

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI

By Rachel Hines

“Living with the Mississippi” is a blog series that examines the history of the river flats communities and what it means to almost literally live on the Mississippi River.

Follow along to learn more about life on the Mississippi prior to luxury condos and clean river water, before the riverfront was considered a desirable place to live.

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LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE CONNEMARA PATCH

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The Connemara Patch, also known as South Phalen Creek, was a community located adjacent to Swede Hollow until 1908, when it was dispersed by railroad construction.[i] Though there were a number of ethnic groups represented at this small and short-lived settlement, many of the

residents were from Ireland or the United Kingdom. The name of the community has origins in the Connemara region of Ireland, which saw a terrible famine in the late 19th century. Catholic Bishop John Ireland of St. Paul, hoping to alleviate some of the poverty, brought a group



“Happy Hollow, Connemara Patch.” Painting by Wilbur Hausener, 1935.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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of Connemara settlers to Graceville, Minnesota in 1880.

[ii] This project failed for a number of reasons, explained in an article by Father John Shannon for Minnesota History Magazine.

After barely surviving the harsh winter of 1880-1881, many of the settlers left their farms to take industrial jobs in the Twin Cities, establishing a settlement in the Connemara Patch. Poverty seems to have followed the Connemara settlers there, as the area along Phalen Creek was considered to have some of the worst housing conditions in St. Paul.[iii] Articles in the St. Paul Globe with titles like "Sad Case of Destitution" and "In Homes of Want" describe the miserable conditions of the community, the latter noting that the "little hovel" was "small, contracted and unfit for any human to live in," and that at the Connemara Patch "filth reigns supreme." [iv]

Two other river flats communities, the West Side Flats in St. Paul and the Bohemian Flats in Minneapolis, were both referred to as the Connemara Patch at times as well. [v] Though there was a large Irish population at the West Side Flats into the 1900s, as well as a much smaller Irish presence at the Bohemian Flats, it is unclear whether these settlers were actually a part of the Connemara clan or if this was a name used to designate any poor, Irish enclave. In her book, *Forgetting Ireland*, Bridget Connolly discusses how "Conamara" became a slang term in Graceville to describe "a lazy, drunken, no-good son of a bitch, too dumb to farm, a welfare bum." [vi] It wasn't until she visited the Connemara region that she connected the term to the place, understanding it had been used to describe a group of people by ethnicity, not character. It seems possible that this phenomenon may have occurred in the Twin Cities as well.

Though the Connemara Patch's history is short and is often lumped with the story of Swede Hollow, it has continued to captivate local historians and audiences. In 2011, SteppingStone Theatre produced "Get Up Your Irish" by Natalie O'Shea of The Celtic Junction, an Irish heritage organization which has hosted tours of the Connemara Patch. [vii] This play explored the tensions between the new Irish immigrants at the Connemara Patch and the more

MISERY'S DEPTH.

It is Found in the Shanties of the
Connemara Colo-
nists.

How their Half-Clad, Half-Fed In-
mates Passed Through the
Blizzard.

Such Scenes of Abject Poverty
Never Before Witnessed in
Minnesota.

The Fuel almost Exhausted, and
no Means of Securing Fresh
Supplies.

A Little Meal and Flour the Only
Food now Remain-
ing.

Immediate Relief Demanded—
What the Morris Good Sa-
maritans are Doing.

A Tribune Representative Visits
the Habitations of the
Poor Wretches.

Minneapolis Tribune Headline on Front Page, January 1,
1891, about the Connemara colony at Graceville.

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established Irish community in the city of St. Paul. [viii]
The story of the original Connemara settlers continues to be told through publications like Grace Connolly's book, mentioned above, and Seosamh Ó Cuaig's documentary "Graceville: The Connemaras in Minnesota," [ix] both of

which offer a look into an event considered by many to be Bishop John Ireland's greatest mistake. The history of the Connemara Patch, though short and troubled, is definitely a unique story, and will likely continue to serve as an example of the complications in immigration and assimilation.

Further Reading:

- Father Shannon's article on Bishop Ireland's "Connemara Experiment" from Minnesota History Magazine: <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHHistoryMagazine/articles/35/v35i05p205-213.pdf>
- St. Paul Historical Article on the Connemara Patch, "St. Paul's Most Unique Settlement: http://saintpaulhistorical.com/items/show/9#.U6CMS_IdVSR
- National Park Service website about the Bruce Vento Sanctuary, the nature preserve near the former Connemara Patch: http://www.nps.gov/miss/parknews/venhto_auth-clark.htm
- Tour St. Paul's walking tour of the Dayton's Bluff area: <http://www.historicsaintpaul.org/files/Daytons%20Bluff%20Web.pdf>

Footnotes:

[i] Trimble, Steve. "St. Paul's Most Unique Settlement." St. Paul Historical. <http://saintpaulhistorical.org/items/show/9?tour=1&index=6#.U5n9lvldVSR>

[ii] Shannon, James P. "Bishop Ireland's Connemara Experiment." Minnesota History (March 1957) 205-213.

[iii] Aronovici, Carol. Housing Conditions in the City of Saint Paul. Saint Paul, MN: The Wilder Foundation, 1917.

[iv] "In Homes of Want." St. Paul Globe 2 December 1887." and "Sad Case of Destitution." St. Paul Globe 15 January 1900.

[v] "Sensational Story Growing out of a West Side Fracas over Fuel." St. Paul Globe. 12 May 1890. and "Two Men Badly Slashed: Fourteen Kegs of Beer Cause a Serious Cutting Affray and a Wedding Down on the Flats." Minneapolis Tribune 20 May 1891.

[vi] Connelly, Bridget. Forgetting Ireland. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2003, page 12.

[vii] "Tour! Connemara Patch Irish, October 1." The Celtic Junction, 2011. <http://www.thecelticjunction.com/home/past-events-2011/tour-connemara-patch-irish-october-1/>

[viii] Pleasants, Deb. "At SteppingStone Theatre, "Get Up Your Irish" tells the story of Irish immigration to Minnesota." Twin Cities Daily Planet, March 10, 2011. <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/arts/get-up-your-irish-steppingstone-theatre-preview>

[ix] This video, produced in Galway in 1996, can be difficult to find in the U.S. However, the Minnesota Historical Society has a copy in their archives.