

Felix Dunlavy and the Irish Influx into Hamburg Township, Michigan

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I'd like to begin my talk about Felix Dunlavy – who was the first person to purchase land here, in 1831 – by stepping back a bit to look at what drew him and others to this place at that time in history.

At the dawn of the 19th century, Michigan – then a territory – had just passed through a period of intense upheaval. First a war between the French and British had scarred the land and entangled the Native population. The British won, but they didn't keep the land for long; they were routed by the Americans during the Revolutionary War. The War of 1812 brought these two combatants together again, but the result was the same. By 1815, Americans were seemingly free to extend their reach into Michigan.

But it was not until the regions' tribes relinquished their property rights that the pioneer era in Michigan could begin. That task fell to Governor Lewis Cass, who secured more than 20 treaties during his tenure, effectively expelling most Native Americans from their lands. He then personally led several surveying expeditions and facilitated the first public land sales in the southern tiers of our counties. Settlement was further spurred by the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, which opened the floodgates to farmers and merchants from New England and New York. By the 1830s, the rush to Michigan — “Michigan Fever,” it was called — resulted in the territory growing faster than any other part of the country.

It was into this environment that Felix Dunlavy arrived, seeking a home for himself and his family. A native of County Fermanagh in northern Ireland, Felix was then in his mid-50s – considered rather old for a settler.

So why would Felix start a new life in Michigan at his age? Likely for the same reasons that other people did: In the 1830s, fertile farmland was available here in generously sized plots for just \$1.50 an acre. Another draw was that Michigan represented a “clean slate”: a chance for those who were struggling to make ends meet in the East to improve their lot in life.

The very first land transaction in Livingston County occurred in March 1831 in Green Oak Township. But Felix wasn't far behind: In July of that year, he checked out several sites in Hamburg Township – then part of Washtenaw County, until Livingston was established in 1836 – and rushed to the land office in Detroit to stake his claim. He also bought land in Webster Township, which is still a part of Washtenaw County. For this reason, he's regarded as a pioneer settler in both areas.

Felix and his wife Abigail brought four children with them from their previous home in New York state: they were named Felix Jr., Mary, Lucinda, and John. Soon after their arrival, Felix Sr. began to build a proper house for them, which still stands at 6601 Mast Road. The Dunlavys became involved in their community and were one of the founding families of Dexter's St. Joseph Catholic Church. After Abigail died in 1843, Felix Sr. married a woman named Ann and they had two children.

Felix Jr., the eldest child, grew up to be very highly regarded. He married a local girl named Anna Gallagher in 1854 and their union produced 9 children. The 1881 *History of Washtenaw County* describes him as being engaged in agricultural pursuits and

stock raising. It further notes that “he has toiled long and hard and succeeded in acquiring a large landed estate, consisting of 740 acres. He is liberal in both religion and politics.”

Like his brother, John Dunlavy also married a Gallagher girl and established a farm: in his case, around Whitewood Lake. His obituary in an 1891 issue of the *Livingston Democrat* says that he was “a good man in all that the term implies. Conscientious in all his dealings with his fellow men, and generous to a fault, he won and retained the friendship and respect of all with whom he associated.” John also made provisions for his sister Lucinda in his will.

The extended Dunlavy family generally lived quiet lives in Livingston and Washtenaw Counties. But every now and then, a “Mrs. Dunlavy,” whom I suspect was Felix Jr.’s wife, appeared in the Ann Arbor newspapers. Once it was for being pitched out of her carriage and suffering a nasty head wound. Another time, she accused her neighbor of stealing silverware that she was taking home from an event. It turns out that she had put the silverware in his carriage by mistake.

In the next generation, grandson Frank Dunlavy chose to break away from the family business and open a meat market in Pinckney. And another grandson named John J. Dunlavy was asked to be the keynote speaker at the 1931 celebration honoring the 1831 pioneers. Here’s a snippet from his speech:

“The men and women who settled Hamburg had a lot of vision and a lot of grit. ...They had hard times and good times, and plenty of good hard cider to keep their spirits up when times were bad. ...This [event] is exactly the kind of celebration they would have liked. [Were Grandfather Dunlavy] here tonight, he

would bid you all welcome with a warmth of good old Irish brogue expressing genuine Irish feeling.”

Immediately after his talk, John J. took a seat and was promptly seized by a heart attack, dying at the scene. Given the pall that his death cast over the 1,000 people who had gathered for the centennial, organizers thought it best to cancel the rest of the day’s events.

The Dunlavys were the first of many Irish families to settle in southern Hamburg Township in the 1830s. Within one year of their arrival, the Patrick Gallaghers moved in, followed shortly by the Connors, Fagans, O’Briens, O’Maras, Ryans, Shanahans, Shehans, Sullivans, and others who purchased land in sections 28 through 34.

As John J. Dunlavy had noted at the end of his centennial speech, “The Germans named the town[ship]. But the Irish pioneered it.”

The timing of the Irish influx into the township coincided with territory-wide efforts to reach a population level that would satisfy one of the key requirements for statehood. At the beginning of the 1830s, the number of people in the territory was 32,000: about half of what was needed. As the decade and migration progressed, however, that number jumped to 200,000-plus. After checking off this requirement, writing a constitution that Congress would approve, and settling a “minor” border dispute with Ohio (the Toledo War), Michigan was declared a state in 1837. Where would we be without the Dunlavys and their friends from the Emerald Isle?

And how do we remember the early Dunlavys today? Their presence is acknowledged in a street name off Strawberry Lake Road and, for a time, as a lake. Most importantly,

Felix Sr. is celebrated on a state historical marker in Hamburg Cemetery as one of the first settlers who saw the potential in this township and chose to put down roots here.