

## **Daviess County, The Wabash and Erie Canal and the Acquisition of Land by Irish Immigrants, 1849–1857**

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The land transactions listed below represent part of the massive transfer of landed property to workers on the Wabash and Erie Canal in Indiana. This type of transfer was common throughout the United States for the duration of the transportation revolution of the nineteenth century, a revolution whereby vast tracts of the interior of the continent were incorporated into the economic life of the country by the creation of one of the world's most impressive networks of roads, canals, and railroads. The building of this great infrastructure facilitated the settlement of that interior, both by settlers, who moved west following these new pathways, and also by those who had worked on the projects and were sold or given land by the construction companies involved.

The Wabash and Erie was the longest canal to be dug in the United States in the years of the canal craze. Once completed, it linked Toledo, Ohio, on the western end of Lake Erie, to Evansville, Indiana, on the Ohio River, close to the place where it was joined by the Wabash River. The canal company was granted land along its route by the state, and this land was sometimes used to pay workers. The workers who labored on the project, especially the common laborers, were overwhelmingly Irish. Because the Wabash and Erie was such a large undertaking and because work on the project often slowed down or even stopped, workers had a reason to consider acquiring land and turning their hand to farming.

Transfers of land to Irish immigrants by the Wabash and Erie Company in Daviess County resulted in a significant number of Irish families settling down to farm in the area in the 1850s. A search of the Daviess County Deeds Index for the period 1852 to 1853 has produced the list that is appended here. It suggests that transfers almost always took place in units of 40 acres at a time, with a small number of units of 80 acres being transferred in that period.

The recipients of these properties received widely varying amounts of land within those parameters. If we can assume that there is no duplication of names in this group, we can conclude that a total of eleven individuals received just a tract of 40 acres each, seven received two tracts of 40 acres each, four received three tracts (and in two of those cases the total was 160 acres), and one individual, James Farrell, received seven tracts of 40 acres each, or a total of 280

acres. While there was considerable range in terms of the total transferred to different individuals, then, the majority of individuals got small grants of 40 or 80 acres.

These grants were widely distributed throughout the county. A few were made for land in townships through which the canal passed, but most were in Barr and Reeve Townships, at some distance from the route but in the heart of the area that already had a large Irish farming population by 1850. The desire to join an already established Irish community may have motivated some of these individuals to take land from the company at this point.

### **Select Bibliography**

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Way, Peter. *Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of the North American Canals*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

**Grants of Land in Daviess County to Individuals Likely to Have Been Irish  
Workers on the Wabash and Erie Canal, 1849–1857**

Although the list below was created by a search of the Daviess County Deeds Index, individuals are included based on their having appeared in burial information for Irish Americans in Daviess County or because the nature of their last name indicates they were Irish.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Location in Section</b>	<b>Sect/Twnshp/Rnge</b>	<b>Date</b>
Burke, Michael	40	NEq/SWq	23/4/5	Dec. 1, 1853
Burns, James	40	NWq/SEq	33/5/5	Mar. 1, 1854
Burns, James	40	NEq/SEq	33/5/5	Dec. 1, 1853
Cahill, William	40	SWq/NEq	5/2/5	Mar. 1, 1854
Collins, John	40	SEq/SWq	35/2/5	June 1, 1849
Conlon, James	40	SWq/NWq	28/2/5	Nov. 1, 1854
Devine, Michael	40	NEq/SWq	33/3/5	July 1, 1849
Doyle, John	40	NWq/SEq	14/2/5	July 2, 1852
Doyle, John	40	SWq/SEq	14/2/5	June 1, 1853
Farrell, James	40	SWq/SEq	28/3/5	June 1, 1849
Farrell, James	40	NWq/NEq	28/3/5	Dec. 1, 1853
Farrell, James	40	NEq/NWq	33/3/5	Nov. 1, 1853
Farrell, James	40	SWq/SWq	28/3/5	June 1, 1853
Farrell, James	40	SEq/NEq	28/3/5	Dec. 1, 1854
Farrell, James	40	NWq/NEq	33/3/5	Mar. 1, 1854
Farrell, James	40	NEq/NEq	33/3/5	Dec. 1, 1854
Fitzgerald, John	40	NWq/SEq	5/3/5	Apr. 1, 1852
Flynn, Thomas	40	NEq/SWq	5/3/5	June 1, 1853
Hughes, John	40	NEq/SEq	34/2/6	Dec. 1, 1853
Kennedy, James	40	SWq/NEq	28/3/5	Nov. 1, 1853
Kennedy, James	40	NEq/NWq	28/3/5	Nov. 1, 1853
Kennedy, James	80	NWq/SWq and SEq/NWq	28/3/5	May 1, 1853
Lafferty, Joseph	40	NWq/NWq	34/5/5	Mar. 1, 1855
Lavelle, Michael	43	NEq/SWq	18/3/5	Nov. 1, 1851
Lavelle, Michael	40	SWq/SEq	18/3/5	Nov. 1, 1853
McCann, John	40	NWq/NEq	23/2/5	May 1, 1854
McCarthy, Dennis	40	SWq/SEq	5/3/5	Oct. 1, 1852
McCormick, Michael	40	NWq/SEq	10/4/7	Mar. 1, 1855
McCormick, Michael	80	Eh/SEq	10/4/7	Mar. 1, 1855
Murphy, Cornelius	80	Wh/NEq	17/3/5	Mar. 1, 1853
Murphy, Cornelius	80	Sh/NWq	17/3/5	Mar. 1, 1853
Murphy, John A.	40	NWq/SEq	28/3/5	Mar. 1, 1850
Murphy, John A.	40	SWq/NEq	33/3/5	Mar. 1, 1850
Nealan, Dennis	48	SWq/NEq and NWq/SEq	9/1/5	July 10, 1857
O'Donoghue, James	40	NEq/NWq	21/3/5	June 1, 1851
O'Donoghue, James	40	SEq/NEq	29/3/5	Mar. 1, 1853

O'Donoghue, James	40	SWq/NWq	28/3/5	Dec. 1, 1854
Ryan, Michael	80	Nh/NEq	32/4/6	June 1, 1853
Ryan, Michael	40	SEq/NEq	32/4/6	Apr. 2, 1853
Ryan, Michael	40	SWq/NEq	32/4/6	Mar. 1, 1856
Shea, James	40	NWq/NEq	32/2/5	Dec. 1, 1853
Shea, James	40	NEq/NWq	28/2/5	Mar. 1, 1853
Solon, John	40	NWq/NEq	30/2/5	Aug. 1, 1851
Solon, John	40	SWq/SEq	19/2/5	Dec. 1, 1853

*Source: Daviess County Courthouse, Deed Index, Grantors I, 1852–1853*

Note: Explanation of “Location in Section” and “Section/Township/Range”: SWq/NEq and 33/3/5 means a plot occupying in the southwest quarter of the northeast quarter of section 33 in township 3 north (of the baseline) and range 5 west (of the second prime meridian in Indiana). For an explanation of the baseline and meridians, see Marion Clawson, *The Land System of the United States: An Introduction to the History and Practice of Land Use and Land Tenure* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 48; or Hildegard Binder Johnson, *Order Upon the Land: The U.S. Rectangular Survey and the Upper Mississippi Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 75.

An “h” indicates half, so, for example in the entry for Michael Ryan containing 80 acres, “Nh/NEq” would indicate the north half of the northeast quarter.