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Immigration in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries: New Neighbors

The “melting pot” of cultural traditions and religions that distinguish American life began in earnest in the mid-1800s, as successive waves of European immigrants arrived on America’s shores. The chance for a better future attracted farmers and peasants whose lives were tied to poverty by feudal land ownership, or battered by political upheavals. In Fairfield, the declining population of founders’ descendants was infused with newcomers from Ireland, Sweden, Italy, and Eastern Europe who saw in the town their land of opportunity.

Years of potato crop failures in Ireland began the trend in the 1840s and 1850s, forcing thousands of families to choose between emigration or starvation. Irish immigrants took employment here as laborers and domestics, sometimes displacing African-Americans. But the transition was not easy. Prejudice against Irish Catholics was widespread and persistent, especially in New England with its Puritan heritage. Despite this barrier, Fairfield’s Irish population grew to thirteen percent by 1860.

As industrial centers multiplied and expanded in the late 19th century, immigrants supplied the increasing demand for cheap labor. Thousands of recent arrivals found their way to Bridgeport’s burgeoning factories. People of similar ethnic backgrounds typically clustered in neighborhoods, which were given the nicknames “Little Italy” and “Little Poland.” These neighborhoods provided a sense of community, as well as cultural and linguistic continuity, important for those who found factory work alien to their agrarian background.

Some eventually purchased land to cultivate in Fairfield, and later built homes on their land. In the early 20th century, new, culturally distinct neighborhoods began to emerge in Fairfield. Land that had once been considered undesirable for farming--on Fairfield’s east side and in areas west of the town center, where marshes had been drained--provided that opportunity, especially among Hungarian immigrants. The Tunxis Hill area became home to people from Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Sweden, and it continues to be identified with the immigrant population that settled that area although ethnic businesses have now largely disappeared. Many of the street names reflect Hungarian heritage, while local churches like Fairfield’s Magyar Reformed Church and St. Emery’s Roman Catholic Church, maintain Hungarian cultural traditions. The large population of Italian immigrants who came to Bridgeport also contributed to Fairfield’s cultural mix, although they did not settle in any one particular neighborhood. Fairfield’s Jewish population was quite small until after World War II, when many chose the Fairfield Woods and Stratfield neighborhoods on Fairfield’s east side as their home.

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