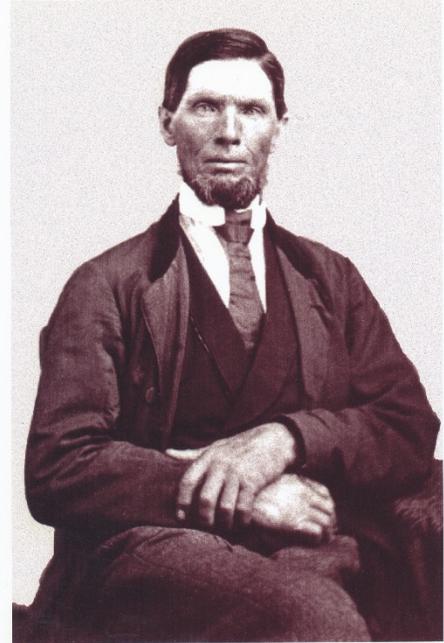


Celebrating the Irish in Cascade

Edward Lennon had a choice: he could work for his elder brother, who would inherit the family farm in Ireland, or he could leave his native country and try to build a new future for himself on the other side of the Atlantic. In 1836, his decision put him on a journey from Baltinglass, County Wicklow to what would become Cascade, Kent County, Michigan.

The Irish were drawn to the southwestern corner of the township, where, according to *Cascade Chronicles*, “the heavily wooded acres contained some of the best farming land in the region.” Most of the first Irish settlers were bachelors who spent the winter in shanties, working for farmers in adjoining Paris township or felling trees. Some of them had worked in Grand Rapids, digging a canal that would have made it possible for steamers to bypass the rapids of the Grand River, a project that ultimately failed. Lennon had been a laborer on one of the first Canadian railways before crossing into the United States at Detroit and heading west, in search of a place to buy land, and ultimately arriving here.



Edward Lennon

In early 1837, Lennon and his countryman, James May (also from County Wicklow), walked together from Cascade to the government land office in Ionia, where they each bought 80 acres. Their neighbors included, or would soon include, William Annis, John Brougham, Michael Eardley, and Thomas Harmon. These men were often followed by siblings; Thomas Eardley, for example, came from a family of eleven children, eight of whom eventually settled in Cascade. His sister, Rose Eardley, married Thomas Harmon in Ireland before they, too, made the long trip to our township. Together these men and women formed a tightly knit Irish enclave that dominated southwestern Cascade.

This community was very different from the mostly Protestant English and, later, Dutch settlements along the Gull Trail stagecoach route (along Whitneyville Road) and what we now think of as the center of Cascade, where Cascade Road crosses the Thornapple. The Irish spoke with a lilting accent, kept to themselves, and were Roman Catholic.

Through hard work and perseverance, the Irish prospered. Within the lifetimes of most of the early immigrants, their community would include a church, a school and a cemetery.

The church had its beginnings in the Lennon home in the 1840s, and was served by Father Andreas Viszosky, who traveled to outlying areas to preach and offer mass. In 1857 a log church was built on land donated by Edward Lennon. *History of Kent County* reports that this was the first church built in Cascade. By 1881, the church had a name: St. Mary's, and was the spiritual home for 47 families. In 1888 the log church was replaced with a new structure, complete with a steeple, located at the corner of 52nd Street and Kraft Avenue. Parish records described it as "... a thing of service and beauty ... a monument proclaiming far and near the devotion of the Catholic people of Cascade to God and the Holy Mother." In the 1970s St. Mary's was torn down, in part because the steeple posed a hazard for aircraft needing safe

access to the runways of Kent County airport. The parish merged with others to form Holy Family in Caledonia.

The school, like St. Mary's, was built on land donated by Edward Lennon. Completed in 1849, it was a log structure, later replaced by a frame building, located on 48th Street. Officially, this was Cascade School No. 5, but because so many children from the Irish community went there, it was known among the non-Irish as Paddy's College, "Paddy" being a nickname for any Irishman. In 1983, to make way for the expanding airport, the building was put up for auction. It was purchased for \$425 by Elizabeth Kegel, who had begun her teaching career at the school sixty years earlier and had attended it as a child. She moved it to her farm down the street and remodeled it into a rental home.

The cemetery surrounds the former site of St. Mary's church, and so technically, it, too, is on property donated by Edward Lennon. It remains a peaceful and humble place, where the headstones memorialize many Irish families. It is also the last bit of the Irish community that the early settlers would still recognize as their own.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century Irish families continued to predominate in the southwestern corner of Cascade. "For a square mile all around, everybody was Irish," says Cascade Historical Society member Ted Milanowski, who grew up in the area. "Except us. We were one-hundred percent Polish."

Dramatic change came in the early 1960s, when Irish (and Polish) farms were purchased to make way for the new Kent County airport. Many of the sons and daughters of the Irish pioneers had already moved on to find careers in business, education, manufacturing and other fields, yet the obliteration of the family homesteads marked the end of a significant era in Cascade history.

Before his death in 1895, at age 78, Edward Lennon had expanded his farm to 130 acres. He and his wife Margaret Lewis Lennon raised five boys and four girls. He arrived a landless immigrant and became a man of property and a community leader.

Today you can set foot on a small portion of Edward Lennon's farm by visiting the new Gerald R. Ford International Airport viewing area at 4910 Kraft Avenue. One can only imagine what he'd think, looking over at the runways built on land he'd cleared with an axe, seeing airplanes and jets arriving and departing for distant cities.