

The Irish Brigades during the American Civil War

There is perhaps no other ethnic group so closely identified with the Civil War years and the immediate aftermath of the war as Irish Americans. Of those Irish who came over much later than the founding generations, fully 150,000 of them joined the Union army.

Unfortunately, statistics for the Confederacy are sketchy at best; still, one has but to listen to the Southern accent, and listen to the sorts of tunes Southern soldiers loved to sing, to realize that a great deal of the South was settled by Irish immigrants. But because the white population of the Confederate states was more

native-born than immigrant during the Civil War years, there did not seem as much of a drive in the Southern army to recognize heritage in the names and uniforms of regiments as there was in the Union forces.

In the Federal army there was the fabled Meagher's Irish brigade, led by the flamboyant Thomas Meagher; they went into battle with an emerald green flag with a large golden harp in its center, celebrating their heritage even in the midst of death.

In the North, centers of Irish settlement were Boston and New York, both of which had sizeable Irish neighborhoods. There were major immigration periods in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s; the numbers steadily increased until, according to the 1860 census, well over one and a half million Americans claimed to have been born in Ireland. The majority of these lived in the North. There were periods of severe economic difficulties both before and after the war when the immigrant Irish were singled out for the distrust and hatred of their fellow Americans; "No Irish Need Apply" was a frequently seen placard sign above the doors of factories, shops, warehouses, and farms.

The Irish were chiefly distrusted because they were Catholic, and there was much opposition in the United States to the Church of Rome. The frustration this prejudice caused led indirectly to the boil-over of tempers in July 1863, when the first official draft was held; a mob of mostly immigrant laborers gathered at the site of the draft lottery, and as names were called and those not wealthy enough to purchase a substitute were required to join up, the mob's temper flared. The situation escalated into full-scale rioting; for three days, cities like New York and

Boston were caught up in a rampage of looting, burning, and destruction. Many of the rioters were frustrated Irish laborers who could not get jobs, and their targets were draft officials, as well as free blacks living in the North, who seemed able to get jobs that the Irish were denied. It took the return of armed troops from the fighting



at Gettysburg to bring the cities back to peace and quiet.

Such events did little to help the image of the Irish in America, until many years after the war. Despite their wartime heroics, many Irish veterans came home to find the same ugly bias they faced before going off to fight for the Union. Many of them chose to go into the post war army. Still others followed Thomas Meagher into Canada, where they joined up in an attempt to free Canada from British domination. Many simply chose to remain in the Eastern cities, hoping matters would improve as time went by. Eventually things did get better for the Irish, but it was many long years before ugly anti-Irish prejudice faded.

Source: The Civil War Society's "Encyclopedia of the Civil War."

Second Brigade.

Brig. Gen. THOMAS F. MEAGHER.

28th Massachusetts,
Col. Rich'd Byrnes.

63d New York:

Lieut. Col. Richard C. Bentley.

Maj. Joseph O'Neill.

Capt. Patrick J. Condon.

69th New York:

Col. Robert Nugent.

Capt. James Saunders.

88th New York,

Col. Patrick Kelly.

116th Pennsylvania:

Col. Dennis Heenan.

Lieut. Col. St. Clair A. Mulholland.

Lieut. Francis T. Quinlan.