent Charity, such servicemen had no place for professional care in Cleveland.

- 6) Opened a seminary in 1848 in a barn in the rear of a house he had leased for his residence at East Sixth Street. That site is occupied by the Public Auditorium today.

As the immigrant population of the Diocese began to swell, parishes and schools sprang up in Cleveland and in the hamlets and villages of Northern Ohio. There was Immaculate Conception at East 41 and Superior for the Irish from Mayo; St. Peter's on Superior at East 17 for the Germans from the Rhineland; St. Patrick's on Bridge Avenue for the Irish from Galway and Sligo; St. Mary's on West 30 Street near Lorain for the Germans from Alsace; St. Wenceslas at East 37 Street and Broadway for the Slovaks. There were churches established in Painesville, Ashtabula, South Thompson, Madison, Youngstown, Warren, Hubbard, Niles, Mantua, Cuyahoga Falls, Akron, Doylestown, Rockport, Avon, Lorain, Norwalk, Fremont, Wooster, Sandusky, Huron, Elyria, Randolph, Milan, Valley City, Sheffield, and so many more -- all of this in ten to fifteen years.

At the close of the First Vatican Council in the summer of 1870, Bishop Rappe resigned his diocese. He was aging and partially blind. He went to Burlington, Vermont where his closest friend,

Louis De Goesbriand was bishop. There he spent the last seven years of his life visiting and serving the isolated French communities along the north shore of Lake Champlain. In Cleveland, the 14 priests he started with had become 117; there were 90 parishes in the Western Reserve, each with its own school. There were four orphanages, a major hospital and two homes for the aged.

But given these statistics, how was life for the early Catholic immigrant in the Western Reserve? The following points may be close to describing that reality.

1) By 1845-50, the Irish or German immigrants who would be coming to Cleveland knew that there was no place for them on the Eastern Seaboard. They began to move westward shortly after disembarking from the immigrant ships in the harbors of New York, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia or Charleston. They often found jobs working on the railroad which Commander Vanderbilt was building connecting New York with Chicago and, a few years later, with St. Louis.

2) The cities in which they first settled were along the railroad right-of-way. These were also cities which were beginning to participate in the Industrial Revolution - Albany, Rochester, Buffalo, Erie, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Chicago and St. Louis.

3) By 1847, iron-making mills were springing up in the city. Iron ore had been discovered in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and after the locks were opened at Sault St. Marie, boats could bring the ore directly to docks in Cleveland. A large steel mill was opened in Newburgh in 1855. One can easily locate its abandoned buildings today, running parallel to Broadway from East 75 Street to East 93 Street.

4) The Irish were the least skilled of all immigrants. They had been farmers in Ireland. With the famine, the land betrayed them. Regardless of the nature of the work, they generally spurned the inviting rural land. The Irish were familiar with the English language but could neither read nor write it. In Ireland the laws of Catholic suppression made it a crime for Catholics to be taught to read or write.

Roughly half the German immigrants of the 1840s-50s settled as farmers west of the Cuyahoga River in Lorain, Erie and Seneca counties. The Germans were far more literate than the Irish, but in their own language. The Slovaks settled around the huge oil refinery created by John D. Rockefeller in the Flats below East 37 Street. They had been skilled barrel makers in Europe and Mr. Rockefeller's refinery had its own barrel-making facility.

5) The immigrants who settled in the city exchanged their raw physical labor for \$6 a week working on the docks on the Cuyahoga unloading the ships with wheelbarrows or in the mills. There was little chance for any kind of upward mobility for these people. They lacked skills of any kind and were perceived to be lawless. Moreover, they were quick to discover that the mills, the docks and ships were all owned by Yankees, who also seemed to own the city itself. And to the Irish immigrant, these third generation Yankees seemed to be close kin to the landlords who had so brutally suppressed them for two centuries in Ireland.

6) For their part, the Yankees saw the massive influx of these new and strange people as the beginning of a vast threat to their serene American enclave.

7) At least three-fourths of those immigrants were Roman Catholic. The original Western Reserve settlers were not and they feared greatly the possibility of the domination of their society by both the Pope of Rome and the Church of Rome.

8) These immigrants were the first non-Yankees to arrive in Cleveland. Hence neither group had any knowledge of acculturation in which they might find hope of becoming "like us," or "like them", depending on one's point of view.

9) At first, the immigrants were remarkably unruly. *The Cleveland Leader*, a notoriously anti-Irish newspaper, claimed that between 1845 and 1870, 90% of violent crimes were committed by the Catholic immigrants.

10) The immigrant Irish and Germans had no previous experience with representative government, orderly town meetings, or consensus in decision making. Yet, as soon as they became citi-

zens, they were given the vote with little preparation or knowledge of issues. Moreover, the Yankees saw the Irish and German reputations for revolutionary tactics in the presence of tyranny in Europe as a positive threat to the whole system of state and national political life.

11) These immigrants, when they arrived, found no organized societies of their kinsmen to welcome them, nor were there any agencies which could even help them think through the trauma of immigration. Nearly all ethnic groups who arrived in Cleveland and the Western Reserve after 1855 found such agencies or organizations.

12) The voyage across the sea, all by itself, was an event loaded with fear and risk. Babies were born aboard ship, mothers and fathers died aboard ship, contagious disease ran rampant on many ships; in some cases 90% of the passengers died on these six- week voyages. The immigrant who survived the trip seldom spoke of the voyage once he was in America. It was hardly the passage for which the immigrant might have hoped and by the time he or she arrived in the Western Reserve, the question as to whether the whole thing was worth the effort had a devastating effect on the hope the immigrant had once possessed.

The Yankee understood none of this and was genuinely puzzled by the rootlessness and consequent psychological disorientation of the immigrant. And without any attempt to excuse the fact, it must be admitted that the German and, to a greater degree, the Irish immigrant had a real or potential problem with the abuse of alcohol which, in 1847, was cheaper than water in Cleveland. For the descendant of the Puritan living in Cleveland at that same time, sobriety was one of the most cherished virtues. For him, any lack of sobriety was much more than a troublesome annoyance. It was a sin which could not be tolerated.

Thus did the Catholic immigrant and the Yankee, rooted in New England Puritanism, encounter one another in Cleveland between 1845 and 1860.

What happened?

Power was in the hands of the Yankees in Cleveland. Their reaction to the immigrants followed several predictable steps. The first was to generally withdraw altogether from any part of "our" city in which immigrants settled. These areas of immigrant settlement became so densely populated that they had to be noticed by the Yankee population and, indeed, they were noticed. The newspapers of the day gave vivid descriptions of the scenes, condemning the squalor, the crime and the general lack of good citizenship displayed by the immigrants. There was, however, not the slightest hint as to how to help these newly arrived immigrants and not a bit of sympathy for their plight. There were no organized programs of public health or sanitation, adequate housing or job opportunity, not the whisper of a hope on the part of the Yankees that the immigrants might become useful citizens of their new land and city. Quite the contrary was true.

Political forces already in motion in other major cities in this country in the form of the Nativist American Movement came alive in Cleveland. All sorts of laws, which have been well described by Carlton Beals in his book, *The Brass Knuckle Crusade*, became part of the legal and punitive system in Cleveland. The immigrants drew in upon themselves, responded with more violence and with a deep hopelessness.

This was the sociological condition of the Western Reserve when the Diocese of Cleveland was formed, to which so much of the earlier part of this paper is directed.

The perception that the creation of the Diocese of Cleveland saved the early Cleveland immigrants for the Church, from the perspective of a later time, is very accurate. But why? Historians have noted often that about one in ten Irish immigrants and, perhaps, one in eight German immigrants who arrived here in the late 1840's went to church regularly in their country of origin. Did those patterns of behavior change for these people when they arrived here? The answer clearly is yes. I should like to close this paper with much of the text of a letter written by a newly arrived pastor in Youngstown to Archbishop Purcell in which the priest gives a remarkable picture of his parish, St. Columba, in 1871. In it he gives an exceptional portrait of the work of his predecessor,

Eugene M. O'Callahan, who was the first resident pastor of Youngstown. The time span to which this letter alludes is 1861 to 1871.

On September 18, 1871, Fr. Walter Gibbons wrote to Archbishop John Purcell:

Most. Rev. Archbishop,

What I write in this letter I write in obedience to my conscience and without prompting on the advice of anyone.

I have now been the successor of Rev. Eugene M. O'Callaghan for four weeks. This congregation in Youngstown is in every respect, a splendid one. It is morally in the best condition; as to temporal affairs, in my opinion nothing less than wonders have been accomplished. A magnificent Gothic Church, very large and beautiful, gives the Catholics of this place a sense of pride that they have the largest and grandest church in the region in which good churches are not few...

The People are proud to be Catholics and the enemies of the church have been silenced in the public press by my predecessor...

While dealing with the enemies of the church, and breaking down the prejudices of the Americans who, in the end, became most attached to him, he did not forget his sacerdotal duties. When he came to Youngstown over 10 years ago, these people were very poor, most degraded by the vice of intemperance, few in number and caring little for the Church. He worked among them literally night and day, recalling the erring, reforming the vicious, strengthening the weak, giving firm kindness to the obstinate, changing with God's blessing the relentless, in a word, transforming a mass of mean despicable drunkards into respectable, earnest, God-fearing Catholics who are a real credit to the Church. This is no exaggeration; the solid facts forbid me to say otherwise. There are honorable men who now are wealthy and exemplary who declare quite openly, that to Fr. O'Callaghan, under God, they owe their reclamation from immorality and vice. To his teaching, in private and in public, they attribute the successful cultivation of that beautiful sense of Christian honor and uprightness, which commends them even more than their wealth, to the respect of the whole community.

He built this church here all the while attending 17 missions in the Mahoning Valley. He dug out the foundations with his own hands, assisted by a few good men who came to help him after their day's work in the steel mill. If he had not done something like that to rally the people and perhaps shame some of them into action, of precious little account would be the church of Youngstown today....

Father O'Callaghan is most highly respected and esteemed by all classes of this community. The best Americans deplore his going as a loss and a calamity. Only last Saturday night, the former Governor of this state told me that as far as the keeping of the peace in this city, he was of greater service than the entire police force. Only the saloon keepers and the dance house keepers rejoiced at his going....

I believe that this letter which reveals so much of the life of an immigrant pastor working with immigrant people is deeply significant. In a way, it speaks to the topic of this symposium which concerns itself with the origin of religion in the Western Reserve.