Moving beyond "Rags to Riches": New York's Irish Famine Immigrants and Their Surprising Savings Accounts

Tyler Anbinder

Counsel for Emigrants, first published in 1834, was one of many guidebooks written to satisfy the demand for reliable information on the conditions facing immigrants in Canada and the United States. Yet the first edition, which contained extracts from dozens of glowing letters written by people who had relocated to North America, met with skepticism. Were immigrants exaggerating their success to justify their decision to leave Europe? Could life in North America really be so good? When the guidebook's anonymous author issued a new edition four years later, he decided to address those questions. He related the story of an Irish immigrant who wrote a letter "home" bragging that he was doing so well in America that he could now afford to eat meat twice a week, far more often than he had in Ireland. When his employer saw the letter, he asked the immigrant why he did not tell the truth, which was that he now ate meat "every day of the week, . . . three times a-day." The immigrant replied that "his friends would *disbelieve all* he had said" in the letter "if he had told them *that*." Letters extolling the virtues of America were reliable, the author of *Counsel for Emigrants* insisted, because immigrants had just as many reasons to understate their success in the New World as to exaggerate it.[1]

Tyler Anbinder is a professor of history at George Washington University.

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Readers may contact Anbinder at anbinder@gwu.edu.

[1] *Counsel for Emigrants, and Interesting Information from Numerous Sources concerning British America, the United States, and New South Wales* (Aberdeen, 1838), ix. Emphasis in original. Scholars too have recently begun to debate the reliability of immigrant letters. See David A. Gerber, "Acts of Deceiving and Withholding in Immigrant Letters: Personal Identity and Self-Presentation in Personal Correspondence," *Journal of Social History,* 39 (Winter 2005), 315–30; David A. Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2006); Wolfgang Helbich and Walter D. Kamphoefner, "How Representative Are Emigrant Letters? An Exploration of the German Case," in *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants,* ed. Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke (New York, 2006), 29–55; David A. Gerber, "'Yankeys Now'? Joseph and Rebecca Hartley's Circuitous Path to American Identity—A Case Study in the Use of Immigrant Letters as Social Documentation," *Journal of American*

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The first historians to write about immigrant life in the United States harbored few doubts about these glowing "America letters," and those pieces of correspondence became centerpieces of the earliest histories of American immigration. According to the letters these scholars cited, opportunity abounded in the United States and the newcomers' hardships, real though they may have been, were far outweighed by the benefits of political and religious freedom and economic opportunity. But immigration history, like most fields in the discipline, changed dramatically with the social history revolution of the 1960s. Scholars disavowed "elitist" primary sources, pledging instead to write history "from the bottom up" by turning to previously neglected records, such as the census and court records, that would enable them to recover the stories of people whose letters would not previously have been deemed worthy of preservation or who could not have written letters at all. With the America letters no longer playing a central role in the writing of immigration history, depictions of immigrant life became far less positive, stressing instead the physical suffering, economic privation, social isolation, and outright persecution that immigrants often experienced.[2]

The sharp contrast between the optimistic America letters and the hardships and discrimination highlighted by these later historians is exemplified by the case of the immigrants who left Ireland because of the great famine of 1847–1852. One famine immigrant living near Toronto boasted that she was now "fed everyday like on Christmas at home." We "eat good beef, and pork, and butter, and eggs, and bread—not so at home in the old country," concurred a County Wicklow native in New York City. "I have got along very well since I came here and has saved some money," wrote a Philadelphia immigrant to his uncle in northern Ireland. New Yorker Margaret McCarthy, a native of County Cork, vividly summed up the sentiments of many fellow emigrants: "Any man or woman without a family are fools that would not venture and come to this plentiful country where no man or woman ever hungered or ever will and where you will not be seen naked."[3]

Historians of the famine immigration typically present a far different picture than that portrayed in these letters. In the pioneering work in the field, *Boston's Immigrants* (1941), Oscar Handlin asserted that the absence of employment opportunities for famine immigrants "forced the vast majority into the ranks of an unemployed, resourceless proletariat." Handlin's book is surely outdated, but today's most influential historian

Ethnic History, 28 (Spring 2009), 7–33; and Walter D. Kamphoefner, "Immigrant Epistolary and Epistemology: On the Motivators and Mentality of Nineteenth-Century German Immigrants," *Journal of American Ethnic History,* 28 (Spring 2009), 34–54.

[2] George M. Stephenson, ed., "Typical 'America Letters,'" *Yearbook of the Swedish Historical Society of America,* 7 (1921), 52–98; George M. Stephenson, *A History of American Immigration, 1820–1924* (Boston, 1926); Carl Wittke, *We Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant* (New York, 1939); Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Atlantic Migration, 1607–1860: A History of the Continuing Settlement of the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940); Theodore C. Blegen, ed., *Land of Their Choice: The Immigrants Write Home* (Minneapolis, 1955); Arnold Schrier, *Ireland and the American Emigration, 1850–1900* (Minneapolis, 1958).

[3] Bridget Rooney to Pat Rooney, Jan. 15, 1848, section BR146, "Correspondence Relating to the Sligo and Dublin Estates, 1814–58, including with the Agents for the Estates," bundle 10, item 13, Palmerston Papers (Broadlands Archives, Special Collections, Hartley Library, University of Southampton, Southampton, Eng.); Michael Coogan to the Editor, "Correspondence," *New York Irish-American,* July 30, 1853, p. 4; Andrew Pauley to his uncle, Aug. 21, 1854, in *Ireland and the American Emigration,* by Schrier, 24–25; Margaret McCarthy to her parents, Sept. 22, 1850, quoted in Ruth-Ann Harris, "'Come All You Courageously': Irish Women in America Write Home," in *New Directions in Irish-American History,* ed. Kevin Kenny (Madison, 2003), 213.

of nineteenth-century Irish immigration, Kerby Miller (who utilizes immigrant letters), also finds "a gloomy picture of Irish-American deprivation. . . . In general, the Famine Irish experience in the New World was one of poverty and hardship." A few authors, most notably Donald Akenson, have challenged Miller's pessimistic portrayal of the famine immigrants, but few outside of Irish studies seem to have noticed. "In the two decades before the Civil War," notes one historiographic survey, "the success of German and English immigrants stood in stark contrast with the dire poverty of the famine Irish." Textbooks paint an equally dreary picture, typically characterizing Irish immigrants as "desperately poor, . . . widely despised, and often subsisting on the bare edge of starvation."[4]

New technology and the relatively recent opening of a unique set of papers—those of New York's Emigrant Savings Bank—make it possible to take a new, more reliable look at Irish immigrants' economic prospects. The Emigrant Savings Bank's customers were predominantly famine-era Irish Catholic immigrants—the white antebellum Americans who have been perceived to have had the least upward socioeconomic mobility. The bank's depositors were also residents of one of the teeming Eastern Seaboard cities where economic opportunities were, according to the historical scholarship, most scarce. Because the Irish are said to have had such dismal prospects, the surprisingly high balances found in their accounts (nearly 40 percent of Irish immigrant depositors saved the modern equivalent of $10,000, usually after less than a decade in America) have important implications for how we view the upward mobility of not only the Irish but of other white Americans in this period as well, because opportunities for non-Irish Americans were even greater than those of the famine immigrants. Some might argue that these results, from one bank in one city, do not really tell us much. But data from other banks indicates that the Emigrant Savings Bank's depositors were not atypical. One might therefore conclude that, in antebellum New York at least, the rags-to-riches "myth" was not such a myth after all. But for historians the real task is to discard entirely the rags-to-riches paradigm, including its more recent rags-to-respectability variant, and instead reconceptualize how we think about immigrant economic achievement in America.

That there could be any uncertainty today concerning the economic achievements of nineteenth-century immigrants would have surprised historians forty years ago during the heyday of the "new urban history." Its practitioners believed that by adopting the methodology of social scientists, they could objectively determine whether the immigrants' dreams of moving from rags to riches had any basis in reality. Modeling their work on Stephan Thernstrom's groundbreaking *Poverty and Progress,* a study of Newburyport, Massachusetts, published in 1964, these scholars chose various American cities and used data on occupations, real estate holdings, and personal property gathered by mid-nineteenth-century census takers to assess the degree to which Americans were able

[4] Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation* (1941; Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 69, 55; Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, 1985), 314–16, 321–22; Donald Harman Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer* (Toronto, 1993), 236–44; Kevin Kenny, "Twenty Years of Irish American Historiography," *Journal of American Ethnic History,* 28 (Summer 2009), 67–69; Kenneth A. Scherzer, "Immigrant Social Mobility and the Historian," in *A Companion to American Immigration,* ed. Reed Ueda (Malden, 2006), 374; Edward Ayers et al., *American Passages: A History of the United States* (Fort Worth, 2000), 397.

to improve their socioeconomic status. Their findings were relatively consistent. In most cases, they found, as Thernstrom had for Newburyport, that a "substantial segment" of the "laboring class made notable economic progress." Rags-to-riches stories might be rare, but achieving the "American dream" of upward mobility was within reach of many Americans, even those starting out on the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder. These scholars admitted, however, that natives moved up further and more quickly than immigrants and that among the immigrants the English advanced the most, the Germans second most (though not much less than the English), and the Irish least of all.[5]

That Irish immigrants achieved less upward mobility than other Americans convinced historians of the Irish American experience that skepticism of the positive America letters written by famine immigrants had been justified, and those scholars cited the Thernstrom school studies to buttress their interpretation. But few others embraced the new urban historians' social-mobility conclusions, as critics quickly raised serious concerns about their methodological and conceptual underpinnings. The primary-source foundation upon which the new urban historians' conclusions rested—self-reported census data concerning employment, personal property, and real estate ownership—was inconsistent and unreliable. The census did not, for example, differentiate between an American who owned $1,000 in real estate free and clear and another whose property of the same value was heavily mortgaged—both were listed as owners of $1,000 in property.[6]

Scholars attacked yet another assumption that lay at the interpretive heart of Thernstrom school studies—that upward mobility was the progression from "blue-collar" to "white-collar" occupations. As the critics correctly noted, white-collar status was not necessarily the goal of immigrant workers. Even more problematic was the fact that for every worker these scholars could follow from census to census or in city directories, there were two or three more whom they could not track. Thernstrom and his followers imagined that the workers who disappeared could not have been upwardly mobile—he famously characterized them as America's "permanent floating proletariat." Critics charged that with so many Americans unaccounted for in these studies, Thernstrom and his followers had grossly overestimated upward mobility because they did not count these wandering workers presumably locked in permanent poverty. It says something about the state of the discipline in the mid-1970s that without any concrete evidence to support them, both the new urban historians and their critics agreed that workers who fled the cities of the eastern seaboard must have been less upwardly mobile than those who remained behind. Frederick Jackson Turner would not have been pleased.[7]

[5] Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 58–59, 132 (quotation), 163, 251–52; Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880–1970* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973); Peter R. Knights, *The Plain People of Boston, 1830–1860: A Study in City Growth* (New York, 1971); Howard M. Gitelman, *Workingmen of Waltham: Mobility in American Industrial Development, 1850–1890* (Baltimore, 1974); Glenna Matthews, "The Community Study: Ethnicity and Success in San José," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History,* 7 (Autumn 1976), 305–18; Jo Ellen McNergney Vinyard, *The Irish on the Urban Frontier: Nineteenth-Century Detroit, 1850–1880* (New York, 1976); Clyde Griffen and Sally Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers: The Ordering of Opportunity in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Poughkeepsie* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978); Gordon W. Kirk Jr., *The Promise of American Life: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century Immigrant Community, Holland, Michigan, 1847–1894* (Philadelphia, 1978).

[6] "Special Instruction Number 12 to the Free Inhabitants Schedule, Instructions to the Marshals," 1860 U.S. Census, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series,* by Steven Ruggles et al., 2010, http://usa.ipums.org/usa/voliii/inst1860.shtml.

[7] Howard P. Chudacoff, "Mobility Studies at a Crossroads," *Reviews in American History,* 2 (June 1974), 180–86; Stanley L. Engerman, "Up or Out: Social and Geographic Mobility in the United States," *Journal of Interdisciplinary*

Historians who did mobility studies found it extremely difficult to continue their work in the face of the relentless attacks on their methods, and as a result this scholarship "came to a crashing halt" by the end of the 1970s. Students of history might be surprised to learn, therefore, that mobility research is not dead in other disciplines. Sociologists have published more than five hundred articles on the subject since the last significant mobility study written by an American historian appeared in the late 1970s. Nor was the field discredited in economics. Studies by economists come to essentially the same conclusion as those by historians: there was significant upward mobility in Civil War–era America, more than the Thernstrom school would have led us to believe. "Free men in the United States at midcentury did very well indeed," wrote Lee Soltow, the field's pioneer, in 1975. Soltow found that those in the West did better than those who stayed in the East and that natives did better than immigrants. A number of economists followed up Soltow's national survey with more detailed local studies, and they all came to similar conclusions.[8]

This work culminated with the publication in 1999 of the economist Joseph Ferrie's *Yankeys Now,* which tracked European immigrants from their ships in New York Harbor in the 1840s to the censuses of 1850 and 1860. Just as Soltow had discovered for Americans as a whole, Ferrie found that immigrants "were able to accumulate impressive amounts of wealth in the years after their arrival." Ferrie also demolished the "floating proletariat" thesis. Using newly available national census indexes, he tracked many of the people who disappeared from their original city of residence and determined that while many had died, most of the remainder had gone west. Ferrie discovered, as Turner and Horace Greeley would have predicted, that the immigrants who moved on did better in terms of occupational mobility and real estate acquisition than those who remained in the East. Soltow, Ferrie, and their fellow economists did, however, confirm one Thernstrom school observation. They found that natives accumulated wealth more readily than

History, 5 (Winter 1975), 469–89; James A. Henretta, "The Study of Social Mobility: Ideological Assumptions and Conceptual Bias," *Labor History,* 18 (Spring 1977), 165–78; Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Quantification and the New Urban History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History,* 13 (Spring 1983), 653–77; Alan C. Kerckhoff, "The Current State of Social Mobility Research," *Sociological Quarterly,* 25 (Spring 1984), 139–53; Michael Frisch, "*Poverty and Progress:* A Paradoxical Legacy," *Social Science History,* 10 (Spring 1986), 15–22; Stephan Thernstrom and Peter R. Knights, "Men in Motion: Some Data and Speculations about Urban Population Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History,* 1 (Autumn 1970), 7–35, esp. 31; Stephan Thernstrom, "Reflections on the New Urban History," *Daedalus,* 100 (Spring 1971), 367; Thernstrom, *Other Bostonians,* 42. Frederick Jackson Turner famously argued that many Americans did not "accept inferior wages and a permanent position of social subordination" in the East because "freedom and equality was theirs for the taking" further west. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1921), 259.

[8] Joel Perlmann and Roger Waldinger, "Second Generation Decline? Children of Immigrants, Past and Present—A Reconsideration," *International Migration Review,* 31 (Winter 1997), 896. Lee Soltow, *Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850–1870* (New Haven, 1975), 178. For mobility studies by economists, see, for example, Richard H. Steckel, "Poverty and Prosperity: A Longitudinal Study of Wealth Accumulation, 1850–1860," *Review of Economics and Statistics,* 72 (May 1990), 275–85; David W. Galenson, "Economic Opportunity on the Urban Frontier: Nativity, Work, and Wealth in Early Chicago," *Journal of Economic History,* 51 (Sept. 1991), 581–603; and Steven Herscovici, "Migration and Economic Mobility: Wealth Accumulation and Occupational Change among Antebellum Migrants and Persisters," *Journal of Economic History,* 58 (Dec. 1998), 927–56. The number of mobility studies published by sociologists is based on a search in *Sociological Abstracts* using the title phrases "social mobility," "economic mobility," and "occupational mobility." For examples that consider the Civil War period, see Lawrence E. Hazelrigg, "Occupational Mobility in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Cities: A Review of Some Evidence," *Social Forces,* 53 (Sept. 1974), 21–32; Melissa A. Hardy, "Occupational Mobility and Nativity-Ethnicity in Indianapolis, 1850–60," *ibid.*, 57 (Sept. 1978), 205–21; and David B. Grusky and Ivan K. Fukumoto, "Social History Update: A Sociological Approach to Historical Social Mobility," *Journal of Social History,* 23 (Autumn 1989), 221–32.

did immigrants, and among antebellum immigrant groups, again, the English improved their lot the most, the Germans were a close second, and the Irish a distant third. So while economists interpreted their data as indicating that immigrants were impressive wealth accumulators, historians of the Irish diaspora could argue that the findings that the Irish consistently lagged economically behind all other white Americans supported their contention that "poverty" was far more characteristic of the famine immigrants' experience than "progress."[9]

One reason that the economists' studies have had so little impact on historians is that the economists' scholarship is based on the same discredited sources that historians rejected when the Thernstrom school used them—self-reported employment and real estate ownership information from mid-nineteenth-century censuses. Even a casual observer of this field can appreciate that occupational change and real estate ownership are no substitute for what we really want to know: how much money were the famine immigrants, arriving in America with so many disadvantages, able to accumulate?

The early records of the Emigrant Industrial Savings Bank, as it was officially known in its initial years, offer insights into those issues and a host of others concerning Irish famine immigrants. The bank was founded in 1850 by the wealthy Irish American merchants and professionals who directed the Irish Emigrant Society, which had been started in New York in 1841 to assist immigrants with settling in America, finding jobs, and sending remittances back to loved ones in Ireland. Hoping to spur the Irish to save by offering them a bank intimately tied to the Irish Catholic community, leaders of the Emigrant Society organized the Emigrant Savings Bank, which began accepting deposits in September 1850. To encourage those without much money to patronize the new institution, the bank paid a higher rate of interest to accounts with balances at or below $500 than to larger accounts. Such policies helped the bank grow rapidly; by 1856 its approximately 5,500 accounts held more than $1,300,000, making it a midsized player among New York's dozen or so savings banks.[10]

The bank's richly detailed "test books" are what make the Emigrant Savings Bank's records so remarkable. Most nineteenth-century banks asked for a depositor's name, address, and occupation. Hoping to prevent thieves from impersonating customers, a few kept test books that recorded more, such as height, hair and eye color, place of birth, marital status, and number of children. The Emigrant Savings Bank's test books are more detailed still. Under place of birth, they list not merely the county in Ireland where the depositor was born but also the parish within that county and even the "townland"

[9] Joseph P. Ferrie, *Yankeys Now: Immigrants in the Antebellum U.S., 1840–1860* (New York, 1999), 128.

[10] Marion R. Casey, "Refractive History: Memory and the Founders of the Emigrant Savings Bank," in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States,* ed. J. J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York, 2006), 305–9; Cormac Ó Gráda, "The Famine, the New York Irish, and Their Bank," in *Ireland's Great Famine: Interdisciplinary Perspectives,* by Cormac Ó Gráda (Dublin, 2006), 176–78; "The Commercial Revulsion," *New York Herald,* Oct. 31, 1857, p. 2; "Dividends," *New York Times,* June 28, 1858, p. 7; Richard E. Mooney, "An Unexpected Treasure: Bank Books Shed Light on Irish Refugees," *ibid.*, Sept. 21, 1995, p. A22. For my analysis of Irish immigrants' savings at the Emigrant Savings Bank that looks only at bank customers from a single estate in County Kerry who settled in a single New York neighborhood, see Tyler Anbinder, "From Famine to Five Points: Lord Lansdowne's Irish Tenants Encounter North America's Most Notorious Slum," *American Historical Review,* 107 (April 2002), 381–84. The present research project grew from a desire to see whether the impressive savings of the Lansdowne immigrants was unusual or commonplace.

within the parish (even a hamlet of four or five ramshackle cabins had a townland designation). The bank's test books also record the name of the ship that brought the depositor to America, the ship's date of arrival, and the names and whereabouts of the depositor's parents (including the mother's maiden name), siblings, and children. These details make the Emigrant Savings Bank's test books the crown jewel of Irish American genealogical treasures. Yet they remain one of the great untapped sources in American social history, even though they are now available on Ancestry.com. Most significantly, the information on date of arrival allows one to correlate savings to immigration date, a calculation heretofore impossible for the famine Irish.[11]

To assess the savings of New York's Irish famine immigrants, my students and I created a database of nine hundred depositors (immigrants and nonimmigrants) chosen randomly from among the first 18,000 accounts opened at the bank (deposit and withdrawal ledgers are extant only for those 18,000 accounts, created from September 1850 to October 1858). We recorded the birthplace, occupation, address, immigration date (if applicable), and marital status of each depositor. Priests' accounts were excluded because we could not be sure if their funds belonged to them or their parishes. If we randomly chose the same depositor or his or her spouse a second time (47 percent of Irish depositors in this sample of nine hundred had more than one account, typically opening a second account shortly after closing their first one), we moved on to the next depositor listed in the ledger, so that the database consists of nine hundred distinctive households. Next we searched the bank's records for additional accounts held by members of those nine hundred households. We then calculated the highest amount that depositors and their household members had in their accounts on any single date through 1869, the last year these ledgers were used (those used after that year are not extant).[12]

Before considering how much the Emigrant Savings Bank's customers saved, one must consider to what extent its depositors were representative of New York's overall Irish immigrant population. Date of arrival in America is an important factor because the pre-famine Irish fared better economically than those who arrived with the flood of

[11] Typical bank records include the "signature books" of the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society, Collection 2062: Philadelphia Saving Fund Society Records (Hagley Library and Museum, Wilmington, Del.); the "identification books" of Philadelphia's Western Saving Fund Society, *ibid.*; and the ledgers of the Troy Savings Bank (Troy Savings Bank Charitable Foundation, Troy, N.Y.).

[12] One might worry that this method would over-sample depositors with more than one account, but a separate sampling done from a list we compiled of the bank's Irish-born customers (in which each household was listed only once) found that a similar proportion, 45%, had more than one account. Most of those who had multiple accounts had them open consecutively, not simultaneously. Why depositors closed one account and opened another (and why others had more than one account open at the same time) is not clear. "Trust" accounts opened to benefit someone not clearly related to the trustee were also eliminated from the sample, because it is not possible to determine whether the money in these accounts was placed there by the trustee or the beneficiary. Accounts opened by fraternal and charitable organizations were also excluded. For the list of accounts that make up my sample, the names of the depositors, their addresses, occupations, places of birth, immigration dates, and the high balances achieved, see "Tyler Anbinder Dataverse—Replication Data For: Emigrant Bank Sample Used for *Journal of American History* Article, December 2012," http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/anbinder. Construction of the data sample utilized here was begun by George Washington University undergraduate Meaghan Casey as part of the school's George Gamow Undergraduate Research Fellowship program for collaborative student-faculty research. Casey compiled a sample of 900 bank accounts and published her analysis of them as Meaghan Casey, "From Irish Rags to American Riches?," *The Recorder: The Journal of the American Irish Historical Society,* 19–20 (Summer 2007), 104–28. I have spent 5 years correcting and augmenting her data, creating a database of 900 households rather than 900 accounts. This was necessary because, unbeknownst to Casey, nearly half of the nearly 900 accounts she transcribed were owned by depositors who had more than one account at the Emigrant Savings Bank, often open at the same time as their other accounts. The addition of the deposit data from these depositors' other accounts markedly increases their savings.

refugees during the famine years. My sample very closely matches the ratio of pre-famine to famine immigrants found in the overall New York City Irish immigrant population. Seventy-five percent of the bank's depositors from 1850 to 1858 arrived in America in 1845 (the first year the potato crop failed) or later. In comparison, 78 percent of the Irish immigrant population in 1855 in Five Points, the New York City neighborhood with the highest concentration of Irish immigrants, had come to the United States after 1844.[13]

Another important factor to consider is occupational distribution. While the occupations of the bank's customers are not a perfect cross-section of New York's Irish immigrant work force, the differences between the two are not great. The biggest discrepancy between the bank's depositors and the overall Irish immigrant population involves unskilled workers—44 percent of male Irish immigrants in New York City could be so categorized in 1855, while the unskilled made up only 36 percent of the bank's male clientele. The proportion of skilled manual workers in the bank's customer base, however, does very closely match that in the overall population—these workers constituted 41 percent of New York's male Irish-born work force and 40 percent of the bank's customers.[14] By looking separately at the savings of each occupational group, we can control for the imbalance between the bank's customers and the city's overall Irish immigrant population and independently assess each group's ability to save. (See figure 1.)

We know that the Emigrant Savings Bank's customer base was very representative of the New York Irish in terms of immigration date and fairly representative in terms of occupational distribution, but one might wonder if the bank's depositors arrived in America with more money than the average Irish immigrant. Several factors, however, suggest that this was not the case. The Emigrant Savings Bank was located in the Sixth Ward and near the Fourth, giving the bank a disproportionately high number of customers from these two wards, the poorest in the city. The Irish who lived in the more well-to-do wards to the north (where those arriving with significant savings would have been more likely to settle) are underrepresented. Second, we know that emigrants from what is now Northern Ireland—the most prosperous part of mid-nineteenth-century Ireland and one whose emigrants could have been expected to arrive in America with more money than other Irish immigrants—are underrepresented among the Emigrant Savings Bank's customers. Five times as many natives of impoverished County Kerry in the Southwest, for example, patronized the bank as did immigrants from more prosperous County Antrim, in the Northeast, even though Antrim had a pre-famine population 25 percent larger than Kerry. All of relatively prosperous northeast Ireland is underrepresented among the bank's customers, while all the poverty-stricken southwestern counties are overrepresented. (See figure 2.) So although it is impossible to prove that the bank's customers did

[13] Date of immigration of Five Points' Irish-born population is based on a 10% sample of the manuscript 1855 New York State census, Old Records Division (New York County Clerk's Office, New York). That census recorded how long each person had lived in the state, which, for the Irish-born, was usually equivalent to the number of years since emigration. The median pre-famine Irish immigrant saved three times as much as his famine counterpart. See "Tyler Anbinder Dataverse."

[14] For the long list of occupations that make up each category, see "Tyler Anbinder Dataverse"; or Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The Nineteenth-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York, 2001), 459n14. Figures for the percentage of male Irish immigrants employed in 1855 as skilled and unskilled workers is based on the work of Robert J. Ernst, who tallied the occupation of every New York City immigrant listed in the manuscript returns of the state's 1855 census. I then simplified his seventeen occupational categories into the six used throughout this article. See Robert J. Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825–1863* (1949; Syracuse, 1994), 214–18.

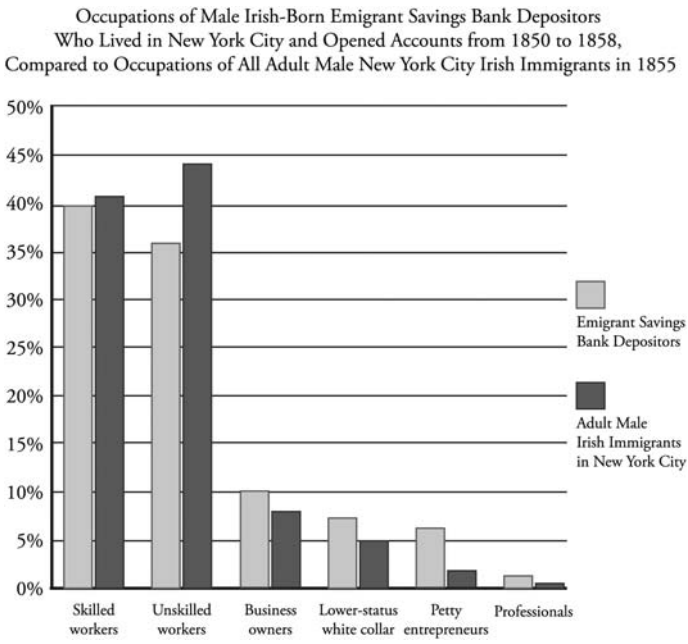

Figure 1. Source: Robert J. Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825–1863* (1949; Syracuse, 1994), 214–18; "Tyler Anbinder Dataverse—Replication Data For: Emigrant Bank Sample Used for *Journal of American History* Article, December 2012," http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/anbinder.

not arrive in America with more wealth than the average Irish immigrant, the available evidence suggests they did not.[15]

A skeptic might also wonder if only those immigrants who were financially successful in America opened Emigrant Savings Bank accounts. There is no evidence to support this argument and plenty to contradict it. We know the total population of New York City in 1855 was 623,000, of whom 61 percent, or 380,000, were eighteen or older. About two-thirds of those adults were immigrants. We can also document that New Yorkers had 122,500 savings accounts open as of January 1 of that year and that nearly 250,000 different individuals owned those accounts (there were more account owners than accounts because many people opened joint or trust accounts with spouses, siblings, parents, or other relatives). That means that about two-thirds of adult New Yorkers had bank accounts. If two-thirds of adult New Yorkers had bank accounts and two-thirds of New York City adults were immigrants, then *at the very minimum* 50 percent of adult immigrants had accounts. We do not know what percentage of these accounts were opened by Irish immigrants because other New York City banks did not record the nativity of their customers. But in Philadelphia, where the largest savings bank

[15] The Sixth Ward, which includes Five Points, was the most overrepresented, with 50% more accounts than one would predict given its share of the city's Irish population. The next most overrepresented ward was the Fourth, with 25% more accounts than one would predict. Data on the Irish-born population of each ward of New York in 1855 is from Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City,* 193–95. For northern Ireland, see Christine Kinealy and Gerard Mac Atasney, *The Hidden Famine: Hunger, Poverty, and Sectarianism in Belfast, 1840–50* (Sterling, 2000).

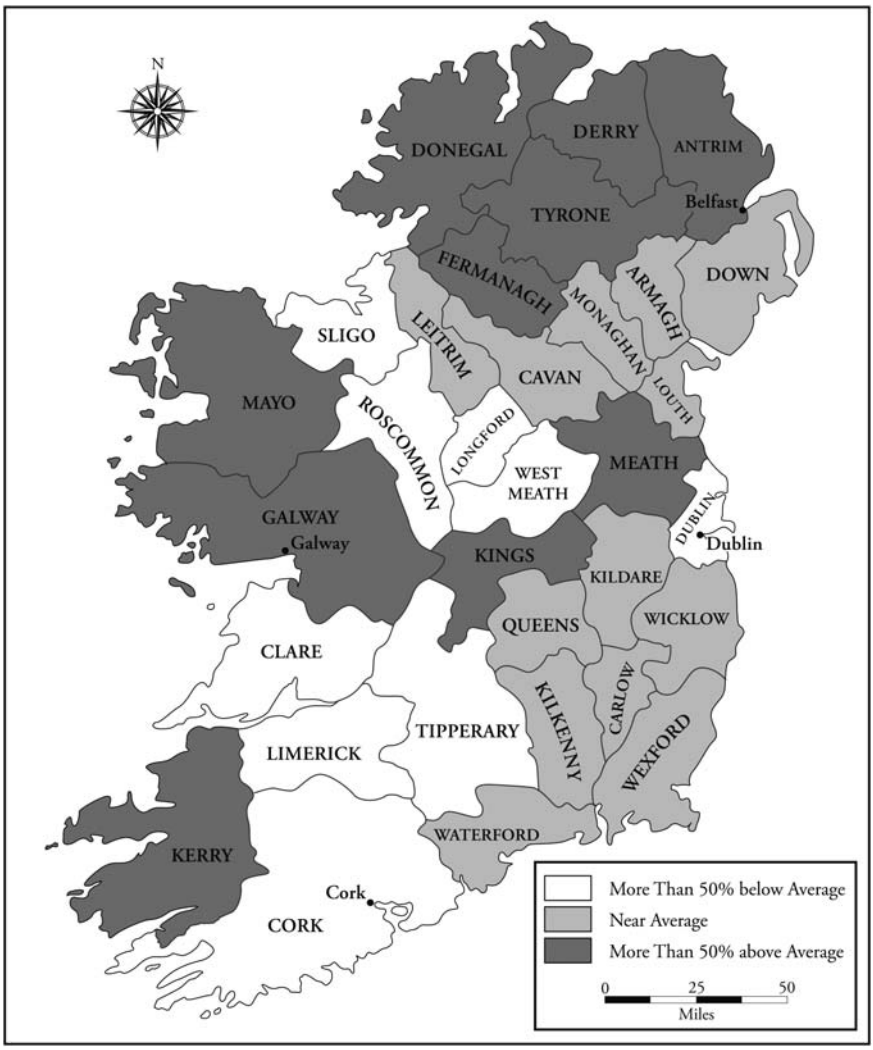

Figure 2. This map shows the relationship between an immigrant's Irish county of birth and his or her ability to save in accounts opened at New York's Emigrant Savings Bank from 1850 to 1858. Darkly shaded counties are those whose immigrants saved far more than the average Irish-born Emigrant Savings Bank customer, while those from the counties that are not shaded tended to save relatively little. *Map by Chris Crusoe*.

(the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society, which was not affiliated with any ethnic or religious group) did record that information, we know that Irish immigrants were *overrepresented* among depositors when compared to the city's overall population. So there is no reason to think that the Irish in New York would have been underrepresented as owners of bank accounts. Therefore, even if only the most economically successful famine Irish opened accounts, they were the most successful 50 percent, not the most successful 1 percent.[16]

[16] For the population figures, see *Census of the State of New-York for 1855* (Albany, 1857), xxiv. For the proportion of population that was adult and immigrant, see 1850 and 1860 census samples, in *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series,* by Steven Ruggles et al., 2010, http://usa.ipums.org. For the account figures, see Alan

In fact, there are many reasons to believe that the savings figures in this study *underestimate* the immigrants' true net worth. First, we know that many Emigrant Savings Bank customers had additional accounts for which deposit ledgers are not extant. We therefore cannot add the sums in those accounts to the amounts we know the immigrants saved in others. Second, many immigrants sent remittances to family members in Ireland, meaning that they had saved money above and beyond what remained in their accounts. There are no extant bank ledgers detailing these transfers, but we know from state banking records that the Emigrant Savings Bank's customers sent hundreds of thousands of dollars to Ireland. Third, these immigrants had other kinds of assets—real estate, business investments, and personal property—that cannot be traced. Cornelius Sexton, for example, who emigrated from County Cork in 1847, saved nearly $700 in his bank accounts but also owned real estate worth $1,200. My assessment of Sexton's wealth ignores his real estate because, even though we know that he could not buy property with "no money down," it is impossible to determine how much that real estate added to his net worth. Fourth, we know that some of the Emigrant Savings Bank's depositors did far better financially than their low account balances indicate. Catherine Sheedy, for instance, never raised her account balance above $30. But we can document that her husband was a prominent tinsmith, that she became a grocer after closing her account, and that they later owned personal property worth about $2,500. For all these reasons, it seems clear that the savings figures presented in this study understate the immigrants' actual financial resources.[17]

Having established that the Emigrant Savings Bank's customers are a fairly close, but not perfect, cross-section of the New York Irish immigrant community and that its depositors do not merely represent a tiny, ultra-successful portion of the New York Irish American community, we can turn to the question of how much its customers saved. The short answer: they saved a lot more than anyone who has read the pessimistic portrayals of the famine immigrants would have imagined. The average high balance

L. Olmstead, *New York City Mutual Savings Banks, 1819–1861* (Chapel Hill, 1976), 157–60; and "Report of the Committee on Banks in Relation to Savings Banks," in *Documents of the Senate of the State of New York for 1856* (Albany, 1856), document 107, p. 6. For the number of account holders, see *New York Herald,* Oct. 31, 1857. Philadelphia data from George Alter, Claudia Goldin, and Elyce Rotella, "The Savings of Ordinary Americans: The Philadelphia Saving Fund Society in the Mid-nineteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History,* 54 (Dec. 1994), 747. That a number of accounts in New York City banks were held by non–New Yorkers complicates estimates, but we know that very well-to-do New Yorkers had accounts that are not represented in these figures. They kept their money at commercial banks because savings banks were not supposed to hold more than $1,000 per customer.

[17] Charles Clarke, for example, had nearly $1,000 in three accounts in the 1860s. But we know he had two other accounts open at the same time whose deposit ledgers are not extant. Test books and deposit ledgers for accounts 8332, 14833, 16421, 21643, and 25391, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers (New York Public Library, New York). On immigrants having other kinds of assets, see accounts 561, 10247, 13629, 15554, and 38128, *ibid.*; manuscript population schedules, 1850 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 12, family 1344, available at Ancestry.com; 1860 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 12, district 1, family 1429, *ibid.*; and 1880 U.S. census, New York County, enumeration district 627, family 160, *ibid.* There is very little scholarship on Irish remittances. One example is Robert Doan, "Green Gold to the Emerald Shores: Irish Immigration to the United States and Transatlantic Monetary Aid, 1854–1923" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1999). On some of the depositors doing far better than their account balances indicate, see accounts 5241, 18734, and 55955, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; 1870 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 10, district 3, family 338, available at Ancestry.com; 1880 U.S. census, Kings County, New York, enumeration district 34, family 171, *ibid.*; "Tinsmiths' Ball," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* Dec. 21, 1875, p. 4; and "The Tinsmiths' Ball," *ibid.*, Dec. 1, 1876, p. 2.

achieved by famine immigrants who opened accounts from 1850 to 1858 was $392. The median high balance was $163. If we consider only households that include a male breadwinner, the average is $421 and the median $190. While these amounts may seem small today, in the 1850s they represented substantial sums of money. The median for households with a male breadwinner equals about $5,100 in 2011 dollars, while the average high balance in those households equates to $11,300 in contemporary terms. Significantly, most of these balances were not achieved after decades of savings. Three quarters of the depositors who had opened accounts by 1853 reached their savings peak by 1855, and 94 percent of depositors achieved their high balances by the end of 1860.[18]

It is especially noteworthy that 47 percent of the Emigrant Saving Bank's famine immigrant households managed to save the equivalent of $5,000 today. Thirty-four percent reached the modern equivalent of $10,000. That such a high proportion managed to achieve those levels of savings indicates that a large percentage of the famine immigrants had become financially stable by the eve of the Civil War and calls into question scholars' gloomy depiction of the economic opportunities that the United States afforded them. It is true that New York's famine Irish did not save on average as much as other New Yorkers. Whereas 35 percent of the famine Irish saved $400, 55 percent of the Emigrant Savings Bank's native-born depositors reached that savings level. While the typical New York famine immigrant was not rich, after a few years in America he did not live in dire poverty either. And a large minority of those immigrants saved enough to make even many native-born Americans jealous.[19]

The occupations of the depositors played a large role in determining their ability to save. Among men, the median high balance of famine immigrants whom I label "professionals" (mostly physicians) was $2,100, or about $56,000 today (even then, doctors made a lot of money). The median for business owners was $615 in savings ($16,500 today) and petty entrepreneurs (mostly peddlers) $408 ($11,000 today). In contrast, the median high balance for lower-status white-collar workers, mostly clerks, was $188 ($5,000 today) and for artisans $145 ($3,900 today), while that for unskilled male workers was $165. That last figure may not seem like much, but laborers in this period typically earned a dollar a day and found work no more than three hundred days per year. That balance meant that the median famine immigrant laborer had savings equal to more than six months of pay in the bank. A third of laborers had more than a year's

[18] The current value of Emigrant Savings Bank balances from the 1850s is based on a consumer-price-index multiplier of 26.8 for 1855 as suggested by the Economic History Association at *MeasuringWorth,* http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/. Because of Civil War inflation, the multiplier drops after 1860, so the figures cited for the current value of balances from 1861 onward use the consumer-price-index multiplier supplied by the site for each individual year (the 1861 multiplier to compute the value of an 1861 account balance; the 1862 multiplier to compute the value of an 1862 account balance; and so on). I designated as "famine immigrants" those who arrived in North America from 1845 through 1852 (1845 is the year that the potato crop first failed; with the 1852 harvest—which came after the emigration "season"—food supplies once again became adequate to feed Ireland's population). For data on the end of excess mortality in Ireland in 1852 as well as a review of the various dates historians have designated as the end of the famine (none of which are necessarily the date at which the famine-related emigration subsided), see Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory* (Princeton, 1999), 41–43; and Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845–52* (Boulder, 1995), 294.

[19] "Tyler Anbinder Dataverse."

worth of pay on deposit. These sums represented a huge improvement in financial status to a group that, back in Ireland, often would have had very little cash.[20]

Why could unskilled famine immigrants save even more than their skilled counterparts? The New York labor market could apparently absorb an almost endless supply of unskilled laborers, especially during the building boom that lasted from the late 1840s until the panic of 1857. Artisans who immigrated during the famine years, in contrast, found that they had far less earning power than pre-famine craftsmen. That Irish artisans who came to New York in the six years before the famine saved three times as much on average as their famine-era counterparts suggests that the influx of famine immigrants did not degrade the earnings potential of all artisans. Rather, the tradesmen who arrived in the famine years seem to have been shut out of the most lucrative employment opportunities by those already in New York and found their ability to save reduced to that of unskilled workers. Nonetheless, while famine immigrant artisans earned less than they might have been led to believe before they left Ireland, their account balances indicate that they were not typically impoverished and they earned far more than they would have had they stayed in Ireland or immigrated to England instead.[21]

Even the Emigrant Saving Bank's female depositors, who would have usually earned far less than the lowest-paid men, managed to save surprisingly large sums. When asked for their line of work, some women gave their husband's occupation but most reported what they did. Of those who did not list their husband's line of work, 38 percent stated that they did not work outside the home. The remainder indicated that they worked for pay, and of these, the majority toiled as domestic servants. (See figure 3.) Domestics were typically unmarried young women who received room and board from their employers and thus had few day-to-day expenses. Consequently, even though their pay was not great, they could save almost everything they earned. Famed for their thriftiness,

[20] For the vocations that make up each of my occupational categories, see *ibid*. On laborers' lack of cash and ability to save in pre-famine southern and western Ireland, see House of Commons, "Poor Inquiry (Ireland), Appendix D, Containing Baronial Examinations Relative to Earnings of Labourers, Cottier Tenants, Employment of Women and Children, Expenditure," *Sessional Papers, Reports from Commissioners,* 1836, vol. 31, supplement pp. 1–393; and House of Commons, "Poor Inquiry (Ireland), Appendix E, Containing Baronial Examinations Relative to Food, Cottages and Cabins, Clothing and Furniture, Pawnbroking and Savings Banks, Drinking," *Sessional Papers, Reports from Commissioners,* 1836, vol. 32, supplement pp. 1–393. The pay for New York laborers in the early 1850s typically ranged from 87.5 cents to $1 per day. See "Document No. 14," *Proceedings and Documents of the Board of Assistant Aldermen of the City of New York,* 44 (1852), 309–24. For the number of days per year a laborer could find work, see "Labor Movements: Laborers' Union Benevolent Association," *New York Tribune,* May 13, 1850, p. 6; "The Laborers' Demand," *ibid.*, May 14, 1850, p. 4; John F. Maguire, *The Irish in America* (London, 1868), 232–33; and Richard B. Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis: Class, Ethnicity, and Youth in Antebellum New York* (Ithaca, 1990), 60–61.

[21] On the initial phase of the antebellum building boom, see Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785–1850* (Ithaca, 1989), 276–77. For the 1850s, when the city stopped publishing the number of buildings constructed each year, the best sources on construction are fire insurance maps, which document the footprint, height, and construction material for every significant structure on every lot. Comparing virtually any block north of Thirty-Fourth Street in 1854, the year the first of these maps covering that area was published, to the 1859 edition reveals the enormous amount of residential construction that took place. Compare William Perris, *Maps of the City of New York Surveyed under Directions of Insurance Companies of Said City* (7 vols., New York, 1852–1854), VI, plates 81–86, VII, plates 93–98; and William Perris, *Maps of the City of New York Surveyed under Directions of Insurance Companies of Said City* (7 vols., New York, 1857–1862), V, plates 73–81, VI, plates 91–101. These maps can be viewed online at *New York Public Library: Digital Gallery,* http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/index.cfm, "Image ID" numbers 1615980–85 and 1615992–6000 (for 1854) and 1268259–63, 1268267, 1268369–71, 1268373, and 1268374 (for 1859). For artisans' wages, see Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis,* 53. For the savings of famine-era immigrant artisans versus those who arrived in New York before 1840, see "Tyler Anbinder Dataverse."

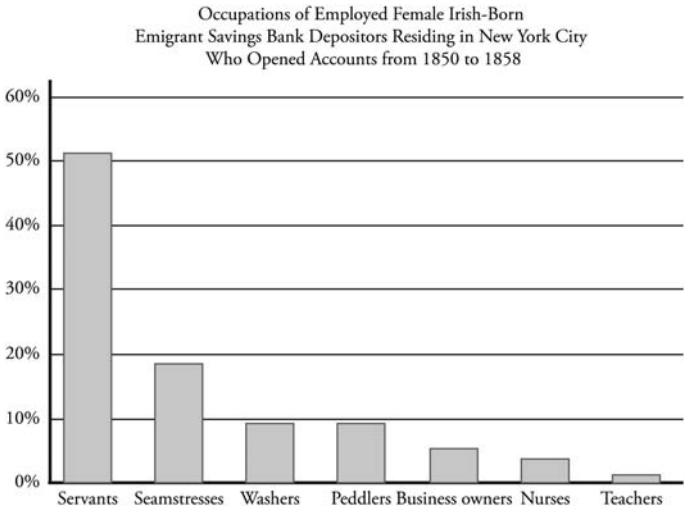

Figure 3. SOURCE: "Tyler Anbinder Dataverse—Replication Data For: Emigrant Bank Sample Used for *Journal of American History* Article, December 2012," http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/anbinder.

domestic servants saved significant amounts—nearly half salted away the equivalent of $5,000 today. Female needle workers, in contrast, were the worst-paid workers in the city. They saved less than any other occupational group, male or female. Only about 20 percent of them saved the modern equivalent of $5,000.[22]

Many women accumulated their savings with the help of male family members. Of the needle workers who saved above the median amount, half were married when they opened their accounts, whereas none of the needle workers below the median were married when they became Emigrant Savings Bank customers. Even among the domestic servants, who were usually not married, we know that a brother or future husband aided half of the top quartile of the bank's domestics in their accumulation of wealth. It is quite likely that other female depositors who were single when they opened their accounts had married by the time their balances peaked. Occasionally, the bank records document the cases of women who saved large sums of money without any male assistance. But in most cases, the lack of high-paying employment opportunities for women meant that they could save very large sums only if they had husbands, brothers, or sons to help them. The test books make clear, however, that most Irish-born women in New York

[22] Of the 900 households in my sample, 231 (26%) listed a female account holder's occupation. Almost all of these accounts were opened by women in their names only or in trust for their children. Of these 231, 95 were married, 84 were single, 32 were widows, and the marital status of the remaining 20 was not recorded. "Tyler Anbinder Dataverse." On domestics, see Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, 1983); and Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840–1930* (Syracuse, 2009). The literature on needlewomen is sparse, but see Beth Harris, ed., *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (Burlington, 2005); "Labor and the Laborers: The Needlewomen of New York," *New York Tribune,* June 8, 1853, pp. 5–6; "The Industrial Classes of New York: The Shirt Sewers of the Metropolis," *New York Herald,* June 11, 1853, pp. 1–2; and "The Case of Margaret Byrne," *New York Times,* March 1, 1855, p. 4.

had male kin with them, which helps explain why female immigrants' accounts had nearly as much in them as those opened by men.[23]

How did these famine immigrants manage to save so much money? The bank records, supplemented with information from other sources, suggest a number of answers. Some of the immigrants could trace their success to their ability to move from the ranks of the unskilled into more lucrative occupational categories. Arriving in New York from the Dingle Peninsula of County Kerry in 1850, Patrick O'Shea took the $500 he saved working as a porter and became first a bookseller and then a publisher. Patrick Lennon, who emigrated in 1848 at age eighteen from County Monaghan, also worked as a porter until 1860 when he withdrew much of his nearly $800 from the bank to open a grocery. In 1870 he owned real estate worth $3,500. Cornelius Sexton worked first in a "wash house" and then as a "barge man" for the New York Custom House after arriving from County Cork in 1847. By 1859 he had become a clerk, and in 1863, with almost $700 in his bank accounts, he became a "liquor dealer." John Irvine followed a similar path, immediately beginning work as a day laborer after emigrating from County Fermanagh in 1850 at age twenty-five with his wife Margaret McNeely. Soon he was a "laborer in a pickling house," and by mid-decade he had become a pickle maker in his own right. New Yorkers even then must have loved their pickles because by 1857 he had amassed almost $1,200 in savings, the equivalent of about $32,000 today. By 1860 he too had become a grocer.[24]

While some immigrants managed to rise from the ranks of the unskilled to operate their own businesses, such cases were relatively rare. Others moved from one blue-collar trade to a better paying one. Michael Curley, for example, who had emigrated from County Monaghan in 1849 at about age sixteen, had become a blacksmith in New York and saved $100 by the time he opened his first Emigrant Savings Bank account in 1857. But he soon became a coach maker, after which his deposits became larger and more frequent. By 1868 he had his own carriage-making business and had amassed more than $2,900 in savings. County Cork native Cornelius Collins immigrated to New York in the spring of 1852 and by that fall was working as a laborer when he opened his first Emigrant Savings Bank account with a deposit of $48.95. In 1858 when he opened his second account, he was employed as a soap boiler, and by January 1869 he had accumulated $642, about $11,000 today.[25]

[23] The test books document that 72% of female Irish famine immigrants who opened accounts in their name only had male kin in New York when they first became Emigrant Savings Bank customers. "Tyler Anbinder Dataverse."

[24] On Patrick O'Shea, see accounts 1161, 1162, 8620, and 10195, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; and *Trow's New York City Directory for 1858–59* (New York, 1858), 618. On Patrick Lennon, see accounts 6240, 14038, 15657, 58850, and 99837, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; 1860 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 14, district 3, family 1569, available at Ancestry.com; and 1870 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 14, district 4, family 368, *ibid*. On Cornelius Sexton, see accounts 5241, 18734, and 55955, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; and 1870 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 10, district 3, family 338, available at Ancestry.com. On John Irvine, see accounts 6070, 9429, 10761, 10762, and 20659, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; 1850 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 6, family 811, available at Ancestry.com; and *Trow's New York City Directory for 1858–59,* 402. On Irvine's age at arrival, see passenger manifest, *The Gipsey,* New York, May 18, 1850, "New York Passenger Lists, 1820–1957," available at Ancestry.com.

[25] On Micheal Curley, see accounts 13541, 15686, and 16818, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; 1850 U.S. census, Queens County, New York, village of New Town, family 257, available at Ancestry.com; and passenger manifest, *Conrad,* New York, May 29, 1849, "New York Passenger Lists." On Cornelius Collins, see accounts 3146 and 17581, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers.

The most common scenario, however, was one in which a famine immigrant remained within the occupational category that he or she had occupied upon arrival in New York. But even these newcomers could save substantial sums. Cooper William Walsh, who emigrated from County Cork in 1850 at age twenty-one and opened an account with $40 in 1855, had, with his wife, Mary, saved $428 (more than $11,000 today) by the eve of the Civil War. Walsh was still a cooper in 1880. Dublin native John Fitzherbert, who arrived in New York in May 1851 at age eighteen already trained as a gunsmith, tried his hand at locksmithing but soon returned to the gun trade, and by 1859 he and his wife, Catherine Ryan, had saved $203, the equivalent of about $5,400 today. Bricklayer Patrick Kelly, who came to New York from County Kerry in 1847, had amassed $906 (about $24,000 today) by 1857. He still worked as a bricklayer in 1867.[26]

Even unskilled workers who remained in that occupational category typically saved significant sums. Lunatic asylum night watchman Michael Cordiel, a native of County Longford, accumulated $160 in five years. Laurence Galligan, who left County Cavan in 1847, had saved $244 by 1854 working as a house servant for a Broadway dentist. Even those who remained day laborers could do quite well. Laborer Cornelius Sullivan came from County Kerry to New York in 1851, at age forty, with his wife, Honora, and four children and settled in Cow Bay, the most notoriously decrepit block in Five Points. In 1858, when he opened a second account with Honora and their fourteen year-old son, Daniel, Cornelius was still a laborer, but he continued to save slowly but surely. On January 1, 1865, their account balance peaked at $1,173.30, about $16,700 today. Michael and Bridget Horan from County Limerick also arrived in New York in 1851, when Michael was forty-six. He was a laborer when he opened his first Emigrant Savings Bank account in 1853 with an initial deposit of $21. He was still a laborer at the end of the decade when he created his second account, by which point he had saved $410, about $11,000 today. Despite suffering from rheumatism, Horan still worked as a laborer at age seventy.[27]

Immigrants also improved their financial situations by using political connections to get higher-paying jobs. For Irish immigrants who typically had more brawn than book learning, a position on the police force was a dream job, and many of the Emigrants Savings Bank's depositors achieved that dream, though demonstrating allegiance to the Democratic party through campaign work was generally a prerequisite. In the mid-1850s, policemen earned $12 a week, about double what a laborer earned when he had

[26] On William Walsh, see accounts 9081, 16044, and 30931, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; 1860 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 12, district 3, family 901, available at Ancestry.com; and 1880 U.S. census, New York County enumeration district 184, family 40, *ibid.* On John Fitzherbert, see accounts 1930, 3114, 6078, 7586, 12261, 16964, 23006, and 27143, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; 1860 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 21, district 5, family 1861, available at Ancestry.com; and passenger manifest, *Lady Hobart,* New York, May 27, 1851, "New York Passenger Lists." On Patrick Kelly, see accounts 2207, 6280, 6281, 19539, 19264, and 58083, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; and 1880 U.S. census, New York County, enumeration district 591, family 188, available at Ancestry.com.

[27] On Michael Cordiel, see account 2841, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers. On Laurence Galligan, see account 6261, *ibid.* On Cornelius Sullivan, see accounts 2581 and 15839, *ibid.*; and passenger manifest, *West Point,* New York, March 29, 1851, "New York Passenger Lists." On Michael Horan, see accounts 4321, 23329, 35564, and 47553, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; and 1880 U.S. census, New York County, enumeration district 16, family 266, available at Ancestry.com.

work, and because laborers were often unemployed many weeks of the year, a position with the police might mean the tripling of a laborer's yearly income.[28]

Joseph Dowling, who came to New York from the city of Waterford at age ten with his shoemaker father, was one immigrant who used his political connections to land a position as a policeman. He joined the police force in the Sixth Ward in 1848 and by 1854, just before he was promoted to sergeant, had saved $448 ($12,000 today) in his Emigrant Savings Bank account. Bootmaker Bernard "Bryan" Morrissey also secured one of the coveted positions, and Felix Hayes even gave up work as a grocer to become a patrolman. Laborer Thomas Magner, who came to New York from County Cork in 1848 at age twenty-four, landed a police job in 1857 and doubled his savings from $200 to $400 in his first six months on the force.[29]

Like their male counterparts, Irish American women utilized a variety of strategies to accumulate savings. Most women who emigrated without a spouse initially chose to work as domestic servants. Some, such as Mary Hayes, who emigrated from County Cork in 1850 at age twenty-three, closed her account two months after opening it in 1852, never having supplemented her original $35 deposit. But the typical domestic saved nearly $200, about $5,300 today. Ann Hinson, for example, who arrived in New York from County Galway in 1850, and opened her account with $10 in 1855, had saved $140 by the eve of the Civil War. Honora Guinan, who emigrated in 1851 from County Tipperary, amassed $182 by 1857. And many, of course, exceeded the median. Ellen Mahon saved $243, Bridget Wall saved $382, Johanna Gallagher saved $383, and Mary Monaghan, who came to New York in 1847 from County Cavan, saved $396 (over $10,500 today) by the summer of 1860. Arriving single in New York was clearly not an impediment to wealth accumulation for the female famine emigrants.[30]

The vast majority of these domestics, both those who saved a lot and those who apparently saved only a little, eventually got married and stopped working as household servants. Most married women with bank accounts did not report working for pay, but most of the 40 percent who did labored at home as washers or needle workers so they could also care for their children. Jane Fitzpatrick, who came to New York from Dublin in 1851 at age thirty with two small children, took in washing while her husband, Terrence, worked as a bricklayer. Catherine Daly also toiled as a "washer and ironer" even though she had four children and a husband, Dennis, who worked as a laborer in a coal yard.[31]

[28] On police pay, see *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New-York for 1856* (New York, 1856), 225. On the politics of police hiring, see James F. Richardson, *The New York Police: Colonial Times to 1901* (New York, 1970), 54–57.

[29] On Joseph Dowling, see accounts 4149, 6508–9, 18007, 23637, 28836, and 31827, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; and Anbinder, *Five Points,* 169–70, 310–11. On Bernard Morrissey, see accounts 5438, 13823, 14549, 15010, and 23746, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; and passenger manifest, *Columbia,* New York, July 31, 1846, "New York Passenger Lists." On Felix Hayes, see accounts 10208, 18859, and 24206, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers. On Thomas Magner, see accounts 2313, 2895, 4080, and 8941, *ibid.*; *Trow's New York City Directory for 1857–58* (New York, 1857), 546; and 1850 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 7, district 1, family 2045, available at Ancestry.com.

[30] On Mary Hayes, see account 1561, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers. On Ann Hinson, see account 9021, *ibid.* On Honora Guinan, see accounts 7661 and 9321, *ibid.* On Ellen Mahon, see accounts 7685, 10321, and 27629, *ibid.* On Bridget Wall, see accounts 6921 and 15641, *ibid.* On Johanna Gallagher, see account 16521, *ibid.* On Mary Monaghan, see account 1941, *ibid.*

[31] On Jane Fitzpatrick, see accounts 12361, 15037, 24532, 31080, 35099, 46996, 49557, and 58913, *ibid.*; and passenger manifest, *Columbia,* New York, Nov. 5, 1851, "New York Passenger Lists." On Catherine Daly, see accounts 867, 2139, 2651, 3581, 4360, 5104, 5856, and 6961, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers. That most Irish

Married women who worked in the needle trades often did so with husbands who were tailors. Five Pointers Susan Mitchell and Eliza Sproles, for example, both emigrated in 1851 with tailor husbands and worked as "tailoresses" while caring for four children each. Mitchell, who arrived in New York at age twenty-seven, must have been glad she had put away the extra savings that her sewing brought in when her husband, James, died in the winter of 1854–1855. She managed to increase her savings from about $300 to $500 (more than $13,000 today) in the two years after James's death. But once the panic of 1857 struck, her business apparently dried up. Luckily, she had that substantial emergency fund upon which to fall back. By March 1858, when work picked up again, she had run through half her savings, but she did not make another withdrawal for the rest of the decade.[32]

Running a boardinghouse was another popular occupation for married women because it too could be done within the home. Most boardinghouses run by famine immigrants were not freestanding affairs but an apartment down the hall from the operator's residence or even just a room or two within one's own home. Dorah Greenfield, who had immigrated to America from County Roscommon in 1842 at age twenty-two, ran a West Side boarding establishment in the 1850s while her husband worked as an "express driver." The Greenfields saved more than $1,000 (more than $1,700 including the accounts of her children living with her). Mary Quail, who had come to New York in 1849 at age thirty-five from County Down, operated a boardinghouse near the East River waterfront while eighty-two-year-old James Quail (her father-in-law?) worked as a longshoreman. But married female Emigrant Savings Bank customers (boardinghouse keepers and others) occasionally hid their avocations from the bank secretary—they were too embarrassed or too modest to admit that they worked for pay.[33] (See figure 4.)

Some married women did work outside the home. Teresa Mooney, an 1851 emigrant from County Cork, peddled glass, saving $151. Ann Ennis from County Roscommon worked as a nurse. When Margaret Chartres, who came to New York in 1849 from County Limerick, opened her first Emigrant Savings Bank account in August 1852, she reported that she had been toiling as a domestic because she could not locate her husband

immigrant domestics eventually married and stopped working as servants is based on an analysis of New York City's 1860 manuscript census returns, which show that the vast majority of Irish immigrant women in their twenties who were unmarried worked as domestics but that very few Irish immigrant women above age 35 had never been married and virtually none of these older women still worked as domestics. That analysis is based on the 1% sample of households in New York County from the 1860 census compiled in Ruggles, et al., *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series*. My copy of the data, converted to an Excel file, is available at "Tyler Anbinder Dataverse."

[32] On Susan Mitchell, see accounts 3801, 8021, and 15632, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; passenger manifest, *James Wright,* New York, July 23, 1851, "New York Passenger Lists"; and *Trow's New York City Directory for 1855–56* (New York, 1855), 586. On Eliza Sproles, see accounts 4382 and 8863, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers.

[33] On Dorah Greenfield, see accounts 12171, 15018, 16181, 22514, 23867, 29125, 33213, 44937, 50973, 54048, and 61569, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; and 1860 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 6, district 2, family 216, available at Ancestry.com. On Mary Quail, see account 11741, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; and 1860 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 4, district 2, family 111, available at Ancestry.com. Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, 2007), 34–46, 49–56. For an example of a female depositor (Catherine Sullivan) who hid her occupation from the bank, see "Mrs. Sandy Sullivan's Genteel Lodging House," drawing, *New York Illustrated News,* Feb. 18, 1860, p. 216; and account 23603, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers.

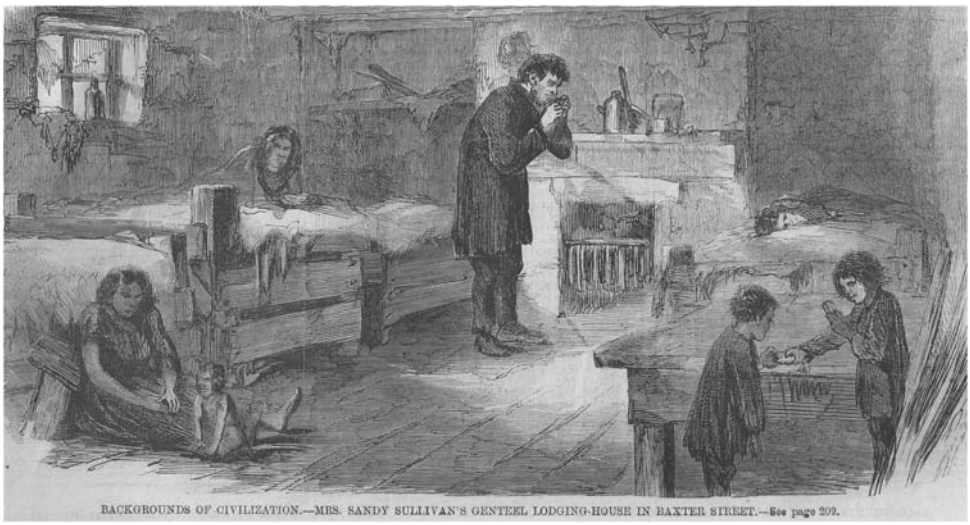

Figure 4. This drawing, entitled "Mrs. Sandy Sullivan's Genteel Lodging House," depicts the boardinghouse of Emigrant Savings Bank customer Catherine Sullivan, who did not reveal her work as a boardinghouse keeper to the bank secretary when she opened her account two months after this image was published. Like other immigrant women, Sullivan may have been too modest or too embarrassed to admit that she worked for pay. *Reprinted from* New York Illustrated News, *Feb. 18, 1860, p. 216*.

Cornelius, a painter, who might have left town looking for work. She was working in 1854 as a fruit peddler even though he had returned a year earlier.[34]

Although not all husbands were reliable breadwinners, marriage was a much more reliable path to economic security for Irish immigrant women than remaining single. Even widows left with small children to support typically managed to save more than women who had never been married at all. Some widows saved with the help of new mates. Others, starting with very little at the time their husbands passed away, accumulated substantial sums without remarrying. Mary T. Byrnes, whose shoemaker husband, James, died around 1850, opened an Emigrant Savings Bank account a few years later with $50 and, running a boardinghouse, managed to increase her balance to $428 ($11,900 today) by 1860. Mary Healy, already widowed when she came to America in 1852 at age thirty-nine, peddled fruit when she opened her account with $11 in 1855, the year her only child, twelve-year-old Judy, joined her in New York. By 1869, still unmarried, Mary had increased her savings to $943. Widow Ellen Hagan arrived in New York from County Tipperary in 1850 at age thirty-two with children aged twelve, nine, and seven and worked as a nurse at the Verplanck State Emigrant Hospital on Ward's Island when she opened her account in 1852 with $34. While her children were small her savings grew relatively slowly. By 1857, however, they could all probably work for pay as well, and as a result her savings grew more rapidly—by the middle of 1860,

[34] On Teresa Mooney, see account 2921, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers. On Ann Ennis, see accounts 3606, 11254, 17061, and 17394, *ibid.* On Margaret Chartres, see accounts 2641, 5323, 7577, 9159, 10814, and 20802, *ibid.*

still unmarried, Ellen had accumulated $1,349, about $37,000 today. Children thus played a key role in enabling widows to save.[35]

Perhaps some of the bank's surprisingly wealthy widows were involved in illegal activity. We know that boardinghouses sometimes served as fronts for brothels, so it is possible that some of the wealthy immigrants who claimed to keep rooming establishments might have been engaged in the sex trade. Policemen among the Emigrant Savings Bank's customers may have taken bribes to ignore these or other crimes. In rare cases, the illegal activity of an account holder can be documented. The $1,000 that Ellen Barnett from County Waterford had in her accounts, for example, probably related less to her work as a matron on Randall's Island, where the city institutionalized juvenile delinquents, orphans, and the insane, and more to the fact that her husband, the Spaniard Pedro "Peter" Barnett, was a pirate.[36]

Some of the financial accomplishments of the famine immigrants simply defy explanation. Thirty-five-year-old Mary Mulvey, for example, emigrated from Dublin to New York in 1846 with her husband, Charles, and four daughters aged ten and under. A year later, Charles disappeared, never to be seen again. Mary began working as a "washer and ironer" and in 1851 opened an Emigrant Savings Bank account with $200. Somehow, Mary saved an additional $2,000 by January 1857 (about $59,000 today) and nearly $1,000 more by the eve of the Civil War. Perhaps her children helped her save (we know two became teachers, but only one was old enough to have been so employed by 1857). Perhaps she inherited the money. Perhaps her brother, who lived around the corner, contributed to his sister's accounts, though as a tailor he was not in a high-income occupation either. More likely, she was very frugal or a very successful businesswoman, probably both. These accomplishments are all the more impressive because Mary Mulvey was illiterate—like 63 percent of the Emigrant Savings Bank's female Irish depositors and 21 percent of its Irish male customers, she could not write her own name. The bank records are full of cases such as Mary Mulvey's that cannot be readily explained.[37]

We do know, however, that widows, such as Mulvey, had significantly more money in their bank accounts than did married women whose accounts were in their name only. This fact may relate to the apparently more conservative way that Irish Catholic immigrants defined financial responsibilities within marriage. At the Bank for Savings, the most popular savings bank in Civil War–era New York, women owned the vast majority of the accounts. Not only did single women open three times as many accounts there as single men, but even considering only the accounts opened by married persons, more than three-quarters were opened in the name of the wife only. At the Emigrant Savings

[35] On Mary T. Byrnes, see accounts 2861, 22449, and 22448, *ibid.*; and *Doggett's New York City Directory for 1852–53* (New York, 1852), 101. On Mary Healy, see accounts 10341 and 99049, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers. On Ellen Hagan, see accounts 2481 and 80461, *ibid.*; and passenger manifest, *New World,* New York, Sept. 27, 1850, "New York Passenger Lists."

[36] Accounts 6957, 11917, 13390, 20955, 23108, 26057, and 27756, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; 1850 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 12, family 1345, available at Ancestry.com. On Pedro Barnett being in prison for piracy, see 1860 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 6, district 4, family 1201, *ibid.*

[37] Accounts 315, 2541, 28606, 13655–57, 30883, 32947, and 103191, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; 1850 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 7, district 1, family 1130, available at Ancestry.com. On teaching as a means of socioeconomic mobility, see Janet Nolan, *Servants of the Poor: Teachers and Mobility in Ireland and Irish America* (Notre Dame, 2004). Literacy rates are based on test book entries of accounts 17000 to 18000. The bank began asking for depositors' signatures beginning with account 17000 in June 1858. The literacy rate for pre-famine Emigrant Savings Bank customers was identical to that of famine immigrants.

Bank, in contrast, two-thirds of the accounts opened by married persons were opened in the husband's name only. Class differences between the clientele of the two institutions cannot explain the difference, because the average balance at the Bank for Savings was no higher than that at the Emigrant Savings Bank. That so many fewer married women opened their own accounts at the predominantly Irish Catholic Emigrant Savings Bank than at the Bank for Savings suggests that Irish men did not cede control of family finances to women to the same extent as other New Yorkers.[38]

These facts hint at the variety of meanings that savings would have had for New York's famine Irish. On the most basic level, a little savings allowed one to avoid the stress of living payday to payday. A little more provided a cushion should one become unemployed due to sickness or economic downturns. Many types of work in Civil War–era New York were seasonal—construction workers, for example, were typically underemployed in the winter months, and savings could help such workers and their families avoid hardship until the spring. Savings could also allow an immigrant to host an impressive wedding party or give loved ones a suitable burial. Nest eggs gave husbands and wives peace of mind, knowing that the family would not become destitute if the breadwinner suddenly passed away, an all-too-common occurrence for the famine Irish. Should the immigrants be lucky enough to escape that fate, savings could be used to enter a new trade or open a business, with the cash used both to capitalize the new venture and to support the immigrants while they got the enterprise up and running.

Irish geography also seems to have played a role in determining an immigrant's economic success in New York. Depositors from the counties that now constitute Northern Ireland, for example, tended to save more than immigrants from other parts of Ireland. In contrast, the savings of depositors born in the isolated southwestern counties of Clare, Limerick, Tipperary, and Cork fell well below the median. But there were notable exceptions to these patterns. Natives of County Kerry, also an isolated, impoverished southwestern district, accumulated double the savings of the median depositor, as did the immigrants from Galway and Mayo, west coast counties also renowned for their rugged isolation and poverty. Furthermore, emigrants from the east coast of Ireland, typically portrayed as more integrated into the market economy and thus more likely to prosper in America, saved at well below the median rate. This was especially the case for the many immigrants from Dublin, whose savings rate was half that of all Irish-born Emigrant Savings Bank depositors and one-quarter that of immigrants from Kerry.[39]

One might suppose that the New Yorkers from northern Ireland would have emigrated earlier than those from the South or West because in the early nineteenth century emigration was more common from northern Ireland than from the isolated and impoverished South and West, where few residents could afford transatlantic relocation. Time in America, rather than place of birth, thus might have led to the higher balances of those from northern Ireland. Some evidence does support this supposition: well over half of the depositors from high-saving northern counties such as Tyrone, Donegal, Antrim, and Armagh came to America before the onset of the famine. But immigrants from Sligo and Roscommon (located southwest of the northern counties), which also sent most of their depositors to New York before the famine, saved at well below the median rate.

[38] Bank for Savings data from "Commercial Revulsion."
[39] "Tyler Anbinder Dataverse."

And of the five counties that sent the highest proportion of their immigrants to New York in the famine years, the emigrants from three had very low savings rates but those from the other two (Meath and Mayo) had very high rates. The immigrants from northerneastern Ireland must have been more likely than others to be Protestants because that was the part of Ireland most heavily colonized by Protestant English and Scottish settlers. Yet the other counties whose emigrants had well above average savings rates (Kerry, Mayo, and Galway) were western counties without many Protestant emigrants. County of birth, date of emigration, and religion all appear to correlate to an emigrant's ability to save, but I could not determine the relative importance of each of these factors due to the size of my sample.[40]

While the impact of Irish birthplace and religion may be difficult to measure, the Emigrant Savings Bank's deposit ledgers do clearly indicate that owning a business was the path to wealth in America—almost all of the top savers in my sample were successful entrepreneurs. The famine immigrants who accumulated the most wealth were, in descending order, a liquor dealer ($8,000), a politically active charcoal dealer, a washerwoman (the mysterious Mary Mulvey), a physician, a blacksmith turned coach maker, a compositor named John Lennon, a peddler turned fancy goods importer, another peddler, a clerk turned liquor dealer, and another doctor ($2,115). Not every immigrant who saved enough to open his or her own business succeeded. For every successful entrepreneur in the bank's records, there is another who briefly opened a business but was later found back at his or her original trade. Only with the proper combination of ambition, luck, and entrepreneurial talent could an immigrant remain self-employed over the long term.[41]

While immigrants on my list of top savers likely sought to save as much as possible, that goal clearly was not paramount for every depositor. A disproportionate number of accounts peak at very round numbers ($100, $200, $400, and $500 were especially popular), suggesting that many Emigrant Savings Bank customers had a specific savings objective in mind. Once they reached that goal, they stopped putting money into their accounts, often withdrawing the semiannual "dividend" (amounting typically to about 6 percent interest annually) as soon as the bank "declared" it. Immigrants likely saw these accounts as emergency funds to be used only if a family breadwinner was unable to work. They ceased growing not because the depositor was incapable of saving any more but because he or she chose not to do so. At that point, these immigrants either stopped working as hard or began to devote more of their income to improving their standard of living—perhaps making more discretionary purchases, moving to a roomier apartment, relocating to a better neighborhood, or all three.[42]

These suppositions are borne out in the stories of the bank's customers. Mary Graham and her peddler husband, Charles, who had come to New York in 1849, moved

[40] Only by undertaking a much larger study than this one, of all 18,000 accounts for which the full array of data is available, would one be able to isolate each variable to determine in what combination and to what extent each contributed to the immigrants' ability to save. I am currently engaged in such a study, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and in collaboration with the economic historians Cormac Ó Gráda and Simone Wegge. The transcribing of the biographical and deposit data for all the accounts should be completed by the summer of 2013 and will be available at "Tyler Anbinder Dataverse."

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] On the propensity of depositors to leave their balances at round numbers and to withdraw dividends as soon as they were posted, see Deposit Ledgers, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers.

in 1860 to a house they bought in bucolic Manhattanville (modern-day West Harlem around 135th Street). Ellen Barnett (the wife of the pirate) and Cornelius Sexton, two more famine immigrants, also relocated to Harlem. Moving across the East River to Brooklyn was another popular option. Illiterate Five Points carpet weaver Hugh Haggerty saved enough money by 1865 to move his wife Mary and three sons to a house he purchased there. Many more Emigrant Savings Bank depositors relocated to Brooklyn without purchasing property.[43]

Some of the bank's customers chose to move west rather than east. Many laid down roots just across the Hudson River in New Jersey. William Dick, an 1847 immigrant from County Down, had become a "fancy goods" merchant in Hoboken (just across the Hudson from Manhattan) by 1857. The laborer Francis Campbell moved to Hudson Township (just west of Hoboken), where he became a chair maker. Bootmaker Richard Lee also relocated to Hudson, but by 1870 was living in Jersey City (just south of Hoboken and Hudson), where he owned $1,800 in real estate.[44]

Other Emigrant Savings Bank depositors ventured farther west—Ohio, Illinois, and California were especially popular destinations. One such migrant was Bridget White, who had opened the very first account on the very first day the Emigrant Savings Bank opened for business in September 1850. She and her husband, Richard, who had come to America from Queens County (when Ireland gained its independence the name was changed to County Laois) in 1844, worked long hours with needle and thread in their dark, fetid tenement apartment in the rear building at 45 Henry Street. In 1850, when they opened their joint account with a deposit of $100, they shared their cramped quarters (two or at most three rooms) with their three small American-born children and two boarders, an Irish-born carpenter and his wife. By January 1856, just before Bridget gave birth to her fourth child, the Whites had accumulated $633 in their account, equivalent to about $17,000 today. They decided to take their savings and escape the crowded city, closing their account in September 1856 and moving to Bloomington, Illinois. There they were able to buy their own home while continuing to work as tailors. Bridget had three more children in Bloomington, and by 1870 they valued their real estate at an impressive $6,000, or about $100,000 today.[45]

Using the census and other records, a genealogist and I attempted to track the children and grandchildren of Bridget White and others—in all we looked for the descendants of 20 percent of the Irish immigrants in my sample. Daughters were exceedingly

[43] On Mary Graham and Charles Graham, see accounts 11574, 13401, 13961, 14297, 23365–68, 25745, 27864, 33489, and 34735, *ibid.*; and 1860 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 12, district 3, family 460, available at Ancestry.com. On Sexton, see accounts 561, 10247, 13629, 15554, and 38128, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; and 1860 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 12, district 1, family 1429, available at Ancestry.com. On Ellen Barnett, see accounts 6957, 9001, 11917, and 13390, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; and 1850 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 12, dwelling 1147, family 1345, available at Ancestry.com. On Hugh Haggerty, see accounts 1645, 11578, 11721, 53252, and 59565, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers.

[44] On William Dick, see accounts 6129, 6130, 14461, and 17431, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; and 1860 U.S. census, Hudson County, New Jersey, city of Hoboken, Ward 2, family 1154, available at Ancestry.com. On Francis Campbell, see accounts 7859, 14941, 22248, and 30968, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers. On Richard Lee, see accounts 81, 30176, and 61860, *ibid.*; 1850 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 7, district 1, family 1658, available at Ancestry.com; 1860 U.S. census, Hudson County, New Jersey, city of Hudson, family 1143, *ibid.*; and 1870 U.S. census, Hudson County, New Jersey, Jersey City, Ward 12, family 680, *ibid.*

[45] Account 1, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; 1850 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 7, district 1, family 1656, available at Ancestry.com; 1860 U.S. census, McLean County, Illinois, city of Bloomington, Ward 1, family 1059, *ibid.*; 1870 U.S. census, McLean County, Illinois, city of Bloomington, family 345, *ibid.*

difficult to trace because their surnames changed with marriage. Only in the rare cases when a parent or sibling lived with a married female relative could such daughters be found. Sons were much easier to track. While some followed in the occupational footsteps of their fathers, the vast majority of the American-born male children of the Emigrant Savings Bank's famine depositors did not engage in manual labor but instead took either lower status white-collar jobs, opened their own businesses, or became professionals (the law was especially popular). And the third generation did better still. The Dublin native Joseph Kingsley, for example, came to New York in 1852 and became a tailor in Five Points, never managing to save more than $40 in his account. His son, Joseph Jr., worked most of his life as a railroad station agent in Baltimore. Joseph Jr.'s son, Joseph III, started out as a station agent but eventually rose to the presidency of the Norfolk Southern Railway.[46]

The female children of the famine immigrants likewise had better employment opportunities than their mothers. The daughters of washers and domestics typically became teachers and office workers, though one niece of the laborer and porter Thomas Magner became a school superintendent in California and another became an insurance agent there. Marriage was another means of upward mobility for the daughters of Irish immigrants. Mary Bergen, the daughter of the immigrant bricklayer John Bergen, married the real estate broker John W. McGuire, also the child of Irish immigrants. The McGuires's daughter Susan married John J. Pulleyn, who, in the early twentieth century, became the president of the Emigrant Savings Bank.[47]

That some of the children and, in particular, grandchildren of antebellum Irish immigrants became presidents of major corporations is hardly surprising. One of the most important reasons that immigrants, then and now, have ventured to America is to secure greater opportunities for future generations. It is startling, however, to find that so many of the Irish famine immigrants managed to save significant amounts of money by the mid-1850s. The economic achievements of the famine Irish were possible largely because they had more control over their economic lives than we have previously recognized.

[46] Account 12901, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; passenger manifest, *Devonshire,* New York, Nov. 25, 1852, "New York Passenger Lists"; 1860 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 6, district 2, family 270, available at Ancestry.com; 1900 U.S. census, Baltimore County, Maryland, city of Baltimore, Ward 19, enumeration district 243, family 115, *ibid.*; 1920 U.S. census, District of Columbia, city of Washington, enumeration district 276, family 50, *ibid.*; 1930 U.S. census, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Ohio township, borough of Osborne, enumeration district 747, family 25, *ibid.*; "Norfolk Southern Votes: Major Kingsley Succeeds L. A. Beck in Presidency," *New York Times,* May 16, 1947, p. 34; "Norfolk Southern under I.C.C. Inquiry," *ibid.*, Jan. 24, 1952, p. 39; "New Regime Runs Norfolk Southern: Kennedy Takes Over Control in Sweeping Reorganization as Kingsley Is Ousted," *ibid.*, Feb. 13, 1953, p. 30.

[47] On Magner, see accounts 2895 and 8941, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; 1850 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 7, district 1, family 2045, available at Ancestry.com; 1860 U.S. census, San Francisco County, California, district 2, family 100, *ibid.*; 1870 U.S. census, San Francisco County, California, Ward 2, family 2350, *ibid.*; and 1920 U.S. census, San Francisco County, California, assembly district 26, enumeration district 97, family 18, *ibid.* On the Bergens and the McGuires, see accounts 4534, 8789, 10650, 12461, 14909, 16401, 33497, and 64755, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers; 1850 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 9, district 3, family 2012, available at Ancestry.com; 1860 U.S. census, Ward 22, district 2, family 140, *ibid.*; and 1880 U.S. census, New York County, enumeration district 233, family 154, *ibid.* On the Pulleyns, see 1880 U.S. census, New York County, enumeration district 539, family 156, *ibid.*; 1900 U.S. census, New York County, enumeration district 526, family 84, *ibid.*; 1910 U.S. census, New York County, Ward 12, enumeration district 591, family 205, *ibid.*; 1920 U.S. census, New York County, assembly district 11, enumeration district 819, family 141, *ibid.*; "Only One in Ten Is Thrifty," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle Sunday Magazine,* March 28, 1926, p. 3; "John J. Pulleyn, Banker, 86, Dead: Former Head of the Emigrant Industrial Savings Served in Port Authority Post," *New York Times,* April 4, 1947, p. 23.

Immigrants changed jobs frequently, networking assiduously to find better employment situations. Of the male famine immigrants who opened Emigrant Savings Bank accounts in 1852, for example, only one in twenty owned his own business. But by 1860, nearly one in six was a business owner. If we consider all forms of self-employment, only 10 percent of New York's male Emigrant Savings Bank's famine depositors in 1852 were self-employed; by 1860 that proportion rose to about 25 percent. These figures probably underestimate self-employment, for they do not include craftsmen, hackmen, and porters, many of whom were self-employed, nor any skilled workers, even though many of them would have eventually operated their own businesses.[48]

One might wonder why the surprising ability of the famine Irish to save is not better known. Part of the answer relates, undoubtedly, to the methodological predilections of our discipline. Historians once vowed to wean themselves from "impressionistic" primary sources, but the cliometric studies that resulted from such pledges were so dry, so devoid of the *stories* that draw most of us to history, that the discipline soon moved in the opposite direction, away from the social science model and back toward the narrative-driven histories that dominated the field a half century ago. As a result, we still rely too often for our descriptions of the famine Irish on the florid prose of bigoted reformers and sensation-seeking journalists who could not imagine that immigrants who dressed so shabbily and crammed so tightly into such small, dilapidated tenement apartments could also have significant savings in a bank.

But the legacy of the Thernstrom school and the tenacity of the rags-to-riches concept have played an even more important role in obscuring the impressive savings of Civil War–era immigrants. The Thernstrom school's primary definition of upward mobility—the movement into white-collar occupations—masked significant Irish immigrant economic achievements, which were characterized by savings more than occupational change. In addition, the Thernstrom school's methodological deficiencies, real as they might be, concealed the fact that its conclusions—that Civil War–era immigrants made very impressive economic gains after arriving in America—were valid. The shortcomings of the Thernstrom-inspired studies—their overreliance on real estate holdings and census occupational listings and their inability to track Americans who left a given city—led Thernstrom and his acolytes to underestimate rather than overestimate the immigrants' economic progress.[49]

Furthermore, Thernstrom and others, influenced by the rags-to-riches yardstick, may have set the bar too high in defining economic success for American immigrants. In his section on savings in *Poverty and Progress,* Thernstrom quotes a Civil War–era Massachusetts banker who reported that "we have many laborers with $1000 on deposit." Thernstrom then notes that "the 'laborers with $1000 on deposit' who allegedly existed in great numbers in Massachusetts were hard to find in Newburyport." An obsession with uncovering rags-to-riches stories may have influenced Thernstrom to accept the banker's unreasonably lofty figure as the benchmark for immigrant success, when in fact many laborers

[48] Business ownership figures are based on the occupations reported by every famine immigrant who opened an account at the Emigrant Savings Bank in 1852 and 1860, not the sample used elsewhere in this article. I have categorized as "self-employed" all business owners, petty entrepreneurs, and professionals. Test books for 1852 and 1860, Emigrant Savings Bank Papers.

[49] On the Thernstrom school and its methodological deficiencies, see Chudacoff, "Mobility Studies at a Crossroads"; Engerman, "Up or Out"; Henretta, "Study of Social Mobility"; Conzen, "Quantification and the New Urban History"; Kerckhoff, "Current State of Social Mobility Research"; Frisch, "*Poverty and Progress*"; and Thernstrom and Knights, "Men in Motion."

would have chosen to stop adding to their nest eggs well before reaching the $1,000 mark.[50]

How is it that "rags to riches" came in the first place to be the measure of American immigrant success? While the term is synonymous with dime novelist Horatio Alger Jr., the phrase never appears in any of the more than one hundred novels he published in the second half of the nineteenth century. Alger's protagonists who start out in rags (poor but good-hearted boys—rarely girls—with names such as Ragged Dick and Tattered Tom) ascend at best to respectable middle-class jobs. These boys are rarely immigrants or even the children of immigrants. The Alger characters who do attain riches are native-born children who begin life wealthy, are orphaned and cheated out of their inheritances, but through "luck and pluck" have their rightful fortunes restored.[51]

The term *rags to riches* was virtually unheard of until four years after Alger's death, when *From Rags to Riches,* a play by Charles Alonzo Taylor based loosely on Alger's stories, opened in 1903 in New York. Taylor apparently believed that the story of a newsboy who rose to a clerkship in a wholesale dry goods concern would not fill theater seats, so he took a Ragged Dick–type protagonist and placed him in one of Alger's cheated-heir stories. Taylor's protagonist, the newsboy Ned Nimble, outsmarts the lustful scoundrel who stole Ned's legacy and tried to seduce Ned's sixteen-year-old sister. The play concludes with Ned and his sister inheriting a palatial mansion and the fortune that goes with it. *From Rags to Riches* was a huge success. It ran in New York for several years and was staged in cities across America and even in England, where fourteen-year-old Charlie Chaplin was cast in the leading role.[52]

By the 1920s, when a film version of Taylor's play was released, *rags to riches* had become a staple American phrase, appearing in the popular press with ever increasing frequency. Scholars did not use the term much until after World War II, when they cited the concept to denounce it as a myth that had never had basis in reality. The sociologist Leonard Reissman suggested in 1959 that "rags to respectability" better described the potential upward mobility of Americans in both the nineteenth century and the twentieth. David Donald had used that term in an essay a few years earlier to describe Abraham Lincoln's life story—he was apparently the first historian to utilize the phrase. Thernstrom adopted it in *The Other Bostonians,* his 1973 sequel to *Poverty and Progress*. Nowadays, the term *rags to respectability* is omnipresent in American academic

[50] Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress,* 127, 130.

[51] John Tebbel, *From Rags to Riches: Horatio Alger, Jr. and the American Dream* (New York, 1963); John Seelye, "Who Was Horatio? The Alger Myth and American Scholarship," *American Quarterly,* 17 (Dec. 1965), 749–56; Carol Nackenoff, *Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse* (New York, 1994).

[52] Charles A. Taylor, *From Rags to Riches,* in *The Great Diamond Robbery and Other Recent Melodramas,* ed. Garrett H. Leverton (Princeton, 1940), 101–53; *From Rags to Riches* clippings file (Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library); entries on Charles Taylor and Laurette Taylor available at *American National Biography Online;* Harry M. Geduld, ed., *Charlie Chaplin's Own Story* (Bloomington, 1985), 57–65. A play called *From Rags to Riches* was performed as early as 1897, though whether it was an earlier version of Charles Taylor's play or a distinct production is not clear. See "News Items around Town," *Fitchburg Daily Sentinel,* May 4, 1897, p. 5. That the term *rags to riches* was very rarely used before 1903 is based on a search of the digital library of nineteenth-century American primary sources *Making of America,* http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moagrp/; the *New York Times;* Gale's Nineteenth-Century U.S. Newspapers database; *Google Books,* http://books.google.com/; and the *Oxford English Dictionary.*

writing, and historians constantly invoke it as the alternative to *rags to riches* in describing immigrants' potential socioeconomic mobility.[53]

One might imagine that with *rags to respectability* having eclipsed *rags to riches* in scholarly writing, the necessary reconceptualization has also come to pass. But *rags to respectability* is nearly as inaccurate and misleading as its better-known precursor. During the great "century of migration" from the 1820s to the 1920s, in which millions of immigrants arrived in the United States, very few came in rags or in a condition of destitution one would equate with rags. Potential immigrants living in poverty could not afford the cost of travel to their port of embarkation, much less the fare to America. The trip to the United States potentially entailed months of unemployment, so once indentured servitude faded away in the late eighteenth century, only those with savings could make the journey to the United States. This was especially the case during the Irish famine, when transoceanic transportation was irregular, when the sea voyage from Liverpool typically lasted five weeks, and when passengers were expected to provide their own food and water for the long journey. In famine Ireland, "the most energetic, skilful, and substantial are the foremost to emigrate," observed the London *Times*. The Dublin *Freeman's Journal* concurred that those who remained in Ireland were "the old, the most feeble, and most destitute."[54]

There were exceptional cases, of course, in which poorer immigrants might manage to make it to the United States. Family members already in America might pay the fare for relatives and supply additional sums for food and clothing, although in such cases of family-financed "chain migration," these immigrants really should not be considered poverty-stricken given the family resources at their disposal. Governments, religious organizations, and landlords also financed the emigration of paupers. But these assisted immigrants never constituted more than a tiny proportion of the total, despite nativist claims to the contrary. By the late nineteenth century, regular and rapid steamship service drastically reduced the costs of emigration, but in response the commissioner of immigration began requiring in 1909 that immigrants arriving in America possess a significant amount of cash, $25 per person. Immigration inspectors did not always strictly enforce these regulations, but often the steamship companies or American consular officials had done so before allowing the immigrants to embark. As a result, while victims of the Irish famine

[53] On the rags-to-riches myth, see William Miller, "American Historians and the Business Elite," *Journal of Economic History,* 9 (Nov. 1949), 184–208; R. Richard Wohl, "The 'Rags to Riches Story': An Episode in Secular Idealism," in *Class, Status, and Power: A Reader in Social Stratification,* ed. Reinhard Bendix and Seymour M. Lipset (Glencoe, 1953), 388–95; Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (New Brunswick, 1954); Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York, 1969); and Bernard Sarachek, "American Entrepreneurs and the Horatio Alger Myth," *Journal of Economic History,* 38 (June 1978), 439–56. For an important dissent, see Herbert G. Gutman, "The Reality of the Rags-to-Riches 'Myth': The Case of the Paterson, New Jersey, Locomotive, Iron, and Machinery Manufacturers, 1830–1880," in *Nineteenth-Century Cities: Essays in the New Urban History,* ed. Stephan Thernstrom and Richard Sennett (New Haven, 1969), 98–124. On the rags-to-respectability model, see Leonard Reissman, *Class in American Society* (New York, 1959), 340; David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York, 1956), 58; John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago, 1965), 101–23; and Thernstrom, *Other Bostonians,* 73. Popular textbooks that have adopted the rags-to-respectability model include John Mack Faragher et al., *Out of Many: A History of the American People* (Upper Saddle River, 2009), 520; and Paul Boyer et al., *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People* (Boston, 2010), 555.

[54] "Emigration," *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin), Dec. 29, 1848, p. 4 (quoting *Times* [London]); "Emigration from the United Kingdom," *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin), Aug. 5, 1852, p. 4.

arrived in the United States with fewer resources than any previous newcomers, immigrants in rags (either literally or figuratively) were the exception rather than the rule.[55]

Likewise, the word *respectability* does not accurately describe what immigrants managed to achieve in America. Very few Irish Catholic immigrants of the famine era, no matter how much they accumulated in their bank accounts, were ever considered respectable by the Protestant, native-born American majority. Irish immigrants were believed to drink and fight too much, desecrate the sabbath, fill American jails and poorhouses, corrupt American politics, and practice a religion characterized by ignorance and superstition. Huge numbers of Americans deemed Irish Catholics unfit for citizenship, while most of the remainder who were not of Irish Catholic ancestry at best grudgingly accepted them. Irish immigrants did not really achieve "respectability" until at least a generation later, when the "new immigration" from southern and eastern Europe brought to America large numbers of Italians, Slavs, and eastern European Jews, making the Irish seem desirable by comparison. Another generation or two would again have to pass before these newer groups could, in turn, earn the respect of native-born Americans. For both the Irish and their successors, it was usually their American-born children who would be the first to gain the respect of their native-born fellow citizens. Those who immigrated as adults would almost always speak too strangely, dress too oddly, and live in neighborhoods too notorious for vice and crime to ever be considered respectable by most Americans.

If *rags to respectability* is as inadequate as *rags to riches* in describing immigrants' economic accomplishments in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, what term should we use? I would suggest that we not even try to find a new one. No catchphrase can convey the complex economic circumstances and prospects immigrants faced in the United States. Their backgrounds and opportunities varied too greatly from generation to generation and place to place to be capable of summation in a single phrase.

But we can, I think, agree on several overarching principles that should guide our reconceptualization of immigrant economic opportunities and accomplishments. First, Horatio Alger has no place in the teaching of immigration history. He did not write about immigrants, immigrants did not read his books, and he never used the phrase with which he is synonymous. Because historians so often couch their discussions of immigrant economic accomplishments in terms of Alger and *rags to riches,* they end up focusing on the wrong questions (Was the concept valid? For what percentage of immigrants was it valid?) and therefore rarely consider immigrants' economic prospects in the manner that the immigrants would have considered them. Most immigrants did not expect riches. Rather, they hoped to accumulate capital—something that had been very difficult in their homelands—to survive life's inevitable emergencies, to buy a business or a home, or to pass on so their children could have more opportunities than they had. Second, we should agree that occupational change is not the right measure of economic achievement for immigrants. In most cases, they cared much more about income than their place in some imaginary occupational hierarchy (especially because so many higher-

[55] Simone Wegge, "Chain Migration and Information Networks: Evidence from Nineteenth-Century Hesse-Cassel," *Journal of Economic History,* 58 (Dec. 1998), 957–86; Benjamin J. Klebaner, "The Myth of Foreign Pauper Dumping in the United States," *Social Science Review,* 35 (Sept. 1961), 302–9; Gerard Moran, *Sending Out Ireland's Poor: Assisted Emigration to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (Dublin, 2004). On the enforcement of the monetary requirement, see Vincent J. Cannato, *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island* (New York, 2009), 195–222.

status jobs seemed off limits to them). Third, census data concerning real estate holdings are not as revealing as information on savings, especially for immigrants living in urban America, where land was so expensive that even most members of the native-born middle class rented their homes.

Historians need to look more at savings rather than these other measures of economic achievement. Savings is a much more accurate measure of economic accomplishment, and the data is available, waiting to be exploited. But it needs to be exploited soon because the records are quickly disappearing. Until recently, the old account books of the two behemoths of New York's nineteenth-century savings bank industry, the New York Bank for Savings and the Seamen's Bank for Savings, were available to scholars at the banks' headquarters. Combined, these two institutions had eighteen times more customers than the Emigrant Savings Bank. But in the 1980s both institutions succumbed to the savings-and-loan crisis. Their assets (including their thousands of old test books and deposit ledgers) were sold to consortiums of other shaky banks, which also soon collapsed and were sold to still other banks, most of which no longer exist. No one I have contacted in the New York archival community knows the whereabouts of these records—everyone assumes that they were thrown away. Their destruction, if they were indeed destroyed, is a scholarly tragedy of enormous proportions.[56]

Yet the records of other nineteenth-century banks remain intact, at least for now. A few, such as those of the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society, the largest savings bank in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, are in archives. But most savings bank records are still held by the banks. In small cities and towns these banks often still exist, and historians need to begin visiting them to analyze and preserve their records before they too disappear. In big cities, consolidation in the banking industry has led to the disappearance of many of the most prominent local savings banks of the past. Many were bought up by today's banking giants, and in some cases their records have been preserved. There are dozens or perhaps hundreds of such record sets sitting in bank basements waiting to be exploited.[57]

If we examine them, I think we will find that in the absence of a social safety net, nineteenth-century Americans, even those with low-paying jobs, felt compelled to save and succeeded in doing so to an extent we find surprising today. That was certainly the case for the customers of New York's Emigrant Savings Bank. State banking records indicate that the bank's customers were not unusual—the average balances at other New York savings banks that catered to laborers, artisans, and petty entrepreneurs are similar to those at the Emigrant Savings Bank. Nor do New Yorkers seem to be unique. A study by economists of the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society's customers comes to a conclusion similar to my own: that the typical immigrant depositor had "by just about

[56] The once-extant records of the Seaman's Bank for Savings and the New York Bank for Savings were utilized in the research for Olmstead, *New York City Mutual Savings Banks*. I learned of their disappearance and the cause from Alan Olmstead. Alan Olmstead to Tyler Anbinder, Dec. 18, 2009, e-mail (in Tyler Anbinder's possession).

[57] Philadelphia Saving Fund Society Papers (Hagley Museum and Library). The J. P. Morgan Chase Archives hold the records of a New York savings bank that catered to German immigrants, whose records, the bank's archivist told me, are "even better" than those of the Emigrant Savings Bank. But my efforts to examine those records have been rebuffed. Stephen M. Cutler, J. P. Morgan Chase general counsel, to Anbinder, Oct. 14, 2010, e-mail (in Anbinder's possession). The test books of the Bowery Savings Bank, another of nineteenth-century New York's biggest savings institutions, are in the basement of the Capital One Bank branch at 365 Fulton Street in Brooklyn. As this article went to press, I had not yet gained access to them; nor had I determined if the deposit ledgers have also survived.

any standards . . . accumulated a large nest egg." Immigrants in that era could save because the rapidly expanding American economy presented white Americans, native-born and immigrant alike, with opportunities for economic advancement that are difficult to imagine today. The famine Irish, forced for years to practice extraordinary thrift and self-denial, were especially well prepared to save. Success was not guaranteed; the roads in America were not paved with gold. Nor were lives of the immigrants easy. The famine Irish in New York worked incredibly hard, lived in tenements that by American standards were shamefully overcrowded and unsanitary, and had life expectancies much shorter than other New Yorkers. But the vast majority survived the ordeals of hunger, emigration, and acculturation to city life. Those who did found that hard work, good health, frugality, and a talent for entrepreneurship—the "luck and pluck" that Alger extolled—were far better rewarded in the United States than they had been in Ireland. Most immigrants could, as their America letters insisted, eat more meat in their new homeland in a week than they had in Ireland in a year. In many cases they could save enough to ensure that their children's lives would be easier and more financially secure than theirs. Even if they arrived impoverished, most did not remain in that state for very long—and they were by no means doomed or even likely to become permanent members of a "resourceless proletariat." That is why so many of the world's emigrants in the nineteenth century chose to come to the United States. That is why so many of them continue to come to America today.[58]

[58] Alter, Goldin, and Rotella, "Savings of Ordinary Americans," 765.