KELLYVILLE: AN IMMIGRANT ENTERPRISE

BY DENNIS CLARK

PATTERNS of immigrant settlement and adjustment varied widely amid the turbulent American growth and development of the nineteenth century. Ethnic and religious groups scattered across the land in a bewildering variety of social configurations. Some of their groupings were communitarian and utopian, some were promoted by commercial interests, others were simply accidental. Among the nineteenth century immigrants, the Irish Roman Catholics faced a distinctive set of problems with respect to community foundation. Their poverty and minority social status were such that they were forced to concentrate to an overwhelming extent in cities upon their arrival. In urban areas the patterns of settlement were already established by the time the Irish arrived in great numbers in the 1840's. Usually, the demographic alignment of the cities was guided by forces beyond the control of the immigrants, such as the price of available land and housing, or the existence of zones of class segregation. The Irish Catholic newcomers tended to cluster together in whatever areas were available to them. Attempts to launch rural colonization schemes for the Irish failed repeatedly. Consequently, we have relatively few

*The author is in the Center for Community Studies, Temple University.
1 Mark Holloway, Heaven on Earth: Utopian Communities in America (New York, 1951), and O. F. Ander, ed., In the Trek of the Immigrants (Rock Island, Illinois, 1964), Part II, 49-137.
2 Maldwyn Allen Jones, American Immigration (Chicago, 1960), 121.
examples of actual planned community development by Irishmen if we exclude the Irish ghetto communities that grew as prototypes of ethnic segregation in the large urban centers.

Some of the reasons for this condition are related to the disposition and characteristics of the Irish immigrants themselves. As a group whose experience with farming had been calamitous due to the land system and English repression in Ireland, the Irish did not readily seek out rural territory and try to build communities from the ground up. As refugees from successive families and evictions, they had to emigrate, not in communal units or villages, but in scattered and random fashion, driven headlong by the collapse of the society they had known. As strongly religious Roman Catholics, the Irish of the nineteenth century were dependent upon priests to perform obligatory religious ceremonies for them, and such ministers could be found in the larger cities, but only rarely in the hinterlands. In addition, intentional communities required some economic base. If it was not to be agricultural, it would have to be commercial or industrial, and the economic proclivities of enterprising Irishmen did not lead them to build businesses upon ethnic settlements of their confreres outside of the cities. Although social commentators and churchmen alike decried the effects of city life on the Irish immigrants, there were rarely any alternative settlement possibilities.

The village of Kellyville in Upper Darby Township in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, offers an exception to this general picture. Although it was founded before the great famine emigration of 1846-1847, it still became a refuge for some of those who fled "the great hunger." As a settlement it manifested the qualities of individual enterprise of its founders, their economic

---


6 E. P. Hutchinson provides data on occupational distribution among immigrants based upon the United States Census of 1870, showing that the Irish had fewer representatives in trade and in managerial levels of manufacturing than other immigrants. E. P. Hutchinson, Immigrants and Their Children: 1850-1950 (New York, 1956), Table 21, 82-83.

7 Jones, American Immigration, 122, and John Francis Maguire, M.P., The Irish in America (New York, 1868), 214.
shrewdness and an unusual degree of benevolence. It also represented an informal process of colonization more congenial to the disposition of Irish people than the sober rural communities and elaborate utopian schemes of pioneering visionaries and evangelists. Its growth was more natural than calculated, with residents being recruited by word-of-mouth, chance encounter or family connections. The village did not exist as a legal entity. It existed by virtue of the life that was led there. In many ways it reflected the casual, good natured Irish capacity to get things done without seeming to work at them or take them too seriously.

The genesis of Kellyville could hardly have been more accidental. Dennis Kelly, born in County Donegal, Ireland, in 1779 was left fatherless as a boy and apprenticed to a linen manufacturer. After marrying, he came to the United States in 1806. It was his intention to go West and to settle in what was then frontier territory around Pittsburgh. Accordingly, he purchased wagon passage in Philadelphia and set out. The journey was not long underway for Kelly and his wife, when one of the other passengers began roaring curses, a not uncommon practice among wagoneers and teamsters. Kelly forced the wagon to halt, and insisted on taking his wife and belongings from the wagon and obtaining a refund of his passage money. He would not proceed with the traveller whose language had offended him and embarrassed his wife. The point where they alighted was near Darby Creek, the place where Kelly was to settle, grow wealthy and gather a community around him.8

At first Dennis Kelly worked as a day laborer. In 1808 he began making "bagging" cloth. His efforts brought a steady reward and he saved carefully. The outbreak of the War of 1812 created a great demand for cloth for army use, and Kelly prospered in filling government contracts. The failure of commerce to revive after the war made capital available for the development of manufacturing. New textile mills grew up rapidly, among them the mill of Dennis Kelly seven miles from the center of Philadelphia.9 By 1824 Kelly's mill was one of

8 Stephen N. Winslow, Biographies of Successful Philadelphia Merchants (Philadelphia, 1864), 158-161.
9 Ibid., 61. The growth of textiles after 1812 is described by Caroline F. Ware, The Early New England Cotton Manufacture (New York, 1966), 70.
the thirty-three in the Philadelphia vicinity that were the foundation of the area's later eminence as a great textile center.¹⁰ In 1814 Kelly had purchased the site for what would be the Clinton Mills on Darby Creek, and here Kellyville would be situated.¹¹

As his business prospered, Dennis Kelly invested widely in real estate.¹² He invested as well in people. Every reference to Kelly's life extols his open-handed generosity.¹³ His aid to immigrants was as extensive as it was unaffected. In a time when there was a persistent shortage of labor, Kelly found opportunities to employ people newly arrived from Ireland. Perhaps his most notable extension of aid, however, was that he proffered to a young man from his own native area in Ireland, Charles Kelly. Born in 1803 in Ardnaganna in County Donegal, Charles Kelly came to America in 1821. His subsequent career was to continue the economic and social development begun in Delaware County by his diligent namesake.¹⁴

Whether Dennis and Charles Kelly were remotely related by ties of their families in Ireland is not clear from the sketchy biographical notes about them that are available. Kelly is the most common of all Irish surnames and occurs frequently throughout the island. The fact that both of these men were born quite near one another in Donegal suggests some relationship. Whether bound by blood or simply by immigrant comradeship, the two Kellys were remarkably alike. Young Charles Kelly was as energetic and generous as his mentor. He soon married Margaret, the eldest daughter of Dennis. He joined his father-in-law in conducting the expanding textile business. His abilities added even more to its success. Like his father-in-law he sought out immigrants at every turn to aid and counsel them.¹⁵

No sooner had young Charles Kelly arrived in Delaware County in 1821 than he leased a mill under Dennis Kelly's

¹¹ John W. Eckfeldt, Cobbs Creek in the Days of the Old Powder Mill (n.p., 1917), 84.
¹² Winslow, Biographies of Successful Philadelphia Merchants, 162.
¹⁴ Ibid., 442.
¹⁵ Ibid., 442.
The two worked closely together in similar ventures over the years. In 1841 they acquired the mill property of William Rogers and Israel Wheelin on Cobbs Creek. In Kellyville they conducted business in the Cedar Grove Mill. Water power was used at first, but later steam power drove the machinery. By 1845 Kellyville had fifty dwellings and a population of over five hundred. In 1847 the five story Kelly mill on Darby Creek had two hundred employees working in the production of ticking, Canton flannel and other cloths. In addition to this mill there were five others in Kellyville. The major Kelly mill burned in 1856, but an even larger structure replaced it, and the new organization of the mill provided for the special separation and further specialization of carding, spinning and weaving with steam power. Thus, the exceptional Kellys entered the American capitalist tradition. This in itself was notable, for as William V. Shannon points out, it was rare for Irish Catholics to make a frontal entry into sizable businesses. As immigrants they usually lacked the capital and personal connections to substantially penetrate the business world.

One notable feature of the Kelly enterprise is the extent to which it was a phenomenon of immigration. Founded by immigrants, it depended upon immigrants for its labor supply. John and Barbara Hammond in their pioneering studies of industrialization noted the utility that rural cloth-making skills held for the Irish who were forced to emigrate to areas where the Industrial Revolution was in progress.

---


19 Kellyville Centennial, 22.


21 Bishop, History of American Manufactures, III, 60. The mill built after the fire was divided into sections that separated carding, spinning and weaving, and cotton and woolen production.


The preoccupation of both Dennis and Charles Kelly may have been a result of their own humble beginnings, or the tradition of sociability and hospitality for which Irish country people were renowned, but it had a practical side as well. Part of the Kelly generosity resulted in the gathering of skilled craftsmen into the Kelly mills and related businesses. Analysis of the United States Census schedules for 1850, when Kellyville was a thriving community, shows that the entire township of Upper Darby contained a population of 2,044 persons. There were 349 families in 339 houses. Of this total of over two thousand persons, there were 456 Irish-born, with a considerable number of persons born in England or Scotland as well. The Irish were concentrated in the immediate Kellyville area. Thus, Kellyville was practically an Irish village, especially when it is considered that many of the inhabitants who were not Irish-born were the children or spouses of those who were.24

The Census schedules show that the greatest concentration of occupational skills among the Irish was in textile work. There were among them 47 weavers, nine spoolers, four spinners, four beamers, six carders and one bailer and one dyer. The weavers were mostly young women, but also some older males. The bulk of the Irish-born males in the area, however, were laborers, drivers, carters and artisans. If we assume that the employment at the Kelly mills totalled around 200, as is indicated by contemporary references, then the Irish-born constituted about one-third of the total employed. The remainder of the work force was composed of persons born in England, Scotland and America, many of the latter being members of families with Irish-born heads.25

The question of how these workers were actually drawn to Kellyville is of some interest. The process of informal colonization stimulated by the two Kellys was not unusual.26 It should be recalled that since the Irish Catholics did not usually settle on the land where their concentrations would be distinct and

---

24 These figures were compiled from the Seventh Census of the United States (1850), National Archives of the United States, Micro-copy No. 432, Roll No. 726.
25 Ibid.
26 "... the average Irish immigrant's whole effort was directed towards saving money to send for his friends and to provide for their coming." Oliver McDonough, A Pattern of Government Growth (London, 1961), 29.
leave lasting landmarks, most of their efforts toward community building took place in cities where they were blended with the complexity and diversity of urban life. The minority consciousness and ethnic kinship of Irishmen did lead them to aid their friends and relatives to escape the crushing poverty of distressed Ireland. This assistance extended not only to the remittance of money for passage to America, but also to shelter, guidance and employment when the new immigrant arrived. The dimensions of the aid were huge and persistent.\(^\text{27}\)

Dennis and Charles Kelly maintained their ties to the old country. They imported fine horses from Ireland, and, hence, visited there. Did they recruit for the work force in America during these visits? Charles Kelly was born and raised in Ardnaganna, which in Gaelic means “Hill of Scarcity” or “Barren Hill.” This area of Donegal is less mountainous than other areas of the county, but it is, as the name implies, still far from lush land.\(^\text{28}\) In the hard years of the middle of the last century, it was, like so many Irish localities, a place of deep poverty and emigration. The Irish Ordnance Survey includes a Valuation of Rateable Property for this area for 1858. This survey shows fifteen property occupants in the townland, none of them named Kelly. The adjacent townland of Creeve, however, lists three Kellys as occupants, none of whom owned the land they lived on.\(^\text{29}\)

A comparison of the names of fifty-four families listed as occupants of land in and around Ardnaganna with those occurred in the Census schedules for Kellyville indicates that only five names are the same. If direct recruiting from Charles Kelly’s native place was carried on, a greater correspondence would seem probable. The lack of numerous corresponding names, however, is not entirely conclusive, for many of those who emigrated to America were drawn from the class of rural labor that would not be listed as occupants of land, for they were laborers below the status of even the poorer tenants.

\(^{27}\) Arnold Schrier, *Ireland and the American Emigration* (Minneapolis, 1958), Table 18, 167.


\(^{29}\) Griffith Valuation of Rateable Property (1858), *Ordnance Survey* (Dublin: Stationery Office of the Republic of Ireland), 79-80.
Although Charles Kelly may have recruited from his native townland, it is just as probable that in a time of massive immigration he would have freely sought labor among the Irish in and around Philadelphia. The purposeful recruitment of labor overseas was not a feature of American industry prior to 1880.50 Dennis and Charles Kelly would have had ample opportunity to obtain workers among the Philadelphia Irish.31 The success of the Kellys was as widely known as their generosity. This alone would have attracted many people to them. In order to insure resident labor, the Kellys had built fifty stone dwellings at Kellyville. These were comfortable, whitewashed in the Irish fashion, and much admired in a time when immigrants were frequently forced to live in the most unhealthy slum conditions.32

Although the population of the village tended to fluctuate with the vagaries of the textile business, the Kellys had the reputation for keeping their mills going even at a sacrifice in order to maintain employment as steadily as possible. Judging from the praise accorded them, their treatment of the workers was more than simple paternalism. It is worth noting that the Kelly mills apparently did not discriminate on the basis of religion or nationality in hiring in spite of the heavily Irish orientation of the operation. The Census schedules contain the names of many Scotch and English workers unlikely to have been Catholics, whose textile skills were employed in the Kelly mills.

Since Kellyville was a strongly Catholic community, provision had to be made for religious facilities. Dennis Kelly donated land in Haverford Township for a Catholic chapel, the first in Delaware County, in 1822. In 1825 St. Denis Church was built on this land. Charles Kelly donated one acre of land in Kellyville for St. Charles Church, which was dedicated in 1850. The first pastor was Rev. James C. McGinnis, who was Irish-born,
as were seven of the succeeding eight pastors.33

The social life of the village, which was in the nineteenth century a relatively self-contained community, was lively. It had its own blacksmith, shoemaker, tailor and grocer. It had its village characters, like big John Hannigan, known for his pretensions as "the Squire." There was old Peggy Keenan—Peggy the Burler—who supplied residents with potables distilled by her own hands.34 The parish church provided a meeting place, a focus for weddings and celebrations, and eventually a school. Considering the Irish capacity for social discourse and celebration, it is not mere conjecture to suppose that Kellyville was a genial and active community.

The style of life of the two immigrant entrepreneurs was more like that of landed Irish gentlemen than Philadelphia cotton manufacturers. Both retained a taste for rural surroundings. Both Dennis and Charles Kelly were avid horse fanciers. The heavy, ungainly horses of the area drew the attention of Dennis Kelly soon after he began to enjoy some affluence. He resolved to try to improve the breed so that men of modest means could have a horse they could use as a good riding mount as well as a draught animal. To this end he imported a renowned thoroughbred stallion from Ireland, "Daniel O'Connell." After successfully breeding this importation, the older Kelly bought the English racer "Langford" and a number of valuable pedigreed brood mares. Charles Kelly also bred fine horses, and both men raised prize herds of cattle. Charles lived with his wife, six children and six servants in a large, handsome mansion, somewhat effusively described by a local newspaper as "... not exceeded by any establishment in this or adjoining counties."35 Successful, open-minded, surrounded by the community they had created, the Kellys presented a picture of landed notability closed to that drawn by Maria Edgeworth in her novels of

---

33 A sketch of the Kelly donations for these churches is given in Vol. 23 of "Historical Notes" in the files of the Delaware County Historical Society, typewritten ms. of T. J. Horan.

34 Eckfeldt, Cobbs Creek in the Days of the Old Powder Mill, 22 and 56.

35 For information on the Kelly horses see Winslow, Biographies of Successful Philadelphia Merchants, 162. The mention of the Kelly mansion is in The Upland Union (Chester, Pennsylvania), September 4, 1950. Delaware County Historical Society files.
Ireland, rather than that of the mill barons portrayed by Charles Dickens.

Prior to the Civil War, Charles Kelly sold his interests in the cotton mills to Patrick Boyle. The mills continued to operate until economic changes made them unprofitable around 1880. Charles Kelly died on March 27, 1864. Dennis Kelly, having lived to see his great-great-grandchildren, died on July 21, 1864 at the age of eighty-five. They bequeathed their name to the community they had founded, but like the mills they built, the designation would pass. It is retained on maps until the late nineteenth century, but then disappears. Older residents of Upper Darby, however, still recall and use the name.

Kellyville was the kind of mill village that pioneered our way into the Industrial Revolution. As such, its creation was a tribute to the economic perception of the two men who built it. It was also a distinctively Irish creation. The population and style of the community reflected its immigrant origins. Finally, it was a community reflecting the benevolence of Dennis and Charles Kelly, men who habitually assisted people torn from their native roots by emigration with all the problems that this implies. In an age when economic gain was beginning to outweigh traditional bonds and community solidarity, the Kellys stood for the kind of personal ties to workers that permitted mutual respect between mill owner and mill hand.

Campbell, History of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, 442-443.

Although the standard work on Pennsylvania place names does not mention Kellyville, it appears on maps. See A. Harry Espenshade, Pennsylvania Place Names (Harrisburg, 1925), and Henry F. Willing and O. W. Gray, Atlas of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1872), 79.