The Milwaukee English

Early history

Great Britain controlled the territory of Wisconsin between 1763 and 1815. However, because the British were mainly interested in the fur trade with the Ho-Chunk and Ojibwe people, few British immigrants actually settled permanently in the area. This began changing in the 1820s when some English immigrants made their homes in ethnic enclaves alongside Yankee families.

Outside of Milwaukee County, the British left behind place names such as Manchester, Exeter, and Leeds. Immigrants from Cornwall settled in the towns of Dodgeville and Mineral Point and nearby rural areas.

History in Milwaukee

At least one, if not two, of the three purported founding fathers of Milwaukee was of English background. Where records are available, the origin of George H. Walker's ancestors were in England. Walker developed the area of Milwaukee known later as Walker's Point.

During the early years of Milwaukee development, people of British descent (some later referred to later as Yankees) settled mainly in the Yankee Hill neighborhood. The neighborhood's early settlers are what make Yankee Hill unique. John Gurda, in *Milwaukee, City of Neighborhoods* (p.6) describes them well.

> Although they were a minority in their own city as early as 1850, the Yankees had come to Milwaukee in the very first wave of white settlement, and they had a virtual lock on wholesale and retail commerce, the grain trade, the professions, and local politics. These Easterners were the frontier elite, and the most successful of them built sumptuous Italianate, Gothic, and Greek Revival homes on the high ground northeast of the business quarter—an area known appropriately as Yankee Hill

They also built Protestant churches. Some of the majestic Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches still stand in the neighborhood today.

Additional newcomers of British ancestry made their homes in other Milwaukee regions. Some settled just blocks southeast of today's Cannon Park neighborhood. A small hamlet, founded by pioneers from New York, housed a blacksmith shop, post office, schoolhouse, and homesteads. Their neighbors included the Cornwall, Douvalle, Smith, Sheldon, Strong, Marsh, and Marlott families—people of British ancestry who were practicing Episcopalians and Baptists.

"It's a pity that the English Americans are all but lost in Milwaukee. While a high percentage of residents have some English heritage, there's just no visible signs of them in the built environment. This is not true of other cities. But Milwaukee is unique in that it was developed by Germans."

"Many people think that the English never suffered persecution in this country, because being English was almost the norm here. But few know that after the Revolutionary War, many of those that sided with the English (and were English) lost their lands. My ancestor was a British Indian trader and because the English were more lenient in their policies toward the Natives, most traders sided with the English in the War. But because of this, a large group of Indian traders, including my ancestors, had their lands confiscated after the Americans won the war, even though they had been in America for over one hundred years at the time."

Quotes of English informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Bay View is another example. The township, which later was annexed to Milwaukee, was founded by Detroit capitalist, Eber Brock Ward. He created the Milwaukee Iron Company in 1868 on 30 acres of land in the Bay View area. While Ward never lived there, he built modest houses and barracks for his workers that were within walking distance of the mill. Many of the first employees were imported by Ward from Great Britain because they possessed skills in iron production. These English, Scots, and Welsh immigrants brought an early British flavor to an area that was dominated by Germans, and later by Poles.

Meet one of your past English neighbors

Myrtle Cootware

Myrtle Cootware (nee Gorell) ran Cootware's Restaurant in the 1940s in today's Franklin Heights (also known as Amani) neighborhood. At the time, she lived one block up the street at 2508 West Hopkins with her grown daughter Ruth Frances Cootware.

This was not Myrtle's first restaurant in the Franklin Heights neighborhood. In the early 1930s, she and her then husband Elmer Cootware ran a café at 3924 North 29th Street, before the couple divorced.

Myrtle's ubiquitous presence in the neighborhood added to its diversity. The daughter of English immigrants (most certainly Cornish from Cornwall), she was born and raised in Iron Mountain, Michigan, where her father worked as a miner. She met her husband Elmer in that area. He was the son of a Canadian immigrant.

One might wonder what kind of food the restaurant served. While the English were never known for their culinary contributions, the Cornish had an iconic dish—the pasty (see photo[i]). Pasties are large, flaky pies filled with steak, potato, onion, other vegetables, and herbs. Some can be filled with sweets, such as jams. The pasty developed in the mining culture of Cornwall, as the pies were a convenient, satisfying, and nutritious lunch that workers could take with them to the mines. The dish was carried over by Cornish miners to Iron Mountain, Michigan. While it is not known if Myrtle had pasties on her café menu, it seems highly unlikely she would not.

"You look at their wills [ancestors]. You almost cry. All that was written by hand and witnessed and it amounted to some cooking pot, a table, a mare, and two sets of clothes. I try and imagine what life was like for the frontier people and how hard they struggled, having to move on all the time when they couldn't get a crop. And those wills. An entire life spent and they left a pot to a daughter, the mare to the spouse, the table to a son, and the clothes to whoever they fit. That's the entire life and probably as much as they ever owned. But they left kids behind. They managed to raise them until they were old enough to start their own families. And out of all that came us. I look at what I own—maybe thirty outfits, two cars, a house, furniture in every room, a ton of technology, and so on. But now, when I start to think my life has not yielded much, I go back to those wills. And I still tear up."

"I developed an interest in history by doing genealogy into my British ancestors. By the time I got to visit England and Scotland (oh, and Wales too), I knew the history of these areas and wanted to learn more. I got enthralled with Cornish history even though I don't think my ancestors came from there."

Quotes of English informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

No information was found on how long Myrtle's restaurant remained in Franklin Heights. Upon retirement, she moved to Racine, where she died in 1975.

It is interesting to note that the pasty is still accessible in the area. Reynolds' Pasty Shop is just blocks' away from Cootware's old place, at 2235 W. Burleigh. And is this owner also Cornish? It's proprietor is African American.

In addition to the above, one of the largest influxes of British immigrants to the Milwaukee area came right after World War Two when many local soldiers who had married English women during the war brought them home to the US. The war brides developed an organization on Milwaukee's south side called Britannia, which no longer exists.

Where to observe British culture today

Today, residents in Milwaukee are very interested in everything British—from *Downton Abbey* to One Direction to the British royals to Shakespeare to Monty Python to James Bond to the BBC to Helen Mirren to Jane Austen. But there is very little actual English culture to be found within the city. One of the few examples is the Three Lions Pub on Milwaukee's East Side (3944 North Oakland Avenue). At Three Lions Pub, patrons can watch a cricket match on wide screen televisions, and try shepherd's pie, fish & chips, or a variety of English ales and spirits. The décor is British through and through, and patrons are usually served food and drinks by bartenders or wait staff from the United Kingdom.

Three Lions Pub

"We love poetry, we love drama, we love walking—lots of walking. We all grew up walking. I mean the age group that I am talking about—anybody over the 60—we all walked to school when we were kids. We all walked to the station."

"We consider it very bad luck to have to live in a country that doesn't have it [easy access to healthcare]."

Quotes of English informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

The Milwaukee British stay active. They play soccer, tennis, golf, and they walk everywhere. They also enjoy lawn bowling, practiced today by Brits and non-Brits at Lake Park (the Lawn Bowls Association is at 3131 East Newberry Boulevard).

Meet one of your past English neighbors

Juliet Miller Hills

Juliet Miller Hills emigrated from England as an adult. In England, she earned an associate's degree in Library Science from North London University, and worked as a children's librarian in a London suburb next to Pinner where Elton John grew up.

After immigrating to the United States, Juliet Miller Hills returned to school and got a B.A. in Anthropology at Marquette University and an M.A. in Pastoral Studies at St. Francis De Sales Seminary, Wisconsin. She has since worked as a chaplain and a museum educator.

With one son and activities that include giving local history talks, hospice ministry, poetry, quilting, sketching/painting/printing, and reading, Juliet nourishes an encyclopedia of interests. She keeps abreast of local nature, films, waterways, conservation, spirituality, children's literature illustrators, history of people, and English life.

With all this, Juliet still maintains contact with her past. She recently inquired about the girls in her school class of 1965, and seeks out ways to stay in harmony with her ethnic heritage. She most enjoys "maintaining and honoring holidays, spiritual celebrations and events in Britain, hearing my accent spoken by others I meet, sharing stories about my home town, learning about my own family background and connections, eating pancakes (crepes with lemon juice and sugar) and Christmas pudding and Christmas cake, and finding British candy and jams in stores."

On a visit home about four years ago, Juliet had breakfast with her first library boss in 1967 and was able to obtain a photo of a significant volunteer endeavor she carried out in 1968, restoring a canal pumping station in the Bath, Somerset area where her family had relatives. (See below.)

Juliet Miller Hills (photo to the left) in her slicker digging gravel out of a mill leat (the channel leading to a mill building covering a waterwheel) in order to improve the water flow from a river uphill, under the railway line, to a working canal whose summit pound (pond) had to be maintained in order to provide water to the locks emptying below the level of the summit. It was a joint venture with the engineering department of the University of Bath and the Kennet & Avon Canal Trust. Juliet and 13 men did the work over a weekend. The volunteer engineer's day job was being the tool and die maker for the Concorde, which of course had no tools because it was newly designed, about 1967. He cut the applewood blocks for the cog wheel and re-planked the water wheel, and the others repainted the Cornish beam engine and the interior of the pump house. They slept the first night in sleeping bags. When completed, Juliet got to stay over in a warm house with dinner and breakfast.

[i] Photo attribution: https://media.defense.gov/2010/Oct/22/2000314432/-1/-1/0/101022-F-5212M-001.JPG