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Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Salem, Massachusetts



Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions

Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS



A parade down Derby Street in front of St. Joseph Hall, c. 1940.
Collection of Salem Maritime NHS

Polish-Americans In Salem: A Transition in Photographs

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The Polish eagle

Courtesy of Salem Maritime NHS

The Salem Maritime National Historic Site's collection contains objects and photographs that are clues to the lives and customs of people in Salem's past. Many of these objects provide information about technologies or traditions that persisted for long periods of time, while some of them show us material and social changes that were taking place in history. Sometimes a still photo can capture social change, such as the photos documenting the lives of the Polish immigrants in Salem from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s. This was a period of tremendous transition, as millions of displaced workers from occupied Poland fled to the United States to save themselves and their families from poverty and starvation. Photos in Salem Maritime's collection can show us details of individuals who made this journey and the transformations that took place as they helped create a new society here and became identified as Americans. Two photos in particular (shown below) document changes in outward appearance and inward perspective that accompanied the development of the Polish-American community in Salem.

The first photo (Figure 1) is a formal portrait of the officers of St. Joseph's Fraternal Society, dating to the era of the founding of the society, between 1890 and 1910. These are first-generation immigrants to Salem, posed in their official uniforms and regalia. The second photo (Figure 2) dates to 1928 and shows a group of second generation Polish-American boys forming the St. Joseph's baseball team. These are American-born children who were raised with both the traditions of their parents' native land and those of early 20th century America, a place of baseball and multicultural patriotism.



Figure 1. Photograph of officers of Fraternal Society of St. Joseph, 1890-1910 (SAMA 15346)

Figure 2. Photograph of Fraternal Society of St. Joseph baseball team, 1928 (SAMA 15339)



Their parents' original home, Poland, had been partitioned in 1795 among the countries of Prussia, Austria, and Russia. After a rich monarchical history, Poland was eradicated politically and did not exist again as an independent state until 1917.¹ The Prussian, Russian, and Austrian governments did not abolish feudal serfdom until the mid-1800s, and then implemented disastrous policies of land ownership reform and agricultural policies that left millions of former farmers and peasants homeless. Polish immigration to the US began after 1830, with early refugees from the upper classes seeking political asylum. Beginning in 1870 and lasting through 1914, however, large numbers of landless agricultural workers began flooding to the US from the three partitioned areas of Poland. By 1900 there were almost 2 million Poles living and working in the US.²

Census data from Massachusetts estimate that in 1910 there were over 58,000 Polish-born citizens in Massachusetts and over 28,000 American children born to Polish immigrants.³ Immigration and establishment of families in America continued through the century, and by 1960 there were over 100,000 American-born children of Poles in Massachusetts. Different numbers of immigrants arrived from each of the three occupied areas of Poland, all subject to similar pressures of poverty and landlessness back home. In particular, an estimated 850,000 displaced agricultural workers from Galicia in the Austrian-occupied part of Poland immigrated between 1880 and 1914.³ It was mainly Galician immigrants who settled in the waterfront area of Salem.

Before immigrating to the US, inhabitants of villages in Poland were identified by their dialect, region, or village. People in Poland were tied closely to the land they lived and worked on until the terrible displacements of the early 1900s. There was no national concept of "Polishness" until they arrived here and found common bonds with immigrants from other villages and regions. People from different regions who spoke different dialects nonetheless identified with each other as "Polish" when confronted with the other foreign languages and ethnicities of American cities and factories. Because of the huge numbers of Polish immigrants who came to the US in the early part of the century, and because they often came to join existing colonies of neighbors or relatives already established here, expatriate Poles in the US became a substantial population in their own right. The community of Poles in America came to be known as "Polonia", with their own business associations, newspapers, schools, and church parishes.

Polish immigrants had strong ties to both their old and new country, and they experienced conflicting pressures over Americanization. On the one hand, there were strong forces acting to keep Polish immigrants separate from other ethnic groups and to make them maintain a strong sense of Polish identity rather than adopting a more inclusive American one. There was geographic isolation, as Polish families and social groups settled in tight-knit communities such as that of the Derby Street area of Salem.

Religion was a strong unifying element throughout the early 20th century and provided a core around which Polish immigrants built churches, schools, and social organizations, all using Polish as the predominant language. Private parochial schools and special “Saturday” Polish classes were founded and supported by the Polish community as a way to raise their children speaking Polish and maintaining a strong faith and cultural traditions. Polish immigrant communities across the country were also influenced by two powerful political organizations, the Polish Roman Catholic Union (PRCU) and the Polish National Alliance (PNA), each of which had a vision and wanted to direct development of these communities in a particular direction.¹ While the PRCU had a religious focus and the PNA was a secular group promoting education, both organizations were focused on inhibiting assimilation of Polish immigrants into American society. The PRCU wanted to maintain the Church as the focal point of social identity of immigrants, and the PNA hoped to encourage immigrants to help liberate occupied Poland and then return to populate the revived state in Europe. Neither group wanted Poles in America to lose their sense of being a community apart.

At the same time, Polish-Americans experienced tremendous pressure to assimilate and conform. While the PRCU wanted the Polish Church in America to be as independent as possible, the American Catholic Church tried to incorporate separate ethnic parishes into a single institution. Polish church leaders opposed this, but there was continued pressure on local churches to adapt to American-style Catholicism and to conduct classes in English in the Parish schools.³ Factory workers were exposed to English at their jobs and encouraged to learn the language in order to obtain better-paying and more desirable jobs. Consumerism was a very influential factor in Americanization of Polish immigrants and their children.⁴ A desire to own a radio or car was common ground among all Americans in the early 20th century and spurred people to obtain better jobs and the commodities that money could buy. Finally, there was direct government pressure to assimilate ethnic groups in the form of mandatory public schooling and the efforts of social workers. A result of this assimilation process was shown by a survey conducted in the 1920s, which found that Polish-American children were more familiar with Washington, Lincoln, Thanksgiving, and the 4th of July than they were with Polish history.⁴

The Fraternal Society of St. Joseph in Salem was established in 1897 as a mutual aid association for Polish families immigrating to the area.⁵ While the membership was originally all men, benefits were paid to families and widows of members as well. The association served as both economic and social insurance in case of hardship and, particularly, funerals. Funeral benefits consisted of cash to help cover funeral expenses as well as guaranteed attendance of members at the service.³ Community assistance also existed in the form of apartments on the third floor of the clubhouse that housed newcomers and single men without families.



Exterior of St. Joseph Hall,
1993, before renovations.

Courtesy of the National
Park Service

The fraternal society was a new kind of institution adapted to the new conditions of settlers in America.⁶ Financial cooperation and the pooling of resources allowed workers to acquire capital, get bank loans, and buy property. In addition, the social aspects of St. Joseph's were at least as important as the economic aspects. Associations such as St. Joseph's had sprung up to help ethnic communities cope with life in a strange land. The society hosted balls, plays, sports teams, debates, parades, musical entertainments, and lectures [Salem Maritime NHS collection]. Many of these activities raised money to donate to Church and school funds, help members, or to send back to Poland for liberation and rebuilding efforts after World War I. For example, in 1907 Galician immigrants in the US, including those in Salem, sent an estimated four million dollars in aid back to the small province of Galicia to help combat famine.¹

The activities of St. Joseph's Society changed over time as social realities changed in Salem. In the early days, the association was a haven for the familiar comforts of Polish language and traditions and a safe launching point for new arrivals. The association provided material help for struggling factory workers trying to create a place for themselves in American society. Slowly, local culture permeated St. Joseph's as members became predominantly second or third generation Americans. English was used more frequently and American leisure activities such as baseball and basketball became important to the children of the

community. The two pictures introduced here illustrate these changes dramatically.

In the earlier photo, we see the first generation members, who more than likely had a limited command of English. They had come from small villages or towns in southern Poland and were truly self-made. The careful display of shined Sunday boots, watch-chains, starched shirt and cuffs, and official medals highlights the importance of these material symbols of wealth and respectability. They are posed formally in a studio with their sashes and badges of office, and the officer on the far left is carrying an official staff. Working conditions at that time were dangerous to a degree that we can't imagine now, and employees were often maimed or killed in factory accidents. We can note that the man seated in front on the left is blind, and both he and the man in the center have arthritic and work-roughened hands, possibly results of their careers in mills or factories. Eight out of ten men have mustaches, an identifiably Polish fashion that persists there to this day. Finally, we see that all the men are serious and unsmiling, and that they wish to create an impression of dignity and importance. These men were creating identities for themselves in a new society, one in which they were offered the lowest paying jobs and little room for social advancement. Founding the St. Joseph's Society and serving as officers was one way to achieve financial and social status. From homeless immigrants they were able to become property owners, humanitarians, and civic leaders. Their struggles were so recent and so central to their lives, however, that a photo like this one served as an opportunity to document and display these fragile new identities.

The second photo, taken approximately 25 years later, sends a very different message of increasing Americanization and upward social mobility. This picture of St. Joseph's baseball team is shot outside on a field, with the team members kneeling or reclining on the ground. These are second generation Polish-Americans and they look different from the previous generation. The boys' baseball jerseys read St. Joseph's in English, and baseball itself was a purely American game. These boys can afford luxuries such as special game equipment, uniforms, and cleats. They are comfortable in informal poses, and they are all clean-shaven, which adds to their American look. Finally, many of them are smiling. The purpose of this picture is clearly different from the first photo. These boys do not need the symbols of social status so important in the first photo. The fact that they have the leisure time to play baseball at all is significant, and the relaxed feel of the photo conveys that these boys are comfortable in American society. Both in spite of and because of the efforts of first generation Poles in America, assimilation has occurred and these young men embody the idea of a Polish-American community in Salem.



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Thalia Gray has assisted Salem Maritime NHS in interpreting the Polish-American artifacts from St. Joseph Hall since June 2003.

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