

Whence came all these Roman Catholics?

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In May 1911, Thomas Watson, at that time, editor of *The Jeffersonian Magazine* published in Providence, Rhode Island, visited Cleveland, for his first, and perhaps only time. He was asked how he liked the city. He responded with a question, "Whence came all these Roman Catholics?" This question, I believe, is the place to start in this brief overview of the origin of Catholicism in the Western Reserve. Incidentally, the reason Mr. Watson was interviewed by the newspaper was a statement he had written in *The Jeffersonian Magazine* that month. He said, "The Roman Catholic hierarchy is the deadliest menace to our liberties and our civilization today."

I'm sure that all of you know the story of the founding and early settlement of Cleveland and the Western Reserve. Cleveland was part of a strange colonialism from its very beginning. When the survey of the Western Reserve, made by perhaps 40 men from Connecticut led by Moses Cleaveland, was completed in the fall of 1796, the surveyors returned to their homes and most of them, including General Cleaveland, never saw the city again. The land they surveyed into ranges, townships and lots was generally sold at auctions, and the purchasers of the land came out to settle on it. Often they were enticed by the lurid advertising - which bore only slight resemblance to the reality of the frontier, but having purchased the land, they had little choice except to occupy it. So they came west, generally in Conestoga wagons, grimly determined to make the whole area prosper. The area did prosper, but not during the short lifetimes of the original settlers.

The study of the early history of Cleveland reveals that the city, perhaps, never would have grown had it not been for the sense of the covenant the first settlers made with one another. This theory of covenant was borrowed from the Congregational Church of New England with which they were very familiar. The early settlers could not go home except in disgrace for failing to keep the covenant. In the case of Cleveland's early settlers, the covenant was one of money and community, as well as a covenant made with God and one's neighbors.

In any case, the settlers stayed. They endured cholera, fever, family tragedy from premature death, dreadful winters, mosquito-infested summers, homesickness and separation from the dynamics that were forming the states of the Eastern Seaboard into the United States. Especially helpful to these settlers was the town meeting which they had experienced back in Connecticut.

All of these factors caused a very tightly-knit Yankee community to become extremely proud of itself, homogeneous and confident of its future in the Connecticut Western Reserve. However, these factors all but guaranteed the failure of later settlers - non-Yankee arrivals in the Western Reserve - to become part of this community for the entire remainder of the Nineteenth century. These facts provide significant background that aids one in understanding the several ways in which later immigrants - most of whom were at least nominally Roman Catholic - who encountered this original Yankee community, found themselves rejected by the host culture and were forced in upon themselves. This was especially true for the first non-Yankees who came directly from Europe to the Western Reserve: the Irish, fleeing the catastrophic potato famine in Ireland; the Germans who came to this country to escape the laws of Catholic suppression in their home country; and, to a lesser extent, Bohemians, who came to the Western Reserve in search of great new wealth.

The original Catholic settlers in the Western Reserve did not arrive here in any significant numbers until 1845. Prior to that year, there was one church in Cleveland, St. Mary of the Flats, a small frame building which stood on Columbus Road at the corner of Girard Street in the Flats. There was one priest living in a cabin on the site occupied today by the Rose Building. There were 14 priests in the entire Western Reserve. With the advent of the potato famine in Ireland in 1845, immigration began. In 1845, there were a little over eight million people in Ireland; by 1853, there were five million people living in Ireland. Eighty-five per cent of those who left Ireland listed the place of destination as the United States. In the subsequent half-century, another three million Irish came to