

Introduction

An estimated two million Irish immigrants came to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century seeking to better their lives economically. Nearly fifty thousand of them sought out the farmland and cities of southern Wisconsin, many of them having been deprived of their livelihoods by an impoverishing potato famine that struck Ireland from 1845 to 1855. And of those fifty thousand, seventy-six Irish families had settled in the Town of Fitchburg by 1860.¹

The Irish of Fitchburg, Wisconsin, constituted one of the largest rural ethnic settlements in southern Dane County. In a time when a cluster of five homesteads of the same heritage was often called a settlement, an area such as Fitchburg with seventy-six Irish families was a very significant community. The Irish were leaders in founding churches, organizing schools, and serving in both state and local government. Today, most people remember the Irish as having lived in working-class neighborhoods of big cities. But three-quarters of all Wisconsin Irish lived in agricultural communities and small villages in 1860, and only later did a majority of the Irish move to cities in response to growing employment opportunities.²

The rural Irish settlement in Fitchburg was formed in the 1840's near the northern end of the convergence of two of the most important roads in south-central Wisconsin: the Madison-to-Janesville mail road and a Milwaukee-to-Mineral Point road associated with the lead trade. The merging of these roads began south of the intersection of Fish Hatchery and Adams roads, extended south to Swan Pond, and then went through Oregon township and into Rutland. In Oregon, a road branched off and went to Beloit. In Rutland, the Old Janesville/lead teamsters' road divided, with one road going to Janesville and the teamsters' road going east to Milwaukee (see Map on page 19).

Travel on the territorial roads was essential to the Irish. For example, the railroad did not reach Madison until 1854, so farmers hauled their wheat cash crop on a ten-day journey by ox team and wagon to Milwaukee. Local roads were used to take farm produce such as potatoes to sell in Madison. Also, most Irish Catholic families made the two-hour trip to Madison each Sunday to St. Raphael's Church, a small wood-frame structure built in 1850.

The majority of Irish who settled in the thirty-six square miles of Fitchburg township arrived between 1840 and 1860. They shared their new-found homeland with people of other cultural backgrounds, including German immigrants and Winnebago Indians, as well as families of varying ethnicities who moved from the northeastern states. As time went on, some of the Irish moved to northwestern Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas. Fitchburg became an important family anchor point for Irish homesteaders throughout the region. Today, Fitchburg has the municipal status of a city, but it is still home to a large rural Irish-American community with many families continuing to live on the homesteads of their ancestors. The Irish-American residents of the 1990's are proud of their past and concerned about the future of their community.

