The Harp, the Stars, and the Dollar: Irish Immigrants and their Motivations for Fighting in
the Union Army during the American Civil War

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When the call for volunteers to join the Union Army went out at the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, many Irish immigrants signed up for service. It is estimated that 150,000 Irish Americans served in the Union Army over the course of the war.¹ Irish American service for the United States was not new in 1861. About 5,000 Irish Americans served in the United States Army during the Mexican American War in the 1840’s.² They served in the United States Army in the period between the Mexican American War and the Civil War as well.

Irish immigrants volunteered for service for many reasons. Some were motivated by patriotism. They saw themselves as doing their duty to their adopted country or to the state where they had made their home.³ Some Irish Catholics believed that by demonstrating this patriotism and duty to the United States would change the public’s opinion on the Catholic religion. Service in the Union Army could also be a chance for social mobility. Working their way up through the ranks of the army was one way that they could move upwards in society. Volunteering for service in the Union Army also provided Irish immigrants with a job and a much needed income. The previous years of their lives had been spent working unskilled labor jobs, or struggling to find work. The army often offered a bounty at the time of enlistment. It also provided soldiers with rations, equipment and money that could be sent home to support their families. While Irish immigrants

² Ibid., 37.
³ Ibid., 3.
were motivated to enlist in the Union Army through patriotism and the chance of social mobility, the majority of them enlisted for the job and the money that they could earn.

**Irish Immigration to the United States**

Irish immigrants had come to the United States of America since the colonial period. The early Irish immigrants were mainly Protestant. These early immigrants included the Ulster Irish, also known as the Ulster Scots or the Scots-Irish. The Ulster Irish were Presbyterians originally from Scotland who settled in Northern Ireland. They were encouraged to do so by the English government, who wanted more Protestants in Ireland and the Ireland ruling class. The term Scots-Irish started to be used when more Catholic Irish immigrants started arriving in the United States, since the Scots-Irish wanted to distinguish themselves from the Irish Catholics. Early Protestant Irish immigrants left Ireland because land competition and rising land prices led them to look for better farming opportunities in the United States. Some of them settled in New England, including in Boston. Others settled in Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina, where there were sparsely populated areas that had land available for farming. There was little Irish immigration to the United States during the period of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, 1796-1815. After the wars ended, Irish immigration increased. An economic recession pushed some of the Irish from Ireland when estates were consolidated and Irish tenants were evicted. The middle class had heard from earlier Irish immigrants about their successes in the United States, which encouraged them to go there. During the years 1815-1845, there were some Irish Catholic immigrants. However, many of the Irish immigrants were still Protestant and middle class.

4 Ibid., 7.
5 Ibid., 9.
6 Ibid., 7.
7 Ibid., 8.
8 Ibid., 9.
Irish immigration to the United States changed in the second half of the 1840s. The summer of 1845 marked the beginning of the Irish Potato Famine, also known as the Great Famine. The potato crop became invested with Phytophthora infestans, and in 1846 most of the potato crop rotted. The potato was a very important crop for Irish peasants, who ate potatoes at every meal and could even use them to burn for fuel. The failure of the potato crop left the poor in Ireland struggling to survive. People were dying in the streets, either from starvation or disease because of poor sanitary conditions. One example of an experience of Irish immigrants during the Potato Famine can be found by examining the tenants of Lord Lansdowne’s estate, located in Kenmare Ireland. The poor tenants on Lord Lansdowne’s vast estate started starving after the failure of the potato crop, and crowded into his workhouse for relief efforts when they could no longer feed themselves. Most of them owned little, had no shoes and were wearing rags. They were fed just enough food to keep them alive. The conditions were unsanitary and overcrowded, leading to death from disease as well as from starvation. In April of 1849, there were 1,800 people inside the workhouse, which had been built for five hundred. In 1850, Lord Lansdowne hired a new agent for his estate. The new agent, William Trench, suggested financing emigration to the United States since the tenants could not afford to pay for the trip themselves. He showed Lansdowne that it would be cheaper for them than paying for the relief efforts for the tenants, and better for the tenants themselves. Lansdowne agreed and financed the emigration, starting with those who had been living in the village workhouse the longest. One of the first families to leave the crowded village workhouse for the United States was Ellen Holland and her three sons: Joseph who was

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10 Ibid., 90.
11 Ibid., 90.
13 Anbinder, “From Famine to Five Points,” 352.
14 Ibid., 364.
thirteen, Thomas who was nine and George who was four. The conditions on the thirty-nine day journey to the United States were not much better than the conditions in the village workhouse. Each person had only one pound of flour and thirteen ounces of water each day. When they arrived in the United States, Holland and her sons settled in New York City, in the section known as Five Points. Most of Lansdowne’s tenants followed the first two hundred to Five Points. Only fifty tenants did not take up the offer to emigrate and remained on the estate.

By the 1850s a quarter of Ireland’s population was either dead or had left the country. It is estimated that between 1.1 and 1.5 million people died of either disease or starvation. Between the years 1845-1855, 1.5 million Irish immigrated to the United States. Others immigrated to countries such as Canada, Great Britain, or Australia. Upon their arrival in the United States, Irish immigrants spread to different parts of the country, including both the North and the South. The city with the highest Irish born population in 1860 was New York City with 203,740 people living who were born in Ireland. This was 26 percent of the city’s population. In Boston, the Irish became a third of the city’s population following the settlement of about fifty thousand Irish immigrants there. Before 1830, there was only about two thousand Irish living in the city. Other cities with high numbers of Irish-born residents included Philadelphia, Brooklyn, St. Louis, Chicago, Cincinnati, Albany, Newark New Jersey, Lowell Massachusetts, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Jersey City, Rochester New York, Detroit and Milwaukee. Irish immigrants usually settled at their ports of arrival since they could often barely afford their passage and could not travel far upon their arrival in the United States.

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15 Ibid., 352.
16 Ibid., 365.
18 Ibid., 13.
The Potato Famine changed Irish immigration to the United States. The new Irish immigrants were Catholic instead of Protestant. They were also poor instead of from the middle class. These differences changed the way that the American population viewed the Irish immigrants and resulted in discrimination against the Irish Catholics. With the increasing wave of Irish Catholic immigrants, some native-born Americans started a Nativist Movement that included groups such as the Know Nothing Party, who were against immigrants and Catholics. The Know Nothings believed that Irish Catholics were threatening Protestant traditions in the United States. Irish immigrants were affected by policies such as NINA, No Irish Need Apply, which affected their ability to take certain jobs. Most ended up working unskilled labor jobs in cities. These jobs included dock laborers, stable boys and house servants. The majority of Irish Catholics supported the Democratic Party because of the party’s support for unrestricted immigration and religious freedom. They saw the Republican Party as having more Nativist views, trying to free the slaves, and supporting the prohibition of alcohol. Many Irish immigrants were against these issues. Some feared that freed slaves would take the unskilled labor jobs that the Irish immigrants usually worked. In some Northern cities such as Boston, freed blacks and Irish immigrants were already competing for jobs. Most Irish immigrants were also against prohibition since they saw alcohol as a part of their culture. One Irish immigrant, Michael Doheny stated that the Republicans were “the result of an unholy marriage between the Whigs and the Know Nothings, and offered nothing for the Irish in America.”

Irish Patriotism

Following the election of Abraham Lincoln as president of the United States, Southern States began seceding from the Union, starting with South Carolina in December 1860. Initially, Irish opinion in the North was mixed. They did not support the Republican Party but many feared the division of the country.\textsuperscript{28} In April of 1861, Confederate forces under General P. G. T. Beauregard fired on Fort Sumter. The attack on Fort Sumter increased Irish immigrant support of the Union in the North.\textsuperscript{29} When both the Union and the Confederate armies began recruiting volunteers, Irish immigrants volunteered to serve in both armies. Their decision generally depended on the state that they lived in; those in the North signing up for the Union Army and those in the South signing up for the Confederate Army. Both armies had units in which most of the soldiers were either Irish immigrants or of Irish descent.

Patriotism towards the United States motivated some Irish immigrants to volunteer for service in the Union Army. They saw it as their duty to help protect their adopted country and protect the state where they living. It is possible to get an idea of the thoughts and motivations of some Irish immigrants serving in the Union Army through the letters that they sent home to their family. One soldier in the Union Army, Peter Welsh, was assigned to carry the flag of his regiment. It was a duty that he was proud of. He wrote to his wife about his new duty and when she wrote back with concern about his safety as the color bearer, he wrote to her again explaining his duty some more and telling her not to worry. He wrote that he was not in any more danger carrying the flag than he was at any other point in the regiment’s line. There was no safe place on the battlefield, so he would not give up his duty of carrying the flag just because his wife believed it to be more dangerous. Welsh wrote, “i will carry it as long as God gives me strenght for i know that he can as easly protect me there as if i was in the strongest tower that ever was built by the hands of man

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 51.
The flag was an important symbol of the regiment. The regiment that Peter Welsh was in, an ethnic Irish regiment, carried several flags, the United States flag, and a green flag for Ireland. The flags were a symbol of the patriotic feeling of the men serving in the regiment, representing both the country that they were serving for and the country that they were from. Peter Welsh’s pride in carrying one of the flags showed that he felt some patriotism to the United States and the Union Army that he was serving in.

On July 4, 1862, the New York Volunteer Infantry held a celebration for the Fourth of July. Private Jones wrote home to his family describing the celebration: “We celebrated the 86th anniversary of our independence yesterday at 12 o’clock. There were 30 guns fired in honor of the birth of our freedom and independence. We had fireworks and everybody seemed to enjoy themselves.” The regiment’s celebration of an American holiday was an example of their patriotism to the United States. Jones referred to the celebration as being the “anniversary of our independence.” The use of the word “our” reflects his feelings of being a part of the people of the United States who are celebrating the holiday.

In September 1862, an enlisted man by the name of Aaron Landis heard reports that the Confederate Army was moving north. These reports concerned him because it meant that the Confederate Army was moving towards his home state of Pennsylvania. He wrote that the other soldiers in his regiment were also concerned with the news: “Us boys down here do not feel satisfied when the enemy is so close to the state. We would like to be up to protect the old keystone.” For Aaron Landis, it was important that his state was safe and not invaded by the Confederate Army. He wanted to protect his home, which was the place where he had made a life

for himself in the United States with his family. While it is not as strong of a sense of patriotic duty as the desire to protect and fight for the country as a whole, it was still patriotism that made him want to fight to protect his home state.

Irish Catholicism

Displaying patriotism towards the United States through their service in the Union Army was a way that some Catholics believed would be beneficial towards their position in society. This was a viewpoint that Catholic bishops and Catholic chaplains had about the Civil War. The American bishops “saw the outbreak of war as an opportunity for Catholics to demonstrate their patriotism and loyalty as well as cement Catholicism’s place in American’s religious life.”

They encouraged Catholics to fight in the Union Army bravely and with honor. Catholic priests became chaplains in the army in order to encourage this and to support the soldiers spiritually. The bishops and chaplains understood that their religion stood to gain from a good show of patriotism and loyalty to the United States. Publicly showing their patriotism was a way to change public opinion about Catholics. Archbishop John Hughes, from New York, flew an American flag above his cathedral to show his support to the United States and the Union Army.

Chaplains serving in the Union Army were important for demonstrating the patriotism of Catholics and changing the public’s opinion of them. The main job of a chaplain was to see to the religious needs of the soldiers. William Corby, a chaplain with the Irish Brigade, explained the duties that chaplains performed as being similar to duties that they performed in churches. He wrote in his memoirs, “We celebrated mass, heard confessions, preached on Sundays and holidays.” Corby also

34 Fabun, “Catholic Chaplains,” 675.
wrote that they “encouraged harmony and good-will.”\textsuperscript{35} Other responsibilities of the Chaplains were to help soldiers read or write letters if they could not do so themselves, help soldiers to manage their money and send that money to their family, distribute rosaries and prayer books, and bless objects for the soldiers.\textsuperscript{36}

Out of all of the duties that the chaplains performed, preaching and baptizing soldiers were two of the most important duties that helped to demonstrate their patriotism and change public opinion of Catholics. Catholic Chaplains would invite Protestants as well as Catholics to attend their services. When the Protestants did attend, it was usually for the sermon since they were not allowed to take communion. The Protestants would often express appreciation for the sermons that they heard. Sheeran, a Catholic chaplain, was asked by a Protestant when he would be preaching again.\textsuperscript{37}

While on the march after the Battle of Gettysburg, Corby was approached by someone he described as a “non-Catholic” who wanted to know more about the Catholic religion because he had heard Corby say a prayer on July 2, 1863.\textsuperscript{38} Another chaplain, Peter Paul Cooney was praised in a report by Brigadier General Walter C. Whitaker, who had been a part of the Know Nothing Party in Kentucky before the war.\textsuperscript{39} Since some Protestants were exposed to the sermons and prayers of the Irish Catholic chaplains during the Civil War, they became appreciative of them and became more accepting of the Catholic religion.

Performing baptisms and seeing to soldiers on the field also helped to display patriotism of Irish Americans and improve the public opinion about Catholics. While some chaplains believed that it was too dangerous, there were chaplains who went out onto the battlefield during and after battles to see to the dying. William Corby wrote in his memoirs that “Catholics, when about to die

\begin{footnotes}
\item Fabun, “Catholic Chaplains,” 681-2.
\item Ibid., 685.
\item Corby, \textit{Memoirs of Chaplain Life}, 185.
\item Fabun, “Catholic Chaplains,” 697.
\end{footnotes}
especially, desire to become reconciled to God.” 40 When they went out onto the battlefield during and following the battle, the chaplains were looking for soldiers who wanted a chaplain to be with them and help them reconcile with God before they died. The chaplains heard confessions from the dying soldiers on the battlefield, and also baptized anyone who was not already baptized and who wanted to be saved. Not all chaplains went out onto the battlefield. The duties of hearing the confessions of dying soldiers and baptizing them could also be performed at the hospital, where there was less risk to the safety of the chaplain. 41 William Corby was one of the chaplains who went out onto the battlefield to hear the confessions of the dying who might not make it to the hospital. He wrote of one of the soldiers that he saw to that he “heard his confession on the spot” before the dying soldier was carried away to the hospital. 42 Baptizing soldiers who were not Catholic promoted Catholicism, although to the chaplains it was mostly about saving the souls of the men that they baptized. When a soldier who had not previously been a Catholic was baptized, it also become more likely that the family of that soldier would become more accepting and be less prejudice towards the Catholic religion. 43 The display of patriotism by Catholics and by the chaplains in the Union helped to change the public opinion of Catholics. This was one of the reasons why Catholic chaplains and bishops encouraged patriotism and loyalty to the Union among Catholics.

**Economic motives**

While some Irish immigrants experienced a sense of patriotic duty towards the United States and their home states, the stronger motivation for serving in the Union Army was that their service provided them with a job and an income. Most Irish immigrants worked in unskilled labor jobs, if they could find work at all. While some of these jobs paid higher wages than the army did, serving

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in the Union Army came with some added incentives. Many regiments offered bounties that were paid to soldiers when they enlisted. These bounties were listed on recruitment posters, and provided an additional motivation to the poor Irish immigrant who needed the money. There also were ways to earn more money than the average soldier’s pay. Soldiers could earn extra money by doing extra duties. The duties included cutting wood or digging entrenchments. In order to receive any pay the soldier needed to sign up to do the duty for ten days, but if he did he would be paid two and a half cents per hour of work. It was not much, but it gave the soldiers a chance to earn a little extra money along with their regular pay.

Peter Welsh, the soldier who displayed patriotic pride when carrying the flag, enlisted primarily for the job and the pay. Before the war, Welsh was a carpenter from New York. He had trouble finding work in New York and so he traveled to Boston in search of a job. Unable to find a carpentry job in Boston as well, he enlisted in the Union Army as part of the Irish Brigade. If he had been able to find a carpentry job like he had been searching for, it is unlikely that he would have signed up to fight in the Union Army since he would have been able to support himself and his wife.

Throughout his service in the Union Army, Peter Welsh wrote letters home to his wife. Many of these letters included the mention of money, especially the amount of money that he could send her so that she could support herself at home. In the first letter following his enlistment in the Union Army in September 1862 that he wrote to his wife, Margaret, he explained that she could get relief money if she needed it. He wrote: “About the relief mony, i understand it can be drawn at any time so that if i am long out here which i dont expect to be you could go on and draw it any time before i got back [sic].” The relief money that Margaret Welsh was entitled to came from the state

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44 Ural, Harp and the Eagle, 33.
45 Welsh, Irish Green and Union Blue, 106.
46 Vandall, Our Experience in the Irish Brigade, 8.
47 Welsh, Irish Green and Union Blue, 3.
48 Ibid., 17.
of Massachusetts. The General Court of Massachusetts passed an act in 1861 that provided a monthly stipend to wives and children who were dependent on a man who was serving in a Massachusetts regiment. The relief pay equaled one dollar a week, for a total of four dollars a month. It was not very much money, but it was designed to help support the families of the soldiers. The information that Peter Welsh shared with his wife about the relief money was not the only thing that he told his wife in his first letter home, but making sure that she knew she had access to relief money was important for him to share with her. He wanted to make sure that she would be able to provide for herself when he was away, with the relief money and the pay that he was making.

About a month after his first letter, on October 11, 1862, Peter Welsh wrote to his wife about money again. He was positive about the pay that he was making since he told her that he was making more money than he had as a carpenter before he enlisted since the army provided constant pay that he did not get when he spent a lot of time searching for work. He wrote:

one consolation you will have plenty of means to support you and not go to kill yourself slaving and working for the miserable price you would get for it i can send you my pay as soon as i get it and if i had remained at home i feel sertain we would had hard times to contend with another thing i feel confident of that this war must be ended soon and even though i should have to serve a year which i hope i wont nor more then half but even at a year i would be better paid then working at my trade supposing i got constant work which i could not those times and then should beg for what i would get it was realy heartsickning to be tryind to get along at carpenter work the way times were [sic].

49 Ibid., 18.
50 Ibid., 36.
51 Ibid., 20.
In his letter, Peter Welsh wrote that he would send his pay to his wife so that she would not need to work. He was confident that the pay he was earning through his job in the army would be enough to support her, and did not want her worrying about having to find a job that he did not believe would pay her very well. He considered them better off than they had been when he had been working as a carpenter, and struggling to make a living.

Shortly after writing and telling his wife that he would send her his pay, Peter Welsh wrote Margaret another letter. This one was short, only a paragraph long and its purpose was to tell her that he was sending her sixty dollars of his pay that he had received. A few days later he wrote another letter, explaining how the pay worked. He explained that his pay started the day that he was sworn into service. Some of the money that he had made up until that point was in back pay, and was due to him. He also wrote that he would like to be able to come home and see her as well as the rest of his family, including his mother and sisters, but that he could not afford to make the trip. It would cost too much for him to travel there and back so he would remain with the army.52

It was over a month before he wrote another letter to his wife about the money that he was earning. On December 4, 1862, Peter Welsh wrote to his wife explaining in more detail about how he got paid. He was supposed to receive his pay every two months on the first of the month. However, that month he had not yet received his pay and was waiting for it so that he could send her some more money.53 A few days later, on December 8, 1862, he wrote another letter to his wife. In this letter he wrote that he was still waiting for the pay that was owed to him. He also asked her to send him a few things since the sutlers at camp charged a lot for items such as tobacco and newspapers. It would be cheaper for her to send him a few things than it would be for him to buy what he wanted from the sutlers.54 This letter showed that he was concerned with saving what

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52 Ibid., 24.
53 Ibid., 35.
54 Ibid., 37.
money he could. The more money that he could save by not buying the more expensive items the sutlers were selling, the more money his wife had for herself. His wife did send him some of the things he requested. On January 5, 1863 he wrote that he was grateful for the newspaper that his wife sent him.\textsuperscript{55} She also sent him a handkerchief, some ointment, and postage stamps.\textsuperscript{56}

On January 27, 1863, Peter Welsh wrote that he was sending some money home to Margaret. He sent her twenty dollars worth of his pay and kept five dollars for himself.\textsuperscript{57} The twenty dollars that he sent to his wife he sent through Chaplain William Corby, who often helped the soldiers to send money home to their families. He wrote that “the chaplin of the 88\textsuperscript{th} told us that he had a pass to go to Aquia creek and that he was going in two or three days and that he would send home mony for any of us that wished as he sends home mony for the men of his own regiment in the same way [sic].”\textsuperscript{58} He also wrote that his regiment was owed three months worth of back pay that he hoped they would receive soon so that he could send her some more money.\textsuperscript{59}

While Peter Welsh was away from home serving in the army, his wife sometimes suffered from poor health. He wrote her a letter on March 8, 1863, in response to a letter she must have written to him, telling her that she did not need to worry about sewing to earn money. It was similar to what he wrote to her shortly after his enlistment where he told her that he was earning enough money for the both of them. He did not want Margaret worrying about earning money or sewing because he wanted her to concentrate on her health. He wrote, “you must not think of sitting down to sew it would destroy your health to be so confined … you can live well enough without going to live out or sitting down to sew constant my pay will support you.”\textsuperscript{60} Even though there were times when his back pay was not paid, Peter Welsh was able to earn enough money from his service in the

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 77.
Union Army to support his wife. She could survive without having to work, which was what Peter Welsh wanted. In the same letter, Welsh told his wife that if she had any extra money, she should put it in the bank. Margaret did not trust the banks, but Peter Welsh did and he told her that the savings bank was not going to fail. He believed that they could trust the banks and wrote that she was wrong for not trusting them.\footnote{Ibid., 77.}

Peter Welsh was promoted to sergeant in the spring of 1863. He wrote a letter home to his wife about the new position, and how much money a sergeant would make: “No sargeant ranks any higher then a color sergeant and it is the most honorable position an enlisted man can have the first sargeant of a company gets more pay they get $20 a month other company sargeants get $17 [sic].”\footnote{Ibid., 91.} Welsh was proud to be a color sergeant but to him one of the most important parts of his promotion was that he made more money than he had when he was a lower rank. Earning more money meant that he had more that could be sent home to support his wife.

Until his death in 1864, Welsh continued to send his pay home to his family. In September 1863, he sent her twenty dollars.\footnote{Ibid., 126.} A month later in November he sent her thirty dollars.\footnote{Ibid., 135.} In April of 1864, he sent three months of pay, $60, to his wife through Chaplain William Corby.\footnote{Ibid., 150.} Peter Welsh’s letters reflect a concern for supporting his wife and making sure that he earned enough money so that she would not have to work. He joined the Union Army when he could not find work as a carpenter so that he would make money to support her, and sent her money whenever he was able to during his time in the army. Peter Welsh’s main motivation for signing up to fight in the army was that it provided him with a job and the money that he and his wife needed to survive.
Two brothers, Thomas and William Jones, who signed up together and served in the 48th New York Volunteer Infantry also volunteered for service for the job and the income. Like Peter Welsh, the brothers sent money home to their family. In one of his letters to his younger sister Maggie, Thomas Jones asked her to let him know if their father needed money to buy hay for their farm. If he needed the money, then Thomas would send him some. On June 10, 1862, William wrote home to let the family know that they had gotten paid a few days ago and were sending money home with the letter. Each of them sent twenty dollars to their family. In another letter home, William told his family about a man that he had watched die of disease. The man’s dying words were about sending money home to his family. William wrote, “He was very sensible to the last, sat on the chair and told John D. to send his money home and that was the last. He died sitting in the chair.” The word that William used to describe the dying man’s action was sensible. The man knew that he was dying, and his concern was towards his family, and making sure that the money made it to the people that he cared about.

Thomas Jones was wounded in battle during the spring of 1864. The wound was serious enough that his arm was amputated. However, Thomas was not sure if he should take the discharge from the army. The pay that he could make in the army was $19.50 a month. He wrote to Maggie that he would accept the discharge if there was another job that paid that much, including the cost of room and board. It did not matter to Thomas whether he served in the army or got another job. What mattered was the amount of money that he made. Thomas’ motivation for serving in the Union Army was having a job and earning money.

For a poor Irish immigrant, money was a powerful motivator. The army offered a job and a steady pay that attracted immigrants like Peter Welsh, Thomas Jones and William Jones into the

67 Ibid., 24-26.
68 Ibid., 33.
69 Ibid., 70.
service. The army also had another attraction. While not as strong as the motivation of money that was necessary for their survival, the army offered a chance for social mobility. Through their service, the soldiers had an opportunity to move upwards in their society.

Social Mobility

Patrick Henry O’Rorke was an Irish Catholic immigrant who used the army as a way to improve his position in society. Born in March 1836 in Cavan, Ireland, O’Rorke came to the United States with his family when he was a child, shortly before the Irish Potato Famine. Cavan was an impoverished and overpopulated country in Ireland. O’Rorke’s family was poor and illiterate when they settled in Rochester, New York, in the 1840’s. The family earned its living through unskilled labor.\(^70\) Since he was the third boy in the family, O’Rorke was not pressured to work from a young age to support the family. This gave him the opportunity to get an education. He graduated from high school before he started working as a marble cutter when he was in his late teens.\(^71\)

In 1857, Congressman John Williams offered O’Rorke an appointment to West Point. He could have chosen anyone in his representative area but he chose O’Rorke because he saw him as a good student. The appointment to West Point gave O’Rorke a chance for social mobility that he had not had before. West Point and officers in the United States Army were seen “as distinct classes of gentlemen who were somewhat elitist in character.”\(^72\) It was rare for immigrants to have the opportunity to attend West Point. O’Rorke was the only foreign born student in his class. He was also one of the few students who came from a lower class. The majority of students at West Point came from the middle class or from the upper class. Many of them got their appointments through connections that they had in the government. Only 6.4 percent of the students in O’Rorke’s class

\(^72\) Ibid., 228.
came from a lower social class. Attending and later graduating West Point put O’Rorke into the class of gentlemen that he otherwise would not have been able to reach as an immigrant from a poor Irish family.

O’Rorke’s class graduated in 1861. The school pushed them through earlier than they otherwise would have graduated because of the start of the Civil War, and so his class was the second of two classes that graduated that year. Following his graduation, O’Rorke was sent to Washington as an engineer in time to fight in the First Battle of Bull Run in 1861. A year after his first battle, O’Rorke got involved in raising a new regiment for New York, the 140th New York Volunteer Infantry. Two companies of the new regiment were comprised of Irish American soldiers. O’Rorke was given command of the regiment and promoted to Colonel. This put him above some of the middle class and native born officers that he was serving with. They became his staff officers and company commanders while he commanded the regiment. O’Rorke had command of the 140th New York until the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863. While leading the regiment up Little Round Top he was shot and killed. The regiment fought the majority of the battle without him.

Following O’Rorke’s death at the Battle of Gettysburg, he became a hero in Rochester. The newspapers glorified his final moments. One article read: “Col. O’Rorke fell at the head of his column, while holding and waving the colors of his regiment ... Mounted on a rock, he was cheering on his men when a bullet struck him. He knew no fear.” While the story was not true, the people of Rochester believed it. Today there is a monument at Gettysburg that his regiment dedicated in

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73 Ibid., 229.
74 Ibid., 232.
75 Ibid., 234.
76 Ibid., 235-236.
77 Ibid., 238.
78 Ibid., 238.
O’Rorke became a war hero, and was honored for his actions. His story is one that takes him from being a poor Irish immigrant unable to read, to attending West Point and becoming part of the officer class before dying in the Civil War. The army gave him the opportunity for social mobility that he would not have had otherwise.

Peter Guiney was another Irish immigrant who used the army for social mobility. He was born in 1835 in Ireland and came to the United States with his father when he was seven years old. When he was fourteen years old, he was apprenticed to be a machinist. That only lasted for half a year. Since he did not want to be a machinist, he attempted to attend college, which he struggled to afford. After a year he stopped, tried working in the theater, before returning to college to become a lawyer. He was living in Boston and working as a lawyer when the Civil War started and he decided to sign up for the service. During the Civil War he served as a captain before becoming the colonel of the 9th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, which was an Irish ethnic unit with most of the soldiers coming from Boston. Guiney had moved upwards in society on his own by attending college and becoming a lawyer, but the army helped him to earn a higher place in society. He also wrote in one of his letters how the Irish were being praised by their service. After the first Battle of Bull Run, the 69th New York earned praise for their bravery during the battle and for repeatedly charging the Confederate lines. One historian, Joseph Bilby, described the charge of the 69th New York. He wrote, “The Irish charged twice, clambering over the demoralized wreckage of the previous assaults – and were twice repulsed by a tide of small arms and artillery fire.”

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79 Ibid., 225.
81 Guiney, *Commanding Boston’s Irish Ninth*, xiii.
82 Ibid., 24.
and the praise that the regiment gained helped to improve public opinion of Irish immigrants, and encouraged more Irish immigrants to sign up for service.\textsuperscript{84}

**Conclusion**

There were many reasons that motivated Irish immigrants to join the Union Army during the Civil War. Some of them had a sense of patriotism and believed that they had a duty to protect the country and the state where they made their home. Others believed that showing patriotism through serving in the Union Army would change the public opinion of Irish Catholics. Many Irish immigrants fought in the army for the job and the income that it provided so that they could support their families. Another motivation for their service was a chance for social mobility. Service in the Union Army during the Civil War gave Irish immigrants all of this. They earned much needed money, and changed the opinion the public had on Irish Catholics to one that was more accepting of them than the public opinion had been in the years before the war.


\textsuperscript{84} Bilby, *Irish Brigade in the Civil War*, 20.