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Irish immigrants, unbanned

IRISH, FROMD-1

America sometime after the fall harvest in Ireland.

The seminarian added that religion would be a balm, regardless of the hardships and heartaches ahead. "It must be consoling to father to know, before yet he shall have torn himself from his brothers and relations from that country dear, if on no other account, from its firm and tenacious attachment to the Catholic Church that he will have the same means of salvation in his new country which he enjoyed at home."

John McGee's Sept. 26, 1847, letter to Father Thomas is more cynical about the church and the Irish themselves.

"The fact is our Irish people have no enterprise and, when it comes to the point with them, they cannot be dragged from wretched Ireland," he wrote, voicing an opinion shared by many London officials. "The parish priests are all against emigration on personal grounds and they impede it much. Ireland is poorer, worse in every way than when I last wrote to you."

McGee sought Father Thomas' help for his brother and brother-in-law, whom he described as "intelligent farmers and most industrious and healthy," with wives and three children each. The two men were hoping to sell land in Ireland and buy about 200 acres "in common" in America.

Pittsburgh Bishop Michael O'Connor, a native of County Cork, Ireland, visited Father Thomas sometime in 1847, according to a church history. It seems likely these educated Irish immigrants would have discussed the dire situation in their homeland, in addition to the needs of the far-flung Bedford parish.

The same church history describes Father Thomas as "gentle in manner, but of a dignified and commanding appearance, and very deliberate in his movements and conversation." His response to the letters is unknown.

It is worth noting that, while the letters capture the desperate situation in Ireland in what came to be known as "Black '47," the people referenced were not the most wretched of the famine immigrants. They were people who appear to have had access to some working capital. They were reaching out to Father Thomas, and presumably to others, to pave their arrival, rather than showing up as penniless strangers, as so many others did.

Several Irish families with Whelan and McGee surnames arrived at New York City in late 1847 and early 1848, immigration records show, but it is impossible to definitively link them to the people described to Father Thomas. The 1850 U.S. census also shows numerous Whelan and McGee families living in Pennsylvania, but no details of when they emigrated.

By the time he received these letters, Father Thomas was mourning the loss of his mother, Bridget, who had died Sept. 5, 1847. She was 84, the same age as her husband and the priest's namesake father, who had died six years earlier in Bedford.

Father Thomas remained in Bedford for the rest of his life, and in 1868 began to oversee the construction of a church closer to the center of town. He died two year later, before it was completed and consecrated.

He is buried next to his parents in the old Catholic cemetery at the edge of town, which includes other Irish immigrants from counties Galway, Wicklow and Tipperary, as noted on the gravestones. Father Thomas' memorial obelisk, which rises above these smaller markers, describes him as "a beloved and zealous pastor."

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