

The aking of ilwaukee Stories

Historical Time Period : 1846-Present

Milwaukee Neighborhoods Change Over Time



Polish Immigrant Family



Latina Women



St. Josaphat's Basilica

Connecting to “The Making of Milwaukee”

Video Chapters: #5 - Neighbors and Strangers, #7 - City of Immigrants & #13 - The Roaring Twenties

Curriculum Chapter: Gr. 5-12 - Coming to Milwaukee

Milwaukee Neighborhoods Change Over Time

Milwaukee is a city settled by different immigrant groups, people from many different countries. In the 1800's and early 1900's most of Milwaukee's immigrants came from Europe. Later, immigrants came from Mexico, various parts of Asia and the Middle East. People left their homes in these countries to find a better life, a place with opportunities to make a good living and to get an education. Many immigrants came because family or friends had already immigrated to Milwaukee and encouraged them to make a new life here in the United States. Some immigrants came because their countries were engaged in devastating wars.

The immigrants usually settled in ethnic neighborhoods made up of people from their homeland. In ethnic neighborhoods, it was not uncommon for people to speak the same language, eat the same foods and practice the same religion. Children in ethnic neighborhoods became bi-lingual, able to speak two languages. They were often the first in their families to learn English and would translate from English into Polish, Italian, or Spanish for their parents. The same is true for immigrants arriving today.

Part. 1: The Irish and the Italians in the Third Ward

The first neighborhood story takes place in the "Third Ward". It is an area south of Michigan Street between the Milwaukee River and Lake Michigan.

When people from the country of Ireland began coming to Milwaukee over 150 years ago they settled in the Third Ward. Most Irish people were very poor because Ireland was in the midst of a famine. Life was difficult for them in the Third Ward, too, because the land there was very swampy and living conditions were not good. Even though Irish people were from the same ethnic group, some had a hard time getting along with each other. So many fights broke out in the Third Ward that the area became known as "The Bloody Third".

The Irish were industrious people and found work in factories, construction, lumber and coal yards, and building railroads. These were difficult jobs but gradually the Irish began to make more money and to improve their living conditions. After a few years, some Irish moved out of the Third Ward to be closer to jobs in the Menominee Valley. The Irish workers and their families settled in the neighborhoods of Merrill Park and Tory Hill where they build Catholic churches and opened businesses. These neighborhoods are high on the bluff above the Menominee Valley and working men could walk a short distance down the bluff to jobs in the valley.

In 1892, the worst fire in Milwaukee's history destroyed a very large area of the Third Ward. Almost 2,000 people were left homeless. The fire was so bad that it could be seen from Chicago. Firefighters from Chicago came all the way to Milwaukee to help fight the blaze. The fire caused even more Irish people to move out of the Third Ward.

As the Irish people moved out of the Third Ward, another group of immigrants began to move in. These new immigrants were Italians from the country of Italy. Much like the Irish immigrants, Italians came to Milwaukee with very little money. They could not afford to rent or buy new homes, so they, too, settled in the poorest area of the city. A visitor to the Third Ward in those days would hear Italian and English spoken. Just like the poor Irish immigrants before them, the Italians took the most dangerous, dirty and difficult jobs in factories and on the railroads.

Not all of the Italians worked in factories, though. Many Italian immigrants grew up in Sicily, an island just off the shore of Italy. Some had been farmers and grocers who sold fruits and vegetables. So, when they came to Milwaukee, they began to sell fruit and vegetables. They loaded small carts with oranges, bananas, apples, and seasonal vegetables. Then they pushed their carts through Milwaukee's streets to sell the produce. When people heard the call of the vegetable and fruit peddler, they came out of their homes to buy fresh food. This was before the days of supermarkets, so it was handy for people to have food brought right to the front door. Other Italians started companies that made pasta and other traditional Italian foods.

In spite of having so much in common, the Irish and the Italians often had problems living together. As more Italians moved into the Third Ward, more Irish people moved out. When the Italians first arrived, they went to the Catholic Church at St. John's Cathedral in downtown Milwaukee where many Irish people attended. But the Italians did not feel comfortable there and wanted their own church. So they built a Catholic Church and called it the *Madonna di Pompeii*. Here they worshipped with people who spoke Italian and understood Italian religious celebrations. On special holy days, Milwaukee's Italians walked through the Third Ward in a procession and carried statues of their holy people. After the procession, the Italians celebrated with food, music, and fireworks. These celebrations were known as *festas*, or festivals.

Many years later these *festas* became organized into *Festa Italiana*, Milwaukee's oldest ethnic festival, celebrated every summer along Lake Michigan. Today, there are many popular summertime ethnic festivals in Milwaukee that honor various cultures including Polish Fest, Greek Fest, Bastille Days, Mexican Fiesta, German Fest, Afro Fest, and Indian Summer. Currently, *Irish Fest* is the largest celebration of Irish music and culture in all of North America.

Like the Irish, Italians eventually moved out of the Third Ward and the area continues to change. Today the Third Ward is thriving with shops, restaurants, businesses, the Riverwalk, and many new residents. People in the Third Ward now live in condominiums or apartments, many created out of former factories where the Irish and Italians worked. Some of the new Third Ward people have moved from Milwaukee's suburbs back into the city. The current Third Ward residents walk on the same ground that was once a swamp, then a place where Irish people built modest homes that were eventually destroyed by a great fire, and where Milwaukee's Italians first lived. New residents are building new Milwaukee traditions just like the people who came before them.

Part. 2: Polish and Hispanic People on the "South Side"

The Third Ward was not the only part of Milwaukee where one ethnic group settled and was gradually replaced by another. The South Side of Milwaukee was home first to Polish immigrants and then to Mexican people in search of a better life. Like the Irish and Italians, their stories are similar, yet different. Polish and Mexican people are mostly Catholic but they came from different parts of the world. Both brought their traditions, or ways of living, to Milwaukee, yet those traditions are very different. The Polish and Mexican immigrants were alike, though, because they came in search of a better life.

Polish people began coming to Milwaukee during the mid to late 1800's. They were fleeing from unemployment, poverty and political unrest in the country of Poland. On Milwaukee's South Side, the Polish immigrants created many businesses such as bakeries, butcher shops, barber shops, grocery stores, neighborhood taverns, and other businesses. Shopping on Lincoln Avenue and Mitchell Street became like a downtown for Polish immigrants.

Polish people wanted to own their own homes, something they could never have dreamed of in their native Poland. In Milwaukee they often built their homes one story at a time to accommodate growing families. These homes are called "Polish Flats" and today there are still many examples of those flats on the South Side.

The center of life for Milwaukee's Polish community was the Catholic Church. In 1866, Polish people built St. Stanislaus Catholic Church, which was the first large Polish church in all of the major cities in the United States. Not only did Polish people worship God in this church, they also gathered there with friends, and met and helped other new Polish immigrants. As more and more Polish people came to Milwaukee, their community grew so large that they became the second largest ethnic group in Milwaukee behind the Germans. As a result, they needed an even bigger Catholic church. Together they built St. Josaphat's Church. It was completed in 1901 and was Milwaukee's largest church. Many Polish people sacrificed their time and hard-earned savings in order to build this beautiful house of worship. In 1929, the Vatican in Rome, Italy, which houses the governing body of the Catholic Church, honored St. Josaphat's by designating it as a Basilica, a

Catholic Church with special privileges. The Basilica is one of Milwaukee's most famous and extraordinary landmarks.

During the early 1900's, before St. Josaphat's became a Basilica, Mexican immigrants began coming to Milwaukee in fairly large numbers. Their first stop was Walker's Point, an area of Milwaukee between the Third Ward and the South Side. Many Mexican men took jobs in Milwaukee's tanneries, places where the hides of cows were turned into leather. It was very hard, hot and dirty work, but provided job opportunities they did not have in Mexico. Before long, other Mexican families came to Milwaukee and set up their own restaurants and stores. Their first church was a place of worship called the Mission of Our Lady of Guadalupe. It was located on South Fifth Street. Gradually the Mexican community began to expand into the South Side.

During the 1930's, only a few years after many Mexicans immigrated to Milwaukee, the Great Depression struck the United States. During the Great Depression, many people in Milwaukee and throughout the country lost their jobs. Some Mexican people even moved back to Mexico in those difficult times. However, by the late 1960's, Mexicans began once again to immigrate to Milwaukee in large numbers. Other Hispanic people from places like Puerto Rico, and Central and South America immigrated here as well. By this time, Polish people living on the South Side began moving to homes in Milwaukee's growing suburbs. Although Polish shops and churches remain on the South Side today, the area has now become known for a wide variety of Hispanic restaurants, bakeries, and stores. What was once Sixteenth Street has been named Cesar Chavez Drive, named after a very important Mexican leader in the United States who struggled to gain rights for farm workers. Mitchell Street, once the shopping center of the Polish, is now lined with Hispanic businesses and community service agencies. Today, Saint Stanislaus Church, once the center of the Polish community where people worshiped in the Polish language, offers a Sunday mass in Spanish.

From Irish to Italian immigrants in the Third Ward, and from Polish to Hispanic immigrants on the South Side, the history of Milwaukee's neighborhoods reveals changes over time. The story continues as new people come to our city in search of a better life. As this happens, our neighborhoods change when new immigrants move in and take the place of older ethnic groups who move elsewhere. Milwaukee is a city of immigrants and diversity, a city of ever-changing neighborhoods.