

**THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN HOLYOKE, MASSACHUSETTS**  
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While conducting my research of the beginnings of Holyoke, Massachusetts, many of my preconceived notions were held fast. I have worked in Holyoke for the past decade and have been repeatedly fascinated by the amount of degradation that is heaped upon the Puerto Rican population by the "Old Guard" as I have come to acknowledge it. The people that make up this long-standing faction are predominately white, Irish Catholic constituents that have held onto their beliefs that the "new" immigrants are in fact inferior to the Irish that came before them. This is something that has always fascinated me; in speaking to some of the more boorish citizens, they act as if a pox has been cast upon their great city. Mind you that these are the same gentlemen and women that are the first to hire them and quietly they snicker away. Entitlement, to me, has never been an honor that is gained through generational longevity. Yet day in and day out I am completely ensconced and saturated by it. The outrage that once was teeming throughout my collective reasoning has slowly ebbed into a state of numbness.

Upon receiving this assignment, there was a great amount of trepidation on how to approach such a subject. For years this has weighed on me and through a new medium I have been able to do thorough research on the history of Holyoke. A friend of mine whom works for the Springfield based Republican newspaper was kind enough to sit down with me on two separate occasions to enlighten me and discuss my inquiry. The revelations that came about were somewhat of a surprise, yet many were not.

As far as the city is concerned it was formally known as Ireland Parish, originally a weigh station between Springfield and Northampton. During the 1840's, Industrialists were looking across the state to build energy resources. A group of investors from the cities of Haverhill and Lowell hired the Hadley Falls representation group to find such areas where they could build. This weigh station was seen as a place that could be built into a planned industrial complex and reap enormous amounts of capital. Daniel O'Connell was hired to build the dam that would be used to turn water into electricity. From there, the city of Holyoke began to take shape. First, the railroad was built to bring the goods that were needed to build the linen factories that would be the cornerstone of this first planned industrial complex in America. There was an obvious need for laborers, and this is where the Irish made their mark.

After the construction of the railroads and the linen factories, the next logical step was to fill the new factories with able bodied workers. There was a ready supply of men who were in need of work so the obvious answer was already in place. At this point in the interview, I began to see why the Irish community of Holyoke to this day holds Holyoke so near and dear to its heart. They literally built this city from the ground up. After the railroads it was the linen factories. The linen factories needed workers, so on they went. But the Irish men were not of meek proportions, in other words their hands were too big to fit into the inner reaches of the machines. The Hadley Falls Company knew of a sect of French Canada that was ripe with unemployed, yet nimble handed women. This began the influx of the French Canadians, entire lots of families who were eager for the chance of a new and prosperous life. Unfortunately for them their time in the linen mills would be short-lived.

As the linen industry grew across America, so did the demand for increasingly cheaper labor and products. The investors knew that there was a steady rise of competition in the textile industry and this was not a battle that they were ready to confront with their stagnant labor pool. There was a shift in the city that still to this day identifies Holyoke. Paper was an industry that could be capitalized upon with a relative ease in transference. By now, the Irish had made Holyoke their home, and there needed to be a sustaining force that drove them to keep it that way. The Baltimore Catechism was invoked and a blueprint instilled on how to build an Irish Catholic city. The plans were laid out for all to see on how to position everything from the church, first of which in Holyoke was St. Jerome, to where to build the schools and athletic fields. The Irish were also becoming more and more involved with the politics that governed the State and were being implemented in the various surrounding cities and towns. Through the involvement in the political scene they were and continue to be very prodigious in the decision making of Holyoke.

All the while, the city's paper industry was booming. New immigrants began to arrive in waves, whether it was the Polish in the 1890s or the skilled laborers who hailed mainly from England, Scotland and Germany. The latter groups arrived to an industrial city that had very few who knew the inner workings of the machines and how to repair them. This was a perfect scenario that fit their ability to repair both small and large machines. The Irish and Polish were not simple minded in the slightest, it was just that these new immigrants were trained in the art of industry repair. It was a harmonious situation that greatly benefited all involved.

Although there was an ideal commercial trade industry thriving throughout Holyoke there was a much deeper, unbridled issue at hand. Intermarriage of race and religion was borderline non-existent and if it did happen, severely frowned upon. The social barrier was observed and respected

by all. It was quite all right to sit down with your Polish co-worker for a beer after the shift had ended, but to invite him and his family over for Sunday dinner was unheard of. High school athletics was the great undoing of this social blockade. When the football, baseball and basketball programs began to field all races to their beloved teams there was a genuine knocking down of this construct that had been revered by all. The coaches of the time could care less if the person who just took the running backs' head off was from the Eastern Block or if his parents served a traditional corned beef dinner every Saturday afternoon. Parents and boosters soon began to see the players commiserating amongst one another and rather quickly their sons and daughters began a style of commiserating all their own. I prefer to call it nature taking its course. This was a time of unabashed success for all who were involved with the city. But to quote the great Robert Allen Zimmerman, "The time's they are a changing."

During the 1920's the original investors that had built this city were quickly becoming dismayed with the force that the Union's were becoming. Increases in wages were in their opinion spiraling out of control and the profits that once were, were no longer reaching the goals that they had set. Located a measly thousand or so miles south, the opportunity arose to procure a new complex that would rival the one of the North.

The paper industry was the main resource of many of the people who lived here and were now confronted with the problem of finding new employment. America's involvement in World War I had just begun many of the men saw this as an opportunity to fill the void of idleness that was freshly minted in their lives. Though the Irish have their faults and voids, laziness is one attribute that cannot be besieged upon them. This is where the interview took a decidedly different tone.

The natives of Holyoke had prospered through lengthy times of hardship and turmoil but their willingness to work was never exasperated. During the 1950s, a new industry was beginning to prosper in the towns of Southwick and Westfield. Tobacco production was a crop that was in very high demand and the job of picking the leaves created a new wave of immigrants looking for their own "golden ticket" to the capital gains of America. Through a prime example of history repeating itself, Puerto Rico was targeted as a place to recruit workers for the tobacco industry. Puerto Rican workers presented themselves as a much more readily available labor pool due to the fact that they were already U.S. citizens thanks in large to the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917. The largest wave of Puerto Ricans arrived in the late 1960s and found that there was little if any housing available in either Westfield or Southwick. Yet in Holyoke, there was an infinite amount ready to be had, due to the closing of several of the paper mills. So, in came the mass exodus of "new immigrants" to the Golden Ireland Parish. Suffice to say that the remaining inhabitants of Holyoke were less that thrilled

to see these racially inferior people living in the home that their ancestors had built. At first they were willing to give them a chance, collectively, to adhere to the principles that most had agreed upon that was the construct of their famed city. But soon after it was apparent that the majority had no intent on fulfilling this one-sided agreement.

What they did was exactly what the Irish, Polish and French Canadiens before them had done, at least in a social regard. They separated themselves from the rest of the inhabitants, formed small bands of communities and generally refused assimilation. The harder the pushing came from the general public, the harder they recoiled. The main stumbling block was the refusal to learn the native language. These communities were soon a roiling and thriving zealot of commercialism and progress and the Irish were besmirched with anger and jealousy. Statewide initiative programs helped the Puerto Ricans gain the foothold that was necessary for their continued success and many thought that this was an unfair advantage that was never afforded to them. Soon after, many were continuing to accept the helping hand that was extended to them without giving back. Again, the hardworking, middle-class constituents saw this as unfair and the moratorium of scorn which exists to this day was rubber stamped, but with indelible ink.

Through the course of these interviews I have learned first hand why there is and always will be a dividing line between the staunch supporters of the Son's and Daughters of St. Patrick and their Caribbean counterparts. Nativism is, and in my opinion will always be, a vibrant pulse that keeps the city of Holyoke alive. There is a certain air of dignity that some feel simply cannot be obtained by others; it was earned on the backs of their ancestors who toiled in the mills and sweat under the brutal New England summers of the early 1900s. Without this underlying flow of contempt, some people would just simply have nothing to talk about as they fill out their employee's tax information, or lack there of.

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