Irish Immigrant Experience in Holyoke-

Patrick Hogan-March 1, 2022

Honorable Mayor of Holyoke, Josh Garcia, Marc Joyce, President of the Holyoke St. Patrick’s Committee, public officials, members of the AOH/LAOH, Parade Committee, and Irish Cultural Center of Western

New England:

The Month of March is a Celebration of our diversity. It is a time when we together cast aside our differences to welcome the onset of Spring, enjoy Irish Culture with fine music, marching bands, and of course, enjoyable corned beef and cabbage.

The Month of March has been designated by Congress in 1991 as Irish American Heritage Month to recognize the contributions Irish Americans have made to the country.

John Riley, Irishman, one of the first European settlers, travelled upstream from Springfield in 1636 and established the third parish of West Springfield and by 1786 then became known as “Ireland”.

According to the late Union News Editor Dick Garvey, “for 60 years Holyoke was nick-named “Ireland Parish”, on March 1, 1847, the Postmaster changed the parish to “Ireland Depot”. The name continued until the Northern part of West Springfield became Holyoke after William Pynchon’s son in law and explorer, Elizur Holyoke on March 14, 1850.” Many Irish Immigrants lived in “The Patch”, referred to as Prospect Park in 1840’s and later named Pulaski Park in 1939 after Revolutionary War hero Casmir Pulaski. The Park originally did not have a defined use.

In early city plans of the 1840’s, the park became known as “the Patch”, a place where Irish Immigrant workers, who built the cities canals and infrastructure, built a shantytown. Holyoke became known as “the Paper City” with 25 paper mills along the canals. The Irish helped to build the canals, dam, factories, railroads, and mills. Sometime during the period of 1865-1884, the shanties were eliminated and the informal use of the park began. Irish residents called it Kerry Park after County Kerry because the green views of the surrounding areas the park afforded.

The Connecticut River Valley experienced an influx of Irish Immigrants in the wake of the “potato famine” that ravaged Ireland. By 1855, the Irish constituted a third of the approximate inhabitants of the newly named town of Holyoke.

The Irish faced discrimination, and hostility from native born residents because of their generally low level of education and impoverished living conditions. It has been noted that the classified ads in the New York Times of November 10, 1854 had “No Irish Need Apply” in 29 ads. Each decade brought more immigrants from different countries, and each group of immigrants brought their own customs and religion with them. The immigrants made Holyoke a diverse community.

Then Senator John F. Kennedy received the “Outstanding Citizen of Irish Descent Award” in 1958 from the Holyoke St. Patrick’s Parade Committee in front of the Holyoke City Hall.

Five months before his assassination President Kennedy travelled to Ireland. On June 28, 1963, he spoke to the National Parliament of Ireland at Leinster House: “No country has contributed to the building of my own than your sons and daughters. They came to our shores in a mixture of hope and agony and I would not underrate the difficulties of their course once they arrived in the United States. They left behind heart, fields, and a nation yearning to be free. It is no wonder that James Joyce described the Atlantic as a bowl of bitter tears.”

The 69th Holyoke St Patrick’s Parade will kick off at the Kmart Plaza at around 11:10A. The Hibernians will be present with 2 floats-one of which is the famous Irish Dancer’s float, and the second will hold a contingent from the AOH/LAOH.

We salute the good will that the Parade brings to the City of Holyoke and its presence serves to unite all people of this great city. Welcome back!