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Constructing The Western Railroad: The Irish Dimension *

Edward J. O'Day

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Census data for Massachusetts in 1840 reveal startling numbers for which no footnotes appear in the published population tables. The Federal Census of 1840 in the tiny Hampshire County town of Middlefield showed a 138 percent leap in population over the previous decade, while the county at large had grown by only 2.12 percent and many neighboring towns declined in population. Middlefield's 720 souls of 1830 had become 1717 when counted in 1840; by 1850 the population had fallen as rapidly as it had risen. Nearby Russell in Hampden County waxed and waned similarly, if not as spectacularly. Westfield, with 3039 inhabitants in the state census of 1837 numbered 3640 residents in a special state count of 1840, a jump of nearly 20 percent in three short years. Yet Westfield's federal census figure, taken later that year, revealed only 3526 inhabitants, a loss of 114 people in the space of a few short months.¹

One need not blame some primitive faulty computer for the puzzle of these numbers and the mysterious people who seemed to come and go so rapidly. These historical minutiae reveal the movements of real people and the presence of large numbers of itinerant workers engaged in construction of the Western railway. In the figures is reflected the seasonal movement of hundreds of workers to the most active construction sites during the summer months. Engineers, contractors, workers, and the Massachusetts towns in which they lived were part of a project which was altering the face of the Berkshires and changing the economy of the state and the nation. In linking Boston to the American midwest, they were creating the first sinews of a transcontinental railway system; in employing immigrant labor they contributed to "making New England Irish," as Marcus Hansen described it in his pioneering study of immigration.² Western Massachusetts in 1840 was exhibiting that combination of native capital, English technology and iron, and Irish labor which produced the early American railroads.

It is well known that Irish immigrants provided a pool of unskilled labor for the construction projects of the era, and the shantytowns which dotted American canals and railroads are commemorated in our histories and memorialized in our folk songs. In 1840 the dreams of railroad promoters and the calculations of engineers were being shaped into reality on the banks of the West Branch of the Westfield River by over a thousand persons crowded into one such construction camp in Middlefield.

Alpheus Langley, census taker in 1840 for the Hampshire County district which included Middlefield, was meticulous in recording that community's "R. R. camp," labeling it with his own colorful description, "Extraneous Population." These people were considered foreign transients in Middlefield, yet Langley nevertheless recorded their heads of households, specified the one widow among them and tabulated the 530 active "Rail Road Labourers."³ Such detail was not required for census purposes and it is unique among the communities along the railroad route.

Langley's careful enumeration and description of Middlefield's labor camp, and the designation "R" placed beside some of the census counts in neighboring Berkshire County, enable the researcher to identify with certainty the location and number of a large body of the railroad laborers and contractors at work on the Western Railroad. In none of the counts is ethnic origin noted, but the abundance of Murphys, McCartys and other Irish surnames attests to the origins of most of the laborers. Census takers did not separate artisans and contractors from unskilled labor even when they identified railroaders, yet the 1840 federal census reports for Western Massachusetts provide an intriguing if fragmentary, glimpse of a group of workers who then, as now, are usually "forgotten Americans."

The story of the engineering of the early railroads has long been public. In the case of the Western, the corporate board published detailed reports to its stockholders and to the people of Massachusetts, who, through their Legislature, were the largest investors in the railroad. A few years after the line opened to traffic, a popular *Chart and Description of the Western Railroad*, with graphics and details similar to a modern Triptik, enabled any passenger to identify every major bridge, freight house, and deep cut along the route. It pointed out the steepness of gradients and the costs of construction, but only once was the rider invited to glance at one of the "other objects passed by on this line," an "Irish hut" in West Springfield, a quaint reminder of construction days.⁴ Except for such fleeting reference, contemporary accounts gave little indication that the railroad was the product of any other than the investors, the engineers, and a small managerial elite.

A recent study by Stephen Salsbury describes the inner workings of the corporation and its eventual merger as the Boston and Albany Railroad in 1867. *The State, the Investor, and the Railroad* provides details of private capitalization and state aid, discusses equipping the infant railroad, exhibits graphs of tonnage carried, and calculates profits distributed.⁵ The Salsbury study is excellent within its own limits, but one searches in vain for similar calculations about the workers whose labor, mixed with capital, helped make this railroad the profitable business it became.

Agents of the Western Railroad and contractors who employed the workers kept their own meticulous records. The corporation's Resident Engineer maintained an office in Springfield; private contractors and assistant engineers were at active construction sites; administrative offices and 75 percent of the private investors were in Boston; the Massachusetts General Court required ac-

countability for costs and overruns. Communications between these various interests and the need to coordinate construction efforts produced mountains of paper which would make any contemporary bureaucracy proud. The entire project was of unprecedented scope, and the reader of its records is struck by the precision of its operations and the modernity of its organization. From top management to unskilled labor, there were clearly defined lines of authority and responsibility which kept an army of construction men in the field. Detailed monthly financial and engineering reports, vouchers, claims for payment and payrolls, all carefully numbered, neatly folded and tied in bundles, rest today in a storage warehouse at Harvard Business School, the dust of the last century still upon them. Unwrapped, they produce fragments of coal and cinder, reminders of the age of steam, and nuggets of details about thousands of persons whose brain and brawn completed the Western Railroad in an age when there were no computers to calculate nor steam shovels to excavate. The following pages attempt to shed light on some of those individuals whom Langley and the Corporation recorded, but Salisbury, the 1847 *Chart and Description*, and time forgot.

The idea of overland rail transportation between Boston and New York's Erie Canal network had been promoted for nearly a decade before construction of a limited project, a Boston to Worcester railway, began in 1833. This construction, which employed over 900 laborers, brought a few new permanent settlers to the small Worcester Hibernian community when the railroad was completed to that city in 1835. Worcester was but a way station for most of the drillers, black powder specialists, and pick and shovel wielders whose muscle-power remained on the market for the new ventures of Norwich and Worcester and Worcester to Albany rail lines, both of which began construction in the following year.

Experience had shown the wisdom, as well as the practicality, of dividing a proposed canal or railroad into construction "sections" specified by the engineers. Sections averaged about a mile, but varied from a single bridge to over two miles of roadbed. Independent contractors carried out the actual construction, bidding on as many sections as their expertise and available manpower would allow. There were seven construction divisions along the Western's route and three west of the Connecticut; the fourth division consisted of the bridge over the Connecticut and the approaches thereto.

For investors and promoters of the Western, Worcester was also far short of the Albany connection where an expected lucrative trade with the American heartland could be tapped. They spoke of a midwestern market twice the size of France and "thirty-six times the area of Massachusetts, and derided the Worcester road as little more than a forty-four mile extension of Long Wharf."⁶ By late 1836 a separate railroad corporation, the Western, had completed surveys of some 450 miles of alternate routes west of Worcester. Estimates of engineering needs in hand, and finances apparently in place, they let contracts on the first nineteen and one-half miles of construction.

Construction began near Charlton in December 1836, hardly a propitious

time, considering the vagaries of New England winters, and given the even less predictable financial climate. When spring ushered in a national financial panic, the corporation found investors unable to meet their capital pledges; a few contractors went bankrupt. Though contracts were let as far as Wilbraham, most construction was suspended toward the end of the 1837 season. Yet the depressed wage rates which accompanied the panic eventually benefitted both corporation and some twenty contractors who fielded a labor force along the entire line from Worcester to Springfield in the spring of 1838. Construction was under the general supervision of Chief Engineer William Gibbs McNiell until 1840 and Major George Whistler after that date. Contractors had to meet the exacting standards of regular inspections by Resident Engineer William H. Swift, who supervised daily operations.

Planning and constructing the Western soon outstripped the scale of the Boston and Worcester project. Before rails could reach Springfield, nearly two and one-half million cubic yards of earth had to be moved, and one hundred thousand cubic yards of solid rock blasted. Writing to company President Thomas Wales in June 1838, Swift reported 1175 men and 320 horses at work.⁷ Eventually the 160 masons among them, assisted by seventy-four horses, had put in place thirty-five bridge foundations and other masonry totaling 44,000 perches (one perch equals 24.75 cubic feet). Nineteen embankments, three of them over sixty feet high, were raised above the natural landscape almost entirely by hand and twenty-six separate rock cuttings ranged from twenty-four to eighty feet deep. The first segment of completed line opened from Worcester to Springfield in October 1839.⁸

John Childe, head of the surveying parties which entered the Berkshires in 1836, was reported to have exclaimed, "This is the place for engineering!" This was indeed a place for engineering, and the reports of these technicians to their financial backers in Boston were replete with quantities of earth and rock to be moved and acres of swamps to be filled. Engineering in those days was viewed as an art form, an ability to perfect and beautify nature, a talent to be applied as skillfully as da Vinci's brush. No brush, but thousands of men, would be required to complete the masterpiece which would become known affectionately as "Whistler's Railroad."

Construction crews began work west of the Connecticut in 1838, following the Westfield upstream, ascending the narrow valley on the east slope of the Berkshires toward "the Summit" crossing at Washington. Other crews advanced the railway eastward from the New York line through Pittsfield. Along the Westfield, portions of the roadbed had to be redesigned and raised substantially during 1839 after spring freshets wiped away much of the work of the previous season. The Quaboag at Warren had been easily diverted, but the Westfield fought back. Henshaw's Ridge at Charlton was child's play next to the Summit section, which the final surveyor's reports called the "most difficult" and the "worst" section of the entire route.

Construction had to take into account both natural geography and the limited horsepower of contemporary railroading, which was still in its

technological infancy. For six and one-half miles northwest of the Chester-line, said the survey team:

The river is exceedingly crooked, the mountain shut in on both sides, leaving scarcely room for a road, and requiring between Bigelow's and McElwain's fifteen crossings. The rocky points thrust themselves quite down to the stream and no alternative [to repeated crossings] is left except to resort to very objectionable curvature.⁹

Beyond Middlefield lay another three and one-quarter miles in Washington to the summit of the Berkshires where Whistler, with Childe now as his assistant, planned his most spectacular alteration of the natural topography. By 1840, gathered part way up the mountain in a Middlefield shantytown, the "Labourers on the Railroad" were not extraneous to George Whistler. They were an essential part of his masterpiece.

Extrapolating from payrolls and census data it becomes evident that by 1840 some 2000 men were directly involved in railroad construction and operations in western Massachusetts. With their dependents they represent an influx of nearly 5000 new people into Central and Western Massachusetts since 1836. The books of the Western Rail Road Corporation reveal complex pay scales which belie the generalized statistics that common laborers were paid 80 cents per day. During the years construction was under way, examples can be found of men learning new skills such as masonry laying, or developing talents as "personnel managers," overseeing the labor of others. Those who had been at work longer and had proven their reliability received ten to twenty cents per day more than other laborers. Faced with completion deadlines, the corporation recruited extra help and paid the premium necessary, with "hazard pay" for some and overtime for those who labored at night. Occupations on the rail line, like the nature of the business itself, were becoming increasingly diverse, with differentiation of functions and special-ization of tasks reflected in wage scales.

By midsummer of 1840, the Western Railroad had become a large direct employer of laborers. Operations and maintenance of the completed divisions east of the Connecticut required permanent employees and hundreds of small tasks not done by contractors remained to be completed, from setting frog bars on switches to whitewashing bridges. The Connecticut River bridge alone took several separate payrolls, and west of the river ties and track were being readied on the fifth and sixth divisions. Among these hundreds of laborers, all in the Springfield area, unskilled day laborers in July 1840 received wages at 75 cents, 80 cents, 85 cents, 90 cents, and one dollar per day. The dollar wage was common only for the specialized laborers of "driller," "blaster," "caulker," "trackrepairer," and one "blacksmith's helper." "Car-men," responsible for bringing rock and fill to the bridge project, received 95 cents, while the lone "boat-man" who presumably did numerous ferrying tasks, was paid 90 cents daily.¹⁰

Carpenters earned from \$1.25 to \$1.87 ½ (in 12 ½ cent increments), while

those among them who were yet unskilled received 85 cents. Master carpenter William Howe, whose trussed frame bridge design was being employed, received \$3.00 a day. Accomplished blacksmiths earned from \$1.37½ to \$2.00 for each day worked, but among masons the rate was more standardized, ranging only from \$1.50 to \$1.75. Richard Walsh, fireman, Patrick Kelley, "breakman" [sic], and Timothy McCarty, foreman of a small work crew or six to eight men, were rewarded at \$1.12½. They were typical of scores of immigrant construction workers who were becoming railroaders, many of them for life.

Access to supervisory positions was generally limited to those who had the good fortune of literacy sufficient to keep records and to account for other men with the detail and accuracy demanded by the corporation.¹¹ Positions requiring training in mechanical or manual skills, such as those of the brakemen or blacksmiths were usually still reserved in 1840 for native Americans or immigrants from England and Scotland. This appears to have been a reflection of the corporation's desire to find experienced employees, rather than overt discrimination against the Irish immigrant. Irish who had shown promise during earlier construction were in apprenticeship positions in 1840 on the Connecticut River Bridge project, for example. Those with carpentry skills learned in this way or in the Old World were soon rewarded with pay equal to that of their native counterparts. Patrick Clear, an established carpenter by 1843, is a case in point.¹²

At two locations on the construction line American contractors had begun applications of labor-saving technology which drew the admiration of European observers, such as Francis Chevalier de Gerstner whose reports on the Western's construction were published in French, German, and English during 1839. Resident Engineer Swift estimated that the use of steam locomotive power near Charlton to move quantities of fill was the equivalent of an additional ten horses, while a steam-powered excavator in Wilbraham was "capable of performing the labour of thirty diggers." Basing his information on direct consultation with Swift, de Gerstner marveled at the speed of a machine which moved a cubic yard of fill into the cars every minute. In twelve minutes it achieved the daily output of one laborer.¹³

More than fifty separate contractors along the route of 113 sections of the Western made an interesting mosaic of the construction line. Seldom did one contractor have more than two contiguous sections exclusively under his control, though contractors such as Carmichael and Otis, with substantial capital backing and their powerful "steam digging machine," might win the bidding for several sections where large quantities of earth were needed for fill. There were successful Irish entrepreneurs such as Tobias Boland of Worcester, who had gained wealth and renown for his part in constructing the Blackstone Canal. His skilled workmen placed most of the masonry between Worcester and Springfield.

In 1840 it was not necessary, however, to be a Boland or a Carmichael to profit from the railway's progress. Corporate account books show that less ex-

perienced individuals, far from financially affluent, were sometimes successful bidders. While he might not win a contract for an entire section, the man with little to offer except the services of a team of horses could become a small businessman. The collapse of an embankment or the business failure of a previously successful bidder might lead to such an opportunity, providing work on a "mini-contract" basis, paid in funds dispensed by the field engineer from the corporation's contingency fund. If he performed well he could expect serious consideration of a proposal at the next call for construction bids. John McGuinty was such a "freelance teamster" who became a labor supervisor for the railroad in 1840 and a partner in contracting by 1841.¹⁴

At least two such Irish workers, Patrick Mooney and Thomas Falvey, made substantial advances in their business operations along the route between Worcester and the Berkshires. Mooney, who performed odd tasks in the Brookfields with twelve men in 1837, by 1840 had some forty-six workers living in his shanty in Chester. With contracts for grading Sections 75 and 79, his entire work crew may have been larger. His bookkeeping and reporting to the Treasurer of the corporation had become as precise as that of more experienced entrepreneurs.¹⁵ Falvey, field representative for a contractor in 1840 later formed a partnership with John O'Halloran to bid successfully on a section of the Albany and West Stockbridge line.¹⁶

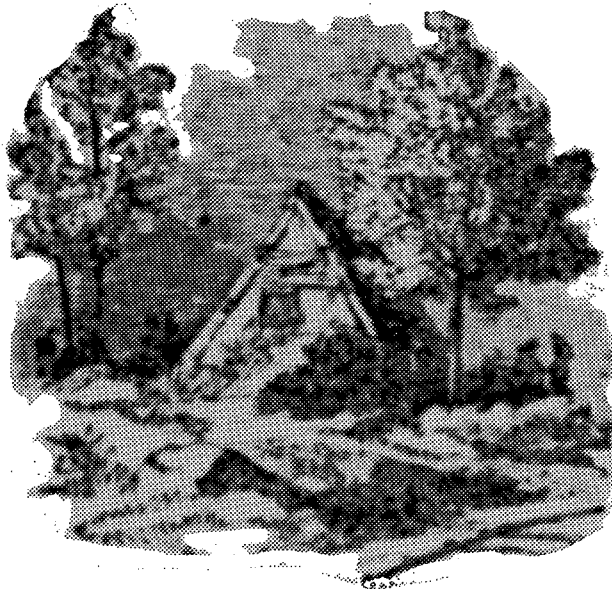
Often contract businesses of ten represented a combination of the differing skills of the partners. Boland's brother-in-law Philip Norton, for example, maintained the office and the books while Boland worked the field. Other firm names represent Irish who had originated in different counties known for their separate talents. Since the first spades of earth had been turned on the Erie Canal project, Corkonians had been recognized for their stamina at digging and their ability to remove earth and rock where others fell victim to disease or simple exhaustion. The farms of Tipperary or King's County provided men skilled with the care and use of animals. They were more likely than not to be the teamsters, hauling away the tons of Massachusetts country-side with which the Corkonians filled their carts. A Corkonian and a King's County Irishman could put together a very effective partnership, especially if each had a few dozen family members and close friends in Ireland ready to make the perilous Atlantic voyage at the slightest encouraging word from America. Enterprises such as Boyle and Hogan, Daily and Finn, and Finnegan and McRoberts appear to have been built in just such a fashion.

What can be told of the Middelfield labor camps and others like them, given the state of the evidence? Attempting to recreate the setting of the labor camps where these immigrant railroad workers lived and where many of them eventually established Massachusetts roots is a difficult one. Few descriptions survive, and those which do were usually composed by outsiders on a journey to a "foreign land." People in the labor gangs, even when literate, were too busy at construction from dawn to dusk (and sometimes beyond) to maintain diaries or other records of their experience. The shanties in which they lived were built from bits and pieces left over from the construction project--lumber for framing and whitewash to brighten the interiors were remnants of bridge construction,

while cedar shake trimmed from the sleepers (railroad ties) shingled the roof. Like the shanty builder, the historian must use the scraps left in the records by the Yankees who ran the business, owned the property, and dominated public office in Massachusetts when these foreigners arrived.

The railroad pledged to communities through which it passed that it “would not disturb the tranquility of their neighborhoods.” It endeavored to keep that pledge with internal control systems, restricting the use of intoxicating liquors, and by the placement of its shantytowns.¹⁷ In cities such as Worcester the camp was located a half-mile outside the settled city center, and workers at the freight yards in Springfield as well as construction workers on the bridge project were housed on the western fringe of the “metropolitan area,” spilling over into Westfield.

Vincent Powers, in a study of the Worcester Irish, dubbed the Hibernian arrivals of the 1820s and 1830s “invisible immigrants,” since so many records such as city directories and censuses exhibit a silence which amounts to stonewalling.¹⁸ Construction kept them “beyond the fringe” and beyond the concern of record keepers. Town records from Worcester to West Stockbridge seldom record a significant Irish presence until 1843 or 1844, and usually not until the late 1840s, a full decade after the railroaders had first arrived. In birth and in death the laboring migrants remained usually unnoticed by the officials of communities in which they were living. Babies baptized by Father James Fitton along the railroad route between Auburn and Wilbraham from 1837-1839 were apparently recorded nowhere other than in the priest’s files.¹⁹ These births numbered 100 or more, all of them clearly attributable to railroad labor, since in none of those small communities along the route had mill work yet begun to draw in the Irish immigrant.



3. Irish Hut, from Guild, *Chart and Description*

Irish shantytowns which had sprung up at Auburn, Charlton, Brookfield, Warren, Palmer, and Wilbraham in 1837 had by 1840 moved to Tatham (West Springfield), Westfield, Russell, Chester, Middlefield, and points west. To inhabitants of the small towns along the railway, the flood of Irish laborers must have appeared as threatening as the spring freshets of the Westfield did to the railroad engineers and contractors. Few New Englanders expected the alien arrivals to remain among them more than a season or two.

For some five years, from 1838 until construction shifted beyond the Massachusetts frontiers in 1842, the Middlefield railroad camp was home to hundreds of immigrant Irish laborers and their families. Living amongst them were a handful of native Yankee supervisors, private contractors, Scottish stone masons, and experienced English railroad navvies. On this most difficult part of the route, in July 1840 the inhabitants of Middlefield's rude "Irish huts" were building nine massive stone-arched bridges with spans up to sixty feet and soaring as much as seventy feet above the river. There were five other crossings of the river, on wooden spans. By 1840 workers were also commuting beyond the Middlefield-Washington line for work on the deep cut at the Summit where geography dictated that it be tackled primarily from the east. Another 200 laborers from Becket and Washington were also engaged there, while about 100 tackled the approaches to the Summit from the west. The engineer's plans required moving a real, rather than a proverbial mountain. Some fifty-five feet were to be cut away from a quarter-mile stretch of the mountaintop and the resultant debris brought down the east slope to fill a natural depression forty-five feet deep.

At the end of life, as at the beginning, the Irish laborer went uncounted. In an internal company memorandum Major Whistler spoke in 1841 of the "many cases of death that have occurred along the line of the road" during construction.²⁰ While legend has it that there was an "Irishman under every tie" of the early railroads, in practice the Irish Catholic laborers took care of their own dead, disposing of remains in far-away burial grounds.²¹ There was no need for Warren officials to record the deaths of three of Boland's men there in 1838, and they did not. Richmond, which enumerated six Irishmen "killed on the Rail Road" during the years of construction, was exceptional in recording the human toll which progress exacted.²²

Most contractors lived among their men, sharing with them the rigors of construction camp life, but also developing the personal trust and common esprit de corps necessary to complete their tasks on the section. Mooney, as mentioned, was living in Chester in 1840, as were James Rankin and John Collins, also contractors; Falvey was in Hinsdale with a crew of twenty-three men. John Hogan was in Russell, his contract sufficiently finished that he could now hire out his crews to the direct temporary employ of the railway corporation; his partner Boyle remained in Southwick with his family. Large contractors such as Boland and Carmichael, often directing works contracted with several different corporations at scattered sites, kept headquarters in the comfort of a rear command post. Boland remained quartered in Worcester, Carmichael among the established Yankee community in West Springfield.

Contractors were represented by Alexander Birnie, immigrant Scotsman and master stonemason who had built canals and railways in New Jersey. With Birnie were John B. Adams, his brother-in-law and financial manager, and younger brother William who acted as labor overseer. John M. Ross and John T. McManus, also Scotsmen, were business associates of Birnie, and Ross had a half interest in one of the general stores at the labor camp. Langley, distinction between management and labor, or among Scotsmen, Irish, or Yankee, listed them all as "Rail Road hands." Birnie's exclusive contract for the masonry on Division 7 (Chester to the Summit) entrusted him with building the stone-arched bridge crossings of the Westfield River as well as retaining walls throughout this difficult mountain section. Some of Birnie's workers, and the business office of the railroad corporation, were in the North Becket labor camp nearby.²³ Birnie's contracts with the Western Railroad Corporation reflect the fact that one mile of road, upon which there were three of Birnie's bridges, cost the company \$219,929.87. The total mountain division of thirteen and three-quarter miles cost over one million dollars. In July of 1840, Birnie received \$12,000 as payment on his contract, and there were similar payments to him and other contractors throughout the construction period.²⁴ The railroad builders grossed far more in 1840 than Middlefield's sheep farmers or the owners of its only industry, two woolen mills. The value of the combined product of these enterprises was less than \$70,000 annually. The mills employed forty-six people; railroad construction engaged over ten times that number.²⁵

The Middlefield labor complex actually consisted of two settlement areas, one near the Chester line on land owned by Daniel Root, the other on John Mann's property at the confluence of Factory Brook and the Westfield River. The latter area became known locally as "the Switch" because here the railroad constructed a turn-out and siding for its then single-track line. These settlements constituted the largest congregation of laborers in any community along the Western route. Thanks to the local efforts of Alexander Ingham, tailor and deacon of the Congregational Church, and state support from Horace Mann, there were schools kept on both sites. Three privately run stores and an infirmary, built at railroad expense in 1840, completed the public buildings of the Middlefield shantytown.

We can only get glimpses of the daily life of a camp complex like Middlefield from the company records because it was not a "company town" but a cluster of people whose needs were often seen to by their contractor employer. Most supplies for Middlefield followed the Western to Springfield by 1840, there to be ferried across the Connecticut and teamed toward the Berkshires. Springfield merchants found convenience and profit in having their goods from S.S. Pierce and other Boston wholesalers delivered in quantity via the new "extension of Long Wharf." Elisha Edwards ran advertisements in the *Springfield Republican* throughout the 1838 construction season addressed to railroad contractors, promising ready delivery of large quantities of salt Grand Bank codfish, smoked pork and beef, cheese, flour, and other necessities of camp life. Quantities of drink, some of it alcoholic, no doubt also found their way to the work crews, but Edwards separated his advertising offers of wine and rum from his appeal to the contractors.²⁶ Clauses in railroad contracts forbidding in-

toxicating liquors, even in private dwellings, required that distribution of such "West India goods" be kept more discrete.²⁷

There were already two houses, a barn, a small factory and a sawmill on Mann's forty acre site when railroad construction began in 1838. In that year contractor William A. Bird, operating as "Bird and Co.," opened a store where he maintained stock-in-trade valued at \$1200 for the next three years. Some ten shanties, owned by Bird, and a stable for about a dozen horses clustered about the store. Joel Houghton and John D. Horton maintained two smaller stores. John and John M. Ross, Scotsmen contractors with the Western, purchased an interest in Horton's store in 1840 and constructed sixteen "new Shantees," valued at \$100, for the influx of new laborers in that year. It was they who constructed a shanty for the railroad in August 1840 to isolate laborers sick with the smallpox.²⁸

About the railroad laborers as individuals we can discern relatively little from the data available. Since the 1840 census names only the head of household, and identifies others in the household only by sex and age group, it is impossible to confirm relationships among the individuals enumerated. The Langley figures nevertheless provide a collective biography of the 159 households in Middlefield's railroad community. Certainly more than a hundred shanties dotted the hillside of the Westfield River valley in 1840. Tax collectors in Middlefield listed only eight houses, thirty-odd shanties, four barns and "sundry other buildings" in the construction area. The most substantial Irish-owned dwelling among them was that of Timothy Quinlan, whose home the assessor valued at \$200. Most individual shanties, with values under \$20, were apparently not worth assessing, since they would return less than 10 cents in taxes at 1840 rates.²⁹ Quinlan maintained a rooming house of some sort where some fourteen other laborers boarded. This was one of twelve such labor gang dormitories, each containing ten or more laboring age males and one or two adult females. The largest such group was the household of Timothy Buckley which numbered twenty-eight people; the average dormitory contained 17.83 people. About one-third of the labor force (171) lived in these structures, some of which were probably converted barns and outbuildings on the Mann and Root farms. The census reveals more families than one might expect to find in a construction camp. Sixty percent of households could be classified as single-family units, many of them with young children. Sixty-six such households consisted of adult couples, while another thirty-one families had a third adult in residence, most likely representing a live-in unmarried relative. Widow Mary Magrath and five children constituted another family. Of the 411 people in these ninety-eight households, 226 were adults and 185 children. Average household size was 4.19 people. The remaining forty-nine households, averaging 8.29 people each, contained 406 residents. While these might be termed multi-family units, this is probably not a meaningful classification. A few appear to be three-generation extended families, while many others most likely represent related adults who shared living quarters. Several can be identified as dwellings of contractors or store owners who may have had lodgers or employees living with them.

As might be expected, the population inhabiting these dwellings was predominantly young and male. The 699 males outnumbered the females by more than two to one, and represented 67.8% of the entire camp. Some 55% of the camp, 413 males and 156 females, were between twenty and thirty-nine years of age. Only two males were in their fifties and there were none as old as sixty; five females were over fifty, two of them in their sixties. Children under fifteen numbered 303 (29.4% of the population) some 60% of them under five. Contemporary practice considered the years from fifteen to sixty to be those of "productive" economic activity. Using this norm, Langley's census data reveal an extraordinarily productive populace. Three-fourths of the males (74.96%) and three-fifths of the females (60.84%) in the railroad settlements in Middlefield fell within this age range. When one adds the thirteen male youths between ten and fifteen whom Langley included among 530 "Rail Road hands," and whom other company records designate as laboring "boys," the percentage of economically productive males rises to nearly 77%.

Productive they were. The men and boys of the area removed nearly a million cubic yards of solid rock at the summit, all of it much too hard to yield to even the most advanced steam shovel of the time. Most of the work here, as Charlton earlier, was powered by man's oldest energy source, human muscle. Skill and muscle combined to grade the landscape and to lay masonry on this mountain division equivalent to a wall six feet high, one foot thick and over forty miles long. Neighboring forests yielded the 24,000 ties placed upon the mountainside between Chester and Hinsdale. By late 1841 laborers and contractors had met the challenge of the Berkshires which the engineers had defined. Grading done, bridges arched, track laid, the first train crossed the summit on October 4. Using one portion of track belonging to the Hudson and Berkshire Railroad, the first through train from Boston arrived at Greenbush, opposite Albany, four days before Christmas.

By 1842 railroad construction had moved from the east slope of the Berkshires and the rationale for the massive Middlefield labor camp had passed. The railroad had moved on and like the spring floods on Factory Brook and the Westfield, most of these extraneous aliens in Yankeeland left the mountains behind. Labor crews dispersed to new construction and contractors to new careers as entrepreneurs. Yet many of the immigrant laborers were quietly absorbed into the fabric of Massachusetts society, their construction days over. Some followed the Irishman's dream of retiring to a farm, bought with savings accumulated from meager construction wages. Others returned to Boston or settled in the cities along the railroad's route such as Worcester and Springfield, where they joined small Irish settlements established earlier in the century.

A few stayed along the banks of the Westfield to protect from fire or sabotage the bridges which were their handiwork, and to tend the track, keeping the way clear of weeds in summer and snow in winter. Daniel Donovan stayed, and son John, born in 1843, was the first of the new Irish-Americans to be recorded in Middlefield's vital records.⁵⁰ Jeremiah Galavin, whose daughter Julia was born at the Warren shantytown in 1837, settled in Middlefield when

construction was completed, raising his family in a home in the shadow of the arched bridge across Factory Brook. Michael O'Byrne (O'Brien) found permanent rest in the Berkshire hills, invisible and extraneous still, in a Middlefield burying ground. His monument and that of his co-workers can be seen today, arched in stone sixty feet above the waters of the Westfield River, still in place after 140 years.

Notes

1. Jesse Chickering, *A Statistical View of the Population of Massachusetts from 1765 to 1840* (Boston, 1846) analyzes only the colonial and federal censuses; State data for 1837 and 1840 may be found in John Warner Barber, *Historical Collections . . . relating to . . . every town in Massachusetts* (Worcester, 1839) and *Niles Weekly Register*, LVIII (August 8, 1840), 359-360; Edward C. Smith, *A History of the Town of Middlefield Massachusetts* (Menasha, Wisc., 1924) discusses the railroad and its demographic impact.
2. Marcus L. Hansen, "The Second Colonization of New England," in *The Immigrant in American History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940), 160-161.
3. Sixth Census of the United States 1840, Massachusetts, National Archives Microcopy 704, reel 184, frames 252-257.
4. William Guild, *A Chart And Description of the Boston and Worcester and Western Railroads* (Boston, 1847), 51.
5. Stephen Salisbury, *The State, The Investor, and the Railroad* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967); earlier accounts of the engineering and construction of the Western are found in Edward Chase Kirkland, *Men, Cities, and Transportation: A Study in New England History 1820-1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948); and Charles Eben Fisher, "Whistler's Railroad, the Western Railroad of Massachusetts," *Railway and Locomotive Historical Society Bulletin*, 69 (1947).
6. John Hayward, *A Gazetteer of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1847), 422-426 popularized the claims of railroad promoters about commerce with the Great Lakes area. Among those promoters, Peter P.F. Degrand of Boston scoffed at the too-short Western Railroad. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., "The Canal and Railroad Enterprise of Boston," in Justin Winsor, ed., *The Memorial History of Boston* (Boston, 1881), IV, 136.
7. William H. Swift to Thomas B. Wales, June 3, 1838, Western Railroad Letter Books, Boston and Albany Railroad Company Records, volume 145, Baker Library, Harvard School of Business. (Hereafter cited as WRR.)
8. *Third Annual Report of the Directors of The Western Rail-Road Corporation* [to the Legislature] n.p., n.d. [1839] 18-21, and George Bliss, *Historical Memoir of the Western Railroad* (Springfield, 1863).

9. *Reports of the Engineers of the Western Rail Road Corporation Made to the Directors 1836-1837* (Springfield, 1838), 15. Fourteen crossings were finally made, nine in stone and five with wood bridges.
10. WRR, Case 10, "Construction July 1840" and "Transportation July 1840."
11. In the Springfield area in 1840 about one worker in ten personally signed payroll sheets, but basic literacy rates were apparently substantially higher. At one small labor camp in West Pittsfield the census taker noted forty-seven illiterates among 113 males and females over twenty. In neighboring Dalton just over fifty percent could read and write.
12. WRR, Case 12, January 1843 payroll. Clear worked on an all Irish crew, with an Irish supervisor. The supervisor received \$2.00 per day, the carpenters \$1.33 1/3, about average for the time.
13. Swift to Wales, June 3, 1838, WRR, v. 145. Francis A. Chevalier de Gerstner, "Letters from the United States of North America on Internal Improvements, Steam Navigation, Banking, etc.," *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, XXXVI (November 1840), 297-298.
14. Receipt #55, John McGuinty, teaming on 8th Division. September 1840, WRR, Case 10.
15. Patrick Mooney account to April 30, 1838, WRR, Case 8; Final accounting, Section 75, November 30, 1840, WRR, Case 10. After deducting monthly payments already made to Mooney, and company advances for goods and supplies, Mooney netted only \$99.94 at the completion of his contract!
16. Contractors Accounts, Albany and West Stockbridge RR 1841, WRR, Case 5.
17. *Second Annual Report of the Directors of the Western Rail Road Corporation to the Stockholders* (Boston, 1837), 10. A typical contract, though not with the Western Railroad, may be found in Joseph Rankin's claim against the Norwich and Worcester Railroad, Worcester County Court of Common Pleas, v. 90 (December 1839), 269-273. The Norwich and Worcester shared engineers and some contractors, including Rankin, with the Western.
18. Vincent E. Powers, "'Invisible Immigrants': the pre-famine Irish Community in Worcester, Massachusetts, from 1826 to 1860" (Ph.D. diss., Clark, 1976), 242.
19. Baptismal Register 1833-1845, St. John's Church, Worcester, Mass.
20. George W. Whistler to the President and Directors, W. R. R. Corporation, June 8, 1841, WRR, Case 1, Clerk's Files. Whistler recommended that the

Corporation reject the claim of Elias Whipple of Springfield for compensation because of the death of a son on construction work. Young Whipple, explained Whistler, "was unfortunately killed while on the road as a hired labourer of the contractor . . . [and] it has never been the custom elsewhere to my knowledge, for Railroad Corporations to make provision, in cases of accident among these labourers. . . ."

21. Worcester city officials had demanded that the bodies of Irish laborers who died building the Blackstone Canal in the 1820s be removed from the city. Powers, 249-252. In 1840 the Catholic cemetery nearest to construction sites was in Chicopee.
22. *Vital Records of Warren to the end of the year 1849* (Worcester, 1910); *Vital Records of Richmond, to the year 1850* (Boston, 1913).
23. Sixth Census U.S., 1840, MC704, reel 184, frames 252-257 (Middlefield); reel 175, frame 80 (Becket).
24. WRR, Engineering Department Ledger 1837-1844, v 121, 62-77. Alexander Bernie grossed \$350,030.33 for his part in the construction of the Western; 85% of that total was for work in the Mountain Division. He retired to Hastings on Hudson in 1843, at the age of 39. Younger brother William had a number of construction and manufacturing careers in Springfield, Mass. *Encyclopedia of Massachusetts Personal and Genealogical* (New York [1920]), I, 15; II, 428-432.
25. Smith, *Middlefield*, 143-145.
26. *Springfield Republican*, April 14, 1838.
27. Rankin's contract with the Norwich and Worcester excluded all alcohol, though it was an accepted practice for contractors to give daily rations of three or more jiggers of liquor. In Palmer, Swift ordered a "rum shop" torn down because its after hours dispensing interfered with the work. WRR, Case 8, "Construction, June 1838."
28. Middlefield Town Records, Book II, Valuation and Taxes. J. & J. M. Ross receipt for nails, hinges and 8 3/4 days labor of 2 carpenters, Middlefield, September 26, 1840, WRR, Case 10.
29. Middlefield Town Records, Book II. Valuation and Taxes, 1840.
30. *Vital Records of Middlefield, to the Year 1850* (Boston 1910), 21. Until the mid 1840s some two dozen other Irish families remained at the railroad camp as William Birnie directed several alterations of the original road bed. Their males were subject to Middlefield's poll tax, and two youths, John and Jerry Dwyer, were enrolled in the Massachusetts militia in 1844.