The Local Contains Multitudes: East Somerville, Massachusetts and the Experiences and Impacts of the Irish and Salvadorans in an “Immigrant City”

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Honors Thesis Submitted to the
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May 8, 2023
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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my family for their unconditional love and support. Not only did they support my academic endeavors, but also reminded me every day to “mine the good stuff” and take in every last moment of my time at Georgetown. To my mom, thank you for making me laugh throughout this process and for listening to my insufferable complaints with open ears. You kept me sane and assured me that I was capable, even when I was at my lowest. To my dad, I cannot possibly thank you enough for your expertise, advice, and emotional support. You taught me more than I could have ever imagined, and without your help, I am not sure I would have finished this project. I am so grateful I had the opportunity to learn from you about something we both care so deeply about.

Academically, I would first like to thank my mentor, Dr. Katherine Benton-Cohen for her endless encouragement throughout this process. She made sure I was always on the right track and never wavered in her faith in my ability to complete my thesis. Her expertise and thoughtful feedback made all of this possible. Additionally, I want to thank Dr. Chandra Manning, not only for being my professor and major advisor, but also for inspiring me to become a history major four years ago. If I hadn’t stumbled upon her class my freshman year, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I think I speak for all of my fellow thesis writers when I say that we are extraordinarily grateful for this class and the support you showed us along the way.

Fourthly, I want to thank my peers. To my roommates and friends who listened to me ramble on about this project for months, thank you for caring so deeply for me. I’ll terribly miss our late night talks, debriefs, and ranting sessions. To my classmates who endured the excessive lengths of my chapter drafts and listened to all of my “rose, bud, thorns” week after week, thank you. This experience has been unforgettable.

Lastly, I want to thank my late grandfather, Richard “Dick” Johnson, whose passion for history and love for Somerville inspired me to take on this project in the first place. He was a steadfast “villen” and the most loving grandfather in the world. This project is dedicated to him.
Preface: A Drive Through East Somerville

“See that place on the corner right there?” I nod towards a tiny convenience store called “Aggie’s Place” as my father narrates our drive down the streets of his childhood neighborhood. “That’s where my friends and I used to buy eggs on Halloween.” I picture him in the seventies running on these same streets that probably look a lot different now, and wonder how a small family business like Aggie’s could stick around for so long.

We continue down Franklin Street and eventually pass Prospect Hill Academy. “The Little Flower School,” my dad says, to my confusion. “That’s what it used to be. That’s where I went to school from kindergarten to eighth grade. And that’s where all the Irish and Italian kids from the neighborhood went to church every Sunday: Saint Benedict’s,” he says, pointing around the corner. I remember learning in Sunday School that Saint Benedict’s did all of their services in Spanish now.

We take a sharp right turn on to Broadway, Somerville’s major east-west thoroughfare, “I want you to pay attention to everything on this side of the road,” he instructs. I had driven this way hundreds of times, so I did not understand. To my surprise, in about thirty seconds, I noticed dozens of businesses: Taqueria Tapatío first, followed by Vinny’s Ristorante, Los Paisanos, Taco Loco, and finally, the Mount Vernon Restaurant right at the Charlestown border. These were restaurants I had heard of, but never noticed before. “Immigrant businesses,” he says. “Cool, right?”

We complete a u-turn at the end of the road and start in the other direction, turning and stopping on the corner of Illinois Ave and Broadway. “Check out that plaque over there,” he says, pointing to a small, gray memorial that says: “Site of Ursuline Convent... Burned 1834.”
The tour is coming to a close as we take a left down Glen Street, making a quick stop to admire the undriveable, dead-end of a street called “Bishop Place” that my father grew up on across the street from the back of what is now the East Somerville Community School. We finally take a turn on to Perkins Street, the skinniest two-way I had ever seen, and my dad stops short. “There it is. Grampy’s old house.” I admire the three story, once single-family home that has been split into condos. “He moved here in the thirties with his grandmother who came to East Somerville from Ireland.” I realize that a friend on my basketball team, whose parents came to Somerville from El Salvador, lives next door.

I was ten minutes from where I grew up in West Somerville, yet I felt like I had entered a different world. This drive I took with my dad when I was just a young girl changed my perspective on the community I grew up in and sparked a long held interest in exploring my family’s past and how we are connected to a deeper history of Somerville.
**Introduction: What is Somerville, Massachusetts?**

0.1 East Somerville and the Passing of the Sanctuary Resolution

On April 23rd, 1987, the Somerville Board of Aldermen made the contentious decision to declare Somerville a Sanctuary City. The Sanctuary City Resolution officially proclaimed Somerville “a city of Refuge and Sanctuary for oppressed people, particularly those from El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Brazil and Ireland,” asserting that these immigrants “shall be afforded all rights and privileges offered and supplied to all people residing or working in the City.”

This declaration meant that Somerville’s local law enforcement would limit its cooperation with federal immigration law, curtailing the disclosure of the immigration status of residents seeking city resources and services and of those who have committed minor infractions of the law. Sponsored by Aldermen John Buonomo and John Connolly, the Resolution further characterized Somerville as a unique place that “has historically welcomed newcomers” and possesses “a diverse cultural heritage and multi-national population, of which the city is proud.”

In the years following the passage of the Sanctuary City Resolution, headlines have described Somerville as an “immigrant city” and a “welcome mat” for newcomers, characterizing the “sanctuary” as a place of “Love, Resilience, and Friendship.” However, the Resolution also became a political flashpoint that brought to the surface a great deal of nativist sentiments, particularly regarding recently arrived immigrants from El Salvador.

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2 Ibid.


So, what did this “sanctuary” resolution signify exactly? Was it purely symbolic or did it have real tangible effects? Was Somerville truly the historic “welcome mat” for immigrants that the headlines made it out to be? What does it mean to be an “immigrant city,” and how did Somerville come to exemplify this title? And why did the Resolution list two vastly different groups, the Irish and Salvadorans, together in one statement?

Some of the answers to these questions may lie in an often forgotten and stigmatized neighborhood: East Somerville. Since the arrival of the earliest waves of European immigrants to the influx of the latest newcomers from Latin America, the City of Somerville has attracted immigrants in large numbers, and many of them have settled in the working-class neighborhood of East Somerville. The neighborhood originally attracted immigrants for its affordability and the availability of low skill jobs. Today, although much has changed, Somerville has maintained its image among newer immigrant groups as a place of opportunity. As of 2022, over 24 percent of Somerville residents identify as “foreign-born” in comparison to only 17.6 percent in all of Massachusetts. East Somerville, in particular, has maintained its character as a refuge for immigrants. 2021 census data lists over 36% of its residents as “foreign-born,” far higher than both the state and city average. Additionally, while Somerville is the most densely populated city in Massachusetts with over 80,000 residents in just four square miles, East Somerville is its most densely populated neighborhood, mainly due to its substantial immigrant population.

The neighborhood is a special one; it is uniquely immigrant-dominated and remains mostly working-class while much of the rest of the city has changed. Yet despite its rich culture

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and identity that Somerville claims to take pride in as an “immigrant city,” outsiders sometimes perceive the neighborhood as “dangerous” and “tough.” Additionally, in the late 1960s, much of East Somerville was literally cut off from the rest of the city by the construction of Interstate 93, which required the demolition of dozens of homes and businesses as entire streets disappeared to make way for the eight lane traffic corridor contributing to the segregation of much of the city’s working-class and immigrant population from the rest of the city.

According to Professor of Sociology Susan Ostrander, “East Somerville has twice as many Hispanics (to use the U.S. Census term) than live in the city as a whole (20 percent versus 9 percent).” She adds that “the eastern part of Somerville has more people of color than any other neighborhood compared with the city as a whole (34 percent versus 23 percent).” The neighborhood’s identification with the Latino community coupled with its historic reputation as “unsafe” and “undesirable” and its segregation from the rest of the city have contributed to its stigmatization. People often avoid the neighborhood, and its history is largely unexplored despite all it has to offer. This project will pay special attention to the neighborhood of East Somerville and the people, particularly the Irish and Salvadorans, who changed it and were changed by it.

The neighborhood is also personally significant to my family. My grandfather and father both grew up in East Somerville and come from working-class, Irish families. They saw firsthand the dramatic shift in the neighborhood’s ethnic makeup from being almost all Irish and Italians to its now extremely diverse composition, where Salvadorans have made an especially noticeable impact. While the arrival of Salvadorans and other new immigrants brought out the nativist sentiment in many working-class Irish and Italian residents, or what Ostrander calls

10 Ibid.
“old-timers,”\textsuperscript{11} the neighborhood of East Somerville still serves as a representation of the history of Somerville’s immigration, home to both old and new immigrant groups alike.

0.2 “The Ville”: A Brief History

 Originally part of Charlestown (which is now part of Boston), Somerville became its own town in 1842, located just northeast of Boston. It was officially incorporated as a city in 1872, thirty years later after a period of industrialization and population growth. What was originally a rural farmland became a booming industrial center with thousands of jobs for working-class residents and immigrants. The population of the city also grew immensely during this time, from just 1,000 residents to 15,000,\textsuperscript{12} mainly due to Irish refugees fleeing the Famine and the local migration of recently arrived Irish from Boston’s more crowded ethnic enclaves to “suburbs” like Somerville during this time. Between this early period of Irish immigration to Somerville and the 1930s, when immigration slowed down due to the Great Depression, the Irish experienced overt discrimination in just about every aspect of life, because of their Catholic religion, their socioeconomic status, as well as their presumed “criminality.” However, they also completely changed Somerville, especially East Somerville, through establishing churches and infiltrating local politics. They took over the School Committee, and later the Board of Aldermen and the mayoral office. According to Ostrander, “Somerville’s evolution from a spacious rural pastoral summer playground for affluent urbanites to a densely populated, working-class industrial immigrant city made possible the election of Mayor Murphy (the first Irish mayor of Somerville) and the first-ever city Board of Aldermen controlled by the Democratic Party.”\textsuperscript{13}

 In the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, Somerville entered a period of decline. Political corruption eroded confidence in local government. Crime rates were high and violence ever present. This

\textsuperscript{11} Ostrander, \textit{Citizenship and Governance}.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 20.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 21.
period of decline for the city turned around with a series of revitalization efforts that will be discussed later. Coincidentally, the changes came around the same time that a new wave of immigrants began coming to the city. Central American refugees, particularly those from El Salvador, began arriving in Somerville in the 1980s due to human rights violations and civil wars plaguing Central America. Between 1970 and 2000, the city’s foreign-born population doubled in percentage. During this period of transition, the older political establishment associated with corruption was ousted in favor of a reform-minded “progressive” wave of political leadership. Ironically, the “reformers” were still “old-timers” in the sense that they were predominantly the next generation of Irish and Italians, albeit with a new agenda for the city. This new agenda began the transformation of Somerville into a more liberal and beautified city, but also contributed to its present-day state as a far more affluent and gentrified place.

0.3 Historiography

This project pursues a similar objective that Nancy Foner undertook in her book From Ellis Island to JFK: New York’s Two Great Waves of Immigration. Foner conducted a study comparing older waves of immigration to newer ones in New York City, discovering important continuities as well as differences. She argues that comparative studies allow for the differences to stand out more clearly, but also reveal important similarities that we may have never noticed or considered before. Taking Foner’s idea of comparing an old wave of immigrants to a newer

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14 Ostrander, Citizenship and Governance, 23.
one, my work intends to do exactly this: to highlight important differences between the Irish and Salvadorans and to simultaneously point out where the two groups overlap in unexpected ways, in the specific, less explored context of East Somerville, Massachusetts.

First, the Irish immigrant experience, most relevant in Chapter 1, has been defined as a journey from intense discrimination to assimilation and an eventual ascension of the socioeconomic ladder. Timothy Meagher and Kerby Miller were two of the first major historians to explore themes in Irish immigration in depth. In his book *Inventing Irish America: Generation, Class, and Ethnic Identity in a New England City, 1880-1928*, Meagher explores the city of Worcester, Massachusetts, tracing the Irish experience from the 1880s when they were heavily discriminated against through the early twentieth century when they had assimilated and taken over Catholic America.\(^\text{16}\) The book specifically explores how the Irish navigated their complicated ethnic identity in an America that had not yet accepted them, and how they were eventually able to gain acceptance. Miller’s book, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, published in 1985, offers one of the first, most comprehensive histories of the Irish’s experience in both leaving Ireland as well as their experience as immigrants in America.\(^\text{17}\) He conducts a study using primary source documents of Irish immigrants, including letters, diaries, memoirs, songs, and poems, to tell their story. The two historians differ in that Meagher highly emphasizes class identity as an important theme of the Irish experience in America, whereas Miller highlights how Irish immigrants’ classification as “exiles” shaped their identity after migrating to the United States.

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Additionally, the concept of “whiteness” has been a prevalent theme in the study of Irish immigrants in America. Many historians have argued that the Irish have not always been considered “white,” but were able to achieve acceptance to this exclusive identity through assimilation and the consolidation of political power. David R. Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* discusses how race played a role in the creation of the “the white worker,” a distinct identity that would separate them from the African American. Noël Ignatiev additionally discusses the question of how the Irish “became white” in his scholarship as well. While historians in recent years have pushed back on the notion that the Irish were not always “white,” ethnic identity and a fear of being left at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder were key themes in the Irish experience in America that historians have addressed quite prolifically.

The story of Irish America also rests on the concept of social mobility. Multiple scholars explore this theme, including historians Reed Ueda, who published two studies specifically focused on the Irish immigrant experience in Somerville, and Stephan Thernstrom, whose work was primarily centered on Newburyport working-class Irish. Ueda, conducting one of the very few studies of Somerville of its kind, strongly emphasizes the importance of education for the Irish in Somerville, arguing that secondary education allowed for the upward mobility of its Irish blue-collar students, contributing to their admittance into a new middle class from the 1870s to the 1910s. From 1912 on, the Irish who did gain political power through their educational achievements proceeded to help other Irish immigrants to do the same by advocating for education reform that would be useful to the upward mobility of working class immigrants such as...

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as the establishment of junior high schools.\textsuperscript{21} Thernstrom, on the other hand, believes property ownership was the most effective way for the Irish to be upwardly mobile in Massachusetts, though he does acknowledge the importance of education for upward mobility. This project agrees with Ueda’s Somerville-centric research and focuses on how the Irish in Somerville overcame discrimination and uniquely used education and the local government through the School Committee to achieve upward mobility and political dominance, something that Salvadorans have struggled with.

For Salvadorans, the major divergences from the Irish experience include the vastly different federal immigration restrictions that existed for newer immigrants as well as the obvious racial and linguistic difference between the two groups that resulted in different forms of prejudice. With regards to differing immigration restrictions, the concept of “illegality” did not become prominent until the second half of the twentieth century. The word “undocumented” had replaced “illegal” in politically correct discourse only in recent decades, but “illegal” has been and is still often widely used to describe many immigrants. Historian and immigrant rights activist Aviva Chomsky explains that “illegality” was really created in 1965, when Mexican migration became “illegal immigration.”\textsuperscript{22} Mae Ngai furthers this idea in her work \textit{Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America}, explaining that the federal immigration restriction constructed the new “illegal alien” as a subject that physically exists within the United States but legally, technically does not, and therefore, is denied rights.\textsuperscript{23} The United States government constructed the concept of illegality at a time when they no longer wanted to legally support the entrance of people from Latin America to the United States. The


concept of being “illegal” was an imposition that nineteenth-century Irish did not have to contend with. Salvadorans, however, did, and it deprived them of their rights by legally making them ineligible for privileges enjoyed by citizens.

Additionally, though the Irish experienced discrimination for their ethnicity, they did not experience the same forms of racial discrimination that Salvadorans faced. Anthropologist Leo Chavez summarizes the concept of the “Latino Threat Narrative” as a few different “interwoven plot lines”: “the construction of illegal aliens as criminals, the Quebec model, the Mexican invasion and reconquista (reconquest) of the United States, an unwillingness to learn English and integrate into U.S. society, out-of-control fertility, and threats to national security.”

In Somerville, both the false assumption that “illegal aliens” were criminals as well as Latino immigrants’ supposed “unwillingness to learn English” were prominent trends. With regards to language, in their book *Speaking Spanish in the U.S.: The Sociopolitics of Language*, Janet M. Fuller and Jennifer Leeman discuss the “one nation-one language” ideology, or “the notion that each nation is defined by a single language and vice versa” and the manner in which the hegemony of English is tied into this ideology. This belief was, and still is, adopted by many nativists who believe that Spanish-speaking immigrants pose a threat to the American way and was often used to justify linguistic discrimination, such as the adoption of English-only policies.

Concerning the false criminality of Latino immigrants, Mary C. Waters and Philip Kasinitz apply Michelle Alexander’s argument from her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* to the experience of Latino immigrants. Alexander argues that because de jure discrimination based on race was no longer politically viable or 

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24 The Quebec Model refers to the fact that Quebec is still French-speaking in contrast to the rest of Canada, and the basis of nationalism in Quebec rests on the defense of the French language.


socially acceptable, another reason was needed to discriminate against black people in the United States, so the government began using criminality to do so rather than race and used the prison system to take away their rights.27 By disproportionately arresting and surveilling the black community, more black people ended up in the prison system, and as convicts, certain rights such as their right to vote were taken away. Mary C. Waters and Philip Kasinitz explain that the same logic was employed against undocumented immigrants through using their status as “illegal” as an attempt to deny them their rights.28 By making crossing the border illegal, the United States government authorized the detainment of millions of Latin Americans, and thus, the denial of their rights, Water and Kasinitz argue.

In Somerville, specifically, Salvadorans were targeted for their involvement in gangs, and many forget that the Irish were also involved in and stigmatized for this as well. This phenomenon of immigrant involvement in gang activity was first discussed by Frederick Milton Thrasher in his 1927 book The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago in which he argues that the real reason that many immigrants participate in criminal activity is for economic reasons, not because they are inherently criminals.29 Elliot Currie further emphasizes the connection between crime and poverty in his book Crime and Punishment in America.30 This project situates the immigrant gang activity that took hold in Somerville amongst the Irish and Salvadorans within this argument to disprove the notion that immigrants are inherently “criminals” and instead show that they often committed crimes out of economic necessity, a historical continuity clearly demonstrated over time in both the Irish and Salvadoran immigrant experience in Somerville.

The economic hardships that immigrants often face relates to a central phenomenon of this project: America’s antipathy towards poverty. Irish immigrants were heavily discriminated against and even deported for their status as paupers and reliance on poor relief. Historian Hidetaka Hirota, in his book *Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States and the Nineteenth-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy*, explains that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts utilized English Poor Laws in order to deport Irish paupers.\(^31\) Additionally, in their influential essay “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State,” philosopher Nancy Fraser and historian Linda Gordon explain that “in the age of democratic revolutions, the developing new concept of citizenship rested on independence; dependency was deemed antithetical to citizenship.”\(^32\) As such, Irish immigrants were deemed “un-American” as well. The idea of relying on government resources like welfare posed a threat to the American ideals of individualism. Immigrants’ poverty was used as a justification for discrimination, and this project intends to explore how this was present in Somerville for not only the Irish, but also for Salvadoran immigrants in a slightly different form. Rather than being labeled as “paupers,” Salvadorans were marked as “illegal” and perceived as heavily reliant on Somerville’s resources that nativists believed did not “belong” to undocumented immigrants. For both groups of immigrants, nativists utilized an economic argument that immigrants took things from “true Americans” to mask a form of racist and classist discrimination based on immigrants’ deviation from the traditional white, middle-class, English-speaking American identity, a trend that can be clearly seen in Somerville’s local history.


While the Irish and Salvadorans in Somerville both faced discrimination for their “poverty,” the Irish ascended through political participation and social citizenship, while Salvadorans were excluded from political power and thus, chose a cultural self-help route. The term “social citizenship” was coined by English sociologist T. H. Marshall in his 1949 essay “Citizenship and the Social Class.” He defines social citizenship as one’s possession of basic socioeconomic and cultural welfare within their community; in other words, a sense of belonging and stability. Susan Ostrander also discusses social citizenship in Somerville, arguing that for Salvadorans, a lack of social citizenship has prevented them from winning elections and exercising political power, whereas for the Irish, their ability to gain social citizenship allowed them to use local government to achieve social mobility. While Ueda and Thernstrom discuss how the Irish and Italians were able to originally gain a foothold in Somerville civic engagement, Ostrander continues this storyline to explore how newer immigrants are trying to do the same but are ironically now being shut out by these “old-timers” who now control politics in the city.

Ostrander and others investigate additional themes in Somerville history, including local government and the changing social landscape. In *Citizenship and Governance in a Changing City: Somerville, MA*, Ostrander details how Somerville’s political climate changed with the arrival of newer immigrants from Latin America and Haiti as well as the new middle-class professionals who have made their way to the recently revitalized city. Other important contributors to Somerville’s overall history include Carole Zellie, Nancy Schultz, and Anthony Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834 (n.p.: Northeastern University Press, 2002).

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34 Ostrander, *Citizenship and Governance*.
Sammarco,\textsuperscript{37} and Dee Morris Dora St. Martin.\textsuperscript{38} Reed Ueda also contributes to the specific history of Somerville through his two studies about social mobility, offering information on what makes Somerville unique, but also placing Somerville in a broader history of immigrant social mobility. Lastly, The Somerville Historic Preservation Commission and Somerville Museum offer many articles and exhibits about Somerville’s history regarding its architecture, businesses, neighborhoods, and people. The museum and the historic commission have been key in preserving Somerville’s history and offering a plethora of resources to researchers and residents.

Overall, this project intends to explore how two major immigrant groups, one old and one new, have shaped and been shaped by the city of Somerville, with a focus on their experiences in the neighborhood of East Somerville. It culminates in a comparative study of Salvadoran and Irish immigrants who arrived in Somerville and came to define the city’s identity as an “immigrant city,” but who also comprise two immigrant groups that have rarely been directly compared. This study highlights both the continuity and divergence between old and new immigrants in a smaller, less-nationally recognized city. The local exploration of the experience of immigrants is often overshadowed by the national conversation. This project aims to address the ways in which immigrants experience and shape local government and culture. The effects can often be unexpected, and in the case of this project, uniquely “Somervillian.”

This project relied mainly on three types of primary sources: local newspapers, City Directories and Annual Reports, and U.S. Census data. Newspapers played the largest role of the three, specifically the \textit{Boston Globe} that provided articles ranging from the 1830s through the early 2000s. These newspapers provided information about the social impacts of both Irish and Salvadoran immigrants specifically related to the Irish’s efforts to establish Saint Benedict Parish.

\textsuperscript{38} Dee Morris and Dora St. Martin, \textit{Somerville, Massachusetts: A Brief History} (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2008).
and Salvadorans’ cultural self-help organizations. They also showed evidence of the
discrimination against both groups: Salvadorans’ racial and linguistic identity, the Irish’s
Catholicism, and their shared socioeconomic status. Annual Reports and City Directories
provided by the City of Somerville revealed evidence of the establishment of Irish businesses,
East Somerville’s changing ethnic makeup through family names, as well as the Irish’s
infiltration of local government and Salvadorans’ lack thereof. Census data accessed through
Social Explorer proved invaluable in revealing the demographic shifts within Middlesex County,
the City of Somerville, and the specific Census Tracts that encompassed East Somerville. Other
important primary resources included interviews with former Massachusetts Congressman and
Mayor of Somerville, Michael E. Capuano, my father and former Ward 1 Alderman, Richard
Johnson, and two voices from Somerville’s Salvadoran community that made all the difference
with their firsthand accounts. Lastly, local policy played a role in informing this project,
specifically the city’s Anti-Gang Loitering Ordinance and Sanctuary City Resolution.

The argument of this thesis is twofold; firstly, that the shared experiences of Irish and
Salvadoran immigrants in Somerville, particularly East Somerville, demonstrate two important
continuities: the ability for immigrants to culturally transform the city, and the shared experience
of enduring discrimination that grew out of an American antipathy towards poverty. Secondly,
this thesis will argue that Somerville’s local government has played a critical role in the lived
experiences of Irish and Salvadoran immigrants; it allowed for the Irish to attain social
citizenship and local political dominance, whereas Salvadorans were unable to achieve social
citizenship due not only to racial prejudice and federal restrictions, but also due to the fact that
they were entering Somerville during a unique period of its history defined by revitalization and
a new form of antipathy towards poverty, and thus, they opted for a cultural self-help route.
CHAPTER 1: The Irish in East Somerville

1.1 The Burning of Mount Benedict: A Forgotten Site of Prejudice

It was August 12th, 1834, still over a decade before the Great Famine that would spark the migration of two million Irish immigrants to the states, and the girls of the elite Mount Benedict boarding school and convent were sleeping in their beds when they heard the rumblings of a riot that historian Nancy Schultz deems “one of the most notorious acts of anti-Catholic violence in American history”39 that would designate the Nunnery Grounds’ place in an often forgotten history.

The Ursuline Nunnery and boarding school were located on the top of Mount Benedict, about a quarter of a mile from Brickbottom in Charlestown, which is now part of East Somerville. The old Middlesex Canal that ran from Lowell to Boston stood at the foot of the hill, where brickmakers could look up at the elite institution established by the newly arrived Irish Catholics. The convent and boarding school were situated in what is now famously known as the “Nunnery Grounds” or “beyond the neck,” the thin sliver of land in East Somerville on the Charlestown border. Mount Benedict, also known as Ploughed Hill, was considered the rural part of Charlestown, and eventually became part of Somerville which would incorporate as a separate town in 1842, less than a decade after the burning of the convent and school.

Around 8:00 PM on the night of the riot, John R. Buzzell and a crowd of angry working-class, Protestant men stormed the nunnery grounds, demanding the release of a woman that was rumored to be held hostage within the convent doors. The Mother Superior, Mary Anne Moffatt, whom Buzzell, the unofficial leader of the mob, called “the sauciest woman I ever heard

“talk,” ordered them away and refused to let them see the supposed “hostage.” According to Louisa Goddard Whitney, a pupil at the school and convent claimed that Moffat yelled to the men, “Disperse immediately… for if you don’t, the Bishop has twenty-thousand Irishmen at his command in Boston, and they will whip you all into the sea.” The mob dispersed, but returned a few hours later forcibly entering the building and began “[throwing] the pianos, of which nine were found, out the windows.” They lit bonfires in the chapel, the cookhouse, and the ice house, according to the first hand account of lead rioter John Buzzell. They shouted “down with the Pope! Down with the convent.” Additionally, Buzzell admitted to putting on the robe of Bishop Benedict Fenwick, for whom Mount Benedict was named, “in a spirit of deviltry.” When morning came, the school, convent, and all other structures on Mount Benedict were effectively burned to the ground and left in ruins. According to Moffat, “Nothing was saved,” and though they survived, the girls lost nearly all of their possessions.

43 Schultz, Fire and Roses, 4.
44 Buzzell, “Destruction of the Charlestown Convent,” 73.
45 Mary Anne Moffatt, “Police Court,” The Boston Post (Boston, MA), August 16, 1834, https://www.newspapers.com
Buzzell, a working-class brickmaker from New Hampshire, also known as “Old R.” was selected as the mob’s de facto leader likely because of his reputation around Brickbottom as a fighter. In fact, he claims that the other men chose him as their leader because he was “the man who licked [Peter] Rossiter,” an Irish groundskeeper at the convent, meaning he was chosen to lead precisely because he had previously committed an act of anti-Irish discrimination. Buzzell was a typical worker in this area of Charlestown known as Brickbottom, where bricks were made for Boston’s increasing industrial economy. Brickworkers migrated there all the way from New Hampshire to work in the brickyards and live in crowded dormitories with the other men. The majority were native-born, working-class, Presbyterians who resented the new Catholic boarding school on the hill, and the growing Irish presence in Charlestown was starting to worry and agitate native Yankees beyond the neck.

The burning of the Ursuline convent marked the beginning of a period of intense hatred and discrimination against the Irish in what is now East Somerville. This chapter will track the experience of the Irish in this neighborhood from the period of anti-Catholic sentiment beginning in 1834 through 1930s. Between 1825 and 1835, the Catholic population in Boston grew fourfold, from 5,000 to 20,900, a dramatic demographic shift that contributed much to growing anti-Irish sentiment that would only worsen in the Famine years of the 1840s and ‘50s. However, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Irish overcame their discrimination in various ways. They established churches, societies, and businesses in East Somerville and worked their way through the ranks of Somerville’s local government. Through utilizing secondary education and infiltrating the School Committee, many worked their way up the social ladder and gained access to the middle class as well as local political hegemony

47 Schultz, Fire and Roses, 3.
48 Hirota, Expelling the Poor, 50.
through the Democratic Party. Their influence in the city culminated in a transformation of the public school system that would benefit future generations of Irish students and began their long-held reign over local politics. This chapter argues that the Irish in Somerville gradually made a city that originally rejected them for their economic status and religion into their city, mainly through their infiltration and eventual dominance of the city’s local government, but also through their conflicts with other working-class communities as well as through forming their own enclaves and religious institutions in the immigrant neighborhood of East Somerville.

1.2 “Subverting our Free Institutions”: Catholicism and its “Un-American” Nature

Of course, the Irish had to overcome many obstacles first in order to achieve political power beginning with America’s hatred of Catholicism. Religious intolerance was certainly rampant in Yankee Boston, especially in the working-class brickyard area, as evidenced by the burning of the convent. Additionally, many of the working-class natives saw the Irish newcomers as a threat to their jobs and their neighborhood. Of course, there were many who fundamentally opposed Catholicism for religious reasons; however, much of the negative sentiments towards the convent were rooted in nativism and the threat the Catholicism posed to the dominance of Protestantism and the “American way.” While the Irish are typically not associated with wealth nor elitism, the Mount Benedict academy was built up by Moffatt and Bishop Fenwick from a smaller school that originally educated poor Irish girls to “an elegant academy that would attract the daughters of Boston’s and other cities’ elite.”

Schultz explains that it was a high-priced academy, charging 160 dollars per year, “that would use Protestant money to help build [the] Roman Catholic mission in the area” and educate the daughters of wealthy Protestant elite, mainly Harvard-educated Unitarians. This was the key; the school educated Protestants, not
other Catholics, and nativists feared that it was spreading “un-American” ideas to young, pure-minded girls.52

One of the main bodies of evidence condemning the convent as “un-American” was an exposé written by Rebecca Teresa Reed, a former nun of the Ursuline convent who claimed she was held there against her will. The introduction of Reed’s book strongly condemns the Mount Benedict institution as anti-American due to its corruption of the minds of “the future mothers of American citizens.”53 These were not just poor Irish women; these were “the future ornaments to our most refined society,”54 and the thought of their receiving a Catholic education would greatly endanger the idea of Republican motherhood and could corrupt the minds of our future citizens who they would later go on to raise. Corroborating Reed’s concerns, an anonymous notice from August 1834 threatening the burning of the convent stated: “GO AHEAD. / To arms!! To arms!! Ye brave and free the Avenging Sword unshield!! Leave not one stone upon another end of that curst Nunnery that prostitutes female virtue and liberty under the garb of holy Religion.”55 This notice, published after the events on August 12th actually took place, was posted throughout the city, and sent the same message that women at Mount Benedict were being deceived and their virtues were being stolen by Catholics.

Reed’s book additionally highlights the strictness of the convent rules imposed by the Mother Superior and the Bishop as anti-American as well. For example, the girls could not leave

52 Wealthy Protestants in the early nineteenth century often chose a convent education for their daughters due to the safe, contained nature of these schools in which the nuns pay close and special attention to the pupils. The 1820s to ‘30s saw the biggest rise in convent schools; in 1820, there were ten such schools in the United States, and by 1838, there were thirty-eight. (Mary J. Oates, “Catholic Female Academies on the Frontier,” U.S. Catholic Historian 12, no. 4 (1994): http://www.jstor.org/stable/25154047.)

53 Rebecca Teresa Reed, Six Months in a Convent, Or, the Narrative of Rebecca Theresa Reed Who Was under the Influence of the Roman Catholics about Two Years, and an Inmate of the Ursuline Convent on Mount Benedict, Charlestown, Mass., Nearly Six Months, in the Years 1831-2 (Boston, MA: Russell, Odiore & Metcalf, 1835), 47.

54 Ibid, 6-7.

55 “Trial of the Convent Rioters (From the Reporter for the Morning Post),” The Boston Post (Boston, MA), December 25, 1834, https://www.newspapers.com
a room without permission, lift their eyes while walking in the passageways, nor touch each other’s hands. Additionally, they could not touch or eat anything and were forced “to walk with pebbles in [their] shoes, or walk kneeling until a wound [was] produced.” She also emphasizes that multiple women had been held in the convent against their will, a claim that the rioters also made on the night of the protest. Reed strongly highlights the strictness of the convent, accusing the nunnery of taking away women’s freedoms and holding them hostage, actions that were the antithesis of liberty. Historians Jean McManus and Rachel Bohlman state that “the deepest critique that Reed made of Catholicism was more political than theological; she claimed that the religion fostered disloyalty, despotism, and monarchism, all common Protestant sectarian tropes of the period.”

Reed’s fear was not of Catholicism in and of itself but of its threat to American values of liberty and Protestantism as well as its corruption of pure American minds.

Reed’s book was not the only condemnation of the anti-American nature of Catholicism. Just one day before the burning of Mount Benedict, prominent Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher reportedly gave three anti-Catholic sermons in Boston, in which he, too, emphasized the incompatibility of the Catholic Church with American values and government. Beecher, the father of author Harriet Beecher Stowe, was a prominent preacher from a well-known family who spent time in Boston from the 1820s to the early 1830s where he exerted much influence. In his powerful sermons he claimed that “the principles of this corrupt church are adverse to our free institutions…” and that Catholics might eventually outnumber natives and “subvert our free

56 Rebecca Teresa Reed, Six Months in a Convent, Or, the Narrative of Rebecca Theresa Reed Who Was under the Influence of the Roman Catholics about Two Years, and an Inmate of the Ursuline Convent on Mount Benedict, Charlestown, Mass., Nearly Six Months, in the Years 1831-2 (Boston, MA: Russell, Odiore & Metcalf, 1835), 77-78.
57 Ibid, 78.
institutions and bring into disgrace all ideas of an effective government.” McManus and Bohlman credit Beecher’s sermons with inciting the mob violence that ensued on August 12th.

Much of Beecher’s warnings against Catholicism center on the power of the Pope. To anti-Catholics, papacy posed a huge threat to American values, specifically because people feared that Catholics would remain loyal to the Pope rather than to the United States. An anonymous Watchman wrote adamantly in 1834, the same year of the riot in Charlestown, that “Popery and civil liberty cannot coexist.” He then questions his readers, saying that “It remains for the inhabitants of this land of freedom, to say whether they will yield themselves to the cold and withering embrace of this system of corruption. Shall popery be welcome to our shores?” Here, the Watchman directly associated Catholicism with immigration and specifically states that we should not “welcome to our shores” Catholic immigrants because they pose a threat to freedom. Many nativists believed that Catholics wanted the Pope to take over America, and this was extremely threatening to American values, a phenomenon that existed throughout the entire nation and manifested itself within the microcosm of Mount Benedict in East Somerville.

In the aftermath of the 1834 riots, all of the men put on trial for the destruction of the Ursuline convent, including John Buzzell, were acquitted, with the exception of one, who only served a few months and was later pardoned. John Buzzell admits that “the testimony against me was point blank and sufficient to have convicted twenty men, but somehow I proved an alibi, and the jury brought in a verdict of not guilty, after having been out for twenty-one hours.” Here, Buzzell proudly and openly admits his guilt, yet he was found not guilty under the law, a

59 “Dr. Beecher’s Sermon at Park Street Church on August 11 [sic], 1834,” The Christian Watchman (Boston, MA), August 15, 1834, cited in Schultz, Fire and Roses.
61 Ibid, 415.
62 Schultz, Fire and Roses.
decision which highlights the rampant anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiment prevalent at the time. The rise of the nativism that would eventually culminate in the powerful Know-Nothing Party as well as the dramatically-increasing Irish immigrant population both contributed to this result. Additionally, many of the rioters that night included firemen, policemen, and even some government officials like selectman John Runey,\textsuperscript{64} who remained politically relevant in Somerville for decades to come. If even those citizens held in highest regard were participating in anti-Catholic activity, it is no wonder that the sentiments were strong enough to result in such a catastrophic event.

The burning of the Ursuline convent and boarding school on Mount Benedict highlights not only the mounting tensions that were brewing against Catholics that would only worsen with the arrival of more Irish immigrants, but also the lack of power and influence that the Irish had over a nativist Yankee government in Charlestown. Despite Catholics’ best efforts to gain Protestant supporters and establish a base in the Boston area, they were shut down and completely thwarted by nativists who felt threatened by their presence. The burning of Mount Benedict represents the intense discrimination that the Irish experienced in the context of East Somerville that, in combination with other forms of discrimination revealed that the majority of nativist sentiments were rooted in fears that immigrants posed a threat to American values.

Additionally, this story demonstrates that a singular event in a small neighborhood can reveal much about the history of anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiment. Though often forgotten, historians and Somerville residents alike have reflected on the burning of Mount Benedict for decades as symbolic of religious intolerance and anti-immigrant sentiment across the nation. In fact in 1895, the \textit{Boston Post} stated of the August 12th riots: “If Charles Dickens could have been an eye-witness of what happened on that occasion, he would have found material for as

\textsuperscript{64} Schultz, \textit{Fire and Roses}, 46.
graphic and moving a picture of what prejudice and passion unrestrained could do, as any he has
given us in his description of the “No Popery” riots in London.”65 A community like East
Somerville that is today largely overlooked can represent so much about immigration history as
well as the “prejudice” and “passion” that went along with it.

1.3 Pauperism: Irish Expulsion and the Threat of Poverty in the Wake of the Famine

Massachusetts had a substantial population of Irish Catholics before the 1840s, which
was undoubtedly affected by the burning of Mount Benedict. However, the state’s Irish
population would explode shortly thereafter during the Great Famine that lasted from 1845 to
1852, sparking a massive exodus of people from Ireland. A large majority of those new arrivals
found their way to the urban centers of the East coast in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston,
eventually settling and forming tight-knit neighborhoods in places like East Somerville. They
immigrated by ship to ports like Boston, where they often already had family and friends, and
where they could find jobs. They settled in places like East Somerville for their affordable
housing and plentiful low-skill jobs in the booming brickmaking industry.

Irish immigrants poured into the Boston area during the Famine years. By 1850, the
population of Middlesex County, where Somerville is located, almost one fifth (19.3%) of the
population was listed as “foreign-born,”66 a significant statistic, considering that in 1830, this
statistic was less than three percent (2.8%).67 By 1880, the immigrant population made up 26.2
percent of the total population of Middlesex County,68 and the Irish themselves made up over

65 “Old Nunnery Grounds: Disappearance of the Grim Relics of the Ursuline Convent,” The Boston Post
(Boston, MA), August 21, 1895. https://www.newspapers.com
66 U.S. Census Bureau, “Nativity of Free Population for Middlesex County, 1850,” Prepared by Social Explorer,
67 U.S. Census Bureau, “Citizenship Status for Middlesex County, 1830,” Prepared by Social Explorer,
68 U.S. Census Bureau, “Nativity for Middlesex County, 1880,” Prepared by Social Explorer,
fifty-four percent of this foreign-born population,\textsuperscript{69} demonstrating immense growth in Irish numbers that often flocked to neighborhoods like East Somerville.

The majority of the Famine Irish arrived with little more than the clothes on their backs. Their impoverished condition was often resented and even feared by nativists. An 1849 article from the \textit{Boston Evening Transcript}, claims that “the increasing number of destitute and unemployed Irish immigrants in our midst give abundant token that the accounts which reach us of suffering and starvation in Ireland are not exaggerated.”\textsuperscript{70} The article further states that “The population of Ireland, under misrule, starvation and disease is rapidly wasting away.”\textsuperscript{71} Because they came in such large numbers, “Yankees” often immediately resented the Irish for being poor and destitute.\textsuperscript{72} Not only did they arrive in these conditions, but they also remained in these conditions, especially in East Coast cities like Boston and Somerville. Though there were many industrial jobs there, these opportunities were not unlimited, and many Irish immigrants arrived to find that their prospects were still grim. \textit{The Boston Evening Transcript} published an advice article in 1849 for Irish immigrants that stated: “don’t remain on the seaboards, but go, at once, into the interior of the country. We really do not know any more miserable course for the emigrant to follow than that of settling down in the seaboards cities, and expecting to make a livelihood. It is a deplorable mistake.”\textsuperscript{73} This article not only emphasizes the poor conditions in the city but also the unwelcoming, often hostile environment Famine immigrants faced.

\textsuperscript{69} U.S. Census Bureau, “Place of Birth for Foreign-Born Population for Middlesex County, 1880,” Prepared by Social Explorer, \url{https://www.socialexplorer.com/explore-maps}.

\textsuperscript{70} “Starvation and Suffering in Ireland,” \textit{Boston Evening Transcript} (Boston, MA), May 25, 1849, \url{https://www.newspapers.com}.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{72} Between 1845 and 1852, one million Irish people died from starvation or related diseases due to the failing of almost all of the nation’s potato crop. Due to this devastation, about 1.8 million people fled Ireland for North America. (Kerby A. Miller, \textit{Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America} (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), [280].)

\textsuperscript{73} “Advice to Immigrants,” \textit{Boston Evening Transcript} (Boston, MA), September 7, 1849, \url{https://www.newspapers.com}.
This hostile environment only worsened with the continued arrival of immigrants. With increased immigration came increased nativist sentiment, and to fully understand the experience of the Irish in Somerville, one must have a comprehensive understanding of the political climate of Massachusetts regarding immigrants, especially in the wake of the influx of Famine refugees. The first rumblings of a nativist movement emerged before the August 1834 riots, and clearly made itself known in present-day East Somerville that year.

The Know-Nothing Party, also known as the American Party, developed from this anti-Irish and anti-Catholic nativist sentiment. The Party emerged in the decades after the destruction of the Nunnery Grounds and became particularly successful in Massachusetts due to an increasing Irish population in the 1840s and ‘50s. The party’s overwhelming success culminated in the 1854 elections heralding their newfound dominance in the state. The Know-Nothing Party virtually swept the election, capturing every seat in the Senate and 376 House seats, leaving only one Whig, one Democrat, and one Free Soiler.74

Additionally, in 1855, the state elected its first Know-Nothing governor. In the two decades between 1834 and 1854, there had been many Whig governors, including John Davis (1834-1835 and 1841-1843), Samuel Turell Armstrong (1835-1836), Edward Everett (1836-1840), George Nixon Briggs (1844-1851), John Henry Clifford (1853-1854), and Emory Washburn (1854-1855).75 The Whig Party, in addition to the Know-Nothings, harbored anti-immigrant sentiment, but it was not the basis for their political platform, and the party did not attract working class members like the Know-Nothings did. It was not until the gubernatorial election of 1855 that a true, self-proclaimed Know-Nothing, Henry Gardner, won on a platform

that prided itself on nativism and anti-Catholic sentiment. Members were sworn in on an oath to uphold “their leading principle”: “the defense of American institutions from the dangers to which they deemed them exposed at the hands of men of alien birth and of Roman Catholic creed.”

The massive success of a party that so strongly opposed immigration and Catholicism was certainly not beneficial to the Irish in Somerville. It is also certainly worth noting that John Runey, the Charlestown selectman who had participated in the Ursuline convent riots, served as a Somerville selectman from 1852 through 1854, nearly twenty years after the 1834 events. Somerville did not have a mayor until the year 1872, the year it incorporated as a city, so while it operated under the classic New England town meeting form of government (from 1841 until 1872), power was concentrated among the town “selectmen.” With this in mind, Runey, someone who clearly harbored negative opinions toward Irish Catholics based on his past actions, wielded considerable influence in local affairs. This represents the continued and long lasting power of nativists in the city that is essential to the Irish experience.

The United States has prided itself on its identity as a safe haven for immigrants for a long time; however, this sentiment has only really applied when those entering the nation were the “right” kind of immigrant. Nativists viewed the Irish as poor, drunkards, and criminals, and therefore, the “wrong” kind of immigrant for the United States. One of the main justifications for the discrimination against the Irish, and immigrants overall, was that they were poor and dependent. The majority of Irish immigrants that came to Massachusetts were, as previously mentioned, in destitute conditions and unemployed. They had to rely on government resources to survive and were therefore “dependent.” According to Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, the three icons of dependency in the United States were the pauper, the colonial native and slave, and the

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housewife. The Irish fell under the category of the pauper, who Fraser and Gordon explain, are framed as morally bad people who live on “poor relief” rather than wages and are situated completely outside of the system of labor.\textsuperscript{78} The Irish became synonymous with pauperism, for in every county in the state, the Irish often made up the vast majority of paupers. For example, in 1852, in Suffolk County (Boston), there were 1700 paupers from Ireland of a total of 3266 paupers overall, and in Middlesex County (Somerville), there were 852 paupers from Ireland of 1434 overall.\textsuperscript{79} More than half of the total pauper population in both counties was Irish, showing that the Poor Laws, designed to target impoverished people, disproportionately affected the Irish due to their economic status.

The concept of a “pauper” in the United States originated in English Poor Laws that were brought to the thirteen colonies. According to historian William P. Quigley, some of the main aspects of the English Poor Laws that continued in the colonies were that poor relief was a local responsibility, the poor from other nations were unwelcomed, and everyone who could physically work was required to.\textsuperscript{80} Poor Laws were meant to be a system of poor relief, ensuring that people living in poverty get the support that they need and are not left behind by the government. However, the catch was that under Poor Laws, there was no obligation for the government to help outsiders, or immigrants. Therefore, “foreign paupers” were often left with no assistance and remained in the impoverished conditions they arrived in. Additionally, those who could physically work, but did not, were not provided with any aid. So, when the Irish arrived in cities like Boston and Somerville, and they could not find employment, often due to anti-Irish discrimination, they were denied any kind of government help.

\textsuperscript{78} Fraser and Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency, 316-317.
\textsuperscript{80} William P. Quigley, “Work or Starve: Regulation of the Poor in Colonial America,” University of San Francisco Law Review 31, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 35-84.
Historian John Cummings claims that “the period 1789-1851 is the dark period in the history of the poor-law of Massachusetts.”⁸¹ During these years, the Irish were severely discriminated against by the government of Massachusetts for their economic status. During this time, the government utilized what were called laws of settlement against immigrants. In order for one to receive aid, they needed to prove that they had legal settlement; at the same time, there were laws passed in Massachusetts that made it very difficult for immigrants to obtain settlement. For example, the 1794 Poor Law “required ten years’ residence, and payment of all state, county and town taxes, during five years out of the ten” in order for one to obtain a settlement,⁸² all things which immigrants were often incapable of.

Additionally, many immigrants were not even allowed to set foot in Massachusetts under the Alien Passenger Act of 1850, which required all incoming passengers to pay a one hundred-dollar fee and put a one thousand-dollar bond on file upon entry.⁸³ The bond was to ensure that “no such alien shall ever become a city, town, or state charge”⁸⁴—in other words, a “dependent.” The Report of the Commissioners for the Alien Passenger Act justified its actions by commenting on the “benevolence” of the state of Massachusetts as a place that accepts and shelters immigrants. However, the Report emphasized that it is only men of “respectability” who can prove that they are a “permanent resident[s], familiar with our constitution, and attached to our laws and people”⁸⁵ who will be considered eligible for citizenship and privileges. It goes on to explain how foreign paupers did not fit into this definition, and that the state needed to

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⁸² Cummings, “Poor-Laws of Massachusetts,” 36.
⁸⁴ Ibid.
“prevent the influx of these worthless and worse than worthless classes” who have “in repeated instances abused our good nature.” J.T. Buckingham expressed these same sentiments in 1834 when he wrote that “it is a proud title for a country, that of the Asylum of the Oppressed. As Americans, we glory in it. But we do most decidedly protest against having the nation converted into one vast lazar-house for the reception of sturdy beggars, the contented paupers, and all of the mauvais sujets of England and Ireland…” Here, Buckingham emphasized America’s pride in helping the oppressed people of the world, but not those that are poor, or “beggars” and “paupers” like the Irish. The 1852 Report concludes by defining what it meant to be a “good” immigrant, and that was one who was “honest, able-bodied, and industrious” as well as “a fresh convert to republicanism,” all things that the Irish were not in the eyes of the government.

Not only were foreigners ineligible for government relief if they did not have legal settlement, but they were also subject to expulsion or deportation, a most extreme action perpetrated by the government of Massachusetts. Hidetaka Hirota argues that the states of Massachusetts and New York set the precedent for federal immigration restrictions enacted in the late nineteenth century “by making the deportation of people other than criminals a practical reality in the operation of national immigration law.” Before the 1875 Page Act and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the federal government did little to restrict immigration, leaving legislation up to individual states. Massachusetts and New York utilized the old Poor Laws through the 1880s. The ways in which they used them against the Irish allowed for the local government to deport any poor person or immigrant without settlement to “any place beyond [the] sea, where he belongs.” According to Hirota at least 50,000 people were removed from

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89 Hirota, Expelling the Poor, 5.
90 Ibid, 1.
the state of Massachusetts between 1830 and 1850 under this policy. An example of such a policy was the 1794 Settlement Act that stated that if a poor person had no legal settlement somewhere, the town could move that person back to the place where they did have settlement. Additionally, before 1794, Poor Laws allowed for town officials to remove people who they thought might become chargeable for “authorizing inhumanity.”

To provide an example, an 1851 article from the Boston Evening Transcript stated that “The Overseers of the Poor, in connection with the Directors of the House of Industry, and the Municipal authorities, are making arrangements to send from thirty to fifty of the recent importation of blind, paralytic, lunatic and idiotic paupers, back to the Old World” who have been “taken from the Alms houses of England and Ireland, or who have been sent to this country by heartless landlords, to become instantly and permanently a charge upon our public charities.” Despite Massachusetts’ insistence on its benevolent charity, the state clearly did not want to absorb immigrants that might become a burden to or dependent on the government. The Providence Journal condemned the state of Massachusetts for its actions and hypocrisy, claiming the practice was “an outrage upon international courtesy and international right.”

The Irish in particular were also targeted for their “vagrancy” under this policy. Without support from the government and with their lack of job opportunities, many Irish immigrants became vagrants. Under the Poor Laws, they were vagrants because they were unemployed but able to work. Vagrancy and idleness were punishable by law, including through expulsion, and

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91 Hirota, Expelling the Poor, 5.
93 “Foreign Paupers to be Shipped England,” Boston Evening Transcript (Boston, MA), July 1, 1851, https://www.newspapers.com
94 “Foreign Paupers Sent Home,” Boston Evening Transcript (Boston, MA), September 27, 1854, https://www.newspapers.com
this was yet another way that the Irish were deemed criminals. John Cummings explains that “Vagrancy laws illustrate the societal demand that all people who could work would work, or face criminal consequences.”⁹⁵ Many of these “vagrants” were simply “members of families stranded in a destitute condition while searching for a place to settle down”⁹⁶ like many of the Irish in Boston and Somerville. The fact that being unemployed and not having legal settlement were punishable often through deportation is extreme and shows the contradiction of the state of Massachusetts claiming that it was welcoming to immigrants, when it clearly was not.

The real problem with vagrancy, pauperism, and dependency was that they are all considered very much un-American, just as Catholicism was. Undoubtedly, the drain on public resources and the prevention of crime were real concerns for people, but what was most threatening about the Irish in Massachusetts, and throughout the nation, was that they embodied these un-American concepts. As stated by Hirota, “Pauperism, more than mere poverty, embodied a form of dependency that was not supposed to exist in free northern society… In the ethnically biased eyes of Anglo Americans, the dependency of Irish paupers, all of whom belonged to the undeserving poor, destabilized the integrity of American free labor society more seriously than that of the native-born poor.”⁹⁷ Immigrants were often impoverished and dependent, and this lack of individualism was seen as the antithesis of, and therefore a threat to American ideals. An 1834 Boston Post article stated that “The real objection to our Irish-born citizens is, that they vote on the wrong side, that is, in opposition to the Whigs… They turn the scale in New York, and have done it in Philadelphia, and will do it again. They will probably do it in Boston, in the approaching elections.”⁹⁸ Not only did the Irish lack “individualistic” qualities

⁹⁵ Cummings, “Poor-Laws of Massachusetts,” 164.
⁹⁶ Ibid, 166.
⁹⁷ Hirota, Expelling the Poor, 52.
in their eyes, but they also threatened the dominance of the Whigs, the party that had come to define American republicanism. Therefore, hatred of the Irish became a nationalistic matter.

This form of discrimination and antipathy towards the poor manifested itself clearly in Somerville. Because the Irish congregated in East Somerville, parts of this community were particularly subject to poverty. For example, the Wall family, living at 24 Linwood Street were described in the Boston Globe as a “pathetic case of destitution,” for the father, James Wall could not work due to a recent physical disability and his wife was no longer earning enough money to support their four children.99 The article concluded by emphasizing that “the mother has not pressed the Overseers of the Poor for much aid because of a fear that her children will be taken away from her.”100 The fact that the family was afraid to ask for help from the Overseers of the Poor shows what was a systemic problem in the city of neglecting the poor Irish population.

Additionally, the Overseers of the Poor themselves showed little compassion towards the “pauper” population in Somerville. In their 1887 Report, overseer Charles Folsom stated: “I believe there will always be more or less suffering among that class of poor persons who are brought to their poverty by the use of strong drink, because, however large the amount of aid the city may give, they will cling to their old habits...”101 This report plays into stereotypes of the Irish as drunkards and blames them as individuals for their own poverty rather than recognizing a systemic issue. Not only were the Overseers of the Poor unapproachable for some destitute families, but they were also complicit in the stereotyping of the poor population.

Additionally, the city of Somerville did not properly support its poor population. The Overseers of the Poor were responsible for administering poor relief, reporting annually on their

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100 Ibid.
expenses and how many people they aided. For example, in the year 1880, 163 families were “chargeable to the city” with 836 total people aided.\textsuperscript{102} These increasing numbers required a more adequate method of care, specifically an almshouse where people could live. “The Annual Report of the Overseers of the Poor” of 1880 stated that “the calls for aid, particularly in cases of insanity, are constantly increasing with the growth of our city, and we would again urge the need of an almshouse, as in our opinion a matter of imperative necessity if we would administer the affairs of this department with economy.”\textsuperscript{103} The city never established an almshouse, despite the clear benefits of having one. Josiah Quincy, former Boston mayor, stated in 1821 that “the most economical mode” of helping the poor “is that of Almshouses.”\textsuperscript{104} Cummings further explains that almshouses made it possible to separate paupers into categories based on their needs rather than generalizing them into one large category, a process necessary to provide them with adequate aid.\textsuperscript{105} Charles Brett, one of Somerville’s former Overseers of the Poor, emphasized the fact that Somerville was one of only two cities that had never had an almshouse to care for the city’s poor population, despite the Board of Health, Lunacy, and Charity of Massachusetts telling the city that “it was a disgrace to be without one.”\textsuperscript{106}

Despite the Overseers’ pleas to erect an almshouse and the dire necessity for one to prevent vagrancy and provide aid, the same year, the Board of Aldermen’s special committee on almshouses decided that “while it would be a great convenience to the Overseers of the Poor, the

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, 199.
\textsuperscript{105} Cummings, “Poor Laws of Massachusetts,” 49.
committee does not consider it an absolute necessity this year.”

The lack of an almshouse in Somerville, an establishment which would have greatly improved the wellbeing of many impoverished families and individuals, shows that the city was neglecting the needs of its poor population, who were majority Irish living in working-class neighborhoods. Additionally, the fact that Somerville was unique in Massachusetts for its lack of an almshouse shows a distinct form of antipathy towards the poor in the city. The local government, which was in charge of the care of paupers, at least to some extent, did not do what was right by them.

While Somerville had its moral failings, particularly with regard to caring for poor immigrants in crowded neighborhoods like East Somerville, as time passed, the Irish managed to overcome this discrimination. Even though they were rejected decade after decade in the city, they eventually established themselves in East Somerville, assimilated, and were able to transform the city in ways that would not have seemed possible on the night of the burning of Mount Benedict. Their use of local government and rise to political power as well as the ways in which they culturally transformed Somerville shows how a group of immigrants can radically alter the places they migrate to.

1.4 Populating the City and Founding Parishes: The Beginnings of an Impact

Irish immigrants began moving to East Somerville as early as the 1830s, and a major way in which they transformed the community was by simply inhabiting the area in such large numbers. As Irish immigrants began moving to the neighborhood, they established families and cohorts who ended up staying in the area for generations. East Somerville became so crowded with immigrants and their children that they often made up almost entire streets in the neighborhood. For example, by 1919, more than half of the family names listed on Glen Street

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were Irish or Italian, the two major immigrant groups arriving in the Boston area at the time. Names like Murphy, Fitzpatrick, O’Gara, Buckley, Murray, and more continue to come up over and over again on streets in East Somerville like Glen Street, Pearl Street, and the “The Aves,” a grouping of smaller streets named after different states. The Aves were commonly known as the “Nunnery Grounds” because they were built on the old site of Mount Benedict. Glen Street also happens to be the street that my father grew up on, along with hundreds of other Irish and Italian families that overtook the neighborhood. By the 1970s, when my father was growing up in the area, the neighborhood was almost all Italian and Irish. He explained to me that “the only diversity we knew growing up was ethnic, and the only ethnicities we knew were Irish, Italian, and a very small sampling of Portuguese and Greek. To us, diversity in East Somerville was different ethnic groups.”

Streets like Glen Street remained predominantly Irish for generations.

We can also see evidence of the Irish populating East Somerville as the end of the nineteenth century approached through looking at records from schools in the area. The two main elementary schools in East Somerville in the 1870s and eights were the Edgerly and the Prescott schoolhouses, established in 1871 and 1867 respectively. By 1880, the neighborhood had become so densely populated and classrooms so full that there was a call for a new schoolhouse to be built in East Somerville to meet this “urgent demand.” The report also shows that of all the elementary schools in the city, the largest number of students, 619, attended the Prescott School. Additionally, the school only had six teachers for all of these students, and similarly, the Edgerly School had 235 pupils but only four teachers, showing the

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112 Ibid, 117.
disproportionality of teachers to students in East Somerville schools.\footnote{113} This not only shows possible inadequate allocation of resources to East Somerville, but also shows the sharp increase in the population of the neighborhood that would cause such a crisis.

Once the Irish had made their mark on the city in large enough numbers, they began to form their own social spaces at the end of the nineteenth century. One way in which they did this was by establishing Catholic churches throughout Somerville. Within three decades, they established a trio of parishes, which are today merged as a tri-parish: Saint Josephs in Union Square founded in 1869, Saint Catherine of Genoa, established in 1891 and built between 1907 and 1920 in the Spring Hill area, and Saint Ann’s in Winter Hill built in 1897.\footnote{114} Alongside the parishes, the Irish also established their own Catholic elementary schools for their children. Additionally, in 1912, they erected Saint Clement’s Parish on Somerville’s border with Medford, the church straddling both cities.\footnote{115} Before these parishes, people traveled to Boston to attend services, so the establishment of these churches made a large difference for the community.

Notably though, none of these original parishes were located in East Somerville. Before 1900, the only churches in East Somerville were Unitarian (the First Congregational Church), Congregationalist (The Broadway Congregational Church), and Baptist (the Perkins Street Baptist Church), save the exception of the destroyed Catholic Mount Benedict. It was not until 1911 that Saint Benedict Parish was founded in East Somerville,\footnote{116} the first Catholic parish in the neighborhood since Mount Benedict. It is also fitting that the church uses the name Benedict to pay homage to the convent that once stood at the top of the hill nearby. This parish remains today a hallmark of the East Somerville community, located at the intersection of Hathorn, Arlington, Arlington,
and Franklin Streets. The dedication of the church was a big deal in East Somerville, as it marked a key point in the Irish’s transformation of the neighborhood.

The fact that by 1911, after decades of Irish immigrants populating the neighborhood in large numbers, there was not yet a Catholic church there to serve these people is significant. The Archdiocese of Boston chose other neighborhoods to establish the first Catholic churches because they did not consider East Somerville to be a prominent neighborhood nor a center of civic life in Somerville. Additionally, while the Archdiocese purchased the land for parishes, the establishment of the church itself relied on the parishioners. Parishioners became the benefactors in the construction of their parishes and schools through donations, and East Somerville residents, who were predominantly poor, likely did not have the money to support the establishment of their own parish. Cardinal O’Connell, the Archbishop of Boston at the time, stated that “For years the problem had clamored for solution and still remained unsolved. The people of this district were thus obliged to travel inconvenient distance or to be deprived of the consolations which religion alone can give.” O’Connell emphasized that the establishment of St. Benedict’s will be of great use to the people of East Somerville and will make their lives much easier and happier. He explained that “there is nothing

![Figure 1.2](https://www.newspapers.com)

118 Johnson, interview by the author.
like the church and the priest for establishing the home sentiment and the spirit of good order in any community.”

Establishing a church in their community meant a lot for the Irish in East Somerville, for they finally had a place of worship that they could easily access and integrate into their everyday lives, rather than having to travel across the city or into Boston.

Irish community members like John Leary, Mrs. J.J. Murphy, and Julia S. Crowley made this possible through community efforts. They organized a field day to raise money for the parish in September of 1911, charging five dollars per ticket and organizing games, activities, and dancing for the community in a nearby park. There was also a large committee formed to organize this event that included over twenty community members, the vast majority of them being Irish. The same was done in the early 1920s when the parish hoped to establish a parochial school. In May of 1924, the parish held a fundraiser run by the parishioners themselves who were organized into teams with captains, of whom the majority were Irish men. They also held a concert and mass meeting to raise money and gain support. The organization efforts of the Irish to establish the first Catholic Church in East Somerville demonstrates a great example of an immigrant community transforming a neighborhood into their neighborhood. Saint Benedict’s Parish and the Little Flower School have been paramount in East Somerville’s community for Catholic immigrants since their establishment in the early twentieth century through the present day, and they represent an immigrant community’s ability to change and shape a city.

1.5 Conflicts with the Fellow Working Class: A Means of Mobility

The Irish were certainly discriminated against in damaging ways, but part of their success story in Somerville also stems from their own biases and poor treatment of other minority

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120 “Dedication of St. Benedict’s.”
121 “Its First Field Day Tomorrow: Grand Program to Be Carried out at Combination Park in Aid of St. Benedict's Parish Fund,” The Boston Globe (Boston, MA), September 1, 1911, https://www.newspapers.com.
123 Ibid.
groups. Up until the early twentieth century, the Irish were not considered true “Americans.” Though they were white, nativists perceived them as outsiders and did not accept them into the dominant American culture. Before moving into their story of political triumph, one needs to also know that Irish success was partly due to their own racism and desires for social mobility.

One interesting story about the establishment of Catholic churches in Somerville that is worth noting, though it does not apply directly to the neighborhood of East Somerville, pertains to the relationship between the Irish and the Italians in the city. The two groups were quite similar and experienced kindred forms of discrimination, yet butted heads. While the Irish were establishing their trio of churches, the Italians, who were also Catholic, erected Saint Anthony of Padua Parish in 1915. Saint Anthony’s, located on the corner of Properzi Way and Somerville Avenue, was in an area that was highly populated by Italians and quite close to Saint Joseph’s, one of the three original Catholic churches, established almost twenty years prior. Originally, the parish was established on the corner of School Street and Somerville Avenue, but in 1921, after the parish had raised enough money, they built a church in its new location. It took a long time for the Archdiocese of Boston to erect a church for Italians, just as it took a long time to establish a Catholic Church in East Somerville. In the words of the records Archdiocese, “The US Census for 1890 documents the presence of Italian immigrants in Somerville, Massachusetts, but it was not until 1915 that Father Nazareno Properzi of the Society of Saint Charles-Scalabrinians was assigned to organize a Roman Catholic parish there.” Italian Catholics had been present in Somerville for twenty-five years before Saint Anthony’s was established, and a lot of this presumably had to do with the fact that the Irish, specifically Cardinal William Henry O’Connell, ran the Catholic Archdiocese at the time. Additionally, the Irish Catholic churches in Somerville

125 Ibid.
often excluded Italians from their churches. It may seem odd that Saint Anthony’s is extremely close in proximity to Saint Joseph’s, but the Archdiocese specifically established this church for the Italians because the Irish did not welcome their rising numbers into the other Catholic churches in the community.

Italians began coming to the United States and the Boston area in the late nineteenth century, and were first recorded in large numbers in Somerville in 1890, around the time when the Irish were beginning to establish themselves in the city. Between 1880 and 1921, the largest influx of Italian immigration, 4.2 million Italians immigrated to the Boston area. In 1900, the Irish made up over thirty percent of the foreign-born population in Middlesex County, and the Italians just under two percent. However, the Italians were climbing quickly and by 1920, they made up ten percent of the foreign-born white population in the city, whereas the Irish fell to twenty-one percent. Italians also began populating the neighborhood of East Somerville, replacing the upwardly mobile Irish who moved out and living alongside the blue-collar Irish that remained. With that being said, the Italians posed a threat to the Irish working class who did not want their jobs to be taken by these new immigrants. As explained by historians James R. Barrett and David R. Roediger, “As the Italians moved west in East Harlem, they gradually displaced older Irish enclaves and encountered terrific resistance in the process. They were welcome in neither Tammany Hall political clubs nor Irish churches.” The same is true of Somerville, particularly East Somerville where the Irish and Italians were in close proximity.

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In addition to friction with the Italians, the Irish harbored negative sentiments towards African Americans for similar reasons. They wanted to keep someone below them on the social ladder and because of this, they not only opposed abolition, but also continued to behave in racist manners throughout the twentieth century, even in Somerville where the political climate was supposedly liberal and accepting. Firstly, throughout the United States, the Irish were known for being pro-slavery, and this stance was part of their journey to “becoming white.” For context, according to Professor of Law David Bernstein of the *Washington Post*, when people refer to the Irish becoming white, “they are referring to a stylized, sociological or anthropological understanding of ‘whiteness,’ which means either ‘fully socially accepted as the equals of Americans of Anglo-Saxon and Germanic stock,’ or, in the more politicized version, ‘an accepted part of the dominant ruling class in the United States.”  

While the Irish have always been phenotypically white, they were not socially accepted into “whiteness” until they moved up the socioeconomic ladder, and part of their means of moving up was through pushing African Americans down. An 1849 article from *The Liberator*, a Republican abolitionist newspaper, narrated a meeting in the Massachusetts House of Representatives mentions a “Mr. F.” who “had not seen one of these Irish immigrants who was not [abolition’s] avowed opponent” and “was yet to see the first Irish abolitionist.”

The Irish often felt that Republicans in Massachusetts cared more about ending slavery than they did about the poverty of the Irish. It therefore makes sense that the Irish sided with the Democrats and were anti-abolition, not only because they felt threatened by free black people

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130 David Bernstein, “Sorry, but the Irish were always ‘white’ (and so were Italians, Jews and so on),” *The Washington Post* (Washington D.C.), March 22, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com.
who could come to the north and take their jobs from them, but also because of rejection from Republicans as well as Republicans’ pro-temperance stance.

It is ironic that the Irish feared African Americans so much, for the Irish were often feared in the same manner by working-class natives who thought that the Irish were threatening their jobs. The Irish went so far as to accuse African Americans of planning a possible insurrection of the American government, just as Know-Nothings feared the Irish would do. In an article from the *Boston Pilot*, an Irish Catholic newspaper, discusses the fear of a “black Aaron Burr”¹³² and advocates for the continuation of slavery, claiming that the black man “will be better appreciated in the South” and that “Southern slaveholders would admit a talented negro to more equal terms than a Northern negro patron will, or does.”¹³³ The *Pilot* shows one of many examples of the Irish in Massachusetts advocating for slavery to continue for their own benefit and social mobility.

Additionally, in Somerville, Irish Catholic institutions perpetuated racism throughout the twentieth century. Catholic schools, churches, and societies put on minstrel shows throughout the nation up until as late as the 1970s, including at Saint Benedict’s. In 1931, an article from the *Boston Globe* advertised a minstrel show at Saint Benedict’s in which Mayor John J. Murphy would act as interlocutor, and the “front row girls” would dress in “Mexican costumes.”¹³⁴ Despite its general social inacceptability, minstrel shows continued within Catholic institutions throughout much of the twentieth century. Jesse Remedios of the *National Catholic Reporter* states that “by the turn of the 20th century, minstrelsy was no longer the preeminent form of popular entertainment in the U.S. However, communities, schools and Catholic churches across

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¹³³ Ibid.
the country continued to stage blackface minstrel shows for decades, perpetuating negative and offensive stereotypes of African-Americans among multiple generations.”

According to my father, in the seventies at the Little Flower School, each year, the youngest children would put on the Christmas show, the fourth through sixth graders put on the Saint Patrick’s Day show, and the oldest students, the seventh and eighth graders, put on the reunion show, which was a minstrel show. Alumni would return home and buy tickets for the show in order to raise money for the parish. Despite minstrelsy no longer being socially accepted in America, Catholics continued to participate in activities that pushed African Americans below them socially in order to raise themselves up, and this trend is even visible in the microcosm of East Somerville.

1.6 Social Mobility and Infiltration of Local Government

Throughout the country, the Irish were able to rise up the ranks in similar ways. They joined the Democratic Party, and through these connections, they were able to obtain jobs that they used for political leverage. It was not until 1930 that the first Irish Democrat, John J. Murphy was elected Mayor of Somerville, showing that it was a gradual process, but the Irish eventually gained control of Somerville politics by the thirties. In order to get to this place of political dominance, they had to start by rising up the ranks occupationally and gain access to the middle class. Many Irish men started off working tough, manual labor jobs, but eventually some started becoming police officers and firemen. Before the 1920s, the large majority of men with Irish names were listed as “laborers” in City Directories. They lived mainly in East Somerville working in meat-packing and brickmaking. However by 1919, many Irish names were listed as clerks, printers, telegraph operators, salesmen, bookkeepers, real estate agents, firemen, and


137 The Somerville directory of the inhabitants, institutions, [etc.] (1873) (Boston, MA: Greenough & Co., 1873), https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hn4hva&view=1up&seq=198&q1=murdock.
police officers. These better-paying, white collar jobs solidified their positions as community members and leaders and demonstrated their social mobility. Of course, there were still many Irish names listed as laborers, steel workers, janitors, rubber workers, etc., but there were far more who had ascended by the 1920s in comparison to decades past. One important marker of social mobility for the Irish was their ability to move out of the East Somerville neighborhood and into more affluent areas of Somerville in Ward 3. This physical mobility is evidenced by the increase in Irish names listed on streets in areas like Spring Hill by the early 1900s. As Senator Michael E. Capuano puts it, the wealthier East Somerville residents first moved to the Aves, which was considered the “rich” part of the neighborhood, and then, when they made a little more money, they moved out of the neighborhood entirely into West Somerville.

The main form of Irish mobility in Somerville was intergenerational. This mobility did not happen immediately for the Irish; it took one or two generations for them to enter into the middle class and gain political positions. According to Stephan Thernstrom, in Newburyport, Massachusetts, the Irish gained social mobility through property ownership and never actually entered the middle class. The most common form of mobility was within the working class rather than an actual exit from the working class. However, in Somerville, though this was the case for many earlier Irish immigrants, the city was home to many later immigrants who were able to ascend the socioeconomic ladder. In his article “The High School and Social Mobility in a Streetcar Suburb,” Reed Ueda argues that secondary education in Somerville was what provided the Irish with a means of upward mobility that helped form what he calls a new “pluralistic middle class” in the city. Irish immigrants who came to the United States after the Famine more

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138 The Somerville directory of the inhabitants, 1919.
140 Michael E. Capuano, interview by the author, Via Zoom, November 29, 2022.
frequently sent their children to Somerville High School and sometimes college as well, rather than pull their children out of school to work and contribute to the family income. As Reed Ueda explains, “this later generation valued education more, as a result of the expansion of public schooling in Ireland after the famine years.”\textsuperscript{142} By sacrificing immediate economic success and sending their children to high school, later working-class Irish immigrants in Somerville were, unlike Irish immigrants before them, able to gain access to the middle class through intergenerational mobility. Ueda further explains that blue-collar Irish students in Somerville had a much higher rate of success in gaining white-collar employment than did their counterparts living in Boston due to the fact that Somerville was considered a “streetcar suburb” rather than a major city at the time. The larger numbers of Irish in Somerville who received a secondary education “increased the size and vigor of the Irish middle class.”\textsuperscript{143} They then, according to Ueda, “converted [these] socioeconomic advances into political power,”\textsuperscript{144} and began to rise up the political ranks as well.

Not only did the Irish use secondary education for social mobility in Somerville, but one of the main ways in which they truly transformed the city was through changing the public educational system. They began their journey within Somerville politics through first infiltrating the School Committee to advocate for educational reform, posing a challenge to the historically Republican-dominated government. Ueda says it best: “in the suburb of Somerville, middle-class ethnic groups, based in the Democratic Party and and espousing progressive ideals of a better educated citizenry and more efficient social services, promoted school reform against the

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid, 771.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
opposition of Republican, old-stock, and business groups to increase their social mobility and to control assimilation in their own way.\footnote{145}

Schools were becoming overcrowded, and after decades of the city’s population growing at a rapid rate, the movement to establish junior high schools in Somerville, championed by the Irish, began. By 1913, Irish politicians hugely impacted the School Committee which now included four Irish Democrats–George C. Mahoney, Thomas A. Kelley, Charles A. Kirkpatrick, and Martin P. Hogan–who were running the show.\footnote{146} It was in this year that the first planning for the establishment of intermediate schools, or junior highs, took place.\footnote{147} Irish board members felt that these schools would better prepare students for high school during “an interesting, vital, formative time” of their adolescence.\footnote{148} After a trial period, in 1916, the School Committee voted to approve the establishment of four new junior high schools, a huge success for the newly elected Irish officials.\footnote{149} For the Irish, the establishment of junior high schools meant a great deal to their community specifically. As Ueda explains, “the Irish spearheaded the drive for reform because they saw the public schools as a stepping stone to higher social and economic status and political power.”\footnote{150} Irish politicians wanted to create more opportunities for success for their fellow Irishmen, and in public schools, Irish children interacted with other “Yankee” children on an equal playing field.\footnote{151} They opted to act within the public school system rather than Catholic because many working-class people simply could not afford parochial school tuition and because

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150 Ibid, 183.
151 Ibid.
there was only one small Catholic high school in the city at Saint Josephs. All of Somerville’s other parochial schools only instructed through the eighth grade when students made their confirmation, the sacrament after which the Catholic church viewed them as adults.

When the movement by the city’s aldermen to abolish junior highs and replace them with vocational schools began in 1920, the Irish vehemently opposed it. They began a “popular civic campaign” against this movement in which William T. McCarthy, the Irish Ward 1 school committeeman, spoke out loudly to *The Somerville Journal*.\footnote{Ueda, “Suburban Social Change,” 191.} These junior highs were particularly important to the Irish in Ward 1, where East Somerville was located, for there was such a large population of working-class immigrant children there. In fact, in 1920, the Southern Junior High School that served the students of East Somerville had the highest population of students who were children of immigrants,\footnote{“Report of the School Committee: City of Somerville,” in *City of Somerville: Massachusetts Annual Reports: 1920* (Somerville, MA: Somerville Press Print, 1921), https://archive.org/details/annualreportofci1880some/page/n1(mode=2up), Cited in Ueda, “Suburban Social Change,” 187.} showing how much use immigrant families were getting from these junior high schools. Additionally, Irish politicians wanted to avoid the establishment of more vocational schools because they felt that these institutions would just “reinforce patterns of inequality by funneling even more working class-students into blue-collar occupations”\footnote{Ibid.} rather than white-collar positions. Junior highs were also beneficial to Catholics, as they eased the transition from parochial school to public high school, helping students avoid tough entrance exams for transfer students and making the major change in environment less traumatic.\footnote{Ueda, “Suburban Social Change,” 198.} The movement to abolish the junior highs was shut down due to the work of Irish politicians like McCarthy; however, the debate shows the tensions that existed between the
majority Irish School Committee and the still majority Republican Board of Aldermen and the challenges the Irish had to face to really make an impact.

Because education was the major means in which the Irish obtained social mobility, the newly powerful Irish wanted to better the educational system in a way that helped more of their friends and family gain access to the middle class in the future. Changing the public school system in Somerville was one of the major ways in which the Irish transformed the city of Somerville, and it had a particularly important impact on the immigrant children of East Somerville, vastly improving their educational experience and helping some of them to achieve middle-class success in the future. They did this through social mobility within the Democratic Party, using Somerville’s local government to help their own community.

The Irish started from the bottom of the social ladder in Somerville, and over the course of a century, completely changed the trajectory of their American experience, transforming an entire city. While they often pursued upward mobility by putting others down, they also found their own ways to shape Somerville into an immigrant city through religion and local government. Their experience in particular highlights the importance of local government in the lived experiences of immigrants. The Irish used local government as a stepping stone for social mobility to eventually make the city into their city that they controlled, a feat that not all immigrants have had the privilege of doing.
Chapter 2: Salvadorans in East Somerville

Before 1980, barely a trace of Salvadorans lived in Somerville, Massachusetts. In fact, in the 1980 Census, there was not yet a category documenting their presence in the city; with regards to the “Hispanic” population, the data only tracked Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans.\(^{156}\) However, by 1990, Salvadorans had begun to populate the neighborhood of East Somerville in large numbers. In just ten years, their numbers rose from near zero to 7.4 percent of the neighborhood’s population, a number which also made them the largest Latin American group in the neighborhood\(^{157}\) and more than half of the total “Hispanic origin” population in East Somerville (which was 17.4 that year).\(^{158}\) The 1990 Census also indicated that of the entire foreign-born population in the Census Tracts that encompassed East Somerville, 64 percent came between 1980 and 1990, a statistic that was consistent with the timing of the Salvadoran Civil War.\(^{159}\) By 2000, the Hispanic/Latino population in East Somerville had grown over twenty percent, a total of which Salvadorans made up the largest proportion at 8.4 percent.\(^{160}\) And finally, by 2000, the East Somerville area was almost fifty-fifty between foreign-born (48.5 percent) and native-born (51.5 percent),\(^{161}\) a significant statistic that showed just how many immigrants had arrived to this neighborhood during the 1980s and ‘90s.

This stark increase is attributed to the wave of new immigrant groups from Latin America, Haiti, and China that arrived in Somerville during these two decades. More than 65


\(^{158}\) Ibid.


percent of this foreign-born population in 2000 was from Latin America, and Salvadorans were over twenty percent of this 65, second only to Brazilians. All of this data indicates a major shift in the racial and ethnic makeup of East Somerville during the time of Salvadoran immigration, and it provides the context for just how much of an impact Salvadoran immigrants made on East Somerville and just how important the neighborhood was in shaping the Salvadoran experience in Somerville overall.

Firstly, the arrival of Salvadoran immigrants in large numbers to the city contributed greatly to Somerville’s decision to become a Sanctuary City. The manner in which they changed the population demographics of the city, especially those of East Somerville, and the contributions they, along with other new immigrant groups, made in establishing Somerville as an “immigrant city,” inspired the decision. However, Salvadorans’ arrival also brought to the surface a new wave of anti-immigrant sentiment resulting in discrimination against Salvadorans’ racial and linguistic identities as well as their falsely perceived “criminality.” At the same time, it brought a new culture to East Somerville that completely shifted the social landscape and political climate of the neighborhood through forming their own organizations and introducing their religious traditions. Just as it did for the Irish, East Somerville served as an enclave for new Salvadoran immigrants coming to the city where they inevitably faced a lot of discrimination, but also where they were most welcomed and formed the most impactful religious, social, and political organizations through which they could advocate for themselves. This chapter argues that Salvadorans, facing discrimination amidst backlash against the Sanctuary City Resolution and unable to access local government due to nativism and racial prejudice, established

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themselves in Somerville through their use of cultural self-help organizations, as well as their religious transformation of East Somerville to advocate for their community’s needs and rights.

2.1 National Context: Federal Policy Targets Salvadorans

The Salvadoran Civil War that lasted from 1979 to 1992 sparked the exodus of 650,000 and 1.4 million people from the country.\textsuperscript{163} In 1977, Carlos Humberto Romero became President of El Salvador in an election that he manipulated in his favor, establishing a military dictatorship. Additionally, an oligarchy controlled all of the nation’s wealth and possessed total control of Salvadoran politics. In the years following, peasant guerrilla organizations formed to challenge the oligarchy and military government. Though Romero was overthrown in 1979, the military remained in power through the governance of three military juntas, creating death squads that killed tens of thousands of people and tortured and kidnapped even more. The government paid little attention to whether the people they killed were innocent civilians or members of guerilla organizations. The conflict between leftist guerrillas and the government that culminated in the Salvadoran Civil War wreaked havoc and terror in cities and on the countryside of El Salvador, causing hundreds of thousands of people to flee this violence and migrate to the United States.

Notably, the United States government financially and politically backed the military dictatorship in El Salvador and was in effect complicit in the deaths of countless Salvadorans. U.S. support for the military juntas was driven by Cold War era policy. Preventing the spread of communism in Latin America became the paramount concern of U.S. foreign policy in the region. They not only allocated millions of dollars to the Salvadoran military, but also provided them with training and weapons. Consequently, the United States government, in large part, actually caused much of the Salvadoran immigration to America by authorizing the violence.

\textsuperscript{163} Aviva Chomsky, Central America’s Forgotten History: Revolution, Violence, and the Roots of Migration (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2021), 156.
When they arrived in the United States, Salvadoran immigrants suffered disproportionately from federal immigration policies that intentionally prevented them from receiving amnesty, asylum, or refugee status. For context, amnesty refers to an official pardon for violating federal immigration law. Asylum, according to the UN Refugee Agency, is “a form of protection which allows an individual to remain in the United States instead of being removed (deported) to a country where he or she fears persecution or harm.” The process of becoming a refugee is separate from that of asylum and requires participation in a resettlement program. Acquiring amnesty, asylum, or refugee status were all different and confusing processes that many new immigrants often did not understand and that the U.S. government used against them.

President Reagan’s 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act granted amnesty to only immigrants who had arrived in the United States and lived in the nation continuously prior to January 1, 1982, officially excluding thousands of Salvadorans who fled during the second decade of the Civil War. A 1988 Boston Globe article stated that “Recently some refugees have arrived in the mistaken belief that they would qualify for amnesty under the new immigration law,” and this “mistaken belief” resulted in the rejection of thousands of applications. For example, a 1989 Boston Globe article stated that “Since 1981, INS authorities have approved only two percent of such applications for Salvadorans. Of 2,833 asylum applications by Salvadorans in 1987-88, the Boston INS office had granted 9 approvals as of June last year.”

While many Salvadorans saw themselves as political refugees based on the fact that they were

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165 Ibid.
fleeing life-threatening violence, they still had to prove that their lives were in danger in order to receive amnesty or asylum, and many could not. To hide its complicity and avoid admitting that a humanitarian crisis was occurring in El Salvador, the U.S. government labeled Salvadoran immigrants as *economic* rather than political refugees, barring them from political asylum and amnesty and thus, marking them as “undocumented.”

These unjust federal restrictions played a key role in the story of Salvadoran immigrants in Somerville; however, the specific context of Somerville tells us even more, highlighting both how local policy and prejudice prevented Salvadorans from ascending in the same way that the Irish did as well as their tenacity and perseverance to make Somerville their home even amidst intense discrimination and strict federal law. While their undocumented status limited Salvadoran immigrants’ ability to gain political power and achieve social mobility, the community they chose to make their home also heavily influenced their lived, everyday experiences in the community.

**2.2 Facing Discrimination: Sanctuary Backlash and Criminalization**

Though Somerville’s Board of Aldermen did elect to become a Sanctuary City, symbolically asserting itself as a welcoming haven for immigrants, the term “sanctuary” was not always an accurate description of what Somerville was. Salvadorans experienced a multitude of discriminations, based specifically on their race and socioeconomic status, as well as their status as undocumented immigrants. Nativists and skeptics in Somerville and throughout the nation made the false generalization that Salvadorans all lived in the United States “illegally” and acted as “criminals” and therefore, should not be welcomed. Despite the city’s seemingly welcoming politics, Salvadorans faced intense discrimination, especially during the time of the Sanctuary City Movement, which was particularly visible in East Somerville.
Somerville’s Sanctuary City Resolution was extremely divisive city residents. Firstly, the word “sanctuary” in relation to immigration was (and is) often misinterpreted causing confusion and controversy. Nativists and skeptics of the Sanctuary City Movement that began in the early 1980s interpreted the term as a synonym for harboring criminals. Former Alderman and sponsor of the Resolution John Buonomo stated that “There is a perception that sanctuary city means people can do whatever they want and be immune from the law. That is not what it says, if people are violating the law they will be arrested. But if they are living within the law, they are not going to be hassled by city officials when they need help.” On the other hand, many undocumented immigrants misinterpreted the term to mean that they were fully protected from federal immigration law in Somerville, which was also not the case.

Former Somerville mayor and senator Capuano explained that “the term ‘Sanctuary City’ is probably a bad one… it implies more than what it is, I think, and what it was meant to be.” In a Sanctuary City, the local government of that city does its best to limit cooperation with federal immigration law and to protect undocumented, otherwise law-abiding immigrants from being deported or detained. However, this does not mean that the federal government is prohibited from entering the city and enforcing federal law; in fact, ICE raids can and have been carried out in Somerville, particularly in the early 2000s under Operation Community Shield (which targeted gang members) and as recently as 2018 in a three-day operation targeting “criminal aliens and immigration fugitives.” Salvadoran Somerville resident Jennifer Martinez,

170 Capuano, interview by the author.
whose mother worked at Market Basket in Somerville explains that in the early 2000s, “when ICE was coming around, they would come around randomly to Market Basket and Broadway which were the hotspots for catching any immigrant they could… My parents would tell my brother and me to lock all of the doors and close the windows and just hide.” For Salvadorans, this meant that the city was not entirely a safe haven, but a place where they were, at least, less at risk of their immigration status being reported.

The backlash surrounding the Sanctuary City decision came to a head in 1993 when several local politicians started a referendum movement to abolish the Sanctuary City Resolution. A 1993 *Boston Globe* article stated that “Today, Somerville is at a crossroads. At a time when anti-immigration opinion is gaining force across the country, a petition drive here is placing a referendum on the November ballot that would sweep from city books the last reference to Somerville’s unconditional welcome to all immigrant newcomers.” Expressing support for the referendum, former Ward 1 Alderman Charles Chisholm said: “We need to draw the line and get some breathing room… Some of those who supported ‘sanctuary city’ set out to do something altruistic, but it is turning out to be a big burden on the city.” The referendum received thousands of signatures, emphasizing the widespread opposition to the Sanctuary City Resolution. Much of this backlash was related to the large numbers of Salvadorans coming into the city, especially East Somerville.

For context, the word “undocumented” has replaced “illegal” in politically correct discourse only in recent decades, but “illegal” has been and is still widely used to describe immigrants from Latin America. Aviva Chomsky explains that “illegality” was really created in

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175 Ibid.
1965, when Mexican migration became “immigration.”176 Prior to this year, Mexican workers would cross the border legally to work in the United States seasonally, and this was not considered immigration because they would eventually leave and go back to Mexico through short-term labor contracts like the Bracero Program.177 Chomsky argues that the migration of workers to the United States has and will always continue, but instead of being called “migration” or the “Bracero Program,” it is now called “illegal immigration.”178 Historian Mae Ngai states that “immigration restriction produced the illegal alien as a new legal and political subject, whose inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility – a subject barred from citizenship and without rights.”179 The constructed concept “illegality” was an imposition that the Irish did not have to contend with. Salvadorans, however, did, and the label deprived them of their rights and freedoms by legally making them ineligible for certain privileges enjoyed by citizens.

Nativist attitudes existed within the specific context of Somerville as well. In 2006, Ward 1 Alderman William Roche expressed his concern about undocumented immigrants, stating, “I don’t want to open up the gates, provide every city service to people who have broken the law and look the other way… I don’t want people crossing the border to be given a map to Somerville that says, go there and they will take care of you… Any legal immigrant I will welcome and help any way I can… My father and grandfather were immigrants and had to go through a process. All immigrants should have to do the same thing.”180 Roche not only emphasizes the idea that undocumented immigrants are dependent on city resources, but he also

176 “How Immigration,” video.
177 The Bracero Program was the result of an executive order/agreement between the United States and Mexico called Mexican Farm Labor Program in which millions of Mexican migrant workers were permitted to enter the United States legally to work during short-term labor contracts to ease the United States labor shortage.
178 “How Immigration,” video.
179 Ngai, Impossible Subjects.
expresses a preference for “legal” immigrants in Somerville. Additionally, he incorrectly comments on “the process” that his ancestors went through, when in reality, Irish immigrants did not face federal immigration restrictions in the same way Salvadorans did.

By the ‘90s and early 2000s, being an immigrant became synonymous with being Latino, which also became synonymous with being “illegal.” Labeling a person as “illegal” stamps them as deviant and criminal, and while technically they may have committed a crime through the way they entered the United States, they are often otherwise law-abiding. The “criminal” label has been used to justify racial discrimination. By criminalizing immigrants from Latin America, it becomes socially acceptable to discriminate against them without openly admitting to racism. Salvadoran immigrants were not white, and therefore, not viewed as “American” regardless of their citizenship status. Michelle Alexander explains that after the Jim Crow era, the government used the prison system to continue to deny black Americans their rights. By disproportionately arresting them for minor crimes and effectively turning them into “criminals,” law enforcement and policymakers created a socially acceptable excuse to discriminate against them at a time when doing so through the law was no longer viable. Like black Americans, undocumented immigrants were also constructed as criminals through the label of “illegal.” By making crossing the border unlawful, the government made it possible to detain and more latently deny these now “illegal” immigrants their rights.

The criminalization of and racial discrimination against Salvadorans became prevalent in the specific context of Somerville in the late 1990s and early 2000s when the presence of the Salvadoran gang, Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, first appeared in East Somerville. While MS-13 originated in Los Angeles in the late seventies and early eighties, the gang arrived in Somerville

182 Waters and Kasinitz, “The War on Crime and the War on Immigrants.”
in the late nineties and early 2000s.\textsuperscript{183} Though there were prior instances of MS-13 graffiti, the Somerville police first became keenly aware of the MS-13 presence in Somerville in October of 2002 when two members of MS-13 raped two girls at Foss Park in East Somerville.\textsuperscript{184} The girls were 14 and 17, both deaf, and the older of the two had cerebral palsy and used a wheelchair.\textsuperscript{185} Additionally, there were several instances of assault committed by MS-13 members in East Somerville throughout that same year.\textsuperscript{186} MS-13 had made its presence known particularly in East Somerville, and this growing violence raised deep concern for people living there.

Somerville residents and policymakers experienced increased feelings of alarm and a sense of urgency to do something about gang violence in East Somerville. For example, Former Mayor Joseph Curtatone, who was Alderman at Large at the time, said “Something is going to happen… God help us if it erupts, there’s going to be a price to pay.”\textsuperscript{187} The concerns about MS-13 were particularly relevant to East Somerville, where the Latino population, made up predominantly by Salvadorans, had risen to about nine percent.\textsuperscript{188}

These concerns culminated in changes in policy that greatly affected Salvadorans, especially undocumented immigrants living in East Somerville. In 2005, the city approved what became commonly known as the Anti-Gang Loitering Ordinance, and its purpose was to combat the gang violence that was taking place throughout East Somerville. It essentially allowed the Somerville Police to arrest any potential gang member for “loitering,” or gathering suspiciously on city streets. Section I of the Ordinance reads as follows:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{188} “Gang Members Arraigned.”
\end{itemize}
“(a) Whenever a police officer observes members of a criminal street gang engaged in gang loitering in any public place designated for the enforcement of this section under subsection (b), the police officer shall, subject to all applicable procedures promulgated by the chief of police: (i) inform such criminal street gang members that they are engaged in gang loitering within an area in which loitering by groups containing criminal street gang members is prohibited; (ii) order all such criminal street gang members to disperse and remove themselves from within sight and hearing of the place at which the order was issued; (iii) inform those criminal street gang members engaged in gang loitering that they will be subject to arrest if they fail to promptly obey the order or engage in further gang loitering within sight or hearing of the place at which the order was issued during the next 3 hours.”\(^{189}\)

Sponsored by Alderman Roche, the law was given preliminary approval by the Board of Aldermen in 2002, and officially put into effect in 2005.\(^{190}\) Roche stated that “these gang members hang around street corners, standing there taunting everybody… the problem hasn’t gone away.”\(^{191}\) According to the *Boston Globe*, teachers at Saint Benedict’s Little Flower School in East Somerville had to take alternate routes to school each morning to avoid harassment.\(^{192}\)

The idea behind the Ordinance had good intentions. It was to protect the people of Somerville from potential violence and to make them feel safer while walking through East Somerville.

However, while it was imperative to stop real gang activity, the law ended up targeting Salvadorans in a manner in which it may not have intended to, but in a way that greatly hindered their experience of living in a Sanctuary City. With the passage of the Anti-Gang Loitering Ordinance, police officers were able to arrest people on the basis of perceived “loitering.” Though this may have worked in catching actual gang members, the majority of Salvadorans in East Somerville had nothing to do with MS-13 and were typically law-abiding residents. The Ordinance seemed to them like it was targeting all people who appeared “Latino,” and therefore


\(^{191}\) Ibid.

\(^{192}\) Ibid.
became a matter of racial profiling and contributed to the assumption that all Salvadorans were gang members. As stated by the *Tufts Daily* in 2005, “Somerville’s Anti-Gang Loitering Ordinance is an affront to citizen’s rights and can be used as a tool for official racism by Somerville Police.”¹⁹³ Marcos A. Garcia, a Salvadoran from Somerville, told the *Boston Globe* in 2002, around the time of the preliminary passage of the Ordinance, that “Somerville’s growing Latino community… has seen its reputation tarnished. Fellow Latinos say their image as hard-working immigrants, many of whom fled civil wars in Central America, has been replaced by a caricature of violent, delinquent youths and inattentive parents.”¹⁹⁴ Latino community leader of Somerville, Maria Madrid, furthered this sentiment when she said, “We don’t want the image that all Latinos in Somerville are walking around with guns in their hands.”¹⁹⁵ Lastly, Somerville immigrant advocate Marleine Vera told Susan Ostrander, referring to this stereotyping, the following: “I’ve heard it that if you go into East Somerville, you don’t want to be there, that there’s so much violence, that it’s an unsafe place in Somerville. There’s this perception from the older Somerville residents that immigrants are bringing this lack of safety to the city and it’s deteriorating the neighborhood.”¹⁹⁶ So, not only was the Salvadoran population stereotyped and stigmatized, but so was their neighborhood. This law, along with the threat of ICE raids in the city, contributed to a culture of fear surrounding possible deportation for Salvadorans.

Garcia, Madrid, and Vera were all referring to what anthropologist Leo Chavez calls the “Latino Threat Narrative,” which includes the construction of undocumented immigrants as criminals. This perceived “threat” resulted in increased vigilance towards and surveillance of

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.
East Somerville. Even before the passage of the Ordinance, racial tensions were high. For example, in 1991, there was an incident between a group of Salvadoran teenagers and the Somerville Police in which an eighteen-year-old Salvadoran boy was allegedly beaten by a police officer while he was gathered with his friends. Police claim that there was no beating, and that the boy simply fell, but regardless of what truly happened, the incident contributed to racial tensions between Salvadorans and whites in the city. Philip Bennett emphasized that the group of boys seemed harmless and quoted Caroline Abrego, a resident of Somerville who witnessed the incident, who said, “three policemen had him on the ground and were punching him and choking him… The kid hadn't done anything. They just went after him because he’s Hispanic. It’s just racism. That’s what it is.” Bennett further stressed that “the episode has become part of a running debate about which is more troubling: the arrival of an unfamiliar group of Hispanic teenagers on their streets or the actions of police, whom residents accuse of relentlessly and pointlessly harassing the young people.” Overall, the surveillance of Salvadorans was a symptom of the harmful ideology surrounding the “Latino Threat” throughout the nation.

Intentionally or not, the political climate in Somerville, though welcoming and accepting in many ways, was not immune to the nation-wide negative sentiments towards and discrimination against Salvadoran immigrants. They were accused of being criminals and a “burden” on city resources, and were unwanted by those who opposed the Sanctuary City Resolution due to their status as undocumented. Somerville residents’ sentiments were reflective of the nation as a whole. As stated in 1997 by Oscar Chacon, executive director of Centro Presente in Cambridge, Massachusetts, “The bottom line is, what is going on in Somerville is

198 Ibid.
what is going on in the country in general... Unfortunately, immigrants and refugees are being represented as if they were the root causes of the problems of our society.” Salvadorans became representative of gang violence, and as undocumented, non-white immigrants, were viewed as “un-American” and not fully accepted in Somerville’s community; their arrival to Somerville was met with much backlash and injustice, circumstances which make their achievements in East Somerville all the more impressive and inspiring.

2.3 Salvadorans and Cultural Self-Help Organizations

Despite the many challenges, Salvadorans were still able to make their mark on the city and transform the neighborhood of East Somerville just like immigrants that came before them. Firstly, they completely transformed the linguistic landscape of the neighborhood and inspired more people to learn the Spanish language. They additionally not only inspired the creation of nonprofits and organizations, but they also created their own organizations and coalitions through which they addressed their own needs and fought for their rights and acceptance in Somerville. Salvadorans also made a significant religious contribution to East Somerville, making their mark on the once Irish and Italian Saint Benedict’s Parish by introducing their culture to the neighborhood. While they were never able to achieve political power through winning elections, they found ways to form enclaves and support networks and truly changed the social landscape of East Somerville into a neighborhood that belonged to them.

Among the many ways that Salvadorans transformed East Somerville was their bringing of the Spanish language to the city in large numbers. Many of Somerville’s immigrants in the eighties and nineties were not fluent English-speakers; according to the 2000 U.S. Census, 36

percent of Somerville residents did not speak English at home, a statistic that grew by eleven percentage points since 1991. Additionally, according to the Boston Globe, in 2000, eighteen percent of students in Somerville Public Schools came from Spanish-speaking families, a majority of which probably attended the East Somerville Community School. This trend was not unique to Somerville, and throughout the nation, people began to feel concerned about the rise of Spanish, for it posed a threat to the dominance of English. Many Americans were also concerned that Spanish-speaking immigrants would not assimilate to American culture by learning English. Samuel P. Huntington, political scientist and former Harvard University Professor, expresses this opinion in his article titled “The Hispanic Challenge.” He states that “Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves -- from Los Angeles to Miami -- and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream.”

Firstly, the title of this article suggests something important: that the presence of “Hispanic,” or Spanish-speaking people, is a “challenge” that we must overcome in our nation. Secondly, Huntington suggests that if the United States continues to allow immigrants from places like El Salvador to migrate here, the nation will eventually consist of “enclaves” of people who refuse to learn English. Huntington’s fears fit perfectly into Chavez’s “Latino Threat Narrative” as well, for he believes in a Hispanic “unwillingness to learn English and integrate into U.S. society.”

To combat this growing “threat” of the Spanish language, throughout the nation, many states adopted “English-only” policies. In the second half of the nineties, Massachusetts policy makers strongly considered adopting such a policy through, for example, forcing people to speak

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200 Gedan, “Seeking the Common.”
English at work, requiring citizenship ceremonies to be conducted in English, and doing away with bilingual ballots.\textsuperscript{204} Waldert Rivera-Saez, executive director of Centro Hispano, an organization that provides resources to Hispanic people in Chelsea, Massachusetts, feared that with the adoption of such policies, “People who might have an accent or broken English… won’t have access to jobs or apartments. It will be legalized discrimination based on language.”\textsuperscript{205} While Massachusetts never adopted English as its official language like some other states did, in 2002, the adoption of Ballot Question #2 eliminated the majority of bilingual education programs in the state in favor of English-only immersion.\textsuperscript{206} Part of the reasoning behind the decision to adopt English-only policies like this one was the assumption that monolingualism, the “one nation-one language” ideology, or “the notion that each nation is defined by a single language and vice versa,”\textsuperscript{207} should be the norm.

While all of this information related to English-only ideology sounds like it belongs in the discrimination section of this chapter, in East Somerville, Salvadoran immigrants found ways to overcome this form of discrimination and work with other community members to transform East Somerville into a neighborhood that served them and their needs. In 1999, the Unidos Program, a bilingual, bi-literate educational program, was established at the East Somerville Community School. The program was structured so that half of the school day was instructed in English and the other half in Spanish. The program begins in kindergarten and continues through the eighth grade, each grade consisting of two teachers, one being a native Spanish speaker and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{205} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
the other a native English speaker.\(^{208}\) Rather than forcing students to immediately learn English and assimilate, the program incorporates the Spanish language into their education as an equally valuable tool as English. The students, largely Salvadoran, are not expected to rapidly learn English in this program nor is their native language disregarded, whereas as Luigi Palazzo, an Italian immigrant who ran the Unidos Program in 2002, explained, “in most Somerville schools, students are expected to achieve English fluency within three years.”\(^{209}\) Palazzo further emphasized that in the Unidos Program, “students’ native language is never phased out,”\(^{210}\) taking off the pressure from native Spanish-speaking students to assimilate. Jennifer Martinez, a Unidos participant herself, furthers this sentiment, stating, “all of the kids that were born in El Salvador felt more comfortable speaking Spanish… Unidos was a good bridge to learning English for them.”\(^{211}\) They felt more empowered being able to speak Spanish in school because they could better express their knowledge and intelligence. “It boosts morale,” Martinez explains.\(^{212}\) Unidos was inspired by the large number of Spanish-speaking Salvadoran immigrants who came to the city in the eighties and nineties, and the dual language program served as a symbol of their presence in East Somerville specifically. The choice to establish this program at the East Somerville Neighborhood School was intentional, for having it in the East Somerville neighborhood would make it more accessible to Salvadoran students living nearby.

Since 1999, the year of its inception, the Unidos Program added a new grade, and it is now a large program that serves elementary students of all ages.\(^{213}\) People from different parts of


\(^{210}\) Ibid.

\(^{211}\) Martinez, interview by the author.

\(^{212}\) Ibid.

Somerville actually opt to send their students to the East Somerville School for access to this program and the benefit of becoming bilingual. According to Christine Henebury, a parent of an Unidos student of the original 1999 kindergarten class, stated that “the Unidos kids came from all corners of Somerville and most would never have met if they had opted for their neighborhood schools. They did meet, learned together and grew together sharing knowledge of not just their native languages, English and Spanish, but also their cultures. This merging of east and west, north, central and south is what Somerville is all about. The fact that these children now have the added gift of bilingualism turned out to be the icing on the cake; the true meaning of Unidos came through in the bonds that these diverse students are proving possible to us all.”

This quote encompasses the name of the program, “Unidos,” meaning “united” or “joined” in Spanish, perfectly. The program attracted people to the neighborhood of East Somerville that may have never spent time there otherwise. It brought Salvadorans and other Somerville residents together. In spite of her concern that the program has gotten much more competitive, Martinez believes that it truly created a sense of community. “Being able to speak in our mother tongue added so much more to our bond,” she states. Additionally, the program was spearheaded and run by other immigrants like Palazzo, making it a true unification of Somerville’s immigrant communities, new and old, as well.

Of course, Unidos was hit hard by the adoption of the 2002 Ballot Question 2. In June of that year, students, parents, and teachers from Unidos and other dual language programs in the state protested at Governor Mitt Romney’s office. Luckily, even with the passage of Question 2, two-way language programs like Unidos would be permitted, but with the caveat that students

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215 Martinez, interview by the author.
must either be at least ten years old, or able to speak English. So, while many bilingual education programs were banned, Unidos was not because it also included instruction in English half of the time. However, it was unfortunate that restrictions had been placed on the program with the ballot question’s passage, especially the fact that Spanish speakers technically could no longer learn in their native language. Superintendent of Schools in Somerville in 2002, Al Argenziano found a way around this. He explains that “There’s no law against teaching U.S. citizens Spanish. I just have to speed up the process for Spanish speakers.” Argenziano worked around the new policy, arguing that if the Spanish-speaking students all learned English, albeit rather quickly, the program would have no legal problems, as it would just be a program in which English-speaking students were also learning Spanish. This new law did alter the program, as it required students to all be proficient in English prior to enrollment, and this was a challenge for about fifteen years until Governor Baker passed An Act Relative to Language Opportunity for Our Kids (LOOK) that gave public schools more flexibility and freedom to decide how they would run their bilingual education programs.

Despite all of the challenges it faced from negative sentiments towards bilingual education to legislative obstacles, the program endured and still exists today as a symbol of the strength of East Somerville’s Spanish-speaking community. The creation of Unidos serves as a major mechanism through which Salvadorans shaped the educational landscape of the neighborhood by bringing their native language to the community and refusing to give in to “English only” ideologies.

Unidos served as an important example of Salvadorans ability to contribute to organizational efforts that served their needs as a community in East Somerville. Another one of these efforts resulted in the Welcome Project, an organization based in East Somerville that supports the needs of immigrants throughout the Greater Boston area. According to the organization’s website, “The Welcome Project provides programs for immigrant and lower-income families that hone leadership and personal development, provide access to employment and education, help residents to learn English and the nuances of a new culture and engage more fully in the civic life of the city.” Services include English classes for immigrants looking to pass the United States’ citizenship exam, interpreter training for bilingual youth, and a summer Culture Camp for children. Their mission is one that “strengthens the capacity of immigrant youth, adults and families to advocate for themselves and influence schools, government, and other institutions.” Essentially, the organization provides resources to immigrants who are adjusting to life and the new culture of the Boston area and offers opportunities for those who hope to further their economic and social prospects.

The program notably began in 1987, the same year that Somerville adopted the Sanctuary City Resolution. It originated out of the Mystic Public Housing Development, known today as the Mystic River Development and came in the wake of the 1985 state-mandated racial integration of the Housing Development. Mystic River is essential to one’s understanding of East Somerville, as it has historically housed low-income residents of Somerville, which included many Salvadoran, Haitian, and Vietnamese immigrants later on, but also many Irish and Italians before the arrival of these new immigrants. While the housing development is technically

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220 Ibid.
221 Ibid.
222 Ibid.
located in the Winter Hill section of Somerville, it is often conceptualized as part of and associated with East Somerville, as it physically borders parts of the East Somerville neighborhood like Foss Park. This housing development has always served as a key site of history in East Somerville, and its mandated racial integration was significant for immigrants from El Salvador along with others from Haiti, Brazil, and Cape Verde. The Welcome Project was designed to make sure new immigrant residents of Mystic River felt safe in their environment. According to Suzanne Sankar, co-founder of the Welcome Project and the former director of a mental health clinic at the Mystic River Development, “when these immigrants were moving in, there were some troubling incidents of violence and harassment directed toward the new residents.”

The Welcome Project anticipated a lot of racial tensions as the housing development began to desegregate, and wanted to protect immigrants from even more discrimination than they were already experiencing. What began as a small non-profit serving residents of Mystic River became an organization serving all of Somerville and the surrounding Boston area, though it remains grounded in the heart of the Mystic River Development.

The Welcome Project significantly changed the immigrant experience in Somerville for the better; however, it was founded by non-immigrants like Sankar who was inspired by the arrival of so many new immigrants. So, while Salvadoran immigrants greatly influenced the creation of the organization and worked directly with people like Sankar in its establishment, they did not necessarily spearhead its founding. They did, however, also create their own organizations while simultaneously inspiring the creation of nonprofits like the Welcome Project.

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223 Simmons University, “The Welcome Project – Supporting the Needs of Immigrants,” Simmons University Blog, https://online.simmons.edu/blog/the-welcome-project/.
224 Ibid.
One example of these organizations was the Young Latino Youth for Prevention in Somerville, a group of teenagers made up of mostly Salvadoran immigrants. Founded in the late nineties, the organization’s goal was to mitigate the number of Latino youth joining gangs like MS-13. During this time, Salvadoran youth fell into the Latino Threat Narrative trap and were often demonized. The program’s leader, Salvadoran immigrant Ismael Vasquez, organized a discussion at the Union Square social service agency to educate Latino youth about the dangers of gang violence in 1997 and was able to obtain a $30,000 federal grant from the Department of Education and the Governor’s Alliance Against Drugs. He also paid stipends to Somerville youth leaders to hold discussions with their peers about this topic. Salvadoran immigrants like Vasquez made a significant impact in East Somerville, targeting Salvadoran youth who might have been influenced or affected by the pressure to join a gang like MS-13. Efforts like the Young Latino Youth for Prevention in Somerville are great examples of Salvadoran immigrants taking initiative to address their own needs and making a difference in East Somerville overall by preventing the young population from engaging in gang violence in the neighborhood.

Another significant organization that was created directly by Salvadoran immigrants in Somerville is the Committee for Refugees from El Salvador (CORES), founded by two refugees from El Salvador in the eighties. CORES is located on Medford Street in East Somerville, and now “supports many different communities in the greater Somerville area through ESL instruction, citizenship exam counsel, legal counsel, cultural resources, and more.” In this sense, the program is quite similar to the Welcome Project, just more centered on the specific

226 Ibid.
227 Ibid.
228 Ibid.
needs of Salvadoran immigrants and founded by Salvadorans themselves. The organization was formed during a time of uncertainty and fear among the Salvadoran community in Somerville. Garcia strongly advocated for the granting of permanent residency to Salvadoran refugees in the early nineties. In 1992, he stated that “More than ever, we should be allowed to stay here and help our country recover so that one day we can return.” CORES began as an effort to help refugees seeking asylum in the United States, but it is now a large organization that offers so many services to Salvadorans in Somerville. It has now partnered with Tufts University to create the Teach-In CORES program in which Tufts students volunteer to teach ESL and citizenship classes to the immigrant community. According to Maria Grant, the 2019 co-President of Teach-In CORES, “working with the surrounding community is the main focus of Teach-in CORES… We leave campus to teach and work directly with a local organization. Our students live in and around Somerville, so it’s a really great way to get to know residents who we normally wouldn’t.” The partnership between CORES and Tufts demonstrates Salvadorans’ efforts to form bonds and establish ties to other parts of Somerville and other members of the Somerville community. This connection formed with a prestigious university is extremely important, for it illustrates Salvadoran immigrants’ ability to network and create opportunities within the city that support their needs that may not have existed had they not made this effort.

Some notable leaders of CORES include its founder, Marcos Garcia who was also a member of the city’s Task Force for Racism and Violence as well as Ismael Vasquez, the leader of the Young Latino Youth for Prevention in Somerville. Salvadoran leaders in Somerville

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often worked together and collaborated on similar projects that served the Latino community during this time. Local leaders also formed the Latino Coalition of Somerville in the early 2000s. They worked together in opposition to the Anti-Gang Loitering Ordinance and advocated for more Latino leadership in Somerville’s government.\textsuperscript{233} Maria Madrid, one of the founders of the Coalition, stated in 2002 that “something is happening in Somerville that didn’t happen before… The Latino community never got organized. Now they are getting organized.”\textsuperscript{234} According to Latino community leader Nelson Salazar, the Coalition “is a way for politicians to understand the community is here and needs to be recognized… We want to identify issues facing our community and make a plan to give the city. We are working to have a voice.”\textsuperscript{235}

This Coalition along with the many other organizations in which Salvadorans were involved such as the Welcome Project, CORES, and the Young Latino Youth for Prevention in Somerville were some of the major ways in which Salvadorans put their voices out there and brought their ideas to the table. These organizations are examples of what sociologist Cecilia Menjívar calls “hometown” associations “through which people, by virtue of their membership, had access to a web of friends, and often help.”\textsuperscript{236} The community comes together through these organizations and establishes ties and networks with one another that help them to thrive in their new and often unwelcoming community. These organizations and leadership were the main political means through which Salvadorans transformed the city to meet their needs. Cultural self-help organizations became the most effective means for them to advocate for themselves due to their exclusion from local government, a concept which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Without having voices in local government, they had to find ways to make their opinions heard,

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{235} Ibid.
and they were able to do that through these groundbreaking organizations that not only caught the attention of local politicians but also actively worked to make East Somerville feel like it belonged to them too. Salvadorans empowered their own community and despite not yet being able to rise through the political ranks like the Irish did, still found ways to change the city for their benefit and carved out spaces in which they felt safe and supported.

2.4 Salvadorans’ Religious Transformation of East Somerville

In addition to political organizations, another one of these safe spaces or “hometown associations” that Salvadorans carved out for themselves in East Somerville was the Catholic Church. Catholicism was very important to many of the Salvadoran immigrants coming to Somerville throughout the eighties, nineties, and early 2000s, just as it was for the Irish. Their churches were places where they came together and shared their common culture, a place where they felt safe to speak their language and practice their faith. The church also served as a system of support for many immigrants and refugees. According to sociologist Cecilia Menjívar, “the Catholic Church – along with mainline Protestant denominations – has filled the vacuum of government assistance for these *de facto* refugees and has been actively involved in improving their lives.” Where the United States government was failing them, the Catholic Church often stepped in and helped them. Menjívar explains that as the United States government has refused to grant asylum or refugee status to many Salvadorans, the church has created sanctuaries to protect them from deportation, offered assistance in establishing settlement in the United States, and simply provided a community of support and acceptance in an unfamiliar place.


238 Ibid.
Additionally, Catholicism specifically was a faith through which Salvadoran immigrants could comfortably practice their traditions, but also contend with their new environments. An important argument that historian Hosffman Ospino makes about Catholicism is that it “is a universal, transnational reality. Regardless of the place, language, or cultural setting in which Catholics practice their faith, the rites and doctrinal beliefs are the same. This homogeneity allows Latino Catholics to quickly relate to their religious practices back home, and also try to incorporate their learned experiences within the communities in which they now worship.”

The essence of Catholicism was universal, so even with cultural differences, Salvadorans were able to practice their faith at churches that had historically been Irish and Italian, and they were eventually able to incorporate their own practices that they brought with them from El Salvador.

Menjívar argues that “Responding to the needs of the new flock, churches themselves are changing and new ones are being created, so that in the interaction between new immigrants and the receiving society’s religious spaces transformation occurs both ways.” In East Somerville, this is exactly what happened. Not only were Salvadorans’ lives changed as they were supported and welcomed by the neighborhood’s Catholic parish, Saint Benedict’s, but they also completely transformed the church itself. Saint Benedict’s became a place that kept Salvadorans connected to their homeland, for they were able to transform the church into their space. Saint Benedict’s was originally established by the Irish, but once Salvadorans began moving into the neighborhood in large numbers, they started attending mass at Saint Benedict’s and eventually became the majority of parishioners. With this increase in numbers came an increase in influence. According to the Boston Globe, Saint Benedict’s was one of the first parishes in the

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Archdiocese of Boston to offer masses in Spanish, a feat that was undoubtedly inspired by the large number of new Salvadoran parishioners. This trend is not unique to Somerville, and was in fact occurring throughout New England due to the rise in immigration from all over Latin America. According to Ospino, “in 2003, 130 Catholic parishes in New England were reported to be offering regularly scheduled services in Spanish for Latinos.” He additionally adds that by 2000, there were approximately 700,000 Latino Catholics in New England, a number which was 12.4 percent of all Catholics. By the early 2000s, Salvadorans had completely taken over Saint Benedict’s, and not only did they change the language in which masses were held, but they also brought in completely new traditions that Somerville had never seen before.

One such tradition that Salvadorans brought to Saint Benedict’s was the baile de los negritos, a practice researched by Tufts anthropology student, Sebastian Chaskel, in 2005, right after the late nineties and early 2000s when Salvadorans established themselves at Saint Benedict’s. The baile de los negritos, which translates directly to “dance of the little black folk,” is a tradition that originated centuries ago in Yucuiaquín, a town in Eastern El Salvador. The dance is performed in dedication to Saint Francis of Assisi as a gesture of gratitude towards him.

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243 Ibid.
for granting them favors.\textsuperscript{245} While it is an ancient tradition in Yucuaiquín, in Somerville, the ceremony has more modern purposes. According to Chakel, “some thank their patron saint for safe arrival in the United States after an arduous journey; some follow the tradition in order to teach their U.S.-born children to continue to celebrate Salvadoran culture and religion in their new homeland.”\textsuperscript{246} The dance would take place after mass, across the street from Saint Benedict’s Church in the Little Flower School. Chakel describes the tradition as consisting of “people wearing a variety of colorful masks, dancing to the rhythm of drums and flutes coming from a cassette player, holding flowers in one hand and maracas in the other.”\textsuperscript{247} They would tease the congregants as they danced and then offered their flowers to a statue of Saint Francis of Assisi.\textsuperscript{248} The ceremony typically takes place during the months leading into October, in which Saint Francis’ Day is celebrated. It serves as both a dedication to their Saint, but also as a reminder of their hometown that they left behind. Chakel states that “while their lives may be drastically different in U.S. urban centers than they were in provincial Yucuaiquín, \textit{el baile} and its saint travel with the people of Yucuaiquín.”\textsuperscript{249} Many Salvadoran immigrants keep the tradition alive, according to Chakel, “to make sure the younger generation stays in touch with their community and their traditions.”\textsuperscript{250} \textit{El baile de los negritos} is a demonstration of the Salvadoran culture establishing roots and a sense of pride in East Somerville, and shows their ability to incorporate their old experiences with their new ones in their new home.

The \textit{baile de los negritos} and the presence of the Yucuaiquinenses in East Somerville had a significant impact on the city politically as well. According to Chakel, about 2,500 people in

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Chaskel and Nichols, “Dancing in the Diaspora.”
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Chaskel and Nichols, “Dancing in the Diaspora.”
\item Chaskel, “From Yucuaiquín to Somerville.”
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Somerville identify as “Yucuaiquinenses” and the majority of them are parishioners at Saint Benedict’s. They began coming to Somerville in the late 1970s and 1980s during the time of the Salvadoran Civil War. Identifying as a subgroup of Salvadorans, Yucuaiquinenses in the Somerville area all tend to know each other and they even formed a support organization for themselves called YUMA (Yucuaiquinenses Unidos de Massachusetts) in 1993. Their gathering in the specific neighborhood of East Somerville is significant, for it shows that Salvadorans often flocked to places where they had other family members and friends.

Their presence and traditions made quite the impact on former mayor Joseph Curtatone. When Yucuaiquinenses performed the baile at the Somerville Museum in 2007, Curtatone was so inspired that he decided to officially establish Yuquaquín as a Sister City to Somerville. Curtatone made this decision through the Washington, D.C. Sister Cities International organization, establishing Yuquaquín as the second of Somerville’s now four sister cities, which also include Gaeta, Italy, Nordeste Portugal, and Tiznit, Morocco. Curtatone stated in 2007 of his decision that “it really goes back to recognizing that Somerville has always been a city of immigrants.”

Another tradition that Salvadorans brought to Saint Benedict’s was the quinceañera, their religious ceremony for a girl’s fifteenth birthday. The quinceañera is not always celebrated religiously, but in the Salvadoran Catholic tradition, it is, and Salvadoran immigrants brought this ceremony to East Somerville and incorporated it into the already existing traditions at Saint Benedict’s. Tufts University student Sara Arcaya, who extensively researched the quinceañera tradition at Saint Benedict’s explains that, “While the quinceañera is not a sacrament, the Latino

251 Chaskel and Nichols, “Dancing in the Diaspora.”
252 Chaskel, “From Yucuaiquin to Somerville
253 Chaskel and Nichols, “Dancing in the Diaspora.”
community and Saint Benedict’s have found a formal way to integrate the custom into its traditions.255 The church began holding quinceañera masses in the early 2000s which consisted of the priest blessing the honoree who offered a bouquet of flowers to the Virgin Mary, asking for her guidance and protection.256 The honoree would dedicate herself to Christianity and her community and must attend CCD (religious education) classes every Sunday to show her commitment to the process.257 However, the ceremony was also much more than just religious. The Salvadoran leaders at Saint Benedict’s like lecturer Berta Guevara and C.C.D. director Daisy Gómez also used the process of the quinceañera to educate the girls on important issues in their community. For example, Guevara would provide charlas or “talks” to the honorees in which she educates them on the dangers of gang violence.258 Additionally, the ceremony was religious, but the honoree’s would also invite her friends and other community members who were not parishioners of Saint Benedict’s to the celebration. As Arcaya states, “The quinceanera’s social quality allows Saint Benedict’s entrance into Greater Somerville, facilitating its outreach and effect on the community.”259 The quinceañera served as a means through which Salvadoran immigrants could make their mark on East Somerville by introducing aspects of their own culture and tradition to a place that had never seen them before, but also as a medium through which they could establish their social networks and better their experience in the city. As Arcaya argues, “The quinceañera is a lived experience that moves with the people who practice it–something that is at once constant, a reminder of the depth and history of one’s culture, and still dynamic, reflecting the daily reality of Somerville Latinos.”260

256 Ibid, 102.
257 Ibid.
258 Ibid.
259 Ibid, 103.
On a similar note, Salvadorans at Saint Benedict’s also created their own ceremony that was actually born in East Somerville called the “fiesta clavel,” which was essentially a quinceañera for boys. It was called a “fiesta clavel,” which means “carnation festival” in Spanish.\(^{261}\) Arcaya argues that “the fiesta clavel may be Somerville’s most marked contribution to the quinceañera tradition,”\(^{262}\) and it is something that Salvadorans in the East Somerville community at Saint Benedict’s spearheaded and created themselves. They used their community church to combine their tradition of the quinceañera with the new ideas brought to them by parishioners who hoped to start a new tradition in their neighborhood.

Salvadoran’s religious impact on East Somerville is very much tied into the experience of the Irish, for Salvadoran immigrants sparked a major transition within Saint Benedict’s in which a completely new demographic took over. What was once a predominantly Irish and Italian parish became almost entirely Salvadoran, and services became completely catered towards the Salvadoran experience and culture. Additionally, within the church and through its parishioners, one can see the changing population of the neighborhood. The city saw so many Salvadorans moving in, and despite Irish and Italians still having large numbers in East Somerville, Salvadorans completely overtook their church. This says something about the strength in the Salvadoran community in making a historically Irish and Italian stronghold into the main Salvadoran church not just of East Somerville, but of the entire city. Saint Benedict’s is a perfect microcosm of the shift from one wave of immigration to another as well as the similar ways in which the two make a lasting impact on the places they migrate to.

Overall, Salvadoran immigrants have made a remarkable impact on the city of Somerville, particularly in their efforts to establish cultural organizations that helped them

\(^{261}\) Arcaya, “Performances of Race,” 105.
\(^{262}\) Ibid, 106.
advocate for their needs as a community as well as through the contributions that they made to the Catholic community of East Somerville. They also changed how people thought about monolingualism in Somerville, inspiring a dual-language program that has improved the lives of thousands of children. However, their achievements were not won without a cost, and they suffered several forms of discrimination, particularly due to their status as undocumented, non-white immigrants. They were also the targets of intense nativism and backlash against Somerville’s decision to become a Sanctuary City, and they were stereotyped as criminals. The combination of the ways in which Salvadoran immigrants experienced the political climate of the city and the ways in which they transformed East Somerville represent what being Salvadoran meant in Somerville from the eighties through the early 2000s. They have very similar experiences to Latino immigrants throughout the nation, but the unique neighborhood of East Somerville made the experience of Salvadorans who ended up there distinct from those who ended up elsewhere.
Chapter 3: Continuities and Divergence

“Certain contemporary patterns… stand out in sharper relief when set against those of earlier arrivals. And while the differences stand out, a comparison makes clear that there are also many similarities and continuities with the past.”²⁶³

In her book From Ellis Island to JFK: New York’s Two Great Waves of Immigration, historian Nancy Foner, comparing New York City’s two major waves of immigration, found that comparing old and new immigrants offers “us a better sense of the impact they have had… over time – and how the immigrants themselves have been transformed in the process.”²⁶⁴ Foner’s study of the continuities and divergence between old and new waves of immigrants is exactly what this chapter intends to do in the specific context of Somerville: to compare and contrast the local experiences of two of the city’s largest, most significant immigrant groups.

The Irish and Salvadorans both culturally transformed Somerville even while they experienced discrimination for their poverty and perceived criminality, which grew from America’s antipathy towards poverty that labeled them as “dependent” and “deviant.” Yet the Irish achieved political dominance whereas Salvadorans have not attained social citizenship nor political office-holding because they entered a very different, revitalizing, “Somerville.” Stronger racial prejudice faced by Salvadorans and new federal immigration restrictions both contributed to the differences, but so did the particular context of a gentrifying Somerville, a phenomenon which emphasizes the importance of local government in the lived experience of immigrants.

3.1 The Cultural Transformation of East Somerville

One of the most visible and long-lasting ways that the Irish and Salvadorans made their mark on Somerville was through their cultural transformation of the neighborhood of East

²⁶³ Foner, From Ellis Island to JFK.
²⁶⁴ Ibid, 3.
Somerville, starting with St. Benedict’s Parish. However, this was not the only manner that both groups similarly transformed East Somerville; they also introduced their culture to the neighborhood through establishing small businesses. Both groups have storefronts and restaurants lining the streets of the neighborhood that now represent the essence of East Somerville today. Foner explains that “the immigrant market provides a base for a host of small businesses catering to special ethnic tastes and needs,” and East Somerville served as the ideal site for these opportunities.

The Irish made their mark on the neighborhood by establishing a plethora of their own businesses, some of which still remain today. H.J. Connell Plumbing and Heating on Broadway and Pearl Street, Frank T. Murphy House Painting and Paper Hanging, and East Somerville and Boston Express and Furniture Mover are some of the early examples highlighted in City Directories beginning as early as 1881 through the 1930s. Another early Irish business that was established was that of James A. Kiley. Kiley started his business, James A. Kiley Co., in 1890 on Linwood Street in the Brickbottom area, where many of the bricklayers who burned Mount Benedict had previously worked. Kiley’s company started off manufacturing carriages, and later began manufacturing trucks for construction. This area, particularly Linwood Street, became increasingly commercialized by the 19040s due to its location nearby McGrath Highway. Today, the company still owns land on Linwood Street and is now what their website calls “fourth generation, family owned and operated business” that manufactures Terex Telelect, Terex Hi-Ranger Aerial Devices and Terex Digger Derricks. The Kiley family has been a part of the

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265 Foner, From Ellis Island to JFK, 96.
266 The Somerville directory of the inhabitants, 1881. The Somerville directory of the inhabitants, 1919.
269 Ibid.
270 “About James,” James A Kiley, Co.
Brickbottom neighborhood for over 120 years and has adapted to the changing needs of the city and developing technology, specifically transportation.\textsuperscript{271} It serves as a great example of one of East Somerville’s earliest immigrant businesses that has withstood time and continues to serve the community.

In addition to James A. Kiley Co., one of the more iconic Irish businesses of East Somerville is the Mt. Vernon restaurant on the corner of Mt. Vernon Street and Broadway, a pub founded in 1934 by John Henry, an Irish immigrant, who arrived in Boston ten years earlier.\textsuperscript{272} The restaurant is still up and running today and has been passed on to the new generations of the Henry family. John taught his son, Martin the family business, who then passed it on to his sons. The Henry family built up what started off as a small bar into a restaurant that now seats four hundred people.\textsuperscript{273} Like Kiley’s business, the Mt. Vernon has withstood the test of time and has been passed down through now three generations of Henrys. Somerville real estate broker Ross Blouin, who writes a column for the \textit{Somerville Times} called “The Villen Gourmet” coined the phrase “Somerville Begins At The Mt. Vernon,”\textsuperscript{274} as it is the first restaurant one sees when exiting the Orange Line into Somerville, and it is right on the Charlestown border. Blouin emphasizes that Boston was “once dotted” with restaurants like this,

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\textsuperscript{271} Gordon, \textit{From Bow Street}.
\textsuperscript{273} \textit{This is East - #6 - Martin Henry}, produced by East Somerville Main Streets, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2ug4v9bcHw.
but the Mt. Vernon now stands as one of the last of its kind, still serving the people of East Somerville every day.

Lining the East Somerville street of Broadway next to and across the way from Irish businesses, stand several Salvadoran small businesses that were started by immigrants in the 1980s, 90s, and early 2000s that continue to flourish side by side places like the Mt. Vernon. One such business is Taco Loco, established by Salvadoran immigrant Luis Morales, who arrived in Somerville in 1980 during the Salvadoran Civil War and considers himself one of the first Salvadoran immigrants to settle in Somerville. With just 500 dollars, he started Taco Loco, a Mexican-Salvadoran fusion restaurant, in 1992 on Broadway in the heart of East Somerville. While Morales sells Mexican food, he also incorporates the Salvadoran pupusa into the menu to incorporate his own culture. His business helped him to become a leader of the Salvadoran community. Not only did he start Taco Loco, and later, another similar restaurant called Tapatío, but he also started a small Evangelical Church for other Salvadorans and helped to found the Salvadoran Chamber of Commerce in Massachusetts. He explains that “when you’re the first one to come, you feel that responsibility with your community.” Jennifer Martinez agrees, emphasizing how the Salvadoran work ethic “motivated other cultures to come

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275 Blouin, “The Villen Gourmet.”
276 Ibid.
277 Ibid.
278 “This is East - #7 - Luis Morales & Luis Morales Jr.,” video, YouTube, posted by This Is East, October 8, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56ZTiK5Fs1w.
out and make their own restaurants and bring about their own businesses” in East Somerville.279 Morales serves as a great example of an immigrant carving out a space for his community and his family in East Somerville while inspiring other immigrant groups to do the same. The presence of these businesses is also comforting to other Salvadorans. Jennifer Bermudez, whose parents immigrated to Somerville from El Salvador, states that “due to the large number of Salvadorans residing in Somerville, it is very easy to find Salvadoran restaurants. It provides me and my family comfortability that we can come across as Salvadoran.”280

Salvadoran businesses, like Irish businesses, demonstrate how immigrants transformed the neighborhood, and they also show that even decades later, different immigrants can make an impact in a similar way. Moreover, the fact that Salvadorans ended up establishing their own businesses side by side Irish businesses visibly shows the historical presence of both groups in the neighborhood and reminds people on a daily basis of the immigrant impact in Somerville, past and present. Immigrant businesses have shaped East Somerville into what it is today; what was once a neighborhood full of working-class “Yankees” is now an extremely diverse representation of the different cultures that populate the neighborhood.

3.2 Dependency and Poverty: The “Burden” of the “Unworthy” Immigrant

Another important continuity between the Irish and Salvadorans in Somerville relates to the ways in which they experienced discrimination. One such form of shared discrimination was for their economic “dependence” and poverty. Prior to the eighteenth century, the general public did not view the concept of “dependence” in a negative light; it was, in fact, a necessary aspect of the social order. However, its definition has not been constant; Gordon and Fraser explain that at some point during the industrial revolution, dependency shifted in meaning from simply

279 Martinez, interview by the author.
working for someone else to relying on charity and welfare. What was once a socially acceptable majority became a “highly-stigmatized,” inherent deviance and incompetence, constructed as “antithetical to citizenship”\(^{281}\) Receiving aid became synonymous with being dependent. Both the Irish and Salvadorans received welfare in large numbers, and this reliance on the government incited a timely prejudice against people deemed “dependent.” As my father and former Somerville Ward 1 Alderman, Richard Johnson states, “as has been the case historically, new immigrants have come with little or nothing of material value. The poor economic condition of the immigrant has been one of the causes for paranoia and resentment among the community’s middle class.”\(^{282}\) This paranoia and resentment stemmed from a belief based in racism and classism–often masked in an “economic concern”– that poor immigrants took what they did not deserve and threatened the idealized white, middle-class, English-speaking “American” identity.

The English Poor Laws that persisted in Massachusetts for much of the nineteenth century emphasized the idea of the “worthy” and “unworthy” poor. The “worthy” poor, or those considered “deserving” of relief and aid, consisted of people like the elderly, children, widows, and people with disabilities. The “unworthy” poor, the category under which Irish immigrants often fell, were people who were physically and mentally capable of working, but did not, as the idea behind these Poor Laws was the compulsion to work: if you could, you must. However, immigrants were often barred from certain jobs due to employers’ prejudices, so they were therefore also barred from receiving aid. They also could not receive aid without permanent settlement, a privilege not afforded to immigrants. Essentially, this system kept Irish immigrants in a state of poverty and dependence, and then blamed and punished them for their own

\(^{281}\) Fraser and Gordon, “A Genealogy,” 315.
condition, a trend that has manifested itself, albeit in different ways, in the Salvadoran experience in Somerville as well.

Both Irish and Salvadoran immigrants experienced aggressive rhetoric regarding their “worthiness” and the “burden” they placed on the city and state. A newspaper article from the Boston-based New England Farmer in 1888 stated that Irish immigrants “do not get beyond our large cities, where they either enter into an immediate competition with our own laboring classes, reducing the wages of industry, or they become a burden on our citizens as paupers or criminals.” This article firstly points out the competition for jobs that immigrants pose to “worthy” working-class Americans, and secondly makes use of the word “burden” to emphasize their dependence. Similarly, J.T. Buckingham, the nativist author of the New England Magazine cited in Chapter 1 also accuses the Irish of possessing “habits of dependence in which they have been educated, with their poverty and their propensity to drink to excess,” another strong example of the shaming of Irish immigrants for their dependence and poverty.

Though the New England Farmer article and the issue of the New England Magazine come over a century before the arrival of Salvadorans to the city of Somerville, their rhetoric and ideas are not much different from the negative sentiment surrounding Salvadoran immigrants in the 1980s and ‘90s. The early 1990s were a tough time for Somerville and the rest of the nation economically; “the fiscal health of the city was in jeopardy,” and Massachusetts reduced local aid to Somerville by 14 million dollars, dropping from $52 million to $38 million in 1991. This large drop in funding, attributed to the nationwide recession of the early 1990s, along with the influx of socioeconomically disadvantaged immigrants created a sense of discomfort for

286 Ibid, 32.
many Somerville residents. As stated in a 1991 Somerville Journal article, “... there is a climate of fear and uncertainty in a city whose ethnic makeup continues to evolve at a time of economic scarcity. Add an election with several tight races and the resulting variables are enough to make every politician in the city squirm.”287 The “economic scarcity” that the city faced was reflected in the rhetoric towards undocumented immigrants. Susan Ostrander quotes Andrea Ferro, a long-time Somerville resident whose parents immigrated to Somerville from Portugal in the 1950s stating, “I think the immigrant today, there’s a stigma… Resources are tight and there’s a growing intolerance.”288 Paranoid Somerville residents viewed new immigrants, a large portion of which were Salvadoran, as the “takers” of these very limited resources.289

Johnson explains that “the perception that the services that are provided with those tax dollars were being disproportionately provided to an undeserving constituency was the wrapping with which anti-alien sentiment was packaged.”290 This idea of an “undeserving constituency” links directly to the idea of the “unworthy poor.” Just like the Irish, undocumented Salvadorans depended on government aid that nativists claimed they did not deserve. Johnson further states that “there are literally hundreds of examples that could be attacked by the anti-alien argument to make its point. From fuel assistance to Section 8 and Chapter 707 housing certificates to the provision of health care. There is an undeniable question of who is deserving.”291 In summation, because Salvadorans and the Irish relied on government aid, they were perceived as “un-American” due to their dependency; this dependency led to nativist arguments about who is “worthy” or “deserving” of assistance. Immigrants were deemed “unworthy” because they

288 Ostrander, Citizenship and Governance, 77.
289 The Social Security Act of 1935 made undocumented immigrants eligible for a lot of the same services and aid as citizens (though not all, and this policy changed in 1996). Some of these benefits included healthcare provisions, public housing/housing assistance, AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) payments, general relief, education, and sanitation services.
290 Johnson, “Sanctuary City,” 60.
291 Ibid, 62.
depleted city resources and taxpayers’ money for services that people felt did not belong to them due to the fact that they themselves did not pay taxes.

The “unworthiness” of undocumented Salvadoran immigrants became especially prevalent in 1993, the year that Alderwoman Maryann Cappello introduced a referendum movement to overturn the Sanctuary City Resolution. During this time of intense paranoia surrounding the city’s fiscal health, people questioned why undocumented immigrants, who do not pay for their own services, should be afforded these resources and protected from the law when money was so tight. A *Boston Globe* article from that year stated that “Today, Somerville is at a crossroads. At a time when anti-immigration opinion is gaining force across the country, a petition drive here is placing a referendum on the November ballot that would sweep from city books the last reference to Somerville’s unconditional welcome to all immigrant newcomers.”292 Charles Chisholm, a former Ward 1 Alderman who supported the referendum also said: “We need to draw the line and get some breathing room… Some of those who supported ‘sanctuary city’ set out to do something altruistic, but it is turning out to be a big burden on the city.”293 The referendum got thousands of signatures, emphasizing the widespread opposition to the Sanctuary City Resolution. As Chisholm emphasizes, people felt that undocumented immigrants were becoming too large a cost to Somerville and were “responsible for draining city resources, crowding schools, and crime.”294 Jimmy Davidson, a resident of Somerville and a delegate to the 2016 Republican National Convention also wrote that the Sanctuary City Resolution “provides an incentive for people of illegal status to remain in the country and puts an incredible financial burden on the local community. Worst of all, those who need the city resources the most – legal


293 Ibid.

294 Ibid.
immigrants, children, minorities, and veterans – are the ones who pay the price due to the drain on services available to them.”

Chisholm and Davidson’s “economic” argument also utilizes the key terms like “burden” and “draining” that come up over and over again, both in the nineteenth century and today, that emphasize the perceived propensity of immigrants’ dependency and unworthiness.

According to Johnson, who was the alderman of Ward 1 at the time, this economic argument was common and one he tried to disprove as a city official. He believed that serving undocumented immigrants used no more city resources than other necessary programs like special education did. However, people often incorrectly perceived the actual financial “burden” that immigrants put on the city and assumed that it was catastrophic. Johnson conducted a study in 1994 using education to exemplify the illegitimacy of the economic argument against undocumented immigrants. Firstly, Johnson points out that 1990 Census figures indicated that Somerville was 78 percent white, but the minority population in schools was 45 percent according to the city’s “October 1st” report. This disparity incited the false assumption that undocumented immigrant children were disproportionately taking up space in public schools. Proponents of this logic then proceeded to attack the city’s bilingual programs, claiming that they used too much of the city’s educational budget. Johnson disproved this argument in his study when he revealed that in reality, it was less than 200 dollars more per bilingual pupil than regular pupil ($5,041 v. $5,223). This minor difference did not take a drastic toll on the city’s resources like many assumed it did, showing that economic arguments against undocumented immigrants in Somerville were quite off base.

296 Johnson, interview by the author.
297 Johnson, “Sanctuary City,” 63.
298 Ibid.
299 Ibid, 64.
Historian Cybelle Fox makes this same point in her study of New York City. She quotes former mayor Ed Koch who stated that “[f]or the most part, these aliens are self-supporting, law-abiding residents. The greatest problem they pose to the city is their tendency to underuse services to which they are entitled and on which their well-being and the city’s well-being depend.” Koch, who eventually signed a Sanctuary City Resolution for New York City, emphasized that undocumented immigrants do not at all deplete city resources; in fact, they do not use them very much at all. Fox additionally provides an example of the illegitimacy of the economic “burden” argument. She explains that in California, “once social workers started to feel as though Mexicans were not capable of racial assimilation they worked to convince the public and legislators that Mexicans were a social and economic burden and therefore should be excluded from the nation.” These social workers then made up statistics to make it seem like Mexicans relied more heavily on government aid than they actually did. This example reveals that the real “problem” was that Mexican immigrants were not white and had nothing to do with the “burden” they posed. The “economic burden” argument was more based in classism and racism than anything else. Johnson explains that for many Americans making this claim, “there’s an undertone of racism and they disguise it in an economic argument, and there’s really no economic argument to be made… Salvadorans were not all economic refugees… this idea was really just a cover for racist undertones.”

Johnson’s and Fox’s examples show how racism and classism can combine to energize and exacerbate people’s antipathy towards poverty. They fear poverty because it poses a threat to individualism, and they fear non-white immigrants because they threaten the dominance of white Americans. However, they especially and intensely fear non-white poverty. Of course,

301 Ibid.
302 Johnson, interview by the author.
Salvadorans more strongly felt the combination of racism and classism than the Irish due to the fact that, unlike the Irish, they were actually non-white. Nonetheless, though the Irish have now integrated themselves into this white, middle-class, English-speaking America, they were once exactly what Salvadoran immigrants are often perceived to be: dependent, and impoverished. This condition was really a result of the discriminatory American system that blamed individuals for their own poverty and dependence and left them behind because they did not fit the “American” mold. Michael Katz states that “... poverty is more accurately perceived... as a point on a continuum rather than a sharp clearly demarcated category of social experience. In truth, the forces that push individuals and families into poverty originated in the structure of America’s political economy.” America’s antipathy towards poverty that has existed for almost two hundred years can be seen within the microcosm of Somerville, through the experiences of the Irish and Salvadorans over time. Through keeping “undesirable” immigrants in a condition of poverty, the dominant American identity remained intact and un-infiltred, and this imposed condition of poverty on immigrants was then used to discriminate against them. Those deemed “dependent” and “unworthy” were really those who were not considered “true” Americans.

3.3 Gang Activity and the Construction of the Criminal Immigrant

Criminalization has often been linked to the immigrant experience, and while the assumption that immigrants are criminals is certainly unfounded, the conditions of poverty that immigrants are subjected to sometimes leave them no choice but to engage in criminal activity. The stereotyping of Irish and Salvadoran immigrants as criminals as well as their occasional decisions to actually engage in criminal activity are often directly caused by their impoverished conditions and represent another continuity in the ways in which they experienced

discrimination. Moreover, the systemic inequality and imposed condition of poverty on non-white immigrants in America has compounded the anti-poverty bias for Salvadorans.

Irish and Salvadoran immigrants were both stereotyped as criminals in a similar manner. The Irish became associated with mob violence and the stereotype of the drunken criminal. An article from the 1834 issue of the *New England Magazine*, which is also cited in Chapter 1, states that “however honest in their purposes, they (the Irish) are proverbially creatures of passion” with a “propensity to drink to excess” and that “it is such men as these that have formed an essential part of every such mob that has disgraced our country.”304 As the article indicates, the Irish were perceived as drunk mobsters and public nuisances; in fact, this type of violence was considered a “national habit” and bricks were colloquially referred to as “Irish confetti.”305 The article essentially calls the Irish immoral and frames them as lacking self-control and discipline, two qualities considered antithetical to poverty. If one exhibited these qualities, the idea was that they would not be poor; therefore, the Irish were economically disadvantaged because they lacked these characteristics.

Salvadorans, too, were stereotyped as criminals, specifically through the Latino Threat Narrative306 and their involvement in gangs. Like the Irish “mobsters,” Salvadorans were labeled as “gangsters,” and because some of them participated in gang activity, the entire community was labeled as criminals. Marcos A. Garcia, a Salvadoran from Somerville, told the *Boston Globe* in 2002, around the time of the preliminary passage of the Ordinance, that “Somerville’s growing Latino community… has seen its reputation tarnished. Fellow Latinos say their image as hard-working immigrants, many of whom fled civil wars in Central America, has been replaced

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by a caricature of violent, delinquent youths and inattentive parents.” For an example of this “caricature,” one can simply look to the image of the political flier from the first section of this chapter that equates a Salvadoran political candidate to a gang member. The idea of a caricature is also quite reminiscent of the Irish immigrant experience being represented in infamous political cartoons as violent drunkards. The negative representation of both groups as criminals in the media propagated a harmful and unfounded stereotype that has been used to discriminate against immigrants throughout history.

The media represented both Irish and Salvadoran immigrants as “immoral,” placing them in stark contrast with the “stand-up citizen” that represents American ideals. It is far easier to justify the deportation and discrimination of criminals than it is for the law-abiding refugee. By framing immigrants as criminals, the government could justify harsh policies against them. In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander states that “Once you’re labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination — employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service — are suddenly legal.” For immigrants, this list would also include deportation. The media and the government used the actions of those Irish and Salvadoran immigrants who were criminals to falsely represent the entire community.

The majority of immigrants do not engage in criminal activity; in fact, most undocumented immigrants are actually less likely to commit a crime than the average citizen. However, both Irish immigrants and Salvadorans had groups of people that engaged in similar criminal activity through their participation in gangs in East Somerville and the Winter Hill

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neighborhood. This phenomenon was not unique to these two groups nor to Somerville; many ethnic groups have historically formed gangs for a multitude of reasons, the most prominent of those reasons being economic.

The working class neighborhoods of East Somerville and Winter Hill have historically been home to the most gang activity in the city. Chapter 2 discusses the presence and overarching effects of the Salvadoran gang MS-13 in East Somerville in detail. Similarly, the Irish have also historically formed gangs and participated in gang activity in Somerville and the Boston area. In Somerville specifically, the Irish formed the infamous Winter Hill Gang. Winter Hill was always very similar to East Somerville in its working-class makeup; Irish and Italians tended to populate this area in a very similar manner, and the Winter Hill Gang, though founded in Winter Hill, often hung out in areas of East Somerville. The Boston Irish Gang Wars of the 1960s between the Winter Hill and the McLaughlin gangs309 incited much violence in Greater Boston and contributed further to the stereotype of Irishmen as criminal mobsters. Like Salvadorans in the late ‘90s and early 2000’s, the Irish also contributed to gang violence in East Somerville, activity which also rendered the neighborhood “dangerous” and “undesirable.”

The first major study on gang activity in America was conducted by sociologist Frederick Milton Thrasher in 1927. Thrasher studied the 1,313 gangs in Chicago which included many Irish and Italian groups. It is important to note that the study is outdated in certain ways, but the claims that Thrasher makes about gang activity and its origins apply directly to the Irish experience in Somerville and indirectly to the Salvadoran experience half a century later. Thrasher makes the clear point that the “… the chief motive which usually prompts the member of the criminal gang to enter such a group is economic. He enters its fellowship with a much

more definite conception as to what he is to derive from it – namely, profit, and that profit from
crime.”310 He further defines “the soil which favors the growth of gangs” as “such underlying
conditions of inadequate family life; poverty; deteriorating neighborhoods; and ineffective
religion, education, and recreation must be considered together as a situation complex which
forms the matrix of gang development,”311 all concepts which he also claims are “inseparable
from the general problem of immigrant adjustment.”312 Immigrants’ participation in gang activity
was and continues to be a symptom of systemic poverty. Thrasher explains that “it is not because
the boys of middle and wealthier classes are Native white that they do not form gangs but
because their lives are organized and stabilized for them by American traditions, customs, and
institutions to which the children of immigrants do not have adequate access.”313 This point
emphasizes the fact that immigrants are not inherently susceptible to joining gangs; they do so
because they are deprived of the basic necessities and resources that those considered “true”
Americans are entitled to, and gangs often offered a sense of community and belonging to
outcasted immigrants.

Elliot Currie further emphasizes this argument in his more modern book *Crime and
Punishment in America* in which he similarly argues the strong “connection between violent
crime and severe deprivation.”314 He explains that “... the links between disadvantage and
violence are strongest for the poorest and most neglected of the poor.”315 Currie cites a study
conducted at Cambridge University in the 1990s by David Farrington and Donald West that
indicated that “the major risk factors for delinquency include poverty, poor housing, and living in

311 Ibid, 339.
312 Ibid.
313 Ibid, 152.
315 Ibid, 122-3.
public housing in inner-city, socially disorganized communities.” With regards to immigrants, Currie states that “it is a common finding that the children of immigrants who face stunted opportunities and discrimination come to resemble people who have lived for generations in poor communities…” Immigrants have often been deprived of resources and live in poverty, and because of these conditions, they may feel more compelled to engage in criminal activity out of necessity. Though this is not the inclination of the majority of immigrants, it makes sense that some would feel that crime was their only option.

Michelle Alexander argues that “the nature of the criminal justice system has changed. It is no longer primarily concerned with the prevention and punishment of crime, but rather with the management and control of the dispossessed.” Though Alexander primarily discusses the effects of the War on Drugs on the black community in America, this logic applies to non-white immigrants, especially those from Latin America, very well, and it can also be applied indirectly to the once socially non-white Irish immigrants of the nineteenth century. Immigrants have often been part of this group of “dispossessed” people that the government wants to control. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, reported that “in many cities and counties, the criminal justice system is effectively a system for keeping the poor in poverty while generating revenue to fund not only the justice system but many other programmes.” Criminalizing immigrants has historically served as a justification for the discrimination against them and the keeping of immigrants at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. In fact, a parallel exists between the Anti-Gang Loitering Ordinance and vagrancy laws in which Salvadorans and the Irish respectively were punished for their “idleness” or “loitering”

316 Currie, Crime and Punishment in America, 124.
318 Alexander, The New Jim Crow, 188.
and generalized for their presumed propensity for crime. The concepts of loitering, vagrancy, and idleness not only connote a negative sentiment towards the poor, but also have been used to generalize an entire community as “criminals.” Criminalization now often serves as a latent form of racism, just as the “economic” argument has. The Irish and Salvadorans both participated in gang activity to some extent and have been stereotyped as criminals because of it, but the true origin of this stereotyping lies in the systemic inequality and purposeful efforts of the American government to exclude those who do not fit the mold of the idealized American identity.

3.4 Social Citizenship and Political Assimilation: A Key Difference

Despite similarities, the Irish rose to political dominance in the city and Salvadorans did not. Numerous factors account for the disparity. Firstly and most obviously, the Irish and Salvadorans have different racial and ethnic identities, and therefore experienced racism and discrimination in different manners. While the Irish were, of course, heavily discriminated against, they were also white, a feature that gave them the ability to assimilate much more easily than non-white Salvadorans could. The Irish also either quickly learned English or already knew English upon arrival, whereas Salvadorans faced linguistic discrimination for the “threat” that many Americans felt that the Spanish language posed to the dominance of English. Their efforts to preserve the Spanish language was also perceived as a lack of willingness to assimilate, unlike Irish immigrants’ quick learning of English.

Additionally, Salvadorans faced far greater federal restrictions with regards to immigration than the Irish did. Former Somerville alderman, mayor, and U.S. Congressman Michael Capuano, echoing the sentiments of Aviva Chomsky, emphasized this phenomenon when I interviewed him. He explained matter-of-factly that for the Irish, “the only barrier to entering the United States was that you didn’t have tuberculosis.” He also explains that his

320 Capuano, interview by the author.
Irish and Italian ancestors experienced “the luck of the draw,” and were fortunate enough to come to the United States before federal immigration restrictions began in the 1960s. The system of immigration restriction that the Irish operated under was vastly different from the system through which Salvadorans had to navigate. Overall, the Irish experience with assimilation, though still quite challenging, was made much easier by their racial and linguistic identities, as well as the immigration legislation that they had to navigate through. Even today, Salvadorans in Somerville have yet to achieve full social citizenship like the Irish did, and this section will explore this phenomenon and how the two groups are intertwined.

The Irish first overtook the School Committee at the start of the twentieth century, and later, by the 1930s, when the first Irish Mayor was elected, had achieved local political dominance. Prior to 1930, the Board of Aldermen were majority English names, with one or two Irish mixed in; however, by 1931, ten out the twenty seats were filled by Irish men (O’Connell, Walsh, Cronin, Lynch, Carr, Rafferty, Donovan, Carroll, Crowley, and Havican). By 1932, they had taken the majority; six out of seven of the Aldermen at Large were Irish and they still held at least seven out of the fourteen Ward Alderman positions under an Irish mayor. These numbers show that the Irish completely dominated city politics up until the late 1940s and fifties, when Italians joined them in achieving social citizenship. In fact, former mayor and Congressman Michael A. Capuano’s father, Andrew Capuano, was the first Italian elected to the Board of Aldermen in 1948, with many more following him.

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321 Capuano, interview by the author.
This political success was made possible by what T.H. Marshall calls “social citizenship,” a privilege that the Irish were able to achieve and Salvadorans were not. Professor of Human Rights Law, Sandra Liebenberg explains the essence of social citizenship when she states: “Full and effective participation in democratic processes requires that every member of society has access to the basic necessities of life… The idea of ‘social citizenship’ thus captures the full dimensions of an individual’s sense of belonging within society.”325 She further emphasizes that “individuals and groups who cannot gain access to these basic human needs, are caught up in a daily struggle for survival…they are effectively marginalized from real political, economic and social power. This in turn perpetuates their disadvantaged socio-economic status as they are unable to exert the political influence necessary to improving their conditions of life…”326 For Salvadorans in Somerville, the lack of social citizenship has barred them from winning elections and exercising political power in the city.

Susan Ostrander further explores social citizenship, arguing that Somerville’s newer immigrants, particularly those from Latin America and Haiti, do not obtain full social citizenship due to a number of factors.327 One of these factors is the fact that what she calls the political “old guard” of Irish and Italians continued to keep minorities out of city politics in order to keep themselves in. This old guard has excluded Salvadorans from civic engagement, and this is part of the reason why Salvadorans often resorted to community self-help organizations in order to advocate for themselves. While this was effective in many ways, Salvadorans have yet to make the same impact that the Irish have made through local elections because local politics in Somerville have always advantaged people with connections, and new immigrants, naturally, have fewer connections to those in power than the “old-timers.” As stated by Ted Nolan, who ran

326 Ibid.
327 Ostrander, Citizenship and Governance.
for Alderman in the early 2000s, “Somerville is kind of edging toward a more professional form of government, but there is still an expectation [that] city government [will] be a place where people can get jobs because they know someone. . . . [G]aining power means gaining friends in government.”\(^{328}\) Irish citizens of Somerville had more connections due to decades of their people controlling the local government in Somerville, especially East Somerville, where Aldermen were almost always Irish.

In addition to having fewer connections than the Irish, Salvadorans were, of course, shut out of local politics because of prejudice against their racial identity. Ostrander emphasizes this in her book, explaining that race became “a key factor” in elections.\(^{329}\) She quotes Vertus Bernique, a Somerville resident and immigrant community leader in the early 2000s who stated, “the people are white, the white Somervillians who were born here, and even though their parents may be from another country, they feel they have ownership of the city. Those are the people who are the decision makers, the people who run the city.”\(^{330}\) The racial identity of Irish and Italians helped them to rise up the ranks into their positions despite starting off very low on the social ladder in the city; however, Salvadorans do not have the privilege of “becoming white” in the same way, and Irish and Italian local leaders had not done anything to help non-white people gain representation in city politics.

Some old-timers actually actively made efforts to keep Salvadorans out of local government. One example of a racially targeted incident that occurred in a local election took place in 2007, when a Latino candidate, Marty Martinez, ran for Alderman at Large against Irish candidate Jack Connolly. Martinez, a Tufts alumni and former youth services director of Somerville, had a chance to become the first Latino elected official in Somerville, but he lost the

\(^{328}\) Ostrander, *Citizenship and Governance*, 33.

\(^{329}\) Ibid, 34.

\(^{330}\) Ibid.
election. While not one incident can fully explain the loss, Martinez came under fire for his work with gang members and opposition to the Anti-Gang Loitering Ordinance. A 2007 article from the Somerville News in support of Connolly\textsuperscript{331} claimed that “Martinez’s numerous appearances on the campaign trail have demonstrated that he is out of touch with the mainstream Somerville resident, that he is not personally approachable, that his representation of his achievements is more filled with fluff than facts, and that the only leadership he has offered has been to integrate gang members into vital Somerville youth services.”\textsuperscript{332} The most relevant aspect of this article is that it emphasizes Martinez’s connection to gangs, referring to Martinez’s efforts as youth services director to provide services to gang members, an endeavor that many Somerville residents were not happy with. Proponents of Connolly’s campaign took the “gang” angle against Martinez in their efforts to block him from winning the election even further by circulating hundreds of fliers right before the election “picturing a threatening-looking dark-skinned teenage male wearing a hooded sweatshirt and posed (in what was clearly a digitized image)” next to Martinez.\textsuperscript{333} The 2007 Alderman at Large election further demonstrates racial discrimination against Latino residents by equating them with gang activity. This flier and other slander against Martinez for supporting gang members were used against him to keep him from winning the election, and thus, keeping Latino residents from gaining politician representation.

\textsuperscript{331} Important to note that Connolly actually co-sponsored the original Sanctuary City Resolution in 1987.


\textsuperscript{333} Ostrander, Citizenship and Governance, 35.
Overall, though Salvadorans were able to get involved by forming social organizations and spreading their rich culture throughout East Somerville, they still have not been able to infiltrate official political positions like the Irish did, and therefore, have not obtained full social citizenship. The Irish have become an “entrenched power” in the city, as Ostrander puts it, and Salvadorans have yet to infiltrate this power due to racial bias and lack of social connections with “old-timers.” However, there is more to it than this. Local context and the particular moment that Salvadorans found themselves in Somerville’s history also played a large role in their struggles to achieve social citizenship.

3.5 Revitalization and Gentrification: A Changing Somerville

In addition to racial discrimination and stereotyping, Salvadorans have faced an infrastructure landscape at a heightened time of change. Beginning in the 1980s, Somerville entered into a period defined by revitalization efforts, championed by newer, more progressive, though still Irish and Italian, politicians. This period began around the same time that Salvadoran immigrants began arriving in Somerville, and came directly after some of Somerville’s darkest decades. It was a unique time for the city and far different from the almost entirely blue-collar Somerville that the Irish had settled in. The 1980s marked the beginning of revitalization, but also of gentrification, a phenomenon that resulted in a new kind of antipathy towards poverty within Somerville.

Through the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, Somerville experienced a period of decline, economically and morally. Crime, violence and what William C. Shelton of the Somerville Times calls “a 50-year history of corruption”334 plagued the city. These factors combined to create Somerville’s, euphemistically known as “Slummerville” during this period, poor reputation.

“Humiliating taunts” about the city began in the sixties and seventies and continued into the nineties. The Boston Magazine notes that “the terms ‘sketchy,’ ‘shady,’ and the ‘armpit of New England’ are just a few of the words that have been used to describe the city of Somerville in the past.” Former Mayor Joseph Curtatone states that “that reputation goes back to, I’d say, starting mid-century when we abandoned the rail system for the automobile. Streetscapes started to become dotted with more blighted and undesirable uses.” Outsiders viewed the streets of Somerville as dangerous, and people no longer wanted to live in the city due to corruption and violence, both at street level and organized crime controlled by the Winter Hill Gang.

Shelton explains that during this time, “politics were not based on ideological or policy differences so much as on friendships, business relationships and favor trading.” Journalists Timothy Leland, Gerard M. O’Neill, Stephen A. Kurkjian and Ann Desantis of the Boston Globe even wrote a Spotlight series in 1971 about Somerville’s corrupt politicians that won a Pulitzer Prize. The Spotlight team conducted a three-month investigation of the city’s municipal spending that uncovered severe “municipal malfeasance” in Somerville. The city had allocated 4.3 million dollars to just five “favored” companies and dealt out tax abatements to former local officials and certain contractors, among many other instances of favoritism. The investigation resulted in the indictment of nineteen offenders, including three former mayors, a former city auditor, a former public works commissioner, and eleven “favored” contractors. The publicity

335 Ostrander, Citizenship and Governance, 22.
338 Shelton, “The Bad Old Days.”
340 Ibid.
341 Ibid.
that Somerville’s widespread, egregious corruption received tarnished the city’s reputation immensely and only made the “Slummerville” label more popular.

In the wake of this period of decline, new politicians worked tirelessly to change Somerville’s reputation and make it a place where people wanted to live. Officials began a beautification campaign starting in the 1980s; unattractive billboards were removed,\textsuperscript{342} new streetlights installed,\textsuperscript{343} sidewalks and streets repaired,\textsuperscript{344} and an overhaul of the zoning code that required more green space in new and renovated construction was enforced.\textsuperscript{345} Additionally, under Mayor Capuano, thousands of new trees were planted; in fact the city has won multiple “Tree City USA” awards from the Arbor Day Foundation,\textsuperscript{346} a drastic shift from the gray urban landscape of the sixties and seventies. Another important development was the completion of the MBTA Red Line Extension through Cambridge and Somerville which added stops at Porter and Davis Squares in 1984. These new developments helped make Somerville more attractive, convenient, and “hip” for newcomers.

Property investment was sparked by the repeal of rent control in 1994. In the early 1970’s, Somerville was one of five cities in Greater Boston that had adopted a local rent control ordinance. Limits on rents had led to widespread neglect by absentee landlords during the rent control era and the repeal of the ban became an early catalyst for a new wave of homeowner investors in the city increasing not only the amount of property investment but also the percentage of owner-occupied properties.\textsuperscript{347} Investment in housing complimented and enhanced the overall beautification effort undertaken by the city. The downside of the rent control repeal

\textsuperscript{344} Johnson, interview by the author.
\textsuperscript{345} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{346} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{347} Ibid.
however was the negative effect it had on availability of affordable housing, a problem that has only become more pronounced with the proliferation of gentrification.

Gentrification is certainly not a new concept, nor is it unique to Somerville, but its effects were clear in the once strictly blue-collar neighborhoods that slowly started becoming more affluent as the early 2000s approached. Sociologists Jackelyn Hwang and Lei Ding define gentrification as, “reconfiguring the urban landscape by shrinking residential options within cities for disadvantaged residents and expanding them for more advantaged residents.”

Susan Ostrander quotes social scientists H. Gibbs Knotts and Moshe Haspel, defining the problem of gentrification as the following: “To some gentrification epitomizes needed revitalization… to others gentrification represents destruction of longstanding communities…” The revitalization project that Somerville took on in the 1980s has certainly beautified and added revenue to the city, but at what cost? On the one hand, Somerville needed to create a safer, less corrupt environment, but, on the other hand, it did so by prioritizing the needs of wealthier newcomers over its working-class immigrants.

The promising nature of revitalization was certainly not felt equally by all. For context, between 1982 and 1996, rent for a standard two-bedroom apartment in Somerville increased from an average of $301 to $821 per month, an increase that most working-class residents would have been unable to cope with. Alvarado Marquez, a long-time Latino resident and East Somerville homeowner interviewed by Ostrander, explained, “a lot of us are struggling to stay in Somerville… Development is good for some people, but . . . it’s not good for other people.”

Ostrander also quotes long-time Somerville resident Isabel Garcia who stated: “I don’t see

350 Ibid.
351 Ostrander, Citizenship and Governance, 112.
[Somerville] growing for the people who are low-income. I see it prospering for people that are middle-class with more money. . . If you see this plan for all these condominiums, I am like, ‘Wow, this is for people that have a lot of money,’ but what about the people that don’t? What about people like me that have a dream to buy a home and have a backyard?’"352 Garcia, who has lived in public housing for low-income residents for forty years,353 emphasizes that Somerville’s growth and prosperity is not experienced equally and that some residents feel left behind. Somerville continues to identify as a Sanctuary City, yet how can it be a sanctuary for immigrants when those very people are not only being left behind, but also pushed away?

East Somerville in particular has been affected greatly by Somerville’s changing identity and revitalization. While the neighborhood was once the most affordable, in the early 2000s that began to change. In the early years of Somerville’s revitalization period, East Somerville remained home to the city’s working class while those who were more affluent flocked to other parts of the city. Ostrander states that “as many first-generation, low-income immigrants (often of color) have moved to the eastern part of the city in recent decades, young middle and upper-income professionals (largely white) have moved into the western part of the city.”354 Additionally, in 2008, the average cost for a home in East Somerville was still $458,194 whereas in the rest of the city the average was $524,000.355 However, at the same time, “residential property values in East Somerville increased the most between 2003 and 2008 compared with the city overall” at 86 percent versus 80 percent for the whole city.356 While the neighborhood remained the most affordable in the early 2000s, it also had the most rapidly increasing housing costs, a trend that began to push the working-class families and immigrants that historically

352 Ostrander, Citizenship and Governance, 113.
353 Ibid.
354 Ibid, 25.
355 Ibid, 27.
356 Ibid, 27.
populated the neighborhoods to other towns like Everett and Malden because they could no longer afford Somerville’s cost of living.

Somerville’s “city of immigrants” self-image has even been used to attract more affluent people to the city with the enticing pitch of experiencing a wide array of cultures in a diverse, progressive place. However, there exists a lack of awareness amongst the city’s officials and more affluent population towards the actual lived experiences of these immigrants. Martinez explains this lack of awareness when she states, “It’s contradictory how someone could have a Black Lives Matter sign on their lawn, but those are the same people that push them out. Technically, they’re the reason why a lot of black people and Salvadorans can’t afford to live there… in a political sense, people are welcoming, but they’re the reason a lot of Salvadorans have had to move out… it feels performative. It is performative when you look at all the numbers.” The revitalization process inevitably led to widespread, unstoppable gentrification, and while this served the new middle class well, it demonstrated an apathy towards the working-class immigrants that the city identifies with. It pushed immigrants out and encouraged, to use Shelton’s words “concentrating low-income families in mini-ghettoes,” or public housing, segregating them from Somerville’s more affluent residents.

This phenomenon specifically shows the continued American antipathy towards poverty in a more latent manner. The mere desire for Somerville to become a place where “people wanted to live” demonstrates a veiled attempt to rid the city of its undesirable qualities, including crime and corruption, but also including poverty. The desire for an affluent city inherently creates an aversion for its un-affluent inhabitants, whether intentional or not. While this form of antipathy towards poverty may not manifest itself as a fear of all things “un-American” like it did

in the past, it certainly demonstrates at the very least an apathy towards poor people. While many of these more affluent residents may not even realize, or at least would never admit, is that what they want from Somerville – quality housing, convenience, and its “hipster” vibe – is all at odds with what working-class immigrants need to survive there.

Just as dependency was antithetical to being “American,” the desires of middle-class residents are incompatible with the needs of poor residents, and, intentionally or not, Somerville prioritized the desires of the middle class because inherently, creating a “better” city meant making it wealthier, even if that was never explicitly stated. So, while gentrification may not seem like an obvious example of antipathy towards poverty, it exists beneath the surface in a more latent manner. Americans’ aversion towards poverty has simply become less and less outward. For the Irish, this sentiment was expressed through an obvious manipulation of the Poor Laws that labeled them as paupers and was used to expel them from the nation. During the sanctuary period, Salvadorans were labeled as “illegal” and accused of draining city resources from worthy citizens. In the most recent period, affluent liberals have outwardly expressed support for poor immigrants, but inwardly desire the exact opposite, for their “hip” and convenient city no longer welcomes nor serves the people they claim to care about. As my father says, “the welcome mat is there, but there’s no longer a key underneath.”

Somerville’s revitalization began with good intentions from politicians like Michael Capuano who wanted to make the city safer and more respectable. However, these efforts cultivated an environment in which affluent people could thrive and working-class people could no longer stay. Early Irish immigrants came to a Somerville that was heavily identified as working class, whereas Salvadorans entered the city during a time when this identity was beginning to shift. This shift highlighted a new form of antipathy towards poverty, a

358 Johnson, interview by the author.
phenomenon that has manifested itself in various ways within this project. This particular antipathy towards poverty came in the form of a desire to rid the city of its “undesirable” qualities as well as through an apathy from affluent people towards the needs of working-class immigrants. With many barely able to remain in the city due to rising costs of living even in the most affordable neighborhoods, amassing political power was hardly realistic. Capuano somewhat lamented the changes that he and his fellow more progressive politicians sparked in the ‘90s and early 2000s. He states: “we wanted to change Somerville into a place where people felt comfortable. We never intended to do it where the very people we were doing it for could no longer afford to live here. That was never a desire. But you start making it a better place, and that’s what happens.”359

Overall, this chapter aimed to construct a comparative study between the Irish and Salvadorans in Somerville that demonstrated the important continuities between the two groups but also to highlight the stark differences that one might not expect to exist. While both shared in culturally transforming Somerville, they also experienced kindred forms of discrimination for their economic status and perceived criminality that grew out of an antipathy towards poverty that has defined “American” nativism for centuries. Somerville’s changing identity alongside racial prejudice and federal restrictions, all hardships the Irish did not face, prevented Salvadorans from achieving the social citizenship and political influence. Today, Salvadorans still fight for a political voice within Somerville’s expeditiously changing environment.

359 Capuano, interview by the author.
Conclusion: Rapid Development and the Continued Threat of Gentrification

This project aims to illustrate key points of divergence and convergence between two otherwise disparate immigrant groups who, separated by time and culture, are joined together through their common immigrant experience and the ways in which they initiated cultural change in their adopted neighborhood of East Somerville, Massachusetts. Both groups experienced discrimination related to their economic status and “criminality,” but adopted distinct approaches to their pursuit of social citizenship. The Irish used politics and local government to propel themselves upward, while Salvadorans more commonly utilized cultural self-help tactics to counter racial prejudice exacerbated by a new form of antipathy towards poverty in a rapidly gentrifying Somerville.

One of the newest major changes to take place in Somerville has been the recently completed Green Line Transit Extension Project adding six new stations through the heart of Somerville and connecting various parts of the city to Boston. The project, anticipated for over a decade, was finally completed and opened in December of 2022. Before these stations were added, Somerville had only one Red Line stop in Davis Square and an Orange Line stop at Assembly Square, added as a part of the massive re-development of Assembly Square. The addition of these stops, four of which are in key neighborhood locations in Somerville, have greatly enhanced local access and travel to neighboring Boston and Cambridge. The ease of connection and increased access to public transportation has had an immediate impact on convenience and will undoubtedly have positive economic effects, particularly for lower income residents.

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360 The six new stops are located at Tufts University, Ball Square, Magoun Square, Gilman Square, East Somerville, and Union Square.
The new transit stops have also made traditionally working-class, industrial neighborhoods more desirable for affluent people. The Green Line has made neighborhoods like Union Square and East Somerville more convenient than ever. The neighborhoods were already home to a plethora of trendy restaurants, bars, and cafes, and this added convenience has made these neighborhoods all the more desirable for young professionals looking for a “hip” vibe.

However, when neighborhoods become more “desirable,” they inevitably become more expensive. Two such neighborhoods, Union Square and East Somerville, both of which now have Green Line T stops named after them, have seen housing prices skyrocket. In Somerville overall, as of 2022, the average rent price in the city was $2631 per month, making Somerville the fourth most expensive “suburb” in the Boston area. Additionally, as of September 2022, Somerville’s real-time vacancy rate was a record low 0.56 percent, indicating a huge shortage of apartments for rent. These combined statistics demonstrate just how badly people now want to live in Somerville and just how difficult it is to do so.

The trendy conveniences of these neighborhoods have further encouraged investments in property, which have, in turn, increased rent to a point that people can no longer afford, pricing out longtime and lower income residents. According to Union Square resident Candice Cole, “my building and several near it have been bought out by a property manager, and my new landlord has increased my rent by over $1,200, forcing me and my three roommates to move out. This is part of a growing trend not just in Somerville and the Greater Boston area, but across the country.”

Sam Polk, a Magoun Square resident, where another of the six new Green Line stops


363 Ibid.

was added, told WGBH that he received a shocking notice of a $700-a-month increase for his two-bedroom apartment that is walking distance from the new T stop.365

East Somerville is at risk for the same sharp increase in rent prices, particularly in proximity to the new neighborhood transit stops. Rents and property values are already on the rise and it is only a matter of time before more working class residents and immigrants are forced out in pursuit of more affordable locations.

Evictions have already begun taking place in the new Green Line neighborhoods, most notably in Union Square. Just a few months ago, in September of 2022, five families were evicted from their apartment in Union Square. One of the families was Haitian and the other four were Salvadoran.366 The building, at 182-184 Tremont Street was bought by a limited liability corporation called BBD Holding LLC,367 representing a recurring trend throughout Somerville in more recent years. Developers have been buying properties and converting them to multi-unit apartment and condominium complexes. The result has been dramatic increases in rents in areas like Union Square and East Somerville, a problem that has been exacerbated by the neighborhoods’ new appeal.

Jose Oge, a member of the evicted Haitian family was paying a monthly rent of $1,261 for his apartment and “said he was notified in July that his rent would increase to $1,800. But by mid-August, that had changed, and Oge was instead told he had to move out by Sept. 30.”368 The sudden evictions of these immigrant families demonstrates the real threat that gentrification is

367 Ibid.
368 Ibid.
posing to vulnerable communities. Though there have not been as many newsworthy evictions in East Somerville, the T station there is newer than the one in Union Square, and it may not be long before we start to hear about the same thing happening in East Somerville.

State Senator Pat Jehlen states of the new Green Line Extension, “as we celebrate the enormous, enormous economic growth unlocked by this project, we can’t forget the people left behind and pushed out by the rapid rise of property values and rents. Apparently everybody in the United States wants to live along the Green Line Extension… But the things that make our community attractive won’t exist if immigrants, working-class people, long-term residents, and artists, as well as small businesses and family-owned triple-deckers, are gone.”

As Jehlen indicates, the Green Line stops in Somerville have made the city more convenient and desirable, a long-term goal of the city’s local government; however, making Somerville a place where people want to live and move to has its costs for working-class people whether their families have been there for generations or are recently arrived immigrants who have chosen to settle there. The relentless march of gentrification will only be bolstered and enhanced by the addition of the Green Line Extension and could potentially change the character of the city and East Somerville, in particular, forever.

The massive development and expansion of the former industrial area known as Assembly Square has also contributed to the desirability of living in East Somerville. Susan Ostrander calls Assembly Square “the largest redevelopment project in Somerville” located on a “145-acre, flat, open area… that fronts directly on the Mystic River and is immediately contiguous to Boston.”

When Ostrander wrote this, “Assembly Square” was just “on the brink of very major change.” Now, however, it has emerged as one of Somerville’s most popular and

369 MacNeill, “As the Green.”
370 Ostrander, Citizenship and Governance, 27.
371 Ibid.
most expensive attractions and a driver of economic development for the city. What was once an industrial wasteland turned outdated shopping mall is now a massive shopping, dining, and entertainment destination with high-end shopping and dining, connected to Boston and outlying suburbs by rapid transit (Orange Line) with a planned footbridge connection to the recently opened 700 room hotel and casino across the Mystic River in Everett.

It has been just twelve years since my youth soccer days playing on an overgrown field in what looked like an abandoned junkyard next to the river in the old “Assembly.” The new Assembly has exploded into something most long-time residents could have never imagined. Somerville’s Redevelopment Authority, the committee tasked with revitalizing the city proclaims: “The jewel in the SRA’s redevelopment crown, Assembly Square is Somerville’s newest neighborhood, arising over the past decade from a moribund factory district centered around the former Ford assembly plant.”372 Now called “Assembly Row,” the neighborhood is one of the newest and hottest places to live for wealthier residents, and for good reason. The high rise condominium residences and apartments are among the highest priced in Greater Boston. The area has been beautifully developed with all the amenities and convenience its well-to-do residents demand, but it can seem almost out of place for older Somerville residents.

Assembly Row is just minutes from the heart of East Somerville, and some would even classify it as part of East Somerville (if it were not so drastically different now). The close proximity of East Somerville to Assembly is truly unmatched, and many people are beginning to discover that living in East Somerville has become a very convenient option. Since rental prices within the Assembly Row community are over $2,500 for a studio apartment,373 moving to

neighboring East Somerville is a bit more affordable and still conveniently located. However, if more affluent people begin to move to the heart of East Somerville for access to Assembly Row and the Green Line, rent costs will only continue to increase and push the immigrant communities that call East Somerville home out, an inevitability that affluent people fail to recognize or choose to ignore.

In spite of the great difficulties afflicting the less affluent residents of Somerville, there remains hope that the working-class identity of the city will not be completely erased. In fact, one of the ways that descendants of both Irish immigrants and Salvadoran immigrants have come together has been in an effort to do something about gentrification. One such effort is called “Save Our Somerville” (SOS). SOS is an organization founded by working-class residents of Irish heritage with the aim of beginning “a discussion about gentrification in Somerville and the negative impacts of rising property values which are driving out the blue-collar and immigrant character of the city.”

SOS hopes to collaborate with the “gentrifiers,” or the new middle-class residents who share the same vision. Ostrander discusses the ideology behind SOS, quoting long-term Somerville resident Sam Martin who explains that “the white working-class part of the city tended initially to see the [newer] immigrants as competition. Now they see that everybody is in the same boat… affordable housing benefits both working-class whites and immigrants.”

Ostrander furthers this sentiment, stating that “these concerns extend across class, race-ethnicity, and generations of old and new immigrants.” This working-class identity that many people of Irish heritage share with their Salvadoran counterparts has brought old-timers and newcomers together in fighting gentrification.

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374 Ostrander, Citizenship and Governance, 114.
375 Ibid.
376 Ibid.
Somerville is a beautiful place, and a large part of what makes it so beautiful and appealing to outsiders is its history of immigrants and its diversity of cultures. The neighborhood of East Somerville is at risk of losing its identity and what makes it so special. Though city revitalization efforts have made a positive impact in many ways, this impact has not been felt equally by all and has negatively altered the lives of immigrants and other working-class residents. However, there is hope in organizations like SOS and individuals who are working to make the city a more equitable place, continuing to improve it, while also making sure it remains accessible to those who have historically defined it. After all, Somerville has been shaped and transformed by immigrants and its working-class identity since its founding, and it would be a shame to see this come to an end.

The experiences of Irish and Salvadoran immigrants in Somerville demonstrate important continuities in the ways in which immigrants shape and are shaped by the places they live. Nancy Foner concludes her book by stating: “The immigrant communities of the past are gone forever, but the people who came of age in them have left an indelible imprint on the city… they shaped the very culture, and the institutions, that the newest immigrants confront as they, in turn, make the metropolis their home. New York is constantly invigorated as new groups plant their roots here, and the newcomers themselves are–and will be–irrevocably changed by their own journeys through New York.”377 The same can be said about immigrants in Somerville. The Irish and Salvadorans both completely transformed the neighborhood of East Somerville through religion and business, but they were also both deeply affected by the discrimination they faced in the city for their poverty and perceived criminality. If there is to be one universal aspect of the immigrant experience, it would be that they undoubtedly are transformed by and transform forever the culture, environment, and identity of the places they migrate to.

377 Foner, From Ellis Island to JFK, 243.
However, the Irish experience was also drastically different from the Salvadoran experience, and these differences highlight the importance of local government in immigrants’ lives and their ability to achieve social citizenship. The Irish had the ability to utilize Somerville’s local government for social mobility, whereas Salvadorans did not due to racial prejudice and federal immigration law, but also due to Somerville’s changing identity which rested on revitalization and a veiled antipathy towards poverty. In spite of all of their similarities, the context that Somerville found itself in, created unexpected disparities in access to government that can only be seen on a local level.

Overall, the experiences of Irish and Salvadoran immigrants in Somerville, Massachusetts highlight how the local, often overshadowed by the federal, contains multitudes; it can show how one neighborhood can become a community’s long-time home and how over time, immigrants have faced similar successes and hardships, yet have also come out the other side in dramatically different manners. It can serve as a microcosm of national trends with its own unique twists, revealing a long lasting American antipathy towards poverty that poor immigrants across time and place have faced in increasing degrees of latency. It shows us that both the positive and the negative can be true at once: that immigrants have suffered at the hands of American hatred towards poverty, but also that they have triumphed through their lasting impacts on the community. And lastly, it reminds us that cities like Somerville and neighborhoods like East Somerville are defined by their immigrant communities and that the mutually-beneficial symbiosis of a local community and its immigrants cannot be overlooked. It is immigrants, after all, that have made Somerville into the beautiful, diverse, and vibrant place that I call home.
Appendix: Photos

Figure 0.1, Wagner, Carrie. *Somerville Bike Path Mural*. 2014. Map of Somerville. Somerville, MA.


Figure 3.1, the various immigrant businesses that line just one section of Broadway in East Somerville. These include (from left to right) Gauchao Brazilian Cuisine, Rincon Mexicano, Taquería Tapatío (Salvadoran, unlabeled food icon across from Mudflat Pottery), Vinny’s Ristorante (Italian), Los Paisanos (Salvadoran), Taco Loco (Salvadoran), and the Mount Vernon (Irish). It also highlights the site of Mount Benedict, St. Benedict’s Parish, and Prospect Hill Academy (the old site of the Little Flower School). Courtesy of Google Maps.

Figure 3.2, an image of some of the businesses on Broadway in East Somerville including Vinny’s Ristorante (red and green building), Tapatío (green storefront), and Amigos Market (red awning). (“CultureHouse East Somerville.” East Somerville Main Streets. https://www.eastsomervillemainstreets.org/)
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