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# Educating Irish Immigrants in Antebellum Lowell

Brian C. Mitchell

The role of education in assimilating immigrants has received considerable attention since Ellwood Cubberly proclaimed "the public school triumphant" in the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Recent revisionists usually explain the growth of education in terms of group conflict in which the dominant American culture used education to impose its social, political, and cultural patterns upon immigrants.<sup>2</sup> Other recent studies have warned of the need to separate formal bureaucratic institutional development from increasing school enrollments, arguing, for example, that education infused with republican virtue and evangelical Protestantism acted as an important mechanism for local community building.<sup>3</sup>

Nowhere are the factors affecting the early drive for public education among immigrants in antebellum industrial America better illustrated than at Lowell, Massachusetts in the early nineteenth century. Lowell's investors built their factory village upon East Chelmsford farmland incorporating Lowell as a separate town in 1826. Within ten years Lowell had become Massachusetts' third largest city and America's premier textile center. This rapid urbanization sparked a massive influx of immigrants, overwhelmingly Irish. Indeed, by the 1855 Massachusetts Census, one-third of Lowell was Irish.<sup>4</sup> Education of these Irish immigrants quickly became a volatile issue.

When Kirk Boott, Lowell's Chief Agent, arrived in town, he found a sparsely attended district school system.<sup>5</sup> Boott was a practical business manager whose primary concern was to develop and operate Lowell's textile mills profitably. He saw no reason to extend public education when his labor force consisted of transient Yankee farm women. Boott certainly never connected the need for education with the Irish for whom he provided no accommodation beyond tolerating their squalid "paddy" work camps on unused corporation land convenient to canal and mill construction sites.<sup>6</sup> To Boott's apparent surprise, the Irish, to whom he offered only seasonal employment, stayed in Lowell permanently. In fact, by 1831, St. Patrick's Church was organized to service an estimated five hundred Irish or eight percent of Lowell's population.<sup>7</sup>

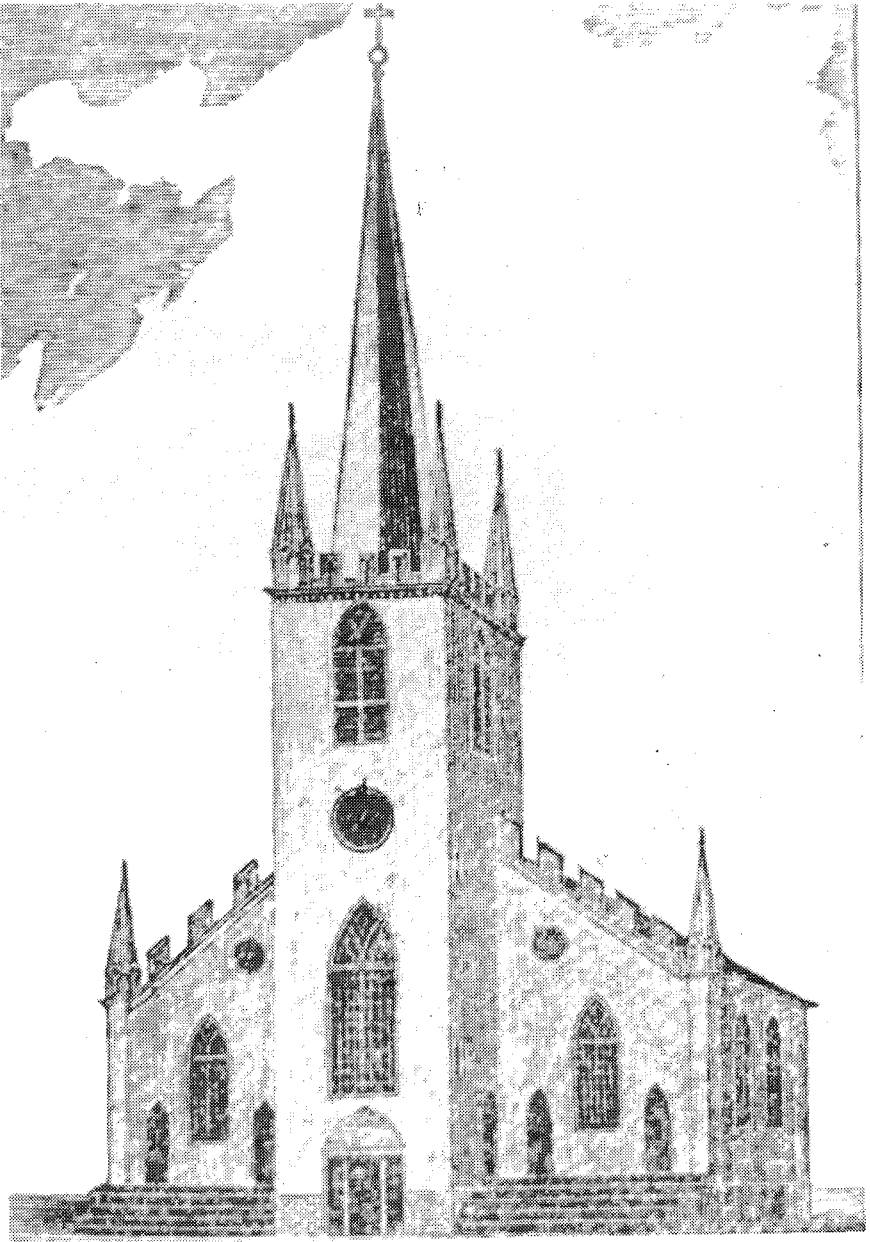
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This rapid population increase included many wives and children who joined the Irish men in the "paddy camps" which continued to expand and merged into an Irish village, usually called the Acre, separated from the mill district by the Western Canal.<sup>8</sup> Boott dealt with the Irish primarily through intermediaries, but he made no provision for the education of Irish children beyond the inadequate district system.<sup>9</sup> Boott did provide two corporation schools for permanent employees but steadfastly maintained that Lowell's officials "had done for public schools what was required; they were proper and sufficient for the poor, but they would never serve for the better sort . . ."<sup>10</sup> Boott's position ran counter to the philosophy of Rev. Theodore Edson whom Boott had personally brought from Boston to Lowell in 1824. An Episcopalian minister, Edson served not only Boott and Lowell's comfortable Protestant middle class but also its transient Yankee factory women. Many of these factory women changed religious allegiance at whim as Lowell attracted an increasing number of Protestant sects and, as education was popular among all religious groups, Edson's support for it enhanced his own stature, reflected his personal beliefs, and made Episcopalianism more attractive to those who might ordinarily join more evangelical sects.<sup>11</sup> Edson emerged as Lowell's leading middle class reformer when, shortly after he obtained a seat on the Lowell School Committee, Edson attacked Boott's support of district schools calling instead for a town-wide graded system.<sup>12</sup>

Edson remained the guiding force behind Lowell's public schools for over fifty years, and his viewpoint closely reflected the majority opinion on the School Committee during that period.<sup>13</sup> In the late 1820s, he vigorously defended the graded system on two levels. First, Edson argued that district schools suited small villages, but that Lowell's spectacular growth had made them ineffective. Second, Edson reasoned that Lowell's educators would exert considerable discipline through a graded system which would create larger and more efficient schools. Such schools would be more manageable and orderly and would also effectively incorporate increased school enrollments as Lowell prospered. Edson reflected that, despite Boott's complaint that Lowell was already in debt with large appropriations for public services, Lowell's schools would serve as a bulwark of morality and stability and foster a sense of community. Edson won the debate.<sup>14</sup>

The funding controversy illustrates the importance of understanding the drive for public education as an extremely complex development. Lowell's early industrialists opposed Edson's school expansion program as a wasteful extravagance from which they derived no direct economic benefit; indeed, Boott even sniped that "ministers were not suitable to manage the expenditures of the town." In an important sense, Boott had missed the point that Edson was, above all else, "of the town," and saw the need to create a sense of community in what had been an artificial economic experiment at Lowell.<sup>15</sup> Edson and men like him fought for school expansion as a means of creating "purified citizen members of a redeemer nation." Education, by merging republican virtues with Edson's brand of evangelical reform-minded Protestantism, created a moral, disciplined, orderly and productive America.<sup>16</sup>



St. Patrick's Church, Lowell.

Edson had succeeded in creating a town-wide graded system but the Irish remained outside his control. Local parish priests and some interested laymen periodically offered Irish children a rudimentary education in the 1820s, but the parish schools lacked funds and they held classes irregularly.<sup>17</sup> In 1830 the School Committee extended the graded system to include a new school in the Acre exclusively for Irish children from throughout Lowell. It appropriated fifty dollars, but the new public school was not a success.<sup>18</sup> Local Catholic priests approved of educating Irish children; in fact, by the early 1830s, they adapted St. Patrick's Church basement to house a number of overcrowded classes. The priests influenced Irish parents against public schools, and they expressed considerable anxiety over possible Protestant proselytizing. Their suspicions kept Irish children in the local parish schools or, more usually, away from education altogether.<sup>19</sup>

The situation called for a compromise which would alleviate the priests' fears and achieve the School Committee's goal of bringing Irish children into the public schools. Curiously, the solution came when a Catholic priest, Father Peter Connolly, approached the School Committee in June of 1835 for financial assistance for his bankrupt parish schools.<sup>20</sup> The School Committee recognized that the Irish public school had sufficient money but few students and frequently suspended operation, while the Catholic school had numerous students but no money. The compromise which arose represented an unusual alliance between Church and State.<sup>21</sup>

Under the 1835 Agreement, the School Committee appointed and examined instructors, selected books, prescribed exercises and studies, and operated the Irish school as an integral part of Lowell's public system. Connolly struck a bargain, however, which gave the Catholic Church a large measure of authority over Irish education. The School Committee agreed to appoint only Catholic instructors approved by the Catholic priests. In addition, the texts would contain no slander on Catholicism; in fact, the School Committee presented the texts used in Lowell's other public schools to Connolly who approved of their content.<sup>22</sup> Connolly undoubtedly knew that the School Committee had adopted a curriculum which stressed reading, grammar, spelling, arithmetic, and geography, and which was based upon a "non-sectarian" program acceptable to all Protestant sects. The Catholic teachers would interpret any questionable material within each Irish classroom.<sup>23</sup> The 1835 Agreement became school policy, and the School Committee set up two classrooms in St. Patrick's Church basement and one in the new Irish "Chapel Hill" neighborhood.<sup>24</sup>

The 1835 Agreement also explains how Irish children entered Lowell's public schools—the Irish had requested and negotiated for their admission. Obviously, not all Irish parents voluntarily sent their children to public school but, generally, those Irish who were also Catholic supported the Agreement negotiated by their priests. An emerging Irish middle class within Lowell agreed with the priests but also shared the School Committee's enthusiasm for public education. Once the religious impediment was removed, these middle class Irish openly embraced education as a useful tool to improve their children's position.<sup>25</sup>

Many middle class Irish joined Protestant reformers in believing that Lowell was a magnificent industrial and social laboratory where "liberal sentiments" prevailed over narrow prejudice. As members of the dominant Irish social institution, the Lowell Irish Benevolent Society, Irishmen such as Charles Gorman and the *pater familias* of Lowell's Irish, foreman Hugh Cummiskey, warmly praised the Agreement.<sup>26</sup> At their 1840 St. Patrick's Day dinner, Gorman proposed, "May the School Committee of the City of Lowell continue to inspire the rising generation with the love of learning and patriotism."<sup>27</sup> At their 1843 celebration, a Protestant doctor, John W. Graves, suggested that the public schools were "A happy expression of the spirit which characterizes an age distinguished for philanthropy and liberal sentiments; may we duly appreciate their value, and continue to give them our most cordial support."<sup>28</sup> Theodore Edson might have written either sentiment himself!

Lowell's priests also shared this middle class perspective as did Bishop Benedict Fenwick. In 1836, the School Committee congratulated Father Connolly "to whose zealous and efficacious co-operation their [Irish public schools] success may be mainly attributed."<sup>29</sup> In 1840, Father James Conway praised "the education of the rising generation of this city. It is conducted upon just and Liberal principles."<sup>30</sup> In fact, both Connolly and Conway represented Fenwick who was also a personal friend of Kirk Boott. Boott met privately with Fenwick on numerous occasions and even donated corporation land for the construction of St. Patrick's Church.<sup>31</sup> Fenwick ran a small diocese which depended heavily upon Protestant support. The Agreement reflected Fenwick's wishes and had been negotiated by his agents. Undoubtedly, Fenwick viewed the Agreement as further assistance from Lowell's social and industrial leaders and firmly supported their efforts to promote peace, order, and enlightenment since it also enhanced his own position in Lowell.<sup>32</sup>

The Agreement worked well for several years. Within six months, 459 children had enrolled and 282 students were attending regularly. Average daily attendance reached 208 students which compared favorably with town-wide attendance.<sup>33</sup> The School Committee retained the original Irish teachers, Patrick Collins and Daniel McElroy, and hired other qualified Catholic teachers. It added a fourth grammar school a year later. In 1838, Collins' and McElroy's schools combined to form the Fifth Grammar School. Lowell's Catholics and Protestants alike hailed the Agreement as a noble experiment worthy of emulation throughout America.<sup>34</sup>

Despite its success, the Agreement broke down in the early 1840s. St. Patrick's pastor, Father James T. McDermott, suddenly in 1843 called for the dismissal of seven of Lowell's twelve Catholic teachers. All but one teacher, the Irish grammar school principal, James Egan, refused to resign. Such impudence infuriated McDermott who publicly denounced them from the altar. McDermott resented their transferring allegiance from St. Patrick's to the new St. Peter's in Chapel Hill which he had vigorously opposed as an unnecessary division of St. Patrick's parish. He apparently issued his vindictive call for dismissal to punish them. He ordered further that every Irish child boycott the schools until the teachers resigned. For several weeks the schools stood empty although, eventu-

ally, the "strike petered out."<sup>35</sup>

McDermott's actions angered the Irish middle class which had solidly supported the public schools. At the 1844 Benevolent Society dinner, Hugh Cumiskey pointedly proposed a toast to the Lowell School Committee, "May their assiduity in promoting the good of that noble cause committed to them never relax, or never again be obstructed by selfishness or ambition."<sup>36</sup> In July 1844, Boston *Pilot* publisher Patrick Donahoe wrote in an effort to salvage the Lowell Agreement calling it an arrangement "without precedent or imitation" in which the School Committee "has long since made a separate and most ample provision for the education of Irish children."<sup>37</sup> He also reported that one School Committeeman, Ithamar W. Beard, "dwelt upon the unworthy prejudice which had possessed the minds of many in relation to the Irish children, and was proud to say that if they need confutation of their erroneous opinions, they had but to come into that school."<sup>38</sup> Although the Agreement never formally terminated, local Catholic influence in Irish public schools rapidly decreased; in fact, by 1846, only three out of twelve teachers in the Irish schools were Irish.<sup>39</sup>

McDermott's willfulness had destroyed the 1835 Agreement, but his actions actually masked far deeper changes occurring within Lowell. Lowell recovered from the Panic of 1837 and embarked upon a rapid economic expansion in 1844.<sup>40</sup> At the same time the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association protested factory conditions calling for the ten hour day while pointing to corrupt management practices designed to maximize profits at the expense of the Yankee factory women. As the economy revived, Irish immigration turned from a steady trickle into a flood. This startling increase of Irish offered mill agents an attractive labor alternative when beset by labor agitation and stockholders' demands for favorable dividends. The Irish, particularly women, obtained employment, and by the late 1840s Lowell had changed from a Yankee factory village into an immigrant industrial city.<sup>41</sup>

It is far too simplistic to suggest that the School Committee abruptly shifted from enlightening "purified citizen members of a redeemer nation" to producing docile factory workers trained in factory discipline by public school teachers. Public education did become increasingly institutionalized as Lowell's officials appointed a truant officer, opened a "House of Reformation for Juvenile Offenders," designed "Intermediate Schools" for older Irish children with no formal education, and enforced a "certificate statute" to ensure that older children who obtained mill employment had received at least some public education.<sup>42</sup> Behind this bureaucratic expansion, however, there also existed some of the same goals which had characterized the earliest drive for public education among Irish immigrants; particularly a demand that public education promote peace, order, and good citizenship. When St. Patrick's pastor, Father John O'Brien, opened Notre Dame Academy for Girls in 1852, for example, the School Committee vigorously attacked sectarian schools:

That any sect has a perfect right to establish schools of its own, none can deny . . . But if it shall be found that the children withdrawn from our Public Schools, and sent to places of religious instruction,

are not properly educated in those branches which make successful men and women, then it becomes a matter of interest to the public mind generally . . . Whosoever refuses to educate his children is a foe to the community, for a single generation of ignorant children would endanger all our future history. For its own safety society is bound to educate its youth, and if children refuse to be educated, the law comes in to enforce the claims of society.<sup>43</sup>

By 1850 several considerations, both old and new, affected the School Committee's actions. First, the School Committee continued to uphold the relationship between public education and the good of the community. Second, the massive influx of thousands of destitute Famine Irish had turned Lowell's Irish neighborhoods, particularly the Acre, into overcrowded slums. This reinforced the need to impose order. Third, Catholic priests and their middle class supporters had turned away from public education and created a separate "sectarian" school. Catholic priests such as John and Timothy O'Brien, who originated the "O'Brien Dynasty" which ran St. Patrick's from 1848 to 1922, opposed public education as "godless" and pledged personal finances for Notre Dame Academy's construction and maintenance.<sup>44</sup> The Academy became immensely popular with Lowell's Irish as the nuns expanded their efforts to care for pre-school children of Irish factory women. The school was equally popular with their Bishop who approved of new Catholic institutional development in Lowell.<sup>45</sup> Finally, the School Committee's actions also reflected the needs of mill agents who made Lowell prosper and who now derived direct economic benefit from factory employees educated in public schools.<sup>46</sup> Homer Bartlett, Massachusetts Company Agent, for example, wrote to Horace Mann in 1859:

From my observation and experience, I am perfectly satisfied that the owners of manufacturing property have a deep pecuniary interest in the morals of their help . . . I believe it will be seen that the establishment, other things being equal, which has the best educated and most moral help, will give the greatest production at the least cost per pound.<sup>47</sup>

The drive for public education among immigrants in antebellum Lowell must be seen as a process in which many of the same motivations and much of the rhetoric justified School Committee actions taken over forty years in an effort to adapt to the enormous internal changes within Lowell. Edson's goal of moral, responsible citizenship in 1830 still applied in 1855, but Lowell was a far larger and more complex city overwhelmed by destitute Irish immigrants unaccustomed to the duties and responsibilities of good citizenship in America. The Irish middle class and the Catholic Church had abandoned public schools, but Lowell's citizens demanded a peaceful and orderly city while its mill agents needed workers of moral, responsible character "at the least cost per pound."



## NOTES

1. Ellwood P. Cubberly, *Public Education in the United States* (Boston, 1934).
2. See Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (Chapel Hill, 1960) and Lawrence Cremin, *The American Common School: An Historical Conception* (New York, 1961). More recent revisionists include Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (Cambridge, 1968) and *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America* (New York, 1971); Colin Greer, *The Great School Legend: A Revisionist Interpretation of American Public Education* (New York, 1972); Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York, 1976); and R. Freeman Butts, *Public Education in the United States: From Revolution to Reform* (New York, 1978).
3. John W. Meyer, David Tyack, Joane Nagel and Audri Gordon, "Public Education as Nation-Building in America," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXXXV (1979): 591-613.
4. The 1855 Massachusetts State Census listed 10,369 Irish out of a total population of 37,553, or 27.6% of Lowell's inhabitants. Undoubtedly, American-born Irish added to this total. Massachusetts State Census (1855), State Archives, Boston.
5. Alfred Gilman, "History of the Lowell Grammar Schools," *Proceedings of the Old Residents Historical Association*, IV (1891): 87-91. In 1825 Chelmsford appropriated only \$113.50 for the upkeep of its schools.
6. Boott met Irish foreman, Hugh Cummiskey, in April, 1822 and put Cummiskey's men to work reconstructing the canal system on the following morning. See George O'Dwyer, *The Irish Catholic Genesis of Lowell* (Lowell, 1920).
7. In the 1830 Federal Census, Lowell had 6,477 people.
8. The "Acre" came to mean the entire Irish district despite the fact that it originally only referred to the "Corkonian" Paddy Camp.
9. Boott's principal contacts were Boston's Bishop, Benedict Fenwick, and foremen such as Hugh Cummiskey.
10. Gilman, p. 93.
11. See Harriet Hanson Robinson, *Loom and Spindle; or Life Among the Early Mill Girls* (Kailua, Hawaii, 1976), pp. 13-14 for a discussion of various Protestant sects in Lowell.
12. Gilman, p. 93. Edson called for a \$20,000 appropriation. The disagreement grew intensely personal and Boott withdrew from St. Anne's. The Merrimack Manufacturing Company evicted Edson from St. Anne's Parsonage in a protracted legal battle which lasted until 1866 when Edson returned to the Parsonage after his congregation purchased it for him.
13. Edson served on the School Committee throughout the period including 1826-27, 1831-35, 1837-39, 1846-47, and 1852.
14. Gilman, pp. 93-94.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-95.
16. Meyer *et al.*, p. 599.
17. Robert H. Lord, *et al.*, *History of the Archdiocese of Boston* (New York, 1944) 2: 314. The first Catholic school began operating as early as 1824 or 1825. "An Irishman

- approved by the priest" kept this first school but it was discontinued. Patrick Collins opened a new Catholic school in 1829.
18. *Eighteenth Annual Report of the School Committee of the City of Lowell* (Lowell, 1844), p. 6.
  19. *Ibid.*, p. 6 and Lord *et al.*, 2: 314-15.
  20. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
  21. *Ibid.*, p. 6, Lord *et al.*, 2: 315.
  22. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
  23. *Twentieth Annual Report of the School Committee of the City of Lowell* (Lowell, 1846), pp. 8-14.
  24. *Eighteenth Annual Report*, p. 7.
  25. See Brian C. Mitchell, "Immigrants in Utopia: The Early Irish Community of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1821-1861," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1981).
  26. Irishmen who appear frequently on the roster of Benevolent Society dinners include men such as Owen Donahoe who ran the Exchange Coffee House, real estate owner Stephen Castles, tailor Hugh McEvoy, and Cumiskey, among others. See *Boston Pilot*, March 28, 1840, p. 79.
  27. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
  28. "St. Patrick's Day," *Lowell Courier*, March 21, 1843, p. 2.
  29. *The Annual Report of the School Committee for 1836*, in Lowell School Department.
  30. *Boston Pilot*, p. 79.
  31. Memoranda of Bishop Benedict Fenwick, July 13, 1830, Chancery Archives, Archdiocese of Boston, Brighton, Massachusetts, 1: 139.
  32. Donna Merwick, *Boston's Priests, 1848-1910: A Study of Social and Intellectual Change* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 4-7.
  33. *Eighteenth Annual Report*, p. 7.
  34. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8; Gilman, p. 99.
  35. Lord *et al.*, II: 317-18; *Eighteenth Annual Report*, pp. 8-9. In 1843, after summer vacations ended on July 5th, only 132 Irish children returned to school. For nearly three weeks, these schools were "almost annihilated." With the opening of the fall term on October 4th, however, the schools had regained most of their former students.
  36. "St. Patrick's Day in Lowell," *Lowell Courier*, March 21, 1844, p. 2.
  37. "Lowell City Schools," *Boston Pilot*, July 6, 1844, p. 214.
  38. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
  39. Lord *et al.*, II: 318.
  40. Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York, 1979), p. 147.

41. Robinson, p. 12 contains a representative discussion of Irish women in the mills.
42. The Massachusetts state legislature passed a law which stipulated that any child under fifteen who sought work in one of the Lowell corporations must produce a certificate demonstrating school attendance of at least three months during the past year. The certificate was supplied by the child's superior at the school who kept a daily record of his attendance.
43. *Annual Report of the School Committee of the City of Lowell, for the Municipal Year, 1853* (Lowell, 1854), pp. 42-49.
44. Vincent P. Lannie, "Alienation in America: The Immigrant Catholic in Pre-Civil War America," *Review of Politics* XXXIII (1970): 503-21. On the O'Brien's commitment, see Fitzpatrick Memoranda, September 20, 1852, III: 92 and *Annals of St. Patrick's Convent* (September, 1852), Provincial Archives, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Ipswich, Massachusetts.
45. Sister Miriam of the Infant Jesus, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, *The Finger of God: History of the Massachusetts Province of Notre Dame de Namur, 1849-1963* (Boston, 1963), p. 64; *A Century in Lowell, 1853-1952: Courtesy of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur* (Lowell, 1952), p. 9.
46. Whether education actually improved Irish productivity matters little, the agents certainly felt that it did. For a discussion on the question see Alexander James Field, "Educational Expansion in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts: Human-Capital Formation or Structural Reinforcement," *Harvard Educational Review* XLVI (1976): 521-552 and Pamela J. Nickless, "A New Look at Productivity in the New England Cotton Textile Industry, 1830-1860," *Journal of Economic History* XXXIV (1979): 889-910.
47. Homer Bartlett to Horace Mann in the "Fifth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board of Education," *Annual Reports on Education* (Boston, 1868), pp. 103-07.