

# Fall River's Irish fled famine

By MARC MUNROE DION  
Herald News Staff Reporter

FALL RIVER — Few immigrants arrive in America fleeing happiness in their own country.

The Irish who came to Fall River fled not the Ireland of songs and sentiment, but the Ireland of the 1840s, where hundreds of thousands fled or starved after the potato crop failed. Those who left walked to crowded emigrant ships past ditches full of the dead, some of them with mouths stained green from eating grass.

Arriving in America desperately poor, the Irish took whatever work they could get. In Fall River, that meant menial jobs, including those in the textile mills.

The first wave of Irish Catholics arrived in Fall River in the 1820s, but a flood of the Irish arrived when the famine hit their home country. They were attracted to Fall River because there was work rebuilding the center of the city, destroyed by fire in 1843.

The greatest influx of the Irish occurred after the Civil War. Many Irish immigrated to Fall River from England, where they had gone to escape the famine. They came in families or in pairs or alone. They sent money back to bring more relatives over. The women worked in the mills or as servants. The men did anything they could.

At the end of the Civil War, Fall River counted 273 residents of Irish birth. By 1875, there were 9,074 people of Irish birth in Fall River. That number was sufficient for the Irish to control the city's Ward 11.

They came from all the counties of Ireland and their Catholic faith was their most unifying feature. In Fall River, St. Mary's Cathedral was built largely by Irish immigrants who did much of the work at night, after finishing their day's labors.



The Irish tended to settle in Corky Row, in the South End or in the hodgepodge of neighborhoods known as "below the hill."

At first, they were met with the bigotry that the native English Protestants most often felt for immigrants of the Catholic faith. The "Know-Nothing" movement, a violently anti-Catholic nativist group, had plenty of adherents in Fall River.

The icy welcome received by the Irish in America made little difference to the Irish. They would not consider being anything other than Catholic and they couldn't be made to go back to Ireland. For the Irish who came in the 1840s, Ireland was one vast graveyard.

They established neighborhoods and churches. The great advantage the Irish immigrants had was their ability to speak English. Coupled with a long tradition of organized resistance against the British in Ireland, this meant the Irish weren't long in acquiring political power — power they retain in Massachusetts to this very day.

By the end of the 1800s, Irish political power was an established fact. In 1885, John W. Cummings became mayor of Fall River, as he did in 1887 and 1888. Dr. John W. Coughlin was mayor

from 1891 to 1894 and attorney John T. Coughlin held that office from 1905 to 1910.

History records the arrival of Patrick and Helen Kennedy and their five children, who found their way to Fall River from Ireland in the 1820s, just as history records the 350 Sullivans listed as heads of households in the 1880 city directory.

During the early years, the Irish organized and sent money back to Ireland, usually through organizations like the Friends of Ireland, formed in 1841. In the first two months of the winter of 1847, a relief committee in Fall River raised \$2,500 for Ireland — an incredible sum of money, considering that most Irish in Fall River were poor.

During the centuries, the Irish were often led, or at least personified, by the Catholic clergy. In Fall River, that meant the Rev. Edward Murphy, who tended the sick during Fall River's cholera epidemic in the 1840s and Bishop James E. Cassidy, famous for his preaching against liquor and economic injustice.

And the Irish left their mark, not just in Democratic politics, but in the Irish names that abound in Fall River and the St. Patrick's Day celebrations that remind some of us of who we are.

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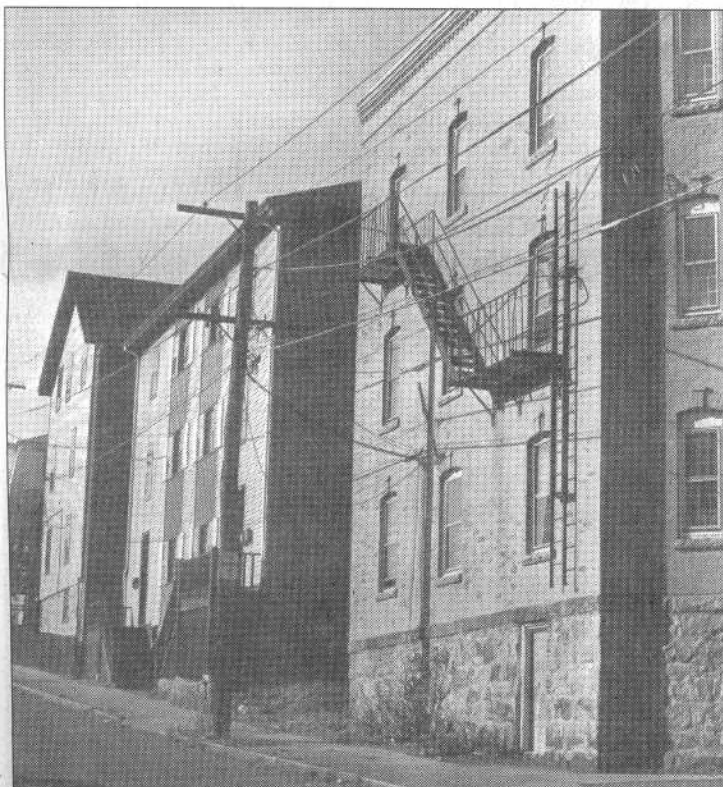
## Robert Irvin first Irish in

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Fall River — The Irish presence in the city began long before the Potato Famine drove immigrants from the south of Ireland to America.

The pages of *The Herald News* record that the man generally considered to be Fall River's "first Irishman" was from Northern Ireland.

The man's name was Robert Irving, and he was living in Boston when he was



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*Herald News File Photos*

### g was city's immigrant

hired by Fall River's Thomas Durfee to drive a ram from that city to this. When Irving arrived in this area, Durfee offered him work on his farm. The only prerequisite to getting the job was that Irving sign up to fight in the Revolutionary War. Irving complied.

After he died in 1831, Irving was buried in the North Burial Ground.

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These photos, taken in 1980, show Fall River's Corky Row neighborhood. Many poor Irish settled in Corky Row and its tenements during the waves of immigration in the 1820s and after the Civil War. Clockwise from top left, a home is decked with potted plants; two dogs inhabit a small yard which nestles between several tenements, where clothes hang out to dry; a cobblestone street in Corky Row retains an old-world flair; living in tenements like these was hard for poor Irish immigrants, as it is for the working-class people who live there now.

