

Patrick's dream

Scholarly sources:

Urban Anthropology (1999). *Oral history of Milwaukee's Irish*. Milwaukee, WI: Urban Anthropology Inc.

Urban Anthropology (2006). *Oral history of Milwaukee's Third Ward*. Milwaukee, WI: Urban Anthropology Inc.

Meet Patrick

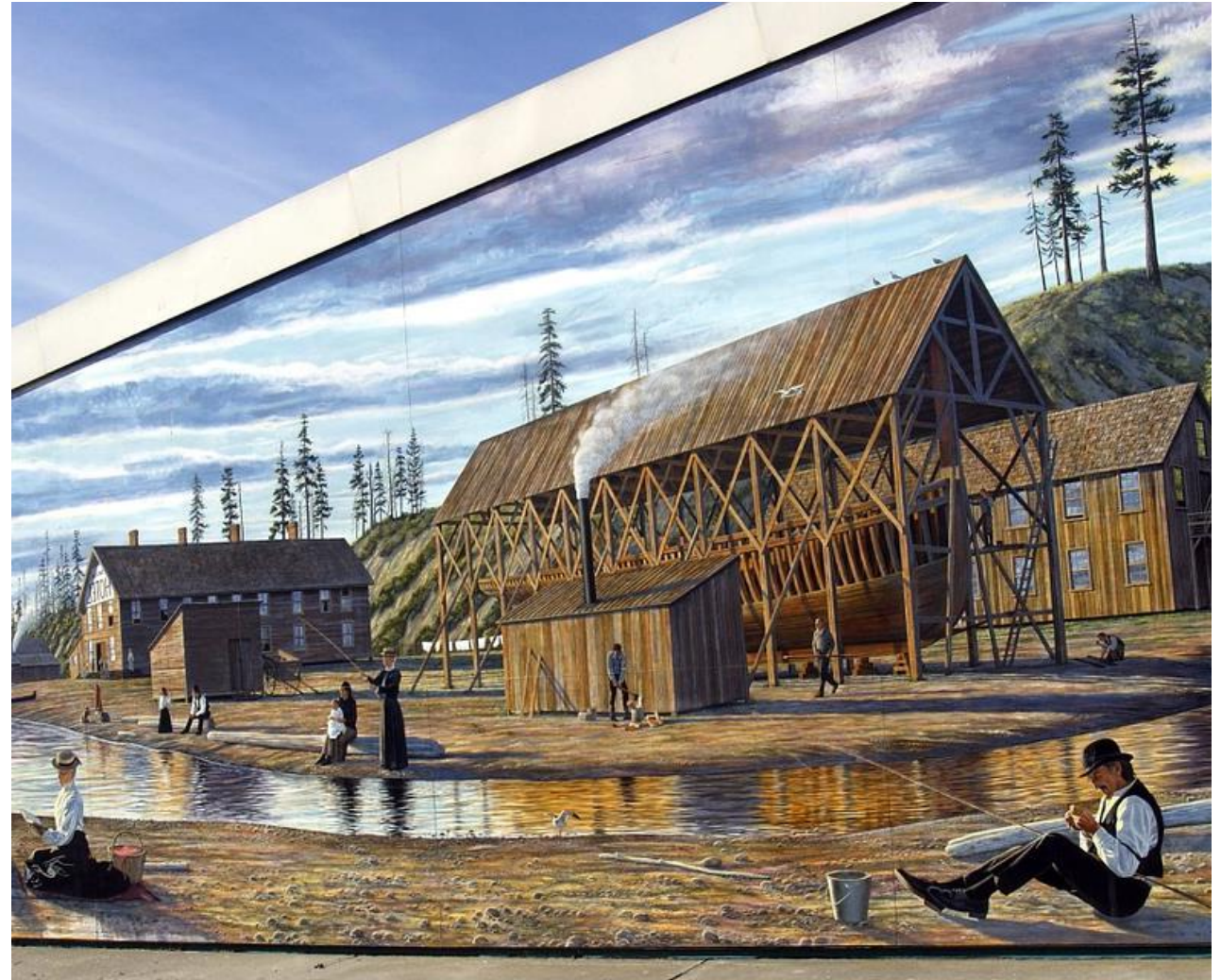
Patrick Connor was a nine-year-old boy living in Milwaukee's Third Ward in 1892. His parents had been born in Ireland.

Patrick had a dream that was not really appreciated by his friends or his family. That was a problem. But before we get to that, let's learn a little bit about his world.



Patrick's world

In the 1800s, the Third Ward was a swampy area along the coast of Lake Michigan. A number of businesses and small factories had built up near the water where trading by ship was easy.



The Ward needed workers. The businesses invited Irish immigrants to come and fill in the swamps, build roads, and work in the factories.



By 1892 the Irish had built a crowded little shanty town in the Ward. The dwellings were so close together that next door neighbors could hand things back and forth through their windows.



Patrick had a lot of friends in the Ward
and he played with all of them.



And being right on Lake Michigan,
there were lots of chances for picnics
and swimming.

It wasn't for years that he realized
that he had different ideas about his
future than his friends had.



Patrick's dream

It was Patrick's fourth grade teacher that brought up the subject.

"Let's have a discussion about what you all want to be when you grow up," she said.

The kids began to raise their hands.



Patrick's best friend Sean was the first one the teacher called on.

Sean spoke up. "I know that most of us are very poor here in the Ward," he began. "But we are living in America—the land of opportunity. And I think every one of us should set our sights as high as we possibly can."

The classroom cheered.



Sean continued. "You take my Uncle Tom. He came from the Ward. But he studied hard and went to law school. Not only did he become a lawyer, but now he's a candidate for the Common Council."

Again the class cheered.



One by one, Patrick's classmates spoke up and talked about wanting to become a mayor or governor or judge or president or even first lady (as Amy had offered). Each time they talked, the class cheered.

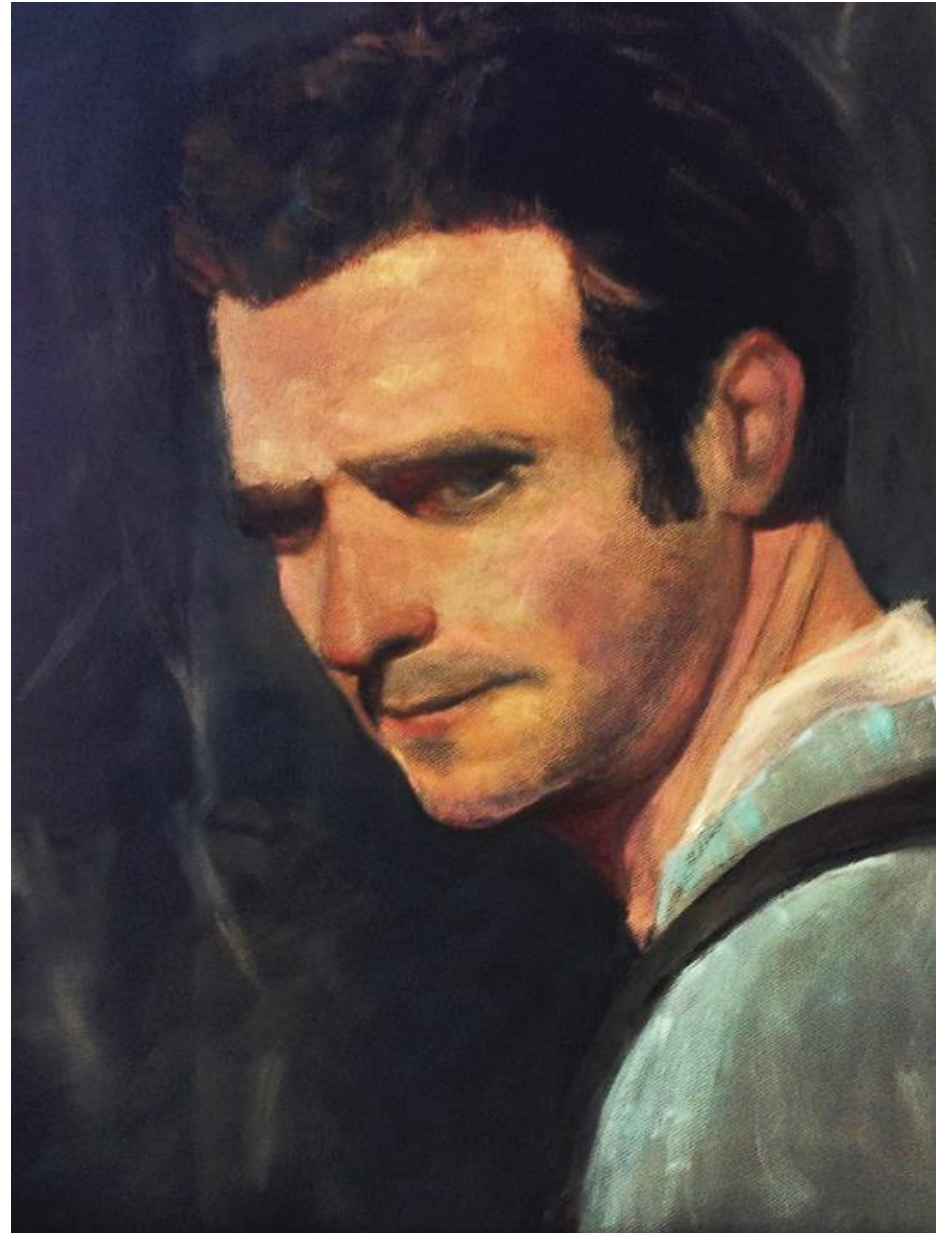


When it was Patrick's turn, he stood up. "I want to be a fireman like my Uncle Jim," he said, expecting cheers. But no one did cheer. Patrick didn't understand.



When Patrick got home, he started to tell his father what had happened at school. He told him how all the kids in his classroom wanted to be judges or politicians or lawyers when they grew up.

"Oh, that's silly," responded Mr. Connor. "They should be aiming for a life where they will fit in—where it's secure. Your grandfather and I have worked at the furniture factory in the Ward all our adult lives and I expect you to do the same. You'll have security."



"But I want to be a fireman like Uncle Jim," Patrick cried.

"A fireman!" exclaimed Mr. Connor. "That's not secure! You could get killed! Haven't I told you enough about the family's past that you've learned to avoid taking risks?"



And so Mr. Connor repeated the stories that Patrick already knew so well.

First, there was the potato famine back in Ireland that had killed so many people, including two of his great aunts. "This is why we decided to come to America—for security!"



"And then there was that awful boat ride across the ocean that killed your uncle Peter," Mr. Connor continued.



"And then we heard about the jobs here in Milwaukee and Chicago, but we had to take another boat across the Great Lakes. And disease broke out on this boat. Do you know what they did with the sick people?"

Patrick knew. He answered. "They locked them up in a pest house on Jones Island where they all died."



"Yes!" answered Mr. Connor. "So only some of us survived. They split us up between Chicago and Milwaukee. And you know what happened after that?"

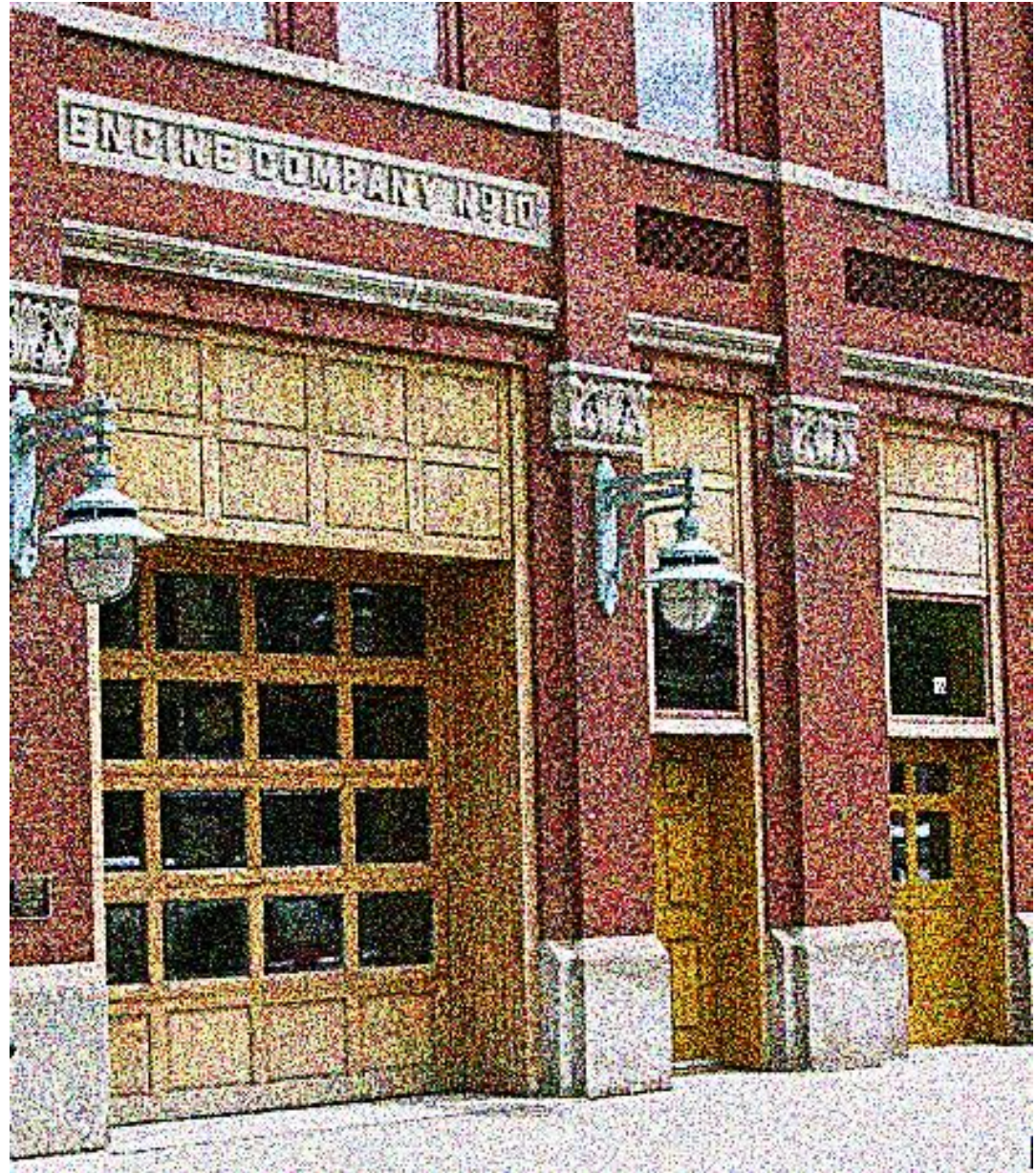
Again Patrick knew. "The shipweck."

"Yes, the shipwreck," responded Mr. Connor. "If we wanted to visit our relatives in Chicago we had to take a ship on Lake Michigan. And just a few years after we got here the ship sank and killed over 300 of our community, including your grandmother."

Patrick hung his head. He knew how much his father wanted his family to be secure—finally.



Patrick felt very sad that day. See, for the past two years he'd been hanging out with his uncle at Engine Company Number Ten in the Ward. Uncle Jim was actually James Foley, the fire chief.



His uncle had been telling him about all the fires they'd put out. But his uncle had also told him about his concerns.



This is what he said.

"See, here in the Third Ward there's no one getting after all these factories and other property owners that are crowding the streets and alleys with all their stuff. If ever a fire breaks out, our wagons and fire equipment will never get through."



Uncle Jim told Patrick that the furniture factory where his father and grandfather worked was the worst at blocking the streets. "They've got their lumber stacked up all over the place," he complained.



Uncle Jim was so worried that he took his complaints to the city government—the Common Council. The political leaders didn't do anything about the crowding, but they did provide one bonus. They gave Uncle Jim the funds to build his own fireboat. Jim called it the *Cataract*.

That summer, Patrick got to spend a lot of time on the fireboat with his uncle.



But something happened that fall. It was late October and the Irish of the Third Ward were getting prepared for their holiday of *Samhain*. It was the time of year when they believed people could make contact with their dead relatives and ancestors. This was both a mysterious and a fun time. Children went around wearing costumes of magical creatures, playing tricks on people, and getting treats from adults.

Often the Connors would go out into the forest with other Irish families and listen to long, scary stories on this holiday.



It was a mere two days before *Samhain* when something terrible happened.

A small fire started at a paint company on Water Street. It was a windy night and the flames spread quickly to the building next door. When the firefighters tried to get to the fire, they could not. Lumber and every kind of trash blocked the streets and building entrances. It was just as Uncle Jim had predicted.



Within mere minutes the fire was out of control.
It took over the entire Third Ward.



The only thing that kept the fire from burning down all of Milwaukee was the *Cataract*. Uncle Jim and his firemen were able to battle the blazes from the boat and save the rest of Milwaukee.

In the Ward only one building and the charred fire station survived the fire. Over 2,000 of the Irish lost their homes.



Almost immediately the families learned about a new housing development on the west side of the city called Merrill Park. They took what little they had to the new neighborhood.

Things actually turned out okay, for a change. The houses in Merrill Park were much nicer than those in the Third Ward. Mr. Connor was able to get work immediately in the railroad yards in that neighborhood.

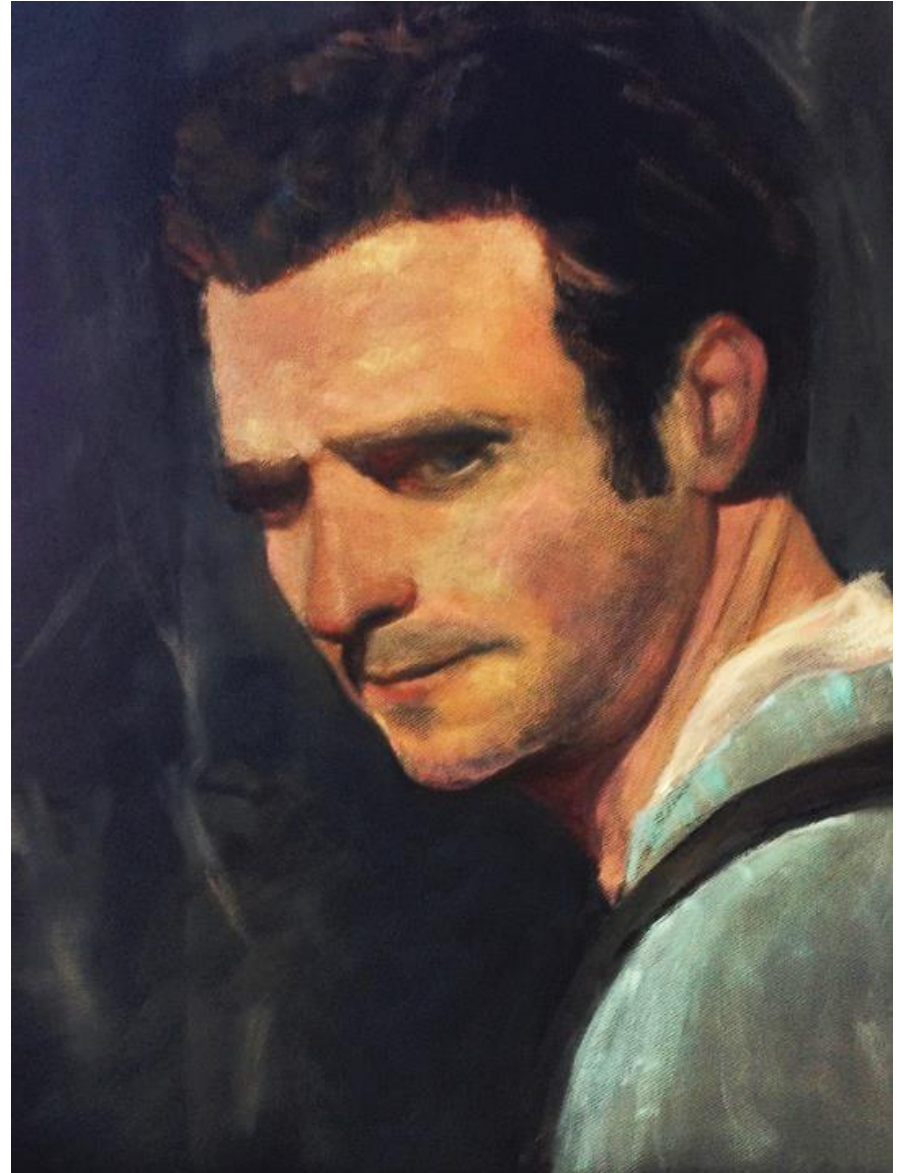


About a month after they settled into their new home, Mr. Connor asked his son to sit down for a talk.

"Patrick," he began. "I was critical of you when you told me you wanted to be a fireman like your Uncle Jim. I said it was not a job that would make you secure. But now I see how the efforts of your uncle saved the rest of the city of Milwaukee. Without his work, we would not have Merrill Park today."

Patrick smiled.

"What I know now is that none of us would be secure if there weren't firemen."



And Patrick in that moment saw his future.

He would surely be a fireman when he grew up.



But you might ask—what happened to the Third Ward?

Well, after the fire, the City wanted to rebuild the Ward. There was a new immigrant population now needing jobs—the Italians. The Italians came in and built blocks of sturdy warehouses.



The warehouses outlived their usefulness and about 100 years later most of them were turned into condominiums.

The Third Ward today is one of the most beautiful neighborhoods in Milwaukee.



And in the middle of the Third Ward sits a fully restored Engine Company Number 10.



And in front of that sits a statue of none other than Uncle Jim—Fire Chief James Foley—the fireman who saved Milwaukee.



The end
Let's talk!!!