

IRISH IN THE CONNECTICUT VALLEY.

An Interesting Paper Read by E. A. Hall At a Meeting of the Historical Society Tuesday Evening.

Jan. 28-1902

Since the organization of the American Irish Historical society in Boston about five years ago, with President Theodore Roosevelt, whose father's mother was an Irish woman, as one of the charter members, and Rear-Admiral Richard W. Meade as the first president-general, many important facts have been recorded of the contributions of the Irish race in the up-building of this Republic.

A distinguished statesman and statistician recently stated that within the memory of men now living, upward of 21,000,000 immigrants arrived and settled in the United States. This same authority states that almost two-thirds of our entire population is represented by English and Irish blood in about equal proportions.

In this computation it should always be remembered that England was given credit for many of the earlier Irish immigrants who were obliged to sail from English parts and compelled to adopt English surnames.

It is, however, with the thousands of Irish pioneers who immigrated to this country before the time of men now living, and who settled many of the towns in, or bordering on the Connecticut valley that we wish to occupy the attention of the members of the Connecticut Valley Historical society.

Up to a few years ago the popular opinion seemed to be that the Irish first began crossing the Atlantic during the famine of 1846 or about the time of the building of canals and railroads. That many Irishmen and women came to this locality and participated in the formation of the first settlements, that is from 1630 to 1730, practically the first 100 years of American life, the records of the towns will prove.

The descendants of the old settlers have, in most instances, ceased to look upon their ancestors as Irishmen, or at least to forget about or appear not to be familiar with their Irish origin, because of the prejudices that existed respecting the more recent comers from the "ever green isle," and have tended to make them disinclined to acknowledge an ancestry which was so little in general favor and popularity.

As we become more educated, intelligent, and enlightened, as a people, and become familiar, by careful study, with the early history of our country, we will learn, to our great advantage, of the names and deeds of illustrious Irishmen who played a most prominent part in the establishment of this government and we will appreciate more fully something of the pride that should animate us for being so fortunate as to be able to trace our ancestry back to such a worthy relationship.

The people of this race—men and women born on Irish soil, and their descendants—have been here from the first, prompted by the motives common to all immigration, dissatisfaction with the old order of things, and the resolve to obtain a freer and better life in the new land under favorable conditions.

Here in the Connecticut valley the best, the cleanest, and strongest blood of Europe has come in to strengthen and accentuate the old stock that existed here and the result has been the enterprising and progressive communities of today in the cities and towns of the Connecticut valley.

A recent publication announced the death of Sir William MacCormic, who died a few weeks ago, as the celebrated English surgeon, although he was born in Ireland. This was probably why he was called English, as was also the case of the Duke of Wellington, Edmond Burke, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Dean Swift, Justin McCarthy and other famous Irishmen. This is even worse than being called "Scotch-Irish," as is the fate of many of our famous Americans of Irish ancestry.

The American I. H. S. questions the authority, of calling persons English, French, German, or any other origin, bearing distinctively Irish names. Facts are necessary, and mere assertions will not answer. In this scientific and practical age of the 20th century we discard the legendary and the mythical. Enough has been lost through change of names and by misrepresentation. We accept no historical data that will not bear the modern searchlight of investigation.

The first settlements in the Connecticut valley were made from Cambridge, Dorchester and Watertown to the towns of Windsor, Hartford and Wethersfield in Connecticut. This immigration took place in 1634 and 1635. It was of a wholesale character, and almost depopulated the towns in the Eastern part of this State. Along with this exodus there went another from Roxbury, led by William Pynchon, in May, 1636. This immigration settled on the eastern bank of the Connecticut river at Springfield, Middletown, Conn., was settled soon after, and may possibly have been called after Middletown in Ireland.

Colerain in Hampshire (now Franklin) county, was called after Colerain in Antrim country, Ireland. This was the town in which William McKinley of Dervock who, under the leadership of Gen. Henry J. McCracken, commanding the Ulster United Irishmen in 1798, was shot for trying to establish a republic in Ireland, 100 years before a descendant of his family was president of this great Republic of the United States.

The territory of Charlemont forms one of three townships given by the General Court to Boston, June 27, 1735. The other plantations granted at the same time were Colerain and Pittsfield. Charlemont was incorporated June 21, 1765, including at first, the present town of Heath and a part of the town of Bockland. Of the first settlers the Rice and Taylor families were the most prominent and important among the inhabitants.

One of the most distinguished soldiers of the Revolutionary war from Western Massachusetts was Col. Hugh Maxwell, who lived in that part of Charlemont now within the bounds of Heath. Col. Hugh Maxwell of Revolutionary fame was born in Ireland April 27, 1733. He was a devoted patriot and rendered his adopted country valuable service in the French and Revolutionary wars. He was in the battle near Lake George and at the capture of Fort William Henry. It was chiefly owing to his influence that there was not a Tory in his town. On the Lexington alarm he marched as lieutenant with a company of minute men to Cambridge. He was in the battle of Bunker Hill and received a ball through his right shoulder, and although he never entirely recovered from his dangerous wound he served throughout

the war, fighting at Trenton, Princeton and Saratoga. He was also with the suffering army at Morristown and endured the horrors of Valley Forge.

Col. Maxwell enjoyed the friendship of Gen. Washington and other distinguished patriots of the Revolutionary struggle. After the war Col. Maxwell was chosen to attend the General Court in Boston, where he obtained an act granting a division of the town. The new town was incorporated Feb. 14, 1755, and named Heath in honor of Gen. William Heath of Roxbury, who was an old friend and fellow soldier of Col. Maxwell. The first meeting was held in March, 1795, with Col. Maxwell as moderator and he was chosen first selectman of the town.

Col. Maxwell married Bridget Monroe of Lexington and they lived at first in a small house, having only two rooms, but his enterprise made him a prominent man among his townsmen, who often frequented his home to discuss the startling conditions of the country from time to time. Of their 7 children, Hannah married Calvin Rice of Charlemont; Lilly married Alfred Jones of Buckland; Dorcas married Samuel Kirkland; Hugh married Olive Newhall of Conway, and lived in the homestead which is now occupied by his son, William Monroe Maxwell; and Clara, who married Roger Leavitt, the father of Roger H. Leavitt of Heath who was grandson of Col. Hugh Maxwell.