



The Moses and Maria Lacy family in front of their house in the 1880's, before additions were made on the structure. The farmhouse is located northwest of the intersection of Lacy and Mutchler roads. Their log cabin, built around 1851, stood a half-mile southeast of this house. Left to right: Libby, Will, Moses, Ellen, Maria, Mary, Margaret, John.

Stoner Prairie Settlement

While the pioneers of the Fox and Irish Lane settlement areas were building thriving communities during the years from 1840 to 1860, a third Irish immigrant area was developing in western Fitchburg. The Stoner Prairie area was settled beginning in 1848 by a number of Irish families, most of whom were fleeing the Famine. Some of the original families were the Barrys, Byrnes, Gradys, Lacys, McQuillens, Sweeneys, and Whalens.

The Stoner Prairie Settlement was significant to the growth of the Irish community in Fitchburg not only in that these Irish worked some of the most fertile land in the township but because the settlement continued to expand through the late nineteenth century as the Irish purchased farms from Yankee families. Stoner Prairie was also desirable because it had few stones, especially compared to the moraines. The settlement area grew along Seminole Highway, West Lacy Road, and Mutchler Road until it covered about two and one-half square miles of land, which continue to be farmed by Irish Americans today. The treeline that bounds the prairie is shown on the 1861 plat map of Fitchburg on page 31.

The Stoner Prairie Settlement area developed in two parts—first the earlier eastern community, and later the western sector. In 1848, the Irish entered eastern Stoner Prairie, where today's Mutchler Road is located, when James and Elizabeth Barry moved onto a tract of prairie land there. Similar to the pioneers of the Fox and Irish Lane settlement areas, a number of the Irish of the Stoner Prairie area came to Fitchburg seeking better farmland than they had found in the northeastern states, where they had lived for a time after their arrival from Ireland. The Barry family, who emigrated in 1834 from Aghada Parish, County Cork, lived first in Cornwall, Canada, and later on a stony farm near Potsdam in St. Lawrence County, New York, until they moved to Fitchburg. Their Fitchburg prairie farm was not located on the Seminole Highway stage

route, so many earlier arrivals bypassed this land thinking that it was not only isolated but less fertile than woodland. When the prairie turned out to be very good for raising crops, the Barrys capitalized on it. By the time of the 1860 census, they owned real estate worth as much as many of the “old money” Yankee landowners' properties.¹¹⁷

The mother, Bridget, and three brothers of James Barry also came to Fitchburg in 1848. Michael, one of the brothers, bought land on Adams Road south of Stoner Prairie. Their holdings gradually expanded as the Barrys worked together to buy a farm first for one brother and then for another. The Barrys later bought properties near Oak Hall, including the Nott family's 1856 Italianate stone house on County M one mile east of Fish Hatchery Road.¹¹⁸

The first Stoner Prairie neighbors of the James Barry family were Irish who bought school section property from the state. The Thomas and Ann Byrne family and the John and Hanorah Sweeney family purchased land and built log cabins just inside the woods where the Milton Moraine meets Stoner Prairie. John Sweeney had relatives living near the Byrne Road marsh and the Cullen farm in the southern part of the Irish Lane Settlement area. The Stoner Prairie Byrne family who arrived in 1853 may also have come from County Wicklow, Ireland, as did the Sweeney and Cullen families in 1849.¹¹⁹

The Sweeney's Wicklow homeland was located near the border of County Carlow, Ireland. Hacketstown, County Carlow, is situated on a piece of Carlow land that extends into Wicklow leaving Hacketstown surrounded on three sides by Wicklow townlands. The Sweeney families lived in the Wicklow Townlands of Rathshanmore (meaning “large old fort”) and Rathduffmore (“large black fort”), and attended Mass at the Roman Catholic parish in Hacketstown.¹²⁰

Another early Irish family on Stoner Prairie near Mutchler Road was the Moses Lacy family, which started a farm on the



The “upright” part of the Edward and Ellen Byrne house was constructed with lumber from the 1857 St. Mary’s Catholic Church, which was dismantled after a new church was built in Oregon in 1886. The Byrne house staircase was made from the old choir loft stairs, and the bannister incorporated part of the communion rail. The Byrne house is located on Whalen Road hill, southeast of Stoner Prairie. Photo taken in 1890’s.

school section in about 1851. Moses emigrated from Ireland in 1849. He was employed on a farm near the present day Whitney Way and Mineral Point Road intersection in Madison. He married Maria Nolan in January, 1851, in the third wedding to be recorded at St. Raphael’s Church in Madison.¹²¹

To the south of the school section homesteads of the Sweeneys, Byrnes, and Lacys was the James and Mary Whalen farm. James Whalen came from a long-time Johnston, New York, family who spelled their name “Whelan.” His great-great-uncle, Rev. Charles Whelan, fought in the American Revolution with LaFayette’s army. Rev. Whelan, who was a Capuchin,

established the first Catholic church in New York City in 1785, where St. Peter’s stands today on Barclay Street.¹²²

While the Whalens were starting a homestead in the Irish settlement on the eastern part of Stoner Prairie, the prairie’s western part, better known for its early Vroman and Stoner farms, had only one Irish family living on it in 1860—the James and Mary Grady family. The Gradys lived on Lacy Road a half-mile west of the Seminole Highway stage road. A relative of this family, Martin Grady, came from Glandree Seakle, County Clare, Ireland, and began farming on Stoner Prairie in the 1900’s.¹²³



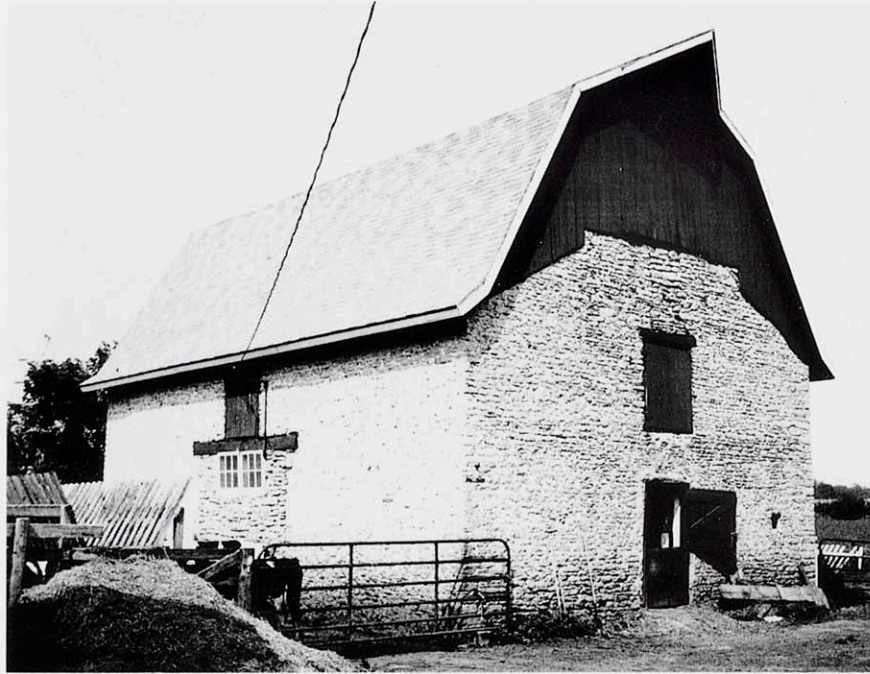
The old cheese factory on the left side of the barn originally stood at the Seminole Highway and Lacy Road intersection, a few hundred feet from where it is today. When the turn-of-the-century cheese factory closed it was moved to serve as an extension to the O'Brien barn. Photo taken in 1990.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the O'Brien and Dunn families bought a number of farms on Seminole Highway. Today, Irish Americans still own most of Stoner Prairie.

Michael and Catherine O'Brien emigrated from County Cork, Ireland, in the late 1820's. The O'Briens had an infant son with them, but a law restricted taking babies under one year of age out of the country. The family wanted to leave together, so the father put baby John in a potato sack, slung it over his shoulder, and walked out past the customs officials onto the ship! Since few vessels were available for carrying immigrants to the New World at that time, the O'Briens bought passage

on what was at hand—a cattle boat. In the following years, the O'Briens operated businesses in Caracas, Venezuela, New York City, and Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. The parents eventually died, and when John was in his twenties he brought his younger siblings including Cornelius from a Pennsylvania orphanage to an Oregon township farm in 1853. Members of the family bought land on Stoner Prairie by 1890.¹²⁴

Similar to the O'Briens, the Dunn family of Stoner Prairie originated in County Cork and left Ireland before the Famine. The Dunns immigrated in 1837 and settled in Pennsylvania before moving to the Town of Middleton around 1843. Descendants bought land near Stoner Prairie in 1919,



The Martin and Janett McKenna family built this stone barn on their Seminole Highway farm which they purchased in 1856. Note the twentieth century addition of the gambrel roof, which added space to the hayloft. The barn is now owned by Gerald and Ruth Dunn. Photo taken in 1990.

although relatives had lived by Dunn's Marsh in Fitchburg since the 1850's.¹²⁵

The Irish family of Martin and Janett McKenna established a homestead in 1856 on the east side of Seminole Highway north of Lacy Road. In the 1860's and early 1870's, the McKennas developed a substantial stock farm by purchasing neighboring Yankee homesteads where the soil had become exhausted from years of intensive wheat farming. They built a large stone barn on the original land. (The only other Fitchburg Irish family known to have built substantial stone buildings before 1860 was the Fox family.) The stone for the McKenna barn was probably quarried to the east of the intersection of Lacy and

Fitchrona roads. Also in the area was the Yankee John Mann's stone barn and house (now Quivey's Grove Restaurant) on Nesbitt Road, northwest of Stoner Prairie.¹²⁶

In the years following 1860, a few Irish families moved to western Fitchburg and lived in areas other than Stoner Prairie. The David and Rosa Byrne family moved shortly after 1860 to the Waterman farm on County M in southwestern Fitchburg, having worked as tenant farmers on Matthew Fox's Irish Lane property. This Byrne family emigrated from County Wicklow, Ireland, before 1830. They lived in Vermont until 1854, and then went west to Milwaukee and rode on the first passenger train from Milwaukee to Madison.¹²⁷



David and Rosa Byrne left their home in Vermont where they had resided for over a quarter of a century to move to Fitchburg in 1854. These Irish immigrants rented land for a number of years and then bought a farm near Fitchburg Village.

Southwestern Fitchburg was also home to the Patrick and Bridget Purcell family who left Ireland during the Famine. After living in Ontario and New York, they took up residence on what is now Purcell Road in Fitchburg shortly before 1880.¹²⁸

Another family that moved to western Fitchburg but lived some distance from Stoner Prairie was the McKees. Dennis McKee left Ireland near the end of the Famine in 1855 and married Bridget Garen. In 1864, they moved to a Fitchburg farm on today's McKee Road a mile to the west of the intersection with Fish Hatchery Road. The McKees later became related through marriage to families of the Stoner Prairie Settlement area.¹²⁹

The Stoner Prairie Irish families built a strong community on the eastern part of the prairie and the beginning of a settle-

ment on the western side between 1848 and 1860. The community was different from the earlier Fox and Irish Lane settlements because its ongoing expansion was not complete until the twentieth century. The Stoner Prairie Irish initially improved their farms with profits from raising wheat on land that many of the Irish and Yankees had dismissed as not sufficiently fertile just a few years earlier. The settlement continued to grow when a number of neighboring Yankees moved away after the end of the wheat era. The Stoner Prairie Settlement and the outlying Irish farms of the western half of the township became integral parts of the Irish community of Fitchburg.

