

Tyler Anbinder, Cormac Ó Gráda, and Simone A. Wegge

## “The Best Country in the World”: The Surprising Social Mobility of New York’s Irish-Famine

**Immigrants** Denis Sullivan and John Lane had much in common. Both were born in the early nineteenth century on the estate of the Marquis of Lansdowne in southwest Ireland, not far from the small town of Kenmare in County Kerry. Both managed to survive the Great Famine that killed hundreds of their kinsmen and neighbors beginning in 1846. Both emigrated to America in 1851, Denis arriving in March and John six months later. Both settled in an enclave of Kenmare-area natives in New York’s Five Points neighborhood; Denis chose an apartment in a dilapidated two-and-a-half story frame house on Anthony Street while John boarded just around the corner in the large five-story brick tenement at 31 Orange Street. Like most Lansdowne immigrants, Sullivan and Lane became day laborers upon arrival in New York.<sup>1</sup>

Tyler Anbinder is Emeritus Professor of History, George Washington University. He is the author of *City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant New York* (Boston, 2016); co-author, with Simone Wegge and Cormac Ó Gráda, of “Networks and Opportunities: A Digital History of Ireland’s Great Famine Refugees in New York,” *American Historical Review*, CXXIV (2019), 1590–1629; co-author, with Wegge and Ó Gráda, of “Immigrants and Savers: A Rich New Database on the Irish in 1850s New York,” *Historical Methods*, L (2017), 144–155.

Cormac Ó Gráda is Emeritus Professor of Economics, University College Dublin. He is the author of *Famine: A Short History* (Princeton, 2009); co-author, with Morgan Kelly, of “The Waning of the Little Ice Age: Climate Change in Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XLIV (2014), 301–326; co-editor, with Guido Alfani, of *Famines in European History* (Cambridge, 2017).

Simone A. Wegge is Professor of Economics, College of Staten Island, City University of New York and a faculty member of the Ph.D. program in Economics at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. She is the author of “Inheritance Institutions and Landholding Inequality in Nineteenth-Century Germany: Village-Level Evidence from Hesse-Cassel,” *Journal of Economic History*, LXXXI (2021), 909–942; “Different Profiles, Different Choices: Mid-Nineteenth Century Hessians Who Emigrated to the Southern Hemisphere,” *Social Science History*, XLI (2017), 415–444.

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1 Testbook entries for Denis Sullivan and John Lane, accounts 6473 and 11910, Emigrant Industrial Savings Bank Records, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library (also available on Ancestry.com); Anbinder, “From Famine to Five Points: Lord Lansdowne’s Irish Tenants Encounter North America’s Most Notorious Slum,” *American Historical Review*, CVII (2002), 351–353, 360–365.

Although their lives to that point had much in common, their experiences soon began to diverge. Sullivan continued as a day laborer for the rest of his life. In 1880, at nearly eighty years of age, he was still living in Five Points just a block from where he had originally settled. Lane, however, left day labor behind to start his own business. Because the liquor trade was one of the most profitable options in Five Points, Lane decided in about 1855 to rent a retail space in his tenement and open a saloon (see Figure 1). He must have been a skillful entrepreneur. Many immigrants who tried their luck as small business owners failed and had to

*Fig. 1* The Large Brick Building at 31 Orange (now Baxter) St. Where John Lane Lived and Later Opened a Saloon



SOURCE Gustavus W. Pach, “View in the Five Points, 1875,” Image G91F179\_046F, New York Public Library Digital Collections, available at <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-1b4c-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

return to their original occupations. Lane was not one of them. In 1860, he remained in the liquor business, though he had moved his dram shop across the street. Ten years later, Lane was still a saloonkeeper, though no longer in the Lansdowne enclave. His new watering hole was across the street from the Hudson River docks at 357 West 16th Street in a tenement that he had purchased with his downtown liquor-trade profits. Lane did so well that he was able to retire from the liquor business before age fifty. For the last twenty years of his life, he lived on the rents paid by those who leased his retail and residential spaces.<sup>2</sup>

Few would dispute that the conditions facing the Famine Irish on arrival were harsh or that the employment opportunities open to them were limited. But the scholarship on the Famine immigrants often creates the impression that the plight of these immigrants was permanent—that stories like Sullivan's were overwhelmingly the norm and those like Lane's were exceedingly rare. In one of the first book-length scholarly studies of the Irish in America, Handlin wrote that lack of opportunity for the Famine refugees "forced the vast majority into the ranks of an unemployed, resourceless proletariat.... [F]or a long time they were fated to remain a massive lump in the community, undigested, indigestible." Similarly, in one of the definitive modern studies of the Famine Irish, Miller paints "a gloomy picture of Irish-American deprivation.... In general, the Famine Irish experience in the New World was one of poverty and hardship." Other social historians studying the Famine Irish have come to

2 For Sullivan, see testbook entries for accounts 38815, 45183, and 65681, Emigrant Bank Records; family 86, dwelling 16, district 5, ward 6, New York County, 1855 New York State Census, Old Records Division, New York County Clerk's Office; family 1349, dwelling 271, district 2, ward 6, New York County, 1860 U.S. census; family 100, dwelling 22, district 6, ward 6, New York County, 1870 U.S. census; family 107, dwelling 42, enumeration district 41, 1880 U.S. census; for Lane, family 156, dwelling 31, district 3 (second division), ward 6, 1855 New York State census; family 1213, dwelling 243, district 2, ward 6, New York County, 1860 U.S. census; family 81, dwelling 23, district 10, ward 16, 1870 U.S. census; family 408, dwelling 73, enumeration district 328, New York County, 1880 U.S. census; Henry Wilson (comp.), *Trow's New York City Directory for the Year Ending May 1, 1861* (New York, 1860), 489; *idem*, *Trow's New York City Directory for the Year Ending May 1, 1871* (New York, 1870), 685; "Fought by the Deathbed," *New York Sun*, 4 June 1894, 3. All U.S. census population schedules are in Record Group 29 at the National Archives but available online for free at Familysearch.org. The New York State censuses are available online at Ancestry.com.

similar conclusions. Economic historians have generally taken a less pessimistic view of Irish immigrants' financial fates, but historians of labor and immigration have largely ignored their work. The historians typically portray the Famine Irish in America as trapped in lives of poverty and struggle due to discrimination, a lack of occupational training, and oversaturated job markets in the East Coast cities where most of them first settled.<sup>3</sup>

Very little of the copious social-science literature about American immigrant socioeconomic mobility has looked at the Civil War era or studied the Famine Irish, and most of the recent historical work considers only intergenerational mobility. Furthermore, no scholars to date have examined whether the Famine Irish were indeed trapped on the bottom rungs of the American socioeconomic ladder. Elsewhere, we have argued that the Famine immigrants—even the day laborers among them—were able to accumulate more wealth (in savings and real estate) than historians have previously recognized. Does the Famine immigrants' surprising ability to save reflect heretofore hidden occupational mobility? If the Famine refugees were climbing the socioeconomic ladder more than previously realized, what was the nature of that movement? And was geographical mobility a factor in occupational mobility?<sup>4</sup>

3 Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants, 1790–1880: A Study in Acculturation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941; repr. 1991), 55 (quotation), 69; Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, 1985), 314–316 (quotation), 321–322; Hasia Diner, “‘The Most Irish City in the Union’: The Era of the Great Migration, 1844–1877,” in Ronald Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher (eds.), *The New York Irish* (Baltimore, 1996), 98; Stephan Themstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 223; *idem*, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880–1970* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 89, 142–143, 247; Steven Herscovici, “Progress amid Poverty: Economic Opportunity in Antebellum Newburyport,” *Journal of Economic History*, LVII (1997), 484–488; Joseph P. Ferrie, *Yankees Now: Immigrants in the Antebellum U.S., 1840–1860* (New York, 1999). Those who included the post-Famine generation in their studies of Irish American mobility have come to less gloomy conclusions. See also Robert A. Burchell, *The San Francisco Irish, 1848–1880* (Berkeley, 1980), 52–61; Meagher, *Inventing Irish America: Generation, Class, and Ethnic Identity in a New England City, 1880–1928* (South Bend, 2000), 99–103.

4 Anbinder, “Moving Beyond ‘Rags to Riches’: New York’s Irish Famine Immigrants and Their Surprising Savings Accounts,” *Journal of American History*, XCIX (2012), 741–770; Anbinder, Ó Gráda, and Wegge, “Networks and Opportunities: A Digital History of Ireland’s Great Famine Refugees in New York,” *American Historical Review*, CXXIV (2019), 1590–1629. Mobility has keenly interested economists, historians, and sociologists since at least the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, and Max Weber. See Marco H. D. Van Leeuwen, “Social Inequality and Mobility in History: Introduction,” *Continuity and Change*, XXIV (2009), 399–419. Notable works on this subject by economists include Ferrie, *Yankees Now*; Ferrie and Jason Long, “Intergenerational Occupational Mobility in Great Britain and in

EVIDENCE FROM NEW YORK'S EMIGRANT SAVINGS BANK The databases that we created from the records of New York's Emigrant Savings Bank—which pre-Famine Irish immigrants and their children founded specifically to serve the Famine refugees—provide a unique opportunity to answer these questions. When opening accounts at the Emigrant Bank, customers had to provide an unusual amount of biographical information. Besides the typical items—name, address, and occupation—required of bank customers in this era, Emigrant Bank depositors also had to disclose their precise birthplace in Ireland, the name of the ship that brought them to America and the date that it landed, their parents' names (including mother's maiden name) and whereabouts, and the names and locations of their siblings and children. The bank periodically updated this information, noting new addresses and occupations, spousal deaths, remarriages, and the like. These records are a bonanza for Irish Americans wishing to learn forgotten parts of their family histories (thus explaining their availability now on Ancestry.com) and a goldmine for those who wish to trace Irish immigrants' lives in the United States accurately.<sup>5</sup>

The information in the bank records enables us to track these immigrants with an unprecedented degree of certainty and to discover their subsequent occupations and locations ten, twenty, or even thirty or more years after their arrival in the United States. The number of Famine refugees who opened accounts at the Emigrant Bank from 1850 (when the bank opened) to 1858 was 8,300,

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the U.S. since 1850," *American Economic Review*, CIII (2013), 1109–1137; Ran Abramitzky, Leah Platt Boustan, and Katherine Eriksson, "A Nation of Immigrants: Assimilation and Economic Outcomes in the Age of Mass Migration," *Journal of Political Economy*, CXXII (2014), 467–506; Raj Chetty et al., "Where Is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, CXXIX (2014), 1553–1623; William J. Collins and Ariell Zimran, "The Economic Assimilation of Irish Famine Migrants to the United States," *Explorations in Economic History*, LXXIV (2019), 1–22; Dylan Shane Connor, "Class Background, Reception Context, and Intergenerational Mobility: A Record Linkage and Surname Analysis of the Children of Irish Immigrants," *International Migration Review*, LIV (2020), 4–34.

5 We created two databases pertinent to this study: (1) the "Emigrant Savings Bank Depositor Database" (hereinafter ESBDD), which contains information about all 15,700 individuals who opened accounts from September 30, 1850, to October 2, 1858; (2) the "Emigrant Savings Bank Mobility Database" (hereinafter ESBMD), which comprises only male Irish immigrants who arrived in America after 1845 at age sixteen or older, lived at some point in New York City or Brooklyn, and whose occupations in the United States could be tracked for ten years or more. Both databases are available in Excel format at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KGYS74>.

5,000 of whom were men. We focused on them because women changed their names when they married, making those who wed after they opened bank accounts difficult to trace. The 15 percent of these male bank customers who never lived in New York City or Brooklyn (then a separate city) were excluded from this study in favor of immigrants who spent at least some time in the urban environments that scholars of the Famine migration tend to scrutinize. Out of the remaining 4,200, we were able to track 1,600 for ten or more years after their arrival in America. Since measuring social mobility requires knowing how an immigrant's employment changed over time, we further refined our mobility database to include only those for whom at least ten years of American occupational information is available. This operation left 1,205 male Famine immigrants who had lived, at least for a time, in New York or Brooklyn and whose occupations could be traced for at least a decade. Half of them could be tracked for a quarter-century or longer after leaving Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

The Emigrant Bank records did not only help to trace immigrants who remained in New York; they also enabled us to find those who left the city. Under normal circumstances, tracking a New Yorker named Peter Lynch from 1850 to 1860 would be nearly impossible, given that the 1860 census listed 123 Irish-born Peter Lynches, dozens of whom are about the right age. Nor would the "right" Peter Lynch simply be one of those who were exactly ten years older in 1860 than the age stated in 1850, because census takers in the mid-nineteenth century were permitted to approximate ages. The Emigrant Bank ledgers, however, also contain the names and birth order of Lynch's five brothers and sisters, who had the same names and birth order as five siblings listed as living with a Peter Lynch in the town of Faxon in the 1885 Minnesota state census. Such information led to additional research that identified the Peter Lynch residing in Faxon in 1860 as Peter Lynch the New Yorker of 1850.<sup>7</sup>

Michael Egan, a day laborer and bank customer who was also a New Yorker in 1850, was traced in a similar but even more circuitous manner. The 1860 census lists 110 Irish-born Michael Egan and Eagans of about the right age. But entering Michael's name into a genealogical search engine along with his wife's

6 ESBMD.

7 For census enumerators being permitted to estimate ages, see *Eighth Census, United States—1860: Instructions to U.S. Marshals* (Washington, 1860), 14.

maiden name (found in the bank records) produces two death records of Minnesotans from the mid-twentieth century whose parents had those exact names. Thus, we eventually were able to determine that the Michael Egan found in the 1860 census in, of all places, Faxon, Minnesota, was the New York Michael Egan from the 1850 enumeration. This link was possible even though Michael Egan was only a customer of the Emigrant Bank for five months. Our longitudinal database comprises people who were bank depositors only *at some point*, typically not for more than a couple of years, rather than of people who remained customers of a bank in New York for a long time.

*The Famine Irish in New York's Socioeconomic Hierarchy* Some might question whether bank customers, such as those in our database, are representative of the Irish immigrant community as a whole, especially a community of Famine refugees renowned for their impoverished status upon arrival in the United States. But every available indicator suggests that the Emigrant Savings Bank customers were not much different from New York's overall Irish immigrant population. Emigrant Bank depositors, for example, filled largely the same occupations in largely the same proportion as other Irish-born New Yorkers. As Table 1 indicates, the bank's customers may not have been a perfect cross-section of New York's Irish immigrant community in terms of occupation, but they came fairly close. We account for this small difference in our analysis by not making assessments of the total New York Irish community based solely on the Emigrant Bank's customers. Instead, we primarily look at each stratum of the city's occupational hierarchy in isolation so that the bank's large proportion of business owners or peddlers among its customers does not skew our findings.

Skeptics might also wonder if the Emigrant Bank's customers were the most upwardly mobile members of each occupational category in the New York Irish community. No evidence, however, supports the supposition that the Emigrant Bank's customers were more successful than other Irish immigrants. In recent years, social scientists have developed algorithms that track Americans from census to census and so help to create longitudinal databases for the measurement of social mobility over time. The most popular such algorithm was created by a team led by Abramitzky, Boustan, and Eriksson. Another, which appears to generate fewer false links for mid-nineteenth-century Irish immigrants, was written by a

*Table 1* Irish-Born Males by Occupational Category: Emigrant Bank New York City Customers (1850–1858) versus All New Yorkers in 1855

| OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORY     | EMIGRANT BANK |     | ALL NEW YORK IRISH |     |
|---------------------------|---------------|-----|--------------------|-----|
|                           | N             | %   | N                  | %   |
| Professionals             | 20            | 0.4 | 16                 | 0.3 |
| Business owners           | 397           | 8   | 310                | 6   |
| Lower-status white-collar | 370           | 7   | 260                | 5   |
| Skilled                   | 1,738         | 35  | 2,022              | 38  |
| Peddlers                  | 255           | 5   | 90                 | 2   |
| Unskilled                 | 2,117         | 42  | 2,567              | 48  |
| Others                    | 91            | 2   | 73                 | 1   |
| Total                     | 4,988         | 100 | 5,338              | 100 |

NOTES Left-hand columns are based on Emigrant Savings Bank depositor database; right-hand columns are derived from a 10-percent sample of the 1855 New York state census. The data underpinning this table and all subsequent tables is available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KGYS74>. The “All New York Irish” columns do not include Ward Seventeen, one of the city’s twenty-two wards, because its returns were lost.

team associated with the IPUMS project centered at the University of Minnesota. The Emigrant Bank customers were no more upwardly mobile from 1860 to 1870 than were the Irish immigrants in New York whom these algorithms tracked during the same period. In fact, the bank depositors were slightly *less* upwardly mobile. This finding, among others, gives us confidence that the Famine immigrants in our database are legitimately representative of New York’s Famine Irish. Furthermore, because of the information in the bank’s records, our database of tracked immigrants is far more reliable than any that existing algorithms can generate.<sup>8</sup>

8 Abramitzky, Roy Mill, and Santiago Pérez, “Linking Individuals across Historical Sources: A Fully Automated Approach,” *Historical Methods*, LIII (2020), 94–111; Abramitzky, Boustan, Eriksson, James Feigenbaum, and Pérez, “Automated Linking of Historical Data,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, LIX (2021), 865–918; Jonas Helgertz et al., “A New Strategy for Linking U.S. Historical Censuses: A Case Study for the IPUMS Multigenerational Longitudinal Panel,” *Historical Methods*, LV (2022), 11–28. For the algorithm used by Abramitzky et al. and the census links generated by it, see <https://censuslinkingproject.org/>. We used both their ABE-JW and their EM algorithms, as well as a beta version of the Helgertz IPUMS census links. For the database tracking, to 1870, of about 1,000 Irish immigrants who lived in New York and Brooklyn as of 1860, as generated by the Abramitzky et al. algorithm, see <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KGYS74>. Our database of Emigrant Savings Bank depositors, modified to show only those who could be tracked from the 1860 to 1870 censuses, is also at that site, making possible a “like-to-like” comparison of results. For a full analysis of selectivity-bias issues in our mobility work, see the appendix to our work at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KGYS74>.



A proper understanding of the significance of Irish immigrants' position in the American socioeconomic hierarchy at the ends of their lives requires determining the point at which they started. As far as we know, no scholars have previously identified the American occupations held by the Famine Irish when they were still, in modern parlance, "fresh off the boat." But the unusual combination of data in the Emigrant Savings Bank records permits us to do so with precision (see Table 2).

The occupational categories in our tables reflect our sorting of the immigrants' hundreds of self-reported vocations into a meaningful yet simple occupational hierarchy. Most of the categories are self-explanatory. The "petty entrepreneurs" category, however, consists of lowly vending occupations—predominantly self-described "peddlers" and street vendors—performed by immigrants who did not rent a physical space for their businesses. The "lower-status white-collar" category is our name for an employment niche dominated by clerks, though it also includes civil servants, salesmen, and agents.<sup>9</sup>

Deciding which occupations belong in each category can be difficult, but so too is choosing how to rank the categories. Economists might order them based solely on income, but we concluded that the status associated with an occupation (as well as working conditions) influenced how an occupation was perceived. As a result, our occupational hierarchy affords significant weight to factors beyond how much a worker earned. We placed petty entrepreneurs lower on the occupational ladder than lower-status white-collar workers and artisans, for example, even though peddlers in this era saved far more money in their bank accounts than did clerks and tradesmen. Mid-nineteenth-century New Yorkers held peddlers in far lower esteem than they did tradesmen and clerks. Apart from our placement of petty entrepreneurs, a tiny category, our occupational hierarchy is not likely to be controversial.

Identifying the most notable takeaway from Table 2 depends on one's expectations. Some might see the fact that about one-half of the male Irish-Famine immigrants held occupations requiring no prior training or capital investment as particularly striking.

9 Notwithstanding the availability of other occupational classifications—the HISCO system being the best known—ours is simpler and a better fit for mid-nineteenth-century New York. Van Leeuwen, Ineke Maas, and Andrew Miles, *HISCO: Historical International Standard Classification of Occupations* (Leuven, 2002). For a list of the vocations that we grouped into each occupation category, see <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KGYS74>.

*Table 2* The Occupations of Male Irish Immigrants Living in New York and Brooklyn within One Year of Arrival, 1850–1858

|                           | IRISH-BORN EMIGRANT SAVINGS<br>BANK CUSTOMERS, 1851–1859 | ALL IRISH-BORN<br>NEW YORKERS, 1855 | MOST COMMON<br>JOBS IN CATEGORY |
|---------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Professionals             | 0.7%   | 0.2%                                | Doctor, lawyer                  |
| Business owners           | 5%   | 3%                                  | Saloonekeeper, grocer           |
| Lower-status white collar | 10%  | 6%                                  | Clerk, civil servant            |
| Skilled                   | 32%  | 33%                                 | Tailor, carpenter, shoemaker    |
| Petty entrepreneurs       | 5%   | 2%                                  | Peddler, huckster, vendor       |
| Unskilled                 | 44%  | 54%                                 | Laborer, waiter, porter         |
| Difficult to categorize   | 3%   | 2%                                  | Nurse, soldier, miner           |
| N                         | 857  | 512                                 |                                 |

NOTES The Emigrant Bank column includes (1) Irish-born adult males who opened an account at the Emigrant Bank from 1850 to 1858 within a year of arrival in America, (2) those who emigrated in 1849 or 1850 and were found in the 1850 U.S. census, and (3) those who emigrated in 1854 or 1855 and were found in the 1855 New York State census. The All Irish New Yorkers column includes male immigrants from our 10-percent sample of the 1855 census who reported having lived in New York for one year or less.

Others familiar with the historiography of the Famine Irish in America might be surprised that *only* one-half of the Famine Irish worked in menial occupations within one year of arrival (see Table 2). The other half were either skilled tradesmen, nonmanual workers of some sort, or traders.

Comparing the occupations of Emigrant Bank customers who opened accounts within a year of emigration to the vocations of bank depositors ten years after arriving in the United States shows that some Famine Irish men found higher-status, and usually higher-paying, work relatively quickly. Ten years after arrival in America, the proportion of Famine immigrants in the ranks of the unskilled had fallen by nearly one-third, from 44 percent to 31 percent. Conversely, the proportion of business owners had tripled, to 17 percent. The size of the skilled Irish workforce had grown modestly as well.

We have ten years of American occupational data for everyone in our mobility database, but 72 percent of them could be tracked for twenty or more years after their emigration. Comparing the last-known occupations of those tracked twenty or more years to the

*Table 3* Occupations of Male Irish-Famine Refugees Living in New York and Brooklyn Who Opened Emigrant Savings Bank Accounts within One Year of Immigration Compared to the Occupations of the Bank's Irish-Born Customers Ten Years after Immigration

|                           | OCCUPATION WITHIN<br>ONE YEAR OF ARRIVAL | OCCUPATION TEN YEARS<br>AFTER ARRIVAL |
|---------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Professionals             | 0.7%                                     | 1%                                    |
| Business owners           | 5%                                       | 17%                                   |
| Lower-status white-collar | 10%                                      | 11%                                   |
| Skilled workers           | 32%                                      | 33%                                   |
| Petty entrepreneurs       | 5%                                       | 5%                                    |
| Unskilled                 | 44%                                      | 31%                                   |
| Difficult to categorize   | 3%                                       | 0.8%                                  |
| N                         | 857                                      | 482                                   |

NOTES The "Ten Years after Arrival" column includes bank customers who emigrated between 1845 and 1855. Deaths do not account for most of the difference in the number of immigrants counted in the two columns. The right column records the occupations of fewer immigrants primarily because it includes only those immigrants whose occupations could be ascertained *exactly* ten years after their arrival in the United States. Another reason, however, is that some of the immigrants in the left column provided too little biographical information to the bank, or had names that were too common, to allow them to be tracked with certainty. We counted those who left New York and bought farms as "business owners" because farming also involved the investment of capital and the risk of its loss.

occupations of bank customers whose employment is known within a year of arrival shows a surprising amount of occupational mobility (see Table 4).

A quick glance at Table 4 might give the impression that almost all the socioeconomic mobility experienced by the Famine immigrants was upward. A closer look, however, reveals considerably more movement between occupational categories (both upward and downward) than is readily apparent. Table 5 is an

*Table 4* Occupations of Male Famine Immigrants Living in New York and Brooklyn within One Year of Immigration Compared to Occupations Ten Years after Immigration and the Final-Known Occupations of Those Tracked Twenty Years or More

|                              | OCCUPATION<br>WITHIN ONE<br>YEAR OF ARRIVAL | OCCUPATION<br>TEN YEARS<br>AFTER ARRIVAL | LAST-KNOWN OCCUPATION<br>OF THOSE TRACKED TWENTY<br>OR MORE YEARS |
|------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Professionals                | 0.7%  | 1%                                       | 2%  |
| Business<br>owners           | 5%  | 17%                                      | 31%   |
| Lower-status<br>white-collar | 10%   | 11%                                      | 11%   |
| Skilled                      | 32%   | 33%                                      | 28%   |
| Petty<br>entrepreneurs       | 5%  | 5%                                       | 3%  |
| Unskilled                    | 44%   | 31%                                      | 25%   |
| Difficult to<br>categorize   | 3%  | 0.8%                                     | 0.7%  |
| N                            | 857   | 482                                      | 867   |

NOTES Because we do not know the occupation of most immigrants within one year of arrival in the United States, most of the immigrants whose occupations are conveyed in the right-hand column are not counted in the left-hand column. The first-known American occupations for the immigrants in the right-hand column are as follows: 8 professionals (0.9% of the total), 74 business owners (8%), 88 lower-status white-collar workers (10%), 347 skilled workers (39%), 45 petty entrepreneurs (5%), 325 unskilled (36%). Eight of the occupations (0.9% of the total) were too difficult to categorize. We know the occupation within a year of arrival for only 11% of the immigrants in the right-hand column. For another 11% of them, the first American occupation that we can ascertain is for nine to twelve years after arrival. The median is 4.5 years. We feel confident that if we were able to identify the first American occupations of all the immigrants in the right-hand column, they would not differ significantly from those of the immigrants in the left-hand column for whom this information was available. The number of immigrants counted in the middle column is smaller than that of the right-hand column because the middle column includes only those immigrants whose occupations could be ascertained *exactly* ten years after their arrival in the U.S. The right-hand column, in contrast, includes the final-known occupation of all immigrants whose vocations could be determined twenty or more years after they immigrated.

*Table 5* Occupational Transition Matrix for Male Irish-Famine Emigrant Savings Bank Depositors Who Opened Accounts from 1850 to 1858 and Whose American Occupations Are Traceable for Ten Years or More

| FIRST-KNOWN<br>U.S. OCCUPATION        | TOTAL<br>PERSONS | LAST-KNOWN OCCUPATION (IN PERCENTAGES) |                    |                              |                    |                        |                      |                    |              | DIFFICULT TO<br>CLASSIFY |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|--|--------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
|                                       |                  | PROFESSIONALS                          | BUSINESS<br>OWNERS | LOWER-STATUS<br>WHITE-COLLAR | SKILLED<br>WORKERS | PETTY<br>ENTREPRENEURS | UNSKILLED<br>WORKERS |                    |              |                          |
| Professionals                         | 11               | <b>100.0</b>                           | 0.0                | 0.0                          | 0.0                | 0.0                    | 0.0                  | 0.0                | 0.0          | 0.0                      |
| Business owners                       | 103              | 1.9                                    | <b>73.8</b>        | 8.7                          | 3.9                | 1.9                    | 8.7                  | 1.0                | 8.7          | 1.0                      |
| Lower-status<br>white-collar          | 106              | 5.7                                    | 46.2               | <b>43.4</b>                  | 0.9                | 0.9                    | 2.8                  | 0.0                | 2.8          | 0.0                      |
| Skilled<br>Petty<br>entrepreneurs     | 447<br>65        | 0.2<br>0.0                             | 21.3<br>27.7       | 4.2<br>12.3                  | <b>68.9</b><br>3.1 | 0.2<br><b>29.2</b>     | 4.7<br>24.6          | 0.4<br>3.1         | 4.7<br>24.6  | 0.4<br>3.1               |
| Unskilled<br>Difficult to<br>classify | 463<br>10        | 0.4<br>0.0                             | 21.8<br>10.0       | 7.3<br>10.0                  | 5.6<br>20.0        | 5.4<br>0.0             | <b>58.7</b><br>40.0  | 0.6<br><b>20.0</b> | 58.7<br>40.0 | 0.6<br><b>20.0</b>       |

occupational transition matrix. The left-hand column shows the category of each male depositor's occupation when opening his bank account; the top row shows his last-known occupation. The diagonal of the table shows the degree of persistence in each occupational category: For example, 68.9 percent of skilled workers remained skilled workers. The numbers below the diagonal show the rate of upward mobility in each occupational category; the numbers above the diagonal show rates of downward mobility in each occupational category.

The occupational transition matrix in Table 5 reveals that the Famine immigrants experienced both upward and downward occupational mobility, something not readily apparent in Tables 3 and 4. Yet the amount of downward movement is far lower than the upward movement. Overall, one-third of the Famine Irish who lived in New York or Brooklyn at some point moved up the occupational ladder from their first-known American job to their last, whereas only 6 percent of them ended up lower than where they started.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly more occupational movement occurred, however, than a matrix can illustrate. Many immigrants moved in multiple directions on the occupational ladder throughout their lifetimes. Peter Mathews from County Longford, for example, trained as a millstone cutter and toiled as such in New York during the 1850s, but for much of the 1860s and early 1870s, he had to work as a day laborer to make ends meet. Perhaps his marriage in the mid-1870s to Sarah Sillery (also a Longford native) and the subsequent birth of six children in rapid succession inspired him to be more ambitious. By 1880, he had become a contractor, in which business he remained until his death in 1893. Yet his stint in day labor goes unnoted on the occupational matrix. He is recorded as having merely moved up from skilled work to business ownership. Others had the opposite experience, initially moving up the ladder only to fall back down. Edward Bradley from Donegal, for example, worked in New York as a tinsmith before becoming a saloonkeeper in the 1860s. He had returned to tin work by 1870, but in 1880, he operated a junk shop before becoming a tinsmith yet again until 1900, shortly before he retired.

10 The median number of years that these immigrants were tracked from their arrival in the United States to their last-documented American occupation was twenty-two years.

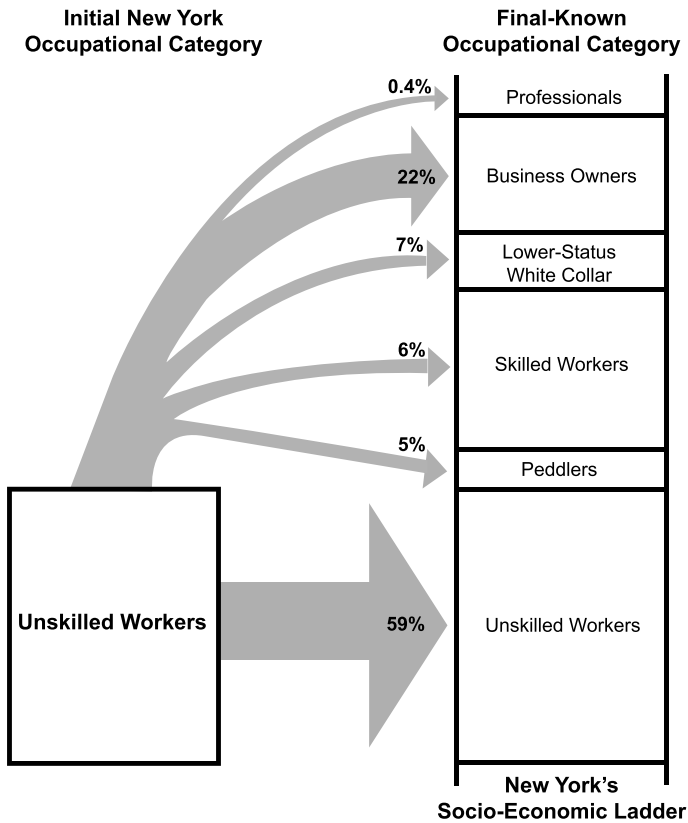
Bradley is recorded in the matrix as beginning and ending his life as a tinsmith, but his occupational history was far more complicated.<sup>11</sup>

*Unskilled Workers* Table 5 and Table 4 also illustrate another important finding—the extent to which the proportion of immigrants in the unskilled category contracted, from almost one-half to only one-quarter all Famine immigrants. That decline is much larger than might be imagined given the prevailing stereotypes held by both native-born Americans in the 1850s and academics today. By the ends of their careers, 41 percent of the immigrants who began in the ranks of the unskilled had managed to move up the socioeconomic ladder (see Figure 2).

These social climbers managed to ascend surprisingly high. More than two-thirds of those who advanced upward from the unskilled category moved into lower- or higher-status white-collar positions—some as clerks and agents but most as small-business owners and retail traders. About one-quarter of these retail operations run by former unskilled workers were saloons, while grocery stores were the second-most popular option (16 percent). Patrick Wallace, for example, born forty-five miles north of Dublin in County Louth, emigrated to America at age thirty-three in 1846. He worked as a day laborer for most of his first decade in New York before opening a grocery store on West 25th Street in 1856. He remained in business there for the next quarter-century until his death at age sixty-nine in 1882. The third-most common choice for unskilled workers who saved enough to become “business owners” was to leave New York City altogether and buy a farm in the Midwest; about one-in-eight unskilled workers who became self-employed adopted that

11 Testbook entries for accounts 12602, 13007, 54928, and 59521 (Mathews), 11657, 18018, and 31406 (Bradley), Emigrant Savings Bank Records. For Mathews, see family 1546, dwelling 469, district 3, ward 20, New York County, 1860 U.S. census; family 787, dwelling 265, district 6, ward 20, New York County, 1870 U.S. census; family 286, dwelling 75, election district 389, New York County, 1880 U.S. census; death notice for Peter Mathews, *New York Herald*, 26 July 1893, 1; family 51, dwelling 11, election district 271, New York County, 1900 U.S. census (for the Mathews' six children); for Bradley, family 1650, dwelling 302, district 2, ward 11, New York County, 1860 U.S. census; family 121, dwelling 41, district 23, ward 11, New York County, 1870 U.S. census; family 147, dwelling 31, election district 140, New York County, 1880 U.S. census; family 612, dwelling 68, election district 292, New York County, 1900 U.S. census; for Edward J. Bradley's death certificate, 18 May 1912, Bronx, New York, in Index to New York City Death Certificates, Ancestry.com.

Fig. 2 Final-Known Occupation of Male Irish-Famine Immigrants Tracked in the United States for at Least Ten Years Whose First-Known American Jobs Were Unskilled



business venture, as did day laborers Lynch and Egan when they moved to Minnesota.<sup>12</sup>

Not all Irish immigrants who made the transition to business ownership prospered; some operated very precarious enterprises. Ten percent of these unskilled workers who opened businesses operated junk shops, and they generally produced only modest profits. Laborer John Harrington, a native of the Lansdowne estate who, like Lane, lived for a time at 31 Baxter Street, had moved

12 ESBDD. For Wallace, see accounts 1680, 11800, and 29538, Emigrant Savings Bank Records; family 353, dwelling 53, enumeration district 347, New York County, 1880 U.S. census; for Patrick Wallace's death notice, *New York Herald*, 27 Aug. 1882, 13.



from day labor to the junk trade by 1863. He had to return to day labor in the early 1870s but was back in the junk business in 1880. Others used the junk trade as a steppingstone to more lucrative retail operations. James Deasy from County Cork, who lived near the East River in Ward Seven, transitioned from day labor to junk sales during the Civil War. After working in that business for at least eight years, he opened a “beer shop” and, by 1900, he was operating a hotel. Yet overall, junk dealers’ median savings were even lower than those of day laborers.<sup>13</sup>

Even many of those unskilled workers who remained on that rung of the socioeconomic ladder for the rest of their lives moved from low-paying, low-status occupations to occupations that paid significantly better. Large numbers of day laborers eventually became porters, cartmen, or coachmen—unskilled positions but far more lucrative than day labor. Thomas Dundon, James O’Brien, Peter O’Leary, John Scanlon, and Michael Sullivan, all from County Cork, were a few of the day laborers who opened accounts at the Emigrant Bank and later became porters. Likewise, James Dunn from King’s County, Michael Molloy from County Galway, and Jeremiah Stokes from County Cork were day laborers who eventually drove a horse and cart. These occupations paid significantly better than day labor. The median porter saved 25 percent more in his Emigrant Savings Bank account than did the median day laborer, and cartmen accrued 30 percent more than porters (see Figure 3).<sup>14</sup>

*Peddlers, Vendors, and Hucksters* One rung above the unskilled on the Irish immigrant socioeconomic ladder stood the peddlers, vendors, and hucksters. Those who have studied peddler’s bank accounts might question placing them so low, because peddling could be highly lucrative. The median savings of Irish peddlers with accounts at the Emigrant Savings Bank were more than double that of the skilled Irish tradesmen whom we placed one rung above peddlers on our ladder. In fact, peddlers even accumulated 50 percent more savings than did the clerks who dominate the “lower-status white-collar” rung two levels above peddlers. But the relatively high mean income of peddlers was not well known. Furthermore, because peddlers tramped the city streets (and often country roads)

13 ESBMD.

14 ESBMD. For comparative savings rates of New York workers in various occupations, see Anbinder, Ó Gráda, and Wegge, “Networks and Opportunities,” 1615.

Fig. 3 An Advertisement with a Rare Depiction of a Mid-Nineteenth-Century Porter at Work



SOURCE *Holbrook's Newark City Directory for the Year Ending April 1, 1877* (Newark, 1876), 2.

in search of sales, regardless of the weather, with their goods often strapped to their backs, the rest of the community looked down on them. That they were renowned for shady dealings, shoddy goods, and lying to their customers compounded their poor reputations. Peddlers' lack of standing in the community explains their placement on our ladder (see Figure 4).<sup>15</sup>

One reason for the monetary success of peddlers was their ability to undercut their brick-and-mortar retail competitors; they

15 Irish peddlers have attracted little scholarly attention, but their reputation can be gleaned from accounts in the New York press—for example, "Scene around the Docks," *New York Herald*, 20 Aug. 1848, 3; "Labor and the Laborers: Street Trader," *New York Tribune*, 2 Dec. 1853, 3; "The Huckster-Women," *The Harbinger*, 25 Oct. 1845, 313–314.

Fig. 4 New York Street Peddlers



UMBRELLA DEALER.

"OLD HAT" MAN.

SOURCE *Harper's Weekly*, 19 Sept. 1868, 604.

did not have to pay the high rents that other New Yorkers faced to operate their businesses. Peddlers were also assiduous networkers. Newly arrived immigrants who decided to peddle could often find a countryman with experience in the trade to show them the ropes and tell them which parts of the city or countryside could benefit from their wares. When some peddlers became too old to tramp the streets themselves, they switched to wholesaling goods to newly arrived immigrants looking to peddle. Immigrants from certain parts of Ireland specialized in peddling certain goods. Newcomers from a single parish in County Tyrone in Ulster, for example, came to dominate charcoal peddling in New York City, typically selling it from horse-drawn wagons.<sup>16</sup>

Most Famine immigrants who took up peddling probably did not intend to make it their life's work. Only 29 percent of the Irish

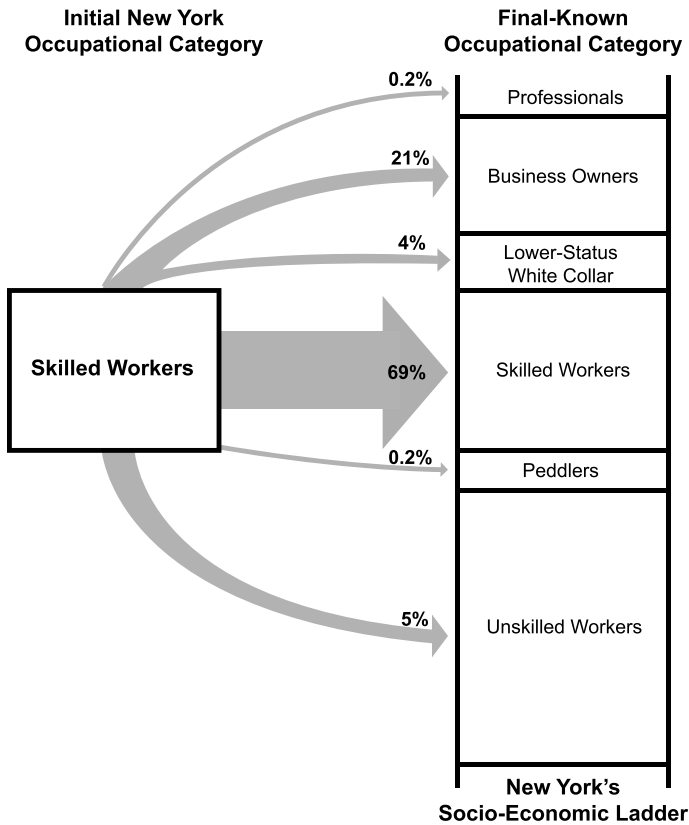
16 For the propensity of immigrants from the Bodoney Lower parish of County Tyrone to become charcoal peddlers, see ESBDD.

newcomers who started as peddlers remained so at the end of their working lives (by far the lowest rate of occupational persistence among all our categories). Many peddlers—40 percent of those who patronized the Emigrant Savings Bank—eventually moved into some kind of white-collar work. Some of them became clerks of one kind or another, but most of them used their peddling profits and sales experience to open businesses with fixed locations. James and Michael Devlin from Tyrone, for example, took the \$1,100 that they had saved peddling charcoal in the 1850s to build a “charcoal factory” in Jersey City to supply other charcoal peddlers. Yet peddling was a risky business; buying too much stock in a suddenly unpopular product or assuming too much debt could cripple a trader’s business and force him into wage work. Michael Hart from County Sligo, for instance, a self-described “huckster” in 1857, was working as a longshoreman by the end of 1870. A widower with two small children at that point, he may have sought the steadier income that wage work could provide. One-quarter of the Irish immigrants who worked as peddlers when they opened Emigrant Savings Bank accounts ended their working lives, like Hart, in the ranks of the unskilled.<sup>17</sup>

*Skilled Workers* The skilled workers in the rung above peddlers in New York’s Irish immigrant socioeconomic ladder also enjoyed substantial upward mobility (see Figure 5). A large number of these tradesmen (69 percent)—primarily tailors, carpenters, and shoemakers—toiled for wages in this category for their entire American working careers. But among the remainder, five artisans moved up the socioeconomic ladder for every individual who fell into a lower category. Yet more wage-earning “journeymen” shoemakers and tailors eventually became “master” craftsmen (employing others

17 For the Devlin brothers, see accounts 14349, 14350, 22353, 24319, 32352, 36322, and 53734, Emigrant Savings Bank Records; family 775, dwelling 148, district 8, ward 7, New York County, 1855 New York State census; family 1700, dwelling 409, district 5, ward 7, New York County, 1860 U.S. census; family 435, dwelling 130, enumeration district 1, Jersey City, Hudson County, New Jersey, 1880 U.S. census; “To Contest the Election,” *New York Tribune*, 12 April 1890, 1 (“charcoal factory”); for Michael Devlin’s death notice, *New York Herald*, 8 July 1890, 1; “James Devlin,” *Jersey City Evening Journal*, 21 Feb. 1899, 8; for Hart, accounts 14152 and 20279, Emigrant Savings Bank Records; family 2066, dwelling 419, district 1, ward 1, New York County, 1860 U.S. census; family 115, dwelling 69, district 1, ward 3, New York County, 1870 U.S. census; page 17, district 5, ward 3, New York County, 1870 U.S. census (second enumeration); family 263, dwelling 45, enumeration district 6, New York County, 1880 U.S. census.

Fig. 5 Occupational Mobility of New York's Male Famine Immigrants Whose First-Known Occupation in New York Was a Skilled Trade



and selling their finished goods to wholesale and retail customers) than we can readily identify. In many cases, we can prove that artisans who continued to identify themselves to census takers as a “shoemaker” or “tailor” were no longer employees working for wages, but other such cases surely escaped our attention.

Those who moved up from the artisan category often turned their wage work into a business that sold the very items they had once made for other retailers or wholesalers. Dubliner Patrick J. Short who worked initially as a painter in New York, had, by 1870, established a Manhattan paint shop. Blacksmith Patrick

McCusker from County Tyrone opened a stable. Bakers Bernard Callan from County Monaghan and Patrick Fitzpatrick from Queen's County eventually operated Manhattan bake shops. But for every artisan who parlayed his artisanal training into a business, two others chose retail operations that lacked such logic. Baker James F. Slattery from County Clare became a contractor. Shoemaker John Kernan from Longford became a hotel keeper. Carpenter John O'Shaughnessy from the city of Limerick became a grocer. Boilermaker Francis Lawler, coffin maker Benjamin Callan, gold refiner Edward Dooley, painter John Keena, printer James Cleary, tailor James Doran, and wood turner John O'Flaherty all opened New York saloons. It is understandable that so many tradesmen sought to become barkeepers; the liquor trade was a highly profitable business. Irish-born saloonkeepers saved more money in their Emigrant Savings Bank accounts than did all other Irish immigrants, apart from physicians and lawyers.<sup>18</sup>

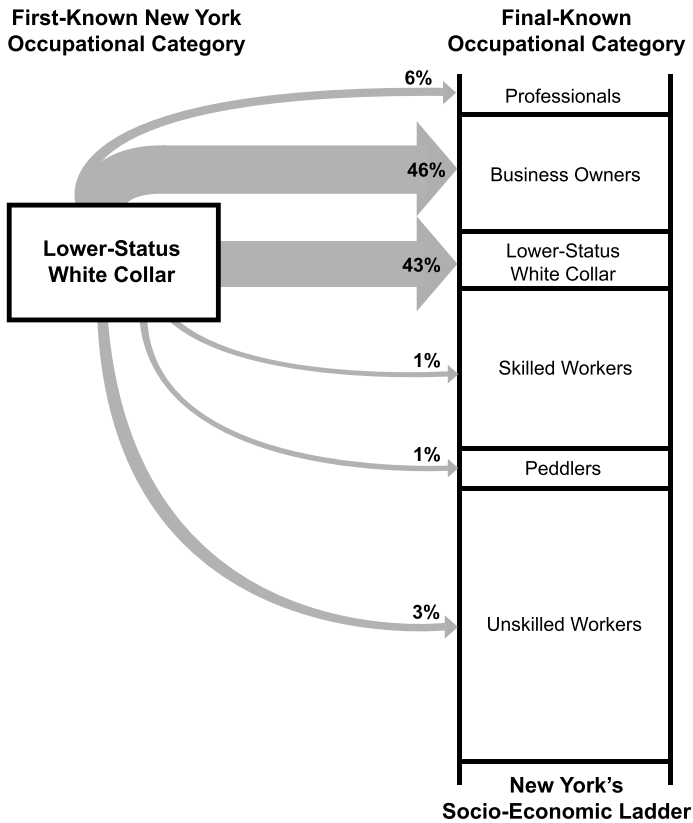
*Clerks and Business Owners* About one-in-ten male Famine immigrants began their American work lives one rung above the skilled tradesmen in New York, as lower-status white-collar workers, a category mainly made up of office and retail clerks. This group also enjoyed surprising upward mobility—more so than did any other group (see Figure 6). Of those who began in this classification, 52 percent moved higher, primarily into the business-owner category. Some clearly spent their clerkships learning a business before opening their own in the same field. Grocery clerk Peter Warren from County Roscommon started his own grocery. Drug clerk James Quin from County Antrim opened a pharmacy. Bookshop clerk Patrick O'Shea became a publisher, and liquor-store clerk Michael McAnnena from Tyrone eventually operated his own dram shop. In most cases, however, the specific kind of clerkship that newly arrived immigrants held before becoming business owners is unknown.<sup>19</sup>

In some instances, bank and other records show that immigrants who arrived in America with enough money to open their

18 For average savings of saloonkeepers compared to those of other Irish immigrants, see Anbinder, Ó Gráda, and Wegge, "Networks and Opportunities," 1615.

19 The scholarship about clerks is rapidly expanding, but none of it focuses on Irish immigrants. See Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and the Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, 2003); Brian P. Luskey, *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 2010).

Fig. 6 Occupational Mobility of New York's Male Famine Immigrants Starting from Lower-Status White-Collar Positions When They Opened Accounts at the Emigrant Savings Bank, 1850–1858



own businesses immediately nonetheless chose to work first as clerks, probably to “learn the ropes” of American retailing before putting their own hard-earned savings at risk. Brothers Thomas, Peter, and Patrick Muldoon from County Louth, who arrived in New York in 1852, had a rich uncle, Peter McLoughlin, who had come to New York a quarter-century before them and had made a fortune in liquor sales and real-estate investments in New York’s Irish neighborhoods. “This is the best country in the world,” McLoughlin wrote to his family in Ireland in 1829. “There is no want; there is room and a living for all but you

may depend they must work for it.” McLoughlin could have easily given or loaned his nephews enough money to start a business upon their arrival in New York. All three brothers, however, worked three years as clerks, for different employers, before they opened a grocery business together (just four doors down from where their uncle had operated a saloon) in 1855. They eventually ran a second grocery and a cigar shop as well.<sup>20</sup>

Twenty-year-old Peter Farrell also had more money than the typical Famine immigrant when he arrived in New York on July 1, 1850, from County Longford with his mother Mary and younger sister Rosanna. That they made the trans-Atlantic journey in a second-class cabin rather than in steerage like most Famine immigrants indicates that they had significant savings. Twenty-six days after the Farrells' arrival, the census taker found Peter living in an Irish neighborhood of Brooklyn just west of the Navy Yard, working as a grocer's clerk. By 1853, when he opened his Emigrant Savings Bank account with an initial deposit of \$74, he was operating his own grocery in the same locale. Farrell apparently had a knack for business. In 1860, he reported owning \$7,000 in Brooklyn real estate and \$2,000 in other assets. Four years later, as the Civil War convulsed the nation, Farrell started two more businesses—a mortuary and a livery stable. “Popularly known and widely respected” for his “unfailing good nature and cheery disposition,” Farrell managed all three businesses (with the help of three sons) until his death in 1894.<sup>21</sup>

20 For Peter McLoughlin, see *Longworth's American Almanac, New-York Register, and City Directory* (New York, 1834), 461; *Longworth's American Almanac, New-York Register, City Directory* (New York, 1837), 410; *Longworth's American Almanac, New-York Register, and City Directory* (New York, 1841), 468; *Doggett's New-York City Directory for 1845 & 1846* (New York, 1845), 236; Peter P. McLoughlin, *Father Tom: Life and Lectures of Rev. Thomas P. McLoughlin* (New York, 1919), 10 (quotation); “Death of Peter McLoughlin, Esq.,” *New-York Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register*, 11 Feb. 1854, 5; “Sale of the Estate of Peter McLoughlin,” *New York Times*, 28 Feb. 1864, 8; for the Muldoons, ESBMD.

21 Account 3819, Emigrant Savings Bank Records; entry for Peter Farral, manifest of the *Isaac Wright*, July 1, 1850, New York Passenger Lists, Record Group 36, National Archives (accessed via Ancestry.com); family 439, dwelling 233, ward 5, Brooklyn, Kings County, 1850 U.S. census; family 1607, dwelling 937, district 2, ward 10, Brooklyn, Kings County, 1860 U.S. census; *The Brooklyn City Directory: The Year Ending May 1st, 1864* (Brooklyn, 1863), 146; *The Brooklyn City Directory for the Year Ending May 1st, 1865* (Brooklyn, 1864), 133; family 151, dwelling 82, ward 10, Brooklyn, Kings County, 1870 U.S. census; family 67, dwelling 20, enumeration district 78, Kings County, 1880 U.S. census; “Peter Farrell Laid at Rest,” *Brooklyn Citizen*, 17 Feb. 1894, 2; “Lucy Farrell,” *Brooklyn Standard-Union*, 1 Dec. 1906, 12.



Many of the Irish immigrants who began and ended their American careers as clerks made failed attempts to start a business. Michael Mara from County Tipperary, for example, had already worked as a clerk in Ireland before becoming one in New York within months of his arrival in 1857. The bachelor was a determined saver; his bank balance rose from \$30 three months after landing in America to \$900 by the middle of 1861. He invested most of those savings in two liquor stores in downtown Brooklyn. The shops did not do as well as Mara had hoped. After two decades in the liquor business (and not long after his arrest for beating his wife), Mara returned to Manhattan with his spouse and their five children and worked as a clerk for the last fifteen years of his career. He retired a few years before his death in 1905.<sup>22</sup>

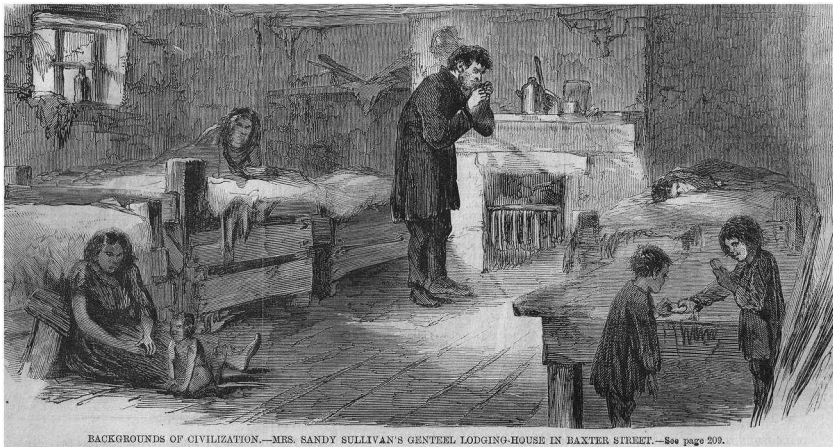
Anthony Geraghty was another clerk who failed in business, but his story had a happier ending than did Mara's. Arriving in New York at about age twenty-three in 1851 with his older brother Thomas, who found work as a day laborer, Anthony landed a less physically strenuous job as a clerk, a position that he held for most of the 1850s. In about 1858, he became a produce dealer at the huge Washington Market, but a year later, he converted his space there into a liquor shop and soon opened another one on the East Side. Yet Geraghty did not prosper in the liquor trade. By late 1860, he had gone out of business at both locations. Thanks most likely to the political connections that he had made in the liquor trade, Geraghty was able to find a new career in 1861 as a grammar-school teacher on Manhattan's Upper East Side. A gifted teacher, he remained at the same public school for twenty-six years until he died of heart disease in 1887. Geraghty's *New York Times* obituary called him "painstaking, energetic, and very popular with his pupils."<sup>23</sup>

22 Accounts 15621 and 46348, Emigrant Bank Records; family 196, dwelling 76, district 1, ward 2, Brooklyn, Kings County, 1860 U.S. census; family 368, dwelling 249, ward 11, Jersey City, Hudson County, New Jersey, 1870 U.S. census; "Mara's Alleged Offense," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 22 Nov. 1879, 4; family 407, dwelling 344, enumeration district 94, Brooklyn, Kings County, 1880 U.S. census; death notice, *New York Herald*, 26 Nov. 1905, 2.

23 Accounts 5021, 10850, and 13569, Emigrant Bank Records; manifest of the *Silas Greenman*, August 8, 1851, New York Passenger Lists; family 479, dwelling 121, district 9, ward 11, New York County, 1860 U.S. census; dwelling 209, page 5, district 13, ward 12, New York County, 1870 U.S. census (second enumeration); family 62, dwelling 41, enumeration district 591, New York County, 1880 U.S. census; "Obituary Notes," *New York Times*, 19 June 1887, 5.

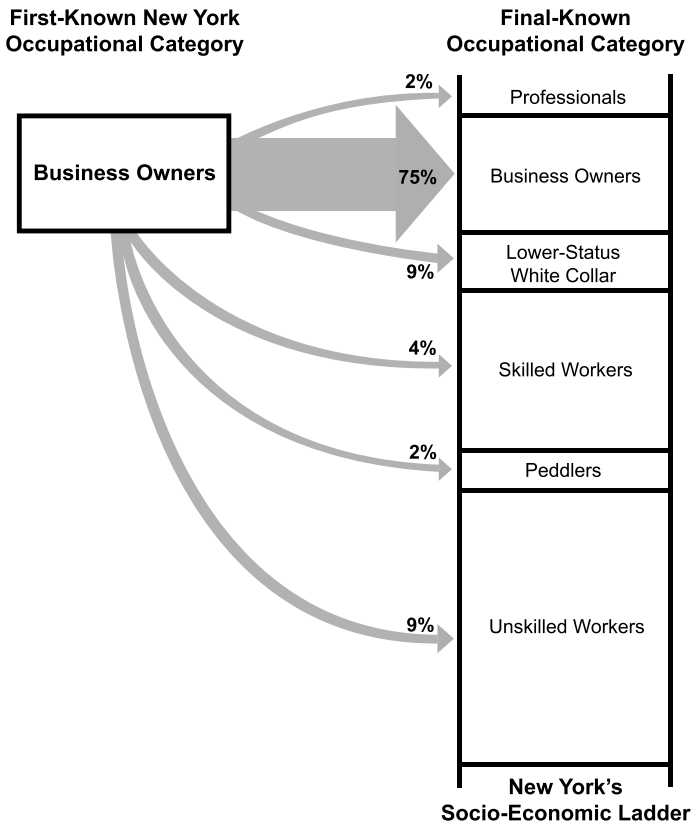
As one might expect, business owner was the only occupational category to experience more downward than upward mobility. Many circumstances could knock a business owner down the ladder, but Irish immigrants had few realistic paths upward into the professions (though occasionally a druggist became a doctor). Not surprisingly, downwardly mobile entrepreneurs came disproportionately from the ranks of those who operated the most precarious businesses—boardinghouses and junk shops (see Figure 7). John McMahon from Kerry ran a boardinghouse by the East River throughout the 1850s, but by 1863, he was earning his living as a day laborer. Charles O'Brien from the city of Limerick operated a junk store (also near the East River) in 1854, but in 1867, he too was a laborer. Even some saloonkeepers had to rejoin the ranks of the unskilled. Laborer John Sharkey from Roscommon had become a “liquor dealer” by 1857 but had returned to day labor in 1860 and was a cartman in 1870. Many of these failed businessmen, like Sharkey, labored in unskilled occupations when they arrived in New York, opened

Fig. 7 The Boardinghouse Run by the Family of Emigrant Bank Depositor Mary Sullivan Shea



SOURCE *New York Illustrated News*, 8 Feb. 1860, 216.

Fig. 8 Occupational Mobility of New York's Male Famine Immigrants Whose First-Known American Employment Was Business Owner

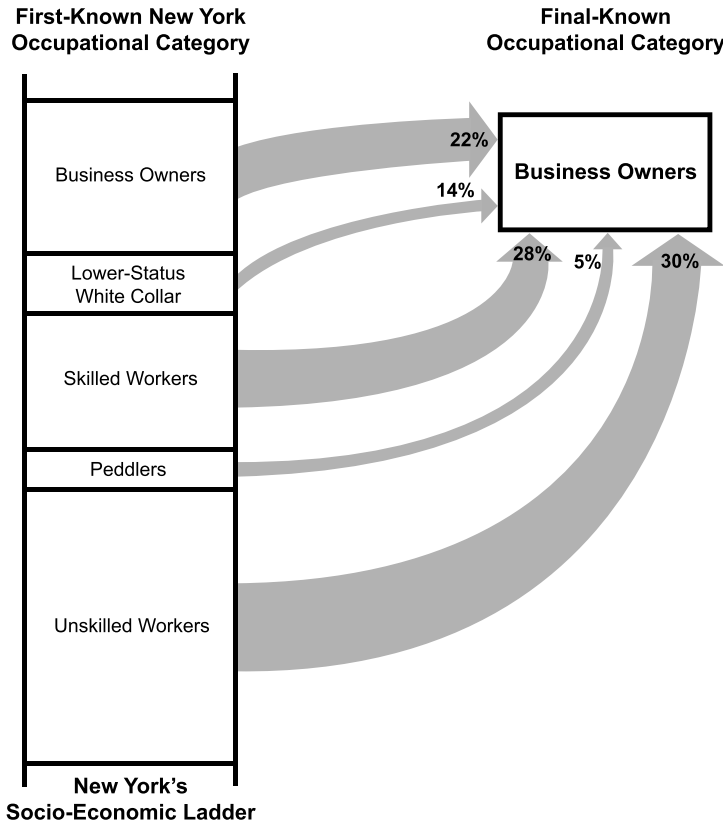


bank accounts only after they went into business, and then quickly returned to the ranks of the unskilled (see Figure 8).<sup>24</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of business ownership for the Famine Irish involves where they began their working careers. Only 22 percent of those who finished their lives as business owners started as such in America—14 percent of them beginning in New York as clerks, 28 percent as artisans, and 30 percent as unskilled workers (see Figure 9). The high proportion of Famine

24 ESBMD.

Fig. 9 Occupational Origins of New York’s Male Famine Immigrants Who Ended Their Careers as Business Owners



immigrants who ended their working lives as entrepreneurs and the diversity of their paths to business ownership are unexpected and notable.

*The Professionals* We found it surprising that Famine immigrants who arrived in America as adults could become doctors or lawyers without previous professional training, but the socioeconomic barriers to the professions were lower in the mid-nineteenth century than they are today. Patrick Keady, who arrived in New York at age nineteen in 1851 from County Roscommon, supported his widowed mother Margaret as a house painter during his first decade in New York. Having taught himself proper

penmanship and grammar during that time, he soon managed first to become a stenographer for the *New York Daily News* and then a reporter. Keady was also active in the city's workingman's-rights movement, giving speeches at several outdoor rallies. This notoriety helped him to win election in 1866 as a Democrat representing Brooklyn in the New York State Assembly, where he won praise for his advocacy of tenement reform and an eight-hour workday. Like Abraham Lincoln, Keady only manifested interest in becoming an attorney after his experience serving as a state legislator. Following the Civil War, he read law while clerking at a Brooklyn law firm and was admitted to the bar by 1870. Keady married soon thereafter and practiced law in Brooklyn for the next several decades. In 1898, the city's mayor appointed him to a city judgeship, which the onetime house painter held until his death in 1908.<sup>25</sup>

Keady's case was unusual. Most of the Famine immigrants who became lawyers appear to have begun their American work lives relatively high on the socioeconomic ladder as clerks. Only two of the 1,200 immigrants in our database moved from the very bottom of the socioeconomic ladder to the very top. One of them was Thomas O'Toole Hartigan, who emigrated from Rathmore (with a population of 157), in rural County Limerick, in 1849 at age twenty-seven. By 1853, Hartigan had married schoolteacher Ann Leonard and was living on New York's Upper East Side working as a "newspaper carrier." In that year, he opened an Emigrant Savings Bank account with an initial deposit of just \$5, a mere fraction of the median opening deposit of \$51. By the end of the decade, however, Hartigan had found work as a clerk, and

25 Accounts 10869 and 29146, Emigrant Bank Records; entry for Pat Keidy, manifest of the *Montezuma*, March 17, 1851, New York Passenger Lists; family 1224, dwelling 689, district 2, ward 10, Brooklyn, Kings County, 1855 New York State census; family 604, dwelling 474, district 1, ward 6, Brooklyn, Kings County, New York, 1860 U.S. census; "General News," *New York Tribune*, 8 April 1864, 4 (workingmen's rights); "Several Gentlemen," *Brooklyn Times*, 11 Oct. 1866, 2 (nomination); "From New York," *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, 29 April 1867, 2 (tenement reform); family 244, dwelling 258, ward 6, Brooklyn, Kings County, New York, 1870 U.S. census; family 301, dwelling 262, enumeration district 44, Kings County, New York, 1880 U.S. census; family 299, dwelling 111, enumeration district 61, Kings County, New York, 1900 U.S. census; "Won By an Epigram: Patrick Keady Gets His Long Deferred Reward at Last," *Brooklyn Times*, 31 Dec. 1898, 2; "Justice Keady Dead," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 7 Oct. 1908, 20. We excluded priests from the database because we could not be certain if an Irish-born priest was a true immigrant or instead considered himself someone temporarily sent abroad by the Catholic Church.

sometime during the 1860s, the Hartigans moved to Massachusetts, where Thomas worked as a traveling salesman. After 1870, they relocated to Chicago, where Thomas managed to become a lawyer and eventually a real estate investor and political operative. He remained an attorney there into his mid-seventies before dying at age eighty-one, in 1903.<sup>26</sup>

*Go West, Young Irishman* Could Hartigan have made his dramatic ascent up the socioeconomic ladder had he remained in New York City? Even before Famine immigrants started arriving on America's shores, New York newspaper editor Horace Greeley had begun urging ambitious East Coast residents, even those with little savings, to leave the big port cities and move westward to improve their material circumstances. Native-born Americans believed that the Irish ignored such advice, "huddl[ing] together in the large cities of the seaboard" with "no plans for the future," as one commentator put it in 1855. Yet many Irish immigrants heeded Greeley's call. More than one-quarter of the residents of New York in our database are known to have left the city for some other locale, but only about one in six of the "movers" left the New York City metropolitan area. The true proportion of Famine immigrants who initially settled in New York but moved away is certainly higher. Many Irish immigrants probably lived in New York for only weeks or months before settling elsewhere. Even among the ones who stayed in New York for a slightly longer period and opened bank accounts, those who relocated before getting married are difficult to trace. Aside from figures derivable by mathematical inference, the percentage of Irish immigrants who lived in New York before settling in other parts of the United States remains something of a mystery.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, the lives of those whose whereabouts are traceable in the records suggest that the West really did offer more

26 Testbook entries for account 5373, Emigrant Bank Records; family 1327, dwelling 758, district 1, ward 18, New York County, 1860 U.S. census; family 676, dwelling 584, town of Dedham, Norfolk County, Massachusetts, 1870 U.S. census; family 81, dwelling 62, enumeration district 132, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois, 1880 U.S. census; family 294, dwelling 249, enumeration district 841, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois, 1900 U.S. census; death notice, *Chicago Tribune*, 31 May 1903, 7.

27 Quotations from "Immigrants Should Go West," Middletown [Conn.] *Constitution*, 14 Feb. 1855, 2. For an attempt to determine the number of Irish immigrants who left New York in the 1850s, see Ó Gráda, "The New York Irish in the 1850s," in *idem, Ireland's Great Famine: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Dublin, 2006), 153–156.

opportunities for advancement, even for the Famine immigrants. Skilled workers were especially likely to leave New York; about one-quarter of Famine immigrants in our database who began their lives in New York as tradesmen moved elsewhere. These movers were one-third more likely to own their own businesses eventually (and enjoy the prestige and enhanced income that came with that status) than were the “stayers” who remained in New York and Brooklyn. Leaving New York was even beneficial for the Irish who lacked vocational skills. Of the unskilled movers, 33 percent became business owners, as opposed to only 18 percent of the unskilled stayers. Although we cannot compare the savings of those who closed their Emigrant Bank accounts and left New York to those who remained behind, real-estate ownership is an alternative means of comparing the wealth of the two groups. Doing so makes the benefits of leaving New York even more readily apparent. Of all the movers in our database, 57 percent had purchased real estate by 1870, compared to only 14 percent of the stayers. Such purchases might not reflect an abundance of wealth; some Famine immigrants purchased land in states like Wisconsin or Minnesota for as little as \$150. Nonetheless, in this era, such investments were generally safer and more likely to appreciate than was buying a business or (in the days before deposit insurance) placing money in a bank account.

The lives of the Famine immigrants in New York were undoubtedly difficult, but the view that most of them were locked into “poverty and hardship” does not seem justified. Of the Famine immigrants who began at the very bottom of New York’s socio-economic ladder, 41 percent ended their careers on a higher rung, most of them in white-collar occupations. Those who started their American working lives as peddlers or clerks enjoyed even higher rates of upward mobility. Skilled tradesmen moved to a higher occupational rung only about 25 percent of the time, but many of them may have remained where they started because of dedication to their trades, not a lack of opportunity. Some of the Famine immigrants, of course, experienced downward mobility, especially those who failed at running their own businesses. But for every Famine immigrant whose occupational status declined after arrival in America, six others were upwardly mobile. By the 1870s, 44 percent of the surviving Famine

immigrants had landed positions as clerks, civil servants, or business owners—primarily running saloons, groceries, or other small retail enterprises.

Not every Irishman who fled the Famine, however, managed to make it to the United States. Many could afford to venture only as far as England, where upward mobility was undoubtedly more difficult. Furthermore, those Famine refugees who did reach America often did not live long enough to enjoy an improvement in status. Many of the newcomers whom we cannot trace for a decade died before they had reached the tenth anniversary of their arrival in the United States. Achieving the social mobility uncovered in this article required both the means to travel to America and the good health and good luck to survive there.

New York's Famine Irish clearly had greater opportunities to improve their socioeconomic standing than scholars have previously acknowledged. Nearly half started out in the ranks of the unskilled, but many of them had strategies for moving up the occupational ladder. Despite what most native-born Americans thought, these immigrants did indeed have "plans for the future." One-quarter of male Famine immigrants started at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy and stayed there for the rest of their lives, like Denis Sullivan from Kenmare, who endured decades of day labor in New York. The other 75 percent either found higher-status work outside the ranks of the unskilled or never occupied the bottom rung of New York's socioeconomic ladder at all. They did not all enjoy the success of barkeeper John Lane, but they were not locked into poverty either. The Famine immigrants' surprising occupational mobility helps to explain why so many of them became convinced that the United States was, in fact, "the best country in the world."