

Ryan Family

**JAMES RYAN: SON OF DUBLIN, CITIZEN OF FLATBUSH**

by Patricia Mansfield Phelan

Many a visitor to Brooklyn's Holy Cross Cemetery and Calvary Cemetery in Queens has noticed the name "Jas. Ryan" engraved in the lower right-hand corner of hundreds of old headstones. And for over a century, visitors to Holy Cross Church in Flatbush have admired its elegant marble and onyx baptismal font, inscribed "The Gift of James Ryan, March 3rd, 1895."

Who was the man behind these inscriptions?

**From Dublin to Flatbush**

James Ryan, a son of Joseph and Mary Ann Ryan,<sup>1</sup> was born in Dublin City about 1840, and emigrated to New York as a boy.<sup>2</sup> He settled first in Blissville in Queens County, where he learned the marble and stonemasonry trade. By the late 1860s, he was living in Flatbush at the corner of Vernon and Canarsie streets. Ryan was the proprietor of two marble works--one opposite Holy Cross Cemetery, the other close to Calvary--and he "employed many men at both places"<sup>3</sup> to carve monuments and headstones.

James Ryan was also the proprietor of Ryan's Hotel, a "liquor saloon" situated near Holy Cross Cemetery and known as "a great resort for mourners."<sup>4</sup> In addition to providing comfort for the bereaved, the hotel played a special role in a well-known event in Brooklyn history.

For several days in March 1888, a severe snowstorm paralyzed much of the eastern seaboard of the United States. By the time the blizzard subsided, Brooklyn was buried under more than two feet of snow, and fierce winds had formed deep drifts. Soon there was "a scarcity of food in the town," and so Ryan's wife, Margaret, "sent around a

considerable amount of bread to the poorer families, and the hotel kitchen [was] turned into a bakery, where all who [applied were] welcome to a loaf of bread."<sup>5</sup>



James Ryan

Brooklyn Citizen, 8 May 1891

Many funeral parties were caught in the storm, and one newspaper reported on Tuesday, March 13, "A number of coaches, horses and drivers, as well as those attending the Monday's funerals, are still housed at James Ryan's hotel, opposite the cemetery."<sup>6</sup>

The *Brooklyn Citizen* later recalled, "During the blizzard of 1888, man and beast found shelter at [Ryan's] hotel. Mr. Ryan was presented for his kindness on that occasion with a handsome silver pitcher" which bore the following inscription:

*Presented to James Ryan Esq.  
in grateful appreciation of his kindness  
to my men and horses  
while snow-bound on his premises  
for three days by the great storm of 1888.  
John J. Sadley<sup>7</sup>*

**Politics**

Although James Ryan was well known for his hotel and his marble works, he was perhaps best known as a prominent politician "who wielded great influence with the Democrats of the old town of Flatbush."<sup>8</sup> His public service included terms as commissioner of charities (1880-1882), sewer commissioner, and a member of the Board of Improvement.<sup>9</sup>

When he ran for office in 1879, the *Brooklyn Eagle* reported, "Mr. Ryan has prospered at his trade, and is now a man worth a good deal of money....Mr. Ryan's personal appearance is that of an industrious man. What he possesses he has earned by hard knocks, and the marks of industry are on his face, his hands and in his manner....[I]n conversation he talks like a man who has a practical, level head."<sup>10</sup> And yet another *Eagle* article noted that Ryan "is a thorough business man, and the very fact of his success in his own behalf is proof enough that he will be thoroughly competent to deal with the affairs of the county in an honest and business like manner. He has been brought in contact with men of all classes, and has received an ill word from none."<sup>11</sup>

When asked why he wanted to be charities commissioner, Ryan said, "Well, I would like the honor of the office, and I think I could fill it properly. Men like me, after they have made money (cont. on p. 6)



### **James Ryan** (*cont. from p. 5*)

at their trade, want to be honored in this sort of way, if for nothing else, just to show their folks that they are well thought about."<sup>12</sup>

A few days before this interview, however, the *Eagle* had expressed doubts about Ryan's presence on the Democratic ticket, fearing that although "he has the reputation of a 'good fellow,' a great favorite with 'the boys,' and is well thought of by people who have...to seek assistance, if not charity...we have found that gentlemen of Mr. Ryan's liberal disposition are apt to be as liberal in the use of the public funds as they are of their own."<sup>13</sup>

### **Arrest**

Early in Ryan's term as commissioner of charities, in June 1880, "a sergeant of the Flatbush Police" arrived at Ryan's Hotel one evening and took the commissioner into custody. He was charged with a misdemeanor for failing "to provide for and support the child of one Annie Oliver, and has illegally and wrongfully shielded and protected the putative father of said child from prosecution for the support of the said child, and illegally accepted the sum of \$50 from said father, and keeps the same."<sup>14</sup>

Upon hearing this complaint read, prisoner Ryan, "with a very perceptible sneer," replied, "All I have to say is that it is all a lie. It is a tissue of lies."<sup>15</sup>

A hearing was held and the complaint dismissed when the judge ruled that Ryan "was ignorant [of procedures] rather than guilty."<sup>16</sup> (Note: A thorough discussion of Ryan's political life will not be attempted here--it is a subject whose scope is too big for this article.)

### **Family Life**

On March 1, 1869, at St. Raphael's Church in Long Island City, James Ryan married Margaret McNulty,<sup>17</sup> widow of his older brother, John Joseph Ryan. As he took his marriage vows, James assumed the daunting role of stepfather to six children, the eldest of whom was about twelve. They were his brother's three daughters (his nieces Margaret Frances, Mary Elizabeth, and Georgeanna Ryan), and Margaret's children by her first husband Thomas McGuire (Margaret Josephine, Alexander T., and Cornelius McGuire). Ryan soon had children of his own as well: John Joseph, James William, James J., and Teresa Francesca Ryan.<sup>18</sup>

The marriage was to be marked by many sorrows. James William died of *cholera infantum*

shortly after his first birthday in 1872.<sup>19</sup> Less than a year later, eight-year-old Georgeanna fell sick one day and succumbed five hours later to "congestion of the brain."<sup>20</sup>

In March 1886, James Ryan's first child, John, then sixteen, left his parents' Flatbush home to enter Manhattan College in Riverdale. A few weeks later, he was dead of pneumonia.<sup>21</sup> More tragedy was to come. In April 1890, James's stepson Alexander died of a lung ailment. The *Brooklyn Eagle* called him "one of the most popular young men of Flatbush" and said he "had given promise of a brilliant future."<sup>22</sup>

### **Origins Not Forgotten**

Although James Ryan spent most of his life in the United States and reportedly served in the Union navy on the ship *Roanoke* when attacked in 1862 by the *Merrimac* in Hampton Roads, Virginia,<sup>23</sup> he was Irish to the core. He made sure his family's origins were not forgotten, and in 1868 engraved on his brother John's headstone these words: "A Native of the City of Dublin, Ireland." Ryan served as county secretary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians of Kings County, and was also a member of the Ancient Order of Fenians and the St. Patrick's Society. In March 1877, he was unanimously elected marshal of Brooklyn's St. Patrick's Day parade by the Irish Convention of Kings County.<sup>24</sup> And in 1880, when Ireland was struck by famine, he was appointed chairman of the relief committee of Flatbush to raise funds for famine relief, and donated generously to this cause.<sup>25</sup>

### **Last Days**

In the winter of 1895, Ryan, "a devout member of the Church of the Holy Cross...gave another evidence of his attachment to the church by presenting it with a handsome baptismal font...made of Vermont white marble and supported by four onyx columns....Father [John] Woods, the pastor of the church, accepted the generous gift on behalf of the church. Vespers were then sung."<sup>26</sup>

In the early 1890s, James Ryan had been diagnosed with a stomach ailment, probably cancer, and sometime in 1895 he traveled to Europe in an effort to improve his health, returning home in the fall.<sup>27</sup> But his condition worsened, and on December 12, 1895, he died at his home in Flatbush.

Many Brooklyn newspapers eulogized Ryan, the *Eagle* noting that "his reputation in Flatbush was that of a kind and charitable man, who, having

amassed a large fortune, gave money freely to the poor and needy."<sup>28</sup> Another paper said, "He was loved and esteemed by all who knew him, and the news of his death has cast a gloom over the entire community."<sup>29</sup>

"Nearly everyone in Flatbush" attended his wake, "a general suspension of business having occurred as a tribute of respect for the dead man."<sup>30</sup> "The funeral procession was one of the largest that ha[d] ever passed through the streets of Flatbush."<sup>31</sup> In fact, "the church was so crowded that many persons were unable to obtain admission."<sup>32</sup>

After a requiem mass at Holy Cross Church, where "a special musical service was sung by the choir," James Ryan's remains were brought to Holy Cross Cemetery "followed...by over one hundred carriages."<sup>33</sup> There Ryan was buried in the family plot, his grave "literally strewn with roses bedewed by the tears of nearly 1,000 mourners."<sup>34</sup>

**Author's note:** I have a special interest in and affection for James Ryan, as he was the uncle—and stepfather—of my great-grandmother Mary Elizabeth Ryan Stewart (1864-1918), whom he raised from the age of five.

<sup>1</sup> Marriage record for James Ryan and Margaret McNulty Ryan, 1 March 1869, St. Raphael's Church, Long Island City, N.Y. Note that the church's marriage register includes the names of James's parents.

<sup>2</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, 12 Dec. 1895.

<sup>3</sup> *Brooklyn Citizen*, 13 Dec. 1895.

<sup>4</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, 19 Oct. 1879.

<sup>5</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, 14 March 1888.

<sup>6</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, 13 March 1888.

<sup>7</sup> *Brooklyn Citizen*, 8 May 1891; photo given to the author by Kathryn E. Ryan (1911-2004), granddaughter of James Ryan. According to the 1880 U.S. census, Kings Co., N.Y., Sadley was an undertaker.

<sup>8</sup> See fn. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Lai Jin Wong (Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library) to author, 2 March 2000.

<sup>10</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, 23 Oct. 1879.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, 19 Oct. 1879.

<sup>14</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, 10 June 1880.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, 15 June 1880.

<sup>17</sup> See fn. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Baptismal records of John J., James W., James J., and Teresa F. Ryan, St. Raphael's Church, Long Island City, N.Y.; John Ryan will, dated 23 Jan. 1868, liber copy of will at Queens County (N.Y.) Surrogate's Court; Thomas McGuire will, dated 8 Dec. 1861, liber copy of will at Queens County (N.Y.) Surrogate's Court; Thomas

McGuire household, 1860 US Census, Queens Co., N.Y. (Newtown); James Ryan household, 1870 US Census, Queens Co., N.Y. (Newtown); James Ryan household, 1870 US Census, Kings Co., N.Y. (Flatbush); James Ryan household, 1880 US Census, Kings Co., N.Y. (Flatbush); handwritten entries on page from family Bible of Mary E. Ryan Stewart in author's possession, Jan. 2005; personal communication with Marguerite Stewart Dillmeier and Angelica Stewart Charrot, daughters of Mary E. Ryan Stewart. Note that the James Ryan household was enumerated twice in 1870, once at Flatbush and once at Newtown.

<sup>19</sup> Long Island City 1873 death records, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Brooklyn 1873 death certificate no. 4747.

<sup>21</sup> New York City 1886 death certificate; letter from Philip M. Down (Manhattan College archivist) to the author, 30 Sept. 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Flatbush 1890 death records; *Brooklyn Eagle*, April 1890.

<sup>23</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, 8 Feb. 1887.

<sup>24</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, 5 March 1877.

<sup>25</sup> *Brooklyn Rural Gazette*, 21 Feb. 1880.

<sup>26</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, 4 March 1895.

<sup>27</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, 13 Dec. 1895.

<sup>28</sup> See fn. 2.

<sup>29</sup> See fn. 4.

<sup>30</sup> See fn. 4.

<sup>31</sup> See fn. 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Brooklyn Daily Times*, 16 Dec. 1895.

<sup>33</sup> See fn. 4.

<sup>34</sup> See fn. 5.

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