Historical Archaeology of Irish-American Identity and Ethnogenesis on Beaver Island, Michigan

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As Irish immigrants from Árainn Mhór off the coast of County Donegal began new lives for themselves in northern Michigan, their identities and social worlds were significantly shaped by their interactions with a variety of cultural groups, including Mormons, Native Americans, and others with whom they had contact. Archaeological and historical investigations of 19th-century homesteads associated with Irish immigrants on Beaver Island have been on-going since 2009.

The project proceeds in four phases each year and consists of: (1) a week-long cultural study in Ireland in partnership with an tAcadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge, National University of Ireland, (2) a three-week field module of practical instruction in the methods and theory of archaeological excavation, (3) laboratory processing and preliminary analyses of artifacts collected during the excavation (both concurrently while in the field and during two dedicated weeks at the end of the field season), and (4) continued investigation of Irish America and other aspects of the human experience on Beaver Island through independent student research projects during subsequent academic years. Each student who participates in the excavation develops and publishes a web page that discusses their chosen research question, the data they used to answer it, and their preliminary research results (see our project blog at http://blogs.nd.edu/irishstories/).
**Brief History of Beaver Island**

Beaver Island with its sparse population and relatively remote location in northern Lake Michigan (northwest of Traverse City and Charlevoix) created unique opportunities for individuals and families seeking to build new lives for themselves in America (Connors 1995). Whereas many other Irish immigrants from the period settled in large urban and industrial centers (such as New York and Boston), the Beaver Island Irish were fisher-farmers in Ireland and able to continue their traditional lifeways once settled in northern Michigan. Consequently, Beaver Island represents a unique opportunity to explore the Irish immigrant experience in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Beaver Irish interacted with a variety of other cultural groups throughout their history. Prior to 1847, occupation on the island was a varied mix of Irish, German, Native American, and other families who were scattered on subsistence farms around the island’s periphery (Metress and Metress 2006). Encounters with French fur traders, commercial fisherman, and crews of cargo ships transporting goods between Buffalo, New York and Chicago were also not uncommon (Collar 1980).

The social dynamics of the island were radically altered in 1847. After a dispute with Brigham Young over leadership of the Mormon Church, James Strang brought his followers to Beaver Island and established the Kingdom of St. James (Weeks 1976:10). There was considerable tension between Strang and non-Mormon families and, by 1856, the island was inhabited almost exclusively by Mormons. In June of that year, two of his disgruntled followers assassinated Strang, after which Irish immigrants evicted the Mormons and reclaimed Beaver Island for themselves (Weeks 1976:9).
Most of the Irish exiles returned, “establishing new fishing camps and farms and occupying former Mormon sites” (Metress and Metress 2006:33). Occupation of the island went from being almost exclusively Mormon to almost exclusively Irish in less than a generation. Indeed during the second half of the 19th century, nearly 95% of the families on the island were of Irish descent (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1870, 1880, 1900). Perhaps not surprisingly, this is also the period during which chain migration direct from Árainn Mhór in County Donegal was most active. At the peak of Irish immigration, Beaver Island was a Gaeltacht, one of only a few Irish-speaking enclaves in the United States (Sullivan 2010:65).

The Beaver Island Lumber Company altered the cultural landscape of the island yet again by bringing an influx of foreign laborers in 1903 (Gladish 1976). Although the Irish continued to have a strong presence, the logging camps were occupied by lumberjacks and millers from Germany, Denmark, Norway, France, Austria, England, and even India (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1910). The Gaeltacht faded into history as English became the language through which daily business was transacted.

Rather than simply representing demographic shifts in the island’s population, the cultural exchanges that accompanied each of these transitions profoundly shaped Irish identity and ethnogenesis (the formation of new cultural identities, particularly the transition from being an Irish immigrant to being Irish American). Ethnic identities were defined and solidified through contact with other peoples. Instead of a straight line of one group becoming like another, however, interactions between these entities represented a series of negotiations in which some ethnic traditions continued, individual choices and adaptations made (Greenwood and Slawson 2008:77), and cultural norms rejected or subverted (Joseph 2004:19).

Researching Irish America

The varied cultural contacts between circa 1840 and circa 1920 are the foci of this multiyear interdisciplinary project. Identity is contrastive by nature: ‘we’ exist by reference to a distinguishing ‘them’ (Newton 2010:96). Our research questions include: how was Irish identity and ethnogenesis shaped by interaction with peoples of varied ethnicities? How was “Irishness” performed when the island
was occupied by disparate cultural groups, such as Native Americans and Mormons? How was identity mediated in the second half of the 19th century when the island was so homogenously Irish? How were consumer choices, food ways, and uses of space shaped and transformed as Irish immigrants on Beaver Island navigated the multifaceted social worlds in which they lived?

Our investigations have thus far focused on the Peter Doney Gallagher homestead (20CX201). Built by Mormons in the 1840s, the cabin was occupied by a German family immediately following the Mormon eviction. Beginning in the 1880s, it was then occupied by multiple generations of two Irish families (the Earlys and the Gallaghers) up through the early 21st century. The occupational history of this homelot provides a wonderful cross-section of lived cultural experiences on the island.

Excavation at the Gallagher Homesite revealed stratified middens, discrete features such as building foundations and trash pits, and extant architecture, including a mid-19th century log cabin, sheds, and other outbuildings. There has been very little development on Beaver Island, particularly outside of the village of St. James, and so preservation of archaeological deposits is excellent. Artifacts from the excavation included container glass, fruit jars, refined and unrefined earthenwares, metal food containers, buttons, beads, coins, personal objects and religious medallions, botanical remains including seeds and dried fruits, and butchered fauna (such as cow, pig, deer, and poultry).

There was one particularly striking feature of the artifact assemblage from the Gallagher Homestead. Notably, all fragments of whiteware ceramics with the “blue willow” pattern – with the exception of a single plate fragment – was associated exclusively with the first generation Irish immigrant family at the site.
The “blue willow” pattern was made as early as 1780. Produced in England, it was imported to Ireland as well as to the United States. Blue Willow was characterized in the contemporary literature as "cheap and pretty" (Good Housekeeping 1889:249) and thus was not a high status dish to own. Littell's Living Age (November 1851) said, "When the whole English nation, below the upper circles - in all its families of the vast middle classes, one and all, day after day, and year after year, morning, noon and night -- only ate off the blue 'willow pattern,' the sense of the beautiful, as an element of the popular mind, must have been incredibly low."

Even Charles Dickens poked fun at the ubiquity of the ware. He visited Copeland Pottery in Staffordshire and wrote an essay entitled, "A Plated Article," which was published in 1894. He says,"...together with the rest of that amusing blue landscape, which has, in deference to our revered ancestors of the Cerulean Empire, and in defiance of every known law of perspective adorned millions of our family ever since the days of platters!" (Dickens and Pierce 1894:430).

My students and I saw this pattern everywhere we went during our cultural study in Ireland. The restored nineteenth-century cottage of Dan O’Hara and his family is part of the Connemara History and Heritage Centre in Clifden, Co. Galway (http://connemaraheritage.com/index.htm). Máirtín Breathnach, the Heritage Centre’s proprietor, indicated that the blue willow pattern was a symbol of love in the home, that it was lucky to have it and unlucky to break it (pers. comm., 2011). Caroline Carr of the Donegal County Council related that blue willow was just for show. It was rarely used, if at all; only perhaps if an important visitor came to the house – the priest, doctor or teacher or on a special occasion. She had never
come across as it being regarded as lucky or a charm in Donegal. It was more of a status symbol; the more you had displayed and not used the higher your status (C. Carr, pers. comm., 2011).

Photograph of the dishes in the hutch at the Dan O’Hara Farmstead, Connemara History and Heritage Centre, Lettershea, Co. Galway. Notice the blue willow platter (top center).

Clearly, this pattern was important to the first generation Irish family (the Earlys) who occupied the cabin at which my students and I have been excavating on Beaver Island. It retained its symbolic significance from Ireland. Equally important is the fact that the second generation deliberately chose not to use this pattern, with the exception of one fragment which may have been an heirloom piece from Patrick Early’s parents. This is not entirely surprising since the occupation of the house by the second generation Irish family occurs just a few years after the arrival of the Beaver Island Lumber Company at the start of the twentieth century and the return of a multicultural society to the island. The second
generation was likely more attuned to the low status of the blue willow pattern in the changing cultural context of the island.

Analyses of the spatial and artifactual data recovered during the past two field seasons are still on-going. Excavation will continue on Beaver Island over the next several years. We will explore additional homesteads associated with both Irish and non-Irish families on the island and the unique process of becoming Irish-American in northern Michigan.

The team will be excavating this summer during the Beaver Island Historical Society’s Museum Week July 15-22, 2012 (an abbreviated field season this year due to other obligations). You can learn more about Beaver Island and the Historical Society by visiting www.beaverisland.net. If you are visiting the island at that time, please stop by our site for a visit!

About the Author
Dr. Deb Rotman is an active teacher-scholar at the University of Notre Dame. Her research program centers on how social relations of class, gender, and ethnicity were created, codified, and reproduced through material objects and the differential use of space in the nineteenth century. Since 2006, she and her students have been investigating Irish immigrant experiences in South Bend, Indiana, including archaeological excavation in the city as well as archival research and oral history collection in both Ireland and the United States. Beginning in 2009, this project expanded to include Beaver Island. She teaches archaeological field school and takes students with her every summer to Ireland. Dr. Rotman is also the Director of the Center for Undergraduate Scholarly Engagement (CUSE), which facilitates student involvement in research and prepares them for post-baccalaureate fellowships (http://cuse.nd.edu/).

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References Cited


**Good Housekeeping** 1889 “The blue willow pattern cups are cheap and pretty.” *Good Housekeeping* 10 (9 November 1889 to 26 April 1890):249.


