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# James Haggerty and the rich Irish tradition

James Haggerty was born in Willimantic in 1849. His father, John, had arrived in Willimantic four years earlier, after escaping Ireland's devastating famine. In 1864, Haggerty, then 15, ran off to Virginia to fight with his friends in the 18th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry. However, a Confederate patrol captured him after a skirmish and he sat out the rest of the war in a prison camp.

After the Civil War, Haggerty joined the regular army in the west and witnessed the railroad officials driving the last spike into the new transcontinental Union Pacific railroad. On leaving the

army, Haggerty joined a traveling minstrel group and then became a correspondent for the New York Mercury and the Connecticut Catholic. Eventually, he found



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a job as a blacksmith with the Willimantic Linen Co. He opened a retail tobacco store on Railroad Street and became involved in the Democratic Party, which led to appointments as deputy sheriff, register of voters, officer of the burgess and truant officer.

James Haggerty's life was recalled in the last major history to be published about Windham county, Allen B. Lincoln's "A Modern History Of Windham County, Connecticut" (1920). Haggerty's life represents important aspects of wider American history, such as the Civil War, the railroad, the Indian wars and the rise of the Democratic Party. Lincoln also praised the Irish:

"They were an industrious race (and) worked at anything and everything. In time they became accustomed to conditions and developed into first-class citizens. Aside from the martial spirit so characteristic of the Irish race ... the people of Irish origin have taken a prominent part in the development of Windham's industrial and civil life and performed a creditable part in the administration of its government.

They are primarily a working people and have supplied a large percentage of the labor required to run the cotton and silk manufactories that constitute the principal source of revenue to the town. Many of the leading merchants of today are descendants of those early pioneer Irish settlers and are now reaping the benefits of a reputation for probity and honesty established by their progenitors."

Lincoln virtually ignores the hatred and discrimination aimed at area immigrants. Windham County was no exception. A nativist, anti-immigration, anti-Catholic political party, the Know-Nothings, had a base in Windham Center in the 1840s. But an anti-Irish feeling can be detected in Ellen Larned's "History of Windham County" (1880).

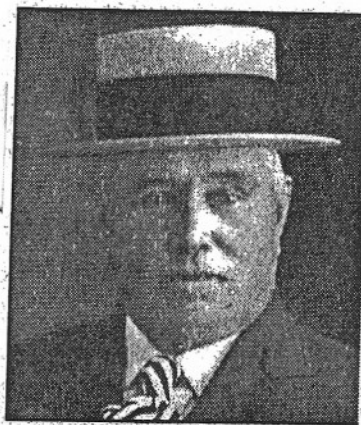
Larned mentions Willimantic's "manufacturing epidemic" of the 1820s, a time when "Hibernians" settled in the village "like an army of grasshoppers" and "shanties were set up whenever they could find a footing." The Irish settlement in Windham occurred in two broad waves. The initial wave arrived when textile manufacturers were established during the 1820s. The second wave arrived 30 years later, during and after the great Irish famine.

This was a period when Willimantic's textile economy was experiencing a boom as capital to erect new stone mills became available. Unskilled Irish immigrants proved to be an ideal workforce in both periods, to build and work in the new textile mills. They also found employment on Willimantic's developing railroad system. The local Irish dealt with much hatred and ignorance as they gradually Americanized — a process, which involved the three Ps — the priesthood, police and politics.

The first local settlements of Irish immigrants occurred in the area that became known as Jackson Place and upon Carey Hill, which was originally referred to as Kerry Hill. Several of them prospered in the years after the Civil War and the so-called "lace-curtain" Irish built fine houses on Jackson Street.

Also, in 1872, work began on the Roman Catholic St. Joseph Church, a feat believed impossible 20 years earlier.

The life of James Haggerty reflects the community's rich Irish heritage and his achievements to overcome the patronizing tones found in the Larned and Lincoln histories.



James Haggerty

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