

Many Queer Ways: Cornelius Heeney, Catholic-Quaker Bachelor

At the turn of the century, Brooklyn's most prominent Catholic philanthropist Cornelius Heeney was remembered as "an odd character" possessing "many queer ways:" until his death in 1848, he dressed like a 18th century Quaker. ["Cornelius Heeney, Founder of Brooklyn Society, Had Many Queer Ways." Brooklyn *Eagle* (Sunday, October 29, 1899, 28.)] As shown here, Heeney's housemates included John George Gottsberger, Francis Cooper, and Patrick Halegan: "a sort of familiar who lived in the Brooklyn house with Mr. Heeney during the close of his life and exercised considerable influence over him." -- Mitchell Santine Gould, curator, LeavesOfGrass.Org

=====

Excerpted from: Thomas F. Meehan. "A Self-effaced Philanthropist: Cornelius Heeney, 1754-1848." *The Catholic Historical Review*, vol iv (April, 1918), 3-17. (Digitized by Google Books. Thanks, Google!)

In these days of "Foundations" and "Libraries" such a title as a self-effaced philanthropist seems a positive contradiction. It must be used however in making the record of Cornelius Heeney, a layman whose name constantly recurs during the formative period of the Church in New York and Brooklyn in the closing years of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. It is only when the details of almost every movement there for the spread of the Faith during this period are gone over that the ubiquity of his energies and the lavishness of his generosity and charity can in a measure be realized. Yet how few in the now great city know anything about him; how few ever heard his name with any sense of realizing what it means in the history of pioneer days in Catholic New York? However, any general and eager curiosity about our Catholic history is not something over which we can boast at much length; and besides, as the lamented Dr. Herbermann wrote in the *Catholic Historical Review* for October, 1916 (p. 306), "many of our Catholic histories read partly like pages of a ledger and partly like catalogues of bishops and priests." The layman, outside a few stock historic figures, is

conspicuously absent. Cornelius Heeney could survey the foundations of the Church in Greater New York today and with justice paraphrase Sir Christopher Wren's famous epitaph. In establishing the Brooklyn Benevolent Society he effaced his own personality, but put himself in the front rank of practical philanthropists.

He was a curious type of the apostolic Celt who has carried the Cross to the utmost confines of the known world. Born in King's County, Ireland, in 1754, the first thirty years of his life were spent in his native land. A relative, who was in business in Dublin, gave Him a good mercantile education, so that he was well equipped to make his way in America when he determined to follow his father to the New World in 1784. After a perilous voyage he landed penniless at Philadelphia, where a Quaker named Mead gave him employment. He tarried there only a few months, and then went to New York. Here another Quaker, a shipping merchant and trader named William Backhaus, engaged him as accountant and bookkeeper in his store which was located at No. 40 Little Dock, now Water Street. In this store he had as a fellow-employee John Jacob Astor, then a porter and salesman, and subsequently the founder of the family of multi-millionaires of our own time. The William Backhaus Astor of local fame was named after the proprietor of the Little Dock Street store, who retired from business in 1797 and, going back to England to end his days, left his business to his two employes Heeney and Astor.

Their dealings were mainly in trading furs and skins, but the partnership only lasted for a short time. When they separated Astor retained the old Backhaus store and Heeney opened another in the same line, at No. 82 Water Street. He was a shrewd,

cautious merchant, well knowing the value of money, and he soon acquired a competence. In those days of moderate ideas as to wealth, as he was a bachelor, his personal outlay was a trifle of his income, for which he seemed to have no other use than to further the interests of the Church and to answer the pleas of charity. St. Peter's, the first congregation in New York, it will be remembered, was organized in 1785 and Mr. Heeney was therefore one of the few assisting in this connection . . .

. . . Of course Cornelius Heeney sat in a prominent pew, as was fitting for a man of his social and commercial standing. It was a coign of vantage whence he surveyed his fellow-worshippers and it led to a friendship with a young Austrian that in a measure influenced this young man's life. This young man was John George Gottsberger, who arrived in New York in 1801, and attended Mass at St. Peter's. One Sunday, he said in telling the story to his son, who in turn related it to me: "A little old man came up to me in St. Peter's and said, 'Young man, I've observed you hearing Mass here regularly and I wish you'd come and sit in my pew.'" The invitation was accepted and an intimacy began that prompted Heeney to take the young man to live with him in his bachelor apartments over the store in Water Street. Another friend who shared its shelter was Francis Cooper, a Philadelphian of good old Catholic stock whose name is to be found among those foremost in early New York's Catholic activities. Cooper was one of the first of the Faith to hold public office in New York, and served as a member of the State legislature in 1807, 1808, 1809, 1815 and 1826. It was when he was elected in 1806 that an obnoxious anti-Catholic oath of office was finally wiped off the statute books so that he could take his seat in the Assembly. The trustees of St. Peter's presented the petition to the

legislature that brought about this reform. Mr. Heeney also took an active part in politics and as a Democrat served five terms in the Assembly, following Mr. Cooper from 1818 to 1822. As a patriotic Irishman he joined with Thomas Addis Emmet and the other exiles of the '98 rebellion to defeat the effort of Rufus King to be chosen United States Senator from New York. King, during the United Irishmen episode, was our Minister to England, and in that capacity by his own diplomatic objections tried to prevent Emmet and his fellow-prisoners in Fort George from coming to the United States, thus keeping them in Fort George as political prisoners for a considerable period beyond the time set for their release. They retaliated by blocking his election as Senator from New York.

Cooper and Heeney were the first Catholics to hold elective offices in New York and the first Catholic members of the legislature. Cooper during his stay in New York appears to have enjoyed the confidence and esteem of his ecclesiastical superiors and to have shown himself in every way worthy of their friendship. His letters to his parents in Philadelphia, reproduced in the American Historical Society's Records in 1900, give interesting sidelights on New York during the first quarter of the nineteenth century . . .

. . . That part of New York's First Ward east of Broadway and below Wall Street was destroyed by a fire that broke out on December 16, 1835. In all 648 stores and property valued at \$18,000,000 were destroyed. Heeney's establishment at 82 Water Street was among the number. He did not rebuild it. His fortune in spite of his lavish gifts to charity was ample and he retired to live at his ease in a house and farm in Brooklyn on the heights overlooking the river which he had purchased for \$7,500, in 1806. He had

always been interested in the progress of his fellow Catholics in Brooklyn. The Catholic colony there began with the establishment of the Navy Yard on that side of the East River in 1801 . . .

. . . Heeney's Brooklyn residence was a Mecca for those in need; few failed in their appeals to his generosity. Children and poor widows were the special objects of his care. In spite of his years and busy life he retained all the alertness and the shrewdness that had enabled him to prosper in his business career. In 1845, he made up his mind to be his own executor, and to provide for the continuation of the benevolence that had been the predominant characteristic of most of the years of his long life. He therefore determined to establish what he called the Brooklyn Benevolent Society, which was really an incorporation of his estate.

. . . The first meeting of the Brooklyn Benevolent Society was held on August 6, 1845 and Bishop John Hughes presided. Besides Mr. Heeney there were present, Mayor T. G. Talmadge of Brooklyn, John G. Gottsberger, Bartlett Smith, James Friel, Peter Turner, and William H. Peck. Mayor Talmadge eulogized "the generous donor whose name shall be held in remembrance by a grateful people," and Mr. Heeney explained that his idea of the charity was mainly that his Catholic fellow countrymen and their families should be relieved from want, many of them on their arrival here being in absolute need of assistance. Bishop Hughes was elected president; James Friel, treasurer; William H. Peck, secretary; and Patrick Halegan, agent. Halegan was a sort of familiar who lived in the Brooklyn house with Mr. Heeney during the close of his life and exercised

considerable influence over him. The life trustees named were the Bishop of New York, the Mayor of Brooklyn, ex officio, Cornelius Heeney, James Friel and W. H. Peck of Brooklyn; John George Gottsberger and Francis Cooper of New York; annual trustees, Peter Turner and N. J. Becar, Brooklyn; Bartlett Smith, New York. They received the formal deed transferring all Mr. Heeney's property to them on September 17, 1845. This property in time became part of the most attractive residential section of Brooklyn and has never been sold. The ground was leased for a term of twenty-one years and then built on. The renewals are made by three valuers, one chosen by the owner of the house, one by the Society and the third by these two. The income of the Society from these rents and investments has averaged from \$15,000 to \$25,000 a year . . .

. . . Mr. Heeney continued to take an active interest in the work of the Society he thus created until a few weeks before his death. The last meeting he attended was held on March 27, 1848. He died on May 3 following. Three days later his funeral took place from St. Paul's Church with all the solemn pomp the Church ordains, after which he was buried in the vault he had built in the rear back of the sanctuary wall.

Over the grave is set a tablet surmounted by a portrait bust . . .

. . . No portrait of Mr. Heeney as far as is known was ever made during his lifetime. A death mask was taken and from this a bust carved for his monument. In a paper read by the Rev. John M. Kiely, at the meeting of the United States Catholic

Historical Society, on September 28, 1891, he said that from those who had known Mr. Heeney he learned that "he was about five feet nine inches in height, clean-shaven and pleasing rather than handsome of face. His forehead was a receding one and his head bald on top. His hair when long was confined behind his neck by a slight ribbon and fell over his coat collar, and to a stranger he would pass as an orthodox Quaker, even to the broad-brimmed hat and William Penn knee breeches."

The Rev. D. A. Merrick, S.J., as a boy lived in a house in Brooklyn, built on Heeney property, and in his *Recollections of an Old Fellow* (Fordham Monthly, January, 1906) says: "The only gentleman I ever knew who wore a pigtail was Mr. Cornelius Heeney." Mr. Frank Gottsberger, the son of Heeney's old protege^ said of his father's patron: "I remember his old home in Brooklyn well. It stood about where Amity Street is now, between Hicks and Henry. At the west end was Mr. Heeney's sitting room where he received his visitors. He sat in a large arm-chair and it was customary for all visitors to salute him on entering the room, the ladies making a curtsy and the men and boys a bow. I remember the drilling I had to go through so that I could make a proper and polite bow. He was very particular in this regard and if any of the boys failed to make a formal salutation on their arrival at the house he would take them to task about it when they appeared before him at their departure."

He was strong-willed, self-opinionated, but not too cranky to get along with his fellows. His long tenure of office, as a trustee of St. Peter's Church in New York without getting into any serious complications with the pastors during a time when trusteeism in

all its most obnoxious phases was rampant, seems to indicate that his charitable disposition extended beyond mere material donations.

After his death the Brooklyn Benevolent Society had to defend its title to the trust he created through a series of vexatious law suits brought by alleged heirs. The famous jurist Charles O'Connor was the Society's legal champion and successfully defeated these raids on its property, which during all the years has been safely and wisely administered for the object this generous old man set it apart. He forgot himself when he gave it to charity, and the great community in which he spent so much of his long and busy life has forgotten him, though the good he did lives after him and yearly adds to the record that is imperishable for his eternal reward.