

April at the Museum!



IT'S YOUR
HERITAGE.
PASS IT ON!

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Unprecedented Times at the Museum.

Dear Members and Friends,

We hope you and your family and friends are healthy and staying indoors. While it has been devastating to have to close our doors so soon after moving in to our new location, we know that it is best at this time to stay apart.

The Museum was founded in 1986 to connect people of Irish heritage across the generations. Our programs and exhibits commemorate our respect for those whose struggles made our lives possible. The stories we share at

the Museum and on our Facebook page and other social media, are often about the courage of ordinary people in exceptional circumstances. The struggles and bravery of our ancestors, who survived famine, or wars, and leaving home, transcending prejudice and hard times, hold powerful lessons for our own current difficulties and encourage us to hold on. We strive to preserve their immigrant stories for the generations who will follow, and as our mission statement says, we encourage Americans of all backgrounds to explore all of the stories

which unite us as a nation.

While our physical doors may have temporarily closed, we are working on ways to share our exhibits digitally with you. Elizabeth is currently finishing writing the new content for the exhibits, and plans to record short video presentations which will be shared on the website and on our Facebook page. We are working on adding new content to our website, including links to resources that may offer insight and stir interest while students are learning from home. This will take time, but do check in.

As you can imagine, there is a lot of uncertainty about the future at the moment. While the Museum is more than just a physical place, having to close in what is our busiest month, foregoing the earned revenue on which we depend, will take a toll on our work. We need your support - now more than ever - to get us through this financial crisis. It is an unsettling time for us here at the Museum, as it is for you at home too. I know people are worried about making rent and paying their bills, and whether their jobs are secure. But I would remind you that museums which preserve and share history and culture are essential to us as a society; they are not just a luxury. Look at the various cultural and artistic entities which are sharing their resources online and in doing so, are getting us through these dark days. We intend to do that too, but I am requesting your help, if you can afford it. I encourage those of you who receive and enjoy our newsletter, but are not members, to join at this time, if possible. Otherwise, please consider making a gift in any amount, which will allow us to survive these unprecedented times, remain strong, and reopen when circumstances allow.

There is an Irish saying which is very appropriate for our times. "Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine." It is in the shelter of each other, that people live. We are finding that to be true in so many ways at the moment, and I am sure our immigrant ancestors knew it too. Like the immigrants who are at the center of our story, we are living through the stuff of history. I appeal to you to help us keep passing on the story and culture of our people in America, and am most grateful for your support.

Please stay safe and healthy, and we look forward to being together again.

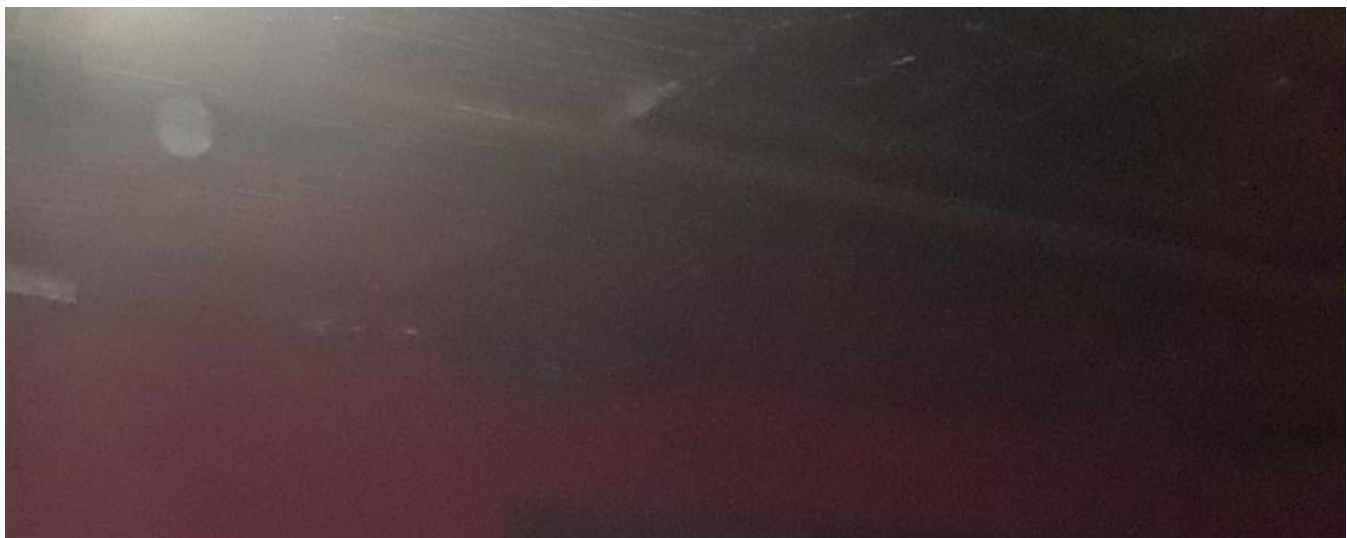
Elizabeth

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Sneak Peek!

Scale Model of an Irish Workhouse, built by John Anson, Museum Exhibit Specialist







We are delighted to announce that John Anson has donated this gorgeous model of the infamous workhouse to the Museum. John began work on this model over twenty years ago, going so far as to visit Ireland with his wife Dorothy, where he made pilgrimages to several workhouses around the country. This one is based on the workhouse at Ennistymon, Co. Clare. We are very grateful to John for his donation and the model will be at the center of a new exhibit on the Great Hunger.

John grew up in Oxford and was aware of the workhouse just outside his own home town. He worked for many years at the NY State Museum Craft Facility, primarily as a Restoration Specialist. In his career he restored the antique fire engine collection, welded the articulated framework for the skeleton of the Cohoes mastodon, made the modern replica of that animal still on display, dismantled, moved and later erected several antique buildings, and built the 30 foot authentic replica of the 18th century Mohawk river batteau, which as part of the Educational Program, he helped to row from Syracuse to the home port in Rotterdam, NY.

The British Poor Law established workhouses in Great Britain - Charles Dickens made them famous when he described Oliver Twist's childhood and his immortal line, "Please Sir, I want some more!" 163 workhouses were built in Ireland beginning in 1838 when the law was extended to Ireland, and they became the last resort of the destitute poor from the 1840s-1920s. During the Great Hunger, to qualify for admission, people had to give up any land they had greater than a quarter of an acre. On entering the workhouse, family members were split up into separate quarters, sometimes never to see each other again. Children aged two or younger could sometimes stay with their mothers, but male and females were separated. Young and old alike were expected to work, and in return, the 'inmates' received enough food to survive.

Very little productive work was carried out. One of the rules was that the workhouse should not enter into competition with outside businesses. When numbers in the workhouse were large, it was difficult to find work for everybody. In the earlier years, the Capstan wheel was in operation in some workhouses. Women & children, maybe up to several hundred, walked around in circles pushing a big wheel to grind corn. Breaking stones for building roads was a common occupation for the men. Older inmates were put to work mending clothes and spinning wool. Girls were meant to be trained for domestic service. Oakum picking was carried out in many workhouses. This involved separating out the strands of old ship rope so that it could be reused. Women also carried out domestic jobs such as cleaning or helping in the kitchen or laundry and looking after the sick.

Most of those arriving at the workhouse gates were already at death's door. Starving and sick with the fever, many died at the gate before admission or very soon afterwards. Packed beyond capacity, disease spread out of control and even the most healthy succumbed and died (including doctors and other members of staff). Dysentery, typhus, and other diseases were rampant in the workhouses because of the crowded conditions and medicine was incredibly scarce. The workhouses could not cope with the overcrowding, the disease, and the deaths. Corpses, without coffins, were carried on carts day after day, as many as fifty a week, to be thrown into mass burial pits in the workhouse grounds, without a funeral service.

The diet varied somewhat from workhouse to workhouse. Generally, it consisted of stirabout, which was a type of porridge, milk, and potatoes. Children got bread. Adults received two meals a day and children three. Reports of the time show that the food was often of very poor quality, with the milk being sour. The workhouse diet remained very basic and it was not until the end of the 1800's that tea, bread for adults, and a meat soup dinner were introduced.

One of the ways that workhouse numbers decreased was through emigration. For landlords, it was cheaper to pay the cost of emigration than to pay the rates (taxes) which kept their pauper tenants in the workhouse. An Emigration Commission was established, with representatives visiting every workhouse in Ireland. Those who wanted to emigrate were offered free passage, clothing and a little money. Between the years 1848-1850, 4,175 orphan girls aged 14-18 left Irish workhouses for Australia under the Earl Grey scheme and supported by the Australian government. In the 1850s, the Poor Law started to assist young female paupers to Canada where there was demand for domestic servants, and over 15,000 girls were sent there.

As an institution, the workhouse was despised, as life inside its walls was harsh and disciplined. In particular, the conditions during the famine years remained in the memories of those who experienced it for generations. After the Great Hunger, the numbers of people entering the workhouse decreased and over time it became a place for people that society did not want: unmarried mothers, children born outside of marriage, orphaned and abandoned children, "lunatics and idiots", old and infirm people, tramps who traveled the roads. Many workhouses became county hospitals or sanitariums for tuberculosis patients in the early years of Irish independence, as well as old age homes. However, for generations that followed, people had an awful fear of spending their final years in the County Home, because it was still seen as being part of the old workhouse system.

Future Programs.





As you know from last month's newsletter, we postponed several fantastic events. But all of our speakers and performers have agreed to appear here as soon as they can. So Steptune will be back to perform their History of Irish Dance program, and Dr. Martin Lyden will be back with his talk on the Priest Hunters during the Penal Laws. Dr. Marc Meyer will take us through the Top Ten Events in Irish History, and our regular Comhaltas session will be back too. We are also looking forward to presentations from Dan Milner on Irish American music, Abby Wise on the Siege of Derry, and Michael Barrett on the Irish and the Transcontinental Railroad. I am hoping to share my own lecture on the Black and Tans online this week.

Two big events that we are excited about (and hope will go on) are the Famine Voices Roadshow and an exhibition and lecture by Dr. Maureen Murphy on Irish Immigrant Girls at Watson House.

The Famine Voices Roadshow aims to bring together Irish emigrants, their descendants, and members of their communities to share family memories and stories of migration from Ireland to Albany and the United States, especially during the period of the Great Hunger and afterwards. They will be gathered for the Great Famine Voices online archive. The Roadshow is an open house event that will feature a lecture about the Irish in nineteenth-century New York by Dr Elizabeth Stack and Director Rebecca Abbott's award winning documentary Ireland's Great Hunger and the Irish Diaspora (2016), narrated by Gabriel Byrne. The event will provide an opportunity for people to share their memories and stories of migration, and to strengthen their sense of ancestry and historical and current Irish connections. It is funded by the Government of Ireland Emigrant Support Programme. We anticipate that this will happen in May.

The Immigrant Girls at Watson House will feature an exhibition and a lecture by Hofstra University Professor Emeritus Maureen Murphy. A unique aspect of Irish migration to the U.S. was the predominance of young women traveling alone. Between 1883 and 1908, 307,823 young Irish women arrived at the Port of New York. Most of the girls who were not met by family or friends were assisted by the Mission of Our Lady of the Rosary for the Protection of Irish Immigrant Girls. The Mission was the inspiration of Charlotte Grace O'Brien (1845-1909), the daughter of William Smith O'Brien, who was deported to Tasmania for his part in the 1848 Rebellion. Murphy has led the research into the rich archives of this extraordinary institution and her lecture will explore this fascinating story. Professor Emerita Maureen Murphy was the Joseph L. Dionne Professor of Teacher Education at Hofstra University. She serves, with John Ridge, as historian of the Irish Mission at Watson House Project which has produced a permanent exhibition, a travelling exhibition and a website with records digitized for 45,000 immigrant women who passed through the Mission.

So stay tuned to our website at www.irish-us.org and our Facebook page for updates which we will post

So, stay tuned to our website at www.irish-us.org and our Facebook page for updates, which we will post daily. We hope that May will see us return to normal and with a full schedule of events. Technology has been a great way for us to stay in contact, even as we are all learning new aspects of it! I am grappling with how to add pages and tabs to our website, as well as figuring out how best to share short videos. But I am most looking forward to you being able to come in to see us at the Museum, and sharing the new exhibits and content with you.

I leave you with a poem from Michael D. Higgins, the President of Ireland, called *Take Care*, from his second collection of poems, *Season Of Fire*, published by Brandon Press in 1993.

Take Care

In the journey to the light,
the dark moments
should not threaten.
Belief
requires
that you hold steady.
Bend, if you will,
with the wind.
The tree is your teacher,
roots at once
more firm
from experience
in the soil
made fragile.

Your gentle dew will come
and a stirring
of power
to go on
towards the space
of sharing.

In the misery of the I,
in rage,
it is easy to cry out
against all others
but to weaken
is to die
in the misery of knowing
the journey abandoned
towards the sharing
of all human hope
and cries
is the loss
of all we know
of the divine
reclaimed
for our shared
humanity.
Hold firm.
Take care.
Come home
together.

