

The Irish in the Civil War

Irish immigrants had a complex relationship to the Civil War. Individuals of Irish ancestry fought on both sides of the conflict. Some were eager to join the fray; others felt it was not their fight and were more focused on the cause of Irish nationalism in their home country.

Certainly many of Irish ancestry fought on the Confederate side during the War, particularly the so-called “Scotch-Irish.” Their forbearers were typically Scottish Presbyterians who had been “planted” in Ireland during the 17th century by the English, primarily in Ulster, in order to help subdue the Irish population. This group had begun immigrating to America as early as the colonial period, and the last big wave of “Scotch Irish” immigration took place in the early 19th century. As a result, there were fewer foreign-born soldiers of Irish descent in the Confederate Army.

Irish Catholics from the other three provinces of Ireland came to the United States in greater numbers at a later date. Many came in the mid- to late-1840s, prompted by the specter of famine. Many in this wave of immigration settled in northern port cities, such as Boston, Philadelphia, and New York and were also drawn inland to the fast-growing cities of the Midwest, such as Chicago, St. Louis, and Cleveland. However, Irish Catholic immigrants found scant welcome. The greater the number of immigrants, the more the chorus grew of nativist opposition to their presence; anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment swelled to a crescendo in the early 1850s.

Churches, convents, and schools were burned. Irish immigrants were refused jobs or were harassed on the job. The Ancient Order of Hibernians was founded in 1836 in New York to support and protect Catholics, and the organization spread across the country as the nativist movement grew into the “Know Nothing” party in the early 1850s. (The name of the party came from the stock response given when a nativist was questioned about a hate crime.) Some Irish immigrants concluded that their stay in the States should be brief; they kept their attention on Irish politics and joined the radical Fenian movement to advance the cause of Irish nationalism.

Small wonder that some Irish Catholics were ambivalent about serving in the Civil War. Many felt more at home in the Democratic Party of the day and were wary of the “pro-war” Republicans. On the low rung of the economic ladder, they resented being drafted when the rich could buy their way out of service, and they feared that freed slaves would take the jobs they could barely obtain. Irish men played a prominent role in the draft riots in New York in 1863—as was noted in the press of the day.

And yet it is estimated that 150,000 Irish-born men joined the Union army. Cleveland’s Hibernian Guard, a militia formed by 1849, at the peak of famine immigration, became the nucleus of Company B of the 8th Regiment of Ohio Volunteers, which was led by Captain William Kinney. Cleveland’s Irish-born soldiers fought with particular distinction at Gettysburg. (After the war, Kinney attained the rank of sergeant in Cleveland’s newly formed police department; 38 Hibernian Guards marched in Kinney’s funeral procession in 1870.)



The Late Sergeant Kinney.
Resolutions of Respect Adopted by the Police Department and by the Hibernian Guards—The Obsequies.
 There are but few persons in Cleveland whose death would be so widely regretted as is the loss of Sergeant William Kinney, of the Police. Though not often prominently before the public, yet he had been a resident of this city many years and was known and admired by more people than scarce any one now living. His virtues were many, and his faults, if he had any, were not apparent. He was a friend to the poor and the erring, and many an unfortunate one will always remember him for unostentatious deeds of kindness.
 On Saturday evening the surviving members of the Hibernian Guards who are now residents of Cleveland met and adopted the following resolutions in memory of their former Captain:

Many immigrant soldiers would presumably have agreed with the ideals articulated by Lieutenant Timothy Lynch in a letter written to his father during the campaign against Charleston on March 7, 1863. Lynch was the Irish-born great uncle of Clevelander Pierce Mullally (copies of his Civil War letters have recently been donated to the Western Reserve Historical Society).

The only consolation left for the soldier is that he sacrifices his life for that which is dearer to him than all--which is the maintenance of a free and independent Nation, whether he be native born or foreign born. The latter case is mine & as experience has taught me to love the free & independent institutions of my adopted country, I deem it my duty & that of all others, without doing manifest injury to an aged Parent, to enter into the same cause: to uphold this great & glorious Republic, which has sustained us in our time of need. Although being a child when you immigrated to this country, I know enough of the past history of your native land to confirm any Idea of its result. Were you still an inhabitant of that place, under the tyrannical yoke of England, your situation [and] that of your children, would, nor could, be compared with your present Situation. This is the conclusion I have come to as regards all adopted citizens. Consequently they should all do their utmost to sustain the government in its present difficulties. *[Spelling and punctuation have been modernized.]*

Captain James K. O'Reilly

by J C. Sullivan

James K. O'Reilly (pictured to the left) was returning from Sunday Mass at Cleveland's St. Edward Church on Woodland Avenue when news posters announced the assault on Ft. Sumter, South Carolina. America's Civil War began on that April day. O'Reilly, born in County Cork in 1838, came to Cleveland in 1858 via New York City. He and his Irish friends James Butler and Thomas Galwey (pictured below) were anxious to join Union forces before the fight was over. They hurried to the armory of the Hibernian Guards and enlisted for three months, officially becoming Co. B, 8th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. When it was all over, almost five years later, the 8th Ohio would have 97 men present for muster-out out of a total 990 that began the unit.

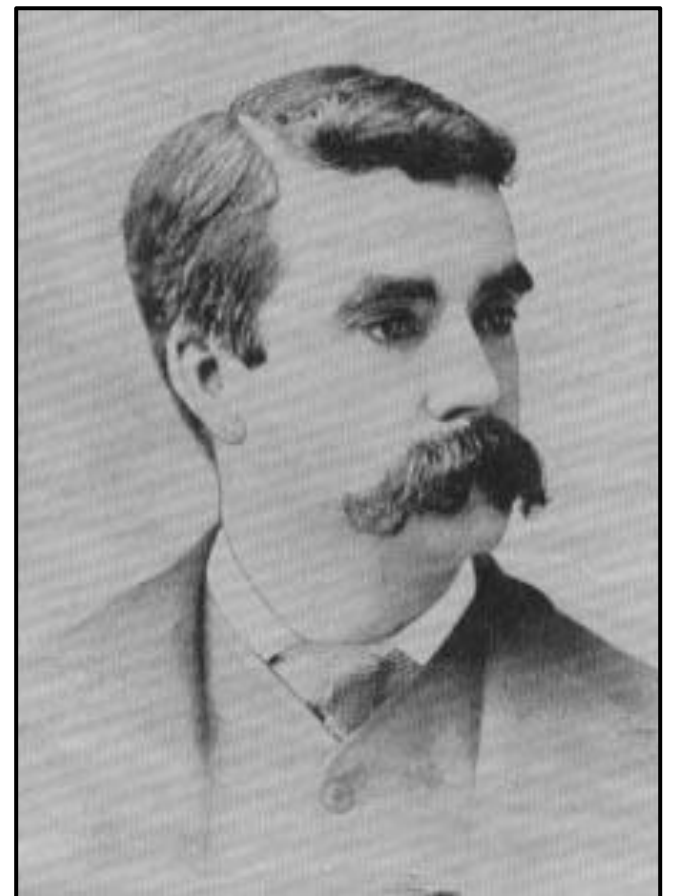
The honorable Kenneth R. Callahan, formerly a Common Pleas Court Judge in Cuyahoga County, is a direct descendent of Captain O'Reilly, his maternal grandfather's father. He honors the spirit of his colorful and gallant forebear by insuring Americans don't forget the deeds and valor of the 8th Ohio, a unit that fought fiercely in most of the major battles of the Potomac Army. He also wants to insure that history accurately reflects the role they played in turning the famous 'Pickett's Charge' at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in July of 1863.

By June, General Robert E. Lee's rag-tag forces had moved into the farmlands of Pennsylvania, rich in the much-needed resources of food, material and steed. The march to Gettysburg was brutally hot. Unlike modern armies, neither side at Gettysburg had winter and summer uniforms - only heavy wool. Some were lucky to have shoes. During the march it was frightfully hot. O'Reilly suffered sunstroke and went by horse-drawn ambulance to Gettysburg. "When he found out the 8th was positioned outside the Emmitsburg Road," said Callahan, "he left the hospital and ran out and joined the company there." O'Reilly, deathly ill, arrived at Gettysburg on July 3rd, after the first day of battle.

Colonel William Carroll (of the Maryland Carrolls) ordered the Hibernians immediately into a cornfield between the Union lines on Cemetery Ridge and Confederate lines on Seminary Ridge, with orders were to push rebel sharpshooters back. With this advanced picket line established, O'Reilly's Hibernians spent the night there while the rest of the brigade was pulled out by General Hancock to support other areas. Confederate sharpshooters reminded them of their closeness throughout the evening by shooting at them. On the morning of the 4th, General Lee, believing the center of the Union line to be weakened, opened up his attack with a two hour artillery barrage. General Lee followed this up by sending fifteen thousand graybacks into the fray. The 150 - 180 men of the 8th Ohio poured rifle fire into the left flank of James J. Pettigrew's division. The surprised Southerners, led by gallant officers on horseback, broke and retreated. "...the first sign of faltering came from Colonel J.M. Brockenbrough's brigade of Virginians who, under Pettigrew, were stationed in the extreme left of the advance, that is, directly in front of the 8th Ohio," Callahan related. With Sawyer admitting their 'blood was up', he then turned his men ninety degrees and fired into the flank of Joseph Davis' brigade. When Union commanders saw this development, they sent reinforcements down to turn the attack. The 8th advanced, cutting off three regiments, capturing their colors and many soldiers. Afterwards, an attempt was made to discharge Colonel Sawyer from the service for it was believed he was drunk...one would think that no commander in his right mind would attempt such a maneuver with such a small force.

Later that summer, after the battle of Gettysburg, the 8th Ohio was sent to New York City for riot duty. In August, 1865, at the war's end, O'Reilly returned to New York City and married Susan O'Brien at St. Stephen's Parish. The couple came to Cleveland and resided at 189 Quincy Ave., where they raised seven children. Part of the time he worked for Thomas Jones & Sons Monument Co., which was located at E. 28th & Prospect Ave. Because of his disability from his Gettysburg sunstroke, however, he was never able to work for long periods of time. He tried to get a pension the rest of his life in a protracted struggle with the War Department. His widow was finally awarded one thirty years after his death, in 1930. In 1900, after a funeral Mass at St. Edward's Church, O'Reilly was laid to rest in St. John's cemetery, next to the church. His stone, erected by his daughter, says simply, "Captain J.K. O'Reilly." Judge Callahan met Captain O'Reilly's daughter, Isabelle, in 1952. She blamed her father for the fact that she never married. "She claimed every time somebody came over to see her he pulled them into the parlor and kept them up until midnight telling stories about the Civil War."

A longer version of this article by J. C. Sullivan has appeared in Ancient Order of Hibernian Division newsletters and is also available on the Irish American Archives Society website at www.irisharchives.org, on the "Local History Links" page. Photograph of James K. O'Reilly (*above*) courtesy of the Hon. Ken Callahan. Photographs of Thomas Galwey and Captain O'Reilly's gravesite at St. John Cemetery, courtesy of J. C. Sullivan.



William J. Gleason and the Soldiers and Sailors Monument

There are numerous Irish names among the 9,000 carved into the walls inside the Soldiers and Sailors Monument on Cleveland's Public Square. But the name of one Irishman deserves to be better remembered for the key role that he played in shepherding the monument from its conception in 1879 to its dedication in 1894--that of William J. Gleason.

A Civil War veteran, Gleason first proposed a commemorative monument in 1879. He subsequently served as the first and long-time president of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument Commission. Since 1894, the Monument has been a fixture on Public Square, but the story of its building was a turbulent one—as told by Gleason himself in a volume whose full title reads: *History of the Cuyahoga County soldiers' and sailors' monument. Scenes and incidents from its inception to its completion.--Description of the memorial structure, and roll of honor.* Gleason's book recounts the uphill battle fought by a passionate group of upstart veterans against the city's establishment.

Who was William J. Gleason? Born in County Clare to Patrick and Margaret Gleason in about 1846, he came to the United States with his parents while still an infant. Arriving in Vermont, the family made their way to Cleveland by 1850. Young William was out on the city streets hawking newspapers by the age of 11, and by the age of 14 or 15, at the start of the Civil War, he was working in the print composing room for the *Plain Dealer*. Gleason bought a drum and tried to enlist as a drummer boy, but his parents dragged him home. Not quite 18, he finally snuck away to enlist in 1864 and served in the final year of the war with the 150th Ohio Volunteer Regiment. After the war, Gleason worked again for the *Plain Dealer* in several capacities before later becoming an insurance agent.

Fifteen years elapsed between Gleason's proposal in 1879 and the Monument's dedication in 1894. The machinations of those who sought to prevent it from being built on Public Square are too labyrinthine to be recounted here in full. Suffice it to say that Gleason's adversaries always hastened to claim that they did not, of course, object to a Monument honoring the heroic service of Civil War veterans. The sticking point was the location--though Gleason's political sympathies may have had something to do with their opposition as well. At the same time that he was butting heads with the city's powerbrokers, Gleason was also actively working for the cause of Ireland's freedom. He was involved in the nationalist Land League movement of the 1880s, served as the Ohio delegate to the Irish National League, and was an officer of several local Irish American organizations.

As Gleason recounts it, when the Monument was first proposed, the city's monied interests had already been planning to extend Euclid Avenue through the southeast quadrant of Public Square so that the East Cleveland Street Railway Company could operate a commercial streetcar service along the length of the extended avenue. The southeast quadrant of Public Square also happened to be the preferred site of the Monument group.

A series of pitched battles ensued, as bitter as the ones the veterans actually fought to preserve the Union. Since the veterans' service had been for the common good, they felt that the Monument should be paid for by public money. They petitioned the county for a tax levy, wisely sought a broader base of support for the plan from the state legislature, and set up a Soldiers and Sailors Monument Commission. At first, Cleveland's Park Commission, headed at the time by J.H. Wade, took the lead in opposing the plan because it would ruin the character of Public Square (whereas a lucrative streetcar cutting through the Square would not, questioned Gleason). When William Ganson Rose became mayor of Cleveland in 1891, he and his Law Director, with help from such influential businessmen as M.A. Hanna, elevated the skirmishes into a series of legal battles. In addition to heated exchanges, both sides conducted spirited rallies on Public Square, and the police led people away in handcuffs on more than one occasion.

But Gleason and his colleagues persisted nonetheless. And all the acrimony was put aside when the monument was finally dedicated on July 4, 1894. With flags flying, bands playing, veterans marching, choruses singing, and the city soaring with pride, who could then quarrel with William J. Gleason's vision and determination? Gleason's own imposing monument at Calvary Cemetery proclaims his devotion to both his native and adopted countries. On the monument's shaft, below a bronze bust of Gleason and a Civil War insignia, read the words: "Author – Orator – Soldier – Patriot – Ever Faithful to God, to Country and Human Liberty." And below the words "Rest in Peace" is carved a harp intertwined with shamrocks.

This display was compiled for the Irish American Archives Society by LAAS Executive Director Margaret Lynch, with support from the Michael Talty and Helen Talty Charitable Trust. Photographs of Gleason and the Soldiers and Sailors Monument can be found in Gleason's monograph; photographs of the Gleason monument at Calvary Cemetery are courtesy of Margaret Lynch.

