

# The Irish Wars

## Laborer Feuds on Indiana's Canals and Railroads in the 1830s

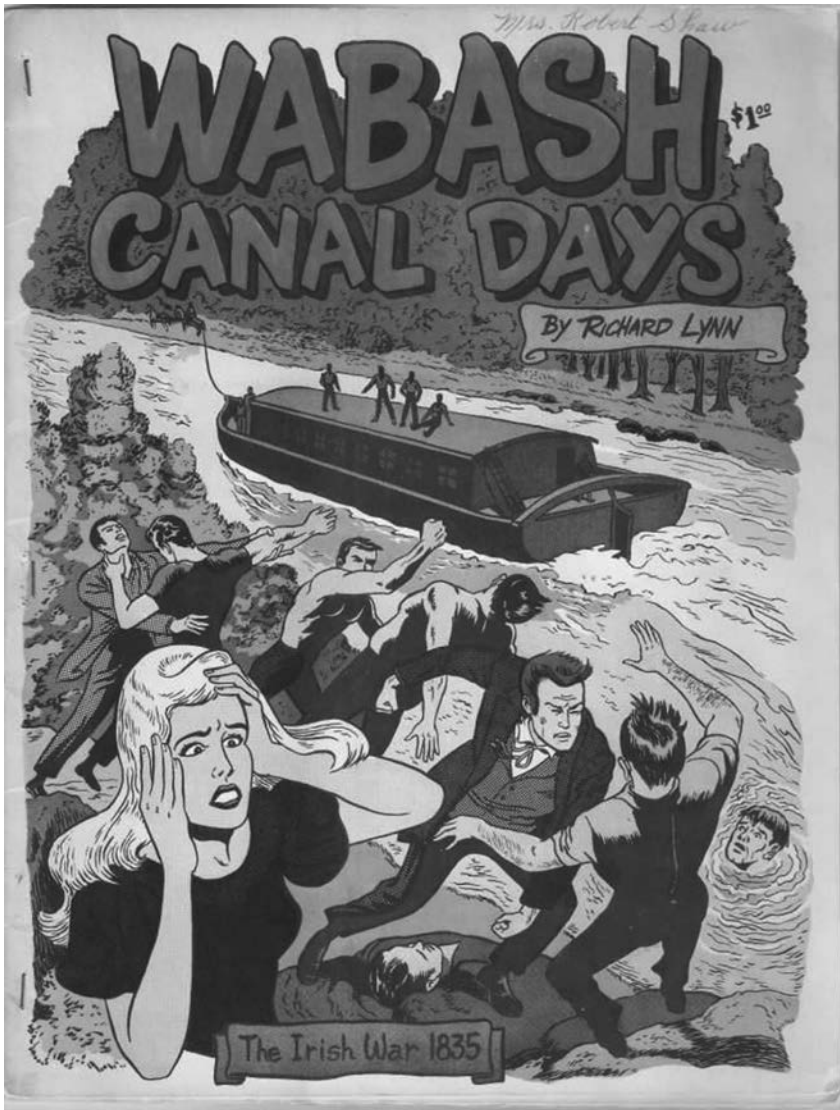
JAY M. PERRY

In July 1835, simmering hostilities between rival groups of Irish immigrant laborers building the Wabash and Erie Canal reached the boiling point. After weeks of feuding and small skirmishes, six hundred laborers—evenly divided between the two sides—turned their shovels into shillelaghs and marched to a predetermined site near Lagro, Indiana, in hopes of settling their differences in one climactic battle. The opposing factions, one called the Corkonians and the other the Fardowns, alarmed local citizens as well as canal authorities. The authorities worried about both the potential carnage and the prospects of losing valuable work time on the canal and sent desperate pleas to nearby towns for help in restoring order. Just as the battle was set to begin the militia arrived, arresting as many laborers as they could find as the rest dispersed.

The specter of six hundred “deluded ruffians,” as one newspaper called the laborers, armed for battle shocked local citizens. People living along the canal lived in “constant fear that the Irish” might attack their

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Program cover, City of Wabash's Canal Days Festival, 1962. The image's not-so-subtle use of ethnic stereotypes reflects prevailing historical interpretations of the 1835 riot, as well as the event's staying power in state and local histories.

Courtesy, Wabash County Historical Museum.

villages “and kill off the inhabitants.”<sup>1</sup> Yet while the riot on the Wabash and Erie captured the attention of Hoosiers in 1835, Corkonians and Fardowns have had a harder time gaining the attention of Indiana’s historians. Scholars have typically dismissed the riot—dubbed the “Irish War”—as an incident of local color or a peculiar anecdote of state and local histories.<sup>2</sup> Few historians have offered a compelling explanation for the laborers’ anger. Some have relied on ethnic stereotypes, asserting that the Irish “staved off boredom by the usual pastime of clubbing each other over the head smartly.”<sup>3</sup> More commonly, Indiana’s historians have assumed that Corkonians and Fardowns—respectively identified as Catholics and Protestants—fought over Ireland’s centuries-old religious divisions.<sup>4</sup> Neither interpretation, however, adequately or accurately explains what drove Corkonians and Fardowns to combat; the complex feud went beyond recreational fisticuffs or imported religious sectarianism.

The Irish War stemmed from real and perceived grievances related to laborers’ economic concerns. The Corkonian and Fardown groups did not in fact reflect religious divisions; rather, members had organized themselves into protective associations aimed at securing and defending the economic interests of their membership, namely preserving access to employment on the nation’s canals and railroads. Violence and intimidation, their key tools in achieving these goals, periodically resulted in brawls like the one on the Wabash and Erie. A laborer’s county or province of origin determined the group to which he belonged, with Corkonians coming from the province of Munster and Fardowns from the provinces of Connaught and Leinster.

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<sup>1</sup>Sanford C. Cox, *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley* (Lafayette, Ind., 1860), 148.

<sup>2</sup>“Disturbance on the Canal Line,” (*Indianapolis*) *Indiana Journal*, July 31, 1835. Multiple sources use the term “Irish War” to describe the riot on the Wabash and Erie. Two examples include B. J. Griswold, *The Pictorial History of Fort Wayne Indiana: A Review of Two Centuries of Occupation of the Region About the Head of the Maumee River* (Chicago, Ill., 1917), 323-26; and David Burr, *The Irish War* (Fort Wayne, Ind., 1953).

<sup>3</sup>Paul Fatout, *Indiana Canals* (West Lafayette, Ind., 1978), 85.

<sup>4</sup>The following citations provide examples of the Catholic versus Protestant interpretation: Logan J. Esarey, *Internal Improvements in Early Indiana* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1912), 94-95; V. Friederika Van Buskirk, *The Wabash and Erie Canal, 1832-1876: with emphasis on the Lagro Locks* (Wabash, Ind., 1965), 10; Charles R. Poinsett, *Fort Wayne During the Canal Era, 1828-1855* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1969), 62; Linda Robertson, ed., *Wabash County History Bicentennial Edition* (Marceline, Mo., 1976), 476; Fatout, *Indiana Canals*, 69; Thomas E. Castaldi, *Wabash and Erie Canal Notebook III, Wabash and Miami Counties* (Fort Wayne, Ind., 2004), 49-50; and William W. Giffin, *The Irish: Peopling Indiana* (Indianapolis, Ind., 2006), 24.

Both groups retained deeply held regional loyalties that encouraged distrust of and hostility towards outsiders. These associations also had roots in other traditions of the nineteenth-century Irish countryside, notably faction fighting and agrarian peasant secret societies, whose members battled landlords and itinerant laborers for control of land. When Corkonians and Fardowns faced threats to their economic livelihood—whether in the form of work stoppages, missed wage payments, or a surplus of workers—they responded with violence in a manner that linked the Indiana frontier to the traditions of nineteenth-century rural Ireland.

The lack of serious historical attention given to the Irish War comes in part due to a scarcity of records, especially those from the perspective of the participants themselves. Few Irish immigrants of the era were literate, and the transient nature of canal and railroad work meant they left few permanent records behind. Those records that do exist tend to come from unsympathetic observers such as the Indiana legislator who dismissed Corkonians and Fardowns as “little armies” of “ignorant emigrants” bringing “lasting injury to the country.”<sup>5</sup> Yet the story of the feuding among Indiana’s canal and railroad laborers deserves as full and accurate a telling as that which historians have given to the canals and railroads that their labor produced. To do so, this essay incorporates sources from events occurring within Indiana with sources examining similar feuds in other locations that help to fill in missing components of the historical record.

The Irish War on the Wabash and Erie Canal was not a singular, random event. Instead, Indiana experienced “Irish Wars.” In 1837, Irish laborers engaged in additional skirmishes on the Central Canal near Indianapolis and again on the Madison and Indianapolis Railroad near Vernon. In fact, between 1830 and 1860, Irish laborers fought at many North American internal improvement sites.<sup>6</sup> In most cases, sources attribute the violence to Corkonians and Fardowns; the Fardowns occasionally appear as “Connaught Men” in reference to the Irish province of Connaught (also spelled Connacht), or as “Longfords,” referring to nearby County Longford in Leinster province.

To examine how Indiana’s Irish Wars fit into this larger pattern of Corkonian and Fardown feuding, this essay considers multiple and diverse

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<sup>5</sup>“In Senate,” *Indiana Journal*, January 28, 1837.

<sup>6</sup>I use the term “internal improvements” to refer collectively to canals, railroads, roads, and other public works.



The July 1835 conflict in Lagro was one of many labor conflicts that played out at internal improvement sites across North America over the course of the decade.

Courtesy, Jay M. Perry.

historical factors that ultimately came together on the Indiana frontier. The essay first considers the historical context of the Corkonian and Fardown rivalry, noting both the prevalence of antebellum rioting in the United States and the traditions and customs of conflict in nineteenth-century Ireland. Next, it examines the motives and organization of the Corkonian and Fardown societies, uncovering clues to their feud within the very names of the organizations themselves. After describing the confluence of circumstances bringing Irish laborers to Indiana, the essay examines the riot on the Wabash and Erie Canal, as well as additional fights typically overlooked by Indiana historians. It concludes with a discussion of how historians have misinterpreted these conflicts in Indiana and an analysis of the economic factors that led to the conflicts.

#### CORKONIANS AND FARDOWNS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Indiana's Irish Wars, occurring between 1835 and 1837, came during the height of a riotous era. The years 1834 and 1835, in particular, have received special attention from historians due to the period's high rate of public disorder. Carl E. Prince has dubbed 1834 the "Great 'Riot Year'" for the number of riots that occurred; David Grimsted, similarly, called 1835 a "Year of Violent Indecision," uncovering 147 riots that "demonstrated," in his words, the nation's "penchant for riotous violence" and "raised doubts about its future stability."<sup>7</sup> Ethnic, class, and religious tension all erupted in these riots, with no one trigger prevailing. Anti-Catholic riots in Charlestown, Massachusetts, led to the burning of a convent. The Bank of Maryland's failure led to riots in Baltimore. New York's hotly contested municipal election of 1834 ended with Democrats and Whigs fighting in the streets. Pro-slavery demonstrations and abolition meetings deteriorated into race riots in multiple places, most notably in Philadelphia, where rioting left thirty-seven homes destroyed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Carl E. Prince, "The Great 'Riot Year': Jacksonian Democracy and Patterns of Violence in 1834," *Journal of the Early Republic* 5 (Spring 1985), 13; and David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York, 1998), 3.

<sup>8</sup>See Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861*, 5; Grimsted, "Rioting in Its Jacksonian Setting," *American Historical Review* 77 (April 1972), 364; and Prince, "The Great 'Riot Year,'" 9-16.

Historians have interpreted these conflicts as the products of shifting political, economic, and social landscapes. During this period, the market revolution, industrialization, and modernization altered the nature of work, social, and community relationships, and class distinctions. Groups marginalized by these changes often lashed out violently.<sup>9</sup> The Corkonians and Fardowns, however, represented a distinct strain of violence during this era. Rather than targeting the system or establishment, Irish canal and railroad laborers attacked others who shared the same social class, occupation, religion, and ethnicity. The battles of the Corkonians and Fardowns were unique—a transatlantic “mix,” as Paul Gilje writes, “of Irish traditions and American conditions.”<sup>10</sup>

While Irish labor riots fit into a context of widespread civil unrest in North America, the Corkonian and Fardown feuds resembled two phenomena common to nineteenth-century Ireland: faction fighting and agrarian-based peasant secret societies. The first of these featured pre-arranged combat, often between hundreds of participants organized along kinship and communal lines. A British investigation in 1836 summarized faction fighting in the following way:

In a large part of the south and west of Ireland, it often happens that, when a quarrel upon some trifling grounds arises among the peasantry, each of which assumes a distinctive name, and a feud is established between them,—which breaks out into open violence when they meet at fairs and markets. In these encounters they fight with as much fury as if they were waging a real war.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to fairs and markets, Irish faction fights occurred at other public gatherings, such as festivals and races. Weapons occasionally ap-

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<sup>9</sup>On rioting in response to the shifting economic and social landscape of the antebellum United States, see Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996); Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861*; Grimsted, “Rioting in Its Jacksonian Setting,” 361-97; Prince, “The Great ‘Riot Year,’” 1-19; and Joshua D. Rothman, “The Hazards of the Flush Times: Gambling, Mob Violence, and the Anxieties of America’s Market Revolution,” *Journal of American History* 95 (December 2008), 651-77.

<sup>10</sup>Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 66.

<sup>11</sup>George Cornewell Lewis, *On Local Disturbances in Ireland; and on the Irish Church Question* (London, 1836), 281.

peared, although participants rarely intended to kill opponents. Despite this, skirmishes periodically resulted in death.<sup>12</sup>

The factors motivating a faction fight varied with each instance. On some rare occasions, faction fights represented a form of violent recreation or tension release.<sup>13</sup> More commonly though, the fights grew out of obscure grudges; British observers of an 1834 faction fight recalled that “no other reason can be assigned even by the persons connected with those factions for the hostility they bear each other, save that it has existed for over half a century.”<sup>14</sup> Yet faction fights also took on clearer purposes, such as defenses of family honor, vengeance for past wrongs, or economic preservation.<sup>15</sup> On the surface, Corkonian and Fardown actions resembled faction fighting. In the case of the Wabash and Erie riot, for example, hundreds of participants chose sides with distinctive names and selected a predetermined public space at which to stage their fight. However, the fact that Corkonians and Fardowns worked and fought at multiple locations suggests a higher level of organization than found in traditional faction fighting. This level of organization points to the second of the two Irish traditions: peasant secret societies.

Ireland’s secret societies flourished due to many of the same economic factors that encouraged emigration. Land shortages exacerbated by rapid population growth—Ireland’s population increased from 2.5 million in 1753 to 6.8 million by 1821—threatened the economic stability of peasants and small communal farmers. Landowners exploited their position by inflating rent prices and pitting potential renters against each other, while the demand for land ensured a steady stream of new renters from which landlords could choose. As the majority of Irish rented land, the high cost of rent and dwindling land resources led to increases in tenant evictions. Many small farmers became landless laborers, roaming the countryside in

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<sup>12</sup>Thomas N. Brown, “Nationalism and the Irish Peasant, 1800-1848,” *Review of Politics* 15 (October 1953), 405; Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, 1985), 60-61; and Paul E. W. Roberts, “Caravats and Shanavests: Whiteboyism and Faction Fighting in East Munster, 1802-11,” in *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914*, ed. Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly (Madison, Wis., 2003), 65-66.

<sup>13</sup>Michael Beames, *Peasants and Power: The Whiteboy Movements and Their Control in Pre-Famine Ireland* (New York, 1983), 71; Carolyn Conley, “The Agreeable Recreation of Fighting,” *Journal of Social History* 33 (Autumn 1999), 57-60; and Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 60-61.

<sup>14</sup>“Dreadful Affray,” *Belfast News-Letter*, July 1, 1834.

<sup>15</sup>Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 60-61.



search of work in competition with existing local workers. In response, Irish peasants formed secret societies to protect their economic interests. These societies sought to ensure access to land and work for members of their family, community, or organization by intimidating, threatening, or attacking those deemed enemies of their cause. Secret societies in Ireland attacked and strong-armed landlords, the authorities, interloping laborers, and new tenants who displaced society members in what historian Kevin Kenny has called “a form of retributive justice enforced to correct transgressions against traditional moral and social codes.”<sup>16</sup>

The Whiteboys and Ribbon Men gained notoriety as the most famous of the Irish secret societies. The Whiteboys—so called because of the white shirts they wore to enhance their visibility at night—primarily operated in Munster (the home province of the Corkonians). The Ribbon Men originally formed in Ireland’s northern counties to defend Catholics from government oppression. As the economic situation in Ireland worsened, the Ribbon Men’s religious foundations became less prevalent, replaced by growing concerns over land disputes. By the 1800s, Ribbon Men participation in land disputes on behalf of peasants became so prevalent that *Ribbonism* became a generic term describing all secret society actions and peasant unrest. Where faction fights and Corkonian and Fardown feuds generally took place out in the open, Irish secret societies operated in a more clandestine manner—open admission of membership in a secret society resulted in penalties from the authorities. The Whiteboys and Ribbon Men required oaths of their members and used night raids, threats, coercion, beatings, arson, and, when the occasion demanded it, murder to accomplish their objectives. Secret societies sometimes left behind notes claiming responsibility for their deeds and warning others who opposed them of similar fates.<sup>17</sup>

Corkonians and Fardowns exhibited organizational traits similar to Ireland’s secret societies. An 1829 investigation of the Whiteboys and Ribbon Men found that taverns served as their headquarters, with leaders frequently meeting in such environs to conduct business. Similarly, canal

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<sup>16</sup>Kevin Kenny, *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* (New York, 1998), 19. On the origins and tactics of Irish secret societies, see Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly, “The Tradition of Violence,” in *Irish Peasants*, 26; and T. Desmond Williams, ed., *Secret Societies in Ireland* (New York, 1973).

<sup>17</sup>Beames, *Peasants and Power*, chap. 2; Brown, “Nationalism and the Irish Peasant, 1800-1848,” 427; Clark and Donnelly, “The Tradition of Violence,” in *Irish Peasants*, 25; Joseph Lee, “The Ribbonmen,” in *Secret Societies in Ireland*, 26-29; and Roberts, “Caravats and Shanavests,” 66-70.

and railroad authorities knew that the Corkonians and Fardowns both had headquarters in New York saloons. Corkonian and Fardown leaders organized branches for individual work sites, collected dues payments from members, and created secret handshakes and passwords, practices also used by secret societies in Ireland.<sup>18</sup> Examples of secret passwords survive from both sides of the Atlantic, including the following 1833 Ribbon Men example cryptically referencing an American connection:

Q: How long is your stick?  
 A: Long enough to reach my enemies.  
 Q: To what trunk does the wood belong?  
 A: To a French trunk that blooms in America and whose leaves  
 shall shelter the sons of Erin.<sup>19</sup>

In 1839, raids on a Fardown camp on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal uncovered documents with secret Fardown phrases duplicating the call and response style of the Ribbon Men:

Q: The winter is favorable.  
 A: So is friendship increasing.  
 Q: True Connaughtmen is valiant.  
 A: Yes, and never will be defeated.  
*Quarreling Words*  
 Q: That Connaughtmen may be steady.  
 A: And they will be respected.  
*Pass Words*  
 Q: That all Connaughtmen may be nice.  
 A: Yes, without they may meet their enemies.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup>George W. Potter, *To the Golden Door: The Story of the Irish in Ireland and America* (Boston, Mass., 1960), 327-28; and "Cork Special Commission," *Morning Chronicle* (London), October 31, 1829.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Hugh B.C. Pollard, *The Secret Societies of Ireland: Their Rise and Progress* (London, 1922), 38. The password's vague nature leaves interpretation of the reference to America open to speculation. An anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this article suggested that the password likely alluded to the concept of republicanism rather than transplanted American Ribbon Men. At least one scholar has interpreted the password as suggesting the Ribbon Men had an American presence. See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995), 107.

<sup>20</sup>"The Canal War," *Daily Cleveland Herald*, September 12, 1839.

Examples of a sophisticated organization behind the Corkonians and Fardowns went beyond barroom meeting places and secret phrases. Front organizations associated with both groups claimed to aid new Irish immigrants while simultaneously recruiting new members. In New York, Archbishop John Hughes publicly condemned these “benevolent” and “fraternal” societies, declaring in 1841 that “many of the scandals and quarrels among Irishmen and Catholics on public works and elsewhere...had their origin in the objectionable parts of such associations.” Hughes summoned the leaders of what he deemed the “Corkonians and Connaught men—far-ups and far-downs” to a meeting to discuss their actions; when the leaders agreed, Hughes rewarded them with participation in Saint Patrick’s Day religious ceremonies. Several front organizations agreed to assist Hughes, including the Hibernian E.B. Society, the Hibernian Universal Benevolent Society, and the Shamrock Benevolent Society.<sup>21</sup> An 1843 anecdote from Canada’s Welland Canal confirmed the connection between these organizations and the Corkonians and Fardowns. A priest noted that violence between Cork and Connaught workers there stemmed from two organizations: “One is called the Hibernian and another the Shamerick [sic] Society.”<sup>22</sup>

#### IRISH REGIONALISM: WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Corkonians and Fardowns had much in common, with seemingly stronger reasons to unify than to share a hostile rivalry: both had recently arrived from Ireland, endured the hardships of immigrant life, and suffered the arduous work of canal and railroad construction. However, at the time these laborers came to North America, allegiance to Irish regional identity trumped notions of national identity. In 1782, a French consul visiting Ireland had observed of this regionalism that “the Irish themselves, from different parts of the kingdom are very different. It is difficult to account for this surprising localization. One would think, on so small an island, an Irishman would be an Irishman, yet it is not so.”<sup>23</sup> The process of immigration did not immediately erase these regional ties; Irish

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<sup>21</sup>Fergus MacDonald, *The Catholic Church and the Secret Societies in the United States* (New York, 1946), 14-19.

<sup>22</sup>Quoted in Peter Way, *Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of the North American Canals 1780-1860* (New York, 1993), 196.

<sup>23</sup>Quoted in R. F. Foster, *The Oxford History of Ireland* (New York, 1989), vii.

immigrants primarily settled near and interacted with those who shared their family lines or came from their same county or province. Most Irish immigrants likely had never traveled outside of their home county before leaving Ireland and thus arrived in North America with little experience interacting with those from other parts of the island. As Brian Mitchell noted in his study of Irish immigrants in Lowell, Massachusetts, “even in Lowell, a Corkonian considered an emigrant from [Ireland’s County] Tyrone as foreign as the Yankees who lived around both of them.”<sup>24</sup>

This narrow construction of community slowly evolved as immigrants replicated the communities they left behind as best as possible. Immigrants from County Cork, for example, grouped together, but extended their communal ties to include those from nearby counties who shared roots in the province of Munster. Likewise, immigrants from other parts of Ireland expanded their networks just enough to include people from nearby counties or villages. Regional associations set the parameters of Irish immigrant communities in America, replacing county and village identities with “regional groupings of Corkonians and Connaughtmen.”<sup>25</sup> For laborers building canals and railroads, the social isolation of the work, which laborers undertook surrounded predominantly by other Irish immigrants, reinforced these narrow connections.

The very names of the two opponents in Indiana’s Irish Wars—Corkonians and Fardowns—point to this construction of Irish regional identity as a factor in their feud. The name Corkonians clearly derives from County Cork, the largest county in the province of Munster, and likely represented the Munster origins of its members. The origin of Fardowns is more obscure and even today remains a matter of speculation. In 1838, confused editors of the *New York Morning Herald* asked their readers for insight on the name, begging them to “give us light on the subject.”<sup>26</sup> One reader responded that people from the south of Ireland (such as those from Munster or County Cork) used Fardowns to describe people from the north, “which was far down as it were,” and the term became a “gen-

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<sup>24</sup>Brian Mitchell, *The Paddy Camps: The Irish of Lowell, 1821-61* (Chicago, Ill., 1988), 23.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 47. See also Matthew E. Mason, “‘The Hands Here are Disposed to be Turbulent’: Unrest Among the Irish Trackmen of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad,” *Labor History* 39 (August 1998), 262.

<sup>26</sup>*New York Morning Herald*, May 8, 1838. Mid-nineteenth-century newspapers reported several variations of the name, including “Fardowners,” “Fardouns,” “Fardonians,” and “Fardownians.”

eral insult.”<sup>27</sup> Andrew Leary O’Brien, an Irish stonemason who observed Corkonian and Fardown feuds in Pennsylvania, recorded in his diary that authorities separated Irish factions so that on “one contract they were all Fardowns (that is from the lower counties of Ireland).”<sup>28</sup> Taken together, the comments that Fardowns came from “far down as it were” and from the “lower counties” suggest they came from distinctly different areas of Ireland than the Corkonians. The comments may even suggest that Corkonians viewed Fardowns as coming from beyond mountainous southern Ireland, such as the comparatively flatter environs of Leinster and Connaught.

Historians and newspaper reporters writing in more recent times have offered other plausible explanations for the term’s origins, again with an emphasis on regional difference. The *Dictionary of American Regional English* suggests Fardowns “probably” refers to “County Down in Northern Ireland.”<sup>29</sup> Alternately, the name may be a corruption of Irish language phrases. Historian David Doyle submits that the term comes from “*Fear an Duin* or *fear aduain* (County Down man or stranger).”<sup>30</sup> In 1949, the *Irish Independent* newspaper investigated the term, offering the possibility of a corruption of *Fir Domhann* or *Fir Domhan*, meaning “man of the world” and likely referencing the *Fir Domnann*, a tribal group from pre-Celtic Irish legends reputedly from Connaught and Leinster.<sup>31</sup> Lastly, the term may come from *fear donn*, pronounced “far down,” and literally translating to “brown man,” perhaps figuratively indicating a stranger or foreigner.<sup>32</sup>

## CORKONIANS AND FARDOWNS COME TO INDIANA

The story of the Corkonian and Fardown presence in Indiana begins in New York, where the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 established a navigable water route connecting the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean. The canal increased the speed by which freight traveled, reduced

<sup>27</sup>*New York Morning Herald*, May 10, 1838.

<sup>28</sup>Annette McDonald Suarez, ed., *The Journal of Andrew Leary O’Brien* (Athens, Ga., 1946), 30.

<sup>29</sup>Frederic Gomes Cassidy and Joan Houston Hall, eds., *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 357.

<sup>30</sup>David N. Doyle, “The Irish in North America, 1776-1845,” in *Making the Irish American*, ed. Joseph Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York, 2006), 187.

<sup>31</sup>“Tatler’s Leader Page,” *Irish Independent*, June 9, 1949, 6. For a brief summary of the *Fir Domnann*, see John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Calif., 2006), 750.

<sup>32</sup>An anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this article suggested this possibility.

shipping costs, connected New Yorkers to new and previously distant markets, and inspired tremendous economic development.<sup>33</sup> Canal mania soon gripped much of the nation, as states hoped to seize on the economic opportunities offered to New York by building canals of their own; Ohio, for example, began constructing two canals the same year the Erie was completed.

Political leaders in Indiana recognized the economic benefits of sending agricultural goods to ports like New York and New Orleans, as well as to growing river ports like Cincinnati. Governor James Ray, for example, wanted to get Indiana's "flour, pork, beef, potatoes and productions of our soil to a good market, with the most expedition and the smallest expense."<sup>34</sup> Unlike its neighbor Ohio, however, Indiana was initially slow to exploit the potential of canals. While Indiana's leaders agreed on the need for economic development, differences of opinion over details delayed the state's commitment to a transportation system. Ray preferred the new and relatively untested technology of railroads, while most of the legislature supported canal construction. Among canal supporters, arguments over proposed routes—debates that centered on whether canals should be located in areas of high population or, conversely, where canals might be easiest to construct—delayed unified acceptance of a plan. Some legislators delayed decisions for political reasons, lobbying for canals running directly through their own districts. Lastly, as a young state, Indiana had little revenue, and political leaders found little agreement on the proper method to fund construction.<sup>35</sup>

It was not until 1832 that Indiana made its first tentative steps toward embracing the transportation revolution, approving the construction of its first canal, the Wabash and Erie. Progress on the canal proceeded slowly, but the groundbreaking inspired Indiana to fully embrace the idea of transportation infrastructure. In 1836, Governor Noah Noble signed the state's Mammoth Internal Improvements Act, a grandiose plan that satisfied every sector of the state with eight separate projects, including turnpikes, railroads, and additional canals. Indiana would borrow money

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<sup>33</sup>Ronald E. Shaw, *Canals for a Nation: The Canal Era in the United States, 1790-1860* (Lexington, Ky., 1993), chap. 2.

<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Ralph Blank, "Early Railroad Building in Indiana," in *Indiana Historical Society Publications*, vol. 6, ed. Harlow Lindley (Indianapolis, Ind., 1919), 124.

<sup>35</sup>Fatout, *Indiana Canals*, 26-32; Poinsatte, *Fort Wayne During the Canal Era*, 23-28; and Shaw, *Canals for a Nation*, 134-37.



Ireland's counties and provinces. Corkonians—their name clearly derived from County Cork—came from the province of Munster. Fardowns—the origins of whose name are still open to speculation—originated in the provinces of Connaught and Leinster.

Courtesy, Jay M. Perry.

to complete the projects; despite some objections, supporters of the bill assured citizens that tolls and revenue from the completed public works would pay off the debt incurred.<sup>36</sup>

Completing the canals and railroads required a large labor supply at low cost. Initially, Indiana attempted to use resident Hoosiers to build the Wabash and Erie, but the labor supply dwindled during planting and harvesting seasons, when farmers returned to their fields. Indiana's canal commissioners reported problems in securing workers as early as 1833, and the resulting budget overruns threatened to halt construction altogether.<sup>37</sup> Forced to find new methods to solve the labor problem, Indiana's canal commissioners sent agents to seek recruits from the growing immigrant communities of eastern cities. There, the agents found Irish laborers willing to take up the shovel and make the trip to Indiana.<sup>38</sup>

The national push to build canals and railroads coincided with an upsurge in Irish migration. Scholars of Irish immigration broadly speak of two great waves prior to 1845. In the first, as many as 250,000 Irish, predominantly Protestants from Ireland's province of Ulster, arrived in the era of the American Revolution. Ulster then, as now, was the only Irish province with a majority Protestant population.<sup>39</sup> A multitude of factors contributed to a second wave of immigration. By the 1820s, Ireland was Europe's most densely populated country, and among its poorest. Overpopulation led to severe land shortages for peasant farmers, a problem made worse by landlords' new emphasis on livestock grazing over growing crops—a practice that further limited land availability. Rent skyrocketed, as did tenant evictions.<sup>40</sup> Not surprisingly, almost half a million people left Ireland for North America between 1815 and 1834.<sup>41</sup> This second

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<sup>36</sup>John Lauritz Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2001), 205-217.

<sup>37</sup>*Report of the Commissioners of the Wabash and Erie Canal, 1833*, 3-4, Indiana Historical Society Pamphlet Collection (IHSPC), Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>39</sup>Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York, 2008), 4.

<sup>40</sup>John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), 17; Clark and Donnelly, "The Tradition of Violence," in *Irish Peasants*, 26; Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 36; and Donnelly, *The Land and People of Nineteenth-Century Cork: The Rural Economy and Land Question* (Boston, Mass., 1975), 10-21.

<sup>41</sup>David Noel Doyle, *Ireland, Irishmen, and Revolutionary America, 1760-1820* (Dublin, Ireland, 1981), 212; and Kerby A. Miller, *Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class, and Transatlantic Migration* (Dublin, Ireland, 2008), 44.



**2,000 LABORERS  
WANTED  
ON THE CENTRAL  
CANAL  
Of Indiana.**

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THE great Central Canal of Indiana is intended to connect the waters of Lake Erie and the Ohio river, and will be about 400 miles in length. In addition to that part already completed and under contract in the middle and northern part of the state, TWENTY miles commencing at Evansville, on the Ohio river, its southern termination, and extending into the interior, were put under contract in November last; since which time the work has been steadily progressing.

No section of country holds out greater inducements to the industrious laborer than the state of Indiana, and particularly that portion of it contiguous to the Central Canal, from the fact that there is much of the land belonging to the general government remaining unentered, which may be purchased at one dollar and twenty-five cents per acre: affording to those who are desirous of doing so, an opportunity of securing to themselves, with the avails of a few months' labor, a permanent home in this flourishing and rapidly growing state.

The contractors are now paying \$20 per month, and the fare and lodgings furnished, is of the most comfortable character. It may not be amiss to say that the acting commissioner reserves, by an express provision in all contracts, the right to see that every laborer receives his just dues; therefore, no man need lose one dollar of his wages, if he pursues a proper course.

It is probable that more of this Canal will be put under contract during the coming fall or spring, when an opportunity will be offered to those who show themselves qualified of proposing for work.

Laborers coming from the south can take passage to Evansville, and find immediate employment upon their arrival. By order of JOHN A. GRAHAM, *Act. Com.*  
Canal Office, Evansville, May 1, 1837. C. G. VOORHIES, *Res'dt Eng.*

EVANSVILLE JOURNAL, PRINTER.

Laborers Wanted flier, May 1, 1837. As early as 1833, Indiana's canal commissioners reported problems in securing workers from within the state. Canal agents attempted to remedy this shortfall by recruiting Irish laborers from eastern cities. This flier, issued by Evansville's Canal Office, promised laborers \$20 per month and furnished lodgings "of the most comfortable character."

Courtesy, Bass Photo Co. Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

wave came with a gradual demographic change from the Irish who came earlier; by the 1830s, Catholics for the first time made up the majority of Irish immigrants to the United States.<sup>42</sup>

Primarily arriving as unskilled laborers, the Irish of the 1830s quickly became the dominant ethnic group working on canal and railroad construction sites in Indiana and elsewhere. The typical Irish laborer—an unmarried man under the age of thirty-five—was demographically suited for the transient nature of the work.<sup>43</sup> Although other immigrant and ethnic groups participated in the construction, the dominance of Irish laborers gave rise to the popular notion that “to dig a canal, at least four things are necessary, a shovel, a pick, a wheelbarrow, and an Irishman.”<sup>44</sup> With limited work opportunities and without family impediments, the Irish became “a mobile army of cheap, unskilled labor for the American industrial revolution.”<sup>45</sup>

Few workers willingly chose this line of work if they had other options. Backbreaking, monotonous, and dangerous, canal building required laborers to fabricate rivers through dense forests using only picks, wheelbarrows, shovels, and gunpowder. Indiana canal building regulations required workers to clear tow paths of trees, bushes, stumps, roots, and rocks, while digging canals four feet deep and forty feet wide.<sup>46</sup> Living and working in close quarters made workers susceptible to outbreaks of cholera, malaria, and other illnesses. These dire conditions led to rampant alcohol abuse; one estimate placed a canal laborer’s daily whiskey consumption at between twelve and twenty ounces.<sup>47</sup> An often repeated story from the Wabash and Erie Canal claims a person called a “jigger boss” traveled up and down the line, doling out daily whiskey allotments to the workers. Questioned about this practice years later, a former jigger

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<sup>42</sup>Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 198.

<sup>43</sup>Catherine Tobin, “The Lowly Muscular Digger: Irish Canal Workers in Nineteenth Century America,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1987), 78.

<sup>44</sup>Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 42.

<sup>45</sup>Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History* (New York, 2000), 64.

<sup>46</sup>*Report of the Commissioners of the Wabash and Erie Canal*, 1833, 16, IHSPC; and Way, *Common Labour*, 32.

<sup>47</sup>Kenny, *The American Irish*, 64; and Way, *Common Labour*, 122-26, 183-87.

boss recalled, "You wouldn't expect them [laborers] to work on the canal if they were sober, would you?"<sup>48</sup>

Social isolation, alcohol abuse, nativism, and other factors led to sporadic outbreaks of violence among laborers constructing North America's transportation network. Beginning in 1827 on the Delaware and Hudson Canal, authorities began to trace some of this violence to a distinct source—the existence of organized Irish immigrant societies.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the 1830s, 1840s, and the early 1850s, a form of guerilla war raged between these societies on public works sites across the United States and Canada. Historian Peter Way identifies more than twenty examples of opposing Irish laborers fighting on North American canals between 1834 and 1844, a number that increases significantly if one adds disturbances on railroads and other public works.<sup>50</sup> During the 1830s, Irish laborers grouped under the names of Corkonians and Fardowns fought, among many other places, in Maryland on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, in New York on the Chenango Canal, and across Indiana's western border on the Illinois and Michigan Canal.<sup>51</sup> The animosity between Corkonians and Fardowns ran deep and often led to violence that went beyond fisticuffs. One eyewitness noted that a member of one group "even passing by the other party would be run down like a rabbit by a pack of bloodhounds, & murdered on the spot he was overtaken on."<sup>52</sup> With the beginning of construction on the Wabash and Erie Canal, this recurring pattern of hostility found its way to Indiana.

## THE IRISH WARS IN INDIANA

Most of the Wabash and Erie Canal workers were Corkonians during the first half of 1834. In September of that year, however, work on the

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<sup>48</sup>Fatout, *Indiana Canals*, 58; Poinsatte, *Fort Wayne During the Canal Era*, 62; and Way, *Common Labour*, 184. One source traces the story to the *Lafayette (Ind.) Journal*, September 23, 1894. See Griswold, *The Pictorial History of Fort Wayne Indiana*, 326.

<sup>49</sup>Potter, *To the Golden Door*, 327; and Shaw, *Canals for a Nation*, 172.

<sup>50</sup>Way, *Common Labour*, 288-95.

<sup>51</sup>This is a representative sample of Corkonian and Fardown feuds in the 1830s although there are many others. For a detailed analysis of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal feud, see Way, *Common Labour*, chap. 7. On the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, see Mason, "The Hands Here are Disposed to be Turbulent," 253-72.

<sup>52</sup>Suarez, *The Journal of Andrew Leary O'Brien*, 30.

canal intensified and canal authorities brought in additional workers. The new arrivals included a large influx of Fardowns and many veterans of previous Corkonian and Fardown clashes on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal.<sup>53</sup> Trouble began quickly thereafter, with the first recorded instance of worker unrest coming the following December. A group of Irish laborers “acting in a very riotous manner” attacked a farmer identified only as “Mr. Turner” near Huntington. Turner’s brother fired at the mob, killing one assailant and dispersing the rest.<sup>54</sup> In the following months, laborers turned their hostilities toward each other as small clashes between Corkonians and the newly reinforced Fardowns erupted. Fear and anger in Corkonian and Fardown camps prompted violent retaliations, causing Canal Commissioner David Burr to write Governor Noble that both parties “manifested their ill will to each other by merciless beatings.” By July 1835, the conflict had grown intense enough that authorities segregated the Corkonians and Fardowns to different sections of the canal in an effort to maintain peace. Nonetheless, threats of mass attacks continued to run through the canal’s rumor mill, and some canal workers reportedly slept in the woods in order to avoid detection by their enemies.<sup>55</sup>

Between July 4 and July 9, rumors of one side attacking the other intensified, causing multiple work stoppages on the canal. On work sites outside of Indiana, similar rumors had also caused severe distress. Andrew Leary O’Brien recalled that rumors of Fardown attacks on a Corkonian camp in Pennsylvania caused laborers to “get dressed, & get out before we were burnt up or shot down.” One such rumor had even caused Corkonians to ford a stream to meet their nonexistent attackers, leading one man to drown in the panic.<sup>56</sup> Back on the Wabash and Erie, Hoosiers living in the vicinity of the canal soon came under threat as well. Irish laborers robbed wagons and homes, searching for weapons in anticipation of a looming battle with their adversaries. Exasperated by the constant threats and determined to settle their differences, Corkonians and Fardowns

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<sup>53</sup>David Burr to Governor Noah Noble, December 30, 1835, in *Messages and Papers relating to the Administration of Noah Noble*, ed. Dorothy Riker and Gayle Thornbrough (Indianapolis, Ind., 1958), 419-20; and “Disturbance on the Canal Line,” *Indiana Journal*, July 31, 1835.

<sup>54</sup>“Melancholy Affair,” *Indiana Journal*, December 5, 1834.

<sup>55</sup>Burr to Noble, December 30, 1835, in *Messages and Papers relating to the Administration of Noah Noble*.

<sup>56</sup>Suarez, *The Journal of Andrew Leary O’Brien*, 31-32.

abandoned work on the canal altogether on July 10. An estimated three hundred Corkonians marched west from the area of Huntington, and an equivalent number of Fardowns headed east from the region near Peru. The proposed battlefield, the town of Lagro, rested halfway between.<sup>57</sup>

Alerted to the work stoppage and impending battle Commissioner Burr approached the Fardowns gathered near Lagro in hopes of averting the melee. The Fardowns told Burr that the constant threat of violence compelled them to fight in hopes that the “weaker party might leave the line.”<sup>58</sup> After hearing the complaints of the Fardowns, Burr sought out the Corkonians and found them already prepared for battle—a position enhanced by their possession of a stolen cannon. Lacking proper ammunition, the Corkonians had loaded the weapon with gravel from the banks of the canal.<sup>59</sup> Reluctant to call off the battle, the Corkonians initially threatened several members of Burr’s party. Undaunted, Burr used finesse and diplomatic skills to get the Corkonians to agree to a temporary cessation of hostilities and to peace negotiations with the Fardowns. Burr’s idea for a peace treaty likely came from his knowledge of Corkonian and Fardown feuds on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal; in 1834, hostile factions of Irish laborers signed such a treaty to temporary effect (referred to by a Washington, D.C., newspaper as a “novelty in Diplomatic History”).<sup>60</sup>

Having gained a temporary lull in the hostilities, Burr sent dispatches to militia units in Fort Wayne, Huntington, and Logansport. The militia arrived on July 12 and immediately began arresting the Irish laborers still gathered for battle. Some Corkonians and Fardowns fled into the woods while others tried to return to their camps unnoticed. The militia ultimately arrested between one hundred and two hundred laborers.<sup>61</sup> The mass arrests exposed two significant problems. First, Wabash County’s newly

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<sup>57</sup>“Disturbance on the Canal Line,” *Indiana Journal*, July 31, 1835.

<sup>58</sup>Burr to Noble, December 30, 1835, in *Messages and Papers relating to the Administration of Noah Noble*.

<sup>59</sup>Castaldi, *Wabash and Erie Canal Notebook III*, 50.

<sup>60</sup>Burr to Noble, December 30, 1835, in *Messages and Papers relating to the Administration of Noah Noble*. On the Chesapeake and Ohio peace treaty, see “Riots upon the Canal,” (*Washington, D.C.*) *Daily Intelligencer*, February 3, 1834.

<sup>61</sup>“Disturbance on the Canal Line,” *Indiana Journal*, July 31, 1835; and Clarkson Weesner, *History of Wabash County Indiana* (Chicago, Ill., 1914), 236. The *Indiana Journal* claims the militia detained one hundred rioters. The reminiscence of Lagro attorney and future judge William H. Coombs, as recalled in Weesner’s *History of Wabash County Indiana*, claims closer to two hundred arrested.

organized government had no place to hold the prisoners, having only authorized construction of the first county jail on July 8 (a decision likely hastened by the increase in hostilities among the canal workers). Second, with so many laborers detained, work on the canal could not progress. For practical reasons, the authorities promptly released the bulk of the workers.<sup>62</sup> No record exists of the proposed peace treaty, which presumably never materialized.

Authorities marched eight men—deemed leaders of the opposing factions—to Indianapolis, where more suitable detention facilities existed. Despite a tense moment when the prisoners refused to cross the Eel River until threatened at bayonet point, all eight arrived safely in Indianapolis on July 23. Their stay in the state capital, however, proved short-lived. A few days after their arrival, a *habeas corpus* technicality prompted the prisoners' release. Authorities later re-arrested one of the eight, a man named Jeremiah Sullivan. Sullivan, reportedly a veteran leader of the Corkonians, had shot at a Wabash and Erie contractor and had allegedly participated in previous laborer battles in Maryland and Pennsylvania. Sullivan ultimately went to the state penitentiary, the only participant in the riot on the Wabash and Erie Canal known to receive punishment through the legal system.<sup>63</sup>

Neither Burr's report to Noble detailing the events on the Wabash and Erie nor contemporary newspaper reports recorded any deaths as a result of the riot or the skirmishes leading up to it. Such an absence of fatalities would be surprising given that deaths resulting from conflicts between Corkonians and Fardowns on other work sites were common. Two other sources, however, suggest that deaths did in fact occur on the Wabash and Erie. The memoirs of Sanford C. Cox, a prominent community member in Tippecanoe County, suggest that three people died during the disturbances.<sup>64</sup> Two years after the riot, Indiana politician John Dumont stated that "sixteen or seventeen Irishmen fell...buried in the earth, the victims of vice and ignorance." Dumont likely inflated his statistics; he

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<sup>62</sup>"Disturbance on the Canal Line," *Indiana Journal*, July 31, 1835. On the authorization to build the jail, see Weesner, *History of Wabash County Indiana*, 157.

<sup>63</sup>Gayle Thornbrough, ed., *The Diary of Calvin Fletcher*, Vol. I: 1817-1838 (Indianapolis, Ind., 1972), 267; Weesner, *History of Wabash County Indiana*, 237; Burr to Noble, December 30, 1835, in *Messages and Papers relating to the Administration of Noah Noble*, 423; "Disturbance on the Canal Line," *Indiana Journal*, July 31, 1835; "100 Dollars Reward," *Indiana Journal*, September 11, 1835; and *Indiana Journal*, September 18, 1835.

<sup>64</sup>Cox, *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley*, 146.

gave them during a legislative speech rife with anti-immigrant sentiment while arguing against increased funding for canal and railroad projects. Such expenditures, Dumont claimed, would bring to Indiana more Irish, people he dubbed “foreigners of the lowest and most ignorant classes.”<sup>65</sup> Given Dumont’s clear bias, the actual number of casualties is likely closer to Cox’s memory.

Not only did media reports of the Wabash and Erie ignore casualty numbers, they also failed to examine causes of the affray. Instead, newspapers used the riot as an opportunity to salute the response of citizens while condemning the behavior of the Irish. The *Logansport Canal Telegraph* boasted that the militia had acted “in a manner that is highly creditable to themselves and their communities.”<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, the *Indiana Journal* proclaimed that the Irish had been “fully satisfied that they could not trample on the laws of the state with impunity,” and warned that should they “proceed any further in their mad career, they would inevitably meet with punishment due to such lawless proceedings.”<sup>67</sup> Newspaper reports, then, presumed that the militia’s appearance brought peace to the Wabash and Erie. This presumption remains today; a 2007 travel piece about Wabash County in a Muncie newspaper declared that as a result of the arrival of the militia, “the so-called Irish War was over.”<sup>68</sup> Contrary to these assumptions, two separate memoirs indicate that unrest among workers continued. Irish laborers attacked Cox and a party of his fellow travelers near Peru in 1835. Cox could only surmise that the attack grew out of hostility left over from the July riot, which had happened only weeks before.<sup>69</sup> One year later, future Wabash County judge and legislator Elijah Hackelman saw laborers fighting in what he deemed a “real Irish Riot,” complete with “clubs and other missiles.”<sup>70</sup> While the militia had helped to avert a large-scale battle, these memoirs present the Corkonians and Fardowns as far from pacified.

By 1837, Indiana’s Mammoth Internal Improvements Act had created multiple work sites throughout the state. Like the Wabash and Erie Canal,

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<sup>65</sup>“In Senate,” *Indiana Journal*, January 28, 1837.

<sup>66</sup>*Logansport (Ind.) Canal Telegraph*, July 18, 1835.

<sup>67</sup>“Disturbance on the Canal Line,” *Indiana Journal*, July 31, 1835.

<sup>68</sup>Earl Conn, “The History of Indiana’s ‘Irish War’ and the Erie Canal,” *Muncie (Ind.) StarPress*, October 14, 2007.

<sup>69</sup>Cox, *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash*, 146.

<sup>70</sup>Margaret K. Fox, Betty Ann Wilson, and Anna M. Harvery, eds., *Elijah Hackelman Scrapbook* (Kokomo, Ind., 1987), 240.



projects such as the Central Canal and the Madison and Indianapolis Railroad also employed Irish immigrants. And like the Wabash and Erie, these other locations saw feuds between Irish laborers. In March 1837, Corkonians and Fardowns renewed their rivalry on the Central Canal near Indianapolis. Newspapers limited coverage to a few brief sentences, and the only known additional information about the fight comes from the diary of Indianapolis resident Calvin Fletcher. Several Fardowns working for a contractor named Sheridan attacked a rival Corkonian contractor and a small number of his employees. In reprisal, six Corkonians attacked Sheridan and his outfit, leaving Sheridan dead and two other Fardowns severely injured. Authorities quickly arrested a Corkonian named Thomas Finch for Sheridan's death, and Fletcher became Finch's attorney. According to Fletcher, Finch feared additional attacks from the Fardowns and participated in the assault only to protect his own life and that of his employer. Fletcher offered a three-and-a-half-hour closing statement to the court on behalf of his client, but Finch ultimately received five years in prison for manslaughter.<sup>71</sup>

Just a few months after the Indianapolis altercation, Corkonians and Fardowns interrupted the construction of the Madison and Indianapolis Railroad. This time, Fardowns initially dominated the employment pool on the line. Through August 1837, only three hundred of the estimated 1,700 workers claimed allegiance to the Corkonians. However, the arrival of additional Corkonians that month threatened the Fardowns' numerical superiority. As it had on the Wabash and Erie, the arrival of new laborers precipitated the violence that followed. Under threat of losing control of the workforce on the Madison and Indianapolis, the Fardowns attacked the Corkonians between the construction sites of two bridges. The attack left one dead and several wounded. In the aftermath, a sheriff's posse raided the Fardown camp and arrested several laborers found with bloody clothing. The sheriff lodged the suspects in the jail at Vernon.<sup>72</sup>

Vernon swirled with rumors that the Fardowns would attack the town in an effort to break their compatriots out of jail. Several days after

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<sup>71</sup>*Indiana Journal*, March 25, 1837; and Thornbrough, *The Diary of Calvin Fletcher*, Vol. I: 1817, 448-49.

<sup>72</sup>"Riot on the Railroad," *Indiana Journal*, September 9, 1837. Copies of the original *Vernon (Ind.) Banner* report do not survive. However, the text of the newspaper report is available in Lori S. Ammerman et al., eds., *Reminiscences of Vernon: Stories from the Early Days of Vernon, Indiana* (Vernon, Ind., 2002), 11; and Thomas P. Conroy, *St. Michael's Catholic Church, Madison, Indiana: A Pioneer Parish of Southern Indiana, 1837-1937* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1937), 28-29.



the arrests, a group of Fardowns gathered just outside of town. Armed townspeople and the militia confronted the Fardowns at a creek on Vernon's outskirts, with one citizen reportedly declaring that "the first man who set foot in the creek was a dead man." After a brief showdown, an influential contractor named Flanigan convinced the Fardowns to abandon their plans and the crowd dispersed.<sup>73</sup> On August 27, the Corkonians retaliated, committing what Vernon legislator John Vawter called a "most wanton attack... on an unoffending Faredow [sic]."<sup>74</sup> Two Corkonians, Michael Brennen and Martin Crotty, received death sentences for murdering the Fardown Patrick Galluly, a sentence later commuted by Governor Noble to life in prison.<sup>75</sup> Circumstantial evidence suggests that a Madison priest, Father Michael Shawe, barely escaped a Fardown mob angry over the priest's role in lobbying for Brennen and Crotty's reprieve.<sup>76</sup> The fates of the Fardowns housed in the Vernon jail remain unknown.

By 1838, financial difficulties slowed the work on Indiana's canal and railroads. Indiana faced rapidly increasing construction costs and an inability to pay off loans for its grand scheme. The Morris Company—the chief financiers of Indiana's transportation system plans—collapsed during the Panic of 1837 while still owing the state several million dollars. The cost of financing eight simultaneous projects became too much of a burden for the state to bear. By 1839, Indiana stopped work on all projects, focusing only on a few remaining sections of the Wabash and Erie Canal and completion of the Madison and Indianapolis Railroad. At the time work ceased, the state owed contractors (who had hired the laborers) over \$700,000.<sup>77</sup> Historians with the benefit of hindsight have noted that Indiana's grand plans were doomed from the beginning; Paul Fatout would write years later that "the mammoth Hoosier system of internal improvements was

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<sup>73</sup>Ammerman et al., *Reminiscences of Vernon*, 11; and Conroy, *St. Michael's Catholic Church*, 28-29.

<sup>74</sup>John Vawter to Noah Noble, September 25, 1837, in *Messages and Papers relating to the Administration of Noah Noble*, 560-61.

<sup>75</sup>"The Jennings Circuit Court," *Indiana Journal*, October 7, 1837; and *Indiana Journal*, October 21, 1837.

<sup>76</sup>Bishop Simon Bruté de Remur wrote Archbishop John Hughes in 1838 vaguely referencing a "Mr. Shaw" who avoided a Fardown mob after working for a reprieve for two Corkonians charged with murder. Although de Remur's letter does not indicate an exact location of the incident, the Rev. Michael Shawe was working as a priest in Madison at the time of the Madison and Indianapolis riots and the trial of Brennen and Crotty. See John R. G. Hassard, *The Life of the Most Reverend John Hughes, D.D., First Archbishop of New York* (New York, 1866), 259.

<sup>77</sup>Way, *Common Labour*, 209.

conceived in madness and nourished by delusion.”<sup>78</sup> The collapse of the construction projects killed much of the need for Irish immigrant labor in the state. Without the jobs that had attracted Irish laborers to Indiana, members of the Corkonians and Fardowns migrated to new work sites in other states, taking their feud with them. In Indiana, the feud was over.

The Irish immigrants who fought as Corkonians and Fardowns imported the traditions of faction fighting and peasant secret societies, applying aspects of both to new hybrid organizations that engaged in violent feuds in Indiana and elsewhere. Yet the mere existence of these societies does not account for the violence. Clearly the two organizations shared a hostile rivalry, but why? Contemporary observers offered little insight. Media reports of the feuds in Indiana paid scant attention to the catalyst behind the violence—the *Indiana Journal* noted only that each group was intent on “driving their opponents from the canal.”<sup>79</sup> Observers of the feuds outside of Indiana did little better in probing causes for the ongoing violence. An engineer on the Delaware and Hudson Canal, for example, summarized the feuds as fighting “for the hell of fighting.”<sup>80</sup> Collectively, most antebellum Americans dismissed the actions of Corkonians and Fardowns as “an ethnic conflict, rival factions of Irish brawling yet again for reasons long lost in the haze of history.”<sup>81</sup>

Indiana historians typically cite religious differences as the chief cause of the Irish Wars between Corkonians and Fardowns. This interpretation dates at least to 1912, when influential Indiana historian Logan Esarey wrote that the Wabash and Erie riot occurred not just between Corkonians and Fardowns, but between “Catholics and Orangemen.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>Fatout, *Indiana Canals*, 76.

<sup>79</sup>“Disturbance on the Canal Line,” *Indiana Journal*, July 31, 1835.

<sup>80</sup>Quoted in Tobin, “The Lowly Muscular Digger,” 152.

<sup>81</sup>Way, *Common Labour*, 201.

<sup>82</sup>Esarey, *Internal Improvements in Early Indiana*, 94-95. Esarey cites an obscure local history, Thomas B. Helm, *History of Wabash County, Indiana: Containing a History of the County, Its Townships, Towns, Military Record, Portraits of Early Settlers and Prominent Men, Personal Reminiscences, Etc.* (Chicago, Ill., 1884), 68. In addition to mistakenly referring to the feud as between Catholics and Orangemen, Esarey and Helm further misconstrue the Wabash and Erie riot as between “‘Corkers’ and ‘Way Downers’ from Kerry,” the only known sources to use these phrases. Another historian of Wabash County writing in 1914 tried to correct the notion of religious sectarianism, stating “historians of the conflict have generally assumed that it was another case of Catholic against Protestant, or Orangemen. But the weight of evidence is that the Wabash & Erie Canal laborers...were all Catholics, and that the hostile forces were divided on other than religious lines.” See Weesner, *History of Wabash County, Indiana*, 236.

The term Orangemen came loaded with religious connotations. The word originally described seventeenth-century followers of William of Orange (later King William III), a Protestant who defeated the Catholic King James II for control of England, Ireland, and Scotland during the Glorious Revolution. Protestant supporters of the union between Ireland and Great Britain commemorated this event in 1796 by forming the Orange Order, a fraternal organization still in existence today. Generations of historians have repeated Esarey's interpretation without questioning its validity.<sup>83</sup>

Esarey and those he influenced, however, cannot directly back their claim with primary-source evidence. The term "Orangemen" appears nowhere in known primary sources, and only a single sentence in the *Indiana Journal* account of the Wabash and Erie riot hints at a possible connection to religious motives: "The contest was intended to have taken place on the 12th inst. the anniversary of the battle of the Boyne," the site of William of Orange's defeat of James II, which ensured Protestant control of predominantly Catholic Ireland for several centuries.<sup>84</sup> Esarey and others seemingly used the date of the proposed battle on the Wabash and Erie as evidence that Corkonians and Fardowns refought the Battle of the Boyne, complete with its religious implications. Yet they have failed to note that Corkonians and Fardowns fought elsewhere in Indiana (and elsewhere in the United States and Canada) on days unrelated to the Boyne's anniversary, leaving the date of the Wabash and Erie Canal affair a curious coincidence rather than a point of evidence.

The presumption that Corkonians were Catholic and Fardowns Protestant rests on the assumption that Fardowns came from Ireland's province of Ulster, and numbered themselves among its Protestant majority population.<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately, few records of the workers on Indiana's canals and railroads survive, and conclusive accounts of the workers' origins remain elusive. However, scholars studying the Fardowns outside of the narrow

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<sup>83</sup>See note 3 for examples of the religious differences interpretation.

<sup>84</sup>"Disturbances on the Canal," *Indiana Journal*, July 31, 1835. Historian Kerby A. Miller declared that "Catholic defeat was total, and vindictive Irish Protestants took care it remained so." See Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 21.

<sup>85</sup>William W. Giffin offers an example of this assumption: "The Fardowns were Protestants . . . who had emigrated from Ulster in Northern Ireland. The Corkonians were Catholic emigrants from Ireland." See Giffin, *The Irish: Peopling Indiana*, 24. Today, six of Ulster's nine counties comprise the region known as Northern Ireland and remain part of the United Kingdom. The other three Ulster counties, in addition to Ireland's three other provinces, are part of the Republic of Ireland.

context of Indiana have come to wholly different conclusions about their Irish origins. Peter Way's analysis of Corkonians and Fardowns fighting on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal finds that Fardowns came from the province of Connaught, and Matthew E. Mason's study of riots on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad shows the Fardowns coming from County Longford (a county on the border of Connaught in the province of Leinster).<sup>86</sup> Given that the local- or county-level biases of Irish immigrants evolved in North America to encompass more regional associations, Fardowns likely came from both Connaught and County Longford. The *New York Herald's* 1857 investigation of Irish laborer feuds in New Jersey provides evidence supporting this conclusion, citing a finding that Fardowns came from "Connaught and the skirts of Ulster."<sup>87</sup> This is significant for two reasons. First, this phrase indicates that Fardowns came from areas close in proximity to each other in Ireland, but not necessarily from the same province. Second, the phrase indicates that Fardowns came from areas bordering Ulster (such as Connaught and County Longford), but not from Ulster itself.

Examining Corkonian and Fardown feuds outside Indiana provides additional evidence of both parties' ties to Catholicism. The New Jersey report concluded that the feud had nothing to do with "persecution for religion's sake" as both sides were "composed entirely of Catholics, as the great mass of Irish laborers belong to this church."<sup>88</sup> Catholic priests intervened on both sides of the feud on several occasions: Father John McElroy persuaded Corkonians and Fardowns on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to meet in a peace conference, and a Father McDonagh threatened the "curse of the Church" on members from both sides who continued fighting on Canada's Welland Canal.<sup>89</sup> That Fardowns came from Catholic areas such as Connaught or Leinster matches Irish emigration trends during this era. Historian Timothy J. Meagher notes that in the 1820s and 1830s, "migration fever began to spread south into northern Leinster and northern

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<sup>86</sup>Mason, "The Hands Here are Disposed to be Turbulent," 260; and Way, *Common Labour*, 194. Mason claims that three separate factions existed on the Baltimore and Ohio: "Connaught men, the Corkonians, and the Fardowns/Longford men," 262. However, given the close proximity of County Longford to Connaught and the regional nature of these affiliations, it is likely that immigrants from County Longford joined with those from Connaught to make up the Fardowns.

<sup>87</sup>"Terrible Riot in New Jersey," *New York Herald*, February 16, 1857.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup>Quote from Tobin, "The Lowly Muscular Digger," 161. See also Mason, "The Hands Here are Disposed to be Turbulent," 261; and Way, *Common Labour*, 196.

Connaught counties . . . [and] specific parts of Munster, the southwestern province, particularly County Cork.”<sup>90</sup> The “skirts of Ulster” referenced in the New Jersey report surely included northern Leinster and Connaught counties, both of which lay on Ulster’s border. Moreover, Irish Catholics were more likely than Irish Protestants to work on canals and railroads in the 1830s; by the early 1830s, more Irish Catholics came to America than their Protestant counterparts and found work as unskilled laborers in greater numbers.<sup>91</sup> For these reasons, historians looking at Corkonian and Fardown feuds outside of Indiana have concluded that the two opposing factions shared the Catholic religion.<sup>92</sup>

If not religion, what then lay at the heart of Corkonian and Fardown feuds? Some nineteenth-century observers pointed to long-standing regional rivalries. An Irish letter writer to the *New York Morning Herald* in 1838 compared the feud to American regional rivalries between “Bos-tonians, Down-Easters, Yorkers, and Yankees.”<sup>93</sup> Andrew Leary O’Brien’s diary traced the rivalry to “an old spleen” Fardowns held against Munster counties for a perceived lack of bravery during the failed Irish Rebellion of 1798.<sup>94</sup> Neither explanation, however, accounts for the level of violence found in the rivalry. Once again, the New Jersey report provides clearer insight. In Ireland, the *New York Herald* reported, laborers from counties associated with the Fardowns sought work in Munster during the harvest season, undercutting the wages of the existing Munster labor pool. As a result, the reporter noted that Corkonians “have always viewed the ‘Far-downers’ with jealous and contemptuous eyes.”<sup>95</sup>

This effort to find the roots of Corkonian-Fardown rivalry in economic competition most closely describes the circumstances of the groups’ fights in North America. On work sites outside of Indiana, evidence exists that

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<sup>90</sup>Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York, 2005), 56.

<sup>91</sup>Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 193-203; and Tobin, “The Lowly Muscular Digger,” 78.

<sup>92</sup>Mason notes that “both sides were Roman Catholic” in “The Hands Here are Disposed to be Turbulent,” 261. Shaw calls them “rival Catholics” in *Canals for a Nation*, 172.

<sup>93</sup>*New York Morning Herald*, May 10, 1838.

<sup>94</sup>O’Brien does not specifically name the Irish Rebellion of 1798 but uses the phrase “Battles of the Irish Revolution.” See Suarez, *The Journal of Andrew Leary O’Brien*, 30. Daniel J. Gahan has charged that some in Ireland begrudged fighters from Munster’s County Kerry who were slow to answer calls to combat, inhibited by “zealous magistrates and conciliatory Catholic gentry.” See Daniel J. Gahan, *Rebellion: Ireland in 1798* (Dublin, Ireland, 1997), 42.

<sup>95</sup>“Terrible Riot in New Jersey,” *New York Herald*, February 16, 1857.

contractors occasionally discharged workers before disbursing payments, or even fomented feuds between labor factions as a way to regulate payment (if the losing party left the line, contractors only had to pay one party).<sup>96</sup> Such behaviors by management left laborers in a precarious situation and perpetually concerned about payment and prospects for continued employment. Thus, access to employment through control of the workforce stood at the center of most Corkonian and Fardown fights.

In Indiana, the evidence supports the idea that concern over employment and wages precipitated the Lagro, Indianapolis, and Vernon fights. The tenuous financial condition of Indiana's projects meant that even as work proceeded, funding was slow to materialize.<sup>97</sup> Cash shortfalls also meant that laborers regularly faced the possibilities of unemployment and missed payments from contractors. As early as one year before the Wabash and Erie Canal riot, Indiana's canal commissioners complained about the lack of available funds, writing of "much distress on the line for cash, and it was so much needed to...pay hands."<sup>98</sup> Just three months before the riot, U.S. Senator John Tipton lamented that surveying missions for new canal routes diverted funds needed for the Wabash and Erie.<sup>99</sup> At the same time that Corkonians and Fardowns were making plans to meet in Lagro, the citizens of nearby Peru were busy searching for between \$30,000 and \$40,000 stolen from a canal commissioner, money intended for contractors who had payroll obligations to the canal's workers.<sup>100</sup> If laborers were aware of this missing money, it certainly would have enflamed existing tensions. The state even struggled to pay the militia members who responded to the Wabash and Erie riot; a year after the riot, a militia captain from Huntington wrote that "no reward but that of ingratitude has been meted out to the Citizens who prevented the intended Massacre of last July.... Money and thanks are both locked up yet."<sup>101</sup>

Hostilities on the Wabash and Erie began only after the arrival of a large number of Fardowns had inflated a workforce previously dominated

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<sup>96</sup>Way, *Common Labour*, 198-201.

<sup>97</sup>Fatout, *Indiana Canals*, 92.

<sup>98</sup>Quoted in Way, *Common Labour*, 209.

<sup>99</sup>Fatout, *Indiana Canals*, 67-68.

<sup>100</sup>Cox, *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley*, 146-48.

<sup>101</sup>Elias Murray to Senator John Tipton, March 1836, in *The John Tipton Papers*, Vol. III, 1834-1839, ed. Nellie Armstrong Robinson and Dorothy Riker (Indianapolis, Ind., 1942), 249-50.

by Corkonians. Such an increase in the labor force might have driven wages down, created a payroll shortage, or diminished the number of positions available—all things that would have reduced laborers' control over their economic situation. In nearly identical fashion, an influx of Corkonians threatened the near monopoly on jobs held by Fardowns on the Madison and Indianapolis, initiating the clashes near Vernon. So long as one faction controlled all of the jobs on the Wabash and Erie or the Madison and Indianapolis, that faction controlled the meager resources available to pay laborers. On the Central Canal in Indianapolis, testimony points to a fatal attack prompted by the desire of a Corkonian to protect his employer. Had Fardowns succeeded in killing Thomas Finch's employer, Finch would likely have lost his job. Corkonians and Fardowns turned to violence in an attempt to decrease competition for jobs or to protect the jobs they had.

Historians analyzing Corkonians and Fardowns beyond Indiana's borders have understood the connection between violence and employment opportunities. Catherine Tobin concluded that the two groups were "closed-shop organizations" who sought to keep "members of the other group from work on a particular section or a whole line."<sup>102</sup> Mason's study of railroad trackmen concluded that riots and fights among Irish societies amounted to "efforts to influence contractors or railroad officials."<sup>103</sup> Given the limited employment opportunities available to unskilled Irish immigrants, influencing the composition of the labor force represented one of the few ways that they could control their environment. Peter Way's study of canal laborers notes that controlling the workforce was the laborers' "most potent weapon in dealing with contractors and the canal company."<sup>104</sup> George W. Potter also noted the relationship between Corkonian and Fardown violence and jobs. The societies, he writes, "had economic objectives: better pay, redress of grievances against unscrupulous contractors, and protection of jobs of its members, even against fellow Irishmen."<sup>105</sup> Only Indiana's histories raise the chimera of Ireland's religious divisions.

In simple terms, the Corkonian and Fardown feuds centered on access to jobs through control of the workforce. Corkonians and Fardowns sought

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<sup>102</sup>Tobin, "The Lowly Muscular Digger," 171.

<sup>103</sup>Mason, "The Hands Here are Disposed to be Turbulent," 272.

<sup>104</sup>Way, *Common Labour*, 216.

<sup>105</sup>Potter, *To the Golden Door*, 328.

to drive each other—and any other unaffiliated laborers—from work sites, thereby preserving a monopoly on the jobs and opportunities provided by the canals and railroads. Deep connections to provincial identity and regional rivalries imported from Ireland dictated how the sides selected participants, but labor concerns incited the violence. As entities, the Corkonians and Fardowns exhibited traits of two Irish traditions: faction fighting and peasant secret societies like the Ribbon Men and Whiteboys. Neither of these traditions alone accounts for the new organizations that emerged in connection with mass construction of canals and railroads in Indiana and across North America. Instead, the Corkonians and Fardowns represented a new, hybrid tradition that combined the rituals and organization of Ireland's secret societies and the open brawls of faction fighters. The violence that accompanied these brawls, while at times savage and lethal, had a specific purpose. Violence became the tool by which Corkonians and Fardowns could challenge their exploitation at the hands of contractors and authorities.

Without reliable records, conversations surrounding the fates of individual participants in Indiana's Irish Wars remain speculative. Four laborers convicted of crimes related to their participation in these conflicts received pardons before completing their sentences. Jeremiah Sullivan, sentenced to life in prison in 1835 for shooting at a contractor on the Wabash and Erie, received a pardon in 1840. Thomas Finch, convicted of manslaughter in 1837 in Indianapolis, served only three years of a five-year sentence before receiving a pardon. Martin Crotty and Michael Brennen, initially sentenced to hang for a murder on the Madison and Indianapolis in 1837, received full pardons in 1843.<sup>106</sup> Where these four went after leaving prison remains a mystery.

Despite the transitory nature of work on internal improvements, a few Irish laborers remained behind at each work site, settling in the area and adding their culture to the local fabric. Most laborers followed the work, wandering to new locations in other states to build additional public works. And yet the story of Irish Catholic migration to North America in the era

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<sup>106</sup>For Jeremiah Sullivan's pardon, see *Pardons and Remissions*, Vol. I., July 6, 1840, Indiana State Archives Manuscript Collection (ISAMC) (listed under Jerome Sullivan), Indiana State Archives, Indianapolis, Indiana. Crotty and Brennen's pardons are located in *Pardons and Remissions*, Vol. I., July 19, 1843, ISAMC. Finch's pardon is located in *Pardons and Remissions*, Vol. I., May 15, 1840, ISAMC.



of the Corkonians and Fardowns goes beyond canal brawls and railroad riots. Not all Irish immigrants or Irish laborers joined these organizations or participated in their clashes. The experiences of Irish laborers on the construction sites of the transportation revolution, however, set the stage for decades of Irish-American association with organized labor.

The story of the Corkonians and the Fardowns places a much-needed spotlight on laborers and immigrants too often overlooked in our history. In those rare instances when we include their histories as part of the larger picture, we too often come to incomplete or erroneous conclusions. Corkonians and Fardowns did not fight for entertainment or to settle Old World scores. They were real people with real grievances, negotiating the complicated challenges of immigrant life, limited opportunity, and a world changing rapidly around them.

