ARMSTRONG STATE COLLEGE

WILLIAM KEHOE:
FULFILLING THE AMERICAN DREAM

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Father Cavanaugh and his staff at the Catholic Pastoral Center. Without their help, this biography would have been incomplete.

I would especially like to thank Mrs. Anne Ritzert, who as the Kehoe family historian, provided me with personal insight into the life of William Kehoe.

I hope this paper does justice to this great man.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Illustration of William Kehoe from *Cyclopedia of Georgia*.

2. Advertisement for the Kehoe Iron Works from the 1890 Savannah City Directory.

3. Photograph of the Kehoe Iron Works from *Historic Savannah: Survey of Significant Buildings in the Historic and Victorian Districts of Savannah, Georgia*.

4. Photograph of 130 Habersham from *Historic Savannah*.

5. Photograph of 123 Habersham from *Historic Savannah*.

6. Kehoe genealogical chart from the Kehoe cemetery plot, the Catholic Pastoral Center database, and the marriage records in the Probate Court of Chatham County.
With the cynicism of the late twentieth century, rags-to-riches tales of American immigrants seem rather trite. At best, they are the tales of poverty-stricken immigrants who have risen a few rungs on the social ladder; at worst, they are the tales of robber barons who exploited their fellow immigrants to achieve great wealth.

William Kehoe's story, though, is the epitome of the American success story. It could have come straight out of the pages of a Horatio Alger story, but it did not. William Kehoe came to America with nothing but hope for a better life. In his lifetime he amassed a great fortune and an even greater respect. And he did so with dignity, fairness, and compassion. William Kehoe's story proves that the American Dream is within reach of anyone who has the heart to believe.

EARLY LIFE

William Kehoe was born in the County Wexford, Ireland on 21 August 1842. He was one of seven children born to Johanna (Rath) and Daniel Kehoe. Daniel worked as a tenant farmer on his wife's family's land.

The first eight years of Kehoe's life in Ireland are a mystery. Economic hardships and English oppression of the Irish sent the family on a voyage to the United States in 1850.
28 February 1851, the Kehoe family arrived in Savannah. The only apparent reason why the family chose Savannah is that was all the fare their meager savings would allow.

The family settled into the Old Fort District, an area occupied by Savannah's poor Irish immigrants. A few years later, Daniel died during a yellow fever epidemic. Kehoe's older brothers and sisters worked a variety of labourious jobs to provide for the family.

INDUSTRIAL GIANT

Kehoe was educated in the public schools of Savannah, but there is no evidence that he went on to a university or a trade school. His first career experience was making bullets in Selma, Alabama for the Confederacy during the Civil War.

Ironwork in Savannah was beginning to burgeon, with the Irish immigrants leading the way. At the close of the war, Kehoe was employed as a moulder at Savannah Machine and Boiler Works. In 1873, James Monahan, a partner in Savannah Machine and Boiler Works, left the company and set up another machine foundry on Bay and Randolph, bringing along William Kehoe and John Rourke. Four years later, he left the foundry to Thomas Mulligan and set up shop a hundred feet away at the Phoenix Architectural Works. By 1877, Kehoe had become foreman at the Phoenix foundry. When Monahan died in 1878, he willed the iron works to his wife, Ellen, and William Kehoe. Two years later, Kehoe bought out Ellen Monahan's share of the foundry for $4000 and Phoenix
KEHOE'S IRON WORKS,
FORMERLY
Phoenix Iron Works;
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA,
MANUFACTURERS OF
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SUGAR MILLS AND PANS
A SPECIALTY.

These Mills are manufactured in the best possible manner, with heavy Wrought Iron Shafts, and Rollers of the best Charcoal Pig Iron, turned up perfectly true. They are heavy, strong and durable, and guaranteed capable of grinding the heaviest fully matured cane. Our Pans are cast bottom down, are smooth and uniform in thickness. Having unsurpassed facilities, WE GUARANTEE OUR PRICES.

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THE ARCADE
New York Oyster and Chop House,
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The most complete and finest fitted up Restaurant and Oyster House in the South for Ladies and Gentlemen.

The following well-known and highly appreciated Oysters are received by every Steamer, viz.:
BLUE POINT, SADDLE ROCK,
EAST RIVER, SHREWSBURY.
Bar supplied with the finest brands of Imported and Domestic
ALES, WINES, LIQUORS AND CIGARS.
OPEN DAY AND NIGHT.
THOS. H. ENRIGHT, Proprietor.
Architectural Works became Kehoe Iron Works. 18

By 1886, Kehoe employed 45 people with trade extending over Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, and Alabama.19 The foundry primarily manufactured sugar mills and pans, and also specialised in architectural iron work.20 The site of the foundry was especially advantageous because it was close to the Central of Georgia Railroad spur that connected the iron works with the Savannah River shipping.21

Near the turn of the century, many other iron works went out of business, but Kehoe's foundry expanded and prospered. By 1903, the iron works consisted of an iron foundry, a brass foundry, machine, blacksmith, and boiler shops, and various storehouses.22 The booming business forced Kehoe to enlarge the plant with an additional machine and boiler shop. The iron works manufactured boilers, engines, sugar mills and pans, light and heavy gray iron castings, brass castings, shaftings, and pulleys. Specialties included: heavy forgings, marine engineering and marine works, and distillers' pumping outfits. By 1906, the foundry was employing 150 employees and earning an average annual aggregate of $250,000.26

Kehoe owned all of the land between Broughton Street, where the first iron works was situated, east of East Broad Street and the Savannah River. After World War One, the Kehoes built a new iron works on the river front, just east of the current Savannah Electric and Power Company building.27 The most unique feature of the foundry was an underwater railroad that was used to bring up
tugs and other boats for repair.  

DIVERSE INTERESTS

The prosperity of the iron works allowed Kehoe to turn the business over to his sons, Simon P. and William J. Kehoe and to diversify his business interests. Kehoe was one of the pioneers of the Savannah to Tybee Railroad and he held the first stock certificate in recognition of his work. His interests on Savannah Beach also included serving as president of the Tybee Beach Company and Hotel Tybee Company. Kehoe was director of the National Bank of Savannah and director of Savannah Electric and Power Company. And was one of the organisers and founders of the Chatham Savings and Loan Company, and its president at the time of his death. Kehoe was also, heavily involved in real estate, including owning three cottages on Tybee Island.

POLITICS

Kehoe spent many years involved in politics. As early as 1878, Kehoe is found at the National Greenback Labor Party convention nominating Stephen A. Corker to represent the First Congressional District. He served as County Commissioner from 1893 to 1898, when he resigned. And he spent some twenty-five years on the Tybee Island town council.
CHARITY

It seems that politics and business was not enough for Kehoe, as he belonged to a lengthy list of religious, civic, and charitable organisations. He was director of the Chamber of Commerce. He also served as director of the Savannah Volunteer Guard. He was a vice-president and director of the Associated Charities of Savannah. And he served, for many years, as treasurer of St. Mary's Female Orphanage Benevolent Society. He was also affiliated with the Hibernian Society, the Georgia Historical Society, and the Georgia Hussars' Club.

RELIGION

Kehoe was a devout Catholic and devoted much of his life to sectarian causes. He was a member of the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic Laymen's Association, the Catholic Knights of America, and the Holy Name Society of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. Kehoe represented the Holy Name Society at the inaugural meeting of Georgia's Catholic Laymen's Association.

Kehoe was a member of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist for the majority of his 87 years. When the Cathedral caught fire in 1898, Kehoe served on the committee to rebuild it. For the dedication of the new Cathedral in 1900, Kehoe donated the baptismal font and the iron railing surrounding it. His grandson, William J. Kehoe, Jr., was the first person to be baptised there. Kehoe also donated other pieces of iron work to the Cathedral and St. Vincent's Academy.
FAMILY LIFE

In November of 1868, Kehoe married Anne Flood at St. Patrick's Parish. In fine Catholic tradition, the two produced ten children. It seems he had a problem matching the children's faces with the children's names, so he referred to the boys as "sonny" and the girls as "sister". The children just assumed it was a term of endearment. Kehoe provided well for his children and allowed them to travel anywhere they liked. Of course, being a fierce Irish supporter, anywhere excluded British soil.

Kehoe's youngest daughter, Helen, scandalised the family by marrying a Northern lieutenant, J. W. Crolly. Being a stalwart advocate for the underdog Confederacy, it took Kehoe many years to come to grips with the addition of a "yankee" in the family.

FAMILY TALES

Anne Ritzert, the daughter of Kehoe's "scandalous" Helen, provides a wonderful insight into his character through an article in the Savannah News Press Magazine and a phone interview with the author.

Though rather small in stature, Kehoe carried himself with great self-assurance. Around 1890, he had begun to grow a goatee. His sense of fashion ranged from black alpaca in the winter and white linen in the summer. And he never, ever came to the dinner table without his pongee coat.

His driving skills earned him a great deal of notoriety
around Savannah. His trademark electric car was a social menace, as he "drove" around the Savannah streets with a complete disregard for traffic laws and pedestrians.

He had devised a rather convenient method for payment of bills. While most people buy goods on a as-needed basis, Kehoe bought items in bulk (by barrel, gross, or case). Rather than pay for each purchase when bought, Kehoe would pay all his bills at one time. The merchants readily accepted this and allowed him to pay at the end of the year without interest.

Kehoe's capacity for compassion and charity was well-known. He made sure that all his employees, and their families, were fed, clothed, and educated. And he never held the widows and children of his workers responsible for the father's debts.

Ritzert relates a wonderful tale of Kehoe's generosity in the Savannah Press article. A man simply named Woodrow worked odd-jobs for the family. His love for the bottle often found him in the Brown Farm. One time Kehoe went in search of Woodrow, but could find nobody matching his description answering to the name Woodrow. There was a fellow present named Kehoe who matched that description though. Rather than being angry with this deception, Kehoe was quite touched that Woodrow thought enough of him to adopt his name. The consequence of this, though, was that Woodrow told all his friends to adopt the moniker "Kehoe" whenever problems arose and "Mr. Billy" would magically appear and bail them out.

Kehoe believed that all men were entitled to freedom and to
dignity. He always rooted for the underdog (i.e. the Irish and the Confederacy) and supported any revolution, even if it had the vaguest chance of victory. But he did not like being forced into action, and he had a special dislike for unions.

Ritzert recounts Kehoe's rather harrowing account with a union in her article. There was an attempt, by the worker's union, to force Kehoe to meet their demands. Kehoe refused and declared that he would shut the factory down first, allowing them all to starve. The men marched to his house on Columbia Square and burnt Kehoe in effigy. Kehoe marched out of his house and into the angry mob. Standing toe-to-toe with the rioters, he shouted, "Go home lads, you've had your fun. Have a good supper, say a prayer for me, and be at work on time in the morning. More of this heathen display and you can warm your winters at a cold foundry." The men went home and the unions never bothered Kehoe again.

THE KEOHE HOUSE

Despite his contributions to industry, politics, and the social well being of Savannah, Kehoe's name is most often associated with the magnificent Kehoe House on Columbia Square.

In 1884, Kehoe bought the south half of Lot 22 in Columbia Ward (130 Habersham Street) for $950, removed the wooden house that was there, and erected a brick one in its place. Five years later, he bought another lot across Columbia Square and erected a $25,000 house.
The new house, designed by DeWitt Bruyn who had designed the previous home, was one of the most distinctive buildings in Savannah. The house was built in a Renaissance Revival style with a mixture of terra cotta moulding, cast-iron railings, balconies, red-brick chimneys, and Corinthian columns. The interior had 24 rooms, a grand stairway, oak wainscotting, 12 fireplaces with marble mantels, 98 windows, and a Victorian castle cupola room that faced northward to the Savannah River, and more importantly, to the Kehoe Iron Works.

TWILIGHT TIME

Towards the end of his life, after his wife had passed away in 1920 and most of his children had left home, Kehoe sold the Habersham house and moved to a cozy home on Sixth Street. Though no longer active at the iron works, Kehoe still indulged in charitable works and served as president of the Chatham Savings and Loan Company.

Kehoe died of pneumonia at the age of 87 on 29 December 1929. The Savannah Press ran an editorial tribute, stating, "A landmark and a valued co-worker has passed to the beyond. Savannah cannot permit a leading citizen to pass without regret and without tribute. He was loyal to his friends and to the city." The flag at the Chatham County Courthouse flew at half-mast from the time of his death to his funeral at the Catholic Cemetery.

Kehoe's will offers one of the best incites into the
character of the man. The first item in his will calls for the donation of $200 to the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, hopefully in return for masses to be said for the souls of his children, his wife, and his own. He then divides his estate among his children, with all children, male and female, receiving substantial portions of his wealth. Finally, he asks that any debts owed be paid off at the time of his death, so his children will not be burdened with them.\(^5\)

Though the Kehoe Iron Works went bankrupt during the Great Depression,\(^6\) Kehoe's legacy lives on. At the time of his death, he was survived by seven children, 25 grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.\(^7\) The Kehoe house still stands proudly on Columbia Square. His artistry can be viewed through various pieces of iron work donated throughout the city of Savannah. And his compassion, dedication, and strength is still remembered by those who knew and loved him.
THE KEHOE FAMILY
NOTES


2. 1860 Census of Chatham County, p. 200.

3. Anne Ritzert, interview by author, 26 September 1991, Savannah, Georgia, phone interview.


5. Anne Ritzert found the information in an alien registration form, but I could not find the original document. Ritzert, phone interview.


7. Ibid.

8. The exact date is uncertain. Ritzert, phone interview.

9. 1860 Census.


12. Ibid.

13. Savannah City Directory, 1866.

14. John Rourke would go on to establish the Novelty Iron Works in 1876 at the foot of East Broad and the Savannah River. Lattimore, Savannah Ironwork.

15. Ibid.


17. Lattimore, Savannah Ironwork.

18. Estate records of James Monahan, File No. 560, Probate Court, Chatham County Courthouse, Savannah, Georgia.
Industries Of Savannah, J. M. Elstner and Company: Savannah, Georgia, 1866.

Ibid.

Lattimore, Savannah Ironwork.


Ibid.

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Ibid.


The actual stock certificate can be found in the Kehoe Manuscript Collection 1148 at the Georgia Historical Society. "William Kehoe Of Savannah Dies", Bulletin of the Catholic Laymen's Association, 4 January 1930, p. 8, column 3.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Anne Ritzert, phone interview.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

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Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

The meeting was held in Macon, Georgia on 24 September 1916. Minutes of the Organizational Meeting of the Catholic Laymen's Association, Catholic Pastoral Center, Savannah, Georgia.


Fair, Historical Sketch of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, 1902, p. 30, Catholic Pastoral Center, Savannah, Georgia.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ritzert, phone interview.

Married by C.C. Prendergast. Index of Marriage Licenses of Chatham County 1866-1873, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

Ritzert, "The Diminutive Giant: William Kehoe."

Ibid.

Ibid.

5\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.

5\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.

5\textsuperscript{6} The house served as the Albert Goette Funeral Home for a time. Professional football player Joe Namath owned the building for a few years. Presently, the home is being restored for a bed and breakfast. Michael Homans, "Grand Mansion to Be Restored," *Savannah Evening Press*, 15 May 1991, p. 24.


5\textsuperscript{8} Ritzert, phone interview.

5\textsuperscript{9} "Kehoe Obituary," *Savannah Morning News*, 30 December 1929, column 3.

5\textsuperscript{10} "Editorial Tribute Paid to Mr. Kehoe," *Bulletin of the Catholic Laymen's Association*.

5\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

5\textsuperscript{12} Estate records of William Kehoe, File No. 424, Probate Court, Savannah Georgia.

5\textsuperscript{13} Ritzert, phone interview.

5\textsuperscript{14} "William Kehoe of Savannah Dies," *Bulletin of the Catholic Laymen's Association*. 
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