

Early Irish Undertakers in Cleveland

Funerals were a central part of the life of the community in early Irish neighborhoods in Cleveland. Until the middle of the 19th century, the profession of “undertaker” didn’t exist. And until the 1940s, the body of the deceased was usually “laid out” at home. Friends and family gathered at the home to pay their respects. Food and drink were provided, and the mix of sorrow and laughter known as the “Irish wake” took place. On the day of the funeral, the neighborhood processed from the home of the deceased to the church.

For most of the 19th century, apart from a priest, the two outsiders who were typically called in to assist the family of the deceased were a cabinet maker and a livery man. The cabinet maker built the coffin out of six planks of wood, and the drayman provided a two-wheeled caisson or a horse and carriage to convey the body to the church and the cemetery.

By the mid-19th century, in Cleveland and other American cities, both cabinet-makers and livery providers began to specialize in funeral services. Undertaking began to be listed as a distinct profession in Cleveland city directories in about 1859. The earliest “undertaker” of Irish origin seems to have been a Thomas McClane, who appears in the 1861 city directory as an undertaker and a livery stable proprietor. Very little is known of McClane beyond his name and occupation.

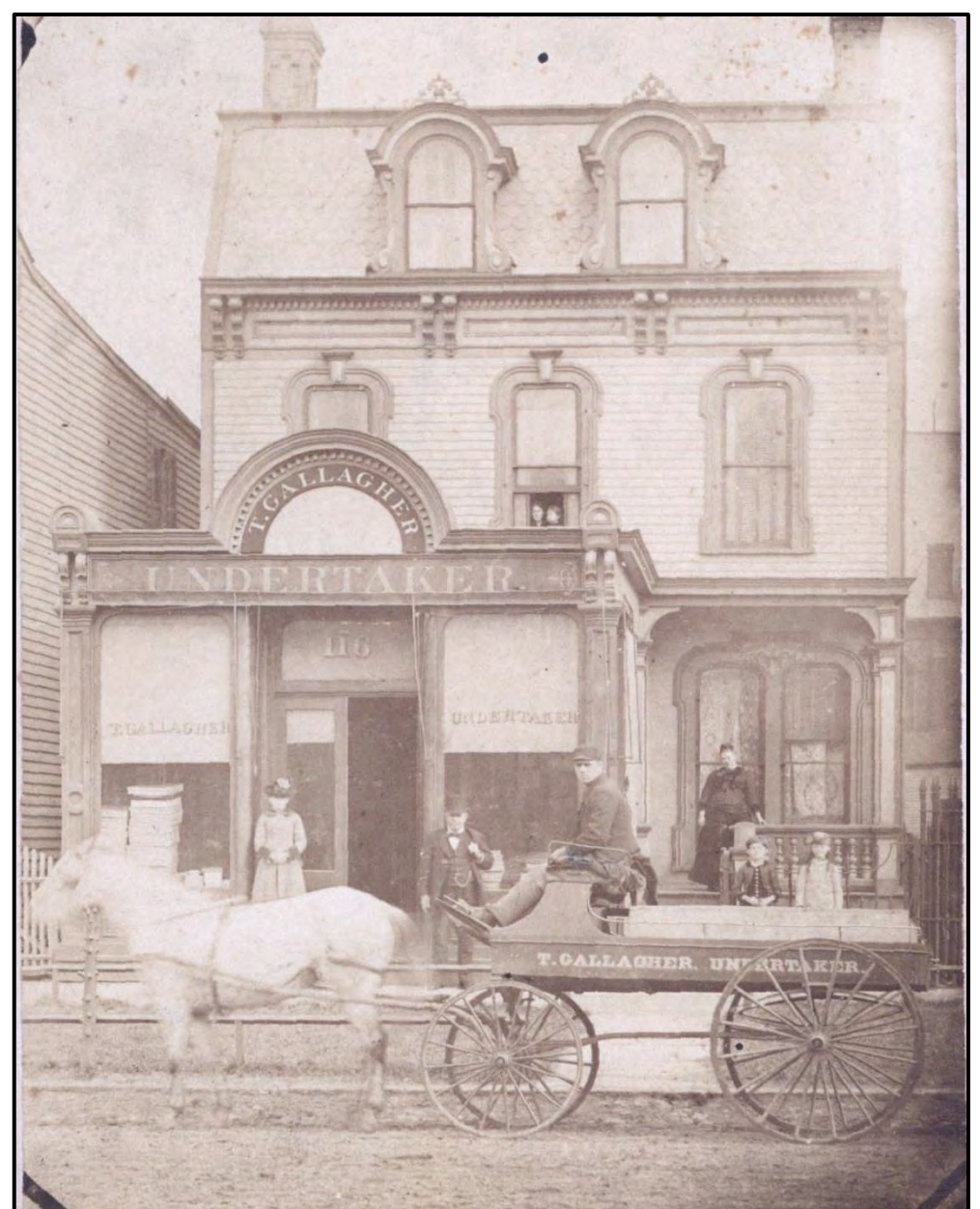
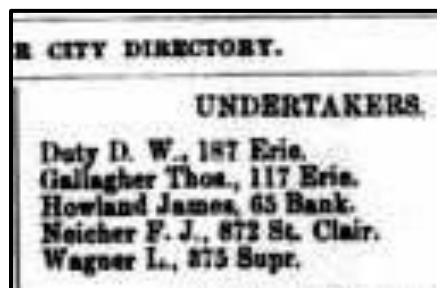
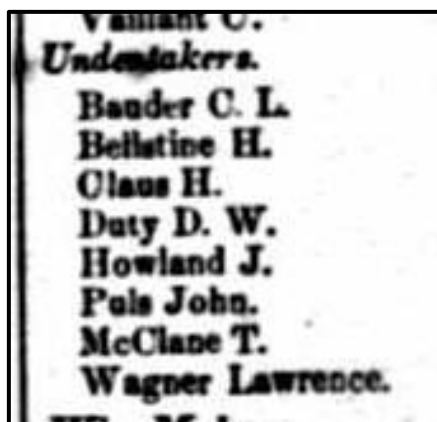
In the 1867 Cleveland city directory, another Irish name appears in the short list undertakers serving the city--that of Thomas Gallagher, another delivery man or “teamster” whose business was headquartered at 117 Erie Street (East 9th Street). Gallagher (*right*) was one of five brothers and a sister who were born in Tiernaur near Newport in County Mayo. His sister Margaret was reported to have immigrated to Cleveland in 1836 and has been numbered among the city’s earliest Catholic settlers. The Gallagher brothers followed their sister to Cleveland in about 1846, and most of them became “draymen.” Thomas Gallagher worked on the docks and for the railroad before starting his own hauling business, which he developed into an undertaking business in about 1866. He married the Limerick-born Catherine Reeves in 1857 in Cleveland and was prominent in support of the church and of Irish societies. Gallagher’s family continued his undertaking business after his own death in 1887, but the business did not survive the early death of his son Joseph in 1914.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Above: When a young boy named Jerry Mahoney was killed in a streetcar accident circa 1890, family and neighbors lined up outside the Mahoney family home on Oregon Street (later East 12th Street) to walk by foot to the funeral mass at nearby St. John Cathedral. Photograph courtesy of Mary Karen O’Neil.

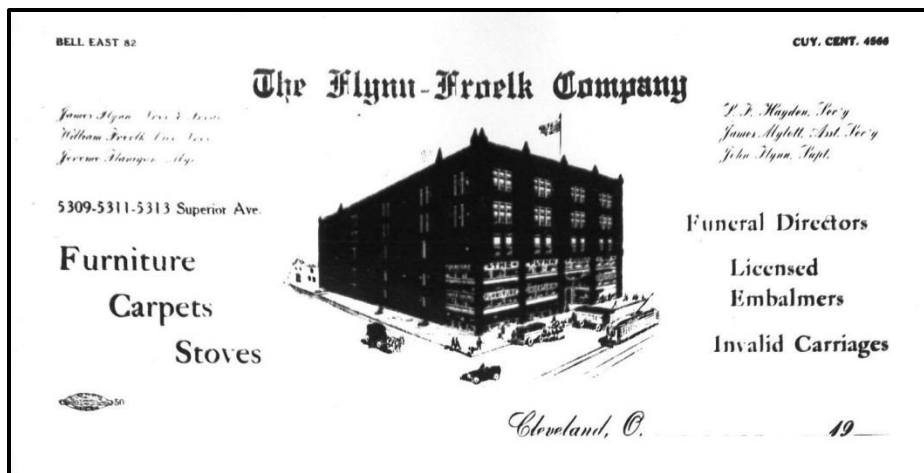
Center, right: The photograph of Thomas Gallagher can be found in *A history of Catholicity in northern Ohio and the diocese of Cleveland from 1749 to December 31, 1900*, Vol. 2 (Cleveland, 1903).

Below: The home and undertaking establishment of Thomas Gallagher on Erie Street. Photograph courtesy of the Western Reserve Historical Society.



Undertaking: From Craft to Trade

As successive waves of Irish immigrants arrived in Cleveland, they settled into different enclaves. Their movements can be traced through the establishment of the city's parishes. St. Mary's on the Flats was organized in 1826 to serve the city's early settlers on the east side of the Cuyahoga River. To accommodate the movement of the city's mercantile center up the hill, toward Public Square and east, the Cathedral Parish of St. John was established in 1848 at Erie (East 9th) Street and Superior. In 1853, St. Patrick on Bridge Ave. was established to serve Catholics on the West Side, and in 1854 Holy Name parish was formed in the village of Newburgh, south of the city, to serve the immigrants who were arriving to work in the steel mills there. A decade later, in 1865, St. Malachi Parish was established in the "Angle," near the docks on the west bank of the Cuyahoga River, while Immaculate Conception, located at E. 41st and Superior, tracked the city's eastward growth.



Undertaking establishments also followed the expansion of early Irish immigrants throughout the city. James Flynn, a railroad man from New York, made his way to Cleveland and started making cabinets here in 1869. He followed the eastward migration and settled first on St. Clair Street and prudently joined forces with German carpenter William Froelk. They made furniture along with caskets for several decades at E. 53rd and Superior. (The funeral business was renamed Flynn Mylott in 1967—acknowledging the leadership of Flynn's Mylott descendants-- and merged to become the DeJohn Flynn Mylott Funeral Home in 1986.)



Fanning out in the other direction, west of the city center, another Irish immigrant, Mark McGorray, combined the carpentry skills of a barrel maker with the horse skills of a teamster. He opened a livery stable at 3040 Lorain in about 1873, launching one of the area's longest operating family undertaking businesses in continuous existence.

In Newburgh, the McGreal family also found their way into funeral services through the route of a livery business, which Michael McGreal may have been operating as early as 1860. Michael McGreal's son Michael and several of his grandsons managed the undertaking business in turn until the last of Michael's grandsons, John, died in 1933. John McGreal was succeeded by his nephew, Lester Gallagher, who operated a funeral home at 9615 Miles Avenue for another two decades.



As the city's population grew, undertaking establishments proliferated in every neighborhood. Cabinet making and livery services were no longer required as "gateway" occupations; undertaking became recognized as its own occupation that involved its own skills. Before the Civil War, embalming was not common. Although the process was first developed by surgeons with medical training, undertakers quickly began to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge for themselves.

More than a collection of skill sets, undertaking also had an important social role. For those drawn by its "people" side, politics also exerted a pull. Launched in the 1910s, Mike "Holy Water" Gallagher's undertaking business was a fixture at West 44th and Detroit, and he also represented the Angle neighborhood, as a Republican, in Cleveland City Council for many years. An active Democrat, undertaker Mark McGorray was a rival in business and politics. Though McGorray was never elected to office, his funeral business stood the test of time.

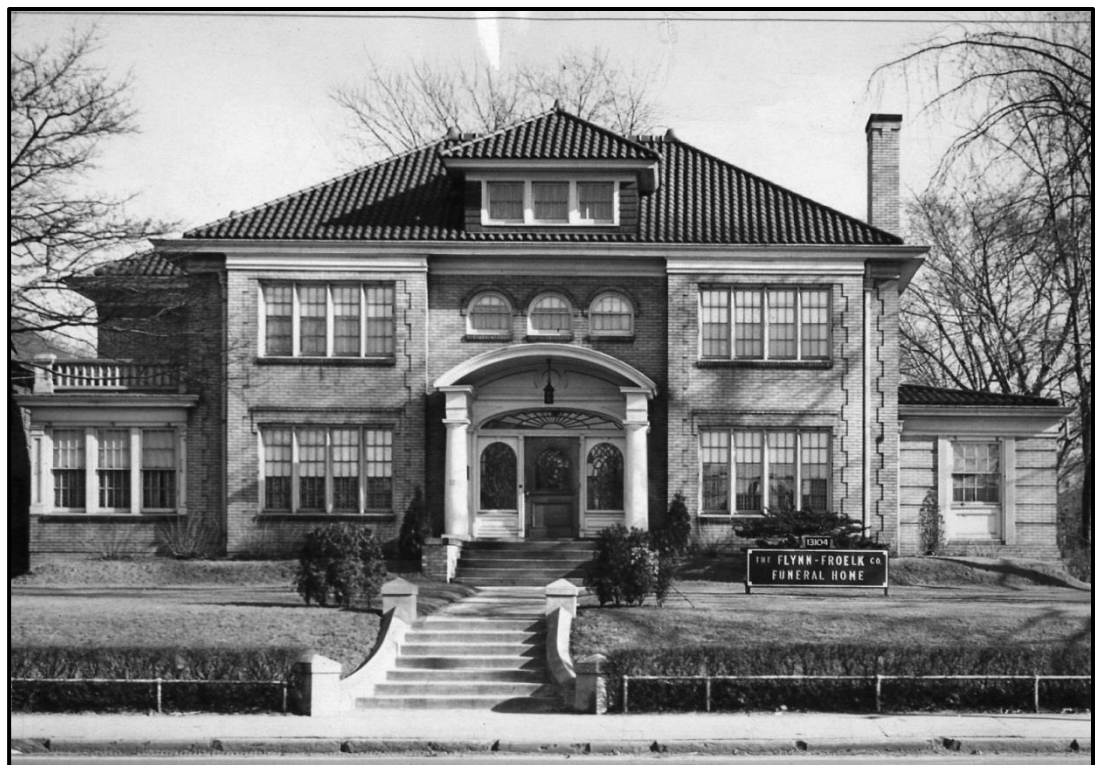
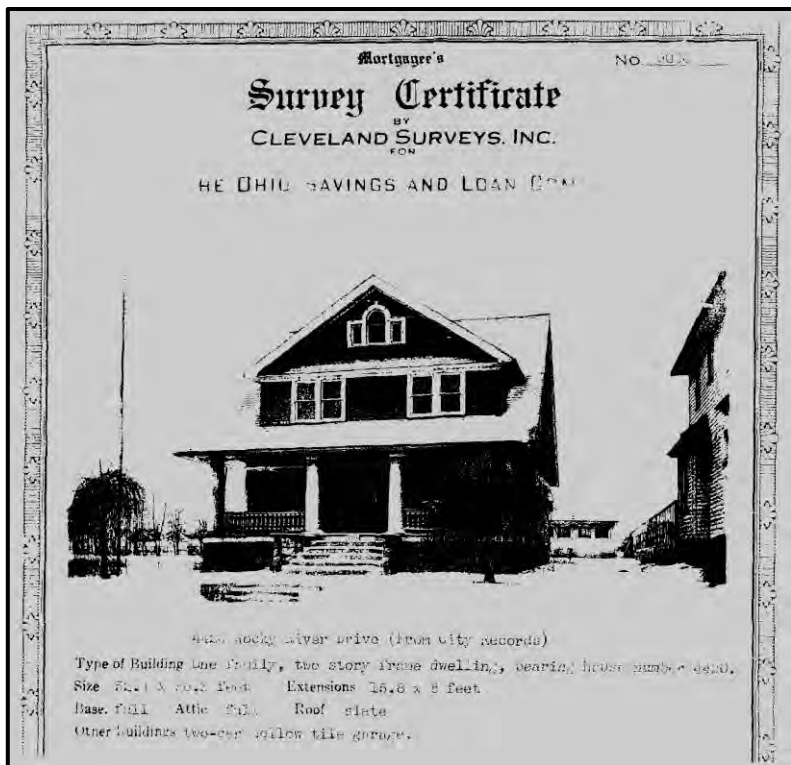
PHOTOGRAPHS

Above: An undated invoice from the 1920s or 1930s, courtesy of the DeJohn Flynn Mylott Funeral Home.

Center: The McGorray's horse-drawn ambulance, circa 1880-1900, with Joe McGorray and Teddy Bowman. Photograph courtesy of the McGorray-Hanna Funeral Home.

Below: A drawing of Mike Gallagher—in his role as politician--appeared in the *Plain Dealer* on May 26, 1928.

Funeral Homes--A Family Business



The use of the word “home” in the phrase “funeral home” should be taken literally. In the 1930s and 1940s, the trend accelerated toward holding wakes outside the family home, in the undertaker’s establishment. As a result undertakers sought to replicate the familiar and comforting environment of the family wake by purchasing and operating out of former family homes. The second floors of these large houses often served as the undertaker’s family home as well.

William F. Chambers, Sr., opened his business in 1934 at West 85th and Madison; when he decided to expand in 1937, he purchased a home at 4420 Rocky River Drive that was substantially renovated in 1968. Flynn Froelk moved into an imposing home at 13104 Euclid Avenue in East Cleveland in the 1940s, also acquiring a second house across the street at 13032 Euclid Avenue. James McMahan, who founded McMahan Funeral Home in 1920, took over an old stagecoach house in Willoughby to accommodate his growing business.

Family and home were closely intertwined in this most personal of businesses. Daniel Berry got his start in the funeral business before World War I working as an embalmer for the McCarthy family. But since he wasn’t a family member, he was let go when business slowed during the war. He went to work for another undertaker, George O’Malley, but again found himself on the outside when O’Malley died in 1934.

Clara Westropp, co-founder of the Women’s Federal Savings and Loan Association, loaned Berry the money to start his own undertaking business in a small rented house at West 65th and Detroit. The family and the mortuary shared quarters in the basement. By 1947 Berry was able to purchase a spacious and well-appointed home at 7200 Detroit Avenue that had been built by Louis Smith for his wife Margaret. Smith and his wife were heirs, respectively, to a leading dredging and tugboat operation and to the successful Farnan Brass Works.

Undertakers were enterprising entrepreneurs who recognized and fulfilled a community need. They typically served particular immigrant groups and were respected members of their local communities. Recognizing the importance of undertakers in immigrant communities, the Western Reserve Historical Society, with the encouragement of the Irish American Archives Society, has begun to emphasize the collection of funeral home records.

The McGorray-Hanna Funeral Homes has prospered under the leadership of five generations of McGorray family members since 1873. In 1999, Mary Susan McGorray donated ledgers from 1876 through 1934, covering the family’s business through the purchase of the property at 14133 Detroit Avenue in Lakewood, Ohio, that now serves as the company’s headquarters. (A location in Westlake has also since been added.) The McGorray records, along with records for Chambers Funeral Home—which were donated to WRHS in 2009--have been indexed and can be searched online at www.wrhs.org/research/Databases. It is hoped that other area funeral homes will also donate their valuable records of the life of an immigrant community.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Above, left: The survey certificate for the home purchased by William F. Chambers, Sr., in 1937. Photograph courtesy of Chambers Funeral Home.

Above, right: The Flynn Froelk Funeral Home at 13104 Euclid Avenue. Photograph courtesy of the DeJohn Flynn Mylott Funeral Home.

Below: Daniel Berry’s 1918 draft registration card records his employment with McCarthy undertakers.

| | | | | |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------|---------|
| Serial No. | 363 | Registration No. | 574 | |
| 1. Name | Daniel Berry | | Age in yrs. | 21 |
| 2. Place of birth | 7308 Detroit | Cleveland | (City of Birth) | (State) |
| 3. Date of birth | June 18 | 1896 | (Month) | (Year) |
| 4. Where born | Cleveland | Ohio | (City of Birth) | (State) |
| 5. Race | Native born | | | |
| 6. Name of father | Louis Smith | | | |
| 7. Name of mother | Margaret Smith | | | |
| 8. Name of employer | The McCarthy Co. Undertakers | | | |
| 9. Address of employer | 7308 Detroit Cleveland | | | |
| 10. Name of father | Roger Berry (father) | | | |
| 11. Address of father | 1500 W. 35 Cleveland | | | |
| 12. Race | White | | | |
| I certify that I have verified above answers and that they are true. | | | | |
| MP SHE | | Daniel L. Berry | | |
| | | (Signature of Clerk of Registrar) | | |
| REGISTRATION CARD. | | | | |

This display was compiled for the Irish American Archives Society by Margaret Lynch, LAAS Executive Director, with support from Chambers Funeral Homes, McGorray-Hanna Funeral Homes, McMahan-Coyne-Vitantonio Funeral Homes, and the Michael Talty and Helen Talty Charitable Trust; with special thanks to the late Roger Berry.