

BEING IRISH

IMMIGRATION AND THE NEW YORK EXPERIENCE

COLONIAL TIMES - TO - THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By

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Manhattan had originally been settled by the Dutch and was called New Amsterdam. It was founded by the Dutch West India Company. The official religion was Dutch Reformed. As for the inhabitants, they were probably the motliest assortment of souls in all of Christendom. A narrow majority was Dutch. The rest were Walloons, English, French, Irish, Swedish, Danish and German. The Dutch Reformed Church tried to exact a tithe from each inhabitant, but it seemed impossible to enforce.

A few Irish were in New York from almost the beginning. While visiting the settlement of New Amsterdam in 1643, Father Isaac Jogues, a Jesuit from Canada, heard the confession of a young Irish traveler from Virginia or, Maryland.

Dr. William Hays of Barry's Court, Ireland was in the Dutch town in 1647. He later became a surgeon in Curacao. Through the following decades others arrived. Among them was Thomas Dongan, Irish born and the only Catholic governor of New York until the twentieth century. Most Irish Catholics entered America as indentured servants.

In 1683, the Catholic Duke of York, later to be King James II, appointed Colonel Thomas Dongan, a royalist veteran of the English Civil Wars as governor of New York. Dongan was an Irish Catholic landlord, the younger brother of Irish peer Baron Dongan, Earl of Limerick. Manhattan's Anglo-Dutch leaders liked him at once. They admired his knowledge and refinement and everyone seemed happy, even though most council seats were given to Englishmen. Above all, they appreciated his readiness to give them freedom to manage local affairs as they saw fit.

Dongan had arrived in New York with a company of several Jesuit priests and immediately celebrated Mass in the fort, the first such occasion in the City's history. He also named Roman Catholics to strategic positions in his administration and authorized the Jesuits to open a Catholic school. New York was a fairly tolerant place and at first the residents did not complain, not openly anyway. The problem was, that the Duke of York ascended to the throne on the death of his brother, Charles II. New York now became a royal colony which meant that all positions would be filled by the Crown. By royal decree, he suspended all anti-Catholic legislation in England. This did not sit well with the Protestants in England and they offered the crown to Prince William of Orange, who was married to James' daughter Mary, a Protestant. James fled to France.

The Stuart monarchy ended at the Battle of the Boyne when William defeated James in 1690. Public persecution of the Catholic Irish continued unabated. The Faith was proscribed, Episcopal sees suppressed, Church property confiscated and Catholic education forbidden. The Catholic Irish were oppressed and unhappy, but not a beaten people. Irish Catholics then came under the draconian Penal laws. Those laws extended not only to Ireland but to the settlement in New York

From the fall of Stuarts down through the American Revolution, Catholicism was proscribed almost as effectively in America as it was in Ireland. New York was not a healthy place to be Irish and Catholic.

Colonial New York was an extension of England in language, custom and tradition and anti-Irish attitudes were prevalent. Guy Fawkes Day was celebrated by almost as much revelry as it was in London and the view that the Irish were 'troublesome' was just as prevalent. But without large numbers of people (2000 lived in the city before the Revolution), and without entrenched political machines, there was little organized bigotry, although in 1712 and 1741, the fear of a supposed Catholic led slave revolt produced anti-Catholic and anti-black hysteria. But with so few Catholics here, there was little opportunity to bloody noses or do worse. With problems like these, few Irish Catholics came to New York.